

*Sermon for St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church, Hardwick; June 18, 2017  
Matthew 9:35 – 10:23; The Kingdom of Heaven; by Rev. John Perry*

I wish to talk about two things today from our Gospel, things that are related: ‘authority,’ and ‘the kingdom of heaven.’

It says in the Gospel, about his disciples, that Jesus “gave them authority.”

It sometimes happens that we come upon a situation, in the world or in our daily lives, when we wish we had said something, or done something. A situation that was less than what God would have wanted. And we wish we had said or done something, having to do with the Gospel. And we held back.

Would it make a difference, I wonder, if we perceived ourselves, as having both the *ability* to do this; and the *permission* to do so, conferred by a higher power?

Because this is what the Greek word here translated as ‘authority’ means, this is what it meant to people in Jesus’ time. Both the ability to do a thing, and the right to do it. This is Jesus means, when he gives his disciples authority.

I’d like to look a little closer into the nature of this authority, and to do so I would like to look at the concept of ‘the kingdom of heaven,’ as it is used in the Gospel of Matthew.

‘Kings’ and ‘kingdoms’ are quite alien to us, in our time and culture. So I’m going to try to make some translations, keeping in mind how people in Jesus’ time understood these things.

Frankly, what got me going in this direction is that I was intrigued by the verse in today’s Gospel when Jesus sends his disciples out, telling them, “Go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

What does that mean?

Let me start by offering an analogy. It is a very imperfect analogy, but bear with me, it may help a little bit.

During the American Civil War, in the middle of the war, in January of 1863, the battles had been going back and forth, the Confederates winning some, the Union winning some. After one particular Union victory, President Abraham Lincoln used that occasion to re-frame what the war was about. The war was now about slavery; he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. I used to think that Lincoln thereby freed all the slaves, but as I studied history a bit more, I learned that he freed only some of the slaves. He freed the slaves that were in the states in rebellion against the Union. And even there, the Proclamation had effect only in the territory within those rebellious states that was under the control of the Union Army.

So let’s say there is a certain slave in the State of Virginia, in the portion still controlled by Confederate forces. And the Union Army has been making advances, with the ebb and flow of

battle. Let's say they are just over the ridgeline, in the next valley, and there perhaps they are stalled for the moment. What do you suppose goes through that slave's mind, as she stands there, looking up at the ridgeline?

She was once free, in Africa. So she remembers. She knows how she is supposed to be, how she is supposed to live. And she knows that state of being, is close to her again; very close. As she stands there, I cannot but imagine that she understands herself to *be* free, already, in her heart, in her soul. She holds herself, she comports herself, accordingly. This is a thing deeply imbued within her. As she stands there, looking up at that ridgeline.

So I wonder if the 'kingdom of heaven' might be a little bit like what was going on, for that slave. A thing she could taste in her mouth, it is that real and present, even as it is not quite fully realized yet.

Now let's look at the 'kingdom of heaven' as Matthew's Gospel understands it, as Jesus speaks of it. 'Heaven,' as it is used here, of course does not refer to the place of God's dwelling. The term is not about territory, but rather, it is about ruling power.

'Kingdom of heaven' means 'God's reign,' 'the sovereign power of God.'

This has to do with the overarching framework of one's thought, how we perceive the world and our place in it.

In the kingdom of heaven, God is the creator; God is the true sovereign, over all things and all people.

However, the present condition of the world, if you look around, clearly does not fully correspond to the will of God.

At the same time, there is a community of people in the world, faithful people who do strive to live according to God's will. People who recognize, at least in part of their lives, the sovereignty of God.

God has *given authority* to these, God's people. So 'the kingdom of heaven' refers not only to the sovereignty of God, but it also refers to this community within the world that strives to live as though the kingdom is indeed real, and true. The kingdom of heaven is not only an eternal ideal, but it is also present now, in this world, in and amongst the community of people who do God's will.

Thinking back to my imperfect analogy, if you were such a person, looking up at that ridgeline, with the Union troops about to come over, you would start, inside yourself, already to live, as though that Emancipation Proclamation applied to you, *now*. In terms of the framework, of the way you perceive the world and your place in it. This would impact *how* you now live, in the world, and with others. One might say, this gives you a certain authority. About what is real, and true. Thus, a certain ability, within yourself. A certain permission, a certain right.

Regardless of your immediate, imperfect circumstances. Which are only temporary, after all.

This may give us some idea about the nature of the authority that is given to the community, to the people of God. Authority, as in the ability, and the charge, to *live* as God's people.

The kingdom of heaven is a multi-faceted thing; there is truth in all its facets. One of these has to do with the future; the kingdom is not fully here yet. This future aspect complements and completes, how the kingdom is already a reality, within the community. Therefore we not only *take on* the kingdom, as a thing we live by, now; we also pray for the *final* coming of God's kingdom in a way that will be fully manifest to all people, in all the world. And, we put our trust in this.

So. We, the people of this church, are part of this community of God's people in the world. We thereby are given the authority, you and I – the ability and the permission, the charge – to live out God's kingdom, as best we can, in our world. And we put our ultimate trust, in this kingdom.

Go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."