

Trinity United Methodist Church

March 29, 2020

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Revelation 11:15-17

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.” And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, The One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign.”

This is the Word of God for the people of God. And we say together: Thanks be to God.

Prayer

Let's pause for a word of prayer this morning. We have a prayer request from Kristin Wilda for a friend of Mike Wilda's, who is a patient affected by COVID over at the hospital in Norfolk. He's in ICU, but not on a ventilator, thankfully, so we pray that his body will be able to fight and not have to go on the ventilator. We pray for the many others who will be affected, and we pray for all involved. So as I start off in prayer this morning, I will start off and then I'm going to pause and let y'all pray as a family, as yourselves in front of your computer, your TV, whatever you're watching me on right now, and have a few moments of prayer as a family, and then I will close us together. So let's pray.

God, we give thanks for all your many blessings. We thank you again for the gift of technology in which we're able to gather and to worship you together, even in the comfort of our own homes. God, we indeed pray for Mike's friend and all of those who have been infected with this virus. We pray for all of those doctors, nurses, medical staff and personnel who are on the front lines fighting this. We pray for their safety and their families' safety. We pray that we will all do what we're supposed to do to slow the spread of this disease. We pray for you to work a miracle to get this disease out of here. We thank you for those to whom you have given wisdom to be able to figure all this out. We pray, oh God, for all those affected economically and otherwise as well.

Hear us, oh God, as we gather as families, as individuals, in our own places of worship this morning as we pray together. (*Time of individual/family prayer*) Hear us as we pray these things and more, for it's in the name of Christ that we pray.

And open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

Sermon

One of the things that I am absolutely loving right now about this virtual church world in which we find ourselves is the breaking down of barriers in the body of Christ. I see pastor friends commenting about how great it is to worship with colleagues in other places, where we don't get chances to worship together as colleagues. And many times we as pastors don't get opportunities to *just* be able to sit and worship. Typically we're up front leading all the time. So sometimes my family and I will escape over to a church that has a Sunday evening service or something like that. We haven't done that in forever. But this way in which we're able to connect virtually. I know I've got folks at my home church that tune in to this; shout out to y'all. Again, friends from all over, friends from Northern Virginia. So it's a fantastic way in which we're able to connect in the body of Christ together, literally beyond our church walls.

So if you're new to Trinity United Methodist Church here in Smithfield, our theme verse for this year is **Matthew 6:33**. I invite you to read it with me. ***But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*** Let's read it again, one more time for good measure. *But seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

This is our theme verse for this year. If you remember, I introduced it back at the beginning of the year, a lesson from the church in Korea. I've been over there twice, this most recent time with my Doctor of Ministry program through Asbury. We visited and took a deep dive into Kwanglim Methodist Church. We visited their campuses all over in and around Seoul, Korea. And one of the things we noticed was that the pastor discerned a theme scripture verse for the year, and they had banners with it in every single church. So taking a key from that, a verse for us to unify around as a church, and boy, if there's any time that it applies, it certainly is now.

We find this verse set in the context of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and specifically in the context of His teaching on worry. And what does Jesus say about worry? He says *don't do it*. And wow, do we have much to be worried about right now.

Getting sick. Our loved ones getting sick. Those who are already sick, and not just with the COVID virus, but those with cancer, those with other ailments as well. We've long been worried about them. Many of us are worried for our loved ones and friends who are in the medical field and on the front lines fighting this. Many are worried about the economy and the economic impacts that we're seeing. Those who have already lost jobs, those in danger of losing jobs. And some of the worries are just down to, "Are we going to run out of toilet paper, and we can't find any? What do we do then?" And one of the things that I find myself, I guess worrying about, but certainly over and over in my mind, is, are we ever going back to life as we knew it?

And if ever there is a time for these words of Jesus, this is it. To sum up, Jesus says, don't worry. But again, seek first His kingdom—God's kingdom—and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

So earlier this year we talked about *seeking*. And seeking is something that is active. It's not passive. If we're playing hide and seek and we're the ones seeking, we're moving about. We're actively looking for the people who are hiding. It's not the opposite, and we're sitting waiting to be found. We are active. We're out there. We are seeking.

Scripture has a lot to say about seeking, and in particular, seeking the Lord. In Isaiah 55, it says, "Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call on Him while He is near." In Colossians 3 verse 1: "Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." And then in Jeremiah 29, God says, "You will seek me and you will find me when you seek me with all your heart."

Well, today we're focusing on the next part of this theme verse, where Jesus says, "Seek first His kingdom," or seek first *God's* kingdom. What do we mean by *kingdom*? Now let me offer a caveat. When it comes to talking about the kingdom of God, we could devote an entire semester's worth of a seminary class to that. There's all kind of scholarship over the last hundred years at least, talking about what is the kingdom of God. So let me distill it down into just a few points for us.

And I think it would be helpful, first of all, to talk about what the kingdom is *not*. The kingdom of God does not conform to any of the standards of this world. When we think about any kind of earthly kingdom. Today we would say country, right? Those concepts fall woefully short of what we mean by the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is *in* the world, but it is not *of* the world. In fact, Jesus, when He is standing before Pilate in the Gospel of John, tells Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world. My kingdom is from another place."

So therefore, the kingdom of God does not follow any earthly political agenda. Let me say it once more for those in the back. *The kingdom of God does not reflect any earthly political agenda.* Certainly not any Republican or Democrat or Libertarian or Green or whatever political agenda. The kingdom of God is political, but it's according to God. Polity is how we govern ourselves, right? And it's how God governs. And yes, that means that there are rules and there are laws about how we are to treat one another. They're in scripture. Go look them up. But, again, the kingdom of God does *not* equate to any earthly political agenda. I hope that is crystal clear.

Therefore, also, the kingdom of God does not equate to any particular earthly nationality. I've seen too much where there is way too much blending, or it comes dangerously close to equating the kingdom of God with America, or the modern-day nation of Israel as we know it today. Or any other country. All earthly kingdoms will fall away. The only kingdom that will remain is God's.

In the gospels, Jesus talks about the kingdom of God being like the mustard seed, that though it's the tiniest of all seeds, it grows into a large tree, such that the birds of the air perch in its branches. And He's not specific about which birds perch in its branches, whether it's cardinals, whether it's robins, whether it's eagles, whether it's buzzards. Whatever...all the birds are able to perch in its branches. And I think that's an example of how all people will be able to gather in the kingdom of God.

So if we're talking about God's kingdom, then a kingdom means that there's got to be a king or a queen, right? A sovereign that governs over the kingdom, that rules above everybody else. So in the kingdom of God, of course, *God* is sovereign. Not us. In other places of scripture, we read about it as "God's reign," or "God's rule." God is in charge. And we see this not just in the New Testament, but in the Old Testament as well. The Psalms declare God's universal and everlasting rule. In one of my favorite books of the Bible, 1 Samuel, God had raised up leaders called "judges,"—the book of Judges, there you go—that were leaders that would arise in time of need to lead Israel through whatever crisis in which they found themselves. But then that person would fade away from leadership and God was still king. God was still in charge. And when people found themselves in crisis again, God would raise up another leader. Deborah was one, Gideon, and there were others as well.

And then in the time of 1 Samuel, that role would transition to more of the priests and the prophets, such as Samuel himself. But in the time of Samuel, as he got to be old and he was beginning to turn things over to his sons, his sons didn't follow the ways of God, and the people began saying, "We want a king 'such as all the other nations

have.” In other words, they were saying, “All these other kingdoms around us, they have a king that they can see. They have a king they can talk to. You say God is king, but we can’t see God.” They said, “We want to be like everybody else.” And Samuel, of course, didn’t like it, but God told Samuel, “It is not *you* they have rejected, but they have rejected *Me* as their king.” They rejected *God* as their king.

And through the history of Israel, through the Old Testament, there were good kings of Israel, and then there were bad kings of Israel. And by the end of the Old Testament, there arose this hope for a “divine king” again. “Hey, we sort of messed it up with these earthly kings. We want a God king. We want a king who is God’s chosen one, God’s Messiah, who would rule over a kingdom that would be everlasting, with peace, with justice, and with righteousness.” And we see that especially through the prophets in the Old Testament, Isaiah on into the shorter books of the prophets.

So, again, Jesus doesn’t make sense without the Old Testament. Jesus doesn’t just show up in the New Testament and say, “Hey! I’m the Son of God. Here I am! Everybody rejoice now!” No. He came in the midst of this hope for a divine King, God’s chosen one, who would bring this kingdom to the people, of everlasting peace and justice and righteousness forever.

In the New Testament, Jesus comes onto the scene, and as we’ve studied in the Gospel of Mark Bible study, Jesus’ central message, He gives it right off the bat. As soon as He shows up in Mark’s gospel, His first message and His message throughout is: “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Good News.” The kingdom of God is near.

In the Gospel of Mark class I took in seminary, the teacher explained it thinking of D-Day in World War II, where after the invasion on the beaches of Normandy and the French coast, we began to get a taste that the end of World War II was coming. It was at hand. We could almost taste it. We could feel it. Man, it was *right there*. It still took a ton of work to get there. It still took some time to fully get there, but eventually we got there to the end. But on June 6, 1944, we could say, it’s at hand; especially looking back on it.

So it’s that sense as well. This was Jesus’ central message. *The kingdom of God is at hand*. You can reach out. You can touch it. You can feel it. You can sense it. So what’s the proper response for us? Jesus said, Repent, and believe the gospel.

Jesus’ awareness of the kingdom of God motivated all that He did. His miracles weren’t just miracles, but they were signs which confirmed the nearness of God’s kingdom, of God’s rule breaking into the kingdoms of earth. And in fact, the kingdom of

God is so wrapped up in Jesus' identity that He speaks of being one with the Father. That He Himself is God in the flesh. That Jesus is the King, Jesus is the One who will be the one to separate the sheep from the goats. And if Jesus is the King, then Jesus embodies the kingdom. So therefore, wherever Jesus is, there is the kingdom of God. Again, *wherever Jesus is, there is the kingdom of God.*

So, there is the sense that the kingdom of God was breaking in in the person of Jesus when He walked on the earth. But then, now He's not here any more. So it's what we call in seminary and in church-speak, "Now, but not yet." The kingdom of God is now, but it's also not yet. Because as we look around us, certainly if we were living fully in the kingdom of God right now, we would be worshiping face to face, around the throne of God, not even here in our beautiful sanctuary or FAC. We would be altogether physically present with Jesus. It would be fantastically glorious. Of course, that is not happening. This virus has pushed us into our separate homes, and we still live in a very fallen world.

But yet we know from the end of the Book, that at the end of earthly time, Jesus' reign will be fully realized, and the fullness of the kingdom is in the future one day. As the old gospel song says, *"Soon and very soon, we're going to see the King. No more crying there, no more dying there. Soon and very soon, we are going to see the King."*

But how is Jesus present *now*? The Bible tells us that Jesus is present through the Holy Spirit. God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is able to dwell in us when we allow the Spirit to do so. And so that means that Jesus lives in us as well, right? So, if A plus B equals C, whatever that equation is—y'all know what I'm talking about—the transitive property, whatever, I think it is...whew! Too much homeschooling these days, maybe. But if Jesus lives in us and through us, then wherever we go, we bring the kingdom, don't we? If Jesus lives in us and through us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, then wherever we go, because we've got Jesus in us and with us, there's the kingdom as well.

Think about some of your interactions even before all of this forced us into our own homes and into social distancing. Think about some of your actions before all of this. Do our actions reflect that wherever we go, the kingdom of God goes with us? I think about some of mine and I think, *mmm...maybe.*

So what does it mean to seek the kingdom first? It means, of course, letting Jesus live in us and through us. And I think ultimately it goes back to what we talked about in the Gospel of Mark Bible study this past week, where Jesus said, "If anyone wants to be my disciple, if anybody wants to get close to me, they must first deny themselves, take

up their cross, and then follow Jesus.” So seeking the kingdom first, above all else, means denying ourselves. It means putting our agendas aside and tuning in to God’s agenda. It means putting aside our druthers, our preferences, our comfort zones, all of those things, and getting in tune with what God wants. We do that through reading His word, staying in His word, and through prayer.

Again, for all the times before these days in which we live, in which we said, “Oh, we’re just too busy to spend time in the word and in prayer”—some of us are still pretty busy, but we’ve all got a little bit more time on our hands now. So how are we doing at that, y’all?

Deny ourselves, and *then* take up our cross. As I mentioned in the Gospel of Mark Bible study, the cross is not meant to be a pretty piece of jewelry. The cross is not meant to be a decoration on the wall or meant to be a lovely brass fixture on our altar or table in worship. The cross is an instrument of death and of torture for the Roman empire. So to take up your cross meant that you’re willing to die for this cause. You’re willing to die going against the kingdoms that are in power at the time. Many people say they’d be willing to die for their country or their kingdom. Well, here Jesus is saying we have to be willing to be so invested in the kingdom of God that we’re willing to go even to death for the kingdom of God.

And then lastly, after we’ve denied ourselves and committed to the point that we’re willing to die, *then* follow Jesus. Abide in Jesus, so that He may bear fruit in us. To be the branches staying connected to the vine that is Jesus, so that He may bear fruit in us. Many times when the preacher says “fruit,” our brains may automatically jump to the fruit of the Spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control, etc.; I always leave out one or two when I do it off the top of my head. Here’s another list that is very similar, but slightly different. 2 Peter says, “For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge (spend time in the Word); and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does *not* have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

And again, what does that kingdom look like? Stanley Grenz, a theologian, says, “The kingdom of God is that order of perfect peace, righteousness, justice, and love that God gives to the world.”

I think you might have heard me tell this story before. When I went for my ordination interviews in the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church, you sit before different subcommittees of the Board of Ordained Ministry and you sit before the Theology Committee, and they grill you on theological questions. You have to have the right answers, otherwise you do not pass. And it was my last interview of the day. You sit before three; they’re an hour long each. It’s a marathon; it’s a pretty grueling process. And the last question they asked was: “Define the kingdom of God.” So I started blubbering about a bit, and I started giving examples of where I’d seen the kingdom of God in my ministry. Where I’d seen reconciliation happen between people that were estranged from each other. Where I’d seen new people get active in the life of the church, and especially in serving others. Where I’d seen individuals speaking up on behalf of others that didn’t have a voice. And I was going along in this vein, and finally one of the pastors on that Theology Committee put his fist down on the table and he said, “No. The kingdom of God is (blank). *You* fill in (blank).” And in a bit of exasperation—like I said, I was tired, I was a bit *done*—I said, “Fine. The kingdom of God is *love*.” And then he sat there and he started writing on his paper with a bit of a frown on his face.

I passed. You get the feedback sheet afterwards, and they said, “Yeah, you did good, except you might want to brush up on your definition of the kingdom of God.” But I was pretty happy with my response, because the kingdom of God, when it boils down to it, is *love*. 1 John tells us that God is love. So why wouldn’t His kingdom be love as well?

So the final question is: How are we bringing the kingdom now? How are we seeking *first* the kingdom? How are we seeking first peace and righteousness and justice and love? We have a fantastic opportunity—everybody’s talking about how unprecedented this time in which we live is. And friends, it’s just as unprecedented of an opportunity for us to be the church.

It’s one thing if we could have gathered this morning in the sanctuary and in the FAC and thought, “Oh, yeah, the kingdom of God is love. Isn’t that nice? Yes, that makes me feel so good. Thank you, pastor, wonderful sermon today.” And then we go out and we live Monday through Friday just like we normally do. Our lives are being so interrupted right now—let’s do something different. Let’s be the church where we find

ourselves. And that means first of all, in our own homes. How are we seeking the kingdom in our own home, with each other? With peace, with unconditional love? How are we seeking the kingdom in our neighborhood right around us? By doing the loving thing and *not touching other people*, right? By doing the loving thing and not hoarding toilet paper and sanitizer and such. But maybe we might bring the kingdom by doing things like, I saw one suggestion online the other day of writing thank-you cards to doctors and nurses in the hospitals, and I want to extend that opportunity (it just popped into my head. Thank you, Holy Spirit, for bringing that to mind.) to gather as a family, make a bunch of thank-you cards to doctors and nurses, and we'll see if we can find out where to send them at Obici Hospital and Riverside Hospital and some of these other places where we end up when we have to go to the hospital.

Maybe seeking the kingdom here means while we're out at the grocery store, we pick up some extra things for COP and drop them off here on the back porch as well. Thank you for those of y'all who have been doing that. There's all kinds of opportunities and ways for us to be the church. To be bringers of the kingdom of God here and now in a way like never before, such that when people see us doing these things, they say, "In the midst of all that's going on, why are you doing *that*?" You say, "Because I love Jesus and because Jesus loves you, and we're building the kingdom together."

I want to lift up two songs for you this morning that we'll link to in YouTube in the comments. The first is a song by Rend Collective. We've sung it many times in Rivers worship: "Build Your Kingdom Here." It's a fantastic, get-you-moving song. That is a great one.

And then the one that kept popping in my head as I was writing this sermon was that chorus: *With every act of love / We bring the kingdom come*. It's the song, "With Every Act of Love." That is a song by Jason Gray (no, not the Jason Gray that goes to Trinity; I'm sure he has a lovely singing voice, but this is a Christian musician and recording artist.). So check those songs out and get your worship on this morning.

And so, it is almost noon. As we shared last week, our bishop, Bishop Lewis, has invited us to pray a prayer together every day at noon. So as we close this time together, would you join me in this prayer today:

Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we thank you for your blessings, past, present and future. You are our rock and the source of our hope in all things and at all times. As Jehovah Jireh, our provider God, we ask you this day to stretch out your mighty hand and eradicate from the face of the earth forever this virus called COVID-19 that is spreading rapidly from continent to continent.

We also pray that you, Jehovah Rapha, our healing God, would place your hand upon all of those who have been stricken by this virus and restore them to full health. Be with those who have lost loved ones and are grieving. Protect all who are caring for those with this virus and keep them from contracting it themselves. Calm our fears and provide us with your peace that surpasses all understanding. Strengthen us with the joy of the Lord and help us to hold firmly to the hope that only you can provide.

Unify us that we, the Virginia Annual Conference, may be able to experience anew the promise of your presence in and through the unity of our faith, hope and trust in you in the days ahead and forever. We offer this prayer in the mighty name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen and amen.

So I will turn the song back on and you can jam out a little bit as we close today.

Music: "With Every Act of Love" by Jason Gray

Sitting at the stoplight / He can't be bothered by the heart cry / Written on the cardboard in her hands / Oh, but when she looks him in the eye / His heart is broken open wide / And he feels the hand of God reach out through him / As heaven touches earth /

(Oh oh oh-oh oh oh oh) / We bring the kingdom come / (Oh oh oh-oh oh oh oh) / With every act of love / Jesus, help us carry You / Alive in us, Your light shines through / With every act of love / We bring the kingdom come /

There's silence at the table / He wants to talk but he's not able / For all the shame that's locked him deep inside / Oh, but her words are the medicine / When she says they can begin again / And forgiveness will set him free tonight / As heaven touches earth /

(Oh oh oh-oh oh oh oh) / We bring the kingdom come / (Oh oh oh-oh oh oh oh) / With every act of love / Jesus, help us carry You / Alive in us, Your light shines through / With every act of love / We bring the kingdom come /

God put a million, million doors in the world / For His love to walk through / One of those doors is you /

I said, God put a million, million doors in the world / For His love to walk through / One of those doors is you /

(Oh oh oh-oh oh oh oh) / We bring the kingdom come / (Oh oh oh-oh oh oh oh) / With every act of love / Jesus, help us carry You / Alive in us, Your light shines through / With every act of love / We bring the kingdom/

(Oh oh oh-oh oh oh oh) / We bring the kingdom come / (Oh oh oh-oh oh oh oh) / With every act of love / Jesus, help us carry You / Alive in us, Your light shines through / With every act of love / We bring the kingdom come / With every act of love / We bring the kingdom / Come /