

**Great Ends of the Church VI:
The Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World**

Based on Micah 6:8 and Matt 5:14-16

Rev. Dr. Nicole Wilkinson

Cape May Presbyterian Church

August 21, 2022

This sermon concludes a series of six sermons focusing on each of the six Great Ends of the Church. It's the last on the list as it was originally written, and I think that's intentional, since it is the deepest and the loftiest. Our purpose as the church is, ultimately, the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world. It's pretty grand. Maybe not even quite as grand as Jesus' statement that we are the light of the world, meant to shine and give light wherever we can. That sounds like about the same thing, I think, as showing the world the kingdom of God. To exhibit the kingdom, we have to be the light.

Some interpretations of the Great Ends see this last one as a sort of result of the other five. This is what happens when we shelter and nurture, worship and promote social righteousness, preserve the truth, and proclaim the gospel. In doing all of those things, we do exhibit the kingdom of heaven to the world.

Then again, maybe we shine the light and exhibit the kingdom of heaven simply in how we treat one another and how we treat the stranger.

There's a story you may have heard, known as the parable of the long spoons. Who first told the parable seems to be in doubt—maybe a rabbi, maybe a pastor, I had the idea for a while that it was C.S. Lewis, but that's not right. The story is that someone dies and God shows the newly deceased two different rooms, each one full of people sitting around a table, and in each room the table is full of all kinds of wonderful food to eat. But in the first room, all the people are moaning and wailing with hunger, because their arms cannot bend at the elbow and their utensils are too long to bring the food to their mouths. This is hell, God tells the newly dead person. All the people sit in front of delicious looking food and they cry and lament as they starve. In the other room, all the same conditions apply—there is a table full of food, but they can't bend their elbows and the utensils are too long to bring the food to their mouths. But all the people are laughing and feasting and enjoying themselves because in that room, they are feeding each other. And this, God says, is heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is not about what God gives us. It's about how we treat one another, no matter the circumstances. It's especially about how we treat one another when the chips are down—when people are starving despite the food on the table.

The kingdom of heaven is a place on earth that works and feels like heaven. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven—that is our prayer. We need to be the people who instead of lamenting our own hunger, our own lack, our own bad luck, instead we feed the person next to us. To exhibit the kingdom of heaven to the world means that we build the kind of relationships where one person's lack is supplied by the next person's resources and vice versa.

I think of Phyllis Douglass, whose life we celebrated on Friday, and her good friend June Willis. Once when June had surgery, and could not be by herself, Phyllis invited her to come to Phyllis's house. Both were alone, both were in their 80s and not very mobile, but they helped each other. They kept each other company and they did each other good.

The prophet Micah lays out what we need to do, what the Lord requires of us. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. It isn't rocket science. It isn't, as the prophet Jeremiah says, something far off that we can never reach. It's right here, written in our hearts. The kingdom of God is simple. It is in fact, simplicity. The more we are aware of what's really important in God's eyes, the less there is to worry about in our own eyes. The kingdom of God is simple: love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. Either way, you could embroider it on a pillow. It's not complicated, it's not even super mysterious; it's simple. But it is not easy. Staying centered in that simplicity, staying open to God's desires that conflict in the short term with our own interests, holding on to justice and love even when it hurts, even when the justice is for others, even when the love means sacrifice for me and mine—it's very difficult.

That's why we need each other. In John's gospel, Jesus says, "the kingdom of God is among you." He doesn't say "the kingdom of God is within you." The eastern religions look within the self to lose the self, to connect with something greater, with truth. That isn't us. Following Jesus means soul-searching, absolutely, and prayer and meditation are time-tested friends of this journey. But the kingdom of God is not inside me, it is among us. It is found, when it is found, in the spaces and the relationships between people, not in my personal relationship to my

creator. The two go hand in hand, certainly. We each of us find the face of Christ, we are reoriented to ourselves as God's creation, as disciples, as sinners and fallible creatures, through our relationships as well as through prayer and contemplation. And time spent in contemplation, in worship and prayer and praise, time spent meditating on who God is in our own lives, that time puts us back where we need to be do love our neighbor, to do justice and love kindness, because it enables us to walk humbly with our God.

But we cannot know ourselves, we cannot see our sins or our capacity for love, except in relationship to each other. I'm reminded of the story of a white woman, who, through no pretense or fault of her own, was mistaken for African American. This is a chapter in a book about race crossings, and in it the woman tells the story that she had many African American friends, had dated an African American man for a while, and had come to be at home in the culture. She volunteered with the NAACP and other organizations that promoted the interests of the black community. And one day two members of one of these organizations came to her and told her they would like to give her the award for outstanding African American Entrepreneur. Race isn't really about skin color, that's one takeaway here. She was white, I think Italian American, but somehow she had accidentally conveyed the impression—with her clothes, her choice of music, and her concerns—that she was Black. But for our purposes the point of the story was her reaction. She said later that if she wrote a book about her life, that chapter would be titled, "the day I found out I'm a racist." Because she found to her own dismay that she was not just surprised at realizing that these women thought she was African American. She was insulted.

It's the kind of thing we only find out about ourselves when we're in deep. When our relationships with our neighbors are sustained and meaningful, then they also get complicated. They reveal our faultlines, they hold up a mirror to our sins. The kingdom of God comes closer in those moments, when we know that much better who we are and what we need to change.

Yesterday my sister told me the story of a beloved former family pastor, a man who in all his years of ministry was consumed by his work for the church, whose wife raised the children and kept the house and taught Sunday school and was in every way the Pastor's Wife as defined in the 1950s and 60s. When they were both in their 80s, the wife became ill and was quickly incapacitated, unable to feed herself or to rise from her bed. And that man who had depended on her for every

meal of the previous 50 some years became her caregiver. He fed her, spoon by spoon, he tended to her every need. Honestly, I wouldn't have thought he had it in him. But he loved her that much, enough to do far more for her than I'm sure he had ever dreamed he could.

That's the kingdom of God. It is characterized, motivated, driven by love, the kind that brings out new strengths in both the one who loves and in the beloved.

To exhibit the kingdom of God to the world, we have to show that depth of love. That means our focus, our doing justice and loving kindness can't just be for one hour a week. It can't even just be how we treat one another as church members. It has to be our whole lives, supporting each other in a different way of living. It has to be in how we treat the drivers next to us on the Garden State, and the immigrant struggling to make a new life in our community. It's about how we vote and how we deal with our trash and how we travel and where we shop. It's about how we relate to our own families and how we support the families in our community. Our purpose, the final and in many ways the biggest reason we are here, is to show that love is possible. That love is viable, a way of living that makes practical, realistic sense when you work at it together.