

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD

### Acts 1:1-11

The 2006 Homiletics Online resource which I often use in my sermon preparation shares the following story: Steve Gottry was a successful entrepreneur who, by 1992, had expanded his advertising agency into a multimillion-dollar company with 10 employees. He had an airplane, a boat and five cars – living the dream, as it were. By 1994, the dream had disappeared faster than a speeding bullet. Gottry nearly lost it all due to a downturn in the economy, bad debts and personal missteps. On top of that, he lost much of his house in a fire and his wife and daughter both had serious health problems. While not quite a full-on Job-ian tale, Gottry's experience was a wake-up call.

Having hit bottom, he decided to go back to basics and retool his life and business according to one simple principle – FANAFI – an acronym for “find a need and fill it.” Using that principle as a guide, Gottry was able to build a new business and, as many in this situation are apt to do, write a book about his failure and resurgence. Gottry's observations and advice aren't particularly innovative, but they're sound and instructive for anyone who wants to be successful in meeting people's needs and growing an entrepreneurial venture. FANAFI, for example, is about as simple as it gets: Find a real need that no one else is meeting, meet it effectively, and your venture will grow. Gottry offers several helpful steps in finding and meeting needs – from dreaming to planning to growth and beyond.

Find a need and fill it. This morning's scripture reading from the Book of Acts tells the story of Jesus' Ascension into heaven. It is worth noting that Luke, who is the author of both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, has two versions of Jesus' departure from earth. The first is in Luke where Jesus is taken up to heaven ostensibly on the same day he rose from the dead. But our text this morning tells us in that Jesus appeared to the disciples over a period of 40 days, talking with them about the Kingdom of God. During this time, the disciples were waiting in anticipation of the coming promised Kingdom; but in reality, they were not seeking the Kingdom of God, they desired the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel. Even after witnessing the miracle of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and his time with them for the next 40 days, the disciples still did not understand the kind of kingdom Jesus was seeking to build.

Theologian David Forney asks the question, “what descriptor best expresses your congregation's understanding of the Kingdom?” Great question!! He goes on to suggest that some congregations are looking for the kingdom of survival. You know this scenario, “we are a small congregation and desperately need young families to join our “gray-haired church so that we can survive! Or perhaps it is a congregation of activity – with multiple ministries available enabling people to serve. It might be a kingdom of consumption – constantly striving to provide bigger, better, and more entertaining worship services so God can take us right back to our glory days when we had 300 people enrolled in Sunday school. Jesus does none of this, does he. Rather Jesus points to the coming of the Holy Spirit in verse 8: *Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.* This wording is nearly identical to the words of the Great Commission from Matthew 28, *I have been given complete authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of this age.*

Exactly how do we go about being the kind of witnesses Jesus is asking us to be? Like the disciples we must depend on the leading of the Holy Spirit. Begin with a dream: all successful ventures begin with a dream – a dream that is envisioned by a leader and shared with others. Dreaming big enables others to see a different future and alter their present to make it a reality.

Jesus had given his disciples a vision – a dream that he called the kingdom of God. The dream no doubt disappeared when Jesus was crucified, but on the other side of the empty tomb they now saw what was possible: a people restored and brought to new life through the power of God’s saving love.

Jesus had instructed them about the kingdom and continued to do so in the 40 days after his resurrection (v. 3). This was the vision that had driven Jesus, the central theme of his preaching, the focus of his healing ministry, and the ultimate dream for which he had given his life. Unfortunately, Jesus’ disciples seem to be fixated on the Kingdom of Israel being restored, and perhaps we are not much different. Most churches I have served long for the ‘good old days,’ when Sunday’s were filled with worship, Sunday school, and dinner at Grandma’s house. The disciples wanted Jesus to restore Israel to its former glory, fully return them from exile, and usher in a new age when God would again dwell with them. The disciples’ question is one of timing – is it here? Is it now?

So... Jesus refocuses their vision, reminding them that their energy shouldn’t be put into speculation, but into action. “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority” (v. 7). He must have despaired that the disciples had failed to grasp the nuanced meanings of “kingdom.” He had told them during the peaceful days of their three- year ministry together that the kingdom of God is “within you.” That’s why Jesus spent his time teaching the disciples how to live in the present – how to love, heal and change the lives of those around them through the power of his Spirit.

Start with a dream – have a vision – which is really the direction the Virginia Conference has been seeking to establish in each congregation for a number of years. Sadly, too many churches are legitimately in the survival mode, and are literally stuck. Once we have that dream, plan to achieve the dream. Once you’ve identified a need, planning is the way to fill it. In business, dreams usually don’t become realities unless there is some good planning involved.

After giving his disciples a vision and training them for it, Jesus proceeded to give them a plan for making it a reality. He told them to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come upon them, empowering them for the work ahead (1:4-5). That work would involve an outwardly focused strategy of taking the story of Jesus and the vision of the kingdom from a local to a global scale. The disciples themselves took on a new job description in this venture, moving from disciples (followers) to “witnesses” (which, in Greek, is connected to “martyrs”). The students were now becoming the teachers and their focus would begin with telling the story and sharing the vision with the very people who had seen Jesus crucified (Jerusalem), then move out to the surrounding areas (Judea), progressing to even the natural enemies of their people (Samaria) and, ultimately, to the “ends of the earth” (1:8).

Finally, we need to implement the plan, which sounds easier than it really is. Too many churches are caught up in the mesh of the power brokers of churches making all the decisions – and not instead of the Holy Spirit power of witnesses and martyrs who give their lives in the back corners of the world where the powerful don’t go. Perhaps it’s time we recaptured a simpler vision – a Jesus vision — for transforming the world.

Consider this: If the gospel means “good news,” then why is much of the world’s news so bad? What would it take to make more good news possible? Whatever it is in our town, our state, this country, in the world, that breaks your heart and the heart of God – that should be our focus! There are some churches who implement this “find a need and fill it” vision.

- The Rev. Victoria Heard of St. Ives Episcopal Church in North Arlington in Virginia wanted to give her people a religious experience outside the walls of the church. She took them tubing on the Shenandoah River.
- Kingdom Knights are a group of Christians who ride motorcycles.
- At Ebenezer AME Church in Fort Washington, more than 300 members belong to a golf ministry.
- Vermont Avenue Baptist Church has a bowling alley in the basement which they use for community outreach.
- Woodstream Church in Mitchellville has a 50-member dance program that meets twice a week.
- First Baptist Church of Glenarden offers an aviation ministry and a drama program.
- The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., sends clergy into bars to reach the younger set. The ministry is called “Theology on Tap,” and first began a number of years ago in the Archdiocese of Chicago. Washington Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick sometimes does a gig as the featured guest and usually commands a standing-room-only crowd of about 500, giving the patrons sermon lite, and a question and answer period.

I would like to add to this list, “The Secret Boutique,” which has been a huge success in Waynesboro and still wants to set up the Staunton location in the Scout Hut. I know. I totally understand your “I’ll believe it when I see it,” looks. But there is a classic example of finding a need and filling it. Retired United Methodist Bishop, Will Willimon has this to say about ministry: “What if the church serves people, not as a market transaction, but because it is the people of God? What if our choir works hard on their anthem, not because they hope you will like it and be inspired by it, but because the choir knows that we are called to be a sign, a signal, a foretaste, a beachhead of God’s kingdom in the world? What if I’m preaching this sermon, not because I think it’s uppermost on your list of weekly wants, but, rather, because I believe this is what God wants? What you get out of what is done here should not be as great a concern among us as faithfulness to the peculiar nature of God’s kingdom”.

What a great phrase, “the peculiar nature of God’s Kingdom.” Well said. Finding a need and filling it is living out the kingdom of God. And the kingdom of God is all around us. Marquis is very needed in our community. No, we may not be growing in huge numbers, but we are touching many, many lives with the love of Jesus. Each Sunday, when I present the offering to God, I pray the loaves and fishes prayer – that God will grow and multiply the tithes and offerings of the faithful of Marquis. I often will add, “to allow us to continue the ministry of this church in our community and beyond.”

In closing I leave you with 2 very different views of the Kingdom of God. The first: Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is like a net.” And he wasn’t talking about just any old fishing net; he named a very specific kind of net. In fact, this is the only place in the entire New Testament that this particular word is used. The Greek word, *sagene*, is better known to gulf fishermen as a seine. A seine is a very

large net with weights on the bottom and floats on the top which is dragged between two, sometimes three boats. It's a huge dragnet which picks up everything in its path. There's a good reason. A seine, a dragnet, is totally indiscriminate. It picks up everything in its path; not just the tuna you were trying to catch, but dolphin, seaweed, old life preservers and the beer can that jerk in the boat next to you threw overboard last week.

And that's exactly the point of Jesus' parable. God's dragnet, the seine of the kingdom, gathers up everything. And that means everything. In fact, the word "fish" never appears in the original language. The old King James translation was literally correct when it said, "gathered of every kind."

The kingdom of God, Jesus said, is like a gigantic dragnet, which gathers everything together under the rule or reign of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

God's dragnet gathers all things: good things, true things, beautiful things, but it also gathers up broken things, ugly things, painful things, the leftover rubbish of our human failures and sins – and in ways which go beyond our comprehension, draws them under the influence of the love of God in Jesus Christ. There is nothing of any kind in your life and mine which cannot be gathered into the loving reign, the gracious authority, the redemptive purpose of God in Jesus Christ. God's kingdom, Jesus said, is like a huge dragnet which gathers things of every kind.

And finally: Robert Benton's Academy Award-winning film *Places in the Heart ...* is the story of a young woman, widowed within the first few minutes of the film, struggling against principalities and powers of evil incarnate in everyday life of central Texas during the 1930s. Forces work to take away the only thing her husband has left her and her two small children - a small farm in Texas. Lynchings, brutality, infidelity, racism, greed, duplicity all of these are woven into the lives of those who make up the tapestry of Benton's story.

The film ends with a communion service. At first the camera shows you a few of the good folk in town. Next, some of the not-so-good. Then the banker and others who conspired to take away the farm. The camera continues to move with the cups of wine. There is the faithful black farmhand who helped bring in the crop so the widow might pay her mortgage; next to him, the blind boarder. The plate passes to the children, then to their mother. She is seated next to her late husband. As you are trying to take this in, the plate moves to the young man who shot her husband. They commune, and each responds: "the peace of God". All are gathered at table, to share the bread and cup of salvation. Suddenly this is more than Sunday morning; this is the kingdom, eternity captured in time...

This is not a human point of view. The camera has given us a look at life, the way Jesus said God looks at it. God has done something to enable everyone to come home. We indeed live in the peculiar nature of God's Kingdom. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.