

Jesus sends 70 missionaries out with the instructions to “cure the sick, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’” This morning I’d like to do some reflecting with this idea of the Kingdom of God. Theologians, of every stripe have written a lot about the Kingdom of God. It has captured a lot of attention. And rightly so...

Traditionally, we speak of the Kingdom of God in two ways, we say that the Kingdom of God is here, now; and that the Kingdom of God is not yet. Kind of a way of saying that we live in an in-between time.

In our Lutheran tradition, we also make a distinction between the spiritual kingdom, where authority rests with the true church; and the earthly kingdom where authority rests with the secular government. And believe me, this theological discussion can get very complicated...

For an interesting tid bit, and since we just celebrated the birth of our country, this Lutheran idea of two kingdoms was influential during the formation of our government. And it resulted in what we call the separation of church and state. In other words, our government can’t tell us what to believe... And the idea originally came from Luther...

I like foundations and I like to keep things simple, so, for me personally, over the years the Kingdom of God has come to mean what we say in the Lord’s prayer.

“Thy Kingdom *come*, thy will be done, *on Earth* as it is in Heaven.” We often think the goal of Christianity is to go to heaven, and that’s one part of it. And

because of God's amazing grace and love we are then moved to live our lives, here on earth, as we imagine we will live in heaven. And that's an interesting thing to think about... It's something we pray about every week!

So, how do we imagine we will live together in heaven? What will our relationships look like? It's an interesting question. And a question that the Holy Spirit answers in all of us and in different ways. So, there's as many answers to that question as there are people in this church... Let me offer some of my own ideas, and maybe you can share some of yours with me later on...

As I think about living in heaven, I think about dwelling in God's love. A self-giving of ourselves for one other without any consideration of personal cost. Essentially fulfilling Jesus new commandment to love God and love the neighbor... It would be participating in the divine dance of Trinity. A complete self-giving of each of us to one another.

For me it would be a little bit like what one of my Seminary Professor's liked to say... "non possee, non picare." Funny words, but essentially meaning that in heaven we would be incapable of sinning. In other words, we would live with one another without hurting each other in the process. In fact, it would be impossible for us to hurt one another.

Now, that's a utopian view... Right? Impossible for us mere humans.

When I think about our sinful nature, I appreciate how so far away the kingdom of God really is, on earth as it is in heaven. In our Lutheran tradition we tell the truth. And the truth is, we're in bondage to sin... We're self-absorbed, greedy creatures.

Human beings can do terrible, awful things to one another... As we live and breathe, we hurt one another.

And not only that we like a little sin in our lives. I once had a parishioner who liked to say, “we all want to go to heaven for the scenery, and to hell for the company.” I suspect he’s right about that... we tend to like our colorful friends. We like our guilty little pleasures... I’m not so sure we would like heaven very much, if there wasn’t at least a little mischief going on...

And so, we know we’re in bondage to sin, we know we’re sinful creatures, we know we like our sin a little bit, **and yet** we also live toward another vision. The Holy Spirit has given us an imagination for what heaven will be like, and we live toward that dream—on earth as it is in heaven...

This vision and hope is the very real work of the Holy Spirit. This is not hocus-focus, this is as real as you and me. We all live in this in-between time where the world isn’t perfect, but we long for it to be better.

It’s this longing that is the energy and the driving force of the Kingdom. We pray, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Jesus tells his disciples to announce that the kingdom of God has come near...

We do the confession, we receive forgiveness, and gracious little miracles happen... Little miracles of reconciliation, generosity, kindness and love happen! Little things that give me big hope...

Let me share a few signs of the kingdom that I came across this past week...  
Bigger kinds of things... More of a macro view than a micro view...

There was a recent study reported in the news about honesty. A researcher in Finland, would intentionally lose a wallet in a strategic location and then see how many people would return it. Some of the wallets had money in them, and some didn't.

The researchers thought that the wallets with money would be least likely to be returned. But the result was the exact opposite. Wallets with money were more likely to be returned.

Then they did a huge cross-cultural study where they intentionally lost 17,000 wallets across 40 countries, and with various amounts of money. They hypothesized that the wallets with the most money would be returned the least.

While there were cultural differences, surprisingly, they discovered that the wallets with the most money were the most likely to be returned. We typically think that if we have an opportunity to benefit ourselves at the expense of another, we'll do it. But, as it turns out, people are basically honest. Who'd a thunk!

A little thing like this gives me faith in humanity. A little thing like this gives me hope the kingdom of God is coming near...

Another sign... Stevin Pinker a Harvard College Professor of Psychology; has studied violence through human history. He says, "*Violence has been in decline*

*over long stretches of time, and we may be living in the **most peaceful time** in our species' existence."*

He discusses things like genocide, war, human sacrifice, torture, slavery, and treatment of minorities, from ancient times to today... And while it looks to us like violence is on the rise, so has been the population... He said that the change has been subtle and slow over many centuries, and combined with our own reluctance to acknowledge the past, we just simply didn't see it happening...

From an anecdotal experience I've had, I wonder if this reduction in violence is real. Six years ago, Kris and I were with some friends in a village in Italy. My friend, Mike and I were walking and came across a place called the torture museum. We decided to check it out...

It was room after room, actually building after building of actual torture instruments. This was the real stuff... Actual instruments used on very real people. And there was so much of it... We couldn't believe how creative people were at inventing ways to torture and kill. I was so deeply disturbed. How could anybody ever use any of that junk on another fellow human being? But there it was! I kept thinking to myself, thank goodness we're past all that garbage!

So, maybe this reduction in violence is right. I think it's worth a deeper look... After seeing all that torture equipment and knowing where we are today, this gives me hope the kingdom of God is coming...

And that's the good news, the Kingdom of God is coming. As Luther would say, here on earth and hereafter in heaven. We know we live in this in-between time.

And we trust with all our heart that the Holy Spirit is guiding our imaginations, and pulling our hopes into reality. Bringing a little bit of that heaven down to earth.

Ohh, we're sinners, that's for sure, but we're also Saints. Children of God, brought into this world to be light for the world. And we are indeed a light, that no darkness can overcome.

And thanks be to God...

Hymn #574