

Sermon

May 6, 2018, Easter 6

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Northeastern Minnesota Synod, ELCA

Opening Greetings from Bishop Aitken

I bring warm greetings to you in Christ's name. On behalf of our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, our Church wide and Synod Staff, our partners all over the world, I thank you for living out the faith God has given you. You have done this through your prayers, deeds of love, and your mission support from your offerings each week. Thanks for trusting that the Church's holy task is to bless the whole world, no exceptions! This sermon is based on the texts for Sunday, May 6th where your voting members are present at the Synod Assembly.

Grace and peace to you in Jesus' name.

Here these words again from our Lessons today:

"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.....By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are **not** burdensome"

I know of a woman who believed these words with her whole heart. She knew that Jesus loved her, and everyone else. She knew that Jesus had claimed her, like all Christians, for a life of love toward others. She knew Jesus' commandment to love brings true joy to our lives. One day, that belief got challenged in a particularly tragic way. I first heard about this woman from one of our pastors, and then in November, last year, I attended a gathering of Bishops and other Leaders called together by black pastors from North Minneapolis. Those faithful pastors believed that the solution to North Minneapolis' gun violence is the church – the Body of Christ – that could do what no other program could; proclaim and model the power of Jesus. They asked us to come together and consider how to use Christian faith to transform lives, even in the midst of a culture of poverty and gun violence.

At that meeting, I learned more about Mary Johnson, from North Minneapolis. Mary was the mother of an only son named Laramiun. ("Lore-oh-mee-in") In the context of North Minneapolis' drugs, gangs and gun violence, her 20 year old son Laramiun ended up at a party he never should have been to. So did another male youth named Oshea ("Oh-Shay"). He was sixteen. One sad and stupid thing led to another, and Oshea ended up shooting and killing her son. Mary's life was shattered. She had lived her life under the Lordship of Jesus, and his commandment to love. Yet this tragedy challenged that strongly held belief, and tempted her to opt for a set of values foreign to God's values.

She knew well the words of Jesus found in our Gospel Lesson today: *"This is my commandment; that you love one another as I have loved you.....You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last..."*

Mary believed those words, but how could she live it right now at this time in her life, when she was so sad and angry at the seemingly unstoppable culture of death? I'll come back to her story, but now I want to address you.

Scripture speaks of two different "Kingdoms." One) The Kingdoms of this world, and two) God's Kingdom. Here is the truth about you: You belong to the "Kingdom of God" and its power. You were baptized into it. You have taken its way of life, the gospel of love into yourself through the Word and Sacraments. You are claimed by it and you regularly pray for it to shape your life: '**Your** Kingdom come, **Your** will be done, right here on earth, as it already is in heaven.' These are the 2nd and 3rd Petitions from the Lord's Prayer. Remember also, that you are part of the one, crazy, imperfect, gifted, beloved, gospel-loving people called the church, going back to Jesus' first followers. But just like Mary Johnson, you and I live in the midst of two Kingdoms, and that is the difficult and joyful challenge that faces all Christians.

These two Kingdoms; God's Kingdom and the Kingdoms of this world collide with one another. The Kingdoms of this world are focused on fear, violence, and one-upmanship. This is the real world where we live; a world of gun violence even in our schools, and the inability of a data-informed culture to deal courageously with it. We witness brutality in speech and social media, and of shameless disrespect for people made in the image of God. You and I observe this collision of values in our own nation like the degrading of people at public meetings, on social media and even in our own family. The vulgarity of the evil values of that Kingdom are: Racial prejudice, getting even, might makes right, misogyny, demeaning whole groups of people like Blacks, Muslims, Mexicans, immigrants and refugees, and LGBTQ sisters and brothers. It includes the idea that the good life is defined not by relationships, but by money. It also includes the increasing momentum of White Supremacy. This Kingdom shamelessly seeks our allegiance. It is the opposite of the Kingdom of God that Jesus ushered in. In God's Kingdom, all are precious, all are valued and love wins out. The Lord's Prayer is our daily reminder that we seek for God's Kingdom to not only come *to* us, but *through* us. In that prayer we begin to understand:

- White supremacy is not the Kingdom of God.
- Money, as definition of the "good life" is not the Kingdom of God.
- Endless new versions of point and shoot video games are not the Kingdom of God values.
- Turning our back on the refugee fleeing for safety is not the Kingdom of God
- Racial bigotry, especially disguised bigotry is not the Kingdom we are claimed for.
- Violence through words or deeds is not the Kingdom of God, wherever it comes from.

But wait: the real world also contains plenty of God's Kingdom growing like tiny seeds among us. When you pray; "Our Father who are in heaven, hallowed be thy name. **Thy** Kingdom come, **thy** will be done, on earth as it is in heaven", it is not in vain. You are not powerless. You are connected to Christ as branches to a vine. You have his resurrected life already in you. It's God's promise. You can stake your life on it a thousand times, as Martin Luther used to say.

Courageous youth and adults are organizing together to stand up for what is right, for justice, and for good and loving acts of reconciliation. God is working through all kinds of people who

don't make the news but whose actions are not in vain. I see it in our congregations. I'm encouraged by faithful people I meet every Sunday when I'm out in our congregations who show up to receive God's grace and strength. Jesus staked his life on the Kingdom of God winning out over the Kingdom of evil. With unmatched courage he disrupted the Empire's plan of "salvation" which was about intimidation and violence, with God's plan of salvation which is unconditional love that alone can transform life. In the end he took into himself the power of evil and death. They crucified him. But they couldn't stop him. That's what Easter is about. Jesus arose. He is the living truth that God loves this planet and everyone on it – no exceptions! He appeared and spoke to people in his resurrected form. Gradually people came to understand that God's plans would not be stopped. Jesus continues his mischief-making against evil through you whom he has chosen and equipped. Through you, God continues to be a nuisance to any system/Kingdom that believes might makes right, that violence in word or deed rules the day, and that sin and evil will win out.

Hear the words again from the 2nd Lesson:

"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of GodFor the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world."

And hear the words of Jesus from the Gospel Lesson:

"You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." Jesus goes on to tell us, "Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love..... I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

Back to Mary Johnson, from North Minneapolis: Oshea, the 16 year old who killed Mary's son Laramiun went to prison. He got 25 years in Stillwater. Mary knew that the hatred inside her for Oshea was NOT part of the Kingdom of God. "I wanted to hurt him but I couldn't hold onto that. Jesus made me want to know what Oshea like now and wanted me to truly forgive him." Mary had read a Poem for her Devotions one night in which two mothers met in heaven. Each had a son who died young. Each told the other if they could've taken their son's place, they would have. One mother was Mary, Mother of Jesus; the other was the mother of Judas. That was it. The Kingdom of God took hold of her anew. She made an appointment to see Oshea. Mary forgave him and Oshea was so moved, he was transformed. The two began to understand, and care for one another. Mary made sure Oshea had an apartment when he got out of prison. Right next to hers. She keeps track of him and he does of her. You should google Mary Johnson to read the whole story, but it ends like this: Mary Johnson wears a necklace with a locket that holds two pictures. On one side is her son, Laramiun, you turn it over and on the other side is the picture of Oshea, "my other son" she says. "I love you lady, you are like a mother to me. I love you too, son, she says. And her joy has returned.

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.....I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete..... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you"

You and I are like Mary Johnson. We live in two very different “Kingdoms” at the same time. But the one called the Kingdom of God is the one that will win out. Stake your life on it.

Amen.

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