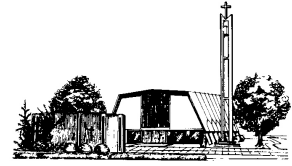


# Campbell United Methodist Church

## *The Weekly Sermon*



### WHEREIN LIES THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

THESIS: GOD'S KINGDOM IS WITHIN US AND WORKS WITHIN AND THROUGH US

Rev Larry LaPierre

January 16, 2011

MATTHEW 13:31-33 (NRSV)

This may or may not surprise you, but the first time that I tried to make sense of what the kingdom of God is about didn't go well. It was the end of my first semester in seminary and our New Testament professor told us to write a paper about the kingdom of God. I got the topic right, but I got the approach all wrong.

I knew, even then, that I could never write a paper that would even begin to adequately describe the kingdom of God. So, I wrote a paper summarizing a variety of views expressed by other theologians. My professor grudgingly admitted that "it had a certain validity of its own," but he gave the paper a "C." To say that I was not happy would be an understatement. It was the only "C" I got in three graduate programs. Clearly, I had not listened when he told us to write about the kingdom of God as it was described in the four books that he had assigned for the course.

What have I learned since that experience about the kingdom of God? I've learned enough to know that my professor was probably generous to give me a "C" for my paper. I've also learned that the kingdom of God exists on many levels and is not easily described. There will be times when the best that we can do to express our insights about God's kingdom is to use word pictures, hymns and Bible stories or to tell our own stories of knowing God is near in prayer or meditation.

One of my earliest teachers about God's nearness was my uncle Wendell—my mother's oldest brother. He didn't go to church, but he had a profound sense of God's nearness. We were standing by a pond where he and I used to fish, and he said to me, "You know, anytime that I want to talk with God, I can go into the woods over there and talk to God." That lesson was repeated to me countless times by the hospitalized veterans whom I met as a chaplain at the Veterans Administration hospital years later. They didn't go to church, but they knew that God was real and was as close as Nature.

A few years after my uncle's comment, an earlier lesson about God was reinforced. I had been admitted to a Roman Catholic college-level seminary. One of our duties was to take turns maintaining a 24 hour presence at the chapel altar where what we now call Holy Communion was kept. The practice of this devotion was based on the Catholic belief that Jesus is truly present in the Communion wafers. We don't need to agree with them to

recognize that it brought God's presence, a major element of God's kingdom, in from Nature to an altar and into bread and wine.

The belief that God's kingdom was even closer, that it was within me and all of us, came in further stages. One major step was when I learned a prayer that was composed by The Rev. Maxie Dunnam. He is a United Methodist minister, pastor and former president of Asbury Theological seminary.

In one of his books he wrote a prayer based on Colossians 1:26. The prayer includes saying one's own name. So, when I say it, it sounds like this: "Larry, the secret is simply this: Christ in you, yes, Christ in you bringing with him the hope of all the glorious things to come." I say that prayer every morning as a reminder that Christ is literally within me. I need to know that the kingdom of God is that close.

Some years ago I found another prayer, this one by the famous 20<sup>th</sup> century Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. It is an intensely personal prayer which implies an awareness of the presence of God when we pray. It is this presence of God with us and within us which is the essence of God's Kingdom within us. This is what Thomas Merton's prayer says:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself and the fact that I think that I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, You will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and You will never leave me to face my perils alone."

Merton's last sentence is what convinces me that he knew that the Kingdom of God is within him and us. He prayed, "I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and You will never leave me to face my perils alone."

To claim, of course, that the entire Kingdom of God is somehow contained within us is to sound ridiculous to the world and at best unrealistic to believers. It seems more likely that it's an awareness of having access to the Kingdom of God is what is within us. While we can't contain the wholeness of God, we can, through grace, be connected with God's loving presence in us and recognize it in others.

The parable of the mustard seed is one of the parables that Jesus used to help us to understand something about what this means. Matthew recorded that Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the

smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” (Vs. 3-32)

Perhaps if we think back to a time when our first bit of faith in God was the size of a mustard seed we can see that it has grown big enough to support a more mature faith in God. It has even grown big enough to support an extended network of shared faith, hope and love with others who know that God is with and within them. It has happened through God’s grace in us.

But a lot of church-going people I’ve met aren’t ready to see that God is with them or us unless we’ve each done what it takes to prove that we’re in a right relationship with God. These believers insist that we do that only through baptism, but not just any baptism will do. No, it has to be by immersion under the water, and in some churches three immersions are required—one in the name of each person in the Trinity. And there are other rules too numerous to describe in this sermon for a person to be accepted into God’s Kingdom and especially into the part of God’s Kingdom we know as heaven.

That’s wrong! There’s room for everyone in heaven. Do we seriously believe that God made a certain percentage of us for Hell? God made us to become increasingly aware of God with us and God within us, and that awareness can grow through our lifetimes and into eternity.

The parable of the yeast expands this claim. It will not surprise many of the older women in the congregation by its claims. You’ve been making bread for decades, and you know how a small amount of yeast added to a mixture of flour, water, oil and a little sugar works wonders. Soon the bread dough has to be restrained from climbing over the edge of the mixing bowl.

Matthew recorded that Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.” Just as an aside, do you have any idea how much bread three measures of flour makes? According to one source it makes 100-150 pounds. There is something about the kingdom of heaven that, like yeast, stimulates growth beyond our wildest imagination, and it grows, like yeast in bread dough, from within us.

However, it’s fair to ask, “What does it do?” The answer is that it changes us into someone that we have not been. We become, through awareness of God’s Kingdom working through us, a means of sustaining and nourishing others with God’s grace. However, there’s more. According to The New Interpreter’s Study Bible, the yeast of God’s kingdom works to invade and eventually overcome “cultural norms like Rome’s empire, hierarchy, patriarchy, injustice.” (p. 1770)

Do we realize how politically explosive this is? It's treason to plot the violent overthrow of a government, but Matthew's Gospel has Jesus proclaiming that, while not violent, the kingdom of heaven will nevertheless overcome the Roman Empire's value system including its focus on empire, hierarchy, patriarchy and injustice. These values are still being challenged by the Kingdom of God, and there are many who don't approve of these challenges. They tend to be men, though not exclusively, and they tend to be people who don't want their grip on power loosened.

Although some of those who don't want their grip on power loosened are in the Church, let's be clear. The kingdom of God includes far more than the Church. It is not simply reforming the Church that we are called to take on—although that is part of it. The change that comes from responding to God's Kingdom within us is an ongoing process that begins with changing who we are, and then it moves outward simultaneously into the Church and into the rest of the world.

May the Kingdom of God dwell within us until it overflows from our hearts onto our lips and outward through our actions to show others that the Kingdom of God is here and welcomes all of God's people.