

“What Is Your Kingdom Work?”

Rev. Carol Howard Merritt

Bridge Pastor

First Presbyterian Church

New Canaan, CT

July 26, 2020

Text: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

I teach at a lot of writer’s conferences. They’re filled with people, hoping to pitch their next great book idea to an eager editor. In denominational circles, it’s often people clutching their doctoral thesis, hoping to make it into something that will grace the *New York Times* bestseller list. Or it’s that person who always makes up stories in their head, and they dream that one day they will sit down and suddenly, effortlessly regurgitate the great American novel. I usually cater to the working parent crowd—we’re the ones who are leaving voice message ideas on our phone and waking up at 4:30 am to write them down. It’s a strange thing, but I can often tell who is going to make it in publishing.

When I meet them, they’re willing to give up everything. When I tell them that they will have to get a Twitter account, they do not object. When I tell them that they will need to dedicate two hours a day to sitting down in a hard chair and writing, they rearrange their schedule. When I advise them to get rid of their television, they say, “Okay.” And if they’re still excited at the end of our conversation, I think, *She might make it.*

There is something there. It is the willingness to work. It is the drive and potential. But there’s also something else—they understand that writing is the thing that will give their life meaning and they’re willing to do whatever it takes. But it’s not just so that they can see their name on the cover of a book. It’s like their lives will not quite be complete without their words getting on a page, in one form or another. They have that strange passion that bubbles up and becomes their source of meaning. I think it’s because it’s their kingdom work. It is the brick that they need to build the kingdom of God.

I often shy away from talking about the kingdom of God. I often edit the term out of our liturgy. It’s an incredibly important concept in the life and teachings of Jesus, but it can be easily misunderstood. Since Constantine, our Christian history has been filled with conquerors who used the name of God to build empires and kingdoms. We have used God’s name to wage too many holy wars. Religion can be an incredibly manipulating force. Religious people will give up all of their ethical and moral grounding to support a leader who will give them more power. And so when we talk about the “kingdom,” especially in our context, we need to be wary and remember where term originated, we need to remember the streets in which Jesus walked.

Jesus always talks about the Kingdom of God. Of course, he was talking with the Jewish people, who lived under the reign of Rome. Roman soldiers walked the hot dusty streets of Jerusalem, making sure there were no uprisings against the Empire. The Jewish people were serving a

Kingdom that peeled their belongings from off their backs and kept them. It was a kingdom that could randomly ask a person to carry a bag for a mile. It was a kingdom that could execute a man of peace and hang him on a tree on the side of the road, as an example of what they would do to people if they got out of line.

While they were surrounded by the clanging swords of the guards, Jesus spoke of another realm. It was not a kingdom of the earth that came about by conquering land, desecrating holy places, and enslaving children. It is not about colonizing land and conquering people, but the reign that Jesus about is abundant, life-altering, and full of potential. It was an altogether different sort of Kingdom. Jesus talked about it in stories. He spoke of it as being something that is already and not yet. It is neither here nor there. And he talks about it by pointing out these simple stories.

(I'm relying on Amy Jill Levine for many of my interpretations, but while we can look at scholarly interpretations and we can be aware of the dangers of interpretations, we also know that that the meaning of the stories of Jesus come from you.)

A woman hides some yeast in some flour. And the thing that strikes me here, is the utter abundance of this bread that she's making. When the text says that she uses three measures of flour, that translates to about 40 to 60 pounds. It much more than one woman can knead on her own, and it points to the vastness, the abundance of God's kingdom. And she is adding yeast to it, which means that the yeast will make it rise, and she will have even more bread. In this story, it seems that Jesus is saying that this reign will not be about the stinginess of the Roman Empire. It is not about stealing the cloak off of someone's back or stealing money as you collect unfair taxes. This kingdom will be about having more than you can ask or imagine.

Have you ever walked along the beach, and suddenly become overwhelm by the vast beauty of it? Have you ever held a child in your arms, and your love is so overwhelming, that you could not contain it? Those are kingdom moments!

The second is about a pearl. This merchant is looking for pearls, and the thing about pearls is that they are extraordinarily expensive at this time. In fact, one set of matching pearl earrings was said to of cost one million dollars in our currency. And this merchant finds the perfect pearl, and he sells everything that he has for it. In fact, he probably can't even be a merchant any longer, because he's sold everything he needs for his trade. He falls in love with the beauty of his merchandise that he throws everything away so that he can have it! It is about giving up everything for the beauty and passion of our lives.

That's the kingdom. The kingdom is not about soldiers who whip a person into submission. The kingdom is about a painter sets up his easel and gives up everything to create. The environmentalist gives up time, convenience, and resources to save our good earth. The civil rights leader, who puts his life on the line to stir up "good trouble." Those are kingdom passions.

The third is about a mustard seed—a tiny seed that has such incredible potential. Eaten on its own, it's rich in protein and nutrients. When it grows, it becomes a home for a myriad of birds and insects. Jesus is telling us that the kingdom is not about the short battles that take life. Rather, the Kingdom is about the slow, life-giving process of protecting and nurturing life.

Kingdom work is my friend, who worked at a 5-star restaurant in D.C., when he got terminally ill. As he was there on his death bed, he knew that if he survived, he didn't want to continue his life in the same way. He made it through his illness and became the chef at a soup kitchen. His kitchen became a place where people could gather and find warmth in the bitter cold. They could be nurtured in their hunger. He made sure that his homeless guests got extraordinary, hot and healthy meals. He listened to the kingdom work.

And what does this mean for us? It means that the reign of God is within us and surrounding us. It is already and not yet. We have abundance. Not always in a material sense. But there is this abundance of beauty and pleasure. There is an abundance of connection and love. There is an abundance of potential to nurture.

Friends, the pandemic is getting better here in Connecticut. But it is flaring up around the country. As we move forward, this is a crucial time. We will need to begin to imagine and create a new world, as people come to terms with the job loss and the closing of businesses. As we begin to struggle with the grief and death. As families grow hungry. And as we rebuild, may we keep the kingdom of God in mind. For God is calling you to a work that is abundant and overflowing. God is calling you to something so valuable that you would give up everything for it. God is calling you to something that has the potential to nurture people for years to come.

So what is your brick? What is that small thing that you can do to build the reign of God? What is your kingdom work?

May we go out and do it. To the glory of God our creator, God our Liberator, and God our Nurturer. Amen.