

MISSION: POSSIBLE – CONTINUALLY DEMONSTRATING GOD’S REIGN

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Matthew 10:1-14

Today wraps up the three-part sermon series I’ve titled *Mission: Possible*. My hope is that these sermons will spark a continuing conversation among you, a conversation about how we view ourselves as a congregation and how we intend to live out our lives of faith.

As I mentioned earlier, I have composed a mission statement for our congregation. This is not meant to be a definitive statement for our church, but a working document designed to fuel a larger conversation. If we wish to develop a more specific statement, that would be wonderful. The important thing is that we are proactive in determining how we will live as Christians.

The mission statement I composed reads like this. FPC is “A welcoming community of disciples of Jesus Christ continually demonstrating God’s reign.” In the first week, we studied the earliest church as described in the book of Acts and asked how we might model ourselves after that Christian community living in common, sharing all they had, and caring for one another. On top of that, we looked at how we must be a welcoming community sharing hospitality with those who come into our midst.

Then, last week, we explored the challenge of being disciples of Jesus Christ and looked at how we are called to carry our cross—a cross that requires that in some manner we die to a new life.

Today, I am focusing on the kingdom of God, with the final phrase of the mission statement, “continually demonstrating God’s reign.”

The challenge of the kingdom of God is that nowhere in scripture is the nature of this kingdom described for us. It is assumed that everyone knew what it was. And they did. It is kind of like baseball. We can talk about baseball without having to define it at every turn. We all know what baseball is. It is part of the fabric of our culture. If I were to say, for example, “Last week’s sermon was a grand slam,” you may disagree with me but you will at least understand the baseball reference.

Now, we may not have a comprehensive definition of the kingdom, but that doesn't mean that the Bible is silent on the subject. The kingdom of God is mentioned in one way or another 162 times in the New Testament.

The first thing we need to know about the kingdom is that it is the core of Jesus message. Jesus said, *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news* (Mark 1:14-15). This was his message, that the kingdom that the people had longed for and were actively searching for had arrived. It had come *near*. This is the *good news* that Jesus brings. The kingdom was within their grasp. All they needed to do was to repent and redirect their lives.

The idea of the kingdom of God has roots in the Old Testament story of the exodus. God delivered the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and led them into the wilderness. At Sinai, God offers to be their king if the Hebrews will be God's people. This idea of God as king becomes an aspiration that will haunt the Israelites for generations. God is their faithful king, but the people are not faithful subjects. And so, their vision of living in God's reign always seems just beyond them.

Jesus' radical message for the people is that the kingdom is present. I like to think he said something like this, "You know that kingdom that we all are expecting? It is here. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent. Turn your lives around." And yet, despite Jesus' assurance, the kingdom remained elusive. If the people knew what to look for, they might see it; they just couldn't grab hold of it. Jesus said that to receive the kingdom we must become like little children. *Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it* (Mark 10:15). To receive the kingdom, we must set aside our ambitions of power and adopt the humility of a child. In a similar way, Jesus also says, *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God* (Luke 6:20). The poor are humble because they have no power.

In another place Jesus teaches that in order to gain access to the kingdom, one's righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees (Mark 15:19-20). The scribes and Pharisees only give the appearance of being righteous. To enter the kingdom, one must become righteous in their heart.

However, where Jesus says the most about the kingdom is in his parables. He tells us that the kingdom is like seed sewn in the ground. It grows (we don't know how) and then one day we must harvest what appears. The kingdom is also like a net, sunk into the water where we cannot see it. But when we pull it up it is full of fish. The kingdom is like yeast hidden in flour. It is unseen yet causes the dough to rise.

I could spend hours talking about what the Bible tells us about the kingdom, but I want to get back to our mission statement. This mission statement says that we, as a church, are a welcoming community of disciples of Jesus Christ continually demonstrating God's reign. You will notice that I said "God's reign" and not "kingdom of God. There's a reason. For one thing, the Bible is not consistent with this term. The Gospel of Matthew for example prefers to say kingdom of heaven. We view these as being the same thing.

But the bigger reason is that for some decades now, scholars have quietly been urging that we move away from the term kingdom. For one thing, as Americans, we do not have an instinctual understanding of a kingdom. We fought a war to escape the rule of a king. Furthermore, the word kingdom is not the best translation of the Greek word. That word is βασιλεία.

In English, a kingdom describes the place where a king rules. A kingdom has definite political boundaries. For example, the kingdom of the nation of Jordan is ruled by King Abdullah II. When you leave Jordan, you leave his kingdom. But this word βασιλεία describes not a place but rather the authority exercised by a king, the authority to rule. So, when we talk about God as king, we aren't speaking of a place where God rules. We are describing a reality—a reality that coincides with our own reality. So, in my mission statement, I chose to use the word reign—God's reign.

As a side note, theologians have long been searching for the perfect word to describe God's ultimate reign. And one proposal is the word kinship. Not kingship, but kinship. Kinship implies that in God's reign we are all one family. This word does just come out of the blue it is supported in the words of Jesus who said, *Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother* (Mark 3:35). Kinship. But that is another sermon.

So, back to our mission statement. We, as a church, should be a welcoming community of disciples of Jesus Christ continually demonstrating God's reign. Our task as a church is to model for the world what it is like to live in God's reign. And we are to do this day and night without ceasing. There is no time off for good behavior. It is what we do as disciples of Jesus Christ. We are to demonstrate what life is like in God's reign.

We are to be like those dedicated people who work at a place like Colonial Williamsburg who are experts in demonstrating how people lived and worked in a particular place in time. And even in August, when the sidewalks are melting in the heat and the tourists are wearing flip flops and skimpy tee shirts, historical interpreters are sweating it out in their period costumes. Why? Because they are committed to demonstrating a particular way of life so that the visitors may learn.

We, as Christians, as disciples of Christ, as members of a welcoming community, are to be models of godly living both here at the corner of West Main and Greenwood and out in the world. We are to live life differently than the rest. We are to do it even if it makes us uncomfortable or even puts us in danger. It is the cross we bear.

In our scripture passage today from Matthew's gospel, we read where Jesus calls his 12 disciples and gives them power. He gives them the power to cast out unclean spirits and cure disease. We know exactly who the disciples are because Matthew lists them here for us: Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew,

Thomas, Matthew, James, Thaddaeus, Simon, and Judas. These are the ones who would go on to build the church in Jesus' name.

Jesus sends these 12 out with specific instructions to proclaim the good news saying, *The kingdom of heaven has come near*. And he tells them that they are to *cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and to cast out demons*. They are to take no money, but are to work for their food. He tells them that if any they meet refuses to listen to them then don't beat your head against the wall. No, just *shake the dust from your feet* and move on.

We are the church and the spiritual descendants of the original 12. We have power to do more than we can imagine. We can work miracles. We can change lives. We have the ability to demonstrate to the world what it is like to live with God as our king and we as God's people. It is wonderful. It is sacred. It is why each week we pray the words, *thy kingdom come*.