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Matthew 9:35-10:8

THE KINGDOM RULES

When you enter into a kingdom, there is no question about who is in charge. It's the monarch: the king or the queen. The monarch holds the power. The monarch sets the rules. At least that is how it was *historically*. Kings and queens governed territories and were the supreme authority over their realm. It was typical, and still is, for monarchs to have great wealth and to live in opulence. Monarchs often sought to advance their personal wealth through the conquest of new territories and the heavy taxation of their peoples. It was common for monarchs to live in secluded palaces or castles, removed from ordinary people and their plight.

We in America don't live under a monarchy but many of the same elements of a kingdom can apply to the powerful people and systems of today—whether those are politicians and people in government or those who run corporations. Whether it is a kingdom or a democracy, people who hold power do not readily share their power. Rules made by those in power impact the rest of us and we may have little or no control over those decisions. People with power and wealth today still usually seek to isolate themselves from ordinary people. And all too often, people with power will use their positions to advance their own personal wellbeing. So we are not terribly surprised when the news reports a story about a politician who took bribes or when we read about a corporate executive who lied about their company to investors. We don't like it, but we are not surprised because those are the rules that many in power play by.

The people in Jesus' world understood the rules and practices of monarchs. They had lived under kings of their own and they had suffered under the domain of foreign kings and

emperors. The people knew what kingdoms were all about and how they operated and what to expect.

It made sense for the people of Jesus' world to think of God as the ultimate king—the most supreme holder of power and might. Many of us today would rightly object to this patriarchal image of God as a male ruler. We know that God is neither male nor female. Using exclusively male language and imagery for God is very limiting and even hurtful to people whose life experiences may make it hard for them to relate to a male God. And in truth, all of us can benefit by incorporating diverse images and terms for God beyond male metaphors.

But in Jesus' day, the metaphor of God as a male sovereign, as a king, made sense to them and their worldview of power and authority. So when Jesus starts to speak about the Kingdom of God, they nodded their heads in understanding. The image of God as their king made sense.

What did *not* make sense was Jesus' understanding of what God's kingdom looked like. What Jesus said about God's kingdom and what Jesus demonstrated about God's kingdom did not match their lived experiences or expectations of kingdoms. Take for example our reading today. Jesus talks about the kingdom of God coming near and then he demonstrates this kingdom by healing people afflicted with all manner of sicknesses and diseases. People would have understood that for Jesus to extend such miraculous healings, God's power had to be in him. In other words, if God was their sovereign, then the king's power was in Jesus. And Jesus chose to use the sovereign's power and authority not by helping the rich and the important, as kings often do, but by healing the sick and the diseased—the kinds of people no one wanted to be around.

When I was little, children would play a cruel game against children who were different in some way. The stigmatized child would be said to have “cooties,” and no one wanted to touch them for fear of getting their “cooties.” I imagine some of you recall something similar from your childhoods.

In Jesus’ world, people who were sick or diseased were thought of as having “cooties” and people didn’t want to be near them for fear of contamination. There was also the underlying belief that illness was a sign of God’s judgment against a person who had done something to offend God. So there was the added stigma of moral judgment.

But Jesus comes along, the sovereign’s agent, and begins healing and touching and interacting with the sick and the diseased. And this throws a brand new light upon God the Sovereign. God, their Sovereign, cared about the vulnerable and the outcast.

Moreover, Jesus had compassion not only for people’s physical ailments but also for the conditions of their souls. In our reading today, Jesus sees the crowds and we are told, “he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Again, we are shown an unusual sign of God’s kingdom. Kings’ priorities often lie with gaining power, exerting their influence, offering favors to those of their inner circle who might do their bidding in some way. Not many kings focus their sights on the helpless and the lost.

Notice what Jesus does next. Jesus gathers the twelve disciples together and gives *them* power and authority to carry out the priorities of God’s kingdom. And what are those priorities? Jesus tells them to cast out unclean spirits and to heal the sick, to raise the dead back to life, and to heal the outcasts and lepers so they can be restored back into the community. Life and healing are offered to the least powerful and least significant in society.

Most kings hoard their power. But notice what Jesus does on behalf of God. Jesus *shares* power, the sovereign's power. He gives his followers the ability to heal and cast out and to restore life. And he shares this power with a most unlikely crew of people. Jesus does not gather around him the wealthy and elite and accomplished of his society. No. Jesus gathers around him and then shares power with uneducated fishermen. One disciple, Matthew, was a former tax collector—a traitor to his community!

And then Jesus tells his disciples, “You received without payment; give without payment.” In other words, don't go looking to get rich off of the kingdom of God. You are not in this business to enrich yourselves.

Through Jesus' behavior and his instructions, we get a glimpse that the kingdom of God, the realm of God, follows radically different rules than most earthly domains of power. The realm of God is concerned with the least and the forsaken. The realm of God is grounded in compassion. The realm of God prioritizes the restoring of life. The realm of God is about sharing power so that everyone can participate in its activity. The realm of God includes everyone.

These are the kingdom's rules. These are the kingdom's priorities. And if we are to dwell in God's realm, if we are to live in the kingdom of God, these are the rules and the priorities we have been given for our lives.

There is among some Christian communities such a discomfort with the kingdom language in the gospel accounts because of its patriarchal connotations that they have started substituting for the word “kingdom,” the word “kin-dom, to imply that we are all kin to one another. And while I resonate with that sentiment, we are indeed kin to one another and God demands we treat one another as such, while I resonate with the concept of a “kin-dom,” I am not

comfortable with that substitution. The word “kingdom,” patriarchal as it is, acknowledges that there is a Sovereign One who is our authority. While a “kin-dom,” of equals is a laudable and worthy goal, it implies something we humans have created for ourselves. But we Christians do not abide in a realm of our own creation. We abide in God’s realm. God is the Sovereign One who sets the rules and makes demands of us.

This Sovereign One demands that we live out the kingdom’s rules of mercy and compassion, that we offer people tangible hope, and that we include those who are outcasts. This Sovereign One expects us to cast out the unclean spirits that oppress people around us: the unclean spirit of hatred and racism, the diseases of poverty and neglect, and the unclean spirit of greed and materialism. This Sovereign One calls us to raise people to life wherever they languish in despair and hopelessness. This Sovereign One tells us to notice who is harassed and helpless and then instead of judging them as welfare mothers or junkies and addicts or as undocumented immigrants, to respond with compassion and help. And yes, this Sovereign One calls us to create a *kin-dom*, a community of equals because our Supreme Authority has made this part of the rules of the kingdom.

We live in a kingdom—God’s kingdom. Jesus takes the idea of a kingdom and turns it on its head. And he calls us to dwell in this realm of compassion and mercy and justice and love every day of our lives. Because those are the rules *we* live by.