

## Time and Intention

By Guest Speaker John Mardis

July 24, 2005

Two things have happened since I first began to think about these comments several months ago when I was asked to lead worship today. The topic I've been thinking about the past year hasn't changed, but my thinking has.

The first event was a children's lesson I did about a month ago. I spoke about a little boy I once knew fifty plus years ago in Roswell, New Mexico, named Johnny. I hadn't thought about Johnny for years until I was asked to talk to the kids in the service. Like such things happen for me, as soon as I asked myself what I should talk about, Johnny came to the front. I didn't really have to plan my comments, I just told what seemed the most important thing about my old acquaintance.

Johnny, to refresh your memories, was an ordinary little boy with extraordinary knowledge. He couldn't read or write, he knew little of the world outside his neighborhood, he had no television, but he went to church with his parents and they told him about God. Johnny knew all about God and Jesus. He knew that God was very powerful and very good. He knew that God had made everything and everybody and loved all of it and them very much. He knew that Jesus cared about what Johnny did and didn't do. When Johnny was dilatory and disappointing, Jesus was sad. When Johnny was kind or brave or obedient, Jesus smiled and all the angels in heaven laughed. He knew the difference between right and wrong and he knew it was an important difference.

Johnny's knowledge was very concrete and very practical. He wanted to make Jesus happy, and he knew that Jesus cared about Johnny's happiness. He didn't know or care about the Trinity, the creed, the protestant reformation, or the virgin birth. Yet his faith was certain. He had no doubts about God or Jesus. They were in his corner, and it was up to him to be in theirs.

After my story, someone asked what ever happened to Johnny. Well, he grew up. He changed his name to John. He went to school, he got married and had children of his own. He took on many responsibilities which he discharged more or less well and he became a man. Eventually he turned into me. A pragmatic politician, amateur theologian, and sometime intellectual. Someone whose understanding of God and Jesus has gone through many evolutions, who has all kinds of opinions about the Trinity, the creed, and the virgin birth.

The impact of telling the story – of remembering the story of Johnny– would be hard to quantify. It has made a big impression on me. Because Johnny had something that John has forgotten. A sure faith. A belief that was not qualified and hemmed about with theories or doctrines. A very simple, concrete, practical faith. One that helped Johnny figure out how to behave and how to understand what was happening to him every day.

The second item that has really impacted me lately is the news about my step-father, Frank Greaves. Many of you have met him. Though they live in North Carolina, Frank and my mother have come to visit us in their big tin tent every year for over a decade. Frank loves the organ in this church. He hasn't loved every organist quite as well, but that is another matter. About eight months ago, Frank was diagnosed with a form of prostate cancer. He was not terribly concerned. Prostate cancer is typically very slow and quite treatable these days. Treatment did commence, and at first seemed to be working well. However, this cancer was not typical and has metastasized rapidly. This week, we learned that his chemotherapy has been canceled and Hospice has taken over the active management of his care.

Frank and Johnny are connected. Frank is a very concrete sort of guy. Very practical. Very action oriented. He has no time for theological debates. He doesn't have very complimentary things to say about egg-head preachers. He believes in doing his religion. He loves music, but he goes to church in

Marion, North Carolina, in a Methodist congregation that has terrible music, in his view. He never misses a Sunday that he is home and can get out of bed. He isn't in church today, I am sad to say. I have never had a conversation about theology or even about religion with Frank, but I know a lot about his views.

I have watched him for years being the best neighbor anyone ever had. He and mom retired to the South after he had lived sixty years in northern Illinois. He and his neighbors each thought of each other that he and they were the most peculiar people each had ever met, but it didn't take long for everyone to recognize his quality. He was always there when someone needed a hand. He loved to talk to strangers about their work, about their house, about tools or bees or any practical thing. He was genuinely interested and concerned. He loves to travel, and since he retired has been around the world and all over this country and Canada. He had the same conversations in China and Denmark as he had here in Iowa.

Now he is dying. He is not happy with the process and the indignities he must endure, not least of which is being forced to allow others to care for him. That has always been his job – taking care of other people. But he isn't worried about the final act. He's tried to do his part all his life, and succeeded more or less well. He trusts God to do God's part at the end.

And there you have the connection. Both Johnny and Frank, though they are separated in time by more than seventy five years, at the bottom have the same faith. They trust God. Neither expect God or Jesus to make their life easy or to expect less from them than their best. They believed that God was going to do what God promised. It was up to them to do their part. Neither are proud people. Neither care if anyone knows about their good works, because they know Jesus and God are paying attention, and they know, and that is enough.

Naturally, I am drawn by now to the passages in Mark and Matthew. Mark 10: 14-15. "Let the little children come to me ... for it is such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

And Matthew 18: 3-5. "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven."

My original topic for today was Seeking the Kingdom. The parables we heard today speak of the importance of the kingdom. Indeed, I think that the core of Jesus' good news was that the kingdom of God was not only the most valuable thing available in the life of a believer, it was accessible! So much of what Jesus spoke of, and so many of his parables revolved around the kingdom, or as it might also be translated, the reign, of God, beginning with his first public pronouncements in which he echoed John the Baptist, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!" Later he clarifies this by saying "The Kingdom of God is within you."

Jesus spent his ministry trying to arouse the interest of the people in living a righteous life under the rule of God, not by working on their feelings of guilt, but by describing how attractive and wonderful life in the kingdom of God is. His goal was to create a strong desire for that kind of life in all of his listeners. Of course, the important next step was drawing the map to the kingdom and explaining how one enters it.

It's all action. The Buddhists practice a kind of alert quietism that fosters a heightened awareness without desire to effect the observer's world. Ours is a more vigorous religion. We are called to action. Listen to the words of Jesus. "Repent. Seek ye first the kingdom of God. Knock and it shall be opened unto you. Ask, and it shall be given. Seek and ye shall find. Love God. Love your neighbor. Feed my sheep."

I believe that Johnny was and Frank is close to the kingdom of God. They both acknowledge the rule of God over their lives in simple, concrete, active ways. We can learn much from their approach – do right as you understand the right, take care of the other children of God as you can, when they need it, and

let God take care of the rest.

More, however, is called for. Jesus tells us that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness are especially blessed, and they will be satisfied. He calls us to seek, and then we will find; to ask, for then it will be given; to knock, and the door will open. Active intention to seek the kingdom seems to be a requirement.

Intention. A goal. We all of us have as a goal to be a good person, to not be an embarrassment to those we love, to live a Godly and good life. Jesus says it is not enough to have a goal. We must work toward it. “Pray without ceasing” is another action directive in the new testament. It all seems overwhelming. We’re so busy! We are so tired. We are so distracted. Have there ever been a people so obligated as we? When will we have the time to devote to seeking the kingdom? Perhaps we are insufficiently motivated.

Jesus in his parables is trying to show us just how incredibly valuable life in the kingdom is. Not only is the one who enters transformed and lives a new life of joy, but the end result is a life in eternity spent in the presence of God.

We mistrust joy. Even as we seek it in our endless quest for entertainment, real happiness is suspect in our culture. Truly joyful people make us wonder if they are on drugs!

And yet most of us know what joy means. We have experienced it in our families, in our work, in moments of great pain and subsequent relief. We have found joy mostly at times and places where we weren’t looking for it. And in those times we have a hint of what the kingdom is like all the time.

The Kingdom of God is, at least in this context, a relationship between a person and God; one where a person comes so completely into sympathy with God’s presence in the world and obedience to God’s way that God reigns in hesh’s whole life, transforming it utterly. Such a surrender must be complete – half-hearted and luke-warm may bring you close enough to see the light in the doorway, but it won’t take you though the door.

Buyer’s remorse and regrets for the life being left; fear of the unknown future in a life lived in harmony with God, being led by the Spirit; wanting to avoid the pain of pulling away from the mold of conformity with this world – all leave the would-be citizen of God’s kingdom much like the hungry waif with hesh’s nose pressed against the window of the bakery longing for the goodness of the sweet pastries within but fearing to go in the doors.

Jesus says, “Knock, and the door will be opened for you.”. Even so, after the door is opened, you have to actually walk in. Even God cannot make you choose to be part of His Kingdom. Your choice must be wholehearted with no turning back. Keep your hand on the plow – hold on.

There is no time like the present to begin, to seek, to ask, and to knock. It is never too late; it is never too soon; it is always the correct time for us – the correct time to repent, turn back to the ways of God, to recall that the Kingdom of God is at hand – the proper time to forgive ourselves, our neighbors, and our enemies and get on with God’s work of love – the right time to practice kindness, generosity, hope, and patience. Our time to trust God is always now. Our time to believe that our strength and gifts are adequate to the task at hand never passes.

We have the wonderful gift that no choice we make is irrevocable – though we may not escape the consequences of our past choices, every moment brings the opportunity to choose again – to choose God. Though I may have turned away from God, God has never turned away from me. Our time to experience God’s healing grace can be now – it is always time to make that choice.

If we live in God’s time, it will never run out. We will never be too early or too late for God. Any times and all times are the best time to embrace eternity. Knock on God’s door right now – we’re just in time.