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**NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

Mark 12:28-34 Psalm 146

In the Wizard of Oz, aside from Toto, who were Dorothy’s three traveling companions?

 Right! The Scarecrow, the Lion and the Tin Man.

* What did the scarecrow want? A brain, a mind, intellect.
* The lion wanted what? Courage, the strength to perform the right deeds and to protect others.
* The Tin Man wanted what? A Heart – the emotional capacity to sympathize, to feel, to love.

L. Frank Baum used those characters to represent the three classical centers of human nature and experience as claimed by many religions and philosophies: the mind, the body and the heart.

A brain would give the scarecrow the capacity to think, to reason, to understand.

 With courage, the lion would use his body to carry out best behavior, actions.

 With a heart the Tin Man could feel, love, to be in relationship with others.

Jesus said the most important commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and the second most important is to love your neighbor. That means that we need to offer God the entirety of who we are, the fullest expression of who and what we are. The heart, soul, mind, and strength compose the totality of a person, and God deserves your best thinking, your best behavior, your best relationships and best treatment of others. Bad thinking, bad behavior, bad conduct, bad treatment of people – these betray who you are and dishonor God! When the teacher of the law responded “Yes, Jesus, you are right, to love God and neighbor with all your being is more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices,” Jesus replied, *“You are not far from the kingdom of God.”*

Probably, the crowd and the man were surprised that Jesus told the man that he was not far from the kingdom, because in most of the New Testament conflicts, the scribes and the Pharisees were the guys in the black hats. But Jesus saw something in this man that pleased him, and he said to him, *“You are not far from the kingdom of God.”* This says some things to us about the nature of the kingdom of God.

**It says to us that the kingdom of God is already here.** Mostly we talk about the kingdom of God that is to come at the end of time. You may have seen the bumper sticker: “Jesus is coming. Look busy.” The Second Coming, when Jesus returns, is the culmination of the kingdom of God, but Jesus teaches that God’s kingdom is already here, already among us. God’s kingdom is central to Jesus’ teachings.

 His first sermon began: *“The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.”* “…*the kingdom of God is at hand…at hand…at hand.”* Nearly all of Jesus’ parables begin with “The kingdom of God is like this … and the kingdom is like that….”

 *“The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed . . . the kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in the field . . . the kingdom of God is like a pearl of great price . . . you are not far from the kingdom . . . the kingdom is within you.”* “The kingdom *is…the kingdom is…”* that’s present tense, the kingdom is already here. **The kingdom of God is a *state of being, here and now****.* The kingdom of God exists wherever God reigns in human hearts. *“You are not far from the kingdom.”*

Consider this analogy. When you or I go overseas we remain an American citizen. We may be on foreign soil, but we take our citizenship with us. So it is that we can be in this world and yet recognize that this world is not our home. We are citizens of another kingdom even though we’ve never set foot in that kingdom. That kingdom in its fullness is yet to come, but we are already citizens of that

kingdom when we have God’s love in our hearts, when we treat others well, when we evidence God in our lives.

John Yoder was a missionary in Laos, adjacent to Vietnam. In discussing the kingdom of God, he pointed out that before the colonists imposed national boundaries, the king of Laos and the king of Vietnam reached an agreement on taxation in the border areas. People who ate short-grain rice, built their houses on stilts, and decorated their houses with Indian-style serpents were considered Laotians. Those people who ate long-grain rice, built their houses on the ground, and decorated their houses with Chinese style dragons were considered Vietnamese.

 The exact location of your home was not what determined your nationality. Instead, each person

 belonged to the kingdom whose cultural values you exhibited.

 So it is with us: we live in the world, but as part of God’s kingdom, we are to live according to

 God’s kingdom’s standards and values. (Yoder, in Larson, 125).

We pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done…” and the two are linked. Wherever God’s will is done, there is the kingdom, and wherever the kingdom is you’ll find people doing God’s will.

**The kingdom of God is already here and available to us. His kingdom expresses unconditional love.** What is the great commandment? *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself.”*  I John 4:7 states, “*Beloved let us love one another, for love is of God and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love, does not know God for God is love.”*

God is love.

 Wherever God is, there is love. And wherever love is, there is God.

 If you are a citizen of the kingdom of God, it will show by the way you love.

 You can’t claim citizenship in God’s kingdom if you continue to hate, to resent, to hold on to prejudice and bitterness.

 The kingdom is centered in love.

In her book *Stories for the Heart* Alice Gray tells a story from missionary doctor Dr. Paul Brand that illustrates that kind of love. Dr. Brand had a patient named John Karmegan who suffered from leprosy. The leprosy had decimated John’s feet and hands, had partially paralyzed his face, and in order to protect his eyes from the effects of the disease, a doctor had sewed his eyes partially shut. John’s appearance caused people to reject him, even to turn from him in fear.

 In his pain and anger John lashed out at people and caused problems at the hospital where Dr. Brand worked. Dr. Brand’s mother took a special interest in John, lavished him with love and attention, and shared with him her faith in Christ. Eventually, John came to Jesus and was baptized.

 But still John was angry and had trouble accepting himself or others. He taunted Dr. Brand with the question of what would happen if he tried to attend the local church. He thought that they, too, would reject him, just as everyone else had. So Dr. Brand approached the leaders of the local church and asked them if John could worship with them. Upon learning that John’s disease was no longer contagious, the leaders of the church not only allowed John to worship with them, they also agreed to let John take communion. That was huge - because this congregation drank from a common cup.

 On that first Sunday at church, after years of being the object of other’s disgust, John expected others to reject him. John had learned to believe that Jesus was love, but, if even Jesus’ followers rejected him, then who could possibly love him? Dr. Brand noticed John trembling as he made his way down the aisle of the sanctuary. But then, an elderly gentleman saw John shuffling through the church. With a warm, welcoming smile, the man scooted over and motioned for John to sit with him.

 John’s life was completely different after that. His anger melted away as the people of this church loved and accepted him. Eventually he left the hospital and got a job. After many years, Dr. Brand happened to cross paths with John again. He was working at a factory, creating tiny and intricate screws for use in typewriters. In recognition of his consistently excellent work at the plant, John Karmegan had just been named that company’s best employee in all of India. (Gray, 23-25)

**Unconditional love can heal hurts and reconcile people. It’s beautiful when we encounter such love, isn’t it?** Years ago, Albert Schweitzer told a parable about a flock of wild geese that had settled to rest on a pond. A gardener at a nearby estate captured one of the geese and cruelly clipped some of its feathers. When the geese started to resume their flight, this one bird tried frantically to lift itself into the air, but its clipped wings would not allow it to take flight.

 The other geese, observing this goose’s struggles, flew about in obvious efforts to encourage him; but it was no use. His damaged wings would not allow it. And then something astounding happened, said Schweitzer. The entire flock settled back on the pond and waited, even though the urge to go on was strong within them. For several days they waited until the damaged feather had grown sufficiently to permit the goose to fly.

 Meanwhile, something was also happening in the heart of this gardener who had clipped the bird’s wings. The cruel gardener was converted by the loving concern of those geese. He gladly watched them as they finally rose together, and all resumed their long flight. (Source unknown)

**The kingdom of God is here and now. Wherever love is, there is God. Wherever God is, there is love. One more thing: The kingdom of God is centered in Christ himself.** It is not enough to sing simply, “What the world needs now, is love sweet love.” It’s not enough to tell our friends and neighbors, “Let’s just love each other a little more and the kingdom will be ours.” That’s not how it works. We do not initiate the kingdom by our good works, the kingdom comes to us through Jesus Christ alone and his love of us enables us then to love God and others as God loves us.

**But can any of us love unconditionally? I say yes, we can. Consider your own loved ones.**

If you are a parent, think of your child.  If not, then think of someone else whom you love deeply.

 What is your love for that person like?  How do you feel about them?

 Would you make sacrifices for their good?

What kinds of hopes and dreams to you have for them?

 Would you do anything to help them realize those dreams?

 Do you love them less when they make mistakes?  When they fail at things?

 What about when they do something that hurts you?

 How would you feel if they started to doubt your love?

 How do you show them that you love them?

Most of us love our children and our dearest friends and family with an unconditional love... yet we have trouble believing that God loves us that way. Why do we doubt God’s love when God’s love is wider and longer and higher and deeper than ours?  God’s love is more gracious, more merciful.

God’s love is unconditional...as well as giving and sacrificial.  1 John 4:9 says *This is how****God****showed* ***his*** *love among****us****: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.  This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

The greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.  But we don’t have to create that love out of thin air.  *We love because God first loved us.* Our love is a response to His love... and God’s love teaches us what love means.  *If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so****we know and rely****on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.*  (I John 4:15).

**You can rely on God’s love...** God loves you as you are, God rejoice when you love Him in return, God celebrates your successes, grieves when you grieve, and comforts you when you hurt, encourages you, and has good plans for you.

**You can rely on God to love you** when you fail and even when you hurt God or one another.  God loves you enough that sometimes, like any good parent, he disciplines you.  But you can rely on God’s love to see you through anything here and now ...and in the future, when you stand before Him in the judgement.  God loves you and he sees in you the righteousness of His Son, Jesus. Let his perfect love drive out of you any fear about whether you are loveable enough or good enough to deserve his love.  The truth is that God’s love *makes you loveable* and his love *gives you* worth.  The more you realize and believe that, the more complete your love will become.

**We love others because God loves us... and when we love God and love neighbor as God has loved us, we are not far from the kingdom of God in this world.** We are citizens of that kingdom here and now by faith in Jesus Christ, and by allowing his love to flow through us to the world.

When Christopher Columbus was sailing to the new world, he saw floating on the sea leaves and branches. That told him he was drawing closer to another world.

 When you see people reaching out in love to other people in the name of Jesus Christ,

 you’re seeing evidence of his kingdom, which has come …

 and will come in completeness when Jesus returns and the kingdoms of this world will become the

 Kingdom of Our God.

Thanks be to God! Amen!

Sources

Gray, Alice. *Stories for the Heart.* Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Books, 1996. Contributed by Dr. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey. 23-25.

Larson, Craig Brian. *Illustrations for Preaching.* Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993.