

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

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2 Kings 5:1-14, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Salem, Bridgeport

“The Key to the Kingdom”

In order to understand our gospel today, we need to go back to the beginning:

What was Jesus’ call, his mission, his purpose?

Well according to Jesus, it was to let people know that the “kingdom of God” was at hand.

He wanted people to understand that this kingdom

wasn’t something that you had to wait until you died to enter,

but it was close enough that you could step right into it in the here and now.

We can step into the kingdom at any time, and that has always been the case from the beginning of humankind.

It was what God’s Law tried to help people do.

It was what the Prophets tried to help people do.

But when neither the Law nor the Prophets succeeded,

Jesus tried once again to tell people – and show people – how to enter into this kingdom.

Now if you can look around at the world around you,

if you can read a newspaper, or you can watch the news on television,

it certainly does **not** appear that the kingdom of God is among us.

And yet it is.

The reason that the kingdom is not obvious or evident in the world around us

is because the kingdom is not something that we can see or hear or touch or taste or smell

with our human senses or with our rational minds.

The kingdom is not a physical or material thing, although it can affect the physical and material world.

The kingdom is a spiritual reality and can only be accessed by faith and obedience to the will of God.

So Jesus came not only to tell people about the kingdom,

but to show people that it’s real by performing signs and miracles.

And that means that while Jesus healed people, healing wasn’t the main goal.

The main goal was to invite people into the kingdom.

And while Jesus healed people, it wasn’t just about those people;

it was also about everyone else who could see and hear about what happens in the kingdom.

And the same is true for us.

When God heals us or performs some other kind of miracle in our lives,

it’s partly because God loves us, but it’s about more than us –

it’s about building the kingdom through signs and wonders.

Now I started off talking about Jesus and about his primary mission

because we have to understand that before we will understand

why Jesus sent out the 12 and why in today’s reading he sent out the 72.

Jesus sent out the 12 and then the 72 for the exact same reason and mission and purpose –

to tell people about the kingdom of God and to show them proof that it exists.

What was true for the 12 and what was true for the 72 is also true for us.

Our primary mission is to tell people about the kingdom of God – that it exists here and now –

and to show them by signs and wonders proof of its existence.

That was what the Great Commission was all about –

Jesus sending his disciples then and now into the world to teach everyone about the kingdom of God

and to perform signs and wonders to prove that what is being said is true.

So if that's true, and according to the Bible it is,
then why do we see so few signs and wonders in our work as the church?
I think the answer to that question is in Jesus' instructions to his disciples:
"Don't take anything with you, no extra clothes, no money, nothing,
and don't even make reservations or plans in advance for your accommodations.
Go with nothing except your faith and your obedience to my command."

How many of us are willing to make that kind of faith journey?
There have certainly been times when I have put my entire trust in God –
like trusting that God would make it crystal clear
whether we were to sell our property to that developer or not,
like trusting in the vision that told me to get out of the way of the train
and trust in the one who controlled the tracks,
like trusting in the sign that I was to fix up the office here & settle in for the long term.
In those instances all I did was trust and follow as I was led.

But I must confess that most of the time it is really difficult for me
to act with total faith in God instead of according to my own reason.
It's really difficult for me to put my trust in God instead of in myself.
And it's particularly difficult to obey God when God's instructions seem to defy reason and common sense.

It's like in our first reading today about Naaman, the head of the entire Syrian army.
Here he was a man of great power and prestige and privilege, but he had run into something beyond his control.
He had contracted a horrible disease – leprosy – for which there was no known cure.
If there had been, he, of all people would have had access to it.
But no, the illness was terminal. And he must have been terrified and devastated.

And then Naaman hears from a lowly Israelite servant girl that there is a cure in Israel.
It's the only hope that he has, and so he goes to the king and tells the king,
and the king says, "You are my friend and my right hand man. Of course I will help. I will do all that I can.
I will send a letter to Israel's king and we will get you the help that you need."

So Naaman sets out on his journey, but when he gets to the king of Israel
the king has no idea how to help and is frightened that his inability to help will lead to war.
Elisha the prophet, however, hears about the king's dilemma
and sends a message to the king, saying, "No problem. Just send him to me".

And when this great military commander Naaman shows this up
with chariots and horses and all of the royal accoutrements,
Elijah simply sends a message through a servant, telling him to wash in the Jordan River seven times.

And Naaman is furious!
The prophet didn't even care enough to come out himself! He didn't have any cure there at hand.
He just gets a message from a lowly servant to wash in a little dinky dirty dismal river.
If it was washing in a river that would cure him, there were far finer, better, greater rivers.

You see, Naaman's rational mind and common sense, as well as his pride and arrogance,
had expectations of how he would be healed, and he was having a difficult time letting go of those expectations.
To take orders from a servant was humiliating.

To follow such seemingly bad advice was scary. It didn't make sense.
And if he followed that advice and it didn't work he would be a laughingstock.
And so he comes this close to walking away from his healing.
And then his own servants challenge him by asking him if it wouldn't be worth it to try.
And so Naaman finally lays aside his arrogance and pride, his logic and common sense,
and follows the crazy advice that comes from God through Elisha, through Elisha's servant,
and through Naaman's own servants.

He throws aside rationality and acts in faith.
And through the gate of faith, Naaman enters into the kingdom of God,
where hope and healing, and grace and mercy, and signs and wonders and miracles live.
And Naaman is healed.

So just to recap for a moment....

God's primary objective has always been to invite people to live in the kingdom of God
which means living under the rule of God, which means obeying God and serving God.

God tried to do that through the Law,
and when that didn't work God tried to do it through the Prophets,
and when that didn't work God used Jesus.

But in order for Jesus' work to continue –
that work of telling people about the kingdom, showing them signs and wonders,
and inviting them to enter the kingdom by faith –
had to be carried on by the 12, and then by the 72, and then by every other disciple down to you and me today.

But before we can carry on that work we need to understand 2 more things.

God's call to each of us individually and to us collectively will never be something that we can do on our own.

God's mission and purpose for our lives will never be something that we can accomplish
by using our intellect, our reason, our common sense.

God only calls us to do things that we cannot do on our own,
things that are beyond our capacity, things that are impossible.

Because if they are things we can accomplish on our own and we don't need God to do them,
then those are things that exist in the kingdom of this world and not in the kingdom of God.

Now there's nothing wrong with accomplishing things in the kingdom of this world on our own.
But those things are *not* what God calls us to do.

God calls us to do things that will require us to lay aside our arrogance and pride and self-sufficiency
and humble ourselves under God's mighty hand,
just as Naaman did when he listened to the advice of a foreign servant girl, Elisha's servant, & his own servants,
and just as Jesus did when he laid aside his own divine power and submitted his own will to God's.

God also calls us to do things that will require us to lay aside our reason & logic & common sense, and act in faith,
just as Naaman did when he went to dip himself in a river seven times,
and just as Jesus did when he allowed himself to suffer, be crucified and die.

You and I live in a world filled with chaos and confusion and conflict.

But anytime we want, we can step out of the kingdom of this world & into the kingdom of God.

And we can do that in 2 ways.

If we are in need of something – like healing, for instance – then we simply invite God into our lives,
asking God to make God's will known to us,
and then following God's will, no matter how crazy or illogical it seems.

And if we are not in need of anything at the moment
then we step into the kingdom as we go out to tell others about the kingdom
and allow God to work signs of that kingdom through us.

What it means to be a disciple of Jesus is far more than we may have ever imagined.

Jesus invites us into something more than membership in a congregation
or worship attendance, or giving money or time to do good works.

Jesus invites us into the kingdom of God, a place where God is in charge,
where we will get to see and hear and experience the signs and wonders of the kingdom,
and from where we will be sent out, to show and tell others
and invite them into God's kingdom, too.

I pray that each one of us might step into that kingdom this week and experience the place
where hope & healing, grace & mercy, and signs & wonders & miracles live! **Amen**