

Sermon Series: Falling into Goodness
Sermon Title: Imagine the Kingdom
Luke 17:20-21

by David Hockett
March 4, 2018

In today's reading from *Falling into Goodness*, Chuck DeGroat quotes Tolstoy who said, "In the midst of winter, I find within me the invisible summer."¹ I think winters are beautiful, especially here in the High Country. But, about this time of year, do you ever catch yourself closing your eyes and all around you, you can imagine the flourishing of Spring and Summer.

Longer days, warm sun, green grass and trees, the world filled with life. And it's all there right now just waiting to surface. We can't make it happen, but we know it will and it gives us hope and joy when the cold of winter lingers to know that in the midst of winter there is the gift of summer waiting to be born.

The kingdom is not unlike that. "The Kingdom is not something that can be manufactured, strategized, or packaged. It's not a brand. It's not a possession. It can't be bought or sold, built or torn down. In other words, this Kingdom which comes with the reign of Jesus is the antithesis of our controlling and managing."² We don't make the kingdom. It is not ours. We do not decide its shape or content, we merely are invited to receive it, to welcome it into our lives, to lean into it and allow it to shape and define our days. Or, of course, we can reject and make our own way. But when we do we risk our own death and decay and the death and decay of the world around us. So, like the emergence of summer following a long winter, the kingdom is a gift. It is God's doing. That's why we say it is the kingdom *of* God.

Now we try and build all sorts of little kingdoms. Fiefdoms of our own making that we can manage and control and rule over as we please. I've seen this happen in churches when pastors or a group of leaders make the church in their own image and then decide who is in and who is out, what checklist of rules everyone must follow, what insider language will shape conversation, as if the kingdom is ours.

The Pharisees in Jesus' day had done a pretty good job of this. With the help of Rome they had established their "kingdom", and anyone, like Jesus, who threatened their reign, was dealt with harshly. So, when Jesus threatened the "kingdoms" we build by saying things like, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19) it didn't and doesn't go over very well. So, what are we to make of Jesus' pronouncement that the "kingdom of God is among us"?

¹ Chuck DeGroat, *Falling into Goodness*. p. 43.

² Ibid.

Now, "...it is no surprise that the Pharisees asked Jesus about the kingdom or the reign of God. All pious Jews, whether or not their beliefs included a Messiah, longed for the coming full reign of God. The reign of God or kingdom of God meant different things to different people, but generally it conjured up images of peace, freedom, prosperity, fullness of life. So, to ask when God's reign would come was to miss on two counts. First, human calculations about God's activity are futile, if not arrogant and irreverent. The subject is the reign *of God*; not when the kingdom I want to build will come, but the fullness of God's reign over the world - the when, where, and how are tucked away in God's own wisdom. The answer is the same given by Jesus to his disciples: 'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed with his own authority.' (Luke 12:32)...The second reason the question asked by the Pharisees misses the mark is that they seek signs of the kingdom's arrival (perhaps because they have in mind what the kingdom should look like and not surprisingly it looks a lot like them and their agenda) while they reject the only real signs available....The presence of Jesus is the presence of the kingdom. That's why he's perceived as such a threat because his kingdom, his reign challenges the status quo and upends the posturing and pretension of the kingdoms we build. Jesus' kingdom subverts and undermines any efforts we make to establish a kingdom of our own design that is out of step with the reign of God. And so, the signs of the kingdom which Jesus makes present, that invisible summer that has already begun to bloom?

The deaf hear; the lame walk, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them. These conditions mark the presence of God's reign in the world. The kingdom, said Jesus, is among you whenever these conditions are present; wherever you see them springing up the kingdom is near.³

Now what this means for us is that our holy vocation, our calling as followers of Christ the King is to be his ambassadors and to seek the places where we see God at work bringing about vital, abundant life and the thriving of our neighbors, to seek the places where we see signs of the reign of God taking hold and join God in that work. To pour our time, and our energy, and our resources in those places trusting God with the harvest. Remember Jeff Hancock from International Justice Ministries a few weeks ago who said God has a plan for mending and renewing the world and church you're the plan? To do otherwise, to build our own little kingdom, or to see those without the strength to walk, or those who lack the ability to hear God speak and turn our backs on them, to see our neighbors dying from suffering that can be prevented, or dying without the comfort and hope of resurrection, to see the poor and the poor in spirit and not seek their thriving or to dismiss them and not offer them the good news that they too are the beloved of God by saying things like, "Well, in heaven life will be better," or "just wait until Christ returns" is to be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. In reminding us that the kingdom is among us, Jesus points us to the incarnational character of the gospel.

³ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*. pp. 204-206.

That is, the good news, God's love, is always embodied. Jesus is the presence of the kingdom. It's not rules and regulations and a check list of do's and don'ts.

It's a person. He is good news in the flesh. And his church, as a foretaste of the kingdom or a living sign pointing to God's reign, is the ongoing incarnation of the gospel and a living reminder that wherever life is being restored and renewed, and wherever hope and peace are springing forth, and wherever God is reigning in hearts, and lives, and churches, and the systems of this world there is the kingdom of God. And we are to welcome and receive it as a gift.

Now a couple of things Chuck DeGroat points out that I think are helpful as we think about falling into the goodness of God's reign in our lives. And Jesus gives us these. They are practices for kingdom living.

First, "Repent," Jesus says, because "the kingdom is near, it is among you." Now as DeGroat points out, the idea of repentance has been so misused that we've lost sight of how beautiful an invitation it truly is. We've used it as a weapon to beat people up, to shame them, and to tell them how bad they are, when instead it really is an offer of grace.

The word is *metanoia* and it literally means to turn around. It's like a tap on the shoulder, you're facing the wrong direction, it's right here.

"Imagine the kingdom in our midst. Paradise here and now. Freedom for captives. Food for the poor. Homes for refugees."⁴ Resurrection and new life. Peace, and hope, and joy in abundance. You wouldn't want to miss that right? But so many of us do because we're looking in the wrong direction, focused on kingdoms of our own design, even seeking good things but in the wrong places. And so, Jesus simply says, hey, turn around. Our Lord is waiting like a patient father for you and me to come home – prodigals that we are – to turn around and see that the kingdom is already among us and to stop all of our breathless striving and attempts to build a kingdom for our self and simply to fall into the goodness of God. If you can't see it then perhaps life needs a reorientation, a redirection, a turning around.

And in part, this reorientation and redirection, this turning into the kingdom is made possible when we abide with Christ. Jesus said, "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you."(John 15:4) When we spend time in the presence of the One who is the presence of the kingdom we begin to see the world differently.

It's as if we're given new eyes, the eyes of Jesus, with which to look upon the world. And with his eyes we can then see the kingdom springing forth. This is what happens with the disciples. They certainly had ideas about the kingdom before they met Jesus that shaped the way they looked at

⁴ DeGroat. p. 46.

the world. But when they encountered Jesus, they repented, they made a turn, and then they spent time with him every day. They made their home in him, dwelled with him, and allowed him to dwell in and through them. Notice, they didn't withdraw from the world. Instead they engaged the world but on different terms. They no longer played by the rules of the kingdoms we have built – kingdoms in which there are haves and have not's, powerful and powerless, the welcome and the outcast, the loved and the unlovable. Turning and abiding they changed addresses and became citizens of the reign of God and from there they lived in ways that literally shook the foundations of the empire.

“The kingdom is among you,” Jesus said. Like the invisible summer in the midst of winter. Its right here; turn around; don't miss what God is doing. That's the gracious invitation. Spend time with Jesus; let him give you new eyes to help you see what God is doing. And then when you see it, pour yourself into the places the kingdom is springing forth, fall into God's goodness, and know that the harvest will be abundant.

Now there are times when it is hard for us to see the kingdom that's right in front of us. There are times when winter is holding on and summer seems to be nowhere in sight. That's why we need seasons like Lent. Lent is the fast before the feast. It is winter before summer. It is a gracious opportunity to turn and abide. Are there things you need to turn from in order to reorient life in the direction of God's reign? Are you so busy and distracted that spending time abiding in Jesus and simply resting in his presence have become an after-thought? You're not alone.

And today Jesus offers us a place to come and meet him. For any and all who are tired, and hungry, and thirsty Jesus has prepared a table. And there is seat for you here. This meal is a foretaste of his kingdom. The bread and the cup remind us of his sacrifice and point to the feast, to the day that is among us and yet still coming when God will mend creation, when all will hear, and all will walk, and all will have life, none will hunger or thirst, and all will know the good news of God's love.

Hey, turn around, it's right here, the kingdom of God among us. Come, and abide with Jesus. Feast on him in your hearts by faith. Amen.