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Mark 4:26-34
Rev. Chip Whitacre

Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest who has been working with gang members in Los Angeles for the past thirty years. He started as pastor of Dolores Mission Church in 1988 and founded Homeboy Industries, the largest gang intervention, rehab and reentry program in the country. His books, Tattoos on the Heart and Barking to the Choir, are packed full of stories about his “homies” that make you laugh until you cry. Sometimes they just make you cry. In Barking to the Choir he relates the story of one young man who has made every effort to turn his life around. It is a story that I found particularly touching. I’ll let you hear it in Boyle’s own words.

A homie named Cruz spent his last dollars taking a Metrolink train sixty miles to Los Angeles from San Bernardino, where he had relocated his lady and newborn to avoid the dangers and desperation of his previous gang life. He had a part-time job but could not get his boss to give him more hours. Now he sits in my office, rattling off a list of pressures and needs of his family. With no safety net in sight but me, he speaks of no food in the fridge, no lights, landlord looming, no bus fare. When he finishes this breathless account, Cruz stops, shaken and exhausted. He grows teary-eyed and says quietly, “I just keep waiting.” “For what, son?”, I ask. “For the last to be first.”

This young man’s struggle and his longing for a reversal of fortunes came to mind as I thought about today’s lesson from Mark. I think that was mostly because my view of the kingdom of God includes a change in the order of things. But then I started to wonder. What exactly is the kingdom of God? Is it a place? Or is it a moment in time – a time when the world’s tendency toward self-focus, violence and injustice is suddenly reversed? We probably all have our own images of what the kingdom might be like. One of the images that is foremost in my mind is of a time when justice and mercy prevail. When we realize that there is enough for everyone and there is no longer a need for a first and a last.

In today’s lesson Jesus is not so much describing the kingdom of God as he is letting his listeners know that it will prevail. He is circling back to the parable of the sower and putting a finer point on it. Telling his disciples that they will not always know when, or even if, the seeds they scatter will bear fruit. But they should scatter them anyway. For no matter how small the seeds they scatter, the ones that sprout and grow will become a safe haven for all. And that is pretty much the image of the kingdom that Mark has to share with us. There is an element of secrecy in Mark’s image like the story in Matthew of the woman who hides a measure of yeast in three measures of wheat. And there is an element of judgment and separation like the story of the weeds among the wheat in Matthew. But that is it for Mark. It is really Matthew who gives us the most images to work with as we consider what the kingdom of God might be like.

In Matthew the kingdom of God is a thing of great value. It is compared to a hidden treasure or a pearl that is worth selling everything we have to acquire. In Matthew the kingdom of God is a place of forgiveness and mercy. The world’s sense of fairness is turned upside down there. Anyone who shows up is welcomed unconditionally, no matter when they show up. But Matthew introduces some

challenges to entering the kingdom as well. We must trust God completely; like children. We must be willing to put our talents to best use. We must be willing to let go of our attachments to the world, particularly wealth. And not just wealth. Family even. In Matthew the kingdom of God will arrive at a time unknown so we should always be on the lookout for it. And Matthew puts even more emphasis on the theme of judgment and punishment. Weeds are separated from wheat at harvest. Good fish are separated from bad fish. The rejects are thrown onto the fire. The picture of the kingdom he paints is more an external place. While it is a hopeful place, getting there requires following a set of rules that are pretty daunting. It's a little like going to downtown Minneapolis these days - you can't get there from here.

But with all those images there is still a question about the kingdom that is unanswered. When? When will the kingdom of God come? The Gospels all present some vague, but not particularly helpful, picture of what the coming of the kingdom will look like. But I think the most important answer to that question is found in Chapter 17 of Luke.

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For in fact, the kingdom of God is within you." Luke 17:20-21

The kingdom of God is within you. Think about that for a minute. That is a huge change in the thinking about the kingdom of God. Is it possible that we are, each one of us, a walking, talking example of the kingdom already? A seed that has silently sprouted, taken root and become a place where all are safe and welcome? A tower of resistance against the powers of violence and injustice? A prophetic voice speaking justice and peace to a frenzied world? Even as I say these words I realize that the very prospect of exercising such authority is incredibly intimidating. But in the end, that's what I think the kingdom of God is really. It's not a time to come or a place we will arrive at some day. Although in a way it is both. But that is another sermon.

The kingdom of God is about authority. It's comes when we accept that God, and God's desire for creation, is the authority that can and should govern our lives. It's much more intimate to think of the kingdom as something within us. It's much more urgent to think of it as already here. I grant that it's frightening to consider the responsibility that comes with it. But you have to admit, it's a pretty compelling image.

Amen.