

**“Heaven Comes Near—That’s What Heaven Does!” [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Romans 5:1—8; Matthew 9:35—10:8**

Jesus says it’s pretty close. *The Kingdom of Heaven*, he says, is pretty close. And what’s astounding about his proclamation is that he’s not necessarily predicting anyone’s death. *The Kingdom of Heaven* he’s talking about isn’t the celestial place we go to when the heartbeat gives out. *The Kingdom of Heaven*’s at hand. Coming. Close. And if that doesn’t sound like good news to you, the chances are very good that you’d enjoy a re-run of the old *Löwenbräu*, commercial. *Löwenbräu* used to be a very popular lager, marketed around the world; and for some reason, it’s no longer available in the United States. Even so, the commercial lingers! The commercial usually consisted of a bunch of guys, who at the end of a long day, would sit around in their lawn chairs; and one of them would raise a bottle and say, “*It doesn’t get any better than this!*” And, of course, as a tag-line that’s pretty good one; it makes me thirsty. But, you see, if I happen to be drinking my *Löwenbräu* while reading through Matthew’s Gospel, I’d have to wonder: MAYBE IT DOES GET BETTER.

“These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The Kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

Heaven, of course, *does* invite on-going interpretation. In Genesis, for example, it’s synonymous with the sky, the stratosphere and the starry expanse beyond. In the Book of Job it’s where God holds court and enters a bet with Satan the Accuser. In the Letters of Paul there seem to be levels of heaven which correspond with that which “*no mortal is permitted to repeat*” (2 Cor. 12:4). In the Revelation to John the Seer, heaven includes a throne room with a Lamb whose been slain since the foundation of the world. And yet, for his part, Jesus couldn’t be more clear.

In close proximity to the people who appear *“harassed and helpless”*— within arms length of those who resemble *“sheep without a shepherd”*—the Kingdom of Heaven nudges. It infiltrates space. It comes very, very, very near... but it never coerces. And accompanying the proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven, coincidental with the words that Jesus speaks, and that the disciples speak, and that we may sometimes speak, the following activities have been known to occur: the curing of the sick, the raising of the dead, the cleansing of the lepers and finally the casting out of demons. Now what do you say! Is anybody up for some good old-fashioned casting out of demons? Wouldn't that put all the beer commercials we've ever seen to shame?

“He started talking. And while he was talking, his face would do a thing, and the voice would change, and the demon would pop out to say hi like an uninvited co-host on a podcast. Then he was back. Then the demon was back. Then he was back...” Tripp Fuller, who is a progressive, philosophical theologian, recently told this story about a man who came to his church office in downtown Los Angeles. (And, of course, if he's coming to a church, already believing that he's possessed by demons, and using that sort of language in the twenty-first century, the chances are very good that he's had some tacit exposure to the Christian Faith.) Anyway, as Tripp Fuller set aside any belief or disbelief in demons or casting them out, he met the strange, sweaty man in a safe space. “As I listened,” Fuller wrote, “here is what I was actually hearing. This guy was a horrible boss. He was making piles of money off people he treated badly. He was a workaholic. He had an addiction problem. He was taking all of it out on his family. Now, friend. If anything is going to count as demonic, that will do.

He finishes his pitch and looks at me and says, “What am I supposed to do?”

And I said, “Do you actually want [the demons] gone?” He said yes.

So I said, look... If you don't fill the space up with the love of God, they are just going to come back and bring their friends... The love of God gets rid of these things instantly — the only question is whether you trust the love of God enough to let it in. And you already know your family is hurting. You already know the people who work for you are getting crushed. The fact that you can see that means part of you is already on the right side of this...”

And, you see, after this strange encounter, Tripp Fuller found some water and baptized the guy, who then collapsed on the floor and said, “That worked.” And it worked because of what *the Kingdom of Heaven* does every time. It comes near. That's what it *DOES*. IT DOESN'T JUST SIT THERE, IN THE STRATOSPHERE. IT DOES SOMETHING TO OUR INTERPERSONAL, FACE-TO-FACE RELATIONSHIPS.

Now maybe you've noticed. Some people need their space. Some keep their distance. And so, when I'm making dinner, stirring up the stir fry, chopping up onions and mushrooms around the countertop in our kitchen, I appreciate a wide berth. By the same token, if Sheryl's making dinner and, in my opinion, using more pots and pans than are necessary I usually don't go in there (around the sink and the dish washer) because I guess I'm a little neurotic that way. *I want space, my space*. And the reason I'm sharing these intimate observations from my family life is this: Suppose the Kingdom of Heaven, coming near in the proclamation of Jesus, doesn't care about my space. And suppose, every now and again, even here, when nerves are frayed and people need their private space, what's really happening is the Kingdom of Heaven. I don't know. I'm just saying. And more importantly, Jesus is just saying.

Steven King's novel, *The Green Mile*, tells the story of a Louisiana penitentiary, where inmates have been sentenced to die in the electric chair. Eduard Delacroix is one of them, and he's a peculiar man because, although he's killed someone in his younger days, he's become incredibly tender. A mouse wanders into his cell and Delacroix befriends it, trains it and names it *Mr. Jingles*. That's how he passes the time on the prison ward, known as the 'Green Mile'... until the date and the hour of his execution are set; and then he's worried about Mr. Jingles and places the mouse on one of the gentler guards' shoulders for safekeeping. He surrenders his beloved companion because he's been told him that Mr. Jingles will be sent to *Mouseville*, and that he'll spend the rest of his life performing in a *Mouse Circus*. And of course the whole tale they're telling Delacroix is a fiction. A well-intentioned fiction. There's really no such place... except maybe... Mr. Jingles then leaps from the gentle guard's shoulders only to be stepped on and squashed by a mean-spirited guard. Just then, however, another prisoner on death row speaks up; his name is John Coffey; and even though this African American country bumpkin has been falsely accused, he doesn't seem vengeful or bitter at all. John Coffey sticks his hand through the bars of his cell and after asking for the creature's dead body, he caresses it to life.

Now, I mention this bit of imagination because maybe Mouseville is among "***all the cities and villages***" where Jesus went to teach. Yes, of course, it's made up. The whole thing is made up. But isn't the imagination a gigantic part of what he's saying and doing. Imagine a Kingdom, coming close, impinging upon the harassed and the helpless and offering what? If it's a Kingdom of Heaven, then it has a King; and if that King is the Crucified Jesus, there's hope. There's always hope. [See Romans 5:1—8.]

Victor Frankl, following his incarceration in a Nazi prison camp, wrote a book entitled, *Man's Search for Meaning*, in which he describes the hopelessness of his imminent death and the not-knowing if his wife were still alive:

"Another time we were at work in a trench. The dawn was grey around us; grey was the sky above; grey the snow in the pale light of dawn; grey the rags in which my fellow prisoners were clad, and grey their faces. I was again conversing silently with my wife, or perhaps I was struggling to find the reason for my sufferings, my slow dying. In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. ... For hours I stood hacking at the icy ground. The guard passed by, insulting me, and once again I communed with my beloved. More and more I felt that she was present, that she was with me; I had the feeling that I was able to touch her, able to stretch out my hand and grasp hers. The feeling was very strong: she was there. Then, at that very moment, a bird flew down silently and perched just in front of me, on the heap of soil which I had dug up from the ditch, and looked steadily at me."

This is what the Kingdom of Heaven *does*. It's not a static place that we go *to*. It's coming *to* us.

I had to laugh the other weekend, when we were cleaning up around the church, and Terry Nielsen climbed on top of a ladder to paint part of the shed in the parking lot. I was slightly worried with him up there. But he smiled and said something about being 'closer to heaven' up there, and that he was 'practicing...' And what's so striking about that winsome remark is that eventually Terry came back down to earth and last week, as I'm trying to navigate the space around him, he grabs me by the arm and says, "*The Peace of Christ be with you!*"

You see, that's inspiring. That's all I need. Two thousand years ago, Jesus sent out his twelve disciples, and believe or not, we are being sent in similar ways today. Northwood Presbyterian Church, of course, occupies this piece of geography, this space right here on North Monroe Street. But what if this is where the Kingdom is pressing in? What it's pressing between and against these pews and in the garden patch outside? Will we yield the space?

A couple more things in today's passage need some attention.

First, among the original twelve disciples that Jesus sends is Judas Iscariot, and in Matthew 10:4, he is identified as ***“the one to betrayed him.”*** And what I'll say about that I'll say very cautiously: Could it be that, as the Kingdom of Heaven comes near, there are also betrayals of that kingdom, that some won't give up space, that some will dig more and more into defending their own ego's? I think that's a possibility we need to be aware of.

Second, did anybody notice a huge contradiction with Jesus' instructions? Matthew 10:5 tells the disciples to ***“go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans”***—and that collides head on with how the mission is described elsewhere in very expansive ways:

- For example, at the beginning of Jesus' life, he's visited by the non-Jewish magi who come to Bethlehem from as far away as present-day Iraq and Iran.
- Then, after his death and resurrection, in Matthew 28, Jesus clearly charges the eleven who've met him in Galilee to baptize and to teach all the nations; that is, all the ethnic groups of the world.

But for this particular moment in the ministry of Jesus, the mission is limited to ***“the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”*** And if I were to venture an educated guess as to why that limitation or restriction is set, it's that Jesus prioritizes something that we might prioritize too. Who are the lost sheep? I think they are those who, at one time, have heard of *the Kingdom of Heaven*, but who believe it's so far away, they've since become disillusioned, cynical and calloused. And maybe they don't think things will get any better. It won't get any better than a *Lowenbrau in a lawn chair*. On the other hand, maybe it will. Maybe it will have to.