

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

June 17, 2018  
*11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
Matthew 6:25-34

### **Kin-dom Building for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Yesterday morning, in St. Louis, Missouri, the General Assembly of our denomination convened for its 8-day meeting. This gathering of church leaders from across the country meets every 2 years and in many ways is a celebration of who we are as the people of God. The official voting commissioners come from each of the 170 regional presbyteries. This group of commissioners is one half ministers and one half ruling elders. As some of you have heard me say in our membership classes, the founders of the presbyterian form of government felt that when it came to the governance of the church, the ministers of the church had to be kept in check by the ruling elders. And by watching out for one another, ministers and elders together seek to discern where the Holy Spirit is leading the church in its day.

This year, as you may know, a member of our congregation, John Patterson, is the elder commissioner from our Presbytery of Yellowstone. So while we're interested to pay attention each time the General Assembly meets, this year in particular will be interesting knowing that John is among those who will be voting on hundreds of items of business before the assembly this week.

Amidst the voting commissioners of the assembly are a variety of what are called advisory delegates who are there to present their perspectives and insights as a way of informing the commissioners in their deliberations. The largest of these groups of advisors are Young Adult Advisory Delegates—young Presbyterians from each of the presbyteries across the country. In addition, there are advisory delegates representing theological students, overseas missionaries, and representatives from other Christian denominations.

But it's not all business and deliberations and decisions that take up the time and attention of the General Assembly. Worship, study and devotion are a big part of the time that is spent together. And while there are over 500 voting commissioners, there are twice that many—more who come together each time the assembly meets. These are regional and national staff people, as well as many ministers, elders and church members who come as guests and observers. Among such observers this year is our church member Judy Patterson, John's wife, who will be soaking up as much as she can of what goes on during the week of worship, study and decision-making.

Those who are interested in following the progress of the assembly can do so online by simply Googling GA223—that's G-A-2-2-3. Many of the large group sessions will be live-streamed at the website. You can also get news releases as well as sign up to get the daily news summary. It's GA223 because this is the 223<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly meeting. We presbyterians have been around for awhile.

The planning for each General Assembly meeting begins several years before the actual meeting itself. For example, when I was at the 222<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly meeting in Portland, Oregon, two years ago, the committee that was planning the meeting going on in St. Louis this week made a presentation on the last day of the Portland assembly in which it shared much of what had already been planned, including the theme around which the assembly would gather.

It's that theme that I want to talk about for a bit this morning. It comes from the passage in Matthew's gospel that we just read in chapter 6. The key verse is the first part of verse 33. "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

The leaders and planners of this meeting chose this verse as it relates to how it is that we interact and live with one another. This is made even clearer as the Bible teachers unpacked the word

kingdom. And along the same lines as was shared from this pulpit last Sunday, this word takes on a more nuanced meaning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when we talk more about kin-dom than kingdom.

Kings and queens and royalty in our world today are less in the forefront of political and governmental affairs and are more understood and experienced in a cultural and societal way, if at all. Therefore a more helpful understanding of this word is to play with it a bit as it is translated into contemporary English - hence the made up word of kin-dom that is nevertheless packed with meaning.

The use of the word *kin* lifts up and points to how we are related to one another as fellow human beings. As human beings we are naturally and intrinsically connected and bonded.

When we talk about the kingdom of God, we're taking this understanding of our connectedness to a deeper and more profound level. In talking about the kingdom of God, it becomes clear just how much our creator God intends for us to live in community and harmony with one another. So when we talk about the church—that is the church universal made up of Christians everywhere—we're talking about how it is to be a place of welcome and hospitality for all people.

In our church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the General Assembly symbolizes the Christian church in its fullness. It is our opportunity to declare to the world that it is God's intention that the human community be joined and connected to one another in bonds that cannot be broken. The church's constitution declares that we are to be "the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity." This means that we as a church are to set the example, and even lead the way as we seek God's transformation of the world community.

This then is the basis for the theme of this year's General Assembly: "Kindom Building for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century."

This theme couldn't be more timely: "Kindom Building for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Rather than coming together and building bonds of community concord, more and more there is a call to hunker down and batten down the hatches as we divide and separate and segment communities and the world into those who are good and those who seek the undoing of the good.

It would seem that the further we live into this 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in our nation, that the ideals and values and foundations upon which Christianity is based appear to be fading into the background and periphery. No longer can we assume that those who are the social and governmental leaders of our nation at the local, regional and national levels have even a passing knowledge and understanding of basic Christian values. More and more this is coming to the fore when governmental leaders seek to find a way to justify unpopular or untenable, and even unjust policies.

The most recent example is the controversy that has developed over the US government policy of separating minor children from their parents upon unauthorized entry to the United States along its southern border. Whatever the source of this unjust, inhumane and frightening practice, it is a travesty for anyone to suggest that there is a biblical basis for it.

Let me be clear as have Christian leaders of all stripes, from evangelical and conservative to mainline and progressive, there is nothing at all in the Bible that condones or supports any policy that breaks up families and tears them apart. Such policies are antithetical to the love that God has for human community that is most clearly and beautifully expressed within the family unit. My dear friends, brother and sisters in Christ, God's heart is breaking over this practice in and of itself and doubly breaking over the claims that somehow it is justified under God's watchful and loving eye.

As people of Christian faith, we must take every opportunity to set the record straight with those who don't know better than to accept this misguided rationale. And furthermore, it is time for us

to call for a stop to this policy of forced separation. It is well within the authority of those we have elected to lead to put an end to this despicable practice.

This is but one example, although an extreme one, of how out of the mainstream the role of the Christian church is and of its fading influence in the national conversation.

As Christians we know better. We know what it is to live in God's kingdom and it is for us within the church to be visible and noticed for the ways in which we model a different way, a way of love and compassion and community.

This week, the leaders of our church will be studying, debating, deliberating and ultimately deciding what they perceive to be the will of God for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in our day and time. Many of those decisions will relate to how we live in the world today. Many of those decisions will call attention to alternative ways to live in relation to the wider secular culture.

In many ways, the Christian church in our day, while no longer as prominent and central to the common life of the community as it was in the last century, has been freed in this new century to be a counter-cultural force that causes others to take notice of alternative ways and perspectives that would move us closer together and into relationships that bring about peace and reconciliation.

As troubling as these times in which we live can be, it's comforting to read the words of Jesus that follow regarding kingdom building. He says, "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." (Mt. 6:34)

As part of the preparations for this year's General Assembly, a new hymn text was commissioned to put words and music together to give expression to "Kingdom Building for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Mary Louise Bringle, a prolific hymn writer, who by the way headed up the committee that developed our current *Glory to God* hymnal, wrote this new hymn, "Draw the Welcome Circle Wider." It's the insert in the bulletin. [We'll close our service with it today.] [We'll be singing it in just a few moments.] It is a powerful text that reminds us of God's vision for human community.

Before we sing though, I want us to enter into solidarity with the 223<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly as a worshipping community. Yesterday, at its opening worship service, the assembly and all who were gathered together at the America's Center in St. Louis recited together a portion of our church's Confession of 1967. While this confession is now over 50 years old, it remains remarkably relevant for the context in which the church finds itself in 2018. The portion the assembly recited is on the cover of the bulletin. As the group recited it yesterday, and as we recite it today, we are participating in "Kingdom Building for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." I invite you to stand, as you're able, and read it together.

We believe in our Sovereign God who rules in Jesus Christ and stirs hope in us all. With an urgency born of this hope, we, the church, apply ourselves to present tasks and strive for a better world. We do not identify limited progress with the reign of God on earth, nor despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope, the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God. "Now to God, who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

*Confession of 1967 (adapted)*