

What in the World is the Church to Do?
The Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World¹
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, Matthew 4:17
Collegiate Presbyterian Church
March 6, 2011

Introduction

This morning we conclude our series of sermons and classes on the six Great Ends of the Church. We have returned to this 100 year-old mission statement at least in part because this congregation is 100 years old and it is good from time to time to remember why it is we exist.

The sixth and last Great End is “the exhibition of the kingdom of Heaven to the world.” It is, as some have pointed out, a pretty good summary of what has come before in the sense that whenever the church faithfully proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ, whenever we provide shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship to God’s children... whenever we maintain divine worship, preserve the truth, and promote social righteousness... whenever we are faithful to any of these we are, in fact, exhibiting the kingdom of heaven to the world.

Bible Readings

Thessalonians 1:1-10

¹Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Matthew 4:17

¹ This sermon is adapted from and depends heavily on a sermon entitled “Life in the Waiting Room,” by Tom Are, Jr., published in *Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church*, Joseph D. Small, editor (Geneva Press – 2010), 141-146.

⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Sermon

I confess to being somewhat of a sucker for a good courtroom drama.

Like some of you, I grew up watching
Raymond Burr as Perry Mason
and Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch.

The other night I stayed up way too late watching “A Time to Kill”
and I still love to watch

Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson go at it
in “A Few Good Men.”

Of course, one of the essential elements

in any good courtroom drama

is the introduction of evidence through some sort of exhibit.

I can still remember how Perry Mason would wait

until the time was just right to achieve the most dramatic effect...

then would walk over to his table

where Paul or Della would hand him a piece of paper

or a plastic bag containing something,

and he would turn and approach the bench saying:

“Your Honor, I would like to enter into evidence Defense Exhibit A.”

Having just asked a line of questions

designed to catch an unsuspecting witness in a lie...

he introduced a piece of evidence...

he offered an “exhibit” which proves his case.

Today’s Great End of the Church

calls us to be that living exhibit of the Kingdom of Heaven...

to show the world that this Kingdom exists...

and not only “up there” where we tend to think Heaven is,

but down here as well.

I don’t know what you like to call it:

the kingdom of God...

the reign of God...

the Holy Commonwealth...

the Day of the Lord.

Matthew calls it the “kingdom of Heaven.”

And I don’t know what you think of

when you hear Jesus talk this way.

Perhaps you think of justice rolling down like waters,

like Amos did...

or maybe of swords being beaten into plowshares,

like Isaiah did..
You may imagine the hungry being filled with good things,
like Mary did...
or you may see tax collectors and prostitutes
finding their way to the feasting table, like Jesus did.

Maybe you like to think more concretely –
like there being no need for an
Emergency Residence Project and Food at First
because everyone in Story County has a home and food...
or maybe you imagine the staff at ACCESSS
(the domestic violence shelter)
sitting around twiddling their thumbs
because all of God’s children are safe tonight.
Or maybe for you Heaven is more personal –
you imagine all of your guilt being washed away...
or the healing of some special relationship too long broken.

Well, no matter what you call it...
and regardless of what it makes you think of...
what Jesus wants us to remember about this kingdom
is that it does not come FROM us, it comes TO us.
It is not something we make or build or spread,
it is something we receive and enter into.
It is of God... and it is already here and not yet here.

In our Bible reading this morning,
the Apostle Paul writes as if something big
has already happened in Thessalonica.
Something has happened, and to use his words,
this “something” has resulted in:
“a work of faith
and labor of love
and steadfastness of hope.”
Paul goes on to describe
what these Thessalonian Christians have experienced.
(It is, in fact, what ALL Christians experience.)

He says:
“You *turned* from idols,
to *serve* a living and true God,
and to *wait* for his Son from heaven.”
You *turned*... you *served*... you *wait*.
These are Paul’s verbs to describe the Christian life

Turning... it is the movement of repentance...
to “repent” is to turn from one way of life to another,

from one set of values to another set of values.
And this turning is not a one-time thing...
 which may be why Paul talks about the “work of faith.”
We keep working at it, don’t we?
 We keep turning and turning and turning.

Serving is also logical word to describe the work of the gospel.
 I can’t think of anything more basic to the Christian life
 than serving the living and true God.
This may be what Paul points to as their “labor of love.”
 “Worship the Lord with gladness and serve only God.”

But then, after turning and serving, Paul mentions *waiting*.
 What is the significance of waiting in the Christian life?
Here’s one way you might think about it...
My daughter, Evelyn, and I spent some time
 in a waiting room at McFarland Clinic last week.
 It’s that time of year, you know!
Well, you also know that much of what happens in a waiting room
 is similar to what happens other places.
People drink their morning coffee,
 they read the paper or magazine,
 do the crossword puzzle.
 talk on the phone,
 watch whatever happens to be on TV.
Sometimes folks initiate conversation with total strangers:
 “She’s darling! How old is she?”
 My other granddaughter turned three in October.

So... much of what happens in waiting rooms
 are the same things we do every day.
But there’s this difference.
 In the waiting room there is someone
 on the other side of the door,
 and that someone is the reason for the waiting...
 that someone... and what we hope they will offer us
 shapes life in the waiting room.
So, there we all sat last week,
 trusting that there’s someone on the other side of the door...
someone who cares about us and wants what’s best for us...
 and it is the *hope* of seeing that someone
 which kept us watching the door...
 kept our ears alert to the mention of our name.

Paul says the church lives in a waiting room.
 We watch for what God will do next.

We listen for what God will say next.
We wait for the life of Christ
to be breathed into us again and again.
But... here's the thing:
our waiting for Jesus is not just sitting around killing time
until the door opens and our name is called.
Christian waiting is active waiting
because Christian waiting is rooted in hope...
and hope is not a spectator sport;
it demands our full participation in the life we hope for...
full participation in the life God has promised.
N.T. Wright says this really well, I think...
he says that hope is about "practicing, in the present,
the tunes we will sing in God's new world."
Practicing, in the present,
the tunes we will sing in God's new world.

Paul believes that in Jesus Christ something has happened.
For in Christ, we have seen into the heart of God...
but not only that,
in Christ we have also see the way God intends US to live.
So we wait... we wait...
and while we wait we try to be that living exhibit
of how God intends humanity to live.

Waiting means speak clearly and authentically in a world
where distortion and dishonesty carry little consequence.
Waiting means living simply and being generous in a culture
that confuses greatness with possessions.
Waiting means making peace in a world
that places far too much confidence in violence to produce good.
As we wait, we tread lightly on this earth...
As we wait, we seek put others' needs before our own...
As we wait, we seek to forgive as we are forgiven.
Why? Why do we live like this?
Because this is what we have glimpsed of the life
on the other side of the door.
We wait because we are living towards
the promised kingdom of Heaven

I don't know what the kingdom of Heaven causes you to think of.
Justice rolling down like waters...
swords being beaten into plowshares...
the hungry being filled with good things...
having the burden of guilt lifted from your shoulders...
the healing of a relationship long broken.

However you think about it...
and whatever you choose to call it...
there is nothing our world needs more from us...
nothing the world needs more from the church than this:
that we live like a people who still have hope in God's kingdom.
The world needs us to live like a people who know
there is something we are waiting for.