

What do you think the Kingdom of God looks like?

What does the Kingdom of God look like when -- as we pray in the Lord’s Prayer -- it comes “on earth as in heaven?”

We’re in the midst of a 6-week series exploring the essentials of the Christian faith as outlined in the Apostle’s Creed. As I’ve mentioned already, no single creed defines the UMC. But like other Protestant denominations, we recognize the importance of historic creeds to help clarify what has been foundational for our faith from the earliest times. Over the last 3 Sundays we’ve explored the affirmations of the Apostles’ Creed related to the Triune God; God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Today, and over the next 2 Sundays, we’ll explore what is meant by the affirmations: 1) I believe in the holy catholic church. 2) I believe in the forgiveness of sins, and, 3) I believe in the resurrection of the body.

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So, what does the Kingdom of God look like? I ask that because the answer relates to, and should at least inform, much of what we mean when we say: “I believe in the holy catholic church.”

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The weekend before this, our church hosted a 2-day training focused on how to do inter-generational ministry. We had two leaders, one from Nashville, the other from Maryland. With the almost 40 people who participated in that training, these leaders from “GenOn Ministry” suggested that the most critical ministry a church does is “nurturing people, especially young people, into an abundant, life-giving relationship with God, through Jesus Christ.” I want to repeat that: “Nurturing people, especially young people, into an abundant, life-giving relationship with God through Jesus Christ is the most important thing a church ever does.” And to do this, young people need to gather with the wider congregation, particularly older Christians, to regularly practice ‘Kingdom of God’ relationships.

To me, this make sense. Where else but the church can any of us, but especially young people, learn -- let alone practice -- how to live in authentic Christian relationships?

This is why I suspect Jesus established the church; so people of all ages would regularly gather to experiment, practice, and hone our ability to live in the redemptive ways that Jesus taught.

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When I was serving another church, we launched a mid-week ministry based on GenOn principles. On many Wednesday nights, about 35-40 students would gather with about 25 adult leaders for recreation, for worship arts, for Bible study, and a sit-down meal. The goal was to demonstrate to each other what it would look like if we practiced the ways of God’s kingdom every time we gathered.

A few weeks after we launched the program, a mother who was not a part of the church enrolled her triplets -- all middle school girls -- into this ministry. Adding 3 pre-teens to our program was exciting, but there was a challenge. One of the triplets was almost completely blind. One was almost completely deaf. The third had both hearing and sight limitations, but not as severely as her sisters. Other than this, they were normal, funny, whip-smart young women.

Our challenge was how to include them in the program, especially when the middle schoolers were learning to play chime bells! How could we include the two sight impaired sisters if they couldn’t read the notes on the sheet music to know when to ring their chimes? How could we include the hearing-impaired girls if they couldn’t take cues from the other middle schoolers about the meter of the melody?

After a couple of weeks, I walked in on the worship arts rehearsal. I saw a dozen middle schoolers, including the triplets, playing the chime bells. One of the triplets could see the director well enough to know when to ring her chime, but standing behind the 2 other girls were 2 adults who could both read music. And just before the girls were supposed to ring their chimes, the adult standing behind them would tap them on whichever shoulder they needed so that they could ring out the song with their peers. It wasn’t perfect, but I’ve rarely heard a sweeter sound or witnessed anything more beautiful. I believe this was a glimpse of God’s Kingdom on earth.

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Keeping this in mind, that the church is meant, in so many ways, to provide us glimpses and foretastes of God’s kingdom, I want to unpack what we mean when we say: ‘I believe in the holy catholic church.’

While I want to focus first on the word ‘holy’, I will point out that the word ‘catholic’ does not refer to the Roman Catholic denomination. I certainly don’t say that any disrespect, but the word ‘catholic’ comes from a compound Greek word, *kata holos*, which basically means ‘everywhere’ (or, as the asterisk in our hymnals indicates, ‘universal.’) This is meant to

affirm that whatever else our differences with other Christians, all who confess Jesus as Savior and Lord are part of the church established by Christ. (This is a good time to recall that the essence of saving faith, according to the Apostle Paul in Romans 10:9 boils down to this: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”)

And yet, given some of our personal experiences of church, it can seem odd, even a bit dishonest, to use the adjective ‘holy’ when describing what’s often a messy, difficult, and cranky community of people. (Enough about me!) But in a biblical context, the word ‘holy’ simply means ‘sacred to’ or ‘set apart’ for God. So, when we join a church, we’re joining a group that is ‘set apart’ to serve God.

I’m not sure how much people get that. We typically think of the church as a place to go based on what we get out of it; what benefits we obtain. We look to be nurtured and inspired; for God to touch us in some way. That’s not all bad; but it falls well short of what the church is meant to be – a place where we are set apart to serve God (not ourselves). As we mature in faith, our reason for being in the church should mature from “What do I get out of it?” to “What can I do to contribute to God’s kingdom in and through the church?”

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This leads to a second thing we sometimes overlook. The church is not, and never was, our idea. The church is not a human invention. It’s God’s idea! If we take scripture seriously, we know that the church is founded by Jesus. It’s a community that belongs to Jesus, to serve Jesus. The Rev. Adam Hamilton, who pastors a UM congregation with 20K members, believes that one reason for the decline in regular church attendance is because “we’ve forgotten to teach what the church is and why it matters.” We don’t want to ask too much of people; they’re already so busy, but then we lose “sight of the fact that the church is not an optional add-on to faith, [it] is an essential part of being a Christian—something Jesus created to fulfill his mission.”

Hamilton goes on, “We are meant to continue the ministry Jesus began, to re-present Jesus to the world. Jesus said, ‘As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.’” For all its faults, and there are many, the church is essential because the church is Jesus’ strategy for healing our brokenness and the brokenness of the world. Really and truly, Jesus has no hands but ours to serve God’s ongoing purposes.

This is what we see Jesus doing in our reading from Matthew, sending his disciples out to continue doing exactly what he has done.

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The last thing I’ll say circles back to the triplets and the middle schoolers I witnessed rehearsing chime bells. As I’ve already said, I think the church is meant to be a place where we experiment, practice, and hone our abilities to live in the redemptive ways that Jesus taught. A different way to say that, is the church is a place where we go to ‘rehearse’ our faith so that we become more skilled in performing our faith beyond the church walls.

One of the ways I’ve seen this ‘rehearsal’ at St Paul’s is at the monthly men’s breakfasts. Let me share that for most of my ministry I’ve gone to the men’s breakfast because I have to; I’m the pastor. For the first time in my ministry, I actually look forward to these breakfasts. I’ve concluded that the difference is that I get to hear people rehearse their faith story in a way that helps me ‘rehearse’ my own.

For the most part, the speakers are invited to reflect on 3 questions as they shape their sharing for the breakfasts: 1) How did you become a Christian? 2.) Considering all the other things you could be doing, why are you still a Christian? and 3.) How does being a Christian affect the way you relate to others?

What if all of us took time to write down our responses to those 3 questions so that we were always ready to share our faith story? I recall much of what Paul Lull shared at the first breakfast I attended about a year ago. I was so incredibly blessed by what my own wife shared when she spoke. Andy Grimaud had an amazing story to share. And how blessed I continue to feel that both of my sons were with me when Mike Burke rehearsed his story. As each of these people rehearsed their faith story, I found myself getting glimpses of God’s Kingdom breaking through heaven to come on earth.

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The church, my brothers and sisters, is certainly much more than what I’ve said this morning. But when I say I believe in the holy catholic church, I am affirming my belief that church is essential to God’s enterprise of salvation, and so we are ‘set apart’ that we may rehearse our faith and become be well practiced in serve as Christ’s continuing presence in the world. Amen.