

How Do We Enter the Kingdom of God?
Matthew 18:1-5 and John 3:1-8
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Today we are in week 2 of our sermon series on the Kingdom of God. Last week set the stage by asking, “What is the kingdom of God?” You’ll recall that we said that, God’s kingdom is “the range of God’s effective will” or to put it another way, God’s kingdom is that place where what God wants done is done. We identified three popular misconceptions about the range of God’s effective will, noting that the kingdom is not synonymous with heaven—it’s not just a reality that is experienced after we die. It’s also not the same thing as the church. As much as we hope that God’s will is being done in and through the church, God’s kingdom is not in any way limited to the activity or the people of the church. And finally, God’s kingdom shouldn’t be misconstrued as only an interior, spiritual consciousness that is divorced from our physical, daily, earth-bound lives. Our conclusion was that the kingdom of God, *as Jesus talked about it*, is a present reality that we are meant to enter and live now. We will experience it in the greatest possible fullness when God’s reign is fully and finally established with the new heaven and new earth, but it was Jesus’ intent that with his arrival, the kingdom was here to stay, breaking out whenever and wherever he was and continues to be present.

It is noteworthy that Jesus never talked about building the kingdom of God. Jesus did not come to inaugurate a construction project because an empire was not his desired outcome. He never talked about marketing the kingdom or lobbying for it, either, as if the goal was to get more people into his kingdom than into any other, even if it required arm twisting or manipulation worthy of Madison Avenue. Jesus also was not concerned with defending God’s kingdom as if it was in some sort of danger, and he seemed not the least bit worried about how the kingdom was going to pay for itself. Instead, Jesus talked about entering the kingdom and his preferred method for that entrance was invitation. As Jesus talked about and modeled kingdom living, he invited people to join him and be part of it. Jesus knew that if people experience the kingdom and encounter the living God, then building, promoting, lobbying, defending and financing the kingdom won’t be an issue: people will be jumping at the chance to be part of it.

But that still begs the question, how does one have such a life-changing encounter? What does it mean, specifically, in practical terms, to enter the kingdom of God? Is it a matter of saying the right words? Or having the right set

of beliefs or doctrines? Do you enter the kingdom by keeping a set of rules or being a moral or ethical or some definition of a “good” person? What, exactly, does Jesus have in mind? Friends, meet Nicodemus. Nicodemus is an intriguing and often controversial character in the NT. He appears only three times, all recorded in the Gospel of John. We’re introduced to him first in today’s passage when he comes to Jesus after dark curious about this new teacher and the miracles Nicodemus has heard reports of Jesus performing. Later, he reappears for 1 verse in John chapter 7, where he is urging his fellow Pharisees to give Jesus’ teachings a fair hearing. His final appearance is after Jesus’ death, when Nicodemus accompanies Joseph of Arimathea, carrying an extravagant amount of spices which they use to anoint Jesus’ body for burial. By almost any standard, Nicodemus is a bit player in the three-year public ministry of Jesus, his brief interactions little more than cameo appearances in the overarching drama of Jesus’ life and death.

Yet Nicodemus is the character who asks one of Scripture’s timeless questions. Jesus has just told Nicodemus that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,” and probably not surprisingly, Nicodemus is confused by that statement and wants to know what Jesus means. He asks Jesus, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

There is in the Greek a word play going on here between Nicodemus and Jesus that we miss in the English. The Greek word “*anōthen*” is used three times in this chapter and it has three basic meanings: 1)from above; 2)again; and 3)anew. When Jesus says, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born *anōthen*, Nicodemus hears Jesus in literal terms, believing Jesus is suggesting that physical birth must occur again, a second time, an obvious impossibility as Nicodemus well knew. But Jesus isn’t using “*anōthen*” that way. He wants Nicodemus to think not in terms of physical birth but in terms of a spiritual transformation that comes from above, that renews one’s heart and life. Jesus is saying that Nicodemus doesn’t need a second life and he doesn’t need to get a life. He needs a new life, life in the kingdom of God.

When Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the middle of the night, he comes curious about the signs, the wonders and miracles that Jesus has been performing. Nicodemus is looking for an explanation for these things, and he assumes that he can hear Jesus and understand his teachings with a well-reasoned, rational, intellectual approach. He does what a lot of us do, particularly we Presbyterians—he wants to be able to think his way into the kingdom. But, the spiritual new life

that Jesus speaks of isn't something that we can get to with our heads, so he uses the metaphor of birth.

If there's one thing in life we don't do on our own, it's being born. We burst into this world kicking and screaming, perceptions confused, eyesight blurred, covered in the aftermath of our one-way journey into the light, thoroughly dependent upon others for everything. What Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand is that we no more engineer our spiritual birth than we arrange for our natural birth. Spiritual birth, like physical birth, is not our doing. It's a holy mystery, an awe-inspiring gift that comes to us by way of the Spirit. And, no one knows where or when the Spirit is going to blow.

While we can't determine our own birth, we can cooperate with the Spirit in that birth. We can put ourselves in a position to hear the invitation to the kingdom, to be open and responsive to the movement of God. From the Nicodemus story, we see three ways we can do that: through repentance, through obedience, and through humility.

In another 10 days, our Lenten journey will begin, and Lent is the perfect liturgical season to remember our need for **repentance**. During the 40 days of Lent, we reflect on the self-emptying and sacrificial living Jesus embodied for our sakes. As we do that, we are invited to honestly evaluate our lives and the ways we fall short of exemplifying that same kind of self-emptying and sacrificial living for the sake of others, and the separation from God and others and even ourselves that results from it. It's that separation that the cross addresses once and for all. But if we want the Spirit to be alive in us, then we have to go beyond mere recognition of our shortcomings and sin or even feeling badly about our sin. Repentance takes the step of saying, "I'm sorry for my sin and I turn away from it. I want to go in a different direction. I want healing and wholeness and forgiveness more than I want to cling to this self-centered way of being or behaving." Repentance is a U-turn, just like when I miss my exit and the GPS tells me to turn around. When we come to a place of being willing to turn around, we are opening ourselves to the work of God's spirit in the kingdom.

True repentance will, by its very nature, lead us to **obedience**. The important point here is that obedience is not something we achieve by *trying harder*. This is where a lot of people get tripped up. We can't think our way into the kingdom and we can't try our way into God's kingdom, either. When we yield ourselves in repentance to the Spirit, God will do the transforming work that needs to be done in us. We can't transform ourselves any more than we can birth

ourselves, but in repentance and obedience we are optimizing the conditions in which the Holy Spirit can do that work. And, the Spirit is changing our hearts so that our natural responses, our choices, our attitudes are the same ones Jesus had. We're being remade, "reborn" from the inside out, which means our obedience isn't a burden or checking a box. It's a joy rooted in trust. That's what it means to be made into Christ's likeness, and only God can do that in us; we can't do it in ourselves.

Finally, a posture of **humility** is necessary for the repentance and obedience that is characteristic of kingdom living. When Jesus wants an example of how we enter the kingdom of God, he doesn't turn to the intellectual giants and Torah scholars of his day. He takes the hand of a child, and he says, if you want to enter the kingdom, be like this. Children more naturally exhibit the kind of humility Jesus knows is central to kingdom living, and I want to briefly mention three ways that this is so:

1. Children are willing to be taught. They're not full of preconceived ideas of how the world should and shouldn't work, of what God is like, or of what God can and can't do. They are curious and they ask questions, but they are not preoccupied with knowing everything. Their play does not stop and their trust does not waver just because they can't explain something. Like children, if we're going to enter the kingdom there are going to be times when we have to live in the tension of not knowing everything yet while still making the choice to trust. And, not infrequently, we're going to have to be willing to unlearn what we think we know in order to relearn from Jesus how to live in his kingdom.
2. Children easily believe what they cannot see. The spirit of truth that Jesus speaks about is hard for adults to receive, because we've been taught in our modern world to accept as reality only that which we can physically see or empirically prove. Children have an advantage because they so readily recognize that sometimes what is most true is not visible to the naked eye, that imagination and trust are needed to receive and enter the joys of kingdom life.
3. Children are perfectly okay with depending on someone else for what they need. We adults really struggle with this. We are taught to be self-sufficient and self-reliant and we take pride in that self-sufficiency. But, while self-sufficiency is a virtue in our culture, it is a real stumbling block to our entry into the kingdom of God. Humility asks that we recognize and acknowledge

our dependency rather than our independence; that we rely on God rather on ourselves; that we set aside our ideas and agendas and let God lead us. It doesn't come naturally to many of us, but it is critical for entering God's kingdom.

If a life is marked by repentance, obedience and humility, the impact will be easy to spot. Jesus says that being born *anóthen* will be as evident as the wind. You can't control it or see it, but you know it's at work. It's as obvious as bent branches or blowing leaves. As evangelist Billy Graham put it, "I do not see the wind, but I see the effects of the wind." A life born *anóthen* is a changed life, a life effected by the Spirit of God.

When we enter the kingdom to live as kingdom citizens, we become representatives or agents of that kingdom, agents that desire God's effective will to be accomplished and that set about doing everything we can to see to it that God's effective will is felt and seen, experienced and known in our world. But, we don't become those kinds of people on our own. To be in tune with God's reign and presence we need a transformative overhaul of our traditional ways of seeing and being. We need a transformation of our whole way of knowing and experiencing the world, a total reorientation of our lives. When this happens, it is as if we have begun life all over again. It's as if we have been reborn. As with Nicodemus, being born again is not something we can do for ourselves, but we can cooperate with God's work in us through repentance, obedience, and humility. Rebirth is God's gift to give, God's work to accomplish, and it is God who labors to bring us new life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.