

THE POWER OF LOVE VS. THE LOVE OF POWER

Matthew 13:31-33

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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In the spring of 1940 just after France surrendered and Great Britain braced herself for the inevitable Nazi invasion, a small group of Christian authors gathered together at their favorite pub for their weekly lunch. C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and the others, certain Hitler would attack at any moment wondered who of them would be arrested first by the Gestapo. Though none of them relished the thought of rotting away in a Nazi prison, I'm sure at least one of them was flattered to think he might be considered subversive.

Is that your image of yourself? Probably not. Most of us would rather blend in than go against the grain, and yet even a cursory reading of the gospels should convince you Christians are expected to be a subversive presence in the world.

When Jesus commanded his disciples, "be in the world, but not of it," he didn't mean we only condemn the obvious excesses of society, but he did mean we shouldn't participate in any activity violating God's will, especially if it's for your gain at the expense of others.

Of course nobody would ever disagree Christians shouldn't be involved in any activity that violates God's will in principle, but when opportunities for gain at the expense of others effects our pocketbooks, that's when the generalities of Christian principles go head to head with the hard realities of the "real" world.

Here's an example of what I mean: When you shop at the upscale stores at the mall the designer clothing you buy just might be manufactured in foreign sweatshops whose employees earn pennies a day while their bosses make huge profits. Maybe we should be more aware of this injustice, become better educated consumers and purchase similar products from the sweatshops' competitors who do pay their employees a fair wage for an honest day's work. The market would then force the sweatshop owners to pay higher wages as well, just to regain our business.

Of course the manufacturing and distributing consumer goods keeps the world's economy humming, puts food on the table and a roof over our heads. If we stop buying products, even for noble reasons, and if enough people lose their jobs then there's a recession that adversely affects your family too.

So whether we like it or not we're all shareholders in the world system, which would be fine and dandy if the world system was free of corruption and injustice. But it isn't, so we're in danger of not only being shareholders, but becoming willing cogs in a system at odds with the Kingdom of God.

That's why the Christian is called to be a subversive presence in the world.

When Jesus emerged from the world system of his time (the Roman Empire) he came proclaiming the good news of God and saying, “The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1:14-15)

The Gospels indicate Jesus’ proclamation of God’s coming kingdom was the overall theme of his preaching from the beginning to the end of his ministry and almost all his parables were about God’s kingdom piercing our present reality with overt hints of what life in the Kingdom of God would be like.

Before I continue, we should define our terms. What does Jesus really mean when he speaks of the Kingdom of God? Most of us would probably answer, “When Jesus speaks of God’s Kingdom, he’s talking about heaven.” Isn’t that what you think? The Kingdom of God is heaven, and heaven will be my reward for good and faithful living in this world.”

I think that’s what most people believe. You enter the Kingdom of God at your hour of death. But if you carefully consider Jesus’ teachings, you realize the Kingdom of God isn’t just a place or even a state of mind. Instead the Kingdom of God is a state of being, being within the will of God.

What’s the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer? “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

When God’s will is done on earth, as it is in heaven that’s where you find the Kingdom of God. Certainly in God’s time we’ll spend eternity in heaven, where the Kingdom of God will finally be fully revealed, but God’s Kingdom isn’t a gated community, God’s Kingdom emerges from its hiding place here on earth whenever someone chooses to be a subversive presence for the glory of God.

Having defined the word kingdom, let’s now define the word “subversive”: my dictionary says, “intending to subvert, especially intending to overthrow or undermine an established system.”

When Christ came into the world, born in a manger, raised in a working class family in a small and backwater village, who’d have thought his birth, ministry, death and resurrection would start a chain reaction of subversion whose goal is to overthrow the pagan world system?

We like to think America is a Christian nation, but even though the Christian gospel has been a strong presence in our society and there have always been good Christian people in the arts, business and public service still, when all is said and done, we will continue to be as pagan as when Rome ruled the world as long as human society organizes itself outside the will of God; and there will always be those as opposed to Christ and his message as Pilate was 2,000 years ago.

It sounds all doom and gloom, and it would be except for Jesus’ good news: The Kingdom of God is nearer than you think. God is on the move to claim his throne and rule over the world with justice, peace and love.

Jesus' parables of the Mustard and Growing Seeds are simple illustrations whose primary purpose is to assure us that even though the world system is corrupt and unjust, God's Kingdom is secretly emerging and unstoppable.

He said, "the Kingdom of God is as if someone scattered seeds on the ground and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how..." (Mark 4:26-27)

Over the years I've become an avid flower gardener. I prefer perennials, which are flowers that continue to live and grow year after year, over annuals, which are flowers that only live for one year. I'm always amazed that every spring and summer, without any help from me these plants suddenly sprout, grow and then flower. Just like the sower in Jesus' parable, I "sleep and rise night and day and when the seeds sprout and grow I don't know how."

I told you once before when I was seven or eight years old my mother and I planted pumpkin seeds. Every day I'd go to the pumpkin patch to watch and wait for my pumpkins until my mother told me watching them wouldn't grow them any faster. So I forgot about them, until the early fall when a neighbor informed us my pumpkin vines were crawling under the fence and into his yard. We had more pumpkins than we knew what to do with, and they appeared without either my knowing or prodding.

Jesus promised that's how the reality of God's Kingdom would suddenly break free from its hiding place and bring God's truth and grace when we need it most.

God's Kingdom breaks through our time and place whenever any Christian sows seeds, becomes decidedly subversive, and does the unexpected. When you willingly strip yourself of your props and badges of status and power and instead clothe yourself in Christ and let him live in and through you, that's when God's Kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. When you sacrifice yourself for someone in dire need that's when you unleash God's power within you bursting to get out. It's when the power of love subverts the love of power that God's Kingdom sprouts and grows.

Don't you see? This is exactly why Jesus called you to discipleship. You are expected to follow in his footsteps and finish the job he started.

Yes, Jesus came to save you but he saved you to serve others. That's why this church is here at 8240 Loch Raven Blvd., to be a faith community helping and challenging each other to go out and change the world, only because Jesus said, "Be of good cheer for I have overcome the world."

Through Christ, God invites you to become aware of God's presence, pray for God's grace and then go out and do something totally subversive for Christ and his Kingdom.