

This month, we have been learning about the Upside-Down Kingdom in our sermons.

What a blessing to know God's kingdom is full of peace and justice, and that this kingdom is not like the ones we are used to. But, hold on a second. If anyone here is like me, I am also experiencing a dilemma.

We are comforted by the fact that this kingdom is not like kingdoms and powers of this world.

God is bringing peace and justice to a chaotic, unjust world. However, on the other hand, there is a sense of uneasiness on the inside of knowing who I really am. The characteristics of this upside-down kingdom are far from who I am. We know who we truly are, and we know which kingdom we come from. It definitely seems like we don't fit in.

For those who experience this dilemma, I would like to say, "Let's not be discouraged. Let's guard our hearts from despair creeping in. Let us listen to the Spirit and allow him to take us beyond our dilemma."

Our dilemma has its place. We feel the discomfort because we are starting to understand the differences. We are beginning to tell apart what is of God's kingdom and what is not, and the Spirit is enabling us to see who we really are. Let us humble ourselves and allow the Spirit to mold us. We are still in the process of nurturing our faith; and it is written in Hebrews that

Christ is the author and finisher of our faith. Not us!

And it is also written in Hebrews 12:11:

...All discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

So, as we ponder on the things of the kingdom of God, I want to encourage all of us to not lose heart, but to keep our hearts open to the Holy Spirit. Let us be encouraged that this discomfort of encountering something which is so peculiar is

actually caused by a heart that is gradually turning towards God. Let us not despair that we are way far off from God, but set our eyes on Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Hebrews 12:1 says:

(S)ince we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God, (interceding for us.)

When I think of a peaceful place, I usually go back to my childhood in Jamaica. Not because of its famous resort places, but because there is something very sweet about our hometowns. Mind you, Jamaica is not the safest place. Jamaica is rather famous for its drugs and crimes when you are outside of the well sheltered resort areas.

But if I may brag a bit about my country, Jamaica is a beauty with deep green mountains and bright turquoise colored ocean. Fresh island breeze flows through the day, and the scent of night jasmine tells us that it is time to wind down when the evening comes. Growing up, I lived in a house that had a veranda. In Jamaica, we did not have to be rich to live in a house with verandas. Most houses came with it. Verandas were a place where we had good conversations. Neighbors and friends, and many unannounced visitors could just stop by to say hi. We would serve refreshments and enjoy the company of each other. Back then, most of us did not have phones so most visits were surprises. Many visits turned into future dinner appointments, and then the party moved inside. Going through my pictures, there were lots of them taken at the dinner table and on the veranda.

(illustrations deleted: personal stories)

You see, hospitality is a beautiful thing, but it comes with its risks.

Now Israel had laws about hospitality, but at its basis, the logic was, “you were once the ones in need, so now it is your turn to take care of the ones around you.”

The passage that we read today is about hospitality. Jesus was invited to have dinner with a group of Pharisees. In Jesus’ days, Pharisees were religious leaders who had power in certain parts of Israel. In the book of Luke, they are often antagonistic to Jesus. Jesus did not specifically belong to a group but walked around with some untrained people. By this time, there was a tension between Jesus and the pharisees, and they were starting to be very suspicious of what he was doing. This dinner invitation was awkward, because they were quite ready to confront him.

But Jesus is amazing. He still went knowingly. He does not turn down this invitation. Even with frustrations at what they are doing he does not treat Pharisees as enemies. Even when they close hospitality to others, he does not close hospitality with them.

So, Jesus enters this Pharisee’s house, but sees something strange. It looked like the seatings were not set, and they all had to sort out who was going to sit where. But as they chose their seats, they were striving for higher ranks, the better seats.

Not a pretty sight. Even something like a generous place of hospitality could be twisted and marred into becoming a platform of self-aggrandizement.

In the midst of all this jostling, it seems like there was one person who tried to make a nice comment about the Kingdom of God. He started to comment on how wonderful God’s banquet must be, so Jesus shared this parable we read today.

There was a banquet, and the invitations were sent out. When it was time for the banquet, a servant was sent out to escort people in, but the people who were invited made some ridiculous excuses and rejected the invitation on the day of the banquet. One man made an excuse based on his property, another made an

excuse because of his oxen, and another made an excuse because he just got married.

None of these excuses made much sense, but they all sent out a message to the host that he is not worth their time nor their interest. They did not respect him. I don't think the Pharisees saw themselves as the ones who were rejecting God's invitation, but I believe Jesus was painting them in that light.

There is a contrast here. Jesus was invited to dine with the Pharisees, but the true host was Jesus himself. He was the one bringing the invitation to them. What I mean is that, the Pharisees were given a promise about the messiah. This messiah was supposed to lead his people into God's kingdom. Ironically, they studied and studied about this Messiah and God's Kingdom for generations, waiting for the promise to be fulfilled, but when the Messiah finally appeared, the great majority of them rejected him so easily without taking a closer look.

The parable does not end there. The Bible says that the host of the banquet got furious when he heard about what had happened. Then he commanded his servant to bring in the people who had been pushed to the margins of society. The house was still not filled, so the host told his servant to go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in.

The people here who are now being invited in, have, up to this point, been pushed to the margins of society. To be sick or have a disability in a time when people are living from hand to mouth could cause severe economic distress.

Poverty comes in various levels. Victor Hugo tried to paint a picture of poverty through a character called Fantine. In his eyes, she represented the cry of many. She placed her hopes in a relationship with a man, but that turned out to be a mistake and she ends up becoming a single mother with a daughter. She has no money, so she leaves her girl in the hands of greedy innkeepers to be able to work. She and her daughter suffer severe extortion. Fantine works at a factory, but rumors spread that she is promiscuous and that gets her fired. Now she is

severely in debt and cannot send money to the innkeepers. This makes her terribly fearful about her daughter's wellbeing, so she sells her hair, sells her teeth, and goes into prostitution to earn money for her daughter. In the end, she dies with this heaviness in her heart without seeing her daughter.

Of course, Fantine is a fictional character made up of a conglomeration of different sufferings. Usually poverty is not so obvious, and it can take on multiple forms. Since poverty is the inability to meet your basic human needs, that could be food, clothing, shelter, medical care, relationships, or leisure.

When we lived in Kentucky, there were families who were choosing which bill to pay. They might have a house, but they might not have electricity because they chose to pay their medical bill that month. One need is fighting against another. In Kentucky that means that you are out of refrigeration for your food in the summer.

In Japan, we have good health insurance. I am glad Tokyo covers all medical costs for children. The difference becomes very obvious when your child goes through sickness or disabilities. People who have been there understand exactly what I mean. When the medical cost is six or seven digits in yen, we become very grateful for the coverage.

Many times in history, sickness and physical disabilities went hand in hand with poverty. Even if you had enough to live peacefully, with a sudden sickness or accidents, money that you stored away for retirement goes down the drain.

What Jesus is doing here is bringing into the conversation people who had no voice in society. These are the people the host of the banquet in the parable invited.

In the parable, the invitation then goes to people on the streets, highways and hedges.

(illustrations deleted: personal stories)

When we throw a banquet, it is easy for us to be like the Pharisees and invite the people who are like us. People who are different make us uncomfortable. But this host invites the people that the Pharisees would have ignored. We often close the spaces that are available for marginalized people, but this host sends his servant to escort them in.

Some people may think that the marginalized people will come flocking into a banquet, even the kind of banquet the rich can disrespectfully decline, but I believe it is not that way for many.

When the people were listening to this parable, they were imagining that the servant of the host would use excessive time and effort to invite the rich. But the parable does not indicate anything about this servant convincing them to come. The servant took the shame of rejection and left. But then this servant went out to invite the people who were not interested in a banquet at all like the people who could not afford to dress up, or the people who could not go on their own. He went out and actually brought them back. He convinced them that this banquet was for them, that they are welcome, and they will be safe. He showed them that they will be able to celebrate with joy, and that his house was a place they can come without fear.

Does this servant remind you of anybody? This servant who quietly does exactly what the host asks and goes out bringing in the marginalized people, I think is a representation of Jesus himself. He gets mocked by some, but he is there reaching out to people who had no voice in society, taking his time, sitting with them, crying with them, convincing them that the host wants them to come to his banquet, that they are going to be okay. No one can hurt them there anymore. They don't have to carry their heavy baggage. They can lay it down now. Because there is a place for them in his house.

But then, there is one huge thing that troubles us in this parable. Why has the host invited the well-off and the people who were in the middle of their happiness before inviting the marginalized?

What Jesus is doing here, as he is sitting at a table with the Pharisees, is playing with their assumptions. They think they are the ones on the inside who are worthy of invitations. They think that what they are doing is a picture of the Kingdom of God. But Jesus is saying they might be missing the banquet, because the kingdom of God is actually coming to invert those assumptions. His table is an open table. The people who the Pharisees cannot imagine sitting with are there, and they themselves might be missing this banquet. Jesus is speaking like a prophet, warning people to watch out, because the justice of God is not always what we expect.

We are all invited to this table, but sometimes we think we have to work to earn a seat at the banquet. Sometimes we think, we would be able to present ourselves more worthy to be there if we just had such-and-such proper qualities. If we cannot afford what is proper, we feel like we will be less valued than the people who can. But the truth of the matter is, our worthiness or our unworthiness has not a thing to do with this host's banquet. He sets the tone of this joyous banquet that our riches or our poverty, our power or our powerlessness cannot change a thing in his place.

There is a valuable gem that we often miss when looking at this servant, Jesus. You see, God sending His Son for our salvation means that Christ came to be one of us. What I mean is that, Jesus does not call us "them," but rather chose to become one of us to form a "we." With all the challenges and fallenness of humans, God still allowed His Son, with His reputation on the line, to be woven into humanity, to be a part of us. How amazing is that! When we were aiming for a better place in this world's hierarchy, God sent His Son to the lowliest of humans. Jesus was born to a poor couple, served within the marginalized, and died for all of us forming a "We" between God and us.

This is the beauty of mission. This is the hospitality of God. When we represent Christ to the world, we form an inclusive “we” from the bottom. God refuses to exclude us. Instead, through his Son, Jesus Christ, we are invited into the very intimate fellowship with God himself.

In history, there are people who have represented this beautiful hospitality of God. One of them, I believe is a lady named Immaculee Ilibagiza. She is a survivor of Rwandan genocide. She was a Tutsi but hid in a small bathroom of a Hutu pastor. The bathroom was no bigger than 3 feet by 4 feet, but she hid there along with 7 other women for 91 days. In her unspeakable terror, she discovers the power of prayer, and she came out of hiding to discover the true meaning of the unconditional love of God. There is something about Immaculee’s life that speaks clearly about the inclusiveness of God, that will not be taken away by the evil, hate or fear of this world. The pastor who hid her in his bathroom also refused to see her as “them.”¹ In the midst of heightened social pressure of a war, they chose to still believe in the “We” of God’s Kingdom, that His table was inclusive, that God will not exclude someone who is different as “them.”

What is the application for us at KBF today? Have you received God’s invitation? Do you know you have a place at His table? If there is anything that hinders us from receiving this invitation, we can ask our Lord to help us. If we are not convinced that this invitation is for us, may be Jesus is trying to help us see that it is. We can ask him to show us more about His table.

Now, as His church in Japan, are we, KBF, reflecting the nature of His kingdom? Are we a place where people come and are convinced that God’s banquet is inclusive? Are we also reflecting who Christ is? Are we serving His people like Christ? Christ-like hospitality is not an easy thing. It comes with risks. It can be very challenging and can really test our capacity.

¹ Immaculee Ilibagiza, *Left To Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*. U.S.A: Hay House, Inc., 2006.

In our daily lives, do we have someone who we are looking at as “them?” It is sad, but the truth is, for a long time in history, Christ’s body, the church has been suffering schism by pointing fingers at each other, labeling the other as “them.” In our world today, there are many who point fingers back at us and accuse us of our failure to be inclusive and for being tone deaf. What kind of image do they have towards Christ when they see us? Churches are accused of looking the other way to sufferings and cries of the weak, and to this, we have to repent and ask God for his forgiveness. God, we have failed you and your people! Forgive us and make us into your likeness.

The Upside-down Kingdom is here to bring peace and justice, and we are comforted by the One bringing this Kingdom. But at the same time, there is this dilemma of knowing who we really are in light of who God is.

Even so, let us not despair. Jesus, who knew what His Kingdom’s coming will be to his disciples said in John 14:1,

“Let not your heart be troubled: have faith in God and have faith in me.”

And in verse 27:

“May peace be with you; my peace I give to you: I give it not as the world gives. Let not your heart be troubled; let it be without fear.”

So, as believers who are shown both worlds, we want to remind ourselves once again to set our eyes on Jesus who is the author and perfecter of our faith.

Hebrews 12:1

(S)ince we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God, (interceding for us.)

May God continue to mold us into His image, may His Kingdom come. May we join His Great Banquet in His Upside-down Kingdom together with all the people as One.

Amen.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us both now and forever. Amen (2 Corinthians 13:14)