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A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Exhibiting the Kingdom of Heaven to the World

Matthew 22:1-4

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet."

Every Presbytery has a committee which is called, "The committee on examinations." It is the task of this body to examine candidates for ordination as well as incoming pastors. The examinations are often quite rigorous and stressful. When I moved to Texas twenty years ago, I was told that the presbytery there liked nothing more than to get their hands on a "Yankee pastor" and grill him like they would a barbecue a steer. With that warning, I prepared hard for my exam, going over the finer points of Presbyterian polity. I reviewed the theories of atonement, the sacraments, and the main points from the Book of Confessions. I also memorized different things that might be asked of me including the six *Great Ends of the Church*.

The examination proceeded quite well and then I was asked, "Name the Great Ends of the Church?" I smiled, because I was ready. I called upon my memory and spit back the answer: "The Great Ends of the Church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and... and....and....." I forgot the last great end of the church.

It was one of those classic moments of brain freeze. Try as I might, I could not remember it. I must have looked pathetic, because my examiners were looking quite pleased with themselves. They let me wiggle like a worm on a hook. Finally, I broke the tension and said.... "I forgot." I forgot. They passed me in spite of that omission. I forgot the last great end of the church.... I believe the church at large has also forgotten this great end. The last great end of the church is to "Exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the World." In the next few minutes I would like to explore three things about this great end: 1. What does it mean? 2. How have we forgotten it? And 3. How can we recover it?

What does it mean? Real estate ads for Vacation getaways might say... "own a little piece of heaven on earth." But the truth of the matter is, that we see very little of heaven here on earth... But there is one place where it should be visible to all: the church. The church is called to show the rest of the world what the kingdom of heaven is like. The church is called to exhibit God's intentions for the way that human beings should relate to one another. In other words, there is a different standard of conduct, a different expectation of relationships within the community of faith.

The great Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, told a visiting missionary, "If you would come in the spirit of your master, you would be irresistible." If church people would start acting like the Jesus that they proclaim, especially in the way we treat one another, the world would take notice and want to be part of our community. Maybe Gandhi's assertion was a bit utopic, but we might never know... unless we start treating one another the way Christ calls us to treat each other.

The object of this great end is the world. Consider this world in which we live:

- The Middle East has not known peace in thousands of years.
- There are signs of growing racial and cultural clashes in Europe and North America.
- Emerging nations find it necessary to subvert the pursuit of food and quality of life for their citizens to pursue the weapons of atomic destruction.
- Our courts are stuffed with litigation and disagreement between people.
- People get mad about silly things.
- Road rage is a reality on our highways.
- Simple civility is neither commonplace nor expected.

You get the picture... The world does not give us a vision of the kingdom of heaven... but the church is supposed to! Our life together, the way we interact with one another, should show the world that there is a better way... that people can get along... that differences can exist together peacefully. This is the vision that Acts gives of the early church:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people*

We might think this is unremarkable, until we read the last sentence: **"The Lord added to their number."** Any church that wants to grow needs to exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world!

II

How did we forget our special calling to exhibit the kingdom of heaven to the world? It is not hard to see. Most of us are familiar with the local congregations that fall into conflict. We can come up with all types of reasons for church conflict, but we seldom take personal responsibility for our part in it. We are trapped by our own sinful egos and continually speak about sin in the third person. Sin is something that someone else does. Perhaps followers of Christ should only speak about sin in the first person.

If you study the letters of Paul, you might be surprised to learn that one of his main topics was conflict in the church. When he wrote the beautiful passage on love, (*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud...*), he was addressing a congregation that was in conflict. When he used the organic image: "You are the body of Christ." He was challenging the church to recognize that it was indeed the representation of Christ to the world. The kingdom of heaven is a community bound together by Christ-like love.

Sadly, that is not what the world sees in the church. When I was a volunteer missionary in Taiwan, one of my students, a Buddhist, asked me, "Why should I become a Christian? You don't get along with each other? You argue about this and that? What moral and spiritual authority do you have to compel me to join your faith?" I fear he was right.... "If you would come in the spirit of your master, Jesus Christ, you would be irresistible." We have been resistible.

III

How can we recover this great end of the church... to exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world? I believe that the road to recovery involves **owning our behavior and seeking forgiveness**. I can be a very stubborn individual. About twenty years ago, I got into an argument with a colleague. His name was Jim. Jim was a brilliant individual who also has the courage of his convictions... in other words, he too, could be stubborn. I can't remember what we disagreed about... but it was an intense verbal knock-down, drag-out altercation. It affected the small presbytery of which we were members. We did not treat each other very well and it went on for about six months. I knew I was right and that Jim was acting like a jerk. He knew that he was right and that I was acting like a jerk. The truth is we were both half right on that score.... We were both acting like jerks.

It was the day before a presbytery pastor's retreat and I knew that he would be there and that our presence would probably color the retreat for others. Six months of carrying a grudge takes a lot of energy, and I was tired. I drove to his church and caught him in his office. I went up to him and said, "Jim, I don't know who is right or wrong, but I know that I have been wrong in the way that I have acted and I am sorry and am asking for your forgiveness." We both broke out in tears, embraced and forgave each other. But we also decided that our reconciliation was important to our colleagues and just as they had witnessed our fight... we needed to show the power of the spirit of Christ. We determined that we would work together

on one of the committees of the presbytery. We would try to exhibit reconciliation, (the kingdom of heaven), to the world of our presbytery...

I do not tell you that story to share how wonderful I am, because I am not. Indeed, I am ashamed of the events that brought about that story. I share it because it revealed to me the way that we in the church need to go if we are to be the church that exhibits the Kingdom of heaven to the world. **We need to own our behavior and seek forgiveness.**

There is a great deal of conflict and pain in the world, in our communities, neighborhoods, and our homes. People truly want to know that there is a better way... I don't think that they will find it from Dr. Phil or Oprah... but they will from the church that takes to heart the words of its master, Jesus Christ and exhibits his kingdom to others. This is the good news, and once again the challenge of Christ's gospel. Amen.