

“The Kingdom As A Gift” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
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Many of the gospel passages that we hear in Sunday morning readings begin with a question or a story or an exhortation to action. Often the focus is on some basic human need or the challenge to look down the road to what lay ahead for Jesus. But the gospel this morning begins in a different sort of place. It doesn't begin with Jesus' journey nor with ours. Instead, the gospel begins with God. It begins with the very beginning, with God's desire for us all.

“Do not be afraid little flock, for it is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” And if there is any one-liner in the Bible that helps me breathe a little more easily this is definitely one of them. God wants us to have what the kingdom is and it makes God happy to share it. It's as simple as that. Notice what is not happening here theologically. The passage does not say that God wants us to earn the kingdom or win the kingdom. It does not say that God wants us to line up for the kingdom, purchase a ticket for the kingdom or gain points toward the kingdom. Nor does it say that God wants us to have the kingdom and then not to have the kingdom. None of that is in here. There's nothing competitive or edgy or even discerning about this passage. “It is God's good pleasure to give you to the kingdom.” Period. The theology, here the stuff-about-God-here is simple, generous, and peaceful.

And the implication of that verse is that our faith and our practices of faith can be all of those things too (simple, generous, and peaceful) and we can approach our faith that way without any fear of losing out on salvation or wholeness or spiritual connection with the divine. We have this tendency to make our relationship with God extremely complicated when in fact there is this life-giving, eternal holiness that we've been invited to step into, no questions asked, no requirements placed before us. The kingdom is apparently given us because God wants to do it that way; and it is God's desire that we receive it. Period. Which doesn't mean that the questions we ask don't have a place; the wrestling we do no doubt grows us in our understanding -- but beneath and before the questions that move us, there is the simple truth of God's gift that grounds us. It is good to allow our faith (more than occasionally) be a simple, basic openness to that gift.

We also have a tendency even as church goes to make our relationship with God a private thing, between me and God and you and God. But the gift of the kingdom is most likely, at its best a shared experience. Notice that Jesus told this to a flock not a person. He didn't pull Peter or anyone else aside and say “It is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Maybe the “you” in this verse is plural. I'm pretty sure that I can't really know love all by myself. It's hard to experience forgiveness alone. I can't practice generosity if I live in a vacuum and loving my neighbor is completely impossible without a neighbor. The theology in this passage is generous not only in its content; it's also generous in its outwardness; it inherently connects us to each other.

Finally, the theology in this passage reminds us that while the kingdom is a gift, we have to make room in ourselves and in our lives for this way of being in the world. This passage invites us to a sense of peace now. To awareness and attention now. This is related to the parable we heard last week where the rich man looked over all that he had, and he built larger barns to store all of his goods so they'd remain safe; and then he decided that after all that hard work of earning it

storing it all up, he could finally relax. Because he had all that he needed for the rest of his life. Well the passage today says that none of that is actually necessary. And not only that but all of that can get in the way. Truth is, according to this passage, we can relax now, even though it's a different kind of relaxing. It's not an "I've done all that I can do to make myself secure" sort of thing. It's not security; it's lack of fear (which are two very different things.) This is an invitation to live with the assurance that God provides. To not being so concerned about tomorrow that we miss out on the kingdom today. And the kingdom comes in the middle of the night and near dawn and at "all kinds of unexpected hours" so awareness is critical. 'Don't be afraid, little flock,' Jesus said, not because he'd checked the account balances of everyone in the crowd, not because he'd read and analyzed the latest political and economic forecasts. "Do not be afraid," Jesus said because "God desires to give you the kingdom." Do not be afraid, little flock, because, God already has.