

11/03/2019

“Choosing to Abide”

Scripture: Ephesians 1:22-23; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10

Series: Abiding in the Reign

All Saints Sunday

Theme: Living in the Kingdom or Reign of God is available here and now to all who would receive Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Today we begin a four week series on Abiding in the Reign – that is the reign or kingdom of God.

Now I know that when we talk about such words as king or queen or ruler or other such words these days, most of us may only have images of the royal family of Britain or maybe even some of the utterly depraved and cruel rulers of Game of Thrones.

But as we open our bibles, our hearts and our minds, we come to know and realize the kind of kingdom or reign that Jesus has come to bring. A kingdom, as he said, is “*not of this world.*” (John 18:36) Indeed, it is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 4:17, 23, etc.)

When we pray The Lord’s Prayer, we pray as Jesus taught us, “*Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*” (Matthew 6:10 NIV)

Once again, we celebrate All Saints Sunday, as described in our bulletin. All Saints Day, November 1st, is a day of remembrance for the saints, and for some, including myself, with the New Testament meaning of all faithful Christian people of every time and place as well as those who have led exemplary lives with signs and miracles. We celebrate the communion of saints as we remember the dead, both of the church universal and of our local congregations.

Think about someone who has led or influenced you in your Christian faith. I’ll be inviting you to share a witness with us.

As lofty as they may be or seem to us, saints are sinners who have chosen to live in God’s kingdom, which is under God’s rule or reign. As saints in Christ, we do so first by turning to God in Jesus, surrendering our will to his, and accepting him as Savior and Lord. We choose to abide.

Those first disciples, whom Jesus called to follow him and made his apostles by sending them out with the power of the Holy Spirit to share the good news of new and everlasting life, were ordinary men -- as were the women who accompanied them, ministered, and witnessed with them. Their stories of coming to Christ and those who perhaps led or introduced them to Jesus, can be found in the gospels.

And those down through the centuries who heard and believed that witness, also became part of God's kingdom.

Even those, like Zacchaeus the tax collector, as I described in the children's message, could be reconciled with God. Certainly, he had wealth and the luxuries it could buy. But some of his own people would have hated him, because he worked for their Roman oppressors and may have defrauded them or others.

We might speculate on the motivations that drove Zacchaeus "out on a limb" that fateful day, and we could come up with a laundry list of reasons and inner thoughts. But Luke doesn't tell us any of that. All we know is that Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus so much that he risked the embarrassment of the moment and then embraced the new reality that Jesus offered him, without a moment of debate. (*UM Discipleship Resources, 2019*)

It is an incredible story. Now he is a new man, a changed man, already in the business of making that change. This isn't a promise; it is a description. According to Zacchaeus, his acts of giving to the poor and paying back those who had been cheated are happening already. The verbs are present tense, not future tense. He's doing it— or having it done.

So, what brought about this change? What is the beginning of this new life? Jesus says to him, "I'm coming to stay with you." Jesus did not say, "I want you to invite me for dinner," or "I want to have a chat; have your people call my people." No, he said, "I'm coming to stay"; "I'm coming to abide with you." When Jesus abides, transformation happens. Jesus comes to help Zacchaeus live up to his name. "Zacchaeus" comes from "*zakchaios*," which means "pure" or "righteous." (*adapted from UM Discipleship Resources, 2019*)

How is Jesus' abiding presence so powerful? It is powerful, because he abides always in the reign of God with the Holy Spirit, and we are invited to do the same. He sits at the right hand of God in heaven, as our Apostles Creed professes.

Zacchaeus takes up residence under the authority of God, in that moment, on the street of Jericho. Will he live there always? Will he abide in that reign for the rest of his life? Do any of us? Like the Apostle Paul writes in the Letters to the Thessalonians, we are living in the tension between the *now* and the *not yet*. Zacchaeus stepped into the *now* in that moment, but he may stumble out of it at some point. But the grace of Jesus Christ is such that we can step back in again and again. We may abide under the rule of our own hearts or our loyalties and preferences and prejudices at any time. But when Jesus comes to stay with us, we can choose to abide in the reign of God at any time. We can receive the Holy Spirit to guide us and keep us by His power with all the saints who have come before us and walk with us now. (*ibid.*)

So, who has been a "saint" (shared the life of Jesus) with you? When, how and why?

I had the pleasure of having some time to read a touching story from Guideposts (Nov. 2019) magazine in addition to The Upper Room this past week. The story was called "No Laughing Matter" by Jeannie Gaffigan, of New York.

The wife and producer of a standup comedian, she is also a mother of five children under thirteen years old. Having managed to work in a packed family life with supporting her husband professionally, she came up against the diagnosis of a brain tumor.

In the hospital room, squeezing her husband's hand, she thought, "This is really happening." After being told by one of the surgeons what her procedure would entail, the surgeon asked if she had any questions. "I have five children at home," she said, before realizing that wasn't actually a question. "The thing is," she said, "they really need me."

Her story reminded me of my own mother's story. Although I was not even a teenager, she had battled cancer. I wouldn't even have known what it meant. And my parents didn't want to tell us how serious it was, although my father, a doctor, did tell my older brother she could die. My mother prayed before the surgery, essentially telling God what Jeannie Gaffigan told her surgeon. It was by radical medical surgeries, my mother's faith, her strength, and a miracle as she described it, that she survived cancer not once, but twice in different parts of her body – and never had it again for the rest of her 89 years.

It was my mother's faith and her desire to fulfill God's purpose for her in this life that made such an impact on my faith.

So . . .

Who has been a saint in your life, to you?

How have you or do you share the life of Jesus with others?

If you haven't made that decision to receive Jesus yet and want to choose today, I invite you to pray with me . . .

"Dear Jesus, forgive my sins and come into my heart. I receive you as my Savior and Lord."

If you said that prayer with me, I encouraged to join in further fellowship and learning as a follower of Jesus. Speak with me or others for more ways to connect in God's kingdom community.

May we always be thankful for those who have come before us, who have shared and shown God's love and life as, and in, Jesus Christ our Lord!