

## **Sermon for November 22: Annual Meeting Sunday Sermon**

We again have held our annual meeting on the last Sunday of the liturgical year, a day when the lessons lead us to think about the kingship of Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is one of the central subjects of our faith and proclamation and one of the most mysterious.

Some say that Jesus initiated the Kingdom of God in Galilee around 29 AD, then the powers of this world rose up and extinguished it on the Cross and here we wait for Jesus to bring the Kingdom back in again.

Others posit that the Resurrection means that the Kingdom continues, indeed that the church is the Kingdom of God, a kingdom we have the power to enlarge as we preach the gospel and share it.

Others see the Kingdom as an entirely future event, toward which we must look with expectation and consistent preparation.

I think the Kingdom of God is an overlapping reality.

St. Paul's speaks in Romans and elsewhere about two ages; a present age, ruled still by the powers of sin and death;

And a coming age in which Christ will be all in all, an age of perfect peace and freedom in which we will all enjoy Christ's final triumph and a wondrous eternal vision of God.

Our hope is to live in the age to come even in the present age, to overcome the powers and leaders of the present age with the forbearance and love of Jesus' age, the age to come.

We stand in the space where the two ages overlap.

That is a tall order; and that's why being the Body of Christ, being the Church has never been easy.

On this annual meeting Sunday, I don't need to pretend that everything is perfect in our life together, as though the Kingdom of God is here.

Nor should I neglect the signs of Resurrected life that are powerfully present in this community of faith.

The Kingdom of God is already and not yet; the Church of the Resurrection is already and not yet as well.

There are times when the powers of sin and death hold sway here; there are times when I am amazed at the the goodness, generosity, and power of God that is to be know in this place and among you.

Church leaders need to take care to be aware of both realities; in themselves and in the congregations they serve.

I was reminded of that when we studied the two letters to the Thessalonians and the Letter to the Romans this fall.

St. Paul had a gift for shaping his congregation's self-esteem.

He gave thanks for them in the most melodious terms as he opened each letter.

I have heard of the grace and peace that reign in your congregation, of your powerful ministry, your services of praise, your giving to the poor, your abiding hope in Jesus.

And he'd sympathize with them; carefully acknowledging the difficulties of their context for ministry, the presence of those who opposed and persecuted the saints of God.

And then, if heads were getting too big, he'd remind them not to think to highly of themselves, not to imagine themselves too wise, or so mature in the faith that they had no need for teaching and reproof.

Paul knew his churches were already and not yet.

There are lots of people studying congregations who will tell you what makes for a spiritually and organizationally healthy church.

There is the Faith Communities Today group at Hartford Seminary; another

is the US Congregational Life Survey.

They survey congregations, asking what church leaders about their sense of the health of the congregation.

Then they look at the numbers, at attendance and giving and other measurable forms of participation.

Then they ask about the practices and habits of the congregation; look for the correlations, and tell us what good practices often produce healthy congregations.

They tell us that a healthy congregation provides regular training for its volunteers and regularly offer recognition for their service.

Healthy congregations practice hospitality to newcomers and quickly offer them opportunities to serve; reading, singing, ushering, etc, and inviting them become involved in a social ministry.

Healthy congregations train lay leaders extensively and equip them for the work of Christian leadership.

Healthy congregations offer powerful worship and preaching and multiple services in different styles.

Healthy congregations devote serious time, care, and resources to ministry with children and youth.

We are blessed to be a congregation in which many of those good practices have already taken root.

Some of them need more attention.

I want to commit more of my time in the year ahead to studying and training with lay leaders in our church, to take our ministry deeper.

Getting back to St. Paul and the issue of congregation self-esteem, I wonder how you'd gauge ours over the last 50 years.

There have been peaks and valleys.

Think of the enthusiasm that built this church in 1934 and paid for it by 1939; the health and vitality that was routed into building the Parish House less than 20 years later.

But there were also times of decline, periods of poor relationships between rector and congregation, the days when we reduced our services and did not meet our goals.

You have told me that it was not so long that we had no need for a nursery and that the Treasurer could not write checks until the Sunday deposit was posted.

Every congregation spend some time in the wilderness. We give thanks that the Holy Spirit has led us out of it.

But I will not be so arrogant as to proclaim that we are in the Promised Land.

It is still around the corner, as it always is.

The Promised Land and the Kingdom of God; just over the horizon, keeping each other company, until Jesus decides to get us there.

In the meantime, we have a blessed foretaste of that milk and honey, of that great, cosmic feast in our life together as the church.

Even as I urge you one, I give thanks for the unmistakable goodness of the work God has begun among us.