

February 11, 2018

Deut. 30: 11-14; Luke 17: 20-21; Mark 12: 32-34

Prayer: Dear God, help us to live into your kingdom that is already present. Help us to understand its meaning. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

The Kingdom Within

As I mentioned back in January, Archbishop Desmond Tutu's daughter spoke at a Martin Luther King Day breakfast at Furman. Nontombi Naomi Tutu was born in 1960, and was raised both in South Africa and internationally.

Apartheid was still in place in South Africa through the early 1990s. In other words, there were still laws to keep the black majority out of certain jobs, educational opportunities, and neighborhoods – much like the American South through much of the 20th century.

Because apartheid was actually the law of the land, the nation's police force was charged with enforcement. That translated into every human rights abuse you could imagine – arrests, torture, murder.

When apartheid was finally dismantled in 1993, the nation had three choices, said Ms. Tutu. They could hold Nuremburg-type trials and put the worst abusers in prison.

They could grant amnesty to everyone and start fresh.

Or they could attempt a middle road.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the middle road they chose.

Facing the truth, admitting the truth, they decided, was the most important place to start. And so they offered a way for people to apply for amnesty. If they told the truth about their actions, they would face no criminal or civil prosecutions.

The hearings were aired live on television. Imagine those hearings as something like our Watergate hearings in the summer of 1973. A whole nation riveted on one subject, one conversation.

In those hearings, people heard what their neighbors had done. The worst of the worst was a man named Eugene De Kock, who was nicknamed “Prime Evil.” He was the head of the paramilitary police unit charged with capturing or assassinating opposition members.

During the hearings he admitted to more than 100 acts of torture, extortion or murder. Not all of them were excusable under the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, so he went to prison for 20 years.

As Eugene De Kock confessed to all those acts of unspeakable violence on TV, Ms. Tutu said her first thought was, “Thank goodness I’m not like that.” Her second thought was, “How do you know you are not like that?”

For what the hearings brought out was that people who had tortured and killed virtually split themselves off from who they were at home with their children. Who they were at church. Who they were when socializing with neighbors.

And she became convinced that evil is not some mutant gene, out there in someone else and not in us.

“Given the right circumstances,” she said, “all of us are willing to impose suffering on others.”

On the flip side, the hearings allowed the people of South Africa to hear the stories of victims and survivors. At the end of their stories, they were always asked, “What can the country do to make things right for you?”

To Ms. Tutu’s surprise, they almost never asked for reparations for themselves. Not for a house or a car or a swimming pool. Almost invariably, they asked for a health clinic or a school or more teachers for their village.

Her temptation was to think that those people were born with a saintly gene. But they weren’t – anymore than the evil-doers had been born with a mutant gene. Either can grow within each of us.

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As South Africa’s system of apartheid began breaking down, the anti-apartheid revolutionary Nelson Mandela was released from prison. He’d been jailed for 27 years. Once released, he was elected the country’s president, and became a symbol of freedom and human rights all over the world.

But Mandela, widely revered and beloved, was always careful to point out these warring natures within us.

This is what he told his people: “You cannot say you are the people of Nelson Mandela if you are not also the people of Eugene de Kock.”

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Today's Scripture passages address this idea of a dichotomy within ourselves, rather than outside ourselves. The first reading comes from Moses' instructions in the book of Deuteronomy. If you'd like to read along, this comes from **Deut. 30: 11-14:**

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹²It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?'

¹³Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' ¹⁴No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

And then in the New Testament book of Luke, we read this similar passage. **Luke 17: 20-21:**

20 Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'

Equally accurate translations are, “the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” or “the kingdom of God is within you.”

The kingdom of God is within you.

Some Bible scholars warn against that last translation because it can invoke some New Age-y nirvana that we can reach with the right amount of naval-gazing. But I don't think we have to veer off in that direction.

I think as image bearers of our Creator God, we can sometimes embody the kingdom of God. It can indeed dwell within us. That is a powerful thought. It's also a thought that can set our direction in life.

Are we always striving for a kingdom of God “out there” somewhere? Or can it, in fact, be found within us?

When we desire health clinics and schools and teachers for everyone rather than houses and cars and pools for ourselves, is the kingdom of God dawning?

When it comes to technology or pop culture, I am usually several years behind the rest of the country. Our children had cell phones for years before I did. I figured people could reach me at home or in my office. I wasn't important enough to be on call in my car.

My kitchen had a huge, clunky hand-me-down microwave with a dial. I was fine with it. Vince and the kids sneaked it out one day when I wasn't home. Now my fancy new microwave balks at re-heating a cup of coffee. It thinks it's beneath it.

So it won't surprise you to learn that I only discovered Netflix last month. During all those frigid nights in January, I binge watched a show set in the Florida Keys. It was called "Bloodline," and it was about a family who owned a fabulous inn right on the beach of Islamorada.

I'm not spoiling anything to tell you that one of the brothers is murdered pretty quickly. But by season three, I found myself still pulling for a brother who had lied and drug trafficked and murdered. And I finally thought, "What's he got to do for you to think he deserves prison?"

I could see the good in him because he started out good. I realized that Naomi Tutu is right: All of us have the propensity for good and for evil.

I'm sure you've heard the parable that may have originated with the Cherokee Indians. A grandfather tells his grandson that there are two wolves inside us which are always at war with each other.

One of them is a good wolf which represents things like kindness, bravery and love. The other is a bad wolf, which represents things like greed, hatred and fear.

The grandson thinks about it, then asks, "Grandfather, which one wins?"

The grandfather replies, "The one you feed."

The one you feed.

So how do we feed the good wolf? We try to put ourselves in our neighbor's place.

We commit to a certain standard of living for all people, not just our families.

We choose a health clinic or a school or teachers over our material comforts.

Our Scripture passage from Deuteronomy states that the ancient people of God were able to live in accordance with God's word – even *before* that word was made flesh. The word is not in heaven or beyond the sea, the Old Testament writer tells them. It is **“in your mouth and in your heart.”**

The apostle Paul actually quotes this passage in his letter to the Romans: **“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.”** (Romans 10: 8)

What is that if not “within”?

There is a sense in which the word of God, the kingdom of God, is already accessible to us. We have a fancy theological phrase for that – a partially realized eschatology.

It means there are times and places that the kingdom of God breaks through. A thin place. A holy moment. A time when the dove flaps or the goose honks.

But where is that? When is it?

20 Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!”

For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.’

One of my seminary professors said he saw the in-breaking of the kingdom most clearly when people were set free. The tearing down of the Berlin Wall. The dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. Recovery from an addiction.

I would agree with that. But I'd add something else.

I think we see the in-breaking of the kingdom of God when people are brought into community.

When they are invited to participate.

When they are invited to belong.

When their humanity is recognized and honored with a basic set of human rights, a basic standard of living, a basic stance of inclusion.

Jesus talked about the kingdom of God as much as he talked about anything. He told 11 parables about it, comparing the kingdom to a mustard seed, to leaven, to weeds in the wheat, to treasure in a field, to a wedding feast, to a pearl.

And then he told a wonderful story in the gospel of Mark in which a scribe asked him which commandment was the most important. Jesus answered with his familiar statement to love the Lord with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

And then we read this: **Mark 12: 32-34:**

³²Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other"; ³³and "to love him

with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength”, and “to love one’s neighbor as oneself”,— this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.’

³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’

In both these gospel passages – from Luke and Mark – Jesus is not in his usual testy stand-off with religious authorities. In Luke, he was talking to the Pharisees when he said, **“the kingdom of God is among you”** or **“within you.”**

In Mark, he was talking to a scribe when he said, **“You are not far from the kingdom of God.”**

We know from other encounters that those same people had dozens of conflicts with Jesus. And yet the kingdom of God was within their reach. As it is within our reach.

You cannot say you are the people of Nelson Mandela if you are not also the people of Eugene de Kock.

Each of us carries the potential for good and evil.

Which will we feed?

Amen.