

*Sermon preached by Christopher Ingram on June 30, 2024, at Yates Baptist Church.*

I invite you to turn in your Bibles to two very familiar sections of Scripture. The first from the prophet Micah, chapter 6. You can put a thumb there or you can have one neighbor find that one. Then if you would also locate Matthew chapter 25. We'll be reading verses 34 through 40. You can put your other thumb there, but I don't know how you're going to read it. You're smart and mature people, and you will figure it out. I'll give you a minute to find it, to hear the words of the prophet, and to hear the words and call of Jesus in a powerful and memorable parable.

Micah chapter 6, verses 6 through 8, and Matthew 25, verses 34 through 40.

From the prophet:

*“With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before the Lord with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with 10,000 rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, oh mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:6-8, NIV).*

And then Jesus' extended parable and teaching from Matthew chapter 25, as time was drawing close for his own journey to the cross. It's no time for idle talk now. Jesus lays it all on the line, telling a story about days to come when the judge and king calls all the nations of the world for judgment:

*“Then the king will say to those on the right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'” (Matthew 25:34-40, NIV).*

May God bless the reading and the hearing of the word today.

Over the last few weeks, I've been talking about the nature of the friendship that God has announced is ours to experience. It is a remarkable declaration that God wants to transform the relationship that you currently know with God into a friendship. So, I

preached about the incredibly demanding and compelling vision for friendship found in Scripture. I've preached about God's desire for friendship with you and with the world. I've preached about how befriending and knowing Jesus is the context in which our friendship with God is grown. And I've preached about prayer being the enduring medium of communication, of challenge, of encouragement, of healing, and growth in that friendship with God. That's where we've gotten so far.

In some ways, if we were to summarize these first four thoughts, these first four sermons, it's about talking about friendship as seeing one another deeply. And that's an intimate thought, isn't it? It's the kind of intimacy that we find in Exodus 33:11: "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks with a friend." Or Hagar in Genesis 16:13: "She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the one who sees me.'" She's the only woman in the entire New Testament to give God a name, El Roi, the God who sees. What a name, face to face.

But you know, friendships and relationships that stay inwardly focused like that, they're at the least kind of limited and irritating. Have you ever known one of those couples and all they can do is look at each other, even at a party, even in a room, and you kind of, you want to get their attention and say there are more people here than just the two of you. In the worst case, when relationships and friendships remain inwardly focused like that, they can grow downright toxic and exclusive. They can become sort of this love affair with each other at the expense of everyone else. We all learned this in school when we started to look at the tables, and we knew where we were allowed to sit and not, and it just goes on from there.

There's something human about being so focused in myopic, in our inward gaze, that we refuse to look outside of those adoring friendships that give us so much soothing and comfort. And so, we're moving to a stage of maturity now in the way we talk about the friendship that God has with us and the friendships that we form with each other. It's more than just looking inwardly at each other and really knowing and seeing one another in all of our complexity and in all of our frailty.

At weddings, very often I'll read a series of quotes about love, and one from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the author of "The Little Prince," wrote these words: "Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but instead looking outward together in the same direction."

And so, for our friendship with God and the spiritual friendships that we form in God's love, it's going to involve looking out for one another and looking out together to our neighbors. That is what we learn from Jesus. And to look in the same direction as the risen Christ, we need to take a little time and simply remember and consider the direction in which Jesus turned his own attention. Where did Jesus look while he was on earth?

We know from reading Scripture that this had to do with something he called the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God. We heard gestures toward that even in our psalm reading today. But what does that mean? It's actually a very complicated question, and it has made a lot of our church friendships and a lot of our church relationships very testy and complicated as a result. I've noticed it for years, but I finally had a way of sort of holding on to that conflict and that disconnect when I read Scott McKnight's book, "Kingdom Conspiracy." It was written in 2014, which to me sounds just like the blink of an eye, but it's got 10 years on it now and it shows in the metaphor that he uses.

McKnight, by the way, is a New Testament scholar, he's a Baptist, and he has a wonderful ability to take very complex information as a teacher and present it in ways that are just so digestible. He likes to compel and provoke new ideas while remaining doggedly loyal to the entirety of Scripture. It's a book about the kingdom of God and specifically what we mean when we say that and how you might recognize it in our modern churches. He creates a metaphor, a dialogue, as it were, between two competing visions of church, particularly in America, and the vision of the leaders who lead them.

He calls one the skinny jeans pastor. That puts it in 2014, by the way, skinny jeans are out! But I grew up in parachute pants and pleated jeans timeframe, so I'll not throw stones. Be that as it may, it's a way of talking about the emerging church vision that's cut from a more contemporary cloth that advocates for social justice and public service as expressions of the kingdom. Very often, that expression, when it omits the name of Jesus, the one in whose name it's doing, or sets down any religious branding, is actually something that receives bonus points, because in some ways, it points to the purity of the love that delivers that care to the world. That's the large vision of the skinny jeans pastor. You might go out and clean a trail or serve the homeless and say, we did kingdom work and mean it with all your heart.

Then the pleated pants pastor arrives and hears you talk. The pleated pants pastor is a little more traditional, focuses a lot more on things like personal salvation, spiritual transformation. These are the markers of kingdom work that the kingdom of God, whether or not it ever manifests in our human community or in the material world, really finds its boundaries in the human heart. As hearts are changed, as decisions are made, that's where we see the kingdom at work, says the pleated pants pastor.

Maybe you can hear, just in the way I've charted it out, the ongoing dialogue that's happening in a lot of our churches, including Yeats, about what it means to be involved in the kingdom of God. From there, McKnight goes on to talk about the limitations and the reductions involved in each of those visions. The pleated pants approach reduces so much of the Christian story and the Christian movement into just these redemptive moments in time that are so personal, that are so individualized, that are so independent of anyone else, that you can have a change of heart and still pass by a hurting soul within arm's reach. At the same time, the skinny jeans approach is one that is so bent on changing systems

and changing the world, it neglects that call for a personal commitment and transformation in the presence of God.

It's almost like you can hear the apostle Paul sitting at one end of the table, and the epistle of James sitting at the other, asking, is it by faith or by works that this kingdom takes place?

So McKnight calls for a deeper kingdom vision that sees the work of God in personal hearts and human lives, as well as an attention to systemic injustice, serving the needs of the hurting and the lost, serving the world in Jesus' name. That call for deeper vision sounds familiar, doesn't it? That's the direction Jesus turned his gaze and attention. That's what we see in the passage we just read in Matthew 25. We see Jesus turning his attention outward to those who are in need, who are hurting, who are lost. We see Jesus calling us to do the same, to look out for one another and to look out together to our neighbors.

That's the kingdom vision we need to embrace. It's not an either/or, but a both/and. We need to care for the personal salvation and transformation of individuals, and we need to address systemic injustice and serve the world in Jesus' name. It's about looking outward together in the same direction, with the same love and compassion that Jesus showed us. It's about being the hands and feet of Jesus in this world, bringing the kingdom of God to earth as it is in heaven.