

“A Kin-dom Ablaze?”
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July 30, 2023

The other day I went out for a run around my house. The weather was pretty comfortable, I was feeling great, going at a pretty good pace for my 40 plus year old joints, when all of a sudden, I hit an uneven patch of pavement and took a tumble.

Reading today’s scripture was like that for me – everything was going great and then all of a sudden, a stumbling block.

Jesus is talking about the basileia of heaven or God. Basilea is the Greek word that appears in the oldest New Testament manuscripts. It is translated as “reign” in today’s reading from the Gospel attributed to Matthew. Traditionally “basileia” is translated as “kingdom”, basileia has a political connotation in ancient Greek. I have seen it translated as “realm” or even “commonwealth.” Here at Central we use “kin-dom”, to sidestep and subvert the patriarchal connotations of kings and kingdoms and capture how radically different Jesus’ vision of the basileia of God is from any other kingdom, realm or commonwealth in human history.

“Kin-dom” is a word first found in print in a book by Cuban-American theologian Ada Maria Isas-Diaz who said she learned it from her friend Georgen Wilson. By omitting the “g” from kingdom we arrive at Kin-dom. Kin-dom places at the center of God’s basileia the concept of kinship, the relationships of care, compassion, mutuality between people, and omits and evicts and overthrows the kingdom’s man on the throne with the crown and the scepter.

Kin-dom, for me, really captures the upside down, revolutionary vision of Jesus for life in the here and now.

That’s why I am with Jesus during most of the scripture reading. Everything is going great! The Rabbi from Galilee is really on a roll, dropping verse after verse

- The kin-dom of God is like a mustard seed.
- Leaven in bread
- A hidden treasure
- A pearl of great price
- A net cast into the sea
- A fishing net bursting with every type of fish

But then at the end, things get a little shaky.

Jesus starts talking about the “end of time” and plucking up weeds and cast them into a fire.

Where was the trigger warning Jesus? It was a bit of a bait and switch Jesus. Ending with a vision of divine judgment is, for me, like slamming on the breaks or tripping over a bit uneven pavement finding yourself flat on your back. What happened?

This is a stumbling block, for me, because we read this scripture after 2,000 plus years of Christian speculation about what happens after we die. I say speculation because while the Bible and Christian tradition does claim there is a life after or beyond death, neither has never been clear or consistent in its articulation of exactly what happens after death.

One of those speculations is Hell — the eternal, conscious torment of people who, some traditions posit, were predestined or chosen by God since the very beginning to end up in Hell. Or, according to other traditions, people who fail to respond with repentance and conversion when presented with the gospel.

At the heart of all these speculations is a theology of punishment. Namely that God's justice demands and requires punishment that in some versions resemble execution, torture, or solitary confinement that is everlasting, forever, eternal.

In our age of mass incarceration, this carceral theology is dangerous and scandalous.

Is God a prison warden? An ICE officer? A judge at a sentencing hearing?

Is this God reflective of the love and justice witnessed in other parts of the scriptures, experienced in the lives of Christians across the centuries and in our own life, is this God worth worshipping?

The simple and rational answer is, "no!"

The world does not need more punishment. More surveillance. More criminalization. More detention and imprisonment.

The USA has the sixth highest incarceration rate in the world. While the USA's population makes up about 4% of the total global population, the USA provides 20% of the incarcerated population in the world. People of color, especially the Black community, are disproportionately incarcerated. As Michelle Alexander wrote now more than a decade ago, mass incarceration is the New Jim Crow — the afterlife of slavery and segregation.

When compared with other so called developed and democratic countries I can't help but wonder if there is a correlation between the US being the most Christian and religious of those developed nations and having the highest incarceration rate?

While there is certainly a need for accountability, justice, and safety in our communities and our societies, our centuries long experiment with punishment and imprisonment have not solved the problem or even seemed to have deterred violence. I think the solution is more economic than carceral. As Fr. Greg Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries (the largest gang-rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world), “Nothing stops a bullet like a job.”

But the perniciousness of this carceral theology permeates our minds and our hearts and our spirits. We are quick to police and punish others and to police and punish ourselves. We strive for perfection. We think we are not worthy or deserving. We are afraid of falling short or being found out as failures. We are ensnared in dehumanizing each other and ourselves, constantly defining each other and ourselves by our worst moments. Are we not more than our worst moment? Are we not truly deserving of second chances, gracious assumptions, opportunities to change and grow? Truly deserving of love.

This is not the kin-dom of God. It is a nightmare. It is a hell on earth. These theological speculations have a real, material impact on our lives.

What then are we to do?

There is a way to read Jesus’ final bit in today’s scripture about burning up the weeds that sidesteps a theology of punishment.

In that reading, we follow Jesus’ instructions earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, in the Parable of the Sower, to interpret the weeds, not as individual people, but as inclinations toward greed and corruption. The plucking and burning up of weeds is, in this reading, then a cleaning out or refinement of our interior lives — not an eternal punishment or destruction of people deemed irredeemable.

Any speculation of hell and its theologies of punishment or its secular afterlife’s in Western societies as systems of execution, torture and mass incarceration are weeds — in need of being plucked up and sent up in smoke.

God’s judgment, in this reading, is not based on retribution but restoration. God identifies the weedy parts of our lives, our systems, our structures. God calls out the faults, limitations, the ideologies that harm and dehumanize; That demand punishment. God’s plucking up and burning off is an offer of grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and liberation meant to restore compassion and justice to remove obstacles and rebuild relationships with God and neighbor. It is the hope and conviction that in the end, all humans, indeed all creation, will be saved.

God’s kin-dom is ablaze with LOVE not punishment.

This view is often called Christian Universalism. It is held by Christians from across the vast diversity of Christians traditions – Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. It has solid Biblical

foundations and sympathies with various Christian theologians from across Christian history. For some Christians this is a controversial, even heretical view. For others, they have never heard of it. For others, it is a breath of fresh air as they struggle and grow in their faith.

My hunch is that for many of us connected to Central this is not a new or controversial idea. But perhaps it is an idea we could put into greater action.

There is a quote in circulation which I have heard attributed to or repeated by various Christian theologians and leaders, “if hell exists, I hope it’s empty.”

Might we not also hope for empty prisons and detention centers and full communities where our formerly incarcerated neighbors can return home and be able to find work, housing and compassionate acceptance.

In that spirit, I invite you to follow the link in the bulletin to add your name to a sign on letter from Nation Outside, an advocacy group led by people who were formerly incarcerated to support Michigan legislation to make it harder for landlords to deny housing based on criminal and incarceration records.

I also invite us all to reflect on our own interior lives and how ideas of punishment ensnare our own imaginations and impact the way we think and treat ourselves and others. What would it mean to pause and offer ourselves and others “gracious assumptions” – to say, “we and others are really trying to do our best with the resources we’ve got.” To lean into conflict and difficult situations with the goal of restoration not retribution. To fight in ways that truly holds out hope that our enemies might one day be friends.

These are small acts – like mustard seeds planted in the ground or yeast added to dough – but given enough time they can grow and rise. They are like buried treasure or grandmother’s pearls – worthy of the search and worthy of passing on to the next generation. They are like getting on your hands and knees and weeding a flower bed.

They are the kin-dom of God ablaze with love.