

1-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Pulley, Kathy J. (2012) "Living in the Kingdom," *Leaven*: Vol. 20: Iss. 2, Article 10.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol20/iss2/10>

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Living in the Kingdom

Brookline Church of Christ, Easter, April 22, 1984

KATHY J. PULLEY

The basic text of my first sermon in 1984 at the Brookline Church of Christ is below. It is much less remarkable than the circumstances that surrounded it. I kept the notes because it was an important life-event. Over the remaining year that I lived in Boston and worshiped at Brookline I preached at least twice more. We had a regular minister and sometimes others filled in, including my sister Micki Pulleyking. I was extremely anxious as I thought about and prepared to step behind the pulpit in the capacity of “the preacher” on that first Sunday. I had been lecturing in a university classroom for a couple of years prior to graduate work, but this speaking assignment was different. Yes, it felt like I was planning to step on holy ground that might sink beneath me, and yes, I did wonder if the sky would fall—perhaps not literally, but I had genuine fears about bad things happening. What if someone disrupted the service because a female was speaking? What if a church member walked out? What if I felt so awkward that the words would not come out? Those and what seemed like a million other “what if’s” went through my mind. The Brookliners and I had been discussing and studying for this moment for well over six months—to do it or not to do it? It was a big step, and it was no accident that I preached on Easter. During that time at Brookline, holidays usually meant fewer in attendance, which meant that there was less chance of upsetting folks by having a woman preaching. I was intentionally careful not to plan a sermon that even mentioned women. If there were guests I did not want to overdo the gender issue, thinking that the very fact that I was standing there, speaking from behind the pulpit, was probably enough for all of us for one day.

I preached my last sermon at Brookline on May 26, 1985, Pentecost! It seems appropriate to share a few of my comments before I started that sermon:

Two years ago I came here excited about a church that had a reputation for being personable and progressive. As I stand here today, for the last time, Brookline is so much more than these adjectives. I experienced life in the church in ways I could not have imagined. . . . Each of you will always be special to me at least partially because I have had the opportunity to choose freely how I would participate in this Christian community. I could speak—we can all speak—and our voices are heard and respected. I am thankful for your encouragement, tolerance, and acceptance.

The Sermon: Living in the Kingdom

It’s good to be back with you this morning. For those of you who weren’t here yesterday, we had a wonderful day together. I want to thank Tom Geer, the minister at the Danvers Church of Christ and a fellow graduate student from Boston University, for his fine presentations. For several weeks now, he and I have met regularly at the Kangaroo and discussed our sessions for this weekend. Our theme, “The Kingdom of God,” is complex, yet central to the Bible. We appreciate your participation yesterday and welcome you back! Today, my focus is “Living in the Kingdom.”

What Did the Kingdom of God Mean in Jesus' Own Ministry?

We know that Jesus' kingdom added a new dimension to human life. Jonathan Edwards called this an "infusion of divine grace." Jeremiah referred to a time when God's covenant would be an internal one, written on one's heart (Jer 31.31–34).

As we see in Luke, John the Baptist's disciples came asking Jesus if he is the one, but he doesn't answer that question. Rather, he says, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them" (Luke 7.22). Jesus doesn't provide John's followers with theological arguments. He simply suggests that they go back and remind John of what Jesus is doing. Jesus wants to be known by his actions. He is healing and preaching the good news to the poor.

Luke's gospel, more than any other, is a social gospel, or some have referred to it as a gospel to the outcasts. So many of his teachings and parables and actions make the point over and over: he came to the disenfranchised and those on the margins of society.

What Does the Kingdom of God Mean Today?

Today, if the church wants a picture of living in the kingdom of God on earth, then we look at Jesus' own ministry. We recognize the clash that is always present—he constantly struggled to work for good despite the forces working against him.

The French philosopher and theologian Jacques Ellul calls on Christians who are living in the kingdom to recreate a "new style of life." He says a doctrine has power only to the extent that it creates a style of life.

Most of us who have studied the Bible and theology seriously have studied doctrines a lot. We know something about God, sin, faith, and on this Easter Sunday, we are also reminded of some of the things we know about the doctrine of atonement. We may have command of a good number of critical arguments about the biblical texts. Many of us have memorized scripture. It is good to know these things.

However, Ellul is right. *A doctrine has power, not when we "know" it well, but when it creates a new style of life—a spiritual style of life.* The spiritual style of life is different from the social and political lifestyles we create. Jesus' death and resurrection are powerful when they create that new style of life.

We cannot equate the church with the kingdom of God. However, the church is also working to break into the kingdom of God. The church, in its institutional life, struggles with "church interests" as opposed to kingdom interests. Too often in the institutional church, doctrine has been used to divide rather than unite. The church has been too consumed by getting the doctrines right at the expense of "doing"—of taking care of each other. If the church wants to be under the reign of God it is imperative that it also must have a new style of life. How do we represent the kingdom of God on earth today?

First, the church must be *spiritually centered*. We, the church, must be steadfastly working to understand and interpret what it means today to be "infused with the divine grace of God." Again, if we look at Jesus' actions, he prayed a lot. Whether alone, or in the midst of disciples, or on the cross, his heart was open to God's will being done. The church must act to feed our souls, which are so hungry for a connection to holy God. The Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard, in regard to prayer, said, "The true relation in prayer is not when God hears what is prayed for, but when the person praying continues to pray until he is the one who hears, what God wills." A spiritually-centered church listens for God's will in each of our lives, in this time and this space.

Second, we must be *other centered*. We must be committed to serving those in need. Here in Boston there is never a shortage of opportunities to reach out to those who are in need. Matthew's gospel says that Jesus came to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10.6). He chose to work among those who had no reputable place and were despised by the religious and political institutions of Israel.

For Jesus, the way to know that one is dealing with kingdom work is that compassion is being shown for people who are hurting. Luke's constituents included the Good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the tax collectors, the widows, the lepers and all the lost sheep, no matter their situation.

Today, our constituents in Boston also include—just to name a few—the poor and homeless in our city, the unwed mothers who lack food for their children, and the increasing number of Hispanic and Asian immigrants

who may be coming for education and jobs in technology, but who sometimes feel displaced and lonely. Jesus' kingdom is for all the lost sheep, regardless of ethnic, racial, economic and social locations.

We must also be committed to serving each other. Superficial relationships may work well in the workplace, but in a church that desires to be "infused with the grace of God," we need to dig deeper—to be willing both to share our own life struggles, and embrace and nurture those who share with us. Difficult though it may be, isn't that what the kingdom is about?

Third, we must be prophetically centered. Like Jesus, the Old Testament prophets were not afraid to speak out publicly against the power structures that led to human oppression. For example, Amos was not a "yes man" put in place by the kings and priests of his day. He was a prophet who spoke boldly against their hypocrisy and their practice of many rituals, while neglecting to act justly. Amos' words were "...I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; ...But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5.21–24). Living in the kingdom means speaking out against those who oppress others and standing with those who need to be rescued, just as Jesus has rescued us.

This Easter Sunday Christians around the world are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ all those years ago in Jerusalem. Jesus' life: his actions, teaching, suffering, death and resurrection tell a profound story—a story that ends with hope. That hope is this: *because of the power of the resurrection, tomorrow can be different*. We can bring change for good, and we can be changed for good by the power of God's kingdom among and within us. May we claim this promise of resurrection and create a lifestyle that is kingdom worthy!

If you have a need you want to share, or if you want to be a part of our community, please let us know as we stand and sing.

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