

Sermon: Serve the Kingdom of God

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Mark 10:35-45**

For a few weeks now, we've been working our way through the Gospel according to Mark, reading consecutive passages that have cumulatively built up to what we just heard Jesus say about himself. Two weeks ago, we heard how we must *receive* the kingdom of God as a child would, as a gift. Last week, we heard that to *enter* the kingdom of God, we must make both a religious and a moral commitment to God.

And now we're getting an idea of what it means to *serve* the kingdom of God.

So, it would be helpful to know what we mean when we talk about 'the kingdom of God,' or even the 'kingdom of heaven,' which is the same thing.

The source for the kingdom of God comes primarily from two covenants, one made with Abram and the other with David. In Genesis, God said to Abram, 'I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing' (Genesis 12:6), and later on, 'The Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land...' and then defines the boundaries (Genesis 15:18).

To King David, God said, 'When your days are fulfilled, and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever' (2 Samuel 7:12-13).

So, God has promised land and a physical kingdom to Abram and his descendants, through David. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God added a spiritual requirement, saying, 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances' (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

These are the core expressions of God's unconditional commitment to humanity.

In truth, the kingdom of God is complex and multi-dimensional. The expression ‘kingdom of God’ does not appear in the Old Testament per se, but the theme of king and kingdom appears over 3000 times. In the New Testament, only Matthew uses the phrase ‘kingdom of heaven,’ and he uses it interchangeably with ‘kingdom of God.’

Even Jesus never defined it precisely, though he did tell us what it was *like* in several parables. The kingdom of God is *like* a mustard seed; when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs for all the birds of the air to nest in (Matthew 13:31-32). The kingdom of God is *like* yeast that leavens the bread (Matthew 13:33). By speaking in parables, Jesus said that he would ‘proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world’ (Matthew 13:35). Tellingly, no one ever bothered to ask Jesus for a definition.

Scripture tells us that it has always existed; that it is universal; that God runs it. Scripture also tells us that it had a definite, historical beginning; that it is local to Mount Zion; and that God and humanity rule it together in covenant with each other. In Scripture, the kingdom is both ‘future’ and ‘now.’ Jesus said, ‘in fact, the kingdom of God is among you’ (Luke 17:21), yet he also taught his disciples to pray that it would come (Matthew 6:10). Getting a grip on one simple definition of the kingdom of God is like trying to give a cat a bath.

The one thing we do know from all these definitions and characterizations is that *God is king*. That is the central theme in the collection of books we call The Bible.

Why bring it up when there is no mention of the kingdom in today’s readings?

We bring it up because James and John make their request while Jesus and the disciples are on the road to Jerusalem, immediately after Jesus tells them, for the third time, what will happen to him when they get there. They’re jostling for their future positions in the kingdom when Jesus returns in glory. They said they were willing and able to drink the cup that Jesus would drink, and to be baptized with the baptism by which Jesus would be baptized. Did they have a full understanding of what that meant? Ironically, and tragically, James died as the first martyr for the movement in 44 AD, something which Mark might have known when he wrote his Gospel 25 or so years later.

In teaching the disciples that there is no hierarchy, Jesus seems a little snarky when he says, ‘You know that among the Gentiles their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants. But it is not so among *you*...’, when, on the face of it, it does seem

that way. But the disciples are not tyrants. They're fisherman and carpenters, farmers and husbands and fathers. In a society built on honor and status, these men just want to know where they stand, and they need a place to stand.

For Jesus, true greatness came from the ideal of servant leadership, of service to others. His teaching is opposed to power and prestige, and we must be wary about imitating the injustices that we see baked into the systems at work in the greater world.

The psalmist says that God, with infinite wisdom, created the heavens and the earth for all creatures, not just the human kind. We're just one of many species that benefit from God's abundance and creative power. God 'set the earth on its foundations.' And in God's first response to Job, the Lord asked, 'Where were you when I did it?'

God created mountains and valleys, and the waters that cover the deep 'as with a garment.' God also set boundaries; there is a place for everything in the natural world. There are no hierarchies, and we praise the Lord for it.

For those actively seeking power – or maybe seeking *more* power – Jesus' teaching intends to check that behavior. It's intended to change the prevailing mind-set that says status and social-climbing are good things above all else. But we have to be careful in how we interpret this teaching. For those already in a servant role, this teaching can be damaging. Jesus wants servant *leaders*. He doesn't want to see people put into servile positions. This teaching does not justify exploitation.

Back in the day, even churches attracted people who were more interested in status than in service. Today's church is less attractive to such people, and that's fine as long as there are people like James and John in the church too. There are plenty of other arenas in which people can exercise a self-serving lust for power.

In the financial-services world, they like to say that 'past performance is no guarantee of future results.' One day the market is up, and the next, it might be way down. Investments gain and lose value all the time. It's the nature of the business. Just don't bet the farm on it.

While a brokerage house provides a service designed to make money for clients, Jesus said, 'whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave to all' – not a slave to just one person, but a universal servant who is also served by others. Rather than seeking to dominate, Jesus says, seek to serve. He turned the understanding of power on its head;

no wonder his disciples had trouble understanding it at first. Putting his ideal into practice today, we would see a faith community made up of servant leaders who act in God's name for the good of all. It would look like a church that worships God, does outreach ministry, is known to and active in the community, and which cares deeply for its own members.

Jesus asked James and John for their total devotion, and they gave it, hopefully with open eyes and full understanding. Our challenge is to decide for ourselves whether we are able to drink from the same cup or not.

Amen.