

SERMON for Sunday, July 24, 2005
I Kings 3:5-12, Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

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Whad'ya Know?

No, I did not misspell the sermon title. And if we were down at the Monona Terrace Convention Center, at a live broadcast of Michael Feldman's radio show by the same name, we would all respond to the question, "Whad'ya know?" with a resounding, "Not much. You?" This Saturday morning public radio show always includes a quiz between an audience member and a call-in quiz player, and the questions are worse than any trivial pursuit game, asking for little known facts and outrageous opinions. I am always surprised, and a bit embarrassed, at how much trivia I know, and, of course, even more that I don't know. We are intrigued by trivia, I think. And by being a master of little if we don't reign over very much. On the other hand, we know lots of little things and yet can't name the all presidents of the United States, or tell the plots of Shakespearean plays, or recall the books of the Bible. Do you know all the words of our national anthem? Can you name the seven deadly sins or the Ten Commandments? Can you perform CPR, figure out how to use a map, look up on a clear night and point out the Big Dipper and Ursa Major, recite a poem to the one you love, perfectly boil an egg? Some not so very well-known, but hardly trivial. And sometimes difficult to sort out. What is important to know, and what is not? And why should we even be stretching our brains on such a hot and sweltering Sunday morning in July?

It seems that these past few weeks and even months around Lake Edge have been taken up with details - details of paint colors and tile installation, handrails and door finishes, whether or not we will be able to complete the work in the sanctuary with the overhead clerestory windows (and we will in the next weeks), packing boxes with everyone on the staff having their own color to mark those boxes, organizing this last week's days of cleaning and cleaning and more cleaning, of moving boxes and furniture and music and library books and nursery toys. This morning we can see the fruits of all of our labors, from the long-range planning committee who helped us focus our vision three years ago to the people who brought food and water yesterday to keep the workers happy. This morning we can see that this dream has come to life - still with odds and ends to be done and furnishings to purchase and arrange. And we can see that Lake Edge is poised for the future of welcoming neighbor and stranger, of being a place of Christ-like hospitality. We can be thankful for everyone of you who has contributed in some way - and that includes almost everyone who has walked in the door. For this place we call God's house, built to the glory of God, we give great and deep heartfelt thanks. As I was leaving the building yesterday in the afternoon, after everyone else had left, I reached the front door and turned to take one last look. Absolutely sparkling and orderly, ready to welcome us all this morning. And I was glad I didn't have to speak to anyone, for I was choked up, and tears started to form. And I felt the touch of the Spirit here.

The followers of Jesus wanted to know what God's kingdom would be like. They had heard the promise of the Messiah, they knew that the political situation in their part of the world was not stable with the rule of invading and foreign governors and armies, they were waiting to hear of God's plan for them. And Jesus taught them about the kingdom, and his description was not what anyone expected. First of all, the kingdom is not a place, but God's word of love embraced and embodied. And the kingdom of God is not elsewhere, but here. And the kingdom of God is not only what

we might call the "big ticket items" - huge cathedrals and mighty organs, great theological works and important Biblical translations. The kingdom of God, says Jesus, is like this...a mustard seed, which is tiny but grows into a huge bush sheltering many of God's avian creatures. Like a bit of yeast that multiplies and makes a loaf of bread large and light and delicious, way out of proportion to the small bit of leavening. Like a buried treasure, small but worth finding no matter what it costs. Like one small pearl whose value is incalculable. Like a net full of fish, all together, of every kind. The kingdom of God is all these small bits and pieces, each one by itself seemingly insignificant, together a mighty movement, a mighty force, a genuine kingdom.

Yesterday while we were moving boxes, five miles south a group of people was building a house for a family at the neighborhood under development by Habitat for Humanity. What an incredible story - board by board and bolt by bolt, offering the dream of a stable home and community to a family who might not have otherwise had an opportunity. And with hour after hour of working side by side with Habitat volunteers, a family builds a future. Not very big in the grand scheme of things, not a mansion or a castle, not an architectural statement. Just a piece of the kingdom.

And about five miles east of that neighborhood, in quieter quarters, quite a bit of hand-holding was happening, at the Don and Marilyn Anderson Hospice Center. No headlines were being made, but much comfort was being given, to those in their final hours and days, to the families and friends surrounding them. The compassion and caring that flows in and out of that center is amazing. Is death stopped there? Of course not. Does great medical research take place there? No. Hospice is filled with little pieces - a favorite food cooked and offered by the chef, a softer pillow is found, birdfeeders are filled, simple words of hope. Just a piece of the kingdom.

And then travel another five miles west and a bit north to the site of the new Boys and Girls Club on Verona Road. It looks like a huge place, what used to be a grocery store. Grand space, perhaps. And what will fill it? Little people, who need a safe haven after school. And half-hour tutoring sessions so a reading score will improve. And games and sports will be played, I imagine, chess and jump-roping and martial arts. And adults will come here to be with the boys and girls, to mentor and guide these young lives. Just a piece of the kingdom.

And head north now and a bit east to Park Street and West Washington Avenue, to a place we call the Triangle, a mix of townhouses and highrises, home to those with physical disabilities and mental health concerns. Lots of small apartments and rooms, lots of small needs - help with grocery shopping, health care, home chores and cleaning, financial oversight and the paperwork of insurance. In the middle is the Triangle Ministry where prayers are said, where people are supported and encouraged, where the lessons of the Bible, lessons of healing and hope, are discussed and taught. Just a piece of the kingdom.

Three or four miles, south again on Park Street, to the office of Madison Area Urban Ministry. Do you know how many people are in jail in this state? I must admit that I don't, but I do know it is a lot. And many of these prisoners will serve their time, will be released, and come back home to Madison. And they will have a tough time making it, finding a job, creating a stable home life, earning enough money to make a decent life for their families, being trusted and accepted by new friends, friends who won't let them get into trouble again. Madison Urban Ministry helps them, through the outstretched hands of volunteers, find their way again. It is not often a

big thing that makes the difference, just someone a returning prisoner can call on with a question, for information, for advice. Just a piece of the kingdom.

Now we are on Monona Drive, heading north and passing schools and stores and churches, golf courses and restaurants. And then we come to 4032 Monona Drive, with a curious juxtaposition of signs out front. The first one is for the 50th Anniversary of the church - a half century of a community of faith, gathering on this same spot, day after day, week after week, year after year, to worship, to learn, to serve. And the second is for the construction going on with architects of the Design Coalition and the builders Bauer and Raether. Neither sign tells the whole story, the story of all the details, all the people, all the prayers, all the love. Day after day, we witness to God's love in so many little gestures. And we are just a piece of the kingdom.

Soon these signs will come down. But the kingdom of God will continue, continue to grow wherever God's people, blessed by grace and filled with the Spirit, share compassion that grows big, justice that multiplies, peace that is worth any price. God's kingdom will continue, as we share the good news that God's is present with us now, and forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.