



“The Door To God’s Kingdom”

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Scripture:

Luke 12:32-38 (NRSV)

³² “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Watchful Slaves

³⁵ “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶ be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. ³⁷ Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸ If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

Sermon:

Let me begin with a personal story. Gloria and I were in Seattle, last week, visiting a college friend of mine and his wife. We had a great time! On the return trip, we stopped just east of the city as we started up Snoqualmie Pass, to buy fuel. Out of the blue I heard the man fueling his truck on the other side of the pump say “Are you a wildcat?” Caught me off guard! Took me a moment. Oh, yes. I was wearing my University of Arizona cap! U of A Wildcats! Turns out he and I lived and worked in Tucson [home of the U of A] at the same time in the early 1970’s. We vetted each other out by mentioning a few Wildcat basketball names, visited for a few minutes and then parted ways.

This is what we sport team fans do! We proclaim our fan loyalty and easily recognize each other by team logos . . . caps, t-shirts, bumper stickers, etc. You may see or hear things like . . . “This is the ‘Huskie’ nation” or “You’re in the ‘Chiefs’ kingdom.” Marketing strategies and appeal to territorial-tribal motives are in plain sight. We like to belong! We like to be around like-minded people, to share enthusiasm, celebrate wins, mourn losses! I’m a U of A Wildcat fan, wherever I go or live!

So . . . what does this have to do with today’s Scripture reading? We hear Jesus . . . knowing what his small band of disciples longed for in their deepest hearts . . . we hear him say to them: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” He’s not talking about something somewhere in the sky, by and by. He’s talking about planet earth. He announces, again, that God is doing an awesome thing right here, right now. The “kingdom” that is among us puts everything else in life . . . food, clothing, politics . . . things that can divide us into perspective. For God’s gift is a reality where every person has a place, where everyone belongs, where differences are not erased or ignored . . . but lifted up and cause celebration, not separation. To the crowds swarming around Jesus, this was Good News . . . not to mention the Good News it is to us!

OK. So knowing that what we are waiting and longing for is already here, how do we see it when we’re pumping gas, how do we live in its presence, how do we recognize others like us? **WHAT ARE THE IDENTIFIERS** . . . the kingdom “team logo”, so to speak. Cross earrings or necklaces, bumper stickers, a bill cap or a fish symbol decal in the rear window of your car? In early times, the sign of the fish helped Christians identify each other. But that came later than the time recorded in Luke’s Gospel.

Jesus, I believe, named two identifying marks of the kingdom’s presence and people . . . not a logo, jewelry, clothing or any symbol . . . but life patterns or paths . . . **POVERTY** and **HOSPITALITY**. When you see these things you know you are not far from the kingdom and who’s in God’s fan club, a kingdom supporter. Let’s look at them in a bit of detail.

First . . . **POVERTY**. “Sell your possessions and give the proceeds away to the beggars,” Jesus says. Get rid of your stuff. **WOW!** There is just no way to water this down or make it sound reasonable. I have heard this to the point where I am no longer shocked. “Where your treasure is there will your heart be also,” Jesus added. Which means if I am holding on to possessions and stuff beyond my basic needs, I am stealing from people who don’t have even life’s basics . . . and furthermore, it means **MY POSSESSIONS, NOT GOD’S KINGDOM, ARE MY TREASURE AND SO MY HEART IS IN THE WRONG PLACE**. This is one of those many

pages in the Gospels where I feel like saying to Jesus, “Just shut up.” Why? Because these words of his expose my own confused and divided heart.

There’s more. The Gospel of Luke quotes Jesus’ first Beatitude this way, “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,” [6:20] more provocative than Matthew’s version, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” [5:3] Poverty in the Gospel sense means more than just having little or no money. It means being pushed to live on the outside, on the edge, on the margins of society.

Who are up front in the line going into the kingdom according to Jesus? The tax collectors, the prostitutes, children, the poor, the hungry . . . and by extension . . . the homeless, the outcasts, the ones who suffer criticism, persecution and even death just for standing up and being true to who they are; in our land today that can mean persons of racial, religious and sexual minorities . . . blacks, browns, yellows, reds, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostics, atheists. And where are the religious leaders (gulp!), the good law-abiding people, the wealthy, the privileged [in our day this can be whites, heterosexuals, males, mostly, and Christians]? Somewhere behind them. [Mt. 21:31]

But our rabbi looks on the (my!) confused, divided human heart with compassion. He is the gentle shepherd, a healer. The poverty of spirit of Matthew’s Beatitude #1 is more than a euphemism for mild-mannered attempts at social downward mobility. It is a call to the spiritual work of moving the human heart from the wrong place to the right place, *from* valuing stuff and privilege more than people *to* valuing God’s kingdom where all people have value. Jesus is a realist. He knows when the human heart is in the wrong place. He is also a “hope-ist” [not optimist]. He believes the human heart can change! Poverty of spirit means the heart is moving toward God’s kingdom. Praise God . . . a human heart moving toward God’s kingdom can move this world’s mountains of prejudice, inequality and injustice!

OK. Word number two is HOSPITALITY. Jesus goes on to tell a little parable about slaves waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet. I imagine the master to be the bridegroom. Doubly important: head of household AND guest of honor! He leaves the place of honor. Jesus blesses the faithful slaves who open the door to their master, as soon as he knocks! They are ready! That in itself is a valuable lesson. But Jesus takes the scene one surprising step further. The master enters, fastens his belt and immediately sets out to feed and serve the servants, putting himself below the lowly slaves! Really? This is scandalous! Again Jesus shocks us by reversing the usual, standard social order and rules. This is not

rewarding the servants for doing what they are supposed to do. This is a gift, the greatest gift possible . . . giving up the highest privilege for the sake of the lowest. Jesus said that whoever wishes to be great must be the slave of others. According to Jesus, loving one's neighbor(s) that way is more important than perfectly practicing one's religion. Do I love trying to be perfect and look good more than I love loving my neighbor? Do I love my beliefs more than I love loving my neighbor? OOPS! My heart is in the wrong place again!

So Lew, what are you saying . . . that I get to wear a God's kingdom tee with these two words: poverty and hospitality? No! GOD HASN'T GIVEN ME A T-SHIRT. GOD HAS GIVEN ME A LIFE. God wants to see poverty and hospitality in my life, not on my clothes! "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and sit and eat with you and you with me." [Rev. 3:20]

The door to God's kingdom is the human heart. At the very least that means God gives me the ability to care and to value. It's up to me what I value and care about. When I value people more and privilege less, when my life pattern or path is marked by poverty and hospitality, then I have opened the door to the kingdom. Praise be to God that the legacy of our denomination, and the legacy of this congregation, has been and continue to be, to open the doors of poverty and hospitality to people and encourage them to follow the paths that lie beyond. [Show UCC JAPANet newsletter and Westminster bulletin.]

The human heart is also capable of closing doors and keeping them shut . . . doors of human rights, doors of equal opportunity, doors of right to healthcare. The doors, the barriers we and our culture create, separate us from other children of God. Every door we shut in the face of one of our brothers or sisters, and keep shut, shuts out Jesus. In order to be Christ in our world, be Christ to others, we will need to open the door of our heart to Jesus, who stands there knocking. And then . . . WE ARE GOING TO HAVE TO GO KNOCK ON SOME OTHER DOORS AND SERVE [be a slave to] WHOEVER ANSWERS.

In this presidential election year of 2016, or in any year, we have many concerns and worries. We have work to do as citizens of the United States of America and of God's kingdom [which are not the same thing]. So let us do our work. And as we work, let us remember Jesus' words. It is not EITHER our work OR God's work, but BOTH our work AND God's work. It is God's good pleasure, he said, to GIVE us the kingdom. That happens every time we open the door to those Jesus calls the least of his brothers and sisters, all of whom are so much more than just charity cases . . . but who are, in fact, the Master, our rabbi, coming again. And so, he also said, when you open a door, do not be afraid. AMEN.