

The Kingdom of God Is At Hand!
EDEO Convention Address 2015

*Take oh take us as we are. Summon all that we should be.
Set your seal upon our heart and live in us.*

John Bell

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel." And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen.

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zeb'edee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zeb'edee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him.

Mark 1.14-20

In Mark's gospel, Jesus appears for the first time at his baptism, then he disappears into the wilderness - where he is tempted by Satan, was with wild beasts and was ministered to by angels. When the holy (crazy but holy, or perhaps crazy AND holy) John is arrested, Jesus returns from the desert and starts preaching.

He preaches: "The Kingdom of God is at hand!"

Even though the Evil One is loose in the world, even though the country is occupied by Romans, and John the Baptizer is in jail . . . the Kingdom of God is at hand - so turn around, change your life, Believe in the Good News. That is, trust God! . . . Trust God."

That's a piece of what Jesus was suggesting to the rich man in last Sunday's gospel. Give it all up - your wealth (which is not only wealth, but also a sign of God's favor, the man's identity, and his life) - give it up all of it. Come Follow Jesus.

"You can do this" Jesus teaches you and me, for as we see. . . when we follow Him, multitudes are fed with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fishes. Because, as we see, when it seems that all is lost, Jesus will reach out His hand, and there will be new life. Abundance beyond financial wealth.

Jesus might have explained to the rich man - (if he hadn't turned away in his sadness), abundance, or eternal life is at hand, as we reach our hands out in love.

There was a time when the church knew itself blessed by prestige, power, identity & wealth. Folks in Eastern Oregon might challenge me on wealth, but I suggest you look at our beautiful church buildings and properties for a quick claiming of our wealth. Having visited the church in India, especially rural India, South Sudan, Central Ecuador and South Africa, I know we are wealthy beyond measure. There will always be someone who has more than we do, but we have a great wealth.

But those buildings aren't as full as they used to be. We no longer have dozens of children in our Sunday Schools. We don't have folks vying to be on Vestries. We no longer hold the moral compass in our communities. People don't know what an Episcopalian is. Many have never set foot inside a church, since weddings and funerals now happen on beaches and in parks and theatres, and we are sometimes afraid that the church is dying.

But my friends, we believe, we trust, we stake our lives on the living God.

On Jesus' resurrection. Do you remember the story of the disciples walking to Emmaus? They have left Jerusalem discouraged, crestfallen really, for Jesus has been crucified and buried. They had, in a way, sold it all and followed Jesus and now he is dead.

A stranger joins them on the journey and they talk about the events of the week. They tell him what they had hoped and how they have lost their direction. The stranger speaks to them of Scripture, of the prophets and then joins them for dinner. As he breaks the bread . . . they recognize him. They had been with him for hours and not recognized him. They had listened to his teaching but they hadn't heard his voice – because although he was present, although he was Jesus, he was with them in a new way.

It critical for us to look for the resurrected Christ at the table with us, calling us to new life. The Kingdom of God is at hand, but we don't always see it.

I was struck last night by Tom Bair's presentation of the Gospel of Mark on how many times Jesus reaches out his hand to heal. It made me think differently about our theme: the Kingdom of God is at hand.

At hand. At the reach of Jesus' hand. At the need that was before him. So often we think the Kingdom of God is in the mighty acts, in the healing itself, but what came to me and pulled the pieces together is the learning, the observation that the Kingdom of God is *in the heart of the need*: In Simon's mother-in-law, in Jairus' daughter, in blind Bartimeus and in the deaf-mute man. Sure, it is indeed in Jesus, but he shows us it to us at his hand!

Over the year, as I read commentaries on the Gospel of Mark, I noted that they make the point that this at hand stuff isn't about time, it's about space, about place. Time seems pretty airy-fairy. Space is here and now. At hand is a classroom in Condega, Nicaragua, it's in the women at new wells in Guatamala, and around the world, it's in schools in Cap Haitien, it is with folks moving through pews in Hood River filled with children's clothes, and the Kingdom of God is at hand in the hungry people who are fed in our gardens of eatin'.

I don't want to say it isn't also in our ministry and self giving, for it is. The Kingdom of God is at hand when we work to heal the sick, feed the hungry, visit the prisoners – when we put on a country fair to raise thousands of dollars for those in need, when we support children in LaPine which is as foreign to some of us as Wau, South Sudan. Eternal life is indeed in our response to the invitation of the Kingdom of God. It comes to us in Cove when children discover unconditional love, and when counselors struggle with the deepest questions of faith.

Our hope then, my sisters and brothers, isn't in rebuilding the church of the 50's. Our hope is in God. Our life is in the Kingdom of God at the reach of our hands. That rich man I mentioned earlier – gave up on the kingdom of God – by refusing to respond to the needs of the poor. The disciples gave up everything, followed Jesus, and discovered the Kingdom of God. Perhaps we will

know the Kingdom of God in our hearts when we discover our deepest hunger can only be satisfied *by OUR NEED to reach out our hands in love.*

Perhaps by making little dresses and shorts for children in Africa and Haiti, or by spending the night in a warming shelter. Cooking for the hungry. Visiting prisoners. Teaching children at Ascension School to make prayer flags or sing a new song.

Here's one of my favorite Kingdom of God stories told to me by, my friend and colleague, Richard Mammana. He was at the Society of Anglican and Lutheran Theologians Meeting in San Diego and told us this story which reminded me not only of Jesus' proclamation, but also of Isaiah 25:

First Lutheran Church in San Diego hosts a breakfast for the homeless each Friday morning, and its pastor invited us to attend, since our meeting took place over a Thursday and Friday. He did not tell us what to expect . . .

The Friday morning "breakfast" includes free distribution of clothing, socks and toiletries, access to shower facilities, legal assistance, basic medical help, and a generous interaction between parishioners and the homeless over the space of a few hours each week. As one says at Passover, "Dayeinu"—It would have been sufficient to assure us that the kingdom of God was manifest here in an especially vibrant way had we only seen the breakfast.

The surprise came in the announcement that there would be a wedding that morning. Two of the long-standing homeless visitors to the breakfast had joined the congregation and were expecting a child. They asked to be married, and the pastor naturally agreed. He hired a photographer, ordered a cake, signed a contract with a musician, and told the bride and groom to invite their families.

As happens so often at a wedding, something essential goes missing or wrong at the last minute. In this case, the musician didn't show up. What better than to have a group of 50 Anglican and Lutheran theologians—people who generally know their way around a hymnal—on hand for just such an occasion? We repaired to the church and brought out stacks of hymnals—and we became the impromptu choir for this wedding, the beauty of which I think I may never see again. It was a foretaste of what I know heaven will be like: the last becoming first, the unexpected guests themselves helping to host at the banquet, the lifting of young, old, healthy and sick, black, white, rich, poor, highly educated and poorly educated, clean and scruffy, hungry and full, tired and wakeful—the lifting of all of us in the embrace of a loving and living God who knows us each by name.

We need to be in Family Kitchens, on the streets of our towns, in the prisons, there - because that's where the Kingdom of God is at hand.

So here's the deal: As we look forward to calling a new bishop, it's important to remember who we are and why we are here.

We are the beloved children of God, called together to heal the world, one person at a time. That's how Jesus did it: The blind man by the side of the road, The women caught in adultery, The deaf man healed with spit and dirt, Mary Magdalene - healed of seven demons. One person at a time. One place at a time.

We have discovered, have been reminded, and have learned that it isn't our job to keep the church as we know it alive. The Church is the bride of Christ, and Christ will care for his bride. We have been baptized to make real, as Michael Curry reminded us, the Dream of God. We have been anointed to heal and be healed and thus to make the Kingdom of God visible to all.

We are a people forgiven, healed, restored, made new.

We are people who are part of the Body of Christ – with diverse and beautiful gifts, with varied and differently needy ministry locales, with assorted partnerships (with Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, libraries, schools, communities and other groups as motley as our own.) We are not Christ, but we are the Body of Christ, making God's love real with and through one another.

It has been my delight to be in ministry with you for nearly seven years (time flies when you're having fun – and I've been having a lot of fun) and we have changed over those years. We have moved from fear, anger, hurt (and why do we even want a bishop) to forgiveness, gratitude and excitement about new possibilities.

We have become missional – in at least one congregation we keep track of the ministry hours both inside and *outside* the parish! We have actually grown as the Body of Christ because we don't measure tushes in pews, but we measure wealth of partnerships.

We are committed to continuing to develop partnerships – we have come to know that our congregations and EDEO itself is only a *part* in the Body of Christ.

In the Kingdom of God we know that we belong to one another for we are all in Christ.

We know, as the old song says “we will work with each other, we will walk *hand in hand*. We know, and live our lives in the truth that we will know eternal life as we reach our hands out to those in need and to one another.

Resurrection is about our willingness to hear and heed Jesus' call to follow him: To give away what we thought we needed to keep; to die to what was and to be raised to new life. When it's about us (will we be a stand alone diocese? Will we have enough money to do this or that?) we will flounder. When we leave our boats and follow him, we discover eternal life – the Kingdom of God that is at hand!