

It's Not about the Money
Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 49:8-16a, Matthew 6:24-34

In my 20's, I lived in a small village on the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina. Linville Falls is the gateway to a 7600 acre wilderness, one of only two places east of Miss where Forest had never seen a logger. Rough and steep, it attracted tourists. Standing outside the Parkway Junction Shell Station, I was talking to some fishing buddies, when a big Oldsmobile drove up. The window came down, and from inside I heard a voice say, "how do we get to see the Falls?" I replied, "...about 3 miles up the Parkway, then 1/2 mile walk to the upper falls, about 3/4 mile to see the big pool of the lower falls." "You mean you can't see it from the car?" ...and off they zoomed in the opposite direction.

They wanted to see the Falls, but their way of sight-seeing got in the way of their seeing. Sometimes what we already think about something gets in the way of our understanding.

For example, I won't ask for show of hands, but I'm pretty sure that when you saw the title and I read the text, you said "here goes David about the church finances again." - even when I told you in the title that it is "not about the money."

What we expect gets in the way of what we can see, and this text is one of the best examples I know.

First, it comes from what we have for a long time called the "sermon on the mount." So, we treat it like a sermon. We listen to all the great ideas, truths, and impossible commands, then sing our praises to Jesus - and zoom off in the opposite direction.

It is not a sermon, and it was not for everyone. Jesus speaks to followers, and these chapters are the collected sayings that followers remembered because they lived by them. This was the instruction book for being a follower. They talked about them, how they related to the example of Jesus' actions to the teachings, and asked how they could apply them to their lives.

Did not hear and forget. They memorized these sayings, used them to guide their choices. At the heart, they had made this commitment to follow the life of Christ in their living and they studied the actions of Christ and the teachings of Christ so they would know how to live like Christ.

It makes no sense at all that one could be a follower of Christ because he heard a sermon one time. You can't see the Christian life sitting in the car. You need to follow the directions - and, like they say, turn the talk into walk.

Changing what we expect when we come to church changes what we see and hear. That is why we come - to changes the ways we follow Christ.

We have heard this passage a lot of times if we have the come to church. "Don't worry. ...Seek first the kingdom of God, and you will have all these things as well." And if we listen with the expectations we already bring to the text, we miss the message and zoom away without seeing much of anything.

What do you think when you hear the phrase “the kingdom of God”? Heaven? Promise of eternal life as opposed to all these things we get on earth as well?

Where is the kingdom of God? Some place else? Is it some spiritual place that we have here in small degrees? Is the kingdom of God this place where we see peace and patience, love and justice, hope and faith that wanders around the world in spiritual ways? Do we sometimes visit that place and get a hint of what heaven will be like when we inherit the “kingdom”? Is the place where God is just 3 miles drive and another 1/2 mile walk away?

What we expect gets in the way of what we can see and hear. What if the kingdom of God is not a “where,” but instead a “when”?

“Kingdom of God” is not a place at all. It is a requirement and a condition. The kingdom of God is whenever God’s will is done “on earth, so earth is like heaven.” For followers, the Kingdom of God is the rule of Christ over the follower’s life. Closest thing to a “place” in the Kingdom of God is the place where Christ rules.

So Kingdom is the set of circumstances, the condition of living when Christ commands and people obey. Kingdom is the time when people do more than hear a sermon and zoom off. Kingdom is the time when people listen for Christ’s teachings and apply them. The Kingdom of God is any time that followers follow.

So, let’s re-phrase the teaching from Jesus that the followers memorized and applied:

I’m not a Greek scholar. I took 22 hours of Greek in school a long time ago, and I loved it. But I don’t trust myself with my translations, so I got this wording checked by some people I know who really know Greek. And they said it was adequate. So here is the Meriwether translation of Matthew 6:33:

“Search first for the rule of God in all your living so that you can live rightly, and all the other things of life will fall into their proper place.”

Focus on what Christ wants you do to, and spend less time on cuisine.

Focus on what Christ wants you to do, and spend less energy fussing over what to wear.

Walk into your closet, and ask yourself if Christ is your fashion designer?

Put yourself in some of the places where you generally don’t think of Christ being present, and ask if the rule of God and the example of Christ would make those places different? “Search for the rule of Christ in all your living so you can live rightly... in all of your living.”

Ask how Christ would deal with a client at work, if that business contract is something Christ would sign, how many places you go in a week are places you can imagine Christ being with you, how many of the items on your VISA statement are stuff Christ would sign for, what political candidate would Christ support?

Applied Christianity, applied to your living. When you are able to say “yes” to those kinds of questions, then you are spending a lot of time and life living rightly in the Kingdom of God. And of course, if Christ is a long way from some parts of your life, then you are a long way from the rule of God in those parts of your life.

It’s pretty simple, once you change the way you see, isn’t it? The choice to “seek the kingdom of God” is just about 3 miles drive down a very different direction and a 1/2 mile walk away.

Of course, it is hard to imagine where Christ would be if we only listen to sermons now and again. The way we learn is by repetition, the way we get to know people is to be around them and listen to them, watch them. The way we “know Christ” is not some magic spiritual “microchip” that God plants in our brains when we say we want to follow. We learn about Christ the way we learn about anything else...

Today we celebrate 45 of our young people who have graduated from high school. They know amazing things, and in a lot of ways they are better equipped to live in today's world than we are. We celebrate their gifts and skills. They know calculus and computers, psychology and physics, literature and language. A good many of them already have a jump on college learning. None of them could solve an advanced algebraic equation in the first grade. They learned over time - concentrated time - living with the subject and focusing on the lessons and applying them in examples until they passed levels and finally graduated. And if they slid by, did not apply themselves, crammed for exams and memorized the night before - well, we and they know that sooner or later it will catch up with them.

So, here is my question for our graduates today, “What are you looking for? What are the things you seek? Where are the directions of your searching? What are the things you hunt for, that motivate you, that become ideals and goals? What comes first for you?”

If Christ and Christian living are way down the list of the things that come to your mind, then Second Presbyterian needs to apologize to you. We need to confess that we have failed you in some ways. As your spiritual parents, we took vows at your baptism to “raise you to know Christ and follow Christ.” We have sat by quietly while you have made a lot of other things a priority. We built you a nice youth suite, but we did not encourage your participation in the whole life of the church enough. We did not set an example for you because we did not volunteer to help teach you or fix meals for you. Some of us parents, and not just your parents that live with you all the time, know that you do stupid things from time to time. My guess is that sometime during this graduation weekend, at least one of you did something stupid. All along the way, we should have been there to be your spiritual parents to support your parents when they were trying to tell you to be smart. But we have smiled and looked the other way because we remember when we were just as stupid. How many of you want the youth of this church to be as stupid as you have been?

We have not done enough to make Second the kind of place that could really train you to follow Christ. You took the Congregational Survey, too. My guess is that you have a lower sense of belonging to the church than the rest of us, you have a lower level of participation, you have a greater desire for spiritual growth than those of us who have taken it for granted. And when we ask you about whether worship is meaningful, you know that we are not going to listen or do much about any answer you give.

A lot of our youth sit on the back row of the balcony. They are trying to tell us something. Is it because we have adult time and children's time in worship, but it is hard for our youth to find much of any time in worship that speaks to their world, that connects to their faith, that encourages them to search for Christ first in the living of their lives? Pull one of the bulletins from the 1960's, and that worship service will look a lot like the one this morning. These graduates were born in 1990. What else in any of your living looks like 1960? Surely more

should have changed for the sake of the people who are the when of the Kingdom of God in this church's future.

We graduate them in confirmation in the 8th grade before they are really facing adult life, and then we criticizing them for not coming back to SS and church. They have graduated from Sunday School. They can start acting like adults who don't come to SS or church? I want every young person to know: In no way am I criticizing our youth this morning. I'm glad you are here. I'm glad to see you even in the balcony any and every time you are here. To be honest, sometimes it is a mystery to me why you show up at all!

What I am saying is that the standard we want to apply to youth about faithfulness, and we forget that we should exceed that standard for ourselves. Someone said a long time ago, that if someone asks you to carry a load a mile, you need to carry it two. Followers seldom surpass their leaders. We won't match Christ example in our living, but all of us should live lives for Christ that our youth want to live.

How can we criticize our young people for their lack of faithfulness or their lack of involvement or their choosing other things over church until we look at the ways that we set examples in our living, ways we work to teach them applied Christianity? Until we set a priority to make the church a place that meets them where they live so they can learn how to serve Christ where they live, we be careful of telling them what they ought to be doing.

You see, it is all about how our expected ways of seeing get in the way of our following - and their following Christ. I'll confess, I don't have many answers to a lot of questions, but I have become convinced that a lot of the ways we are trying to teach youth and train youth and encourage youth to "search for the rule of Christ in all their living so they can live rightly" are not working at all.

So today, it is not about the money. It is about who we serve. Jesus commands us to serve him alone, to follow his way in all our ways, to "search for his rule so that we can live rightly." Jesus says that the children of the future generation can teach us about the kingdom of God. The future - the when - is where we look for the rule of God. We need to put all of them - even our youth - front and center and listen to them, learn from them, ask them how God is at work in their lives, ask ourselves how Christ needs to be at work in our lives in ways he is not.

If we focus on all the other stuff at church, and if we put our focus on the ways of the world that put Christ's way distant when we are not in church, then nothing much will ever change except the cuisine and the clothes in our closets, ...and the decor in our sanctuary. But if we really "search for the rule of Christ in all our living so that we can live rightly, then all the other things of life will fall into their proper place."

I celebrate with you your graduation today. I wish I knew you better. I hope in some small way I have set an example for you of someone who tries to make Christ the pattern of my living. I hope that you will find a place that helps you serve Christ first. I hope that you will find a time where you know you are front and center and you want to sit on the front row. I hope and I pray that you will see that it is worth a 3 mile drive and a 1/2 mile walk to see the amazing joy and challenge and purpose of living your live with Christ at the center of all your life, and "searching for the rule of Christ in all your living, so that you can live rightly."