

MY FAITH WITH JESUS
Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
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University Congregational Church

Reading: “Faith and History” by John Dominic Crossan

The Kingdom of God movement was Jesus’ program of empowerment for a peasantry becoming steadily more hard-pressed, in that first-century Jewish homeland, through insistent taxation, attendant indebtedness, and eventual land expropriation, all within increasing commercialization in the booming colonial economy of a Roman Empire under Augustan peace and a Lower Galilee under Herodian urbanization. Jesus lived, against the systemic injustice and structural evil of that situation, an alternative open to all who would accept it: a life of open healing and shared eating, of radical itinerancy and fundamental egalitarianism, of human contact without discrimination and divine contact without hierarchy. That, he said, was how God would run the world if God, not Caesar, sat on its imperial throne. That was how God’s will was to be done on earth - as in heaven. But heaven was in very good shape. It was earth that was the problem. He also died for that vision and that program. I emphasize that, for Jesus, the Kingdom of *God* meant just what it said, a religious vision and a religious program but incarnated in rather than separated from the social, political, and economic realities of everyday life.¹

The early 19th Century saw a fight within the Congregational churches of New England coming to a head. There were two major issues that were dividing the Congregational Churches: First, is the Bible the inerrant and infallible word of God? The liberal Congregationalists said no. Second, is Jesus to be worshipped as God? Again, the liberal Congregationalists said no. Many churches held meetings and took votes and many congregations were split in two. The liberal Congregationalists became known as Unitarians. Over the next two hundred years

¹ John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus and Why* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), pp.211-212.

even the conservatives changed their minds and determined that the Bible is not to be read literally and that Jesus and God are not the same person. The person of Jesus has been argued since Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”

The Apostle’s Creed emerged out of that argument at the Council of Nicea in the Fourth Century, which claimed that the essence of God and Son were the same, and threw in the Holy Spirit for good measure. Congregational minister, William Ellery Channing, argued that there was no Biblical defense for the doctrine of the Trinity and that Jesus never assumed the same station as God. Channing would later join the ranks of the Unitarians and reluctantly became the first president of the American Unitarian Association.

I would like to share, very briefly, what I do not believe about Jesus. In my sermon, *What, Then, of God*, I declared that I do not believe in a supernatural or theistic God. I do not believe that God is an object of reality remotely located in heaven who is omnipotent and who intervenes in human history from time to time. I affirmed my experience of God in Creation, in human relationships, and in wisdom. You can imagine, therefore, that I do not believe in Jesus who is the essence of the theistic God who has no meaning for me. I do believe that Jesus had his own relationship with God but under no circumstances did Jesus confuse his person with that mysterious force of creation, community, and human freedom. I do not believe that the death of Jesus on the cross is efficacious for the salvation of human beings. The notion of blood sacrifice to appease the wrath of God for the

“fall” of Adam and Eve and everyone of us is a primitive religious idea that I reject because it is barbaric and violent. I do not believe that God’s will is done by such vicarious suffering. Likewise I do not believe that Jesus effects miracles in the lives of people who are dying of cancer, children whose bodies are found at the bottom of the swimming pool, or grants entrance through the gates of heaven for the faithful and eternal damnation for Jews or Muslims or anybody else we do not really understand.

Such thinking is always directed to the self which seems diametrically opposed to the gospel of love, the feeding of the poor, and the possibility of human freedom in radically inclusive communities. It is not unlike the letter we received this past week from St. Matthew’s Churches in Tulsa, OK. The envelope offered this prayer: “Dear Jesus, We pray that you will bless someone in this home spiritually, physically, and financially.” Inside was a paper prayer rug. We were instructed to kneel on the “Rug of Faith” or let it touch our knees. Following this prayer we were to check off our prayer needs listed on the Power of Prayer checklist. These needs included such things as “My Soul,” “My Health,” “My Children,” “A New Car,” and “A Money Blessing.” There were two opportunities to check a prayer for “God to bless me with this amount of money,” which was left blank.

Now these sorts of gimmicks always take us aback. We snort or make fun of those who have the audacity to send out such fiction for the obvious purpose of

getting other people's money. We cannot imagine that anyone actually sends the money or believes that such nonsense works. But if you believe that Jesus Christ ever had the power to work outside of the laws of nature or could in some way supersede the natural order of life, why would you not offer such prayers and subsidize such a process? Either such assumptions are founded on truth or they are not. I believe they are not and the metaphysics of such ideas trivialize the true meaning of Jesus of Galilee.

I do not have a faith in Jesus, if by that you mean to suggest that I worship Jesus as God or believe that Jesus is God. I do not have the faith of Jesus, if by that you mean to suggest that I have or ever could have the same relationship that Jesus had with God. I do not believe that any person can experience God in the same way that any other person experiences God. We too may have had an experience with God but we dare not claim that our experiences are the same. Such a claim makes gross assumptions about what we think another person's life with God is. I have a relationship with my wife. But I cannot experience what her relationship is with her mother or her own children, however well I think I know them. And I hope to God that my relationship with her is not anything like her relationship with her first husband. How could I therefore presume to know the relationship between God and Jesus? Beware of any preacher, priest, rabbi, or religious leader who tells you otherwise! I cannot not dare claim to have the faith of Jesus.

I do think that I can have a faith with Jesus. By that I mean that given my limited understanding of the life and teachings of Jesus there are major themes of his ministry that I trust, and trust ultimately. Not only do I trust such themes, I am embraced by them as a Christian. This is what defines me as a Christian. These are values that I believe offer the world such transformation that all of human can have life and have it more abundantly.

The primary theme that is the foundation and focus of Jesus' life is the Kingdom of God, or the "Imperial Rule of God." Now I confess that these are troubling words in and of themselves. They introduce some problems for those of us who are trying to disestablish the church's penchant for colonial or imperial manipulation of human beings. Maybe we could say something like, "When God's love is the foundation of human relationships," or "When God's grace is the prevailing virtue." But Kingdom of God is the familiar refrain and perhaps our best bet is to expand its meaning.

I believe that the best way to understand what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God is the study of his parables, wisdom sayings, stories, and deeds. We can understand what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God in his relationships with others, particularly his relationship with the broken, insane, diseased, and dying. We can understand what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God in his treatment of the common meal and those who are invited to the table.

Now let me try to unpack the theme of God's Kingdom and the particular manifestations of it.

The idea of the Kingdom of God is not original with Jesus. It is a major theme of the Old Testament. The Kingdom of God is a vision of creation. In other words, what do you envision life to be like in God's will for human beings? Quite simply and ever so radically, God's Kingdom is one of peace and justice, wholeness and completion, happiness and freedom.² The Kingdom of God is a relationship between God's will and God's people. And these are the characteristics of that relationship. When we are in the Kingdom of God our relationships with one another is not one of creed and offering. The prophet, Isaiah, described it so well.

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly:
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer:
you shall cry for help, and he will say,
"Here I am." Isaiah 58: 6-9

² Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980), p. 38.

This is the central message of Jesus. We are invited to participate in this Kingdom, to join in its creation and sustenance. This is not the kingdom of an afterlife nor is it the kingdom of eternal reward. The Kingdom of God is a relationship of grace and justice that we experience as we live it. I dare say, we know God - we are in the presence of God - when the hungry are fed, the abused are sheltered, the lonely are comforted, and the sick are cared for. The Kingdom of God is the crucible of time and history engaging human freedom for the creation, sustenance, and transformation of life. These values of peace and justice, wholeness and completion, happiness and freedom are the benchmarks of God's Kingdom. We only have life in the Kingdom when they are engaged in human communities. They are the gifts of God that only have meaning when the gifts are employed.

This, I believe, is what the gospel of Jesus is all about. I have used the word radical several times. Radical comes from the Latin, *radix*, and it means root. If you want to go to the tap root of Jesus' life and teachings explore his understanding of the Kingdom of God. Engage that Kingdom. Participate in it. It is the very core of his ministry and without it Jesus means nothing. Anything that we say, or pray, or sing about Jesus is meaningless if it is void of the Kingdom of God's peace and justice. The cross means nothing - the empty tomb means nothing - outside the Kingdom of God.

To help us understand the Kingdom Jesus used parables, stories, and wise sayings. Throughout the synoptic gospels we read regularly, “The Kingdom of God is like...” From that introduction Jesus told parables or stories about mustard seeds, leavened bread, lost coins, prodigal sons, and banquet halls empty of guests. Let me offer you several very brief hints of what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God through the use of some of his parables.

When some people in the first century thought of the Kingdom of God they thought of the great cedars of Lebanon. The powerful cedar trees were used by Solomon to build the temple. Cedars were rare and had to be shipped to Jerusalem. They are beautiful and majestic trees. Jesus said no, the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. A mustard is a weed, nothing majestic about it. It can be eaten but is somewhat bitter. It is often found on the tables of the poor. Like all weeds, mustard grows prolifically, taking over the entire garden. Jesus suggests that the kingdom of God is like a common weed. It can be found anywhere. But, of course, most people only see weeds.

And most people imagine that the Kingdom of God is served by the best educated, the well placed, the deserving and powerful people in a community. But Jesus said, “No, I don’t think so. Often the Kingdom is initiated by a woman mixing dough with leaven. Leaven is not a tidy package of yeast that makes the dough rise. Leaven in the first century was common mold that was scraped from old loaves of bread into the dough to create the rising of the new batch. Leaven

was associated with the corruption of dead bodies. What is worse, the character in the parable of the leaven was a woman, often the agent of corruption in the ancient world. Jesus suggests to us that the Kingdom of God is initiated by an agent often thought to be unclean who makes the whole batch of dough rise by the use of corrupt material.

The agents of God's justice and peace, love and compassion, happiness and joy are not fastidious clergy, patrons of the church, or the sincerely well intentioned members of the women's missionary society. There is no agency beneath the dignity of God that God will not use to bring wholeness to God's people. There is no space in the garden that God won't tread to effect the well being of God's children. In fact, I have heard that God prefers a little fatback in the mustard greens.

All around us God is inviting us to join hands to create a world where life is brought to fulness. We will find plenty of partners of every race, color, religion, political persuasion, gender, gender orientation, age, and ability in the Kingdom of God. There are all levels of skill in the Kingdom of God and everyone is needed and welcome. Some will be in the position to finance a Habitat for Humanity build. Some will bring carpentry or plumbing skills. Some will bring muscles to lay sod or plant trees. Some will vacuum and wash windows. Some will bring food to feed the hungry workers. And as soon as you think you have figured out

who is working in the Kingdom, watch out. A new worker with a new accent and new ideas will join you to expand the project of grace.

This is just a glimpse of how the parables of the Kingdom God are used by Jesus to upset our cultural assumptions and our religious education to expand the Kingdom of God and invite us into it. The relationships of Jesus also teach us about his vision of God's community. And more than any other place, it is the table board that is the most common. The table is the place everybody comes to several times a day - if they are fortunate. The technical term that New Testament scholars use is commensality. It means simply the fellowship at the table and the act of eating food together.

Like many societies, who is welcome to our table and how everyone is expected to act at the table are often unwritten but clearly understood rules. There is a chair at the end of our table that I understand is my chair. You are expected to wash your hands before you eat. And, you will not come to the table without a shirt. A muscle shirt is forbidden. A tee shirt is the minimum requirement. Food at our house is eaten with lips closed. If you chew with your lips open in my house it is considered rude. Slurping is also out. But in other cultures it is the norm. I'll bet there are similar rules in your house as well.

There are times when who is welcome to the table and whether or not they are fed is based on such social customs and prejudices. Remember that the lunch counter was often a symbol of the Civil Rights movement because it begged the

question of who was good enough to eat with whom. I remember when people of color were not allowed in some restaurants or they had to get their food outside from the back of the kitchen. Eating is one of the most fundamental human acts and the value that we give people is determined by whether or not they even have a place at the table. We offend others, often with deliberation, or we find ourselves offended when we are not invited to supper, or the church potluck, or the wedding reception, or the neighborhood cookout. The meal is the measure of our worth to others.

Throughout his ministry Jesus was constantly upsetting the social norms of his day by insisting that everyone was welcome to his table. He kept bringing to his table the very ones who were often excluded from the highly placed tables of the rich and famous, including and especially religious leaders. Jesus welcomed not just women but prostitutes, tax collectors, used car salesmen, house painters, and people from other regions of the area that everyone was sure were damned. Even children had a place at the table of Jesus, despite the fact that they were always interrupting, spilling their drinks, and feeding their lima beans to the dogs.

The symbol is unmistakable. In the ministry of Jesus every human being is welcome to the bread of life and the cup of grace. Even when we are on our worst behavior or in the foulest mood there is a place for us at the table of God. If I could give it, I would make the chalice and patten - wine and bread - the symbol of Christianity. I would do that because I think that is what Jesus was all about before

he went to the cross. I think that is what put him on the cross. And I think that is what Jesus calls us to do and be after the cross. The cross too easily points to death and ultimate sacrifice. I believe that faith sometimes calls us to such sacrifice. But frankly, that is seldom required. Welcoming people and feeding people is a daily requirement and keeps us focused on what is essential. The invitation to the table is radically inclusive and egalitarian. It is all about the table in one way or another.

I also want to tell you that when we gather to celebrate the Lord's Supper, I believe that we are engaged in divine theatre, bringing into practice the most powerful image of Jesus' ministry. That is why I worry that it becomes stale or so trivialized that it loses its ability to tell the story of a shared meal and an open invitation. I hope that you have seen that I do not just direct you to the back of the hymnal or rush and rumble through words of institution. That is why I craft and write liturgies that I think bread and wine can convey about Kingdom values and commensality. The Mother's Day Prayer of Thanksgiving is the most recent example.

That is my faith with Jesus. I hope I have made it clear that such a faith is vitally engaged in the well being of human beings. The Kingdom of God is not just a religious banner or bumper sticker. If you truly believe in the Kingdom of God and God's radically inclusive table you must also believe that such faith transports us to the arenas of social policy, economics, politics, and government. The Kingdom of God is less a matter of personal piety than it is public witness. It

is often difficult and no matter how many times you feed people one day they come back hungry the next. Maybe that should tell us something about what eternity is really all about.

Grace and Peace to you all.

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