

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Proper 17 (C) ~ August 31, 2025
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Psalm 112
Luke 14:1, 7-14

Building the Kingdom of God

Let us pray:

Holy God, deliver us from the presumption of coming to this your Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us
one
body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the
world in his name, Amen.

How did you help build the Kingdom of God this past week?

That may seem like a lofty question, impossible to answer, and in some sense it is:

Who are we, who are you, who am I, to “build God’s Kingdom”?

Is that not the height of *hubris*, of arrogance?

But that is exactly what the Church, God’s Beloved Community, is called to do:

to be instruments of healing in the face of hurt;

to be “repairers of the breach,” to borrow language from the Prophet Isaiah;

to engage in what our Jewish sisters and brothers call *tikkun olam*, which is to say “any activity that improves the world, bringing it closer to the harmonious state for which it was created.”¹

That’s quite a job description, isn’t it?

¹ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3700275/jewish/What-Is-Tikkun-Olam.htm

It sounds like a heavy lift – and it is.

And... That is precisely why we are here this morning.

I realize that there are plenty of times when we come to worship, when we approach Christ's Table, because our hearts are heavy with grief or guilt, and we need God's solace and pardon.

Maybe today is one of those days for you. If so, then may you find the peace you seek in this liturgy. (And may this community be a source of love and strength for you.)

Nevertheless, the Church's primary "reason for being," her mission, is to "restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ" (BCP, 855).

And this is Kingdom work.

It's worth noting that the Greek word for Kingdom appears more than 150 times in Christian Scripture, with roughly 120 of those instances attributed to Jesus Himself.

There has been a lot of talk about "Kings" in this country lately, which I don't need to unpack, but I will say that it problematizes our use of Kingdom language in the Church. I get that: Semantics matter.

But context also matters, and Jesus lived and taught and preached at a particular moment in history, in a particular place that was ruled by a foreign power. Judea at the time of Jesus was subject not only to the rule of the Emperor, Caesar, but also to the reign of the local Kings, the "monarchs on the ground," the Herods – first Herod the Great, who was on the throne when Jesus was born, and later his son Herod Antipas. Neither of them enjoyed a positive reputation among the Jewish people of the first century

This is why Jesus uses Kingdom language – to make a clear distinction.

Set against a backdrop of oppressive and capricious authority, God's Kingdom, or the Kingdom of Heaven, is very different. Throughout the Gospels Jesus paints a vivid picture of what the Kingdom of God looks like, in contrast to the "powers and principalities" of this world. It is a Kingdom based on love, where everyone belongs, regardless of class, or race, or age, or economic status, or marital status, or illness, or past sins. It is a Kingdom founded on forgiveness, where we are told to go to extraordinary means to bring wayward members back into the community. It is a Kingdom that invites more people in. Where people care for each other. Where greatness is defined by service. Where hope and optimism and joy spill over, even in the face of pain or despair.

I have to say that this is why I am a Christian. This Kingdom is so attractive, so appealing, that I want to live there, too.

Here's the catch: The Church teaches that, with the birth and life of Jesus, God's Kingdom *already* has broken into human history – it has a toehold – but it has *not yet* been realized fully. Jesus comes seeking partners to help Him usher in God's Kingdom on earth, to re-imagine the worldly power structures in *God's* terms.

And this is where we come in, here in this in-between time.

So, to return to my opening question, what did you do to help build the Kingdom of God this past week?

If you're scanning your hard drive right now and the wheel just keeps spinning, relax:

I'm not asking to make you feel guilty or to shame you. Quite the opposite, actually: I want you to name and claim those ways – perhaps seemingly insignificant – that you participate in God's purposes in your everyday life.

Right here, right now.

While you're thinking, let me remind us of a couple of clues Jesus offers in this morning's Gospel.

At dinner with the Pharisees one evening, Jesus turns to His table mates and says, "When you are invited [to a wedding banquet], go and sit down at the lowest place," urging them to humility.

Imagine: You are a guest in someone's home, and you immediately begin re-arranging the place cards around the table!

Not great manners, Jesus.

And then, as if that weren't enough, He goes on to tell His host to rewrite the guest list:

"When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid."

Yikes. That kind of behavior wouldn't play very well in Bethesda or Chevy Chase, would it?

But the point is clear: Jesus challenges the cultural norms of His day – not to be a difficult dinner guest (although I imagine that He enjoys that part a little bit...), but rather to demonstrate what God’s vision for humanity looks like.

The Kingdom of God, over-against the Kingdom of this world.

I’d like to linger for a moment on this idea of not being repaid.

The late English Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks used to talk about what it means to live as a people defined (and bound) by covenant. He distinguished between the nature of a contract, on the one hand, and a covenant, on the other. He said: “In a contract, two or more people come together to make an exchange... which is to the benefit of the self-interest of each.” Sacks used the example of paying a plumber, but we might think about paying taxes, or paying for a museum or club membership. Contracts are, by definition, transactional relationships, a *quid pro quo*, where one party and gives and expects to get in return.

So much of what we do in life is transactional – from doing our jobs so that we will get paid, or doing our homework so that we will get good grades. In happens in the Church, too: Sometimes we engage in ministries *so that* others will see us, or think better of us. No judgment here; it’s just a statement of fact. We’re human. But the point is that these transactions are, inherently, about self-interest, and effectively they isolate, they pull us apart, us from one another.

By contrast, Rabbi Sacks argued, “In a covenant, two or more parties each respecting the dignity and integrity of the other come together in a bond of loyalty and trust **to do together what neither can do alone**. A covenant isn’t about me; it’s about us. A covenant isn’t about interests; it’s about identity. A covenant isn’t about me, the voter, or me, the consumer, but about all of us together.”²

This is precisely what Jesus is describing in today’s Gospel: privileging the “us” over the “me.” Notice that Jesus doesn’t tell His host to throw food at the poor and the lame and then retreat to eat separately; nowhere does the text say that the host shouldn’t sit to eat *with* his guests. In fact, communal table fellowship is very much the point. What Jesus does say, though, is that the host is to examine his heart and check his motivation.

Whenever we are motivated by self, even under the most benign of circumstances, the bonds that hold us together are broken – or at least weakened. Care for the other is always more

² <https://www.aei.org/research-products/speech/2017-irving-kristol-award-recipient-rabbi-lord-jonathan-sacks-remarks/>

important that one's own status. It means being willing to give something up for the sake of God's Kingdom.

You may be familiar with the Jewish burial custom of mourners each shoveling a spadeful of dirt on the coffin, as a way of honoring the deceased. This is considered an act of *chesed shel emes*, or true loving-kindness, precisely because it cannot be repaid.³

It is such seemingly small gifts of loving-kindness that have the power to transform the world. This is how we build the Kingdom of God, shovel by shovel.

By the way...Did you happen to notice how today's Gospel begins?

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath...

It might be easy to overlook that detail, but it's significant: Jesus goes to dine with the very people who give Him a hard time about just about everything! A few chapters before this Luke makes it clear that the Pharisees are "hostile" to Jesus, "lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say" (Luke 11:53-54).

Nevertheless, Jesus accepts the invitation to break bread with them. He is not hypocritical, mind you – He is not shy about calling them out, to their faces – but He is there, among them.

What might this behavior have to say to us, in 2025 Washington?

Friends, Jesus is calling us – as individuals, yes, but even more importantly as Beloved Community – to help build God's Kingdom here and now. Doing together what none of us can do alone. Right where we are.

In what ways are we participating in God's purposes in our common life already? Let's name and claim them. Not to boast, but to build one another up and to inspire and encourage others to do the same.

Shovel by shovel.

And then: How might we help build the Kingdom of God this coming week? What might we be willing to give up to do so?

If you can't answer right now, don't worry...I promise to ask again.

³ <https://colelchabad.org/chesed-shel-emes-true-loving-kindness/>

Amen.