

John 18:36 12/15/13 (Red Letters #15) **LETTERS OF THE KINGDOM**

I have to start this morning with one of my favorite stories and some familiar thoughts. A big, mean lion met a monkey in the jungle. The lion pounced on the poor monkey and roared, “Who is king of the jungle?” The frightened monkey replied, “You are, O mighty lion.” So the lion let him go. The next animal the lion met was a zebra. He pounced on it and roared, “Who is king of the jungle?” “You are, O mighty lion.” So the lion let him go. Next, the lion met an elephant and asked it the same question. The elephant grabbed the lion with His trunk, twirled him around and threw him 50 feet into the jungle. The lion picked himself up and huffed, “Well, just because you don’t know the answer is no reason to get rough.”

Folks, I submit to you that all of us have some of that lion in us, that “King of the Jungle” attitude. We want to be the ones in charge. Now, winter has hit early this year and the snow piles are forming and it makes me remember one of my favorite games when I was a kid. Do you remember it... “King of the Hill.” There was just something about winning your way up to the top, and standing up there glorying in your kingship, that gave you a feeling of power. Of course, the feeling never lasted very long before someone would pull you down from behind and send you sliding down the hill with your face in the snow. But that was all right, because then it gave you a chance to win your way back up to the top all over again.

Of course, they don’t let kids do that at school anymore– ‘cause the E.R. is already full enough without adding King of the Hill cases. And really, when you think about it...what are the principles of life that game might teach? First of all, the person who is highest is the best. Second, You only get to be the highest by fighting your way to the top and throwing somebody else down. Finally, when you get to the top, everyone else is trying to get you. So if you want to stay on top, you have to keep pushing everybody else down. Unfortunately, too often that is the way the world in general operates isn’t it? Somehow we’ve gotten the idea that the highest people are the best people - and that’s measured in different ways, but the principle is there. The richest, the most athletic, the most beautiful, the most “high society.” And the message the world sends is that it really doesn’t matter how you get there, as long as you do. And when you do, you’d better be good at keeping other people down, or you’ll never keep yourself up.

So, in response, the Christian prays: “Our Father in heaven, **Your** Kingdom come,” not **mine**. And in today’s **Red Letters**, Jesus talks to us about that kingdom. And what I found in these readings is that Jesus certainly wanted to teach people about His kingdom, but He also obviously felt He had to try to get people to unlearn some misinformation. Often in some of the more confrontational Red Letters, Jesus is talking to the **Pharisees** or other church leaders and telling them where they had things wrong, but in the case of the 1st reading today from Matthew, Jesus is responding to the **disciples**. Peter as their spokesman, wanted assurance that they would be rewarded for all they had given up for Jesus. Jesus had just challenged the rich young ruler to give up everything and follow Him. And it strikes Peter that they have all done exactly that, so... “We’ve done our part - what’s in it for us?” And Jesus says: “A lot!” He says:

Slide: 28 “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. **29** And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.” (Matthew 19:28–29 NIV)

Awesome, and exactly what Peter wanted to hear. But Jesus doesn't leave it at that. He goes on to warn Peter and the disciples about an attitude of entitlement with the parable of the landowner who went out at different times of the day to hire workers for his vineyard. All of them, Jesus repeats, were "doing nothing", just standing around. It was the owner who gave any of them an opportunity to make his life count. But how soon we forget! How easily we get our noses out of joint and make everything about us. When those hired last got the same as those hired first, those hired first began to...

Slide: "11 ...they began to grumble against the landowner. 12 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'" (Matthew 20:11–12 NIV)

Folks, this is one of the most powerful parables ever given to men. And in my experience we absolutely need it, because I see Christians still getting bent out of shape over this idea today. And what is it we don't like? That somebody could sneak into heaven at the last minute, having lived an openly sinful life before that? What could you possibly be jealous about? Did you really want to live trapped in sin and away from God all your life? Did you really want to "stand around all day long doing nothing?" Wasting your life? Folks, I don't want that. I don't want any part of that. I want my life to count, don't you? And so Jesus presents the great response of the landowner:

Slide: 13 ...'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matthew 20:13–16 NIV)

Are you envious at the generosity of our God? Does it bother you that He makes people equal with that generosity? In fact, that He makes "the last first and the first last"? If so, it's possible that you don't yet understand Grace – or the kingdom of God. The fact is that God's kingdom is all about Grace! God loving us and choosing us when we didn't deserve it, when we were "doing nothing" to earn His favor. Every human being is in that camp - new disciples of Christ and long time disciples of Christ, and of course people who are outside the kingdom. God so loved all of us that He gave His one and only Son...to live for us and die for us and rise again so that we could have eternal life – and also that we could live differently here and now...so that we could learn to treat each other like God treats us, with Grace, giving each other grace to make mistakes, to get things wrong, even to hurt each other at times because of that and yet to still come to each other with love, to talk to each other and learn from each other, to repent and to bestow forgiveness and to do it all at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ, claiming the benefit of that sacrifice that none of us deserved.

The next two readings are both short Red Letter statements about the Kingdom, again with Jesus trying to get people to unlearn the idea that the Kingdom is on the outside.

Slide: "20 Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, 'The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, 21 nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you.'" (Luke 17:20–21 NIV)

Slide: “Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.”” (John 18:36 NIV)

You know, at one point in putting this message together, I did an image search for the Kingdom of heaven, not really thinking about it, but this is what came up:

Slide: Kingdom of heaven Google search pic

Of course, it’s all about a 2005 epic action film with Orlando Bloom about the Crusades, a time when Christians were also very confused about the Kingdom of God. A time when at least 5 million men gave their lives to try to establish a visible kingdom for Christ in Jerusalem, and took an equal amount of lives, including a children’s crusade where some 50,000 children lost their lives. What a horrible mistake to try to force a visible kingdom of God. We don’t have time to get into all of the geopolitical history of the Crusades, nor of the advancement of the Turks, the Muslim kingdom into Europe. The point is that neither was doing the will of God, nor advancing His kingdom the way Jesus came into this world to establish it.

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The “kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’... His kingdom is not of this world. The kingdom of God is within you! God, your God, loves you so much, He is willing to dwell within you, to be with you wherever you go, whatever you do, to lift you up from the rat race from the way the rest of the world lives, and give you a higher, nobler life.

You know many of us have been frustrated by the direction our country has taken in the last number of years. We saw America as a “Christian country” founded on Christian principles and ethics and we see that going away.

Slide: Holiday card pic

For instance, at this time of year, we don’t want to send or receive “Holiday cards”! We want Christmas cards. We don’t want a Holiday tree, we want a Christmas tree.

Slide: Ed Koehler cartoon

This time of year is special because the event is special. We celebrate Immanuel, God with us, God willing to bring His kingdom down to us... into us. And so we can get a little peeved as we watch some of those things going away. I don’t like it. You don’t like it. Christianity has lost its favored position in our culture. But folks, we need to be very careful in the “Christmas wars” – in our culture, don’t we..., on Facebook or face-to-face. The kingdom of God does not come by getting everybody to say “Merry Christmas” instead of “Happy Holidays”. The kingdom of God comes as Christ comes into your heart and life and into the lives of those with whom you share Him... That doesn’t change...

And we’re going to have to learn how to live like Christians have for most of history...counter-culturally, as citizens of heaven, following our true king, the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to finish this morning with a very simple story from Max Lucado. Maybe you've heard it before. I think it can teach us a lot if we listen:

Hot sun. Salty air. Rhythmic waves. A little boy is on the beach. On his knees he scoops and packs the sand with plastic shovels into a bright red bucket. Then he upends the bucket on the surface and lifts it. And, to the delight of the architect, a castle tower is created.

All afternoon he will work. Spooning out the moat. Packing the walls. Bottle tops will be sentries. Popsicle sticks will be bridges. A sandcastle will be built.

Big city. Busy streets. Rumbling traffic. A man in his office. At his desk he shuffles papers into stacks and delegates assignments. He cradles the phone on his shoulder and punches the keyboard with his fingers. Numbers are juggled and contracts are signed and much to the delight of the man, a profit is made.

All his life he will work. Formulating the plans. Forecasting the future. Annuities will be sentries. Capital gains will be bridges. An empire will be built.

Two builders of two castles. They have much in common. They shape granules into grandeurs. They see nothing and make something. They are diligent and determined. And for both the tide will rise and the end will come.

Yet that is where the similarities cease. For the boy sees the end while the man ignores it. Watch the boy as the dusk approaches.

As the waves near, the wise child jumps to his feet and begins to clap. There is no sorrow. No fear. No regret. He knew this would happen. He is not surprised. And when the great breaker crashes into his castle and his masterpiece is sucked into the sea, he smiles. He smiles, picks up his tools, takes his father's hand, and goes home.

The grownup, however, is not so wise. As the wave of years collapses on his castle he is terrified. He hovers over the sandy monument to protect it. He blocks the waves from the walls he has made. Salt-water soaked and shivering he snarls at the incoming tide. "It's my castle," he defies.

The ocean need not respond. Both know to whom the sand belongs. . . .

And I don't know much about sandcastles. But children do. Watch them and learn. Go ahead and build, but build with a child's heart. When the sun sets and the tides take--applaud. Salute the process of life, take your father's hand, and go home."

What a lesson. And may we learn it well – long before that day comes.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, you are the king of the universe. To you alone be all worship, honor, power and praise. We thank You for Your Word today, Lord. It confronts us with our own pride and egos. It makes us acknowledge that we are weak – but You are mighty. And yet, in your might and power, You loved us enough to leave Your throne in heaven. To come among us – to be one of us. To die a cruel death, to bear our sins and be our Savior. We thank you Lord and praise you. We bow the knee before you and acknowledge You to be the Lord. Amen.