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BEFORE SCRIPTURE –

Jesus frequently talked about the “Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of Heaven”. There are 124 different places in the 4 gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – where Jesus refers to the Kingdom of God – the Kingdom of Heaven. We pray the Lord’s Prayer each week where Jesus taught us to pray “Thy Kingdom come” and in numerous parables he says the Kingdom of God is like a farmer growing seed, a treasure buried in a field, or many other analogies.

What did Jesus mean by “Kingdom of God?” One way Jesus used the phrase was comparing the Kingdom of God...a kingdom of justice, love and freedom to the Kingdom of Rome...a kingdom of injustice and oppression.

When Jesus used the Kingdom of God I believe he also meant “THE LIVING PRESENCE OF GOD”. The Kingdom of God is that time and place where God is fully present and fully experienced by human beings.

Today’s Bible readings focus on 3 places where Jesus tells his followers that the Kingdom of God or the living presence of God is with them right now, in their present situation.

Mark 1. 14-15, Matthew 10.7, Luke 17.20-21

Leo Tolstoy said, “The only power you have is the power of right now.”

Think of this chair. I may regret that I never got around to moving it yesterday. I may hope that I will move it tomorrow. Where does my power to move the chair actually reside? RIGHT NOW. We

often feel so powerless because we spend so much of our lives dwelling in the past or worrying about the future.

It is in the present moment that we are able to receive and give love. Think about how profound and life-giving it is when someone is truly present to you, truly paying attention to you, truly listening to you. There is tremendous power in the present moment.

I love Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*. After Emily dies in childbirth, she asks the Stage Manager if she can return home to relive just one day. Reluctantly he allows her to do so, but urges her to pick an insignificant day.

So she goes back on the day of her 12th birthday. And she is absolutely startled by the beauty of the ordinary, and by our lack of awareness of it. She cries out to her mother, "Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me...it goes so fast we don't have time to look at one another."

And she asks the Stage Manager, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?" The Stage manager replies, "Not really...maybe the saints and the poets."

We are continuing our Lenten path of Inward Journey...Outward passion...recognizing the inward journey without outward expression...recognizing the inward journey without outward expression can become narcissistic and self-absorbed. The outward passion without the inward journey can lead to burn-out or pursuing our own agendas and ego's without a real discernment of where God is leading us. There is tremendous power when we become aware and in tune with the presence of God's love in our lives and we become a conduit for that love to flow through us into the lives of others.

The power of Jesus is that he lived a life fully in the present and our Bible readings today remind us that he invites us into the power of the present.

Do you remember in elementary school when the teacher started every day taking attendance. They would call out your name and you would respond by saying “PRESENT”. I know I would say I was present but I was rarely fully present. My body may have been there in that classroom but my mind was thinking about something that had happened the previous day or thinking about what might happen later in the afternoon during recess. I may have been present in body but my mind and spirit were usually someplace else and I wasn't at all aware of what was going on around me in that moment.

Martin Buber said, “Reality is new every moment and every moment it asks to be shaped by our hands and our heart.” Every moment life is taking attendance. Are you present?

Are you fully present in this moment right now or are you a million miles away?

It's actually very difficult to be fully present in any particular moment of life because our minds are always drifting either to the past or the future. Consequently, it takes some focused attention to be fully present in any particular moment of time. Yet, it is only in the present moment that we have the power to receive and give love. So, learning how to be fully present may be one of the most important spiritual disciplines there is.

The radical message that Jesus came into the world to share is that God is fully present in this and every moment of life...God is always fully present whether we are aware of it or not.

I believe prayer is the intentionality of making your heart available to God whose heart is always available to us. The apostle Paul

encourages us to “Pray without ceasing”. Maybe that means recognizing that in every moment God is fully present.

A little bit of background...the Jews in Jesus’ day believed that God was active and present in the past and would be active in the future but that God was not present in their current moment of life. Jews looked to the past, to the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the great things God did. They focused on how God called Moses to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt and worked miracles to free them. They looked to the past as the good old days when God was alive and active in the world.

And, sometimes, they focused on the future when they believed a Messiah would come and restore Israel to its former glory. They believed God had done great things for them in the past and God would do great things for them in the future, but God was not present in this current moment.

And the current moment was rough. They were dominated by the Roman soldiers...had to pay high taxes and lived in hunger and poverty. Life was difficult. From their perspective, this wasn’t a good time to be alive. They didn’t believe God was present here and now in their current situation.

Jesus came with this radical message that God is present, right here, right now...in this moment and every moment for those who pay attention...for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Jesus asked his first followers to be fully present...the Kingdom of God...the living presence of God is HERE...now...breaking into this very moment.

In Luke’s Gospel, the Pharisees came to Jesus saying, “ Jesus, you are always talking about the Kingdom of God. WHEN is it coming?”

Jesus says, “ The Kingdom of God doesn’t come by looking to the future and counting days on a calender as if to believe that at some time in the future God will arrive. No.” And Jesus says as clearly as he can, “The kingdom of God is already here, within you and all around you, RIGHT NOW.”

The good news Jesus taught his disciples and teaches us is that God is present right here, right now in this very moment and in this very place but only those who are fully present will experience God’s living presence. It is in the present that we experience the gift of God’s presence.

The problem isn’t with God. God is present. The problem is us. We are not fully present, attentive, mindful, aware.

The inward journey is learning to make yourself available each moment to God who is always available to you. God is present. Are we present?

We can’t live in the past. It’s over. We can’t live in the future because it hasn’t come yet. We often fail to live at all because we are dwelling on the past or fretting about the future not realizing our real power is in the present moment.

As the saying goes, ‘Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That’s why we call it the present.’

I love the story of the two Buddhist monks who were walking along a path in Japan after a rainstorm. They came across a young woman who wanted to get across the muddy road without getting her kimono soiled. The older monk promptly picked her up, carried her across the road and set her down safely on the other side. Then the two monks continued their journey walking along beautiful mountain paths with spectacular views. After about five hours of walking, the young monk said, “I don’t understand. We

monks are not supposed to touch women and you carried that young woman across the road.”

The other monk said, “Are you still carrying her? I put her down on the road 5 hours ago and have enjoyed the beauty of our journey along the mountain path. Have you?”

One monk was fully present...responded with love...did what needed to be done in the moment and then let it go and continued to enjoy the journey along the mountain path.

The other younger monk was still carrying the memory of what had happened 5 hours earlier and because he was focused on the past he missed the beauty of the mountains around him...missed the gift of the presence of his brother walking beside him. Many of us do the same thing don't we? We carry memories and baggage from the past, or, we carry worries about the future which prevents us from fully enjoying the life and beauty around us in the present moment.

Until we can let go of the baggage from the past, until we can forgive those who have hurt us, until we can forgive ourselves for the things we regret, until we can let go of the past and surrender it to God, then it is like a weight in our minds and on our backs that prevents us from living fully, loving fully and enjoying the gift of each moment.

There is a love in this present moment that is always available to us...a love that invites us to make our hearts available right here...right now...a love ready to receive the weight of our past and the worry of our future that we might live in the present moment.

Last year I told the story of Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor who wrote **MY STROKE OF INSIGHT**.

Dr. Taylor was a brain scientist who had a massive stroke on the left side of her brain at the age of 37 which made her unable to walk, talk, read, write or recall any of her previous life.

The left side of her brain controlled the rational, logical and intellectual side of her life. When that part was gone, she had to depend on the right side of her brain which is the feeling, intuitive, creative, spontaneous part of us.

When she was in the right side of her brain, she said she felt like she was in nirvana. She had an overwhelming feeling of peace and acceptance.

Today after 10 years of recovery efforts she retrained the left side of her brain to read, write, think and talk but her stroke gave her a stroke of insight and made her realize how important the right side of her brain is.

She says we are so left-brain focused...so logical and rational that we have neglected the right side of our brain which is the part of our brain that brings us peace, forgiveness, acceptance and love. Many believe spirituality is predominantly a right brain experience. Yet, we so often approach our faith with the left-side of our brain...thinking about it...even arguing about it...rather than experiencing it...living it.

Jesus said, "God is present in this very moment, but only those who are fully present tend to experience God's living presence." Dr. Taylor says that we find deep inner peace in the right side of our brain when we leave the left-side that is always judging, analyzing, fretting, worrying, evaluating and invite the right-side by learning to live in the present moment...learning to be fully present in the right here, right now.

Jesus, who wasn't a brain scientist, but who was so available to the presence of God in each moment that the power of God's love literally flowed through him transforming the lives of those around him.

And Jesus said that same power is available to you, "The Kingdom of God is within you...as you learn to live in the present moment."

I invite you to take this card and these prayer beads and be very intentional and attentive this week.

Breathe

Be present

Be kind

God is present in this very moment, but only those who are fully present themselves experience God's living presence.

God is present. Are we?