

Message for World Fellowship Sunday, January 25, 2015
Glennon Heights Mennonite Church
Betsy Headrick McCrae

Scripture passage: Matthew 6:9-13 and 25-34

What in the World is the Kingdom of God?

Kingdom is not a very modern concept. Though there are still a few monarchies left in the world, kings and queens don't wield all that much power anymore. For us they are mostly the stuff of fairy tales and ancient stories. That's the connection, of course. Ancient stories, like those in the Bible, still ground us today. They are our starting point. Our understanding of who we are as a culture, a people, a worldwide community, grows out of these stories, these ancient texts. Though very old, they are still relevant today. They are still alive and vibrant and useful to us as we strive to live God-centered lives.

Today, with the help of resources published by Mennonite World Conference, along with our sisters and brothers around the world, we are asking the question: What in the world is the Kingdom of God? What in the *World* is the Kingdom of God? The kingdom theme is prominent in Jesus' teaching in the Gospels. Jesus emphasized that the kingdom had come with his coming and that the ongoing work of his followers – the church – is to bring in the kingdom that he talked about and prayed for.

Our global Anabaptist family of faith is called to live according to the values of this kingdom of God, regardless from what country, language, culture or tribe we come. As a community of nearly two million Anabaptists in more than 80 countries around the world, we need each other. We strengthen and support each other in times of persecution and suffering and in times of joy. Mennonite World Conference is a communion – we sometimes use the Greek word, *koinonia* – of Anabaptist-related churches linked to one

another in a worldwide community of faith for fellowship, worship, service and witness. Together we share a witness to kingdom ways of following Jesus here on earth. We here at Glennon Heights Mennonite Church in Lakewood, Colorado, USA, are part of this worldwide communion. I don't know about you, but just thinking about this is encouraging to me.

So, what in the world is the Kingdom of God? To answer that question, we start with Jesus. In the gospel of Matthew Jesus makes reference to the kingdom of God approximately 50 times. Obviously this is a central theme of his mission on earth. The Sermon on the Mount, which is central to Anabaptist teachings, features the "kingdom" theme prominently. In the Lord's Prayer, one of our scripture passages today, Jesus prays explicitly for the kingdom to come on earth, just as it is in heaven. In our second passage from Matthew 6, Jesus introduces the priority of the kingdom over the everyday worrisome cares of life. At a time when many people are experiencing hardship, it is reassuring to hear these words of Jesus. It is reassuring to me – and very hopeful – that this passage – the lilies of the field – was selected for us today by folks from all over the world, many from places where daily life is full of many more uncertainties and challenges than we generally have to face.

Jesus taught his disciples to connect with God. That's the starting place. Jesus instructs them, and us, to pray for the kingdom. We know the words of the Lord's prayer: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." By praying in this way we both recognize God's sovereignty and purpose, and we are drawn into participation in God's agenda. Heaven and earth are linked and we are smack in the middle of it. When we pray this prayer we become agents of God's "heavenly" plan and

partners with God in answering this prayer. We let God know, and remind ourselves, that we are aware of who God is – “Our Father in heaven” – and that God is holy and worthy of praise – “hallowed be your name.” In effect, we acknowledge God as king of all creation. Then we pray for this reality, God’s rule, to become known, to become real, to become the way the world works. In effect, we pray for heaven and earth to become one spiritually and practically. When God’s kingdom is realized here on earth there will be enough to eat. There will be forgiveness and reconciliation. Everyone will be safe.

Jesus is serious about this definition of the kingdom of God. There will be enough to eat. There will be forgiveness and reconciliation. Everyone will be safe. In the second passage that we read this morning Jesus lays it out: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.” Really? All of us, I know, have read this passage and found it unrealistic. Things just don’t work this way, Jesus. How can you make promises like this: Strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things – food, clothing, protection – will be given to you? Aren’t you aware of how the world really works?

These are legitimate thoughts. This passage seems way over the top. It would be easy to dismiss. That is why it is so meaningful to me that it was chosen for us for this World Fellowship Sunday by folks from around the world. It was chosen for us by folks whose communities are or have been in the midst of great difficulties and for whom life is very uncertain. It was chosen for us by those whom we might say have the right to say that it’s not true. Why is this? Why did they choose this particular passage? What can

we learn about the reality of the kingdom of God by listening to these brothers and sisters who share our faith but whose lives are so different from ours?

In April 2006 I had the opportunity to interview Tesfatsion Dallelew about his experiences with the Meserete Kristos Church in Ethiopia. The MKC is a member of Mennonite World Conference. Tesfa, who is Ethiopian, was once the executive secretary of the MKC. He and I were colleagues when I worked for MCC. I talked with Tesfa about how he and others faced the many difficulties of the decade — 1982 to 1992 — during which the church was being persecuted in Ethiopia. Through this conversation I began to understand how these promises of Jesus – that if we seek the kingdom God will provide – can be experienced as real even when life is in turmoil.

“How did the Meserete Kristos Church survive?” I asked Tesfa. First of all, he said, they took the example of Jesus seriously. They taught and believed that Jesus, as God With Us, suffered because of his love, because of God’s love, for us. Jesus didn’t take the easy way out. He didn’t put his own personal safety and comfort first. He trusted God to provide no matter what. He showed us that God’s love is a love that is present in and through rejection, pain and death. Of course when things were going well, MKC members, like us today, did not have to have this at the forefront of their faith consciousness. But when things began to fall apart and church members were faced with great difficulty, this understanding of the nature and depth of God’s love stayed with them and encouraged them.

In fact, it was in their suffering that MKC members felt the greatest joy. This is something that we hear about the early Anabaptist martyrs as well. There was joy in their suffering. Can we really believe that this is true? Tesfa didn’t hesitate a moment in

saying, yes, it is! The suffering that people in Ethiopia went through for the sake of their faith was not grudging or complaining suffering but suffering with joy. They did not feel the pain, he said, because the pain was a connection to Christ, who is so much stronger. This gave them a courage which was remarkable, a courage that sometimes astounded those who were persecuting them. This courage came from a deep relationship with God and God's word. It came from believing that ultimately they belonged to the kingdom of God which was here on earth as well as in heaven.

This is not to say that people were not scared. According to Tesfa, it was a nerve-racking, emotionally disconcerting time. Death, torture, uncertainty and arbitrariness were all around them. Tesfa likened it to literally walking in the shadow of death. "When you come face-to-face with suffering," he said, "you have the strength to withstand it. But when you see it happen to others, it is terrifying." MKC members reached out to each other for support. "We kept track of each other," Tesfa explained, "we called, visited, checked in. And we prayed a lot, both privately and together." Prayer was taken very seriously. Prayer was their link to the sustaining love of God. As was singing, though it had to be done softly and quietly so as not to attract attention. Through prayer and song and coming together they reminded themselves of their home in God and of God's promises. They held God's word in their hearts. Even in the midst of very difficult times their trust was strong. They remembered whose children they were.

But, I asked Tesfa, didn't people's faith waver when God didn't rescue them from all that was horrible and painful, when the bad stuff just kept happening? Didn't they question God about this? Didn't they doubt? Tesfa looked at me. He said, "Here in the U.S. we have rights and we trust the government to protect those rights. In Ethiopia at

that time all we could trust in was God. We didn't blame God for what was happening. We just trusted God to be with us in it." And they found that God was marvelously present with them.

Tesfa told me the story of a friend of his, a very tall man with bad arthritis in his knees. This man was arrested and detained. He was held in a prison cell high in the mountains where it was cold. He did not have access to his arthritis medications. When he was released after a month his friends were there to meet him. Tesfa said, "We expected to see him come crawling out of his prison cell barely able to move for the pain. Instead he came walking out upright and healthier than before." When they asked their friend what had happened, why he was not in pain, he explained that God knew the dosage he had needed. God had provided what was needed to control the pain when he needed it most. Later, when he returned to his home his arthritis flared up again and he went back on his medication. God's healing was what was needed in that place and at the time. "Think of Daniel in the lions' den," Tesfa said to me. "When Daniel was there in the lions' den in danger, the lions' jaws were closed. And Daniel survived. But that doesn't mean that those lions stopped eating forever. Later things went back to normal. Their jaws were opened again." God provides what is needed at the time. "Our OK-ness in Ethiopia was in the gift of grace for that moment," Tesfa said. "We knew we could trust and that no matter what, we would be fine."

This is a powerful testimony to the deep truth in the promise of Jesus: "Strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you." Strive first for the kingdom of God.... We don't know what's in store for us. Even those of us who are relatively well off and work hard to be responsible, to plan for

the future and keep everything under control. Nothing is guaranteed. And yet it is. Though probably not in the ways we might expect. If we acknowledge God's sovereignty, if we pray with deep longing and sincerity for the kingdom of God to come, if we put choose to put God first in our lives, if we take seriously the life of Jesus and pattern our lives accordingly, we can be assured that God's goodness and grace will be powerfully present in our lives. In this we can trust.

When we seek to do God's kingdom work, it will be reflected in our priorities, our choices, our lifestyle, our day-to-day lives in this world. By making God's kingdom values, our values, "on earth as it is in heaven," and by keeping the eyes of our hearts open to seeing God at work here in this world, the heavenly kingdom of God will begin to become a reality in our lives and in our communities. This is the word of the Lord. In this we can trust. Amen.