

The Embrace of God

Becoming God's friends

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him

– Luke 15:20

The Kingdom of God

In Matthew 4:23 Jesus talked about the good news of the kingdom, then Matthew launches into the Sermon on the Mount, which is the exposition of what that 'gospel' is.



We spent considerable time last week in this passage and you should return to it frequently throughout this process. It is a passage that will only yield its richest insights with time spent 'dwelling in' the passage.

One of the things we learn from this teaching of Jesus about the kingdom is that the kingdom is available to some pretty unlikely characters. This is what the Beatitudes are about in Matthew 5:1-12.

Discussion: When you read the Beatitudes, what do you hear Jesus saying? Think about who might be gathered around him on the hillside and what they would have heard from these 'blessings.' Using your own words, list a few of the types of people who are blessed in God's kingdom.

The notion of 'kingdom' is pretty foreign to us today. Even in the United Kingdom the idea is losing traction. So we have an imaginative task before us. Think about the concept of a kingdom. A kingdom has a king who reigns over a realm. In that realm the king has subjects who swear allegiance to the king and all he stands for.

Even this imagination is complicated by the fact that we have never known a perfectly good king (or president, or prime minister, or ruler of any type). We only know of good kings in legends like King Arthur. In fact, you might say that people develop these legends and myths precisely because we don't

have good kings. But if you can imagine God as the perfectly good king, who reigns over this people with love, this is the kingdom of God.

Who wouldn't want to be a part of a kingdom like that? In fact, if such a place existed, wouldn't you want to immigrate there? In fact, the notion of immigration is not far from what the gospel offers to every person. Last week we touched briefly on the metaphor of God as the Father who has a family. New people can enter this family through adoption. God offers adoption to everyone. So we could compare these two metaphors this way.

Metaphor for God	Metaphor for community of God's people	Process for entering that community
Father		
King		

Either way, whether 'family' or 'kingdom' metaphors are employed, the invitation of God is to enter or receive something. This goes back to our focus last week of 'belonging.' Christianity is, before all else, something you belong to. It is something you enter. And entrance into this new relationship is a *gift* you receive.

Discussion: Read Ephesians 2. Notice how Paul connects the idea of receiving salvation as a gift with entrance into a new humanity that transcends divisions of race, gender, etc. Notice also that Paul mixes the metaphors of family and kingdom and more in verses 19-22. What other metaphors does Paul employ?

Dwelling in Scripture – Luke 15:11-32

This is the well-known story of the Prodigal Son. It's hard to imagine being a Christian without knowing this story, and so we need to spend some time in it.

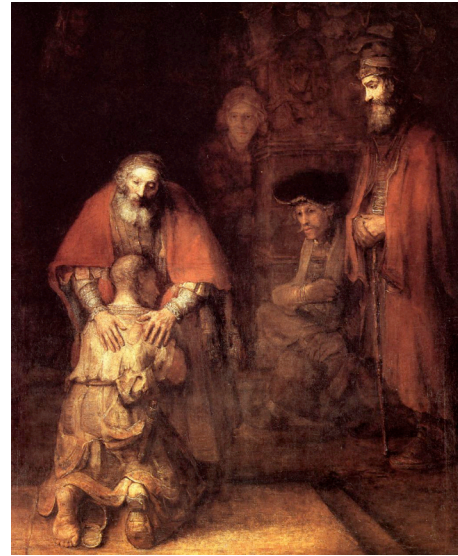
- In groups of three, take turns reading this story. What does this story tell you about the character of God?

- Compare this with what you read from the beatitudes and Ephesians 2.

The Embrace of God

We have each received the embrace of God in this way. The invitation to being a child of God – to be welcomed in his kingdom – is something deeply personal. We are all prodigals, returning to God from a sojourn in a far country.

Think about your own journey. In what ways can you recognize that you have been like the prodigal child? Where do you place yourself in that story now?



Faith in Action

As we saw last week, Christianity is about believing, behaving, and belonging. The *Faith in Action* section of these studies will be about the ‘behaving’ part – or what I like to call shared practices. These are not just practices we do in isolation from each other. They are practices everyone in the community commits to.

The practice of Christian faith that is associated with this lesson on the gospel is the practice of hospitality. Hospitality is a key practice of God’s people throughout scripture.

Discussion: Read Genesis 18; Deuteronomy 24:20-22; Matthew 25:31-46; Hebrews 13:1-2. What is the basis for requiring God’s people to show hospitality to the stranger? What about us?

How can we share God’s hospitality with others?

Praying to Understand

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one,
for yours is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.

– Matthew 6:9-13, TNIV

Don't struggle with this prayer. Just pray it and allow its words to become yours.

Homework

- This week, spend time each day in the scriptures we've mentioned in this lesson. There have been several, but the main ones are the story of Abraham's hospitality in Genesis 18, the story of the prodigal in Luke 15
- Find at least one way to share God's hospitality/friendship with someone else this week. Welcome a stranger in God's name in a creative way.
- Keep a journal and note what you're learning. Be prepared to share next week in class.

Intersections in Culture

One of the very best stories that illustrates the grace of God in extending his unmerited friendship to us is Victor Hugo's, *Les Miserables*. Find a version of this film and watch it. What does it teach you about right and wrong ways of relating to God?

Questions, problems, challenges, insights, discoveries