

Pentecost 7
Ephesians 1:3-14
Mark 6:14-29

7/11/2021

Sermon by Lex Breckinridge

In last Sunday's sermon, we spent time taking a pretty granular look at the humanity of the Apostle Paul. He had confessed to the church in Corinth that he had what he called a "thorn in the flesh", a weakness, a flaw, a brokenness that reminded him of his humanity, that kept him from being as full of himself, from "boasting" of his relationship with God in Christ. Paul had had an ecstatic vision of what he called "the third heaven" and this thorn reminded him not to be too proud of himself. He didn't say any more to the Corinthians about what exactly that third heaven experience might have been, only that this thorn in the flesh (which he also didn't describe) kept him from taking himself too seriously, from thinking he was "special." And when Paul had asked God to relieve his burden, here was the surprising Divine response: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

Here, then, is the great paradox of the spiritual life. Vulnerability, humility, honesty about ourselves and about our weaknesses, is the key to spiritual maturity. Another way to frame this is to say that as our individual egos and our egoic desires for power and control, for safety and security, for affection and esteem decrease, we are drawn ever closer to the Divine Heart, ever closer to The Really Real, which means the Eternal.

Now, Paul's insights about our individual spiritual paths are born out of His cosmic perspective. And we get a look at that cosmic perspective this morning in the opening to his letter to the church in Ephesus that we just read. It's a celebration of Creation and the Creator, the Creator who has chosen and created all humanity to be united in bonds of love with the Creator and with one another. And the key here is "chosen in Christ." The Christ-event from the foundation of the Universe draws together what we think of as Heaven and Earth. Heaven and Earth and all humanity are one in Christ. Remember that Paul says elsewhere, "You are no longer male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free, but all are one in Christ Jesus."

But as this Creation story unfolds, we look around us and see division and polarization. Why is that? If the Creator created humanity to be bound together in love, why is there conflict and division? Because the Creator gives Creation – and human beings – choices. It's this thing called "free will." We can choose to let to of our egoic desires for power and control – our egoic desire to shape the world in our own image and move towards union with the Creator and Creation OR we can choose another path. The path of selfishness, the path that says, "I don't trust the Creator to be in control, so I'll be in control." It's the path of domination, the path of dog-eat-dog and the path of survival of the fittest. It's the path that imagines that security can only be found in creating hierarchies where I – and the ones who look like me – are at the top.

There's the choice that's ever before us. Which path, which Kingdom, will we choose? This morning's Gospel reading provides a great illumination of these two Kingdoms.

You remember last week we heard Jesus sending out his followers two by two to the towns and villages to heal and cast out demons in his Name. And off they go on the first missionary journey, demonstrating that the Kingdom of God has drawn near, healing, teaching, building relationships. This Kingdom of God brings new life, this Kingdom of God shows us the world that the Creator intends. But there's another Kingdom that we can choose – the Kingdom of this world as represented by Herod and his court. What an interesting family. If you're a fan of Game of Thrones, you'll immediately recognize Herod and company. Adultery, debauchery, palace intrigues around power and sex. It's the kind of story that's all over our live streams these days, both fiction and non-fiction. This is a world about gaining power and holding on to power by dominating and destroying your enemies. Competition, fear, envy, dishonesty are the driving forces of this Kingdom. And it's not just on Netflix. It's the reality of cable news. The palace intrigues, the dishonesty, the cruelty, the corruption, the drive for domination, are so commonplace we are numb to them. As if there's no other way to be in the world.

And that's why Mark places his story here. We have just seen Jesus send out his disciples in complete vulnerability, armed with nothing, and nothing less than faith, and the power of the Holy Spirit. They are to depend on the hospitality of others and offer mercy and healing with no expectation of personal gain. And right after the story of Herod's lurid birthday party that we just read, Mark tells us about another kind of feast. We'll read it next week.

It's the story of the feeding of the 5000, it's a feast of mercy. Instead of the selfish and shameless who attend Herod's banquet, this feast is for the poor and the hungry and the tired. Instead of political trickery and cutthroat competition being a dominant theme, it's grace and blessing and astonishing abundance that mark this banquet. Those are the stories Mark serves up to us. Which Kingdom do we want to live in? Which Kingdom will we choose?

Of course, we live in the world as it is, and we can't run away from that, but to which Kingdom will we give our hearts? Well, sure, we want to live in Jesus' Kingdom, right? But as Mark wants to make clear, living in vulnerability and in devotion to the Truth as John did, living dependent on mercy and grace, as Paul does, can also get you killed. So there's that. But, you know, if we give our hearts to the world of power and brutal competition, there's no security there either. Because once we make power and control the most important goals in life, we'll always be vulnerable to someone or something that has more power. Look at Game of Thrones. Look at the evening news. Not much security there either, is there?

So there's the choice. The two Kingdoms. There's the world as it is, Herod's world, and the world that we long for, Jesus' world, a world where all are welcomed and valued and cared for. Which will you choose? Seems like an easy answer except there's a catch. And the catch is really Mark's Gospel, in a nutshell. The catch is that in order to be drawn into Jesus Kingdom, you have to die. That's right. You have to die. Die to all the things that we think are so important, die to the Game of Thrones, die to the game of power and control and selfishness, of putting ourselves and our desires first and to hell with everything and everyone else. Die to the need to be in control and be in charge of everything.

That's really hard to do. For all of us. But it's the necessary death if we are to have all we really and truly want - love, acceptance, meaning, purpose in life.

Mark's story is folded into the Biblical Story and the biblical story over and over again presents these differing visions of the world - there's the world of power and domination and material anxiety.

That's the world that's in a constant feedback loop. It's like another great movie: Groundhog Day. You know where Bill Murray's character wakes up to a 6 a.m. alarm and it's the same day over and over and over again. That's a world that's truly not going anywhere. But there's another world in the biblical story. The world of God's in-breaking Kingdom. That's a world that has meaning and purpose. It's a world that's headed somewhere. It's a world headed to a place that we call Heaven. A place that, believe it or not, is already here. It's a place that's been unfolding since the moment of Creation. We just need to open our eyes and surrender to it.

Paul's ecstatic vision of that third Heaven he described to the Corinthians, his description of the Creator's vision for Creation that Paul described to the Ephesians, it's all here and now. It's the choice that's ever before us. Jesus' Kingdom or Herod's Kingdom.

So let me leave you with another take on Paul's description to the Ephesians as the arc of Creation and Creator's purpose. It's from the contemporary theologian Brian McLaren, and it's also a description of Paul's Third Heaven. It resonates deeply with me:

"Imagine a moment before the Big Bang banged. Imagine a creativity, brilliance, fertility, delight, energy, power, glory, wisdom, wonder, greatness, and goodness sufficient to express itself in what we know as the universe. Try to imagine it, even though you know you cannot: a creative imagination and energy so great that it would produce light, gravity, time, and space...galaxies, stars, planets, and oceans...mountains, valleys, deserts, and forests....gorillas, dolphins, golden retrievers, and us.

And then dare to imagine that this is the great, big, beautiful, mysterious goodness, wholeness, and aliveness that surrounds us and upholds us even now.

Finally, try to imagine that this is also the great, big, beautiful, mysterious goodness, wholeness, and aliveness into which all of us and all creation will be taken up – in a marriage, in a homecoming, in a reunion, in a celebration....

The whole story flows toward reconciliation, not in human creeds or constitutions, but in love, the love of the One who gave us being and life....

So our journey in the story of creation, the adventure of Jesus, and the global uprising of the Spirit has come full circle. It all came from God in the beginning, and now it all comes back to God in the end."

So there you have it, right? This Kingdom of God is here and we are right in the middle of it. So let's celebrate that on this beautiful summer day. Why choose to live in Herod's Kingdom when we can choose the Kingdom of Love instead?