

Do You Want to Build an Island or a Kin-dom?

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Texts: Psalm 146; Luke 16:19-31

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you Oh God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago I was talking to someone here at coffee hour and they mentioned going to Walden Pond often during the week. It reminded me how this state park, once having inspired Henry David Thoreau in his writings and his connection to nature, was so close to this place that very much feels like it's in the city. So off I went, driving the 20 min, taking the scenic route to spend the day swimming in and reading by this kettle pond formed by retreating glaciers 10–12,000 years ago. Did you know that it's up to 108 feet deep? I didn't know a pond could get that big. In any case, it was a day mostly away from my cell phone that was much needed. As I was reading I was greeted by a couple of friendly folks from the area who have made this place their daily ritual for connection and community, one person even sharing how she practices her sense of spirituality with the group gathered there. Even though I was a stranger, I was welcomed into their conversations and life updates as if I belonged there and some part of me looked around and thought, this feels a lot like some kind of church.

As the afternoon lingered on I could hear two little boys within earshot who were playing in the shallows of the pond next to me. They were splashing around as kids do, mounding sand and stones into something of a structure to imagine with, while their parents ate a picnic lunch. Just as I was about to look away, one of the boys matter of factly stood up with his shovel and furrowed brow and confidently asked his companion who was unsure of the whole situation, "So, what do you want to make? An island or

a kingdom?” His gleeful tone as he stretched out the word kingdom, clearly preferring that option, made me think, yeah, he is totally right- a kingdom or kin-dom is 100% better than an island.

In Thoreau’s book *Walden*, inspired by the pond of the very same name, he declares, “Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.” Another way to frame a narrative theme of the Gospel of Luke is to say that this gospel as a whole argues that building a kin-dom, the kind of world centered in God’s liberation that Jesus calls us into, is better than building islands, places that separate us from relationship and connection; from God, and our neighbor.

The parable from our reading this morning focuses in on the afterlife of two very different people on earth, a rich man clothed in all the luxuries of material life and a man named Lazarus who begs at the rich man’s gate covered in sores without relief. There are certainly many uncomfortable images in this story to grapple with: there’s discomfort in talking about money, in talking about the societal impulse to moralize illness, even in the setting itself of a place of rest where Abraham resides and the torment of Hades. With all the discomfort that this parable introduces down to Abraham claiming sassily not even someone coming back from the dead would inspire people on Earth to follow the law and prophets, what can this story mean for us, today, as we reflect on our practices of gathering in an intentional way?

This story at first glance might seem that it is only focused on wealth and poverty, that it is about speaking out against wealth signaling moral virtue and therefore justifying the rich man’s inaction, something that the audience of this parable, the Pharisees, were suggesting in the narratives leading up to this curious vignette. On one level it certainly is doing the work of interrogating assumptions about money and morality, placing at the forefront of our minds the economic justice Jesus very clearly advocates for. This is a practice that the author of the Gospel of Luke does adeptly,

often exacting a reversal of expectations in order to drive home their point. So, yes, this parable is certainly about money, and it is also more fundamentally a parable about the values of authentic connection and inclusion when living in community.

The image of the rich man looking up at Abraham and Lazarus emphasizes the distance created by the lack of vulnerable relationship between the Rich Man and his neighbor Lazarus in this life. In Abraham's explanation to the rich man for the reasons why Lazarus cannot reach him to aide in his relief he says, "between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." A chasm, a word meaning a deep cleft in the surface of the Earth or a marked difference or separation among people was created by the lack of vulnerable and authentic relationship between these two men while they were living in such close physical proximity. Abraham makes it clear the chasm was created due to the rich man, not following the law, meaning that he did not love God rightly by loving his neighbor as himself, which would extricate himself from the cultural norm of ignoring his neighbor's needs. The Rich man's wealth gave him advantages in life and was almost certainly praised and rewarded by societal norms, but it was also protecting him from something good, something that would give him a chance to fully participate in God's redemptive and redeeming power in the world.

This image of two neighbors separated by their lack of connection on Earth begs the question, what are the beliefs, behaviors, and cultural systems that create chasms that separate us from each other and from authentic, vulnerable relationships within our communities? Maybe it's our need to keep doing and achieving that prevents us from being able to make time for an important conversation with someone who really needs a listening ear. Or maybe it's our shame, telling us that we aren't well spoken enough or well versed in history or religion to speak up in a small group or to speak aloud a prayer. Or maybe it's our fear of being different in a society that tells us we have to fit into the small boxes of identities that

white supremacy, and patriarchy deem as acceptable.

We step out of those patterns and systems when we actively choose to love ourselves and our neighbors in a full and embodied way. This can look like including our pronouns when we introduce ourselves, remembering someone's name who is new, or letting people know that they are so wanted in our lives and we are ready for them to shape who we are as we shape their experience of community and God's love too. I think of it especially today as we continue to celebrate our 30th anniversary of being Open and Affirming. The ways in which we can still work towards embodying that deeply held value as a church are unending. We can do this in the ways we speak out against laws harming our trans and non binary siblings and how we actively care for everyone's needs and identities within our local relationships as well. The history of harm to and separation from the LGBTQ community that the Christian church has perpetuated has left a great chasm that we have been faithfully knitting back together row by row here at First Church for 30 years. And yet, there is grief there too, that this work should have started even sooner, that this work shouldn't have even been necessary in the first place, that every child of God should have been called beloved from the start. We can celebrate the healing of this chasm and still attend to the scar in the intentional way we build our community to rest on a theology of love and affirmation of belovedness and not one of fear or of protection from facing hard truths.

Every time we step out of protecting ourselves from feeling discomfort and into authentic relationship we are confronted with shedding patterns of behavior or beliefs about ourselves and others or even God that are no longer serving us. It's hard to participate in that kind of transformational practice of love because what if it becomes way too real? What if we love and are actually loved and accepted in return? It's not a small challenge to open ourselves up to embrace the vulnerability that showing up as our full selves requires. It's not easy to let go of the systems and beliefs that protect us from engaging with hard realities, the suffering of our neighbors and even our own suffering too. It's not easy to accept help or be included

when it feels like our lives depend on it either. But taking that risk grounded in faith is where our deepest hope starts to unfurl, in God's ability to draw us back into this practice of love in the midst of community, healing our disconnection and leading to the kind of liberation that kin-doms are made of.

Bell Hooks in her book *All about Love: New Visions* closes her final chapter by talking about the wisdom offered from the people who function as angels in our lives that lead us to true and authentic connection in relationships. She says, "When angels speak of love they tell us it is only by loving that we enter an earthly paradise. They tell us paradise is our home and love our true destiny." So, I ask us this as we continue to shape a welcoming beloved community for all: "So, what do we want to make? An island or a kin-dom?" Amen.

