

The Unexpected Kingdom

When I say that the Church has lost the Kingdom, I do not mean that it has totally lost the conception of the Kingdom; it has it as a marginal concept, something you get into for security by the new birth now, something you will inherit hereafter as a reward in heaven, something you get at the Second Coming, something to which you point as an ideal. These conceptions of a kingdom are generally dehydrated because they are marginal.

They are not the starting point and the ending point, not the total program now for all life, not the head-on and total answer to man's total need, individual and collective. In other words, we do not seek first, last, and always the kingdom of God as our way of life now, and we do not offer it to the world as our answer to the world's ills now. What we have lost is God's redemptive totalitarianism, the kingdom of God. That is the central sickness of our age. Until we find that, all our endeavors for amelioration are a sprinkling of rose water on a cancer.

E. Stanley Jones

The Unexpected Kingdom

A word from the pastor

I'm excited about what is going to happen during the next five weeks as we study and act on the theme that dominated Jesus' teaching and preaching – the “kingdom of God.” Many of the things Jesus said and, especially, some of the ways he embodied the kingdom astonished his fellow Jews. I will be disappointed if we don't also encounter some surprises along the way!

For the next thirty-five days, I am asking that we use the Gospel of Luke as a way for us to carefully listen to and watch Jesus and his disciples. Whether you've been a follower of Jesus for a long time or whether you are just beginning the journey of faith, **I challenge you to commit yourself to the following spiritual growth activities:**

- Pray daily for everyone who is involved in this Unexpected Kingdom experience.
- Participate in our worship services each Sunday from March 27 through Easter Sunday, April 24. If at all possible, you should plan to be present for our Good Friday service (April 22 at 6:30 p.m.). If you already have conflicts in your schedule, don't despair. By fulfilling the other two commitments, you will stay engaged.
- Read and ponder the daily devotions that are contained in this booklet; take the Weekend Challenge; and take notes during the worship services and/or Bible studies.

I believe that as we listen to what Jesus taught about the kingdom and as we watch how he put those teachings into practice, our hearts—and our lifestyles — will be challenged. After all, didn't he say: “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God”? Is that challenging enough for you?

With a little trepidation and a lot of excitement,

Pastor Norm

March 27

The Sunday Experience

Unexpected Announcements

Luke 1:31-33; 4:16-21

What is it in these “announcements” that is unexpected? Why?

In this morning's focal scriptures is there ...

an example to follow?

a command to obey?

an error to avoid?

a sin to forsake?

a promise to claim?

a new thought about God?

If our gospel is what people think it is, it's no wonder that it's not worth adding church to a busy recreational weekend.

Yes, people are closed to our version of the gospel, but maybe they'd be open to God's gospel. God's gospel was and is his way of explaining the whole story. The gospel tells us why we fight with each other, why we have war, pain, suffering and death. The gospel of Jesus shows the heart of God for humanity and the depths of his love and acceptance and vision for every human being. It gives us hope in the face of injustice, hunger, and poverty, and for recovery from every vice or societal ill... The Gospel of God's Kingdom helps explain where meaning comes from and how we are to live an integrated experience in light of God's love for his created humanity.

It was this gospel that Jesus knew would be good news to those trying to answer the eternity issue and even the more temporal problems. It was the gospel that Jesus knew would draw people naturally like sheep to a clear-water well. It was good news! Always, in all times, with any person, for one major reason we've lost sight of: the gospel meant that life now could be different!

Hugh Halter and Matt Smay
The Tangible Kingdom

Monday, March 28

Daily Devotional

By Norm Langston

Psalm 145:10-13

10 All your works praise you, LORD;
your faithful people extol you.
11 They tell of the glory of your Kingdom
and speak of your might,
12 so that all people may know of your mighty acts
and the glorious splendor of your Kingdom.
13 Your Kingdom is an everlasting Kingdom,
and your dominion endures through all generations.

During January and February, most of us became familiar with the NSTEP model. The “P” in this acronym stands for “Pursuing Christ and His Kingdom to become fully mature believers.” But that phrase—and our conceptions of becoming fully mature believers—won’t make sense if we don’t understand what Jesus revealed by his teaching and practice about the Kingdom of God.

After all, the Kingdom of God is the dominant theme of Jesus’ proclamation! The phrase is found over a hundred times in the gospel accounts of his life. Even if you subtract the parallel accounts of similar sayings, the gospels record 61 separate sayings of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God.

However, Jesus’ teaching did not take place in a vacuum. The Hebrew scripture served as his primer and as a backdrop to everything he said and did. The exact phrase, “Kingdom of God”, is hardly used in the Old Testament, but the idea that God is the rightful ruler of our world is assumed. Indeed, when Jesus says “Kingdom of God” he is not referring to some sort of geographical entity like the Kingdom of Monaco; rather, he is speaking of God’s reign. But the Old Testament does more than assert God’s Kingship; it also speaks of “one like a son of man” to whom “the Ancient of Days” has promised “a Kingdom which shall know no end” (Daniel 7:13-14).

At the time Jesus began his public ministry, the Jews continued to affirm that God was the world's rightful Ruler. However, they felt that something had gone terribly wrong. For some reason God had lost effective control of the world. However, they yearned for and expected a time when God would re-assert his authority.

In C. S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, a wicked witch has taken control of the land. But rumors begin that Aslan, the great Lion who is the rightful ruler, "is on the move." This is how the Jews of Jesus' day heard John the Baptist's words that "one more powerful than I will come" (Luke 3:16). When Jesus proclaimed, "The Kingdom of God is near," they heard, "God is on the move!"

All Jews looked forward to God's coming deliverance. However, they did not agree on what this deliverance would look like. Many thought it would manifest itself as a great spiritual revival in which Israel would become the religious center of the world. Others thought the Messiah would be a political and military figure who would establish Israel as the dominant world power. Still others expected the Messiah would end the present world order and usher in a new earth and a new heaven.

Against the backdrop of these conflicting expectations, Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God was both present and future, and, that in his person and ministry, the Kingdom had come but that its consummation would take place in the future.

King of the Universe, your knowledge is too great for me, but your Love is even greater! Help me, along with all those who engage in this study, to catch a glimpse of how wide and long and high and deep is your Love. Help me to live a life that is full of your Love, O God. Amen.

Tuesday, March 29

Daily Devotional

By Norm Langston

Luke 1:32-33

“... He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his Kingdom will never end.”

The Kingdom of God was the central theme of Jesus’ ministry. From the very beginning of the gospels, we read about the Kingdom. In the first chapter of Luke’s gospel, the angel Gabriel talks about the Kingdom in his conversation with Mary (1:33). Jesus’ first words in the Gospel of Mark are about the Kingdom (1:14). In Matthew, the message of the Kingdom marks the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry (4:17). And, in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells Nicodemus what is required to “see the Kingdom of God” (3:3).

Even after Jesus’ death on the Cross, talk of the Kingdom of God was prominent. Joseph of Arimathea, a man who was “waiting for the Kingdom of God,” asked Pilate to allow him to bury Jesus (Luke 23:50). And, have you ever wondered what Jesus said to his disciples during the 40 days between his resurrection and ascension? He spoke to them “about the Kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). During the last two years of the Apostle Paul’s life, “he preached the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31).

So why have churches of every variety—denominational and independent, conservative and liberal—neglected to teach about the Kingdom? When I asked 17 participants in our Wednesday Night Men’s Study how many of them had ever heard a message series on the Kingdom of God, the answer was ZERO. How is this possible?

First, immediately after Jesus’ resurrection, his followers were focused more on explaining how he was the Messiah than on sharing his

teachings concerning the Kingdom. Moreover, as the gospel began penetrating the Gentile world, this trend accelerated. The Kingdom of God was part of the Apostle Paul's teaching, but it wasn't as central for him as for Jesus. Other than in the four gospels, the Kingdom of God is rarely mentioned. Perhaps the "gospel of the Kingdom of God" was pushed aside by the "gospel of God's King."

Second, many Christians came to understand the Kingdom of God as an equivalent term for "heaven." It is easy to see how this occurred since the Gospel of Matthew usually uses the term "Kingdom of heaven" instead of "Kingdom of God." Concerning this, Dr. Frank Stagg explains: "Matthew prefers 'Kingdom of heaven' either to avoid a political understanding of the Kingdom of God or out of Jewish piety's avoidance of direct reference to God. There is no biblical basis for distinguishing between 'Kingdom of God' and 'Kingdom of heaven.'"

So this idea that the Kingdom is a future reality to be entered into after death is both **inaccurate** and **unfortunate**. It is **inaccurate** because it makes nonsense of the "Lord's Prayer." Why would Jesus teach his followers to pray, "Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10), if God's Kingdom is strictly a future, other-worldly reality? And, if the Kingdom was not present in Jesus' own ministry, then why did he say, "if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20)?

The idea that the Kingdom of God simply means "heaven" is **unfortunate** because it empties many of Jesus' life-transforming teachings of their urgency and power. Jesus never called for his disciples to passively wait for his return. Rather, He commissioned his followers to look for, pray for, and work for the coming of his Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven!

Lord Jesus, let your Kingdom come in my heart and in my life. Let your will be done in my family and in my church. As I read these devotions, clarify my thinking about my own role in the Kingdom. To you be all praise and glory! Amen.

Wednesday, March 30

Daily Devotional

By Norm Langston

Luke 4:42-43

At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, “I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.”

They wanted Jesus to stay. We would have too. After all, he had quieted a demon-possessed man, “rebuked” the high fever in Simon’s mother-in-law, and laid healing hands on people with a wide variety of maladies. No wonder they wanted him to stay.

But he wouldn’t. His work was too important. Jesus said, “I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God” to other towns and villages. After all, that is why he came!

But that’s not what we say, is it? Instead of saying that he came to “proclaim the good new of the Kingdom,” we say Jesus came to die on the Cross for our sins, so that we can have forgiveness and a home with Him in heaven. We say that all we need to do to receive forgiveness and heaven is to believe in Him and say a prayer.

Is it wrong for us to say that?

It’s not so much wrong as it is incomplete. James Bryan Smith says that “the good news about entering heaven when we die has overshadowed the equally good news that we can enter heaven now” (*The Good and Beautiful Life*, 36).

I believe this tendency to truncate the gospel has had significant consequences for our churches and, ultimately, for our culture. Framing

the good news—the gospel—as a cognitive transaction—just believe and say a prayer—has caused our “discipleship muscles” to atrophy. Why do we need to “passionately pursue Christ and His Kingdom,” if we’ve already got our home in heaven guaranteed? Why do we need to worry about Jesus’ teachings concerning the Kingdom of God if we’ve already “prayed the prayer”?

Instead of sharing Jesus’ passion for the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed (see Luke 4:18; 6:20-21; 7:22), too many American Christians have developed a consumer mentality that asks, “What does your church offer for me and my family?” What would Jesus say about this? Maybe...

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26-27).

So, how can we overcome our “flabby discipleship”?

- A first step is for us to reclaim Jesus’ teaching concerning the gospel—the good news—of the Kingdom of God.
- A second step is for us to pray. Let’s pray that God will transform us from religious consumers into Kingdom citizens.
- A third step is for us to practice loving people that are different from us (Luke 6:27-36), especially people that are not followers of Jesus. Our Lord says this is normative for citizens of His Kingdom.
- Our Weekend Challenges are written to help us do these very things. Engage them!

Lord, I don’t want to be a flabby disciple any more. But, Lord, there seems to be some force that constantly pulls me in that direction. A lot of the time it’s just easier to stay in my familiar patterns. Today I give You permission to break me out of my comfort zones and to thrust me in the direction of Your Kingdom. I yearn to see Your Power and Glory. Amen.

Thursday, March 31

Daily Devotional

By Elizabeth Irby

Luke 6:20

“Looking at his disciples, he said: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.’”

This verse starts what scholars traditionally call the “Beatitudes” or blessing (also found in Matthew’s gospel account of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount). The Life Application Bible notes say the Beatitudes, “describe what it means to be Christ’s follower; they are standards of conduct; they contrast kingdom values with worldly values, showing what Christ’s followers can expect from the world and what God will give them.” (p.1806).

When taken literally the verse, “blessed are you who are poor,” seems to indicate that those struggling financially receive Christ’s blessing. One of my favorite writers who helps me understand Scripture better is Charles Swindoll, a pastor from Texas. In his book, *Simple Faith*, he interprets this verse further:

Not poor in substance, but spirit. The first beatitude has nothing to do with being materially destitute or financially bankrupt. Jesus is placing value on a humble spirit, on those who acknowledge a spiritual bankruptcy in and of themselves. Where there is an absence of well-polished pride and personal conceit, there is wholesome dependence on the living God. Instead of, “No problem, I can handle it. After all, look at the things I’ve accomplished already,” there is a quick confession, acknowledging one’s own inadequacies. (p. 25).

Although, we can certainly learn and grow from periods of financial instability by relying on God to provide for us, Swindoll goes straight to the heart of this verse, our character. In a world where independence,

performance, and an “I can do anything if I try hard enough” attitude prevails, it is rare to find humility and people who admit God (not their own effort) helped them achieve their goals.

In 2 Corinthians 12:10, we find an example of a Biblical character who does just that. Paul admits, “that is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties...” In doing so, Paul acknowledges God’s strength, “...For when I am weak, then I am strong.” What an amazing account from someone who used to persecute Jesus and His followers!

In our journey of pursuing Christ, when we apply Paul’s attitude and Jesus’ teaching in the beatitudes, we will truly exemplify kingdom living. It is impossible to encounter Jesus and remain unchanged.

Most Holy God, we confess our own weaknesses. We long to represent your Son to a world where many do not know you. Please help our lives to shine so brightly because of our faith in You that others cannot help but wonder what is different. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Friday, April 1

weekend challenge

It is an overwhelming and likely an impossible task for us to change the way we think about everything, the way we perceive the world around us, how we experience life here on earth, and how we think about eternity. But we find hope in the knowledge that it is God who brings about these changes of heart in his children. And so we've already prayed a number of prayers together this week asking God to begin this work in us. Nevertheless, it's a bit scary to think that God may really challenge us by doing exactly what we've asked... things like "clarify my thinking" and "break me out of my comfort zone."

Have you ever known someone who, perhaps by their own admission, "sees the world through rose colored glasses?" This meaning, of course, that they always see the best in people, the good in every situation, and the silver lining behind each cloud. These people can, at the same time, be both delightfully endearing and quite annoying. Most likely these "rose colored glasses" people really do see all of the pain, discouragement, and frustrations of life that the rest of us see, but are so drawn by an internal desire to focus on what is good and happy that it skews their perception of everything and everyone around them. Our challenge in "Unexpected Kingdom" is simply to learn to put on "kingdom colored glasses" so that our perceptions of everything and everyone around us would start to line up with those of Christ. And so, our first weekend challenge is intended to help us do just this.

Put on your "kingdom colored glasses," and pick up a current or very recent newspaper or magazine. Browse the headlines and stories looking for examples of how God's kingdom is coming "on earth as it is in heaven". Look for examples of the sick being healed and the needy being cared for or of someone mirroring Jesus' passion for the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed. It may take a while for your eyes

to come into focus as is often the case when you get a new pair of glasses, so be prayerful throughout your exercise. If you're a crafty person, you may want to cut out some of the headlines and articles and make some sort of scrapbook page for yourself as a reminder of this first challenge.

April 3

The Sunday Experience

Unexpected Lifestyles

Luke 6:20-49; 12:31-32

What is unexpected in these teachings of Jesus about how we should live?

In this morning's focal scriptures is there...

an example to follow?

a command to obey?

an error to avoid?

a sin to forsake?

a promise to claim?

a new thought about God?

In the kingdom of this world, people feel disempowered, vulnerable, impotent and exposed. The quickest way to deal with this insecurity is to gain power, to take charge. Feeling weak? Go to the gym and build muscles. Feeling financially vulnerable? Build wealth. Feeling unfairly treated by others? Fight back, take them to court, assert your rights. The dominant narrative is, If someone hits you, hit them back harder.

James Bryan Smith
The Good and Beautiful God, 120

Jesus' primary message was the availability, presence and power of the Kingdom of God ... The good news is that we are invited into this life with God. We enter the Kingdom through surrender, humility, trust, and a willingness to begin working on our hearts in order to become the kind of person God desires us to be. God is creating an all-inclusive community of persons whose hearts and character are shaped by Jesus. This can happen only in the Kingdom of God. Fortunately, all of us are invited, regardless of our past.

The Good and Beautiful God, 45-46

Monday, April 4

Daily Devotional

By Dan Schuch

Luke 7: 28

I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

Jesus praised John the Baptist even making reference that scripture spoke of him (Malachi 3:1). It was John who prepared the way for Jesus. It was John who baptized Him.

He represented the end of an era and he helped usher forth the new one. Thankfully for us, life would never be the same. To God’s people, the old was marked by legalism and sacrifice; the new was marked by grace. Christ is the dividing line between the old and the new. We even mark time by Christ – BC (before Christ) and AD (from the latin “anno domini” meaning “In the year of Our Lord”).

John the Baptist was the last of the prophets. He represented the best of the old way. In the old way, one’s good standing before God was achieved by fulfilling the Ten Commandments and being diligent to maintain the proper sacrifices. This new way was brought about by the complete and permanent sacrifice for us made by Jesus through His death on the cross. One’s good standing before God in the new era was based on accepting the free gift God offered us through Christ.

Darrell Bock, author of the NIV Application Commentary on Luke, talks about the significance of this verse:

“Yet John’s greatness is nothing compared to those who participate in the new era’s blessings and benefits. Jesus’ remark in verse 28 is one of the greatest affirmations of the believer’s status in Scripture. To belong to the kingdom is a great privilege. John is the bridge between the two eras,

but those who follow where the Baptist points come into a closer, more intimate relationship to God that transcends even the best the old age offered. That is how great Jesus' work is in this new era."

So, why is this important for you and me? John the Baptist, like the prophets before him, is like the majestic lighthouse on the coast that points all of us navigating the treacherous seas of life towards the safe harbors of the kingdom of God found only in Christ. All other routes lead to death and destruction.

Holy Father in heaven thanks for providing people like John the Baptist who help guide us toward Christ. We are humbled that through Christ we can restore our relationship with the one that created us. We marvel that because of what Christ did for us we are considered as royalty, the joint heirs with Christ.

Tuesday, April 5

Daily Devotional

By Elizabeth Irby

Luke 8:1-3

“After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.”

The MAX train jolted to a stop at Burnside. My husband and I exited and walked upstairs to the Portland Rescue Mission. We had accepted an invitation from the Director to come on-site to learn more about their men’s long-term New-Life recovery program, and our visit included lunch with the residents. I felt both excited to learn more about the therapy process and anxious about interacting with the men who lived there.

After touring the facilities, we entered the dining area, grabbed our meals, and chose a table. As one of only three women in the room and the only female at our table, I was in the minority and definitely out of my element. We made introductions and small talk began. When I mentioned my background in counseling, a man named John told us of his addiction to methamphetamines which ultimately led to the failure of his marriage and the loss of his job. John joined the recovery program to deal with his drug addiction.

In telling his story, John said he lived in Georgia for awhile near where I grew up. With that discovery, we found many commonalities – John’s best man in his wedding was a distant relative of my first boyfriend! He attended boarding school at the Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School located in the Appalachian Mountains in North Georgia which my family drove by

every summer on the way to my Grandmother's mountain cabin in North Carolina. The school published several *Foxfire* anthologies that I'd read while visiting my Grandmother. During his stay there, John submitted and published a story in one of the *Foxfire* volumes. As a fellow writer, this connected us even further.

Because of these connections, our conversation eventually went deeper. John told me more about his new faith in Christ and how God was using the recovery program to help straighten out his life. In turn, I shared ways God worked in my own life during challenging times. Before I knew it, lunch ended, and I left feeling like I'd just eaten a meal with a long lost friend.

When Jesus traveled, not only did his disciples accompany him, several women also joined them. In Jewish culture, women were not allowed to associate with rabbis. By including women in his journey, Jesus proved that everyone is equal in God's eyes. The women, all touched by Jesus in some way, wanted to help spread the gospel by telling others their stories, and they did.

I don't think it was a coincidence that I sat by John at the Rescue Mission. God paired two seemingly different people and taught me a powerful lesson. A married woman from a two-story home in the suburbs can (and did) find common ground with a homeless drug addict living in an inner city shelter.

God, help me proclaim the good news of your kingdom to everyone. Whether young, old, male, or female, we can all be a voice to those who do not know you by sincerely listening, loving, and caring. Amen.

Wednesday, April 6

Daily Devotional

By Kristen Gehring

Luke 9:1-2

When Jesus had called the twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.

The twelve disciples had been under Jesus' tutelage, listening to him teach and perform miracles. Luke 9:1-2 is the first instance that the Twelve were called upon to do something other than follow Jesus. They had been quiet observers and taught on the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God. They were now ready to take the information they gleaned and apply it.

As a Peace Corps Health Volunteer in Honduras, I had three months of training in culture, language and technical skills. I was completely inundated with information and would go to bed exhausted and overwhelmed. At the end of the three months I did not feel ready to go out into the field alone. There was so much more I needed to know and to learn. As part of the "graduation" from the program, our health sector was taken to a rural town to build a mud stove in the home of a local family. The stoves are made from cheap, local resources, but are equipped with a chimney and are well insulated to use less precious burning material. Most homes have an absence of a chimney which leads to many health issues such as recurrent upper respiratory infections, bronchitis, asthma, and emphysema.

We started out tentatively, but once we saw that we were able to effectively communicate with the family and cross cultural barriers, we realized we had the ability to build something very basic, but very valuable. We were able to form a relationship with the family, and they hung out with us all day and observed, learning for themselves how

to build the stove. That family in turn taught another family how to construct the stove, and I'm sure the chain continued. We gained the confidence to start our volunteer services, and the benefit of our small amount of knowledge spread.

These two verses demonstrate how the word of God was spread by a very small handful of men blessed with God's power and authority. The Twelve went from being "T; thoughtful observer" in the NSTEP model to transforming the lives around them and preaching the gospel. As servants of God, we are each blessed with different talents, life experiences, and unique testimonials. We may feel that we couldn't possibly know enough, or have anything in common with someone, or that they might not be receptive. That is when we have to realize the value of the message we are taking out into the world. Through God's authority we are enabled to extend His kingdom rule over people's hearts.

Thank you God for the examples of servant hood you have given us in your word. Use me as your servant to bless your work and your people.

Thursday, April 7

Daily Devotional

by Jillian Ramos

Luke 18:15-7 The Message

“People brought babies to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. When the disciples saw it, they shooed them off. Jesus called them back. ‘Let these children alone. Don’t get between them and me. These children are the kingdom’s pride and joy. Mark this: Unless you accept God’s kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you’ll never get in.’”

Younger people tend to be impatient to grow up. Small children are always talking about what they want to be when they “grow up” and always insisting that they’re “big kids now”. Preteens count the years till they’re 13, and teenagers? Well, they just can’t wait to get out of the house and go into the world as adults.

Then we get to adulthood, and, well, things just get even more complicated. I remember a book, *Wickett’s Remedy*, noting how running, intrinsic to childhood, becomes a last resort as an adult. It’s funny how true that is – everyone begins “reading into things” too in-depth, trying to do everything the right way, and attempting to depend on themselves.

Even as a young teenager, I do this, too. I get worked up over the smallest things that happen in school or with friends. When I try to come up with a solution, what’s the one phrase I say half the time to myself? “It’s complicated.” And we all say this to ourselves, don’t we? Even when we’re thinking about how we minister to others. We overthink so much, and suddenly what started out so small and modest becomes so difficult.

Since it’s become so complicated just to stop seeing everything as complicated, let’s take this step by step, together.

The opposite of complicated is simple. So, what are we doing that we should try to do the complete opposite of?

One thing is to stop fretting over our shortcomings. A child isn't able to do anything perfectly, and if you have a small child or know one, you know that their lovingly handcrafted gifts are never perfect – in fact, most of the time they're not even close. But they offer it up earnestly, and what do their parents or other older recipients do? They accept it and love it. Now, think of these little gifts as what we do for the kingdom of God. They're imperfect because they're done by imperfect people. However, if we put it in God's hands, he can do so much more through us than we could have ever imagined.

And that connects to another thing I pointed out earlier – we depend on ourselves so much. I even realized this about myself this year. But when we fall, what are we going to do? I know that I fell hard right before I had to write this month's devotionals. Some very tragic things were happening around me, and I knew that I couldn't magically pull out something wise and insightful from within me as I like to think I usually can. I was so emotionally and mentally exhausted, with too many questions to have any answers for anyone. I was tempted to give up several times, in fact. But I couldn't, it was too late for that.

So, I did one of the first sensible things I've done this week: I prayed. I prayed, I BEGGED for wisdom, or even simply for the ability to make sense to anyone. I admitted that I couldn't do this, and would never be able to if I didn't lean on God's understanding instead of my own. Like a child pleading for her father's help, I pleaded for the ability to interpret today's passage.

And in a strange turn-about way, I was. To go back to simply trusting, as a child, made the kingdom suddenly not seem that far off – it was like the mist had cleared and I could see the castle in the distance once more.

Dear Father, when life is cloudy or unclear or just complicated, remind me to come to you, in the simplicity of a child, and to trust that You can make sense of the chaos in our lives. Give us the strength, innocence, and wisdom to not lose sight of You, or Your kingdom here on earth. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Friday, April 8

weekend challenge

So, now it's time to act...to do something! As you prepare to engage this weekend's challenge, take encouragement from the devotions we've read together this week:

- God can manifest connections between very different people where we would have guessed there'd be none.
- Though we'll never feel ready and completely prepared for the work, God has given us the power and authority of his Spirit and equipped us with unique talents and experiences.
- Simple and imperfect efforts made in earnest and put into God's hand will yield unimagined results.

Ask God to point you toward a need in someone's life that you can meet with a simple act of kindness this weekend. Pray again that God would use this opportunity to stretch your faith and kingdom mentality, or take you out of your comfort zone. Here's what this will likely mean: the need you meet will most likely belong to someone whom you may have been uncomfortable or reluctant to engage in the past. For most of us to develop true kingdom perspective, there is a need to allow God to remove barriers that we've allowed to stand between us and others. These barriers may be socio-economic, gender related, racial, geographical, or others. When we study the life of Christ, it is impossible to ignore the fact that Jesus spent most of his time with people who had been marginalized by society and by the religious leaders of the day. Some part of our experience should be to allow God to begin breaking down these same barriers in our lives. In terms of the NSTEP model, this would mean simply that those of us who are "E's" and "P's" probably need to stop spending all of our time together and start investing significant time into relationships with people who are "N's" & "S's"

Listen for God's answer to your prayer. Hear his response. Step up to the plate and take a swing!



April 10

The Sunday Experience

Unexpected Power

Luke 8:22-25

Why didn't the disciples anticipate Jesus' power over the storm?

Why did they seem more afraid after the storm ceased than before?

In this morning's focal scriptures is there...

an example to follow?

a command to obey?

an error to avoid?

a sin to forsake?

a promise to claim?

a new thought about God?

The only total relevancy I can see or imagine is the Kingdom of God. The state is relevant in certain areas, the Church is relevant in certain areas and at certain times, the school is a limited relevancy for certain periods of life... But there is only one thing that is relevant in all situations, to all peoples, at all times, and in all ages, and that one thing is the Kingdom of God. For everybody is under that Kingdom whether in allegiance, in rebellion, in total unconsciousness of it, or in total ignorance of it...

So the Kingdom is the starting point of all your thinking, the beginning point of all your acting and the supreme point of all your affections. The Kingdom is a forced option in every situation, a forced option like eating. You don't have to eat, but if you don't eat you can't live. So the Kingdom is a forced option. You don't have to take it, but if you don't take it you can't live, not well, or not at all.

E. Stanley Jones

(The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person, 218, 220)

By Norm Langston

Luke 9:23-27

Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God.”

What did Jesus mean? Did he expect that some of those who were listening to him would see him come in glory with the holy angels? Isn't that its obvious meaning?

Some scholars think that's exactly what Jesus meant, and that he was simply mistaken in this belief, but there are some other interpretations to ponder:

- Perhaps Jesus was referring to his transfiguration. Immediately following this statement, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to a high mountain, and they saw him “transfigured before them.” Peter later wrote: “We were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased”” (2 Pet. 1:16-17).
- Could Jesus have been predicting his death and resurrection? Just before this passage, he told his disciples that he would be killed and raised to life on the third day (Luke 9:22). Wasn't it after his resurrection that they saw the Kingdom of God more completely manifested?

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- Maybe this is a reference to the giving of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. The Gospel of Mark's parallel to this verse says: "Some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God come with power" (Mark 9:1). Just before Christ's ascension into heaven, he told his disciples: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses..." (Acts 1:8).
 - And do you remember what Jesus told Nicodemus? "No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). Perhaps Jesus was simply saying that an unspecified number of those who were listening would come to believe in him, and, when that happened, they would see the Kingdom of God through this "new birth" of insight and understanding.

Personally, I think Jesus was referring to his death and resurrection, but I don't know how we can know for certain. I believe the great mistake we make concerning this passage is to focus on the part that's meaning is unclear rather than on the part that is indisputable, the first part of the passage (verses 23-25). Concerning "losing your life to find it," C. S. Lewis wrote:

Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, the death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and the death of your whole body in the end: Submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in" (*The Weight of Glory*, 36-37).

Dear Lord, save me from needless speculations. Teach me what it means to take up my cross daily. How do I do that? At least some of the time, I am willing, Lord, but I don't know how. Show how I am to lose my life for your sake. Be to me the Bread of Life and Living Water, so that I may be nourished by heaven's food rather than by the husks of this world. Only Savior. Only Lord. Amen.

Tuesday, April 12

Daily Devotional

by Sara Waddell Bobzien

Luke 9:59-62, NIV

He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let dead people bury their own dead. You go and tell others about God's kingdom." Still another man said, "I will follow you, Lord, but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family." Jesus replied, "Suppose you start to plow and then look back. If you do, you are not fit for service in God's kingdom."

When my father was dying, I visited South Carolina with my child as much as I could. At the very end of one 3-week trip, he worsened and the doctors determined he needed open-heart surgery. They set the surgery for the Monday after my Friday flight. I had bought "use or lose" tickets and despite many frantic phone calls, the seats were unchangeable and non-refundable. We were struggling badly and just could not afford to lose (and spend again on different tickets) what to us was an astronomical amount of money.

I talked it over with my father. He said, "I know you love me and would just nurse me right back to health if you could. But your husband needs you back, that baby needs to get on home, and I am in God's hands. If I'm here in the hospital, there's nothing you can do and if I go on home to heaven, well, you know good and well what that will be like! It's all good! You go on home." In prayer, I experienced the "peace that surpasses all understanding." I kissed my beloved father goodbye.

The day after John and I returned, my husband's mother had a massive stroke. She had helped my husband paint our dining room and babysat her other grandchildren just days before. She was their rock and the shock rendered them all mute with grief. My husband relied on me during the awful waiting, the finality, the funeral preparations, and

the horrible aftermath of those initial weeks. I was on hand as a willing worker and a prayer warrior. They had lost their rock and did not know about the Rock of Ages. To my knowledge, I was the only person representing the kingdom of God to all of my husband's family.

My father worsened and for several days, it was possible I would have to take our toddler and fly to Dad's funeral while my husband went through his mother's funeral alone. It was all very upsetting and unexpected. But Audrey slipped away, my father rallied, and through it all, I stayed focused on what it was God would have me to do for Him each day. I knew that none of this was unexpected to the Lord and God had made it clear where He wanted me. My father's willingness to live mindful of the kingdom of God and in pursuit of Christ caused him to not only encourage me to go, but once he was conscious, he prayed for my grieving in-laws and expressed concern for how they were coping themselves.

Pursuing Christ and his kingdom here on earth makes me God's servant, point-person, or ambassador as He sees fit. It is painful to feel split in regard to valid loyalties of love. It can cause our most stressful experiences. But Jesus never asks us to do what He would not do Himself and He knows putting the kingdom of God first is God's best. And it strengthens our faith.

Lord, please lead me. I know You understand the stress of concerns and choices and I need You desperately. Please lead me in kingdom living and let me do what You would have me to do. Let my choices line up with Your will. Amen.

Wednesday, April 13

Daily Devotional

By Dan Schuch

Luke 10:8-9

“When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’”

When I became a Christian I would read the Bible, and try to apply the truths contained within to become the kind of Christian I thought God wanted me to be. I would be remiss if I didn't mention that prayer was a part of my journey as well. However, when I read these verses they scared me to death. And if I were really being honest with you, I would say they still have that same effect on me.

For you see, I don't know how to heal anyone. Not only can I not heal anyone, I can't heal cars, plumbing, garbage disposals, lawn mowers, you name it. Frankly, I just wouldn't know what to do. But even more terrifying to me is the thought that I would have to eat whatever is offered to me. It will come as a surprise to many of you to learn that I'm considered a picky eater. I absolutely hate onions, so much so that it has become a joke between my wife and many of my friends. I don't like seafood of any kind (save tuna fish from a can). I order the same Chinese, Thai and Indian dish every time and don't really like the others. I have the same breakfast most days. You get the picture.

I've listened with horror to stories of people going to various remote areas of the world and being served unusual types of food. I've heard stories where it is custom for a poor family to offer the “best” part of a butchered animal to a guest. In some cases it is the eyeballs, brains, of even the fat from the animals back end. Sometimes I think my wife tells me these stories just to make me squirm. This fear has literally been the most instrumental one in my aversion to traveling overseas on mission trips.

So you can anticipate my initial response when Chaleen wanted me to join her on a missions oriented trip to Turkey a couple of years ago. Being a supportive husband made me “man up” and I went. To my complete surprise I found that the food was great. The fruit was some of the best I’ve ever had and I was completely hooked on the Turkish cherry juice. I had a similar experience when Chaleen and I were in Fiji for our honeymoon.

God knows our fears and reservations. I learned from these experiences that He will provide for us. As we experience God and pursue Him we can trust Him completely to take care of us. I challenge you to take that step of faith with God and watch how He blesses you as you serve Him.

Dear Father in heaven, You know our fears and weaknesses. Because of Your great love for us, You always provide especially when we take steps of faith to follow what You would have us do. Teach us to trust You more and help us to be more willing to take risks for the sake of Your kingdom.

Thursday, April 14

Daily Devotional

by Sara Waddell Bobzien

Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute. When the demon left, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed, but some of them said, “By Beelzebub, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons.” Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven

Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: “Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebub. Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you.” (Luke 11:14-20)

When I was a kid in Vacation Bible School, a boy cracked us all up by pretending to be Jesus as a child playing “Hide and Seek.” We would do a count and that kid would just stand there, arms majestically outreached, and say, “Ollie, ollie! In come free! I already know where you are!”

It was such a mystery to us that Jesus was both God and man: if Jesus were a man, how could He know so much, even our thoughts? But then if He was God, how did He restrain Himself when he could just evaporate Satan during the temptation in the desert in a poof of power?

That Jesus is both fully God and fully man is a complex theological mystery. In Luke 11, an example of this mystery is demonstrated in the encounter between Jesus, a mute man, and a crowd.

Jesus brilliantly reveals the poor logic of those who would actually think he is acting as an agent of Satan. He demonstrates He is fully God by frankly addressing the thoughts of apparently multiple individuals in the crowd of observers of His miracle. (More than just knowing their

thoughts, the phrase used here also includes knowing their intent and purpose.) Essentially, Jesus puts the onus on them to explain this: why would Satan want to kick out his own demons? Wouldn't that lessen Satan's power and cause the kingdom of evil to fall?

Though it is hard for us to understand that Jesus is fully God and fully man, Jesus is perfectly clear about who He is. The tiny phrase "the finger of God" in verse 20 can be easy to overlook, but it is masterful wording. It harks back to Exodus 8:19 in which even the magicians say to Pharaoh in wonder of the miracles, "This is the finger of God." For Jesus to use the phrase "the finger of God," He is saying He is the living, personal agent of God exercising God's power.

Jesus was fully God as He preached the good news to the poor, healed the sick and broken-hearted, set the captives free, and released so many from darkness. But Emanuel, God with us, was also fully man as his throbbing feet blistered from walking the dusty roads. He was fully man as He wearily sat to speak to the woman at the well and asked her to help quench His thirst. And He was fully man as he agonized in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane over the very real and very human pain He would have to experience to suffer and die for us on the cross.

Perhaps the real mystery is why He would come? Why would God send His own personal agent to this lost and broken world - an agent so dear and personal that He was His only Son? The answer, as the mystery deepens, is that God loves us so very dearly. He deems us worth it all.

Lord, I cannot comprehend Your love for me. Thank you, God, for bringing Your kingdom to us and thank you, thank you, thank you Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit, let me exercise Your power for Your kingdom in this broken and hurting world. Amen.

Friday, April 15

weekend challenge

This weekend's challenge is admittedly a plea for help. But it is also an opportunity for you to complete a very simple kingdom minded exercise while getting a bit of physical exercise too. (Most of us could use both.)

When we put on our "kingdom colored glasses" (as we did in our first Weekend Challenge) and look specifically at our church, which is essentially what we've done in our recent Taking Steps Toward Jesus campaign and through the ongoing use of the NSTEP model, one thing becomes clear. We must not, as a church body, exist and operate completely removed or separated from the community around us. Neither should we be satisfied if members of our community/city/neighborhood are ignorant of our very existence...if they don't even know that we're here. Rather, we should seek opportunities to engage our community and build relationships with the individuals and groups with whom we share a common geography. After all, the vast majority of these people have little to no awareness of Christ, His Church, or of their own spiritual need, therefore opportunities to partner in God's kingdom work abound. More and more, this seems to cause us to consider both how we interact as individuals in our community and how we make our church building and facilities available for other community uses. From time to time, it also makes sense for us to make a specific effort to inform our neighbors about an event that may be a good time for them to connect with us. One of the greatest opportunities we have each year to do exactly that is now little more than a week away...EASTER!

As your challenge for the weekend, come to the church office any time between 10:00 am and 3:00 pm on Friday or Saturday. Here, you can pick up a stack of invitations to our upcoming Good Friday & Easter services ready to be delivered to our neighbors. We'll tell you exactly which route to walk and which addresses to deliver to. We'll give you enough invitations to fill up whatever time you want to spend, be it 15 minutes

or 2 hours. Our goal is to personally deliver 1,000 invitations near and around our church building. This doesn't mean that we'll knock on doors and speak to every resident, it simply means that we'll deliver them ourselves rather than paying the postal service to do it for us. If we aren't able to deliver all of the invitations by Saturday afternoon, we'll have the remainder available when we gather on Sunday morning.

Oh yeah, there'll be an additional surprise kingdom opportunity at the end of the challenge too! (Now if that doesn't motivate you, what will?)

April 17

The Sunday Experience

Unexpected Inclusion

Luke 13:22-30; John 10:14-16

What is unexpected about what Jesus says concerning who will be included in the Kingdom of God?

In this morning's focal scriptures is there...

an example to follow?

a command to obey?

an error to avoid?

a sin to forsake?

a promise to claim?

a new thought about God?

Jesus is saying that there is a new Kingdom now, one that's totally different from the kingdom you're accustomed to, and anyone can get in on it. Different things can and should happen now. His message wasn't about just some future blessing of heaven; it was an announcement that his heavenly ways are available in some way here on Earth. Not in fullness, for it will never be heaven here. But you can have a slice of heaven here on earth.

When a father who has been struggling with anger and who verbally rips a hole in the heart of his wife or kids begins to let Christ and his Kingdom win out over his own heart, the family should notice the difference. When that materialistic business man meets Christ and starts to reinvest his treasures for the benefit of others, there will be an observable difference in the lives of people who receive help and on the face of the man who now knows the joy of giving. When someone adopts a child, brings a kind word of encouragement to someone in jail, renovates a dilapidated home in the inner city, mentors a struggling student, plants trees in an ugly city block, plays music for the elderly, or throw a party for friends . . . it's all Kingdom, and it's always good news!

Our culture is starving for something, but this something has to be massive. It has to be a challenge, it has to be scary, and it has to be life encompassing for people to notice.

Hugh Halter and Matt Smay
(*The Tangible Kingdom*, 90)

Monday, April 18

Daily Devotional

By Kristen Gehring

Luke 17:20-21

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.”

When I was about ten years old, I remember reading this verse and thinking, “Well, if we want the kingdom of God to come, why don’t we just have everyone in the world stop thinking about it all at the same time?” As silly as my young self’s interpretation sounds, twenty plus years later and I’m not sure I have a much better handle on the passage.

I once heard that you could Google search any month of years past and find that a prediction was made for the Rapture. Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees was that the day the kingdom of God would come is not known and that it would catch people off guard. The element of surprise is likened to other biblical stories in later verses, Luke 17:26-29; the people in the days of Noah were surprised by the flood and in the days of Lot the people were just going about their daily routines when fire and sulfur rained down. Jesus tells us that just as there were no expectations for flood water or fire rain, we can’t predict the end day.

I looked up this verse in several translations of the Bible hoping to find some clarification on the end of the verse, “the kingdom of God is within you.” I found the following: “here with you” (CEV), “is in your midst” (RSV), “among you” (NRSV), and “already among you” (MSG). If you translate “kingdom of God” literally, it means the spiritual domain over which God is sovereign. During this time of teaching, Jesus was present among the Pharisees and his physical presence meant that the kingdom itself was present. It could also mean that the kingdom is within us as we are filled by the Holy Spirit.

Another thing of significance is that the Pharisees are asking “when” and while Jesus does not predict the time of His return to earth, he does answer with, “the kingdom of God is within you.” This is very much in the present tense and is not in reference to a future event that will occur. I think that Jesus’ presence in our lives, whether through our thoughts, actions, or interactions, creates a bit of His kingdom on earth.

I praise You for the promise of a future with You, no matter when that time may be. Help keep my heart Christ-centered to help create Your kingdom among us.

Tuesday, April 19

Daily Devotional

by Jillian Ramos

Luke 9:10-11 The Message

“The apostles returned and reported on what they had done. Jesus took them away, off by themselves, near the town called Bethsaida. But the crowds got wind of it and followed. Jesus graciously welcomed them and talked to them about the kingdom of God. Those who needed healing, he healed.”

After a large crowd gathered, lunchtime came, and of course, everyone was starving. (Luke 9:12-17) The disciples just wanted to send everyone home, or to some other place to stay where they could eat – but Jesus wanted his disciples to feed them. They were stumped. All they had managed to gather up for everyone was a young boy’s lunch – five loaves of bread and a couple of fish. This tiny contribution wouldn’t make any difference, would it?

Of course it would. Through this seemingly small sacrifice, Jesus was able to “heal” another need: the crowd’s hunger.

Sure, Jesus could have sent them all home, but I think the point of keeping them all for lunch was to show a “demonstration” of God’s kingdom, after talking about it with them so much. Even the smallest things that people did in pursuit of God’s kingdom – even if it was just giving up lunch so that someone else might be able to eat – would have an impact and value as long as we put it in Jesus’s hands. And when we do that, God can touch a lot of people; just think of what Jesus was able to do when he fed the 5 thousand! He multiplied it till everyone had their fill, and twelve baskets of food were left over. If he can do that with a boy’s lunch, think of the things he can do with our ministry.

I like to think of it as me and my love for writing. Some people may not know that I'm actually kind of insecure about my writing. I couldn't even read the devotionals I wrote for the NSTEP booklet when the days of those articles came up. I was too embarrassed!

So, you can imagine my surprise when so many people expressed appreciation for what I wrote. My writings were just five loaves of bread and two fish, but Jesus used them to speak to others, regardless of how small they may have started out. Though I have a way with the written word, I know that I couldn't have touched others without God getting involved somehow.

The disciples thought that a young boy's packed lunch wouldn't have significance in their feeding dilemma. They were wrong. What about your "packed lunch"? Try putting it in Jesus's hands – you'll be surprised to see what kind of need he can fill through you.

Dear Lord, Please take my small, even perhaps mediocre piece of service, and turn it into something that can bless others and draw others toward You. Help us to trust that through You, we really can do all things. Take our "packed lunches" and multiply them to feed the 5 thousand. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Wednesday, April 20

Daily Devotional

by Sara Waddell Bobzien

Luke 19:11

While they were listening to this, he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once.

In Luke 19, Jesus told a crowd a story: a king has to go away for a while to establish his presence in another kingdom. While he is gone, he gives servants work to do by entrusting them with a mina each in order to negotiate business for his advantage. There are people present in the land who do not accept the king's authority over them and voice that discontent loudly while he is gone. When the king returns, he desires to see what the servants were able to accomplish in his absence. Some did well; but some doubted the king's character, foundered in the waiting, and did not even try to make a difference in the kingdom for the king.

As I studied this parable, I was surprised to learn that this story and its meaning are different from the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. In this parable of the minas, Jesus addresses a crowd in which some follow Him, some are as yet undecided, and some are definitely against Him. In the parable of the talents, Jesus addresses His twelve disciples privately. In addition, in this parable of the minas, each person is given exactly the same amount to work with in the beginning. In the parable of the talents, some are given more, some less, at the start. In the parable of the minas, Jesus is illustrating different levels of improvement from a starting basis of the same opportunity. In the parable of the talents, Jesus is illustrating the importance of fidelity, no matter what starting advantage one has. Jesus shows astonishing versatility that He can relate two similar parables with ingenious changes in meaning.

Minutia matters in the kingdom of God. Like compounding interest, our words and actions add up to much more over time for the work of Christ. A mina was one-sixtieth of a talent, but Jesus showed that one who engages in work for the kingdom of God with eagerness and joy, and not fear, will end up with an opportunity to continue that joy with more and more responsibility.

Let love be your start. If you feel inexperienced, do not know what to do or where to begin, then let your love in word and deed grow. Starting with a minute amount of love, as the Lord blesses you with above and beyond your starting amount, you will develop a talent. A talent for love. That is of high value in the kingdom of God. In the words of Mother Teresa, “The needs are great, and none of us, including me, ever do great things. But we can all do small things, with great love, and together we can do something wonderful.”

“Lord, I want to know You well and love You better so I can trust You more. Please help me to eagerly work for the kingdom of God that I may see growth in both my own life and in the number of believers. I desire to make a difference and bring You glory. Amen.”

Thursday, April 21

Daily Devotional

by Sara Waddell Bobzien

Luke 22:14-16

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

I have heard about the parallels between Jesus and the sacrificial lamb of Passover all my life and the parallels are amazing. Passover reminds the Jews how their freedom was gained from their Egyptian enslavement and Jesus came to set captives like you and me free from enslavement to sin and death. Only a lamb without blemish or spot would be a suitable sacrifice and Jesus lived a perfect and innocent life. The blood from the lamb was to be smeared on the doorposts of their homes as a sign of their faith that God would save them and we look to the blood of Jesus in faith to seal our permanent covenant with God. The lamb was to be roasted whole on a spit (a stick that parallels Jesus dying on the cross); not one of its bones was to be broken (as not one of Jesus' bones was broken); and it was to be eaten in a community supper for remembrance and thanksgiving (much like we eat communion together in our church home today).

But I was stunned to learn that in accordance with the ordinances set out for Passover in Exodus 12:1-11, and specifically verse 6, the sacrificial lamb was kept in the household and cared for by the family for four days. As far out of our comfort zone as it is to even contemplate animal sacrifice, few of us could contemplate sacrificing a lamb we and our children had cared for almost as a pet. And then that lamb was to be prepared - roasted whole - in such a way that the people eating it could not forget what it was.

Learning this became my most profound understanding of Jesus and the the Passover lamb. God sent His son to live among us, known by us, and loved as a brother and friend. As the Passover lambs lived in the households for four days before they were sacrificed, Jesus arrived in Jerusalem- legally required for a Passover meal- four days prior. Not only did Jesus let Himself be known by the very people who would abandon Him, betray Him, and even kill him, but scripture consistently refers to how much Jesus loved people. He lived among us willingly, full of love, even though He knew what we would do to Him. At the Last Supper, Jesus, the Lamb of God, presided over His own Passover meal. I feel filled with astonished gratitude and love for Christ.

His suffering and sacrificial death was not a surprise for Jesus. He was so focused on His purpose that in opening their Passover meal, which He had fully planned out beforehand, He used the Hebrew, emphatic idiom “I have desired with desire” (“eagerly desired”) to describe His feelings of fulfilling the requirements for the new covenant with God. Jesus emphatically states that the next time He and His disciples eat such a consecrated meal together it will be in heaven, together forever. This scene in Luke dovetails the full scope of the kingdom of God. Jesus is proclaiming a transition point between the kingdom of God brought to earth through his life and ministry and the transference towards the majestic kingdom of God to come for all of us forever and forever.

“Lord, I grieve over my sins and that You had to suffer and die to bring perfect peace for me with God. There is no way I could ever repay what you did for me! Thank you, thank you Jesus! With all my heart, I ask you to come in and be Lord of my life and let me live a life of humility and gratitude to honor You forever. Help me to endure the suffering of this earth, as you did, and eagerly look forward to life with You forever in heaven. Amen.”

Friday, April 22

weekend challenge

It is going to be a busy weekend, there's probably no way around that. So the challenge this weekend, much as is the challenge during other holidays, is to remain focused on the observance or remembrance of Christ's final days, the love he showed and shared, his sacrifice, his death, burial, and resurrection, the victory he won and continues to share with you and me.

Almost all of us will be together for worship and bible study on Sunday morning. Greet one another with joy and excitement, smile, sing, and show your immense gratitude toward Christ!

Fewer of us, but still many, will gather together on Friday evening to remember more specifically the events of that holy week nearly 2000 years ago. If at all possible, make it your weekend challenge to be a part of this remembrance. If you've not participated before, you'll be glad that you did.

If you're up for even more challenge this weekend, watch the movie entitled "The Gospel of John" which was produced in 2003 as part of the "Visual Bible" series. Our studies in "The Unexpected Kingdom" have all been drawn from Luke's gospel, so this movie is a good complement with a different writer's perspective. It's another way to focus your thoughts on the story of Christ's Passion. John was the most creative of the Gospel writers, and therefore his narrative made for a unique movie experience. Many of the passages we've read together are presented because they were paralleled in the two gospels. As you watch, look and listen for Christ's clear and obvious kingdom message.



April 24

The Sunday Experience

Unexpected Declarations

Luke 23:32-43

What is unexpected about what the thieves on the crosses next to Jesus had to say? What was unexpected about Jesus' response?

In this morning's focal scriptures is there...

an example to follow?

a command to obey?

an error to avoid?

a sin to forsake?

a promise to claim?

a new thought about God?

From a letter Fred Rogers (“Mr. Rogers”) wrote to his friend, Tim Madigan, after Tim admitted he was on the verge of divorcing his wife...

My dear Tim,

Bless your heart. I feel so for you—for you all—but, Tim, please know that I would never forsake you, that I will never be disappointed with you, that I would never stop loving you. How I wish we could be closer geographically! I’d get in my car, drive to your house, knock on your door, and, when you answered I’d hug you tight.

You are a beautiful man, inside and out, and those who care about you are privileged to share your pain... As for suffering: I believe that there are fewer people than ever who escape major suffering in this life. In fact I’m fairly convinced that the Kingdom of God is for the broken-hearted. You write of “powerlessness.” Join the club; we are not in control: God is...

You are my beloved brother, Tim. You are God’s beloved son.

I’m Proud of You: My Friendship With Fred Rogers
by Tim Madigan

As far as I am concerned, the Kingdom is already here. In the light of its being already here, how am I to think and act? I am certain of one thing about that Kingdom, that the Kingdom is the Kingdom of love. So I will begin to love, if not by my love, then with His love... I may make blunders and fall, but if I fall I will fall on my knees, and if I stumble I will stumble into His arms.

E. Stanley Jones
(The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person, 301)

Monday, April 25

Daily Devotional

By Norm Langston

Acts 1:3-8

After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the Kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them... they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

They wanted to talk about the Kingdom. And why not? They surely felt they had passionately pursued Jesus and his Kingdom. For the three years they had been with him, they had longed for the Kingdom, hoped for the Kingdom, worked for the Kingdom. On Palm Sunday "the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices: ... "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord" (Luke 19:37-38). Could there be any question that Jesus was about to usher in the Kingdom?

Then it came crashing to a sudden halt. In Pilate's court and at the foot of Skull Hill, their hopes were shattered like fragile pottery against the pavement. Each nail in His hands tore holes in their faith. If Jesus—the brightest and best this earth had ever seen--could be crushed by betrayal, conspiracy, and Roman cruelty, what hope was there for anyone else?

And then, somehow, miraculously, Jesus was alive again! And their hopes and dreams were resurrected with him, so it was not surprising that they asked, "Will you now restore the Kingdom to Israel?" If even crucifixion could not stop Jesus, then nothing in all the universe remained that could

stand in his way. Surely now he would overthrow the Romans, set up his new government, and appoint them as its chief executives!

So Jesus' response was unexpected. "You will receive power" — not political power so you can throw your weight around, but God-power. "You will be empowered to serve and proclaim and give witness to God's Messiah and to his Kingdom. The Kingdom is coming, but not through the power of the sword or through the coercion of an imposed government. The Kingdom is coming through the power of love and sacrifice. And the Kingdom is for more than Israel. The Kingdom will spread because 'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' The Kingdom is for everyone, everywhere, and the Kingdom is coming because you will help others come to know the King!"

A movement of love and laughter is hard to resist. A gospel that says you can start over again is welcome news. And the sight of a scarred but Resurrected Lord is a guarantee that cruelty, sin, and Satan will not prevail. Joy, worship, and love are the enduring realities. How do I know? Because the King of Glory has obliterated death and defeated the devil. Jesus, the King of God's Kingdom, will reign forever!

Lord Jesus, help me to learn that it is not my business to know "the times or the dates" when You will return in glory. Root out any preconceived notions or convenient excuses that impede my service to You and to others. Give me a passion to pursue You and your Kingdom. Help me to live in such a way that I will one day hear your words, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into your Master's joy!" To You be all glory and praise. Amen.

Tuesday, April 26

Daily Devotional

by Sara Waddell Bobzien

Romans 14:17

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit...

When hiking on glaciers in Alaska, one must be very careful in movements because glaciers are unsteady and it can be very easy to slip and fall. But, in addition, it can be easy to miss the wonder of the full experience. If you hop over an inconspicuous crevice, turn around and take a closer look. Perhaps that tiny crack that seemed so insignificant just goes down and down and down. Sometimes you cannot even see all the way to the bottom. That little thing is so deep, it is a marvel!

This tiny verse in Romans is a great example of the wonders of Bible study. It can be easy to skip over these words because we hear them used so much. They are sprinkled throughout scripture like salt at a potluck. But let us take a closer look at what this verse teaches about the kingdom of God- the true religion as practiced by Christians in a community of broken people made new by following Christ. These little words are a wonder!

First, let us consider “righteousness.” Righteousness refers to our relationship to God, denoting respect and even “rectitude,” which refers to morally correct behavior and thinking. For example, it is the righteousness of Matthew 6:33: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Righteousness refers to the “vertical” part of our lives, that is, looking upwards towards our relationship with God.

Second, we see the word “peace.” This word denotes our relationships with each other, as in “concord,” which means “formal agreement or harmony between people or groups.” Looking in Colossians 3:15, we see it explained this way: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.” As Beth Moore put it, “Jesus did not come to take sides; He came to take OVER!” When we live with Christ ruling our hearts, our different opinions and viewpoints can remain secondary to the rule of Christ which brings peace. Peace refers to our “horizontal” lives, that is, looking side-to-side towards our relationships with other people.

And finally, “joy in the Holy Spirit” refers to ourselves being so under control of the Holy Spirit that our thoughts and feelings are charged with joy. An example of this is found in I Thessalonians 1:6 as Paul, Silas, and Timothy encourage the little Thessalonian church by writing, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.” The joy of the Holy Spirit is in our central, internal core- no matter what suffering we may face.

These three words represent a package deal in the kingdom of God. Living this way both delights God and cannot help but be approved of by other people on the outside looking in. Let us live in such a way that non-believers will press their noses against the glass and eagerly desire to join in the fun.

“Lord, please teach me what it means to be a Christian. Please show me the differences between Your truths and my opinions and give me a progression of knowledge, understanding, and finally, wisdom to sort it all out. Let me not judge others, but live in accordance with Your will and priorities for kingdom living. Thank you so much for giving me the Holy Spirit to counsel and comfort me, as I am in desperate need. Amen.”

By Dan Schuch

1 Corinthians 15:24

Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.

The Resurrection of Christ. The big picture. Sometimes it is important to be able to see the whole plan and not just the immediate goals and objectives. Knowing this gives us a broader view and helps us gain a more complete perspective of the situation. It increases our confidence and satisfaction that what we are doing is indeed part of something bigger.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul reveals to us a glimpse of God's big picture. He begins by reminding us of the foundation, the important first steps:

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...

But there is more. Our life with God in heaven will not begin until Christ has destroyed all His enemies in this world. Once that happens, Christ will hand over the kingdom back to God the Father.

²²For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. ²⁴Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Let's be clear about one thing. This is not a speculation of what might happen. The outcomes are inevitable and final. We are simply given the

rest of the story ahead of time. We are told this for our benefit, to provide comfort and assurance in these troubling days. With the big picture in mind, we can focus better on the task at hand, namely following the great commandment and sharing your good news with others.

⁵¹Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed — ⁵²in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

⁵⁴When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Now for a sidebar comment - buried within this abstract theological big picture is a nugget of gold, if you will, that is too precious to ignore.

³³Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.”

³⁴ Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame.

Father in Heaven, as we continue to pursue Christ and proceed on our journey towards eternity with You, help us to remember to stay grounded and watch over each other with love.

Thursday, April 28

Daily Devotional

By Dan Schuch

Revelation 11:15

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.”

Revelation 12:10-11

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. ¹¹They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

He was 56, in debt, and deeply discouraged. Throughout his life he had been a devout follower of Christ, one who had impeccable morals and was widely known for his concerns for others. (As we have recently learned, we would consider him to be one who is a “P”, that is, one who pursues Christ and His Kingdom.) However, he was not perfect, as his penchant for cursing in several languages would attest. He did have a good sense of humor that he carried with him even during the lean times he was facing. His health was failing. He was very close to ending up in debtor’s prison - which often happened to those who were in debt living in England during the mid 1700s.

He was a musician and composer. It was during this time when he thought that all hope was lost that two independent things happened to him: he was given a commission to compose a work for a Dublin, Ireland charity and he was given text, based entirely on scripture, that he was tasked to set to music. He combined both into one project. He spent the next three weeks, barely leaving his room and hardly eating, to complete it.

Patrick Kavanaugh, in his book, *The Spiritual Lives of Great Composers*, tells the story of the servant who entered the composer's room:

As he swings open the door to the composer's room, the servant stops in his tracks.

The startled composer, tears streaming down his face, turns to his servant and cries out, "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself." George Frideric Handel had just finished writing a movement which would take its place in history as the "Hallelujah Chorus."

Listen to the Hallelujah Chorus. In it you will find Revelation 11:15. Messiah premiered on April 13, 1742 in Dublin, Ireland as a benefit for the charity that originally commissioned him. It raised enough money to free 142 men from debtor's prison. One quote in the book particularly struck me, "Messiah has fed the hungry, clothed the naked, fostered the orphan... more than any other single musical production in this or any country."

The passage in Revelation 12 reminds us that with the resurrection of Jesus our salvation is made complete. We should shout for joy, be humbly thankful, dance and sing in celebration, and prayerfully grateful for the tremendous favor and grace God has given to us – all at the same time (if that's possible). How about you and I practice this together. Hallelujah!

Dear Father in Heaven, Thank You for loving me so much that You chose to send Your Son to die for my sins against You. I'm so humbled that You want me to spend eternity with You in Your kingdom. I'm grateful that Your salvation comes as a simple gift of love to me. I'm so grateful that You have forgiven me for all the times I have turned my back on You and for all the times I will turn my back on You in the future. Given all the stupid things I've done in the past and will do in the future, the smartest thing I have ever done or will ever do is to accept Your gift of love.