

öThe Realm of God Is at Handö  
Matthew 9:35 ó 10:8  
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The title of this sermon is öThe Realm of God Is at Hand.ö Because of the sexist and domination meaning of the word, Kingdom, in this sermon I will use the modified term, kin-dom, or the word örealmö instead.

Before the term öChristianö was coined to refer to the early church, those who gathered in Jesus' name simply knew that they had been touched by Jesus and in response, they followed him. Our lives, as individuals and as a congregation, have been touched by Jesus, too. So, perhaps we also consider ourselves to be followers of Jesus. But it is not enough simply to hold correct beliefs in our heads. To be a believer is useful as far as it goes, but to be a follower of Jesus requires something more than an intellectual understanding of the tenets of Christianity. Jesus makes it clear that to be a follower requires that intellectual belief must become actualized in transformed behavior and social structures.

As I preach this sermon today, I am assuming that many of you are either öfollowers of Jesusö now or you are striving to become followers. In a sense, we in this congregation have been in the process of following Jesus for the last few months just as if we had been members of the crowds that showed up whenever Jesus preached or healed people some 2000 years ago. We have been trying to listen carefully, attempting to open ourselves up to the essence and practical implications of his good news. We have been looking at the nature of the responses of many of his followers as they created their communities of faith after his death. And we have been trying to figure out how to be faithful followers in our present era, given its multiplying pressures and challenges.

We noted that Jesus has proclaimed to us the ögood news of the Realm of Godö and we have observed the healing effect he has had on so many people. Following the lectionary readings through Matthew, we come now to see Jesus making a significant shift in his approach with the disciples. Until now, Jesus has been the star of the show, the primary messenger, the preacher and healer. But at this point in the narrative, Jesus commissions his disciples, and by extension, the rest of us, to proclaim the message.

Now, it's one thing to hear Jesus' preaching and then respond to it by affirming that we believe him. It is quite another thing to assume the responsibility, as individuals and as a congregation, to carry and deliver the message ourselves. We can easily imagine how the disciples' lives changed when Jesus turned to them and said, in effect: öWell, you've heard my preaching and seen the way I treat and heal people. And I notice that you are still here; you haven't run away. Now, get prepared for a big change, because you will no longer be just spectators. It is now time for you to participate in this ministry. Oh, by the way, I'm not going to go with you, but you will to go out in pairs.ö

Can't you feel their anxiety rising as they grumble? *But, Jesus is the special one! He has the power. How are we supposed to find the authority to do what he has done?* Yes, I'm sure they

tried a thousand excuses, but Jesus remained firm. We might note, here, that Jesus gave them two very different kinds of instructions. He gave them a task to accomplish and he gave them a message to deliver.

The task was to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons. These are the very same kinds of healing acts that Jesus had been performing. But the disciples did not think of themselves as healers. Still, Jesus sent them out armed only with their experience of being with him. We should notice that he did not first send them to medical school nor did he give them a crash course in pastoral counseling. He simply sent them out to do the very same things that he had done: *Go to the people who are in need. Show them by your presence with them that you do not see them as outcasts because of their afflictions. Don't recoil from those who are sick or appear dead, but touch them. Everyone else is so afraid of becoming unclean that the sick and dying ones are effectively buried even before the breath leaves them. But I tell you, see and touch the person, not the affliction.*

That was their task, but he also gave them a message to proclaim. It was the same message that had made him a unique presence in his time and that would make their ministry unique, too. Hear his words as he instructs them: "Preach as you go, saying 'The Realm of God is at hand' (which could also be translated 'is coming near to you'). And if you here choose to be followers of Jesus, they are your instructions, too.

As we think about the task and the message, let us remember that the definition of healing includes changing social structures. We change systems by reaching across social, economic, and religious boundaries, resulting in more than the physical healing of some individual malady. When we look at healing from this perspective, it is not difficult to see that the healing mission and the proclaimed message have the same basic meaning. Jesus often tells people to look around and see what is happening. The healing, the touching, the improved relationships stand as tangible evidence that the Realm of God is here.

So, how are we to understand these words of proclamation given our understanding of the modern world? First of all, we need to understand how people imagine God to be. The God of Jesus' day was thought to be stern, distant, and demanding. Religious people wanted God to act on their behalf, but they had been taught to expect God's intervention only if they were completely rigorous in obeying all the commandments with great precision. We can see how such a fearful response to a potentially dangerous God naturally results in personal anxiety and moralistic judgments of others. It sets up a dilemma of living. In order to placate God, the people believed they had to behave in a morally correct way, including staying ritually clean. Following that logic, the religious ones in Jesus' time believed they were obeying God when they separated themselves from those who were unclean. But, in effect, their image of God caused them to fracture their community.

Even today, we recognize that stern, distant, and demanding God who is often portrayed as one demanding obedience and as one who will respond with divine anger (expressed as eternal damnation) if we don't comply. Modern religious culture has developed its own notion of the lines between purity and impurity, and once again has imagined that God wants us to observe ritual purity. As a consequence, the lepers of Jesus' day have become the gays and lesbians, the

indigent, the addicts, people of other faiths, and even the people of color today. Whenever such lines are drawn between the acceptable folk and the unclean ones, then most of the energy of life goes into the moral judgment of those on the other side of the line. Sometimes the judgments are explicit, as in calling someone else evil or immoral. Sometimes the judgments are implicit, like the ways we communicate our many unconscious prejudices.

In all cases, if we are to be followers of Jesus, we must cross many boundaries and then work to eliminate the boundaries altogether. We must go to those who are outcast or otherwise disenfranchised. We must touch others and be touched by them, all the while proclaiming that the Kin-dom of Heaven is at hand. Or support of yesterday's Gay Pride event is such a boundary crossing.

This ministry of Jesus is not one in which the powerful exercise their influence (benign or otherwise) over the powerless. The ministry that proclaims the Kin-dom of Heaven is about the empowerment of all people so they know themselves to be among the children of God. Furthermore, the ministry of the Kin-dom benefits everyone. Anyone who has ever engaged in ministry to others knows that the benefits to the helper often match or even exceed the benefits provided to the other.

Jesus sent the disciples and Jesus sends us out into the world, directing us to cross the arbitrarily drawn purity lines because we can only learn about the Realm of God when we participate in it. With such a ministry, we then become convinced of the power of the living God when we see how the simple crossing of those lines begins to heal the fragmentation of the community. And so it is that the Kin-dom of Heaven is at hand whenever people meet in mutuality and community.

Therefore, in the name of Jesus, I call upon you to proclaim to one another and to the wider community, with your actions and your words, that the Kin-dom of Heaven is here.