

**Sermon – 6/17/18**  
**“The Spirit Brings...Growth”**  
**Ezekiel 17:22-24, Mark 4:26-34**  
**4th Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC**  
**Scott Kenefake**

We are still in the midst of graduation season—locally Hough High School in Cornelius had their graduation ceremony this past Tuesday. Congratulations graduates!

Of course, a mainstay of most graduation ceremonies is honoring in some way the top academic achievers—those with the highest GPA’s whom we call valedictorians and salutatorians, and those with various academic honors.

My brother-in-law was invited to join the *Phi Beta Kappa Society*—the oldest and most prestigious academic honor society as an undergraduate, but he initially tossed the invitation in the trash because “*he didn’t have any interest in joining a fraternity.*” He had absolutely no idea what it was!

Have you ever asked yourself what actually happens to these academic high achievers after they graduate and enter the real world? Do their academic talents translate to the world of work? Do they go on to change the world, run the world, impress the world?

Well, to find out, Karen Arnold, a researcher at Boston College, followed 81 high school valedictorians and salutatorians from graduation onward to see what becomes of those who lead the academic pack. Of the 95 percent who went on to graduate college, their average GPA was 3.6, and by 1994, 60 percent had received a graduate degree. There was little debate that high school success predicted college success. Nearly 90 percent are now in professional careers with 40 percent in the highest tier jobs. They are reliable, consistent, and well-adjusted, and by all measures the majority have good lives.

Commenting on the success trajectories of her subjects, Arnold said, “*Even though most are strong occupational achievers, the great majority of former high school valedictorians do not appear headed for the very top of adult achievement arenas ... (they) aren’t likely to be the future visionaries ... they typically settle into the system instead of shaking it up...*”

And there are two reasons for this. First, (according to Arnold) schools reward students who consistently do what they are told. “*Essentially we are rewarding conformity and the willingness to go along with the system.*” For example, many of the valedictorians admitted to *not* being the smartest kid in class, just the hardest worker.

The second reason (again according to Arnold) is that schools reward being a generalist. There is little recognition of student passion or expertise. The real world, however, does the reverse. “*They’re extremely well-rounded and successful, personally and professionally, but they’ve never been devoted to a single area in which they put all their passion. That is not usually a recipe for eminence.*”

Ironically, Arnold found that intellectual students who enjoy learning (often) struggle in high school (Einstein). They have passions to focus on, are more interested in achieving mastery, but find the structure of school stifling.

So, the moral of this story seems to be to *follow your specific passions and master them. (And to) channel the skill of hard work into learning and truly understanding whatever it is that sparks your curiosity. That’s how you mix things up and change the world.*<sup>1</sup>

I share this with you because Jesus was one of those people who had a *passion* and *pursued* it and *mastered* it—and he changed the world. His passion was *God’s dream*. He called it *God’s Basilea*—which, translated into English means

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Barker, *Why Grade Grubbing Valedictorians Never Get to Rule the World,* The Daily Beast, May 28, 2017

*God's kingdom, God's dominion, God's reign, God's realm.* It's the thing Jesus talked about more than anything else. Think of it this way: (For Jesus) the Kingdom of God is what life would be like *on earth* if God were king, not the rulers of this world.

You see, for the people to whom Jesus spoke kingdoms were a present reality for them, not something "*once upon a time.*" "Kingdom" was not associated with fantasy, as in Disney's "Magic Kingdom." Nor did it refer to a parliamentary democracy presided over by a constitutionally limited monarch, as in today's United Kingdom. Rather, "kingdom" referred to the political system under which they lived: the ancient domination system ruled by powerful and wealthy elites.

Thus, when Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, his hearers would have heard an immediate contrast. They lived under the kingdoms of Herod and Caesar. They knew what those kingdoms and life in them were like. And here was Jesus speaking of the Kingdom of God.

Now, you may have missed this *earthy* focus of the Kingdom that Jesus spoke of if you are a devotee of the Gospel of Matthew. You see, this Gospel writer was Jewish, and he preferred to avoid using the word "God," for reverential reasons; many Jews avoided pronouncing or writing the word.

Thus, as Matthew wrote his Gospel, he most often changed "Kingdom of God" to "Kingdom of Heaven." And because Matthew was the synoptic gospel most commonly read in the lectionary of the church down through the centuries, generations of Christians have heard Jesus speaking about the Kingdom of *heaven*. The natural assumption was that Jesus was talking about heaven, that is, about an afterlife.

But the Kingdom of God is not about heaven; it is for the earth. This really shouldn't surprise us. We pray for the coming of God's Kingdom on earth every time we pray the Lord's Prayer "*Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it already is in heaven.*"<sup>2</sup>

Remember that Jesus's audience was primarily the *peasant class*. "Give us this day our daily bread." "Bread"—enough food—was always an issue in the peasant class. And there is reason to think that the peasant quest for adequate food was becoming even more desperate in the time of Jesus. But God's kingdom (in contrast to the other kingdom's they knew) is about enough bread.

The earthly meaning continues in the next petition, about forgiveness. "Forgive us our debts." Sins? Trespasses? Why the different words? Part of the reason is different English translations of the gospel texts. But it is also because there are three versions of the Lord's Prayer in early Christianity (Matthew, Luke, and the Didache)

But whether Christians have used Matthew's "debts" or Luke's "sins," we have most commonly understood the "real" meaning to be "sins": ... but it may also be too much of a spiritualization of the notion of "debt."

Most likely, the early Christians understood this as "financial debt." Debt, along with bread, were the primary survival issues in peasant life—as they are for millions of people in our society today. Indebtedness could lead to the loss of one's land, if one still owned some, and descent into the even more precarious world of the tenant farmer or day laborer. And if peasants were landless, indebtedness could cause them and their families to be sold into indentured labor.

So also, Jesus frequently spoke of the Kingdom of God in the language of impossible or unexpected combinations (metaphors). For example, the Kingdom, something great, is compared to something very tiny that *grows*: it is like "a grain of mustard seed." Mustard was a weed; thus, the kingdom is like a weed!<sup>3</sup>

But Jesus didn't just talk about the Kingdom—he invited people to *respond* and *participate* in the coming of the kingdom—to participate in what God was already doing in their midst. For example, in the middle of his mission,

<sup>2</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, Harper, San Francisco, 2003, pp. 132-134

<sup>3</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Harper, San Francisco, 1994, p. 80

Jesus sent his followers out to do what he was doing (Luke 10:4-9; Matt. 10:8-11; Mark 6:7-13). He commissioned some of them to heal, to confront demonic/oppressive situations and forces, to share meals with those to whom they went, and to proclaim the kingdom—exactly what he was doing.<sup>4</sup>

It was the “clash” of these two visions of “Kingdom”—one rooted in justice for the poor and oppressed and the other rooted in force and oppression--that led to Jesus’s execution by the Romans on the Cross.

But, you know, millions of people down through the centuries have been inspired by Jesus’s message about the Kingdom of God, and it continues to give hope to people today which is one of primary reasons why Christianity continues to experience such explosive growth in the developing world—it is truly “good news.”

Here’s a story a story about one person who was inspired by Jesus’s message about the Kingdom and how he was convinced that in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America, the new medium of television could be used to teach small children *emotional intelligence*. He was a Presbyterian Minister from Pittsburgh, named, Fred Rogers.

*On December 1, 1997 ... a boy, no longer little, told his friends to watch out, that he was going to do something "really big" the next day at school, and the next day at school he took his gun and his ammo and his earplugs and shot eight classmates who had clustered for a prayer meeting. Three died, and they were still children, almost. The shootings took place in West Paducah, Kentucky, and when Mister Rogers heard about them, he said, "Oh, wouldn't the world be a different place if he had said, 'I'm going to do something really little tomorrow,'" and he decided to dedicate a week of the Neighborhood to the theme "Little and Big." He wanted to tell children that what starts out little can sometimes become big, and so that could devote themselves to little dreams without feeling bad about them. But how could Mister Rogers show little becoming big, and vice versa? That was a challenge. He couldn't just say it, the way he could always just say to the children who watch his program that they are special to him, or even sing it, the way he would always sing "It's You I Like" and "Everybody's Fancy" and "It's Such a Good Feeling" and "Many Ways to Say I Love You" and "Sometimes People Are Good." No, he had to show it, he had to demonstrate it, and that's how Mister Rogers and the people who work for him eventually got the idea of coming to New York City to visit a woman named Maya Lin.*

*Maya Lin is a famous architect. Architects are people who create big things from the little designs they draw on pieces of paper. Most famous architects are famous for creating big famous buildings, but Maya Lin is more famous for creating big fancy things for people to look at, and in fact, when Mister Rogers had gone to her studio the day before, he looked at the pictures she had drawn of the clock that is now on the ceiling of a place in New York called Penn Station. A clock is a machine that tells people what time it is, but as Mister Rogers sat in the backseat of an old station wagon hired to take him . . . to Penn Station, he worried that Maya Lin's clock might be too fancy and that the children who watch the Neighborhood might not understand it. Mister Rogers always worries about things like that, because he always worries about children.*

*The car stopped on Thirty-fourth Street . . . and the moment Mister Rogers got out of the car, people wouldn't stay ... away from him, they respected him so much. Oh, Margy Whitmer tried to keep people away from him, tried to tell people that if they gave her their names and addresses, Mister Rogers would send them an autographed picture, but every time she turned around, there was Mister Rogers putting his arms around someone, or wiping the tears off someone's cheek, or passing around the picture of someone's child, or getting on his knees to talk to a child. Margy couldn't stop them, and she couldn't stop him. "Oh, Mister Rogers, thank you for my childhood." "Oh, Mister Rogers, you're the father I never had." "Oh, Mister Rogers, would you please just hug me?" After a while, Margy just rolled her eyes and gave up, because it's always like this with Mister Rogers, because the thing that people don't understand about him is that he's greedy for this—greedy for the grace that people offer him. What is grace? He doesn't even know. He can't define it. This is a man who loves the simplifying force of definitions, and yet all he knows of grace is how he gets it; all he knows is that he gets it from God, through people. And so, in Penn Station, where he was surrounded by men and women and children, he had this power, like a comic-book superhero who absorbs the energy of others until he bursts out of his shirt.<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>4</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus*, Harper, San Francisco,

<sup>5</sup> Tom Junod, “Can You Say ... Hero?”, *Esquire*, November 1998 Issue (Reprinted April 6, 2017)

That's the power of love. He actually was the same loving person in real life that you saw on TV. That's the kingdom ... on earth.

The Washington Post had a provocative headline last March that read: *"Mr. Rogers Raised Millions of Us. Do We Have What It Takes to Live in His Neighborhood?"*

When Rogers died in 2003, Fred Phelps, then the head of the Westboro Baptist Church, picketed his funeral, declaring that Rogers's "syrupy teachings led millions astray. He was a wuss and he was an enabler of wusses." That's a judgment that many of us who grew up with Mister Rogers would revolt against. Who opposes "the prospect of teaching children that they are valuable and giving them the confidence not merely to negotiate the world but also to believe that they can contribute to it? Who but a monster would tell Rogers that his devotion to approaching everyone he met with love and openness was naive, much less morally degraded?"<sup>6</sup>

Which got me thinking: what would Fred—or Jesus for that matter--think about the current policy of our government separating children from their parents when applying for asylum at our southern border? And trying to justify it by quoting scripture?

Father James Martin spoke for many this week when he said: *It's not biblical to treat migrants and refugees like animals. It is not biblical to take children away from their parents. It is not biblical to enforce unjust laws. Do not use the Bible to justify sin.*"

Friends, Jesus had a passion for the Kingdom of God. It is God's dream as dreamed by the great figures of the Jewish tradition: Moses, the prophets, and for those of us who are Christians, Jesus. It is a dream for the earth.

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<sup>6</sup> Alyssa Rosenberg, *"Mr. Rogers Raised Millions of Us. Do We Have What It Takes to Live in His Neighborhood?"* Washington Post, March 21, 2018