

**Sermon July 24, 2011**

**St. John's Episcopal Church, Jamaica Plain**

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In the World Religions course that I taught at Bunker Hill Community College, we spent a lot of time learning about the great historical religions, their roots, their beliefs, their worship, their sacred writings, etc. Week after week the class looked at each major religion in turn and tried to discover what's really central to the people of that faith, what **really** matters to them. But even after all this study, every semester students continued to surprise me by saying that religions all over the world are really saying the same thing. “No,” I’d say, “they’re really not! These religious beliefs are quite different.”

But no matter what I’d say, the students remained unconvinced. “They all say the same thing,” the students responded. Finally, I figured out what was going on. The students thought that religion is fundamentally about giving you rules for

living your life. In other words, religion is exclusively about ethics. And looked at from this perspective, the students were right to say that world religions look remarkably similar. If you look at the religions of the world in terms of what the believer ought to do, they sound very much alike. All of them teach that the believer should treat others with respect, should tell the truth, should not steal, should not murder, should respect their marriage vows. So the students were correct if religion is only about ethics. But it isn't! And these passages from St. Matthew's gospel, which keep talking about the reign of God, are a perfect illustration of what is central to Christianity, distinct from the believer's personal morality.

St. Matthew talks throughout his gospel about the reign of God, and he does this because Jesus did. What Jesus preached was the already in-breaking kingdom of God. What Christians are to do in Jesus' name is to continue to preach and prepare for the reign of God. Thinking about our religion as only personal ethics, as simply about being good and obeying all the rules, is not only

depressing, it is also way off the mark! The people in Jesus' time who were deeply concerned about being good and about obeying the rules were a distinct group within Judaism, well educated and highly respected, the Pharisees. And although Jesus was close to them on many points there is no single group that gets as much criticism from him, as do these Pharisees. Essentially, Jesus says to them: religion is not about being morally pure, it is about bringing God's dream to reality, making the world look the way God wants it to look.

What Jesus talked about in his earthly ministry was a world refashioned by God, where all our relationships would also be refashioned by God. Jesus gave this message especially to the poor, the marginalized, the outcasts, those who didn't fit in polite and comfortable society. And Jesus not only spoke words, he acted in such a way that the reign of God came close to people. He forgave sinners, he ate with outcasts, he healed lepers, he showed mercy to his enemies, he spoke to Samaritans, he included many women among his disciples. And he took on the good people of

his day who thought that they were in right relationship with God. He said: “No, you look good, but you are only white-washed tombs.” And he spoke and acted in such a way that the Roman authorities executed him.

The reign of God matters deeply to Christians because it mattered so deeply to Jesus. We talk about it but we also en flesh it- make it visible. And other people will get some sense of what God’s dream for the world will look like when they see it in our own lives and in our community.

Our gospel today says that the reign of God is like a tiny little seed that becomes a great tree where many different birds come to make their nest. Jesus' hearers got the point here. Lots of different birds- not just birds that look like me! They understood this reference to “many birds” as a metaphor about Gentiles, sinners, and outcasts. Our greatest moments as a church, and our biggest fights, are often about who can nest in our branches, who is welcome in our community, who gets to eat at our table. The big struggles and the major decisions were about these questions:

Should Gentiles be admitted to the church without having to become Jews first? (the Council of Jerusalem) Is this a church only for the holy or is it a church for sinners? (the Donatist controversy) Should the barbarians, the people beyond the boundaries of the Roman empire, be welcomed into the church? (the missionary movement) What about the native peoples of the Americas, (the Pope decreed that they had souls and could be baptized) Should women be ordained? (ongoing!) What about gay and lesbian people? (also ongoing!!) Every time we opened the community to different people, to different opinions, we grew and flourished, allowed the Holy Spirit more place to move about and breathe. Many birds in our branches.

And this tiny seed that becomes a great tree with branches lifted to heaven is a reminder of the humble and quiet origins of so great and full a revelation of God. God can do amazing things, with tiny seeds, with a little leaven in a great lump of dough. Quietly, the kingdom is coming. But often those who plant the seeds and add the leaven to the dough will never see the tree, never

taste the bread. Ours is to plant, to add, to start, not to taste the fullness until God is all in all. Faithfulness is what we seek, obedience is what we look for, not success.

And, what happens when you *find* God's realm? You give everything for it. The reign of God is not about half measures. The kingdom of God is such a priceless treasure that you would give everything to gain it, this is the chance of a lifetime. Everything. Nothing held back. A life centered on God.

When I was a child I had rules about my dinner plate. I was an only child so it was easy for me to make rules that applied only to me! Nothing on my plate could touch anything else. God forbid that the gravy from my mashed potato valley should spill over and touch the green beans. Nothing, neither potatoes, nor green beans nor gravy could touch the meat. Now, this may work for dinner, but it doesn't work for life. Everything touches everything else when we have found the treasure of a life lived with God. I don't have a religious life at the 2 o'clock position, a professional life at

the 10 o'clock position, a personal life at high noon. It is all one life. It is life in God's realm. And it is God's life, in the end.

A number of years ago I spoke with a friend of mine who is a very faithful Christian. At the time we were in the midst of a presidential election and he confided in me that candidate X was closest to his values and spoke about issues of justice. However, candidate Y was better for his investments and so, he added sadly: "I am voting for candidate Y." At the time I was quite taken aback. But, I need to be clear that I had NO money invested anywhere at the time, so a candidate who would protect investments I didn't have was not so tempting for me. Now that I am older and retired, I understand his concerns much better. But a kingdom life impels us to put God first. To have only one life. and it is all God's.

What might these scriptures be saying to us today? How many birds are welcome in our branches? People who think differently from us? Who hold different theological and political opinions? Who watch cable TV news shows that we would never

watch. Whose skin color, language, social class, ethnicity, educational levels are different from ours? People we don't like, people who don't like us, even our enemies. Who is welcome? Have we given everything for the reign of God? Can people see our commitment to God's dream when they look at our calendar, our checkbook, our wardrobe, our homes, our recreation, our family? None of us has done this perfectly. None of us will in this life. But today we are given an invitation. Will your life, will our life, will the life of the Christian church look like the reign of God? Do you want it to? What are you willing to do it make it so?

And so to God whose power now at work in us can do infinitely more than we can even ask for or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.