

Within
Luke 17:20-21
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; for will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." (NRSV)

I

One day a long time ago, my phone rang. The man on the other end of the call fumbled around for a bit and then finally said, "I want to talk to you sometime soon. Would you be willing to meet me?" I knew this young man fairly well, but I had no idea what he wanted. So we agreed to meet in a coffee shop.

When we sat down in a corner of the coffee shop with our mugs, this man hemmed, and hawed, and beat around the bush for maybe 15 minutes. Finally he blurted out: "I don't want to tell you this story, but I have to. Last week I was driving around the city at night, when I went by some young women out on the street. They were all dressed up, with makeup, jewelry, the works. I parked my truck and went over to talk to them. They looked and acted like prostitutes. Our conversation gradually got racier, and before I knew it, one of the women pulled out her police badge and arrested me for solicitation. They packed me into a patrol car, took me down to the station, and locked me in a jail cell. After a while, they let me call my wife. Since this was the middle of the night, when I called I had to get my wife out of bed. She came to the police station and bailed me out. That's why I want to talk to you: I need help."

More of his story tumbled out. He had grown up in a Christian church where the pastors set rules for how members should behave. There were rules for clothing, rules for food, rules for language, rules for social interaction, and rules for jobs. Everyone knew the rules about what you could and couldn't do, because church life was almost completely based on those rules. Moreover, both the pastors and the other members of the church watched you carefully. If you broke the rules, everyone else would know about it, and the

pastors would respond with disciplinary measures which were usually carried out in front of the whole congregation. Rule-breakers were publicly shamed.

When he finished telling the whole story, the man drained his coffee cup and asked, “So, will you help me? I’ve spent my whole life following the rules, and when I lived back home, it was easy to do that. Obeying the rules wasn’t hard. But now I’m in this city, away from my church of origin, and I’m finding it really hard to follow the rules because no one else here is following them. Those 4 hours in jail helped me realize that I have no inner spiritual life. I believe in God, but I don’t have a relationship with God. I go to church, but I don’t have a relationship with God. I’m baptized, but I don’t have a relationship with God. I never had to develop a relationship with God because back home I could just follow the congregation’s rules. I want to have a spiritual life with God so the motivation for being a Christian comes from inside of me. All my life, the motivation for being a Christian came from the outside—from the pastors, from my parents, from the rest of the church. I just coasted along, but that doesn’t work anymore. It can’t work for me anymore. I have to develop a different set of reasons for following Jesus. I’m kind of a hollow man, and I want to fill the space with God. Can you help me?”

Over the next 6 months, we kept meeting at the coffee shop. I did what I could and he did what he could, yet we both recognized this business of developing a robust inner life with God takes time. Lots of time. It was, and it has to be, long, slow work. One of the longest journeys anyone can take is moving from the outside to the inside.

II

One day some Pharisees walked up to Jesus. “Rabbi,” they asked, “when will the kingdom of God come?” This was not a trick question, and they were not trying to trap Jesus. For them it was an honest question. They were genuinely curious. They just wanted to know: when is the kingdom of God coming?” This is a question about the *time*, about fixing a date on their calendars. If this conversation were happening today, the Pharisees would be standing in front of Jesus with their smartphones in their hands, ready to punch

the date into their calendars. Will the kingdom of God come in 2021, Jesus? Or maybe 2025? Give us a date!

You notice Jesus does not answer their question. He doesn't give them a date, and so they end up sliding their phones back into their pockets.

Instead Jesus answers a different question, a question they didn't ask. The question he answers is about *place*. He tells them where to look for the kingdom, where to find it, where to apprehend it.

First he tells them where *not* to look. He says *not* to look at the stuff you can see. From some of the stories in the New Testament, it seems the Pharisees usually focused on the outward stuff, on the things they could see and touch and taste. They had rules about these things, and in their community, it was relatively easy to see if other people were following the rules or not. It seems the Pharisees kept their eyes on each other, watching for good outward behavior.

III

The apostle Paul was originally a Pharisee. In the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians, he allows himself to brag just a wee bit, admitting that back in the old days when he was a Pharisee, he had succeeded in living blamelessly under the law. He had successfully followed all the rules. Perfect. A+. In Philippians, he even makes it sound like it had been easy, almost hinting that everyone should be able to follow the rules.

Yet Paul goes on to say that following the rules isn't enough. He found that out the hard way, when Jesus finally met up with him and confronted him with the truth about himself: the truth that perfection does not make for a robust relationship with God. You can follow every rule in the book—you can even follow them perfectly—and you can still screw up your life with God.

IV

I think this is exactly what Jesus is trying to tell the Pharisees in Luke 17. If you want to find the kingdom of God, don't look outside of yourselves. Don't look at the

things you can see with your eyes. Don't expect to find the kingdom of God in Roman imperial politics, or in Roman civil religion, or in the status of the Roman economy. Don't pay any attention when someone says, "Look over there! That's the kingdom of God!" Or "Look over here, this is the kingdom of God!" No, says Jesus, instead look *inside* yourselves.

Sometimes it helps to pay more attention to the prepositions. The NRSV translates Jesus' answer to the Pharisees as, "For, in fact, the kingdom of God is *among* you." That's not really a wrong translation, but there is a better one. The Greek word in that sentence is *entos*, which literally means "within" or "inside." Therefore, a better translation might be, "For, in fact, the kingdom of God is *inside* you."

V

My friend in the coffee shop had come to the same conclusion. The kingdom of God wasn't outside. Sure, he treasured relationships with his home church. The people in his church were all good, well-meaning folks. They had nurtured him and pointed him to Jesus. They had trained him to know what was right and what was wrong. They had baptized him and surrounded him with fellow Christian travelers.

Even so, those 4 hours in jail showed him it wasn't enough. He needed something on the inside too. He did not need evangelism, because he was already evangelized. What he needed—what he wanted—was a relationship of trust in God and of love for God. He wanted to feel God in his bones, to sense God in his breath, to have God move in and take up residence. He wanted God to live with him from the inside to the outside.

VI

What about you? Most of you are already evangelized, already baptized. Where have you been looking for the kingdom of God? On the outside or on the inside?

And is there anything more that you want?

Is there anything more you still need?

VI

I'm happy to say that my friend in the coffee shop did indeed begin to recognize the kingdom of God within himself. It took a while, and it took some work. But eventually it happened. So far as I know, until his dying day the police never arrested him again. But perhaps what really mattered is that God moved in and became his intimate companion.