

**Four Pillars of Christian Faith:
IV – “Basileia: God’s Kingdom of Justice & Peace”
Luke 9.1–6 & 17.20–21
The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 18 July 2004**

This is the final installment of what I consider four pillars of the Christian faith. And in some respects, it is a topic that unites the other, bringing together community, relationship with God, and self-giving love. The Greek work *basileia* is derived from *basil*, which means “king.”

What do you think of when I say the word “kingdom?” Is the first thing that pops into your head the Magic Kingdom or the United Kingdom? Well, God’s kingdom is not about territorial borders. It’s not so much of a place as it is a process. That may sound a bit vague and undefined, so you’ll just have to hang in there with me and see if I can help clarify that term a bit.

The kingdom of course, is something we pray about twice every time we say the Lord’s prayer: “thy *kingdom* come, thy will be done on earth” and “thine is the *kingdom*, the power and the glory.” And there are different ways to interpret that loaded theological phrase.

The kingdom isn’t an easy thing to get a hold of and understand, which is why Jesus continually described it with parable, aphorism, and metaphor. Some people interpret the kingdom as being the life hereafter or life after the second coming. But, when Jesus says, “it is among you,” he is using the *present* tense. That sentence can also be translated as “the kingdom of God is in your midst.” It’s not wishful thinking about a future life, but an aspiration for today.

That brief passage of scripture is perhaps the most important sentence to me in the New Testament: “the kingdom of God is among you.” It’s brief, but it’s absolutely critical. And it’s the only verse of scripture that I can remember in the original Greek; in fact I use it as a type of mantra sometimes in contemplative prayer. (The odd thing is that these two critical verses, which tell us that the kingdom of God is in our midst, are nowhere to be found in the revised common lectionary, which provides the three-year cycle of texts used in most mainline churches. Perhaps it’s a concept that’s a bit too radical for the church to digest!)



There is perhaps no theology that has shaped the United Church of Christ than the theology of the kingdom of God, here and now. I say that because of the predominance of “Kingdom Theology” in the Social Gospel movement in this country, which spanned from the days following the Civil War through the end of the First World War, roughly 1865 to 1918.

Some of you will recognize this old war horse, *The Pilgrim Hymnal*, which was used in most Congregational UCC churches from 1904 until *The New Century Hymnal* was published in 1995. The first editor of *The Pilgrim Hymnal* was Washington Gladden, senior minister at First Congregational Church in Columbus, Ohio. Gladden was called the father of the Social Gospel movement. Now, some of you think that the theology of *The New Century Hymnal* is a bit radical, but *The Pilgrim Hymnal* had an entire section called “The Kingdom of God on Earth.” Let me read you the words to a hymn by Frederick Hosmer, a Unitarian minister who taught at Harvard Divinity School and Social Gospeler:

“Thy kingdom come, O Lord, wide-circling as the sun; fulfill of old thy word, and make the nations one.

“One in the bond of peace, the service glad and free, of truth and righteousness, of love and equity.

“Till rise in ordered plan, on firm foundations broad, the commonwealth of man, the city of our God.”¹

Saying those things in certain circles today will have you branded as a *Liberal* and a *one-worlder*. It’s radical stuff with serious political ramifications, and it’s been part of our tradition for a century. Unfortunately, *The New Century Hymnal* excluded a lot of the great Social Gospel hymns.

The most influential theologian of the Social Gospel movement was Walter Rauschenbusch, a German-born American Baptist, who served in Hell’s Kitchen in New York and taught at Colgate-Rochester School of Divinity. “The kingdom of God,” he wrote in 1907, “is a collective conception involving the whole social life of man. It is not a matter of saving human atoms, but of saving the social organism. It is not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming life on earth into the harmony of heaven.”²

Because of the dominance of this theology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, I think one can make a case that it helped shape the politics of the Progressive Era, when government came to grips with the Industrial Revolution. It certainly shaped Woodrow Wilson, the son of a Presbyterian minister. And I think one can make a case that it also informed the New Deal and increased governmental involvement in providing jobs and relief for those who were battered by the Great Depression. If you were to say the phrase, “the Kingdom of God” to Teddy or Franklin Roosevelt, they would have known that you were talking about *God’s liberating reign of justice, here and now*.



As some of you know, I’m about to leave for two weeks of vacation (or actually *visitation* with my in-laws in Maine and New Hampshire) and then I’ll be off to do a week of continuing education with two of my favorite New Testament scholars, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. And I can’t tell you how excited I am about that opportunity. Both Borg and Crossan do research on the historical Jesus, the flesh-and-blood wisdom teacher who lived in Judea in the first century.

And, not surprisingly, one of the most important themes in Crossan’s research concerns Jesus’ preaching about the kingdom of God. Crossan is one of those people who has really pushed me to stretch and think about the social context of Jesus’ preaching – largely to the very poorest of society – and how I am to take Jesus’ message about the kingdom and make it a part of my faith journey. “The basic question is this,” writes Crossan, “How does human power exercise its rule and how, in contrast, does divine power exercise its rule?”³ To put that into application, what does Jesus’ relationship to power look like, and on the other hand, what does Caesar’s relationship to power look like? Or even in our own time, what does our own national relationship to power look like?

Crossan continues, “The kingdom of God is people under divine rule – and that, as ideal, transcends and judges all human rule. . . . The kingdom of God is what the world would be like if God were directly and immediately in charge.”⁴

So, what would it be like if God were directly and immediately in charge of conflict in Israel/Palestine? In the Sudan? In Northern Ireland? In Iraq? What would it look like if

¹ Frederick Hosmer, *The Pilgrim Hymnal*. (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1958), number 448.

² Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. (NY: Macmillan, 1907), p. 65.

³ John Dominic Crossan. *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 55.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 55.

God were directly and immediately in charge of public schools, access to quality healthcare, and a living wage? Think of the self-giving love I described last week as you consider that question.

Wisdom is necessary, asserts Crossan, for “discerning how, here and now, in this world, one can so live that God’s power, rule, and dominion are evidently present to all observers. One enters that kingdom by wisdom or goodness, by virtue, justice, or freedom. It is a style of life for now, rather than a hope of life for the future.”⁵

It is this discernment that pushes us outside of ourselves to love and care about others. It is the liberating reign of God that provides our motivation for outreach. It is spreading God’s dominion far and wide that is the impetus for mission in the world. May we have that wisdom and the hope to carry it forward.



So, what is the good news? It is that *the kingdom of God is among us*. That can fuel hope enough for a lifetime.

When Jesus sends out the disciples, he tells them to do two things: to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God and to heal. This is the heart of mission, outreach, and social action in the United Church of Christ. Jesus sends us, just as he sent the twelve:

- to proclaim God’s liberating reign of justice, as shown through the Hebrew social prophets and through the ministry and teachings of Jesus.
- to heal God’s world, not just in terms of healthy individuals, but in terms of healthy societies.

Your giving to One Great Hour of Sharing helped provide relief to refugees in the Sudan. Your pledge helps us sustain Our Church’s Wider Mission, supporting teachers, doctors, and pastors in mission sites around the world. Our Open and Affirming stance not only provides a welcome to all God’s people, it provides an opening for people who are used to having church doors slammed in their faces. Our congregation’s work with the Homelessness Prevention Program and the Larimer County Food Bank and Habitat for Humanity and Bennett Elementary School are among the ways we are helping to heal God’s people locally.

But, in addition to focusing on charity, we also need to concentrate on advocacy: on changing systems that allow homelessness, hunger, and inadequate education to persist. In the Connecticut Conference of the UCC, we had a fulltime lobbyist working on poverty issues, quality public education, two-parent adoption, and other issues in the state legislature. And our denomination has policy advocates in Washington, DC, working to change the system through Congress.

Vida Dutton Scudder, an Episcopal Social Gospeler and Wellesley professor, listed three ways Christians can respond to a growing awareness of human suffering: direct charity, social reform, and social transformation.⁶ Charity involves giving to those who are suffering (when you give a homeless person a meal); social reform mean creating and supporting organizations for their care (like the Mission in Old Town); social transformation is about justice and changing the structures that *cause* suffering. The aim of the kingdom is radical, and includes dramatic social transformation.



⁵ *ibid.*, p. 56

⁶ I am indebted to Marcus Borg for this analysis. See *The Heart of Christianity*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), p. 201

The word of hope is this, my friends: that the kingdom of God is among us, and that we are a part of a force for goodness and wholeness in the world. The oft-quoted words of Gandhi ring out the truth of the kingdom: “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

To close, I’d like to share a prayer by Rauschenbusch from his collection *Prayers of the Social Awakening*, published by our own Pilgrim Press in 1909. Community, self-giving love, relationship with God, and the kingdom: listen for the ways he embodies these pillars of our faith in his prayer:

“O Christ, you have bidden us pray for the coming of your Father’s kingdom, in which his righteous will shall be done on earth. We have treasured your words, but we have forgotten their meaning, and your great hope has grown dim in your church. We bless you for all the inspired souls of all ages who saw afar the shining city of God, and by faith left the profit of the present to follow their vision.... Make us determined to live by truth and not by lies, to found our common life on the eternal foundations of justice and love.... Help us to make the welfare of all the supreme law of our land, that so our commonwealth may be built strong and secure on the love of all its citizens.... Our Master once more we make your faith our prayer: ‘Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done on Earth!’”⁷

Amen.

⁷ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Prayers for the Social Awakening*. (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1909), pp. 107-108. *Altered slightly*.