

If He Built it, it Will Come

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Proper 12, Year A

When I was a graduate student at Villanova, I had the opportunity to lead a group of about a dozen undergrads on a week-long mission trip to Tupelo, Mississippi. Our group was just one of many who spent their spring break in cities as close as Philadelphia and as distant as those of other nations. All of this was in conjunction with Villanova's Service and Justice Experience program which annually facilitates hundreds of undergraduate students in their engagement with communities experiencing the ravages of poverty. The week-long service-learning program focuses on nurturing spiritual life and building relationships among your peers and the community you are immersed in.

Our Mississippi-based group spent its waking hours partnering with Habitat for Humanity and its evening hours lodging in the rec room of a Lutheran church on the outskirts of town. For a week, we lifted, hammered, painted, and did anything we could put our ready, willing, and able hands to. As the leader of our group, the constant question that I heard from the high-achieving Villanova students was: "What can I do next?" These students had committed their precious spring break to service and any unproductive down time was simply unacceptable. They were here to build houses, and darn it, that's what they were going to do.

I think that the attitude of these Villanova students is quite similar to Christians' attitudes towards the Kingdom of Heaven. Even in the best-intentioned churches, dioceses and denominations, there exists a deep-seated feeling of righteous responsibility for building, establishing, or extending the Kingdom of Heaven.

But the Kingdom is not ours to build, especially not with hammers and nails; and it not ours to establish, not by policies, procedures, and doctrine; and it is certainly not extended by casseroles and free lunches. The Kingdom of Heaven is not a place and it does not have a tangible substance per se. The Kingdom is not a noun, it's a verb. The Kingdom is not a thing, it's an action.

The Kingdom of Heaven is the active reign of God over all Creation and it has happened, is happening, and will happen whether we like it or not. It is both already and is not yet. It is both the promise that God's love rules supreme right now and it will be the total fulfillment of that promise on the Last Day.

The reason Christ must use a flurry of parables to talk about the Kingdom, is because it cannot be described by the limits of human language. The Kingdom is simultaneously like all of these parables, and yet it is none of them. Whatever we can point at in this world right now, which might resemble the reign of God, is merely a shadow of the Kingdom yet to be revealed. When the Kingdom comes in

its fullness, God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, death will be no more, and mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

If we can understand anything from the parables it is that the coming Kingdom promises to be a surprising and extravagant source of hope for those who have little. It is like the mustard seed that grows without our efforts, and on the Last Day surprises us by its size. It's like the yeast that quietly raises enough bread to feed hundreds. It's like the hidden treasures, that when found, are worth forsaking everything for.

The coming of the final Kingdom is the promise of a hope which many of us may never fully understand in this life. Swiss theologian, Ulrich Luz suggests that the Kingdom parables can only be understood from the position of those who need its hope the most. He goes on to say, to our particular dismay in the age of social distancing, that: "In the pleasant lounge, the hope of the kingdom cannot be understood. On the sofa, the parables of the kingdom cannot be understood. Through biblical interpretation alone, the parables cannot be understood." For many of us, the Kingdom of Heaven and the hope it espouses will only be understood from a position of solidarity with those who need it the most.

Our confusion about the Kingdom and our inability to build it does not leave us without work to do. It does not mean we should not build homes for the homeless, or establish just laws for the oppressed, or extend kindness and generosity to those who need it most.

Rather, because God actively reigns over all Creation we are called to act as if He truly does. It means that all of our righteous actions must be rooted in the dynamism of authentic relationships: a relationship with God who is the source of all hope and all action, and a relationship with those who need hope and demand action. Until the day when God's Kingdom will be fully revealed to us, we live under the reign of God which demands much from us. It is a hope we live with and a hope we live for.

In the week those Villanova students worked in Tupelo, Mississippi they did build some houses or at least portions of them and this was a wonderful service to those who needed them. While these houses did not extend the Kingdom, for several of the students, this work, these relationships with the new homeowners, and the prolonged reflection afterwards would become the occasion for new understanding. They had begun to understand what the promise of God's Kingdom

demands of us. Although they had come to the South primarily to build houses, they left with a call to live in a new way and with a new hope.

These moments are the kind that inspire us to pray “Thy Kingdom come...” These are the actions that help us understand that because the Kingdom will come, we must continue to work with, and serve with, and hope with those whose lives depend on its arrival the most.