

The Least in the Kingdom

Matthew 11:11

Sunday, December 11, 2022 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

- Introduction

C.S. Lewis is alleged to have written that if we were to meet the simplest, humbled most ordinary soul in the Kingdom of Heaven they would be so august and radiant that we would be tempted to worship him. The heavenly destiny of a disciple of Jesus is to be even greater than the angels and we know that the prophet Daniel nearly fainted in the presence of one, and that John the Apostle had to be restrained from worshipping another, such was their glory and the destiny of the disciple of Jesus is greater. We are not given details, but it must be more wonderful than we can even imagine. Even the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is great and so we should be grateful, not only of the destiny but because the Kingdom of Heaven is also the presence of the Holy Spirit in the here and now, and God intervenes still in the lives of people. Why is prayer so popular, even among people who go their own way most of the time? Let's look at the statement of Jesus in its context.

- Set the stage

To set the stage, Jesus has sent His disciples out to visit and teach in various towns and He is doing the same, apparently on His own. One day, a couple disciples of John the Baptist came with a questions; "are You the Coming One, or should we look for another. By this time John had criticized Herod for marrying his brother's wife, which enraged her and caused him to be imprisoned. He, apparently, was wondering if Jesus was going to inaugurate His kingdom in time for John to get out alive. Jesus responds by quoting Isaiah (35:5-6) The eyes of the blind are opened, the ears of the deaf shall be opened, the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb will sing, such were the miracles of His ministry. Then He tells the disciples of John "blessed is he who is not offended because of Me. The disciples leave. Herod later throws a party in which his stepdaughter entertains the guest by dancing (if probably wasn't ballet). Everyone is impressed and Herod even promises her whatever she wants, even up to half of his kingdom. Salome asked her mother for advice, and in one of the pettiest statements in the New Testament, her mother doesn't take up Herod's offer to give her daughter (and her) great wealth and political power. No. She wants the head of John the Baptist. Salome is foolish enough to take her advice and John is killed.

As the disciples of John are leaving, Jesus addresses the crowd regarding John and tells them that John is not only a true prophet, but he is more than a prophet, he is the one who heralds the Kingdom of Heaven and of all the people born on earth, John is the greatest. It's quite an endorsement. Yet Jesus says that even the least in the Kingdom is greater. Not greater morally, but greater in privilege.

- Main point: Greater in privilege

Here's the main point. The nature of the Kingdom is such that being a part of it is a wonder and a privilege that we really cannot comprehend, including the Kingdom in the here and now. Back in Matthew 11:5, Jesus responds to John's question by quoting Isaiah 35:5-6, and indicates that such things are happening in His ministry now. If you go back and read Isaiah 35, you find that right next to it, in chapter 36 & 37, a recording of one of the greatest miracles of the Old Testament, lifted straight out of 2 Kings 18-19. In that episode, Israel, led by King Hezekiah during the times

of Isaiah the prophet, find that they are besieged by the Assyrian Army, led by King Sennacherib. The Assyrians have not been defeated in two centuries and were noted for being heartless and cruel. They boast against Israel and loudly proclaim through their spokesman (Rabsheka the Rabmag) that they will starve Israel into submission and there is nothing the God of Israel can do. Hezekiah consults Isaiah and they pray. During the night The Angel of the Lord (Jesus?) comes and destroys most of the Assyrian army and Sennacherib leaves in defeat, later to be assassinated by his own sons. Assyria declines as an empire from this point on. How John the Baptist must have wanted this, but he didn't get it and went on to martyrdom. For us, it is a reminder that the Kingdom is future but also here and now, that we have a God who responds to prayer. He does it in His own way and time, but He does it, and every time we pray, we are inviting the Kingdom to break through into the here and now and great things can happen. The church is, to borrow a phrase from a book, a sign and foretaste of that kingdom and we should relish the power of prayer and of our privileged position to be part of it.

- Application

The application is that we not only cherish prayer, but that we realize that it is something even greater than we can really comprehend. Prayer accesses the Kingdom for the here and now. We should pray and pray again and consider ourselves the most fortunate of people for even the worst day as a disciple of Jesus is better than our best day before we met Jesus. Even death becomes dim in the light of such truth. People will say, "death is the end of the road". Only because the road ends at a runway and it is time to fly. There is more to our destiny than we can imagine, and there is more to what is happening in our present lives than we can imagine as well.

- Conclusion

Jesus said that he who is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than John the Baptist, greater in privilege. Greater because we are part of the Kingdom of Heaven, along with all other disciples of Jesus. It is a Kingdom that involves a wonderful future and destiny, but it is also a Kingdom that breaks into the here and now. We invite the kingdom to do so every time we pray. It is the privilege of even the least in the kingdom to do so.