

*Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is among you.”* LUKE 17.20-21 (NIV)

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IN THE EARLY 1990’s there was a small church in the woods north of Chapel Hill, NC. The building was small but beautiful, especially its sanctuary, which had a smooth hardwood floor and large windows opening to the trees and wildlife outside. Its openness and light made it seem larger than it was. In this place an unlikely group of people met every Sunday. There were elderly people, college students from UNC and Duke, a couple of families, single adults of various ages, academic sorts, hippie sorts, conservative sorts, liberal sorts, all sorts. It had about as many sorts as it had people, which was no more than about 40 on any given Sunday. A number of these folks met during the week for lunch and for Wednesday night studies. For reasons that are not important here, the church did not last. But while it lasted, there was *community*.

A few comments are due about that word – *community*. What do we know about community? We who live in a country awash in individualism, what does it mean to us? I don’t pretend to know too much about it, being as much a product of America as anyone else, but I suspect it may have something to do with what Jesus called *the kingdom of God*. This phrase may not be much more helpful, because Jesus did not tell anyone exactly what it is. But he thought God’s kingdom was really important and he talked about it a lot. And community seems central to the kingdom. After all, it is like a great banquet, a great feast. That’s what Jesus said.

The kingdom showed itself, if only a little, in the community of that tiny North Carolina church. I was there and I think I saw it. After every service of worship we would push the pews to the edge of the sanctuary and we would set up dinner. For three years we did this, every Sunday. It seems remarkable to me now. One day, I was seated at the end of one of the long tables. In the midst of the meal, in the midst of conversation, I looked down the table at those present. And for a tiny moment a veil lifted. I saw the kingdom. I saw reality. And I realized I loved those people. In the words of Thomas Merton, they were shining like the sun and didn't even know it.

Now, my wife Elizabeth would say that those friends stood within my *circle of concern*. Nice term, isn't it – *circle of concern*. It is a term for those people you pay attention to, those people you respect, those people you love, those people for whom you have compassion. Leo, Sarah, Mark, Barbara, Marjorie, Bill, Marie – these are just a few of the good people I had the honor of knowing in that place and time. They are saints and they all stand well within my circle of concern, even today. There was community then and there because Chapel Hill Reformed Church was, for a few years, an outpost of the kingdom of God. And where the kingdom is, there is community.

But community is not always so easy, or so evident. It felt incredible to me that day. It felt fantastic. But when it comes to faith, our feelings are not the most important thing. Not to devalue my experience that day, but there is more to the kingdom of God than realizing you love those that you already like a lot. There are, after all, those people we maybe don't like so much. Can you think of someone you don't like? I admit that I can. Maybe like me you have 470 raw nerves, and this person gets on 469 of them. Just because of who they are, just because of their presence on this planet. Well, C.S. Lewis offered us a nice strong

dose of reality on this point: he said that we are all that person for someone else. Me, you, everybody. Someone out there doesn't like me. Someone out there doesn't like you. I hate to break this to you, but there it is. What to do with those whom we drive crazy, whoever they are? What to do with these people who drive us crazy? Ignore them? Cut them out of *our* community, or even define our community as "anyone who is not them"? That's probably not what Jesus had in mind when he said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

For example: I'm sure that Jesus drove the Pharisees up a wall. His presence in the Temple, the way he taught, the way people loved him, the way they could never pin him down. The Pharisees probably drove Jesus crazy too, don't you think? I can see him rolling his eyes and praying for patience whenever he saw them approaching with their clever questions. Maybe he even prayed *for* them, who knows? After all, what do we find Jesus telling them today? "The kingdom of God is among you." The kingdom is among those who drive us bonkers. We are not allowed to simply cut them out of our lives. These people, whoever they are, are part of our community. Why? Because they are part of God's community. They too have a seat at the Great Banquet. It's actually that simple.

Well now I've done it. I have drawn the circle larger. Can we make it larger yet? Yes indeed. There are all those *other* people. Those who pray to Allah, or to Shiva, or who follow the way of the Buddha. Those Christians, some of them very nearby, who worship in ways different than us. Those for whom God is absent. Those for whom God is an abuser. Those for whom God is a joke. Those with whom we share the parking lot that is the top end perimeter twice every weekday. Those who live in our neighborhoods but whom we do not know. Those who check us out of the grocery store, who clean our restrooms.

Those who appear on the news every night, you know, the ones whose home or workplace or town square has been destroyed by a car bomb. Those who wander the streets of Atlanta (Buckhead!) for years with no home, no job, no family. Those in prison. Those who society ignores or is disgusted by – those in poverty, those of different sexual orientations, those who are addicted, those with mental illness. Most of these people are basically invisible to us. Not because we don't see them, but because we don't *see* them. We don't want to see them, because, frankly, it hurts too much. To see them all clearly is to let in too much information. It overloads the system. It does not compute.

My point today is not to scold and moan about how blind we are. We could all learn to see one another clearly, and may God help us to do that. The point is something bigger, something we all need to hear: Whether or not we see or know or love these people, God sees them, knows them, and loves them madly, just as God loves you madly. That's the way it is: They are part of the community of God, and are therefore part of our community. It may be difficult, and may seem a little silly, to imagine the whole earth as a community. It's so big. But as a former astronomer I can assure you that this earth of ours is frighteningly, unnervingly tiny. And 7 billion of us share it. We are a community before God, whether or not we know it. That's hard to imagine: The world as our community, the world as the kingdom of God.

Where to go from here? I'll tell you. We can enlarge our circle of concern yet again, by looking back at the saints who have come before us. Extend our circle back in time. For many of us there are those beloved who have died, who lived lives of great courage and hope, who accepted the lifelong struggle to become themselves transparently before God, whose presence we feel every day. They too are part of us, just as we here today are part of each

other. They too make us, just as we here today make each other.

Life is like a parade, you know. But you and I only view the parade as from far down an alley, seeing only what is passing now, this moment. But God, who invented time and therefore is outside of time, sits atop a tall building and sees the whole parade at once: those who have passed our alley, those who are passing it now, those who are yet to pass. To God we are all very much alive and present. God sees and knows us and loves all of us, all at once. What must it look like? What must it *sound* like? All of us from every age, every tribe, every nation, in every language: praying, talking, yelling, singing, fighting, crying, pleading, screaming, laughing. What a mess! What a beautiful, terrible mess is the kingdom of God!

It's easy, I imagine, for God to see this parade. But how can we see it? We here today in this room – how can we possibly apprehend the kingdom of God? I don't have an answer, but I can draw an analogy. As an astronomy professor I spent many nights under the night sky with my students, and I would point out stars, or planets, or galaxies. And they would regularly strain and squint, trying to see dim stars I could see easily. This is not because they were blind or my vision was excellent, but because there's a trick to it. The idea is, to see a dim star you can't look straight at it. But once you relax and look a little to the side of it, it pops clearly into view. Of course once this happens you reflexively focus on it again in an attempt to see it even better, but when you do *poof!* it disappears. It's very frustrating to novice skygazers, but once you get the knack of it, it's nearly automatic.

We cannot locate the kingdom of God by trying to focus on it. The harder we look, the fainter it becomes. And we cannot find community by straining for it. The more we strain, the more elusive it grows. The really tough thing is, we do not have to earn it. It is not a reward for being nice or for going to church or for giving to the poor or any other

supposed virtue. Jesus says to us today, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is among you.” He always spoke of the kingdom indirectly, almost elliptically, and largely in images and parables. He resisted any explicit definition of the kingdom, saying only that it is a place into which prostitutes and tax collectors, as well as children, will enter ahead of the righteous and the holy. He said it is *like* a mustard seed, a woman making bread, a pearl of great price, but he never just came out and said what it *is*. But *whatever* it is, we can be sure that it is not in some far future, it is now. The kingdom will not arrive in our boat when it comes in, or when we make enough money, or when we have children, or when our children move out, or when our church finally works out its issues, or when we figure out what we’re going to do with our lives, or when we die. The harder we look for it out there, the less aware we are that we already possess it. Jesus, who can be trusted to tell us the truth, tells us today: *The kingdom of God is among you. True community is already yours. It is now.*

Community is ours, friends, and it is a gift. May God help us to accept it today. Amen.

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At the font of the room are many candles. It is traditional on All Saints’ Day to light a candle for someone whom you love who has passed on. Today I would like to do that, but your candle may be lit for anyone, alive or dead. For the next few minutes meditate on a beloved friend, a family member, someone who drives you crazy, the homeless woman you see every afternoon, our church, the city of Atlanta, any individual or group that makes up the difficult, noisy, beautiful mess that is the community of God. And then light a candle for them.