

Someone asked me the other day what exactly I was talking about. See, we were discussing theology, and the someone I was talking with had no kind of Christian background. Actually, the conversation started because he didn't know anything about Christianity and was curious to learn about this massive religion. But going into that conversation, I didn't realize just how much jargon we use, how much I use. Words that are fundamental to our faith aren't as broadly known as my brain assumes. So, there we were, my conversation partner just staring at me like I had snakes pouring out my ears. Words like "grace" and "sin" and even "baptism" carry a world of meaning for me and didn't mean a thing to him. Part of me just wanted to say "take one Catechism and call me in the morning," but that wasn't gonna help any more than his late night forays into Christian Wikipedia. And it wasn't gonna help me any either. See, everytime he asked what a basic term meant, I had to define it, which is not something I'm accustomed to doing in churchy business. I take it for granted that folks know the weight behind our words. But he didn't, so I couldn't, and that made the whole conversation cooler.

Now, there was one bit of jargon that I kept having trouble getting across. Ok, probably I struggled with a few of the more complicated terms, but there was one in particular that I never could quite pin down: the Kingdom of Heaven. Truth be told, I'm not 100% sure I know what it entails. The Kingdom of Heaven is like...well, I don't know. By the way, it's "The Kingdom of Heaven" in Matthew's Gospel and "The Kingdom of God" in Mark, Luke, and John. You can use them interchangeably. But whatever, the point is, no matter what we call it, I don't know what it means. And that's kind of a big deal 'cause so much of what we're about comes back to that Kingdom!

I can't decide if it's unhelpful or comforting that Jesus doesn't define it either. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed. The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast. It's like hidden treasure, like a merchant, like a net. Got it? And the disciples say "sure." But somehow I don't think they did get it. Jesus says the Kingdom of Heaven is like, he doesn't say the Kingdom of Heaven is. Well, I guess over in Luke, one single time, he does. He says "the Kingdom of God is in you." So, we know where it is, but we still don't know when or what. Later on in Paul's Letter to the Romans, he'll say "the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." That's a little more helpful, but it still leaves out a lot.

Sidebar, sometimes you'll hear about the "World to Come" or the "Age to Come." That's sorta half Kingdom of Heaven stuff. 'Cause sometimes the World to Come is about what happens after we die, an afterlife kinda thing. But sometimes it means what happens when everything that's wrong with the world gets set right. It's confusing. But the setting things right meaning, that's the one that's more Kingdom of Heaven-y. And setting things right comes with an understanding that things are not right now.

So, since Jesus isn't much help here, I think it's helpful to go back, to flip through the old prophets to see what things being right means. It's not just belief in God. It's more than just faith. It's humility and love and a desire to make even the most mundane aspects of life sacred. But it's more. In the Old Testament, they don't use the terms Kingdom of Heaven or Kingdom of God, but they do talk about "the Day of The Lord." It's sometimes a little scary, sometimes off-putting, but the important thing to remember is that it always leads to something better. Sometimes ya gotta go through the whirlwind to find safety. That's the Day of the Lord.

Weirdly enough, I think it's gonna be simpler to find what that safety, that something better means by looking at what the People of God get in trouble for. There's the basics: tons of prophets keep on reminding folks that if you're gonna commit to this religion, The God is the way to go. Don't get distracted by other gods and their trappings. For that matter, don't let anything take God's place. God should be Priority Number One.

Done well, that doesn't lessen what you give to other priorities. In fact, it increases what you can give to everything else that matters. But wait, there's more! The Ten Commandments put up some bumpers on the edges, but the long, relentless line of prophets goes deeper.

Thing is, while the Kingdom of God may be within you, most of the prophets aren't all that concerned with what individuals get up to. When they're trying to put the world right, they're worried about what the entire community's getting up to. Humility on a societal scale's a big one. Look at the crumbling Tower of Babel and all its hubris. You've heard of Sodom, right? Do you know what the sin of Sodom was? It's not what modern interpreters would have you believe. Ezekiel says explicitly, the sin of Sodom was this: "they had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease but did not aid the poor and needy." Isaiah says the wealthy oppressors, both internal and external, "crush my people, grind the face of the poor, and fill their houses with the spoils of the poor." But they will be "brought low," and when the people get it right, the cities become instead "a refuge to the poor." Amos says those in power accept bribes, exploit workers, skim off the top, and generally target the poor. But justice will "flow down like waters." Micah says the oppression's bad enough that it's as though the wealthy eat the flesh right off the bones of the poor. In the New Testament book of James, even the "wages of the laborers that you kept back by fraud will cry to the Lord." Jeremiah begs the people to stop oppressing the foreigner and actually pay the workers that build your mansions. Zephaniah says the same thing, but he tweaks it. It's not just about stopping the oppression of foreigners. Instead, actively give them justice. Isaiah, the Psalms, Hosea take it further still. When the people promote injustice, it's not just the poor that suffer. Creation itself groans. I don't suppose I need to explain how people tearing away at nature for the sake of storing up a little more treasure poisons Creation.

There's more passages, lots more. Ask our Bible Study crew just how often we run into this stuff. So, it might be that by the time Jesus comes around, he doesn't need to define the Kingdom of Heaven. Maybe he could use all those similes to engage deeper with an idea everybody already understood. The Kingdom of Heaven is like all those things Jesus points to. And that's kinda beautiful. Repairing a system rotten to its core's an insurmountable problem. You can't even figure out where to begin, but all it takes is the tiniest seed or a single grain of yeast to get started. To move a little closer to that ultimate divine justice where all things are made right. Isaiah says the path of the righteous is made level in God. I don't think "level" means easy, I think it means leveled in a societal sense. I think it means that, when the poor receive what's due and the oppressors are brought low, there's a massive reduction of inequality, to the point where there is no difference between them. I don't think it's a simple inversion where the oppressed and oppressors just switch spots, like actors trading roles. If it were that, we'd still have oppressors and oppressed just with different names. The Kingdom of God erases the possibility of oppression altogether. But here's the kicker: without God, I'm not sure the Kingdom of God is completely possible. That's why we work towards the Kingdom of Heaven but never get there fully on our own. It takes divine movement to make that happen. But our movement's connected to God, so it's also sacred when we push for justice, give something up for the sake of others, level what we can and pray the rest of it gets leveled, too.

There's an old saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is both already and not yet. In other words, there's a lot happening here and now, in each of us and through each of us, that is sacred. But there's more to come. The Kingdom of Heaven isn't here fully, not yet. And no matter what economic or political systems we come up with, none of them are that Kingdom. Some are closer than others, but none get all the way there. It's kinda strange how hopeful that can be. 'Cause it can get better. It can always get better. And no matter how much better it gets, it can get "more better" still.

Back in my attempt at a jargon-free conversation, I gotta admit, I'm not sure I did much good. Trying to explain the Kingdom of Heaven I stumbled and said a lot of stuff like "Well, it's this but not that and sorta

something but also kinda not and while you're at it there's some we'll never get and some we will and I just know it's not what we've got now so there's always something to work for. Got it?" Look, the Kingdom of Heaven is one of our greatest motivators. And I'm still not sure I can tell you 100% what it means. But I can tell you, with total confidence, this: the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed. I'm kidding. It's like a lot of things, but what it actually is is sacred, holy, and always, always just.