

Matthew seems like as good of a name as any, and the nameless man needs a name if we are going to get to know him. Matthew enters the story in a desperate sprint. We are not exactly sure why he is desperate, but he is. Jewish men do not run in public. To do so would have meant to hold up his robe as he ran exposing his bare legs, and this would have been humiliating. Capernaum is a good-sized town, but still small enough that everybody knew everybody, especially the rich merchants. And Matt was one of those rich men. He had many possessions; he never went to bed hungry. He had a special room just for his clothes, which were some of the finest in the land. He held the honor and the respect of the town leaders. His wives were young and beautiful. But his life was empty. Desperately empty. Empty enough to propel him at full sprint up to Jesus early in the morning just as Jesus was leaving town. Matthew simply had to get to Jesus, he needed something to fill this terrible empty hole in his heart, in his life. It felt like his life depended upon some kind of healing; a healing that perhaps only Jesus could offer. So risking the humiliation of running, risking the humiliation of kneeling in front of a no-body traveling preacher, Matt dropped to his knees at the feet of Jesus.

Matt had been listening to Jesus speak over the past few days and had been moved by what the man had to say. Yesterday Jesus had been preaching when little children began rushing up to him. They had scooted past the disciples and were drawn to Jesus like a magnet, laughing and filled with joy as they hugged him. The disciples had not expected this heavenly onslaught and were caught off guard. They tried to pull the children away from Jesus, but Jesus challenged them. **“What are you doing! Let the little children come to me; do not stop them. For it is to people such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a child will never enter it.”** Then Jesus picked them up, each one of them, laid his hands on them in turn and blessed them. He spent quite a bit of time pouring his attention upon those children while the adults stood there frustrated waiting to get Jesus’ attention. The Kingdom of God. Matthew heard those words, and they did something to him. Maybe that is what his life was missing. Oh, he longed to laugh again, to be filled with the joy of those children. It had been such a very long time since he had experienced joy like that. What did Jesus mean by the Kingdom of God Matt wondered. If that was the prescription he needed to heal his emptiness, anxiety and depression, well he would do just about anything to acquire it.

Jesus looked down at the man kneeling before him and felt the pain pouring off of him like heat waves. Matthew cried out, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Matthew was not sure exactly what the Kingdom of Heaven was, but it kind of sounded like it must be otherworldly, an eternal promise that could ease his pain. Matthew was used to acquiring whatever he wanted; the Kingdom could be transactionally acquired just like anything else, right? Jesus began with the basics, “Are you living life the way Moses commanded?”

“Oh, Yes Jesus, I have kept the commandments since I was a child.”

Jesus looked at him and loved him. Now this is a statement that should cause us to pause for a moment. Maybe it should cause us to pause for quite some time. The word Love is only used in two passages in Mark’s Gospel. This passage and in the passage in which Jesus says you shall

love your neighbor as yourself and love God with all of your heart soul mind and strength. Mark did not tell us that Jesus looked at the 12 other disciples, loved them, and then invited them to follow him. And yet Jesus loved this man. Jesus makes an offer to this man that the man is not spiritually mature enough to accept, but Jesus knows that fact. Jesus knows he is not ready to live in the ever-present Kingdom of God, yet he loves him anyway. We should all hold on to that fact for dear life. No matter where we are in our journey of faith, no matter how close or how far we think we are to Jesus, he is looking at us right now and loving us.

There was something that was causing Matthew to take his eye off of God. There was something that was keeping Matthew from experiencing the Kingdom of God in the same way that those children he met yesterday were experiencing it. This ailment is not a physical condition, it is a spiritual dilemma. Mathew, like so many people today thinks God is transactional. If I do this God will reward me. If I pray hard enough, in the right way, God will respond. If I do the right thing, God will help me, so then as now people keep asking Jesus, what must I do to earn God's favor. Then as now Jesus says the same thing. Metanoia, change the way you think. God is not to be found in transactions. God is always to be found in relationships.

Jesus could easily see into Matthew's heart, he knew the cause of the ailment, and he had a prescription that would cure the disease. As Jesus looked lovingly at Matthew he said, "You may have followed the letter of the law, but you do not yet understand the Spirit of the law. Go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, you will be building heavenly treasure, then come follow me." Matthew, go and build relationships with people who are in desperate need. Go and fall in love with people you would never before have condescended to even look at. When Matthew heard this he was shocked. He slowly stood up, eyes avoiding Jesus, and slinked away, humiliated that he had run in the first place, grieving, now that the pain was worse than ever. Jesus looked at his disciples, sadly shook his head, and commented, "how hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God."

Why is it difficult for people who have wealth to experience the Kingdom of God? Mindset. I earned that money. I came from extreme poverty and built what I have with hard work, blood sweat, and tears. Everybody can do the same thing that I did, and if they don't it is just because they are lazy. Jesus was asking Matthew to go and build relationships with the people who were the least in society, and there he would experience the Kingdom of God. In building those relationships Matthew would discover that life is not about transactions. Some people work incredibly hard, pouring out every ounce of energy they have, and they still need to go to the church food pantry to survive. Life simply is not fair. Life is not a transaction. Then as now, Jesus invites us to go and build relationships with the least because it is in those relationships that we will discover Kingdom of God. Jesus is quite emphatic about this point. The Kingdom of God is not a place we go to, it is a relationship we experience.

I know, I know, every time I teach that I get in trouble. I'll get an email or two that tell me heaven is most definitely a place. It is the place we go to when we die. Perhaps. I have never been there, so I am not going to argue the point. But when Jesus describes the Kingdom of God

he is not talking about life after death. He is inviting us into a heavenly relationship in this life right now. Today. At the end of our story, he paints a beautiful picture of the Kingdom of God for us so we don't have to wonder what it is. It is one of the few times that Jesus is crystal clear in his teaching. **"The disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you."**

Let's note that Peter is still of the same mindset as the man who just sulked away grieving. He thinks God is in the business of transactions instead of creating relationships. If we give something away, what will God give us in return? Jesus responds by saying basically, if you give your life away in love, that love will be returned to you one hundred fold.

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

The Kingdom of God is defined by relationships. Hundreds of houses filled with families. Do you need a place to sleep? Don't worry, your house is my house. Hundreds of mothers, brothers, children; families who will love and care for us. Ah but the kingdom of God does not mean there won't be challenges, there will be, perhaps even persecutions, but we will never be alone. We will never feel the desperate loneliness of Matthew. Not only will be enveloped by the love of innumerable family members, but we will feel the presence of God, the Holy Spirit guiding us into ever deeper relationships. As St. Catherine of Siena describes it, the path to heaven lies through heaven and all the way to heaven is heaven.

This past week, I was given the gift of a taste of the kingdom of heaven several times. First, Keith Holmes has invited me to offer a devotional Sunflower Adult Day Care community the first Wednesday of every month. It is one of my favorite activities as a pastor. Spending time with that group is such a joy because they pour out unconditional love. They don't care about my theology, they just love me because I come to be with them. Keith has been serving there for 11 years, and my guess is that he gifts his time to Sunflower because it is there that experiences the Kingdom of Heaven. Second, Archie Riggs invited me to tour the Senior Center on Wednesday. He insisted that we go on Wednesday because it was the one day a month they have fried chicken for lunch. The best lunch of the month Archie said, and he was absolutely correct. Archie gives a significant amount of his time serving the senior center because when he walks through the doors there, he is not walking into a building, he is walking into the Kingdom of God. The senior center is filled with people all day long playing cards, eating together, sewing exercising, or doing any of dozens of other activities. I lost count of how many times Archie said, "You know Eric, a lot of these people are alive because of the relationships they build here. Being alone kills more people than any disease. Third, I was able to pray for

the KW cross country team Friday morning. I met them about 10am as they were finishing up their workouts. As they gathered back slowly one at a time from their distance runs, we talked about life, school, favorite restaurants. Then one of the girls began calling the spread out athletes in waving at them come on you guys, let's gather up! We are going to pray! How cool to be surrounded by 25 or so college students gathered together in a circle talking about God and praying together. It was a little bit of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Anglican priest Malcolm Guite defines the Kingdom of God for us beautifully in the poem the Triune Poet. Listen again to the way he closes our this poem this prayer:

The Triune Poet makes us for His glory,
And makes us each the other's inspiration.
He calls us out of darkness, chaos, chance,
To improvise a music of our own,
To sing the chord that calls us to the dance,
Three notes resounding from a single tone,
To sing the End in whom we all begin;
Our God beyond, beside us and within.

Our God beyond, beside us, and within. Yes this is a God of relationship calling us out of darkness, chaos, chance, calling us away from transactional mentalities, into the relationships that are the Kingdom of God.

Benediction:

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, Jesus may strengthen your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.