

The Kingdom's Flipped Priorities 9-22-24

Proverbs 31:10-31

Psalm 1

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

With a presidential election on the horizon, the whole country seems to be talking about the kind of world in which we want to live. Christians with fiercely different political perspectives are making arguments about how to structure our government in a way that reflects their understanding of how this is done best. It's a noble goal, but if we want to follow Jesus, our allegiance will always be to God's kingdom first, not an earthly one. And, based on today's readings, I can't help but think about the way the message of Jesus teaching how to live into his upside-down kingdom must have sounded to the disciples. We scoff at their foolishness, but sometimes I wonder if we aren't in danger of being equally blind to Jesus' message.

Have any of you heard of Saint Thecla? She was a contemporary of Saint Paul, in fact, listening to him preach is what changed her life. She was born as a noblewoman around 70AD and was engaged to be married when she decided to leave everything behind, choosing poverty and celibacy so she could devote her life to God by caring for others. In the first century, women had one role and that was marriage. It was what ensured their protection and preservation as well as the legacy of their family. Spurning her betrothed ended up getting Paul imprisoned for his subversive teaching and led to the town attempting to burn her alive. She miraculously survived and went on to pray, serve, preach, counsel, and care for others, assisting in Paul's ministry. She lived as a nun before monasticism was even a thing, paving the way for a new lifestyle option for the women of her time. Her life was marked by repeated persecution, near death experiences, miraculous stories, and subversive resistance against the prevailing social order.

In first century, Palestine, the poor had no hope of being anything other than poor, but among themselves they were ranked based on their value in society. Men, even male slaves, ranked at the top of the social world among the poor. Women came next, but they, like slaves were considered property. And children fell at the bottom among widows, the sick or disabled, and prisoners. The bottom of this social system was comprised of those who had no ability to contribute to society, those who would in fact improve the life of others if they ceased to exist. The metrics were based on the market, not the soul.

When Jesus questions the disciples about their argument regarding rank in the kingdom, he's highlighting the way they prize status. When he tells them that the highest ranking in God's kingdom are children and servants, they have no way of understanding him. To Jesus, God's kingdom is about elevating the lowest, the most vulnerable, and those without value. We know this because we've heard it hundreds of times. The disciples couldn't hear it because it was so new. I wonder if we struggle to hear it because it's so familiar.

When Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me," the word "welcome" isn't as casual a word as we read it. The Greek root of this word carries the feeling of looking forward to someone's arrival, waiting for them. You know how you feel when someone's eyes brighten because they are so happy to see you? Being welcomed is not mere acceptance, it's the way it feels to be prized by someone else. And Jesus is telling us to feel this way, to treat people this way, who have zero value to our world, the people who our society would rather were gone altogether.

Jesus' vision of the kingdom was not necessarily a new one, but it is shockingly, radically, at odds with the world's system in every age. Our readings provide an example of God's kingdom lived well and lived poorly. James highlights the chaos that comes when we live

according to the world's system, rather than God's. He calls it disorder, which literally means confusion and insurrection. We were designed by God to live together in loving harmony and when we do not, things unravel. He says the cause is selfishness. When we center ourselves and privilege our priorities, our envious cravings cause conflicts and arguments. Unfortunately, well intentioned people, ourselves included, risk joining these devilish disputes when we begin confusing our priorities with God's priorities. In our attempts to craft the best society we can, our hearts can deceive us into thinking earthly wisdom will gain us the kingdom. But God's kingdom will always be in conflict with the world's system. The kingdom's wisdom says we must be willing to yield, to remain peaceful and gentle. God's kingdom is not like the ones on earth. It never has been. If we aren't shocked by its expectations, we aren't genuinely hearing what Jesus is saying.

Our readings do, however, offer us a glimpse of this kingdom lived well through the life of one individual, the Proverbs 31 woman. Of all her many many virtues which highlight kingdom priorities, there is one that helps us understand a key to how this kind of life can be lived. She, after all, lived in a broken world, a world in which she was not valued as an equal or permitted the same freedoms as those whose lives her hard work supported. Nevertheless, she was praised as a woman who feared the Lord. We have no modern equivalent for the Hebrew word "fear," so it can be misunderstood. It means profound respect. Imagine the world of monarchs. Imagine a throne room filled with courtesans. People may be engaging in conversations, but their attention is always directed at the king. He is the powerful one, he is why they are there, he holds the power of their lives in his hand. That is how this Virtuous Woman holds God, always before her, making his priorities her own, everything she does holds him in mind. Clearly her life is an extraordinary one, or she wouldn't be so prized. But she is a woman whose life is ordered by God, not the world's system, and that is what makes her an example for us all.

Living in this world means we are constantly flooded with this world's values. We are indoctrinated by them, shaped, and molded into their way of thinking. We can't help it. Like the people of Jesus' day, we still make our priorities and treat others based on how they impact our own lives. If we are honest, we have to face that reality and wrestle with it. The good news is that God has blessed us richly enough to wrestle with it.

Overwhelmingly, we are not the vulnerable ones, the ones without the resources for living or the agency to choose how to live. And so we have the privilege of doing the emotional, spiritual, and practical work of figuring out how to enact God's Kingdom by our choices. This is about how we live, regardless of the political system under which we live.

How do we do this? The first Psalm is an excellent roadmap for us. If we keep ourselves rooted in the Law of Love, delighting in God, keeping the Lord always before us in our minds and heart. Then we will flourish as a tree planted near streams of water, our hearts will prosper, and the kingdom will prosper through us. But the world's system is sneaky, and we have to guard against our pursuit of our own safety and prosperity rather than our pursuit of the heart of God regarding others. Kingdom choices will stand in contrast to this world's values. We cannot hope to make kingdom choices without rooting ourselves in God's presence and love.

Tomorrow, Anglicans will celebrate the feast day of Saint Thecla. Perhaps the best way we can honor her memory is by honestly evaluating ourselves in light of her example. When was the last time we made a personally costly choice for the sake of someone who had nothing to offer in return... someone who our alignment with harmed us socially? And if we keep our eyes fixed on God, rooted in the Law of Love, who might God be inviting us to sacrificially welcome with brightened eyes and a joyful heart?