

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

October 6, 2024

Receivers of the Kingdom

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of my favorite memories from my son's childhood is from the Christmas after he turned four years old. We're not entirely sure where he picked this up. But after opening each and every present he would loudly exclaim, "Oh my goodness!" It was adorable! Literally...every single gift elicited an excited, "Oh my goodness!"

His excitement at each gift was so great that couldn't contain himself. The gratitude and joy that my son displayed warms my heart every time I think of it. He was receiving his gifts from a place of child-like openness and authentic joy. When was the last time you received something that caused you to let loose with some version of "Oh my goodness!"?

I think that's what Jesus is getting at when he said: "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."¹ A child receives a gift with utter joy and gratitude! Especially if it's a gift they've been longing for! Imagine the joy that's potentially ours at being given the very kingdom of God! Do you ever marvel at that knowledge? That the very Kingdom of God is yours! What joyous news!

Jesus makes this joy a major theme when he teaches about the Kingdom of God. We hear in Matthew that the kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field², or like a beautiful pearl³ and people will do anything to get that treasure and pearl. Or we hear in Luke how it's like a mustard seed⁴ or leaven,⁵ small but able to act on the world in amazing ways. God's Kingdom should elicit a response from us when we realize we have it! It's far more valuable than any treasure or pearl after all!

¹ Mark 10:15 (NRSVUE)

² Matthew 13:44

³ Matthew 13:45

⁴ Luke 13:19

⁵ Luke 13:20

Now the question becomes how will we receive the kingdom and what impact will it have on our lives? God has given us this great gift of salvation, completely free of charge, it's already ours. We cannot accept it, for we have it already. But we can reject it (and we regularly do).

This is a key and unique point in Lutheran theology, so I want to emphasize it again. God intends salvation for all people. God in Jesus Christ has overcome death and all evil. That salvific event has already been accomplished for us, we have it already, God has saved us out of pure love and grace. Now while we can't accept this gift (its already ours after all), we can reject it.⁶ And we do reject it. Every time we act selfishly, every time we speak cruel words or judge and criticize others, every time we sin against God and neighbor, we are trying to reject God's kingdom for them and thereby only rejecting it for ourselves.

Thanks be to God for never-ending and unearned love and grace! For as often as we live out our brokenness, God is right there inviting us back to the Way. The Way of Christ, the Way of God's Kingdom. And even in that continual grace God models for us the Way. We too are called to extend grace again and again and again.

This is not easy. It requires both vulnerability and compassion from us. And when our hearts have been hardened by the world or by previous rough experiences, it can lead to broken relationships. We so easily forget the love and grace of God and thereby stop extending it to one another too.

Which brings me to the other major section of this reading. The teaching on divorce that began our Gospel reading. This is a hard teaching, based on the hard hearts of the people. The Pharisees are attempting to test Jesus with this question. But as I reflect on these verses you know what I am struck by? Neither the Pharisees nor Jesus speak of love amid this argument over marriage. It's only about what is lawful not what is loving.

It strikes me that the same open stance that Jesus is lifting up in children may be what is missing in this teaching of divorce too. If a marriage is full of joy and gratitude it is far more likely to last. If each person in a relationship regards the other's presence in their life as a precious gift, well...that seems like a great foundation for a life-long commitment if you ask me!

⁶ c.f. "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him..." Luther's Explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed

Jesus tells the Pharisees that Moses' teaching regarding divorce, and his own amplification of it, are "Because of your hardness of heart."⁷ Humanity is not great at approaching the world with the child-like, open stance Jesus is inviting us to, the quick readiness to express joy and gratitude. It appears our hearts often harden as we get older, perhaps due to the challenges and vagaries of life. So Jesus invites us to address the hardness of heart we so often cultivate by looking to children as an example.

God wants humanity to be in good, loving, and healthy relationships of all different sorts. God has granted us a diversity of relationships to engage in: familial ones, friendly ones, platonic ones, working ones, and intimate ones. But the key to all of them, and what God desires for all of them, is the **good, loving, and healthy** part!

You won't hear me preach from this pulpit that divorce is a never acceptable. Sometimes it is necessary because of our hardness of hearts. But I hope we can see that these teachings of Christ are inviting us to soften our hearts. Jesus is inviting us to prioritize differently. To let go of our hurts and anger and seek gratitude and joy instead.

However, I will offer the same caveat I offer whenever I broach this subject. If your partner is harming you physically, emotionally, or spiritually, please seek help to get out of that relationship. Reconciliation and forgiveness should always be our goal, but so should health, safety, and wholeness. While we should seek to repair our relationships when we can, some may only be repairable in the next life.

But in all our dealings with others, Jesus is inviting us to a far more open stance than we often want to adopt. A kinder and gentler stance too. Sure your housemate has done the dishes hundreds of times, but your "thank you" still means a lot. Seeing your partners eyes light up when they catch sight of you, even after decades...that joy can endure a lot.

What might your relationships look like if you shared the joy and delight you take in them more? What would it mean for someone you love if you surprised them with a thoughtful gesture? What love and grace might bloom from even the smallest act of kindness? What might it mean for your own heart to express your joy and delight more? What could it mean for your relationship with God if you grounded it in gratitude? All of questions get at the softening of our hearts, they open us to a more child-like stance towards the world.

⁷ Mark 10:5b

Take a moment now and think about the people in your life. The people you love and care for. The people work or play with. The people you are thankful for. What does thinking about the people you love and care for do to you? How does thinking about them make you feel? Good? Warm? Fuzzy? Loved? Whole? Maybe those feelings can grow. Maybe if you dwell with them long enough they can even grow big enough to demand being let loose. Maybe like you should say something? Might I suggest, "Oh my goodness!" Amen.