

July 12, 2009

We Can Make The World A Better Place In Which To Live

Introduction

Good morning! Earlier this week, I read the lessons and prepared a totally different sermon than the one I will share with you this morning. It was about the foibles of king David and Herod Antipas. It really had no good news in it for today. So, I tore it up and decided to take a different approach. You tell me whether or not I was successful.

Richard Harris concerning the Protestant and Catholic conflict in Northern Ireland in 1973 recited, *“You carry me secretly naked in your hearts, and clothe me publicly in armor, saying, “God is on my side,” Yet I openly cry “Who is on my side? Who, tell me who? You who buried your sons and crippled your fathers whilst you buried my Father in crippling his Son... Let me in my betrayal lie low in my grave, and you in your bitterness lie low in yours, for our measurements grow strangely dissimilar.”* There is a difference between human desires and aspiration and God’s. And if the world is to be better world in which to live, we must help to make it so.

What if we lived in a world where we shared our bread rather than spread our bombs and missiles? What if we lived in world where it was about justice and not about just us: where “No Child Left Behind” meant more than “Not My Child Left Behind;” where war was truly about human rights and not just about territorial rights, dominance and mineral rights and where there was a kind of Hippocratic law for faith, love and justice? What if love and marriage were more about mutual caring, sharing and child rearing, and not about dominance and selfish passion? What if all of the children of the world were cared for, protected and nurtured by everybody on the playgrounds, in the schools, in homes and on the subways, streets and byways? And what if we lived in a world where the dividing wall between nations, peoples and lands were torn down and we drew an inclusive circle around all of the peoples of the world, as we shared her resources? What if? It is possible, you know!

In today’s lessons, let us take a look at two different kinds of kingdoms: the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

A. David was a king that was holy but not blameless. He was a king who was among the best that the world had to offer. He loved the Lord and whenever he was convinced of his error, he turned to the Lord in contrition with repentance and restitution. David, however, was not blameless before the Lord. He committed adultery with Uriah’s wife Bathsheba, had Uriah killed and allowed foreign gods to be worshiped in Palestine. David’s house was divided as his sons fought against one another and against him. And finally, after four hundred years, the Davidic monarchy came to an end in exile, never to rise again as an earthly kingdom. Yet, of all the earthly kingdoms, Jesus Christ was of the lineage of David.

B. Herod Antipas was kingly but was neither holy nor blameless. His father, Herod the Great had five wives and murdered two of them along with their children. Herod Antipas

took his brother Philip's wife Herodias who was a niece of both monarchs. Then he lusted after Herodias' daughter, his grand niece. For a salacious and provocative dance, his step daughter and grand niece, was an excuse for the cutting off of the head of John the Baptist. The prophet's only crime was to remind Herod and Herodias that they were not living a holy and blameless life before God. As a consequence of Herod's sinfulness, God caused him to be banished by Caesar to the farthest corners of the Roman world in Gaul.

C. We have people who have risen to kingly power that are no different from David or Herod. Thomas Jefferson, Ted Haggard, Larry Craig, Mark Foley, Bill Clinton, John Edwards, John Ensign, Mark Sanford and many, many others proved to be no different than David and Herod. They reflected the fact that all human beings have feet of clay. We err and fall short of the grace of God.

If the true story of our own faults was revealed this morning and we stood honestly naked before one another, who among us would be holy enough and blameless enough to cast the first stone at any of the persons listed above? One problem we seem to have is that we tend to draw our circles of "us" and "them" too small. We excuse those who are within our inner circle and condemn everybody whom we consider to stand outside. Another problem we have is that our news media has changed from reporting the news to spinning and producing the news. And most of us are more attuned to our favorite commentator's spin than to good and impartial investigative news reporting.

D. There is another kingdom that is different, however, to which we can choose to belong. It is the kingdom of God. Only Jesus Christ is both holy and blameless. Nevertheless, in his self-sacrifice on Calvary, he has delivered human beings from sin and death and given us access to a different life here and eternal life in the Age to Come.

I. Chosen to be holy and Blameless Before Him in Love

To be holy means to be set aside for God and different from the world. The Sabbath is holy because it is set aside and different from other days. Objects and appointments are holy because they are set aside for a special purpose. To be blameless means to be without spot before the Lord. Only an unblemished lamb was holy and fit for sacrifice. The animals that were sold in the precincts of the temple had to be without blemishes. However, human beings are never totally holy and never completely blameless.

II. Paul Said That We Are Adopted As Children of God Through Christ

God destined us for adoption according to his good pleasure and his grace, freely bestowed. Adopted children of God means that we have all of the rights, privileges and responsibilities of his Son Jesus Christ.

III. We Are Redeemed Through the Self-sacrifice of Christ on Calvary

God knows that we are weak, so God has given us redemption and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Through repentance and baptism as our response to God's goodness, we are put into a right relationship with God and placed upon the road to salvation, redemption

and sanctification. This enables us, flawed though we are, to become fit vessels for the kingdom of God.

IV. We Are Given Wisdom and Insight Into the Mystery of God's plan, Long Hidden

It is through Christ Jesus that we are given the knowledge of how it all works. God has made known to us the mystery of his will and his plan of salvation through the created order, holy scripture, the prophets and at last through Jesus Christ. God's intention from the very beginning of creation was to gather up all things in heaven and on earth into himself-thus, to sanctify and make them holy.

V. We Are Sealed as God's Own Through the Holy Spirit

God has sealed both Jews and gentiles and all divided humanity in one web of redemption, salvation and sanctification through his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the guide, counselor and giver of power to us to live the life of the Kingdom. God has sealed or marked us as his own just as we mark our possessions with our own names or signatures. We, therefore, belong to him and are pledged and empowered to live according to his Divine Will.

VI. We Are Given the Pledge of Our Inheritance As A Insignia Of Our New Status

Finally, you and I are called to be holy and blameless before the Lord. Not like Herod Antipas who was neither holy nor blameless. Not like the people whom we know to have been publicly embarrassed for their faults. And not even like the great king David who loved and worshiped the Lord. We are invited to be holy and blameless through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are allowed to participate in Christ's holiness and blamelessness in relationship to God. We are brought together in Jesus Christ. Jew and gentile, male and female, great and small, young and old are all one in Christ Jesus. And in that oneness with Christ and with one another, we are reckoned to be holy and blameless before God. Now we may stand before God unashamedly with Godly pride.

God does not love us because we are always good. God loves us because he is always good. God loves us in spite of our faults and weaknesses. That is what I think Paul meant when he said that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. *"To err is human; to forgive, divine."* (Alexander Pope). *"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way...[But], he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed."* (Isaiah 53: 6, 5).

So there you have it, two kingdoms: One kingdom consists of David's kingdom that lasted for over four hundred years and ended in exile; of Herod's kingdom that ended in incest, murder and banishment and of the kingdoms of this world in which we participate with our own foibles still today. There is, however, another kingdom. It is the kingdom of God that calls us to be one, holy, universal and blameless People of God. That kingdom unites and seals us in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. And, when we think and behave according to the precepts of God's kingdom, we give honor and praise to God, God is glorified in heaven and we participate in some small way in helping to transform the kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So, I say to

you this morning, “What if?” I close with the words of Richard Harris recited in the heat of the Catholic and Protestant controversy in Ireland, 1973:

“There is no issue stronger than the tissue of love, no need as holy as the palm outstretched in the run of generosity...I am not in heaven, I am here, hear me, I am with you, see me, I am in you, feel me, I am of you, be me, I am for you, need me. I am all mankind, only through kindness will you reach me... I am not orange, I am not green, I am a half-ripe fruit, needing both colors to grow into ripeness...” In time, those words, many prayers and much blood, sweat and tears changed Ireland for the better. We can and must do no less!

Friends, I believe this to be the very word of the Lord! “Thanks be to God!” Amen.