

October 28, 2012
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DUAL CITIZENSHIP
Luke 12:29-32

One day last week while we were on vacation Laurie and I decided to try stand up paddle boarding. We rented a couple of boards and got up on them right away. Laurie seemed uncertain and said she didn't think she was going to like it. I said it would be no problem, that she would quickly get the hang of it and would have fun, whereupon I immediately fell off my board. But I got back up and we both gradually got more comfortable. It was a beautiful day, but there was a small swell in the water that at times unsettled us. Nevertheless we both did indeed begin to get the hang of it. After about 20 minutes we were sailing along pretty well about 100 yards off the beach. We encountered a man snorkeling and swimming in the opposite direction, which seemed unusual since there was nothing to see underwater in that area. But we made sure to steer clear of him not wanting to run over him. He passed by me about 10 or 15 feet away and I gave him no more thought. But suddenly I was knocked completely off balance and almost fell off my board again. I couldn't understand what had happened. When I regained my balance and settled down I turned to look and saw that snorkeler behind my board. He had swum up behind me, grabbed the back of my board and shaken it. That's what had caused me to lose my balance. He said, "I can't believe you stayed on the board." Then he laughed and said, "I try to knock at least one stand up paddler off his board every day." I felt like saying, "Really? That's interesting because I try to smack one snorkeler in the head with my paddle every day and you look to me like today's candidate."

I paddled away thinking that I had just seen irrefutable proof that the human race is fallen. I had run into a person who got his joy on vacation out of seeing someone trying to learn a new skill fall into the water. No concern with how his action might affect his poor victim, a person he had never met. All that mattered was that he make his mark in this world by knocking down another stand up paddle boarder. Am I the only one or does that just seem wrong to you too?

However, that unsettling experience of having the thing I was standing on be shaken reminded me of what we have all gone through in the last few years. It has been 4 years since our economy suffered a near meltdown. In the years after 2008 the government has thrown a massive amount of money at the problem hoping to boot the American economy back up. The Federal Reserve has interest rates so low they are nearly non-existent. Unfortunately the economy continues to sputter along

with high unemployment leading to frustration and dissatisfaction among the populace. Many fear that this is the new normal, that our economy will remain stagnant permanently and never return to what it was prior to 2008. Even worse we face the looming specter of an astronomical national debt that our leaders are apparently unwilling and or incapable of reining in. The implications of that debt are ominous.

Throw into the mix a tense international situation and a nation deeply divided over a number of social issues, and you have a real witch's brew. It feels like our nation and to some extent the world is standing at the edge of a precipice. In 9 days we will have an election that the whole world is watching. Some alarmists are saying this is the most important election in more than half a century. Whether that is true or not I cannot say. But I do know that there are a lot of tense people out there desperately worried about the outcome of these elections. It is my aim today and next Sunday to remind us of some truths from the Bible that will hopefully give us all some needed perspective on the election. For that perspective I direct your attention to Luke 12:29-32.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS MOST IMPORTANT

Pay careful attention to the words of Luke 12:29. “**And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it.**” These verses are about what you set your heart on. You will set your heart on something. That's part of being human. The day we stop setting our heart on something will be the day that our heart quits beating. Our desires are what drive us, motivate us, give us a reason to put one foot in front of the other.

As long as you have been alive you have been setting your heart on one thing or another. In the movie *A Christmas Story* Ralphie had his heart set on a Red Ryder carbine action two hundred shot range model air rifle that has a compass in the stock and this thing that tells time. His heart was so set on that gun that it became an obsession. Christmas, and really his entire existence, became about receiving a Red Ryder BB gun.

We set our hearts on many different things that come and go in life. Jesus said in verse 30 that “**the pagan world runs after all such things.**” They chase such things as material wealth, represented in this passage by what we eat and drink. They obsess about it. They worry about it. They worry that they won't get it, and when they do get it they worry that they might lose it. How broad do you suppose the category of things the world runs after actually is? I submit that it is exceedingly broad. Some of it is actual material stuff, but some of it while not material is very

much of this world. It is stuff like approval, notice, credit, success. Included in that category would be a healthy economy and a strong nation that affords us the lifestyle of comfort, ease, security and peace that we all like.

Jesus reminds us that we have a Father in heaven who cares about us. He knows that we need things to eat and drink in order to survive. He says our Father will see to it that we get what we need so we don't need to worry about any of it, nor do we need to chase it. We should not set our hearts on that stuff.

Instead of those things Jesus said we should set our hearts on the kingdom of God. That's what we should run after in life. Jesus was claiming that the kingdom of God is, in fact, better than all those things. When Jesus preached about the kingdom he called it good news. You don't call something "good news" if it means "here's a bunch of hard things to do that will make your life burdensome, and you'll probably fail at them and feel guilty all the time."

On December 4 of last year when Toby and Anna called us from Disneyland and told us that Toby had asked Anna to marry him, that was good news. It was good news when they also told us that Anna had said yes. Good news is something that brings joy and smiles. It makes you happy and causes you to celebrate. When Jesus talked about the kingdom of God it was good news. That means it should bring smiles, joy and celebration to us.

In Matthew 13:44 Jesus said, "**The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.**" Imagine that you are a garage sale scavenger. At one sale you encounter a person who has had it with his garage being filled with junk. He is looking for someone to buy everything in his garage for one price. His price is ridiculously high. But suppose that you notice that in his collection of mostly useless stuff is an old baseball card. The owner apparently doesn't realize what it is, but you do. It is a Honus Wagner card dating from 1909. You know this card is worth \$2.8 million. What do you do? Maybe you have been out of work and don't have any cash. You are haunting garage sales looking for needed items you can buy for pennies because that's all you've got. This guy wants \$1000 for his entire stash. Would you say, "Well, I don't have that much" and forget about it? No, you would tell him you'll take the whole kit and caboodle. You'd go sell your car or any possession you have that has any value, you'd borrow money, whatever it takes to get that \$1000 to buy that stuff, because you know that the treasure it includes is worth it. In fact, you'd be so excited you can hardly contain yourself.

Perhaps you think my story absurd, but just a couple of weeks ago I read about a guy in Marin County who bought a copy of a Picasso painting at an estate sale. He thought he overpaid when he plunked down \$65 for it but he really liked it. At home as he looked at the copy for the next few days he kept thinking it was an awfully good copy. Finally he called an art expert who agreed to examine it. Eventually it was certified as a genuine original Picasso. He sold it for millions. So it can happen! Jesus claimed that's how good gaining the kingdom of God is!

In verse 32 Jesus went on, “**Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.**” Yes, you may be little, you may be sheep in a world full of wolves, you may be oppressed, you may be a minority, you may seem powerless in this world, but you have the kingdom. And Jesus said having the kingdom is better than all that stuff. Having it would dispel our fears.

In Matthew's account of this same speech he quoted Jesus saying, “Seek first the kingdom of God” (Matthew 6:33). It is the thing we should pursue first before anything else. Making it such a priority says the kingdom of God is not just *good*, it is also *crucially important*. There are lots of things in this world that are good, but they are not important. Jesus saw it as so important that it is what he talked about when he ministered here on earth. Matthew 4:23 says, “**Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom.**”

Luke 9:2 says when he sent the apostles out to preach “**he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God.**” In verse 11 after Jesus had tried to get away for a little down time “**the crowds learned about it and followed him. He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God.**” In verse 60 when he challenged a wannabe disciple he said, “**Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.**” The heart of the message of Jesus was the kingdom of God. When he taught his disciples to pray in the Sermon on the Mount, perhaps the most famous prayer in the world, what did he say we should pray? Matthew 6:9-10 says he instructed us to pray, “**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come...**” It is a priority to pray that the kingdom would come soon.

What did Paul understand the gospel to be about? It's about God's grace, about the cross of Jesus Christ, right? Well, yes, but that's not all. In Acts 19 Luke tells us about Paul's ministry in Ephesus. In verse 8 he wrote, “**Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.**” At the end of the book of Acts Paul is in custody in Rome. Acts 28:31 tells us how he spent his time. “**Boldly and without hindrance he preached the**

kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.” Do you begin to get the point? If the main message Jesus came into this world to preach was about the kingdom of God, don’t you think it must be a big deal? It is the focal point of all that God is doing.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS PRESENT AND FUTURE

What is the kingdom of God? Tony Campolo wrote a book entitled, *The Kingdom of God Is A Party*. It’s pretty safe to say it is more than a party, but what is it? Start with the ancient concept of a kingdom. This is difficult for us to grasp because we have lived our entire existence in a nation that, while not perfectly, operates by the rule of law. In our world the way things work is that no one is above the law. The President even cannot simply ignore the laws of the land. His actions are bounded by the same laws that govern all of us.

In an ancient kingdom the king was the ultimate authority. He was responsible for everything within the boundaries of the kingdom. He was responsible for the safety and protection of his subjects. He ruled totally. He answered to no one. Whatever he chose to do was legal because he determined legality. If the king told you to do something, you did it because his will ruled in everything. One of the familiar stories of the Old Testament is about David and the time he decided he wanted to sleep with Bathsheba, who was married to another man. We wonder about Bathsheba’s moral character. Why did she agree to be unfaithful to her husband and break her marital vows? It wasn’t because she was a faithless woman. It was because the king told her to sleep with him and his word was law. You didn’t say no to the king. She did it because she had no choice. In that day a king could not be guilty of a crime because he decided what was criminal and what was not. Furthermore, in some societies all property belonged to the king. So everything a person possessed was owned by the king and he was just allowed to use it by the king. Of course, that kind of authority didn’t extend over the entire world. A king who ruled in Egypt could not do whatever he wanted and command people to do whatever he desired in Athens. That was not in his kingdom. A kingdom extends as far as that king’s authority.

So the kingdom of God is that realm where all belongs to him and where his will rules in everything. Now I would like you to think for a moment about what that kingdom is like. It is as foreign to us as that weird land of Saudi Arabia where women can’t vote, can’t hold political office (though this will supposedly change in 2015) and can’t drive, where they must wear clothes that cover everything except their hands and eyes. It is foreign not in its oppressiveness, but in its freedom and beauty.

Consider what God is like according to the Bible. Psalm 25:8 says, “**Good and upright is the Lord.**” Psalm 34:8 says, “**Taste and see that the Lord is good.**” So God is good. Exodus 34:6 says, “**The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.**” He is compassionate, patient, abounding in love. Romans 2:4 speaks of his kindness. Psalm 100:5 says his mercy is everlasting. Psalm 5:4 says in the New American Standard translation which is quite accurate, “**For you are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; No evil dwells in you.**” He is holy, which in part means there is no evil in him. Deuteronomy 32:4 says he is “**a faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.**”

So if God rules, his will is always done in his kingdom, and he is good, kind, patient, merciful, abounding in love, that he does not have or allow any evil at all, always fair and just, what kind of kingdom do you suppose he will have? It will be a kingdom in which people are also kind, good, patient, merciful, loving. It will be a place where there is no evil at all.

What does that mean? It would be a place where no one ever lacked for anything important, because that would not be good. It would be a place where people are always, always kind, loving and good to each other, where they are patient with each other. No one would ever be hungry. No one would ever take advantage of anyone. No one would ever cheat anyone else. No one would ever lie. No one would ever be lonely. There would be no police, no courts, no locks on doors, no crime, no harsh words, no fear at all. Our first night on our vacation Laurie and I went out on the balcony of our hotel room and marveled at the beauty. It was a glorious, warm tropical evening. There was a gentle, warm breeze blowing, the stars were spectacular in the night sky. We could hear waves breaking on the beach not far away. It was paradise. Well, except for the fact that the couple in the room above us was out on their balcony too and they were having an argument, a big one and not in hushed voices either. I’m talking a 15 round championship bout type argument. That doesn’t happen in God’s kingdom. In his kingdom people will love and serve each other.

Before we left on vacation you in this church totally surprised Laurie and me with a great gift, including some gift cards. We were able to use these at restaurants where we ate. When we gave them to our servers we typically told them the cards were gifts to us. They would often come back and say, “that’s quite a gift!” We got to tell them they were from our church family and they would respond, “they must really love you.” It was fun to be able to tell people that we have a great church that gives a taste of the kingdom of God.

There is a present sense of this amazing kingdom of God. In one sense the entire universe is God's kingdom. The Psalms depict him as enthroned in heaven ruling over all. Revelation refers to Jesus as the "King of kings and Lord of lords." God is sovereign over all, something we'll think about next week. But for the time being he has allowed within certain limits a rebellion within his kingdom. So God rules over all, but there is some activity contrary to his will going on in this world at this time. Ultimately all that exists is God's kingdom, but for the time being he is allowing a part of creation to in essence be outside his kingdom by allowing disobedience.

But there is a place where God's kingdom exists right now. Jesus taught us to pray, "**your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**" We think of heaven as "up there." It really isn't up there. It is very near. Just think of it as being a different dimension. It exists very close to us, just in a dimension we cannot perceive. In that spiritual realm, in heaven, God's kingdom exists right now. His will is always done there. So right now God's kingdom is there in heaven. There is no evil there, only good. There is no meanness or harshness there, only kindness and love. There is no impatience there, no sorrow there, only goodness and joy. That actually exists right this minute.

But what about here on earth? Why did Jesus go around preaching about the kingdom of God? Why did he say that the kingdom of God was near? That's because he came to bring the kingdom to them. The kingdom of God was near those people in the presence of Jesus. In his life God the Father ruled perfectly. In the way he lived Jesus displayed the kingdom of God.

But Jesus also came to bring the kingdom of God to people. His followers understood this. In Acts 1:6 after his resurrection the apostles said, "**Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?**" They had heard him preach for three years about the kingdom, and now after proving he is the king by defeating death, they think surely he is going to bring that kingdom to earth. Their problem was they thought way too small. The word "restore" gives them away. They still were thinking that Jesus was going to bring about a kingdom that was a lot like the kingdom David had, only a little better. It was Israel ruling the world. They understood that Jesus was going to establish the kingdom of God on earth. Only that kingdom is going to be way better than the glory days of ancient Israel. It is going to be like what exists right now in heaven. Sadly, the people of Israel weren't interested. They rejected him in part because what they really wanted was like David's rule.

So does that mean there is no sense in which the kingdom of God does not exist on earth? No. The kingdom of God does exist here. It exists on earth in whatever extent God's will rules in our lives. In Luke 17 the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come. In verse 21 Jesus said, "**the kingdom of God is within you.**" It is something that should have already existed inside them. It existed inside Jesus and it should exist inside us.

Inside all believers the kingdom of God exists to some extent. It exists in the church to a point as well. As far as we let God rule both individually and corporately we experience the kingdom of God. Why is it that we don't look more like utopian people living in a utopian fellowship? It's because to a degree we hate to even admit to ourselves we trade the kingdom of God for the kingdom of self.

There is obviously also a future sense of the kingdom of God. The apostles asked Jesus "are you going to set up the kingdom now?" We're still asking that. We know that a time is coming when what happens on this earth will be the same as what is happening right now in heaven. God will rule, and with his rule will finally come the peace, the freedom from fear, insecurity and anxiety that we all long for, the love, the goodness and the joy of the kingdom of God. This is the blessed hope we all long for and look forward to. It means that there is a happy ending to all of this and it is real. It is a hope we can anchor our souls to.

IMPLICATIONS

REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

Lee Greenwood had a hit song that contained the following lyrics:

If tomorrow all the things were gone I've worked for all my life,
And I had to start again with just my children and my wife,
I'd thank my lucky stars to be livin' here today,
'Cause the flag still stands for freedom, and they can't take that away.

And I'm proud to be an American where at least I know I'm free.
And I won't forget the men who died, who gave that right to me.
And I gladly stand up next to you and defend her still today.
'Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land. God bless the USA.

I'm proud to be an American too. I am inexpressibly thankful that I live in this country. I also love this land and say "God bless the USA." I am thankful to live here and very proud of my citizenship as an American. But, I am also the citizen of another realm. Philippians 3:20 says, "**But our citizenship is in heaven.**" I am the

subject of another ruler. I am part of God's kingdom, and that is more important even than being an American, as important as that is.

We must think about our priorities and loyalties. According to Acts 4:17 Peter and John were ordered to stop speaking about Jesus Christ. Even today there are places in the world where it is illegal to tell another person about the good news of Jesus. So imagine this happens. You are faced with a decision. Will you obey the government or will you obey God? Acts 4:19-20 says, "**Peter and John replied, 'Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's eyes to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.'**" Yes, we must submit to our government, but if those authorities require us to disobey God, then we no longer are bound to obey them. If that is true it shows that your first loyalty is to God's kingdom. I hope it is true.

Nations come and go. The ancient Sumerians had their day. So did the Mayans and the Incans. The Assyrians dominated the world for a time, then the Babylonians had their shot. The Persians were strong until they were supplanted by the Greeks, who were replaced by the Romans. Spain was powerful for a time, as was France. At one time the British Empire spanned the globe. And now America is the lone superpower in the world. Are we so foolish as to think America is eternal? At some point our power and status will wane just as has been the case with every other empire that has ever existed. But the kingdom of God continues to this day. It has outlasted the Romans, the Spanish, the British and it will outlast America. Some day all the kingdoms of this world will come to an end, but the kingdom of God will go on. The words of the *Hallelujah Chorus* from *The Messiah* remind us. "And he shall reign forever and ever." Some day there will be no America and for you to be an American will be meaningless, but there will still be a kingdom of God. For you to be a citizen of that kingdom will mean everything.

Our nation has been shaken. It has been shaken in the past and has weathered the storm. It is being shaken now but my guess is that it will weather this storm as well. But a much more significant truth is mentioned in Hebrews 12:28. "**Therefore since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.**" Remember that as proud and thankful as you should be to be an American, first you are a member of God's kingdom, and that is eternally and infinitely more important. For that, no matter what happens in the coming election and in the coming years, you should be thankful and you should worship God with reverence and awe.

In light of this enormous truth we should be at peace, no matter what happens. Our kingdom, the kingdom of God, cannot be shaken. Whether you are a Democrat, Republican, Independent, Green Partier or member of the Peace and Freedom party, if you are a follower of Jesus you are first a member of God's kingdom. If your candidate loses, if in coming days the winner fulfills your worst fears and as you suspected would happen brings our nation to total ruin, you are in the kingdom of God which cannot be shaken.

I am a big fan of the San Diego Chargers. I hope for the best for them. I find myself frustrated by their head coach. I worry about the fact that they seem to consistently find a way to fall apart late in close games. I have a fairly gloomy concern that this will mean they will once again disappoint me and this season will produce mostly frustration. But I am loyal. I still follow them and hope for them to win. I still rejoice when the despised Oakland Raiders lose. More than I am a Charger fan, infinitely more, I am a member of the kingdom of God. This is so true that I can consider David Drake, a completely unrepentant and devoted fan of the Raiders, my brother. And when (note when not if) the Chargers again disappoint me, I will still be at peace and will have great joy because I am a member of God's kingdom with all that means. And so it is if disappointing and even sad things happen to the United States of America. It will sadden me, or give me joy if good things happen, but my peace and my joy are rooted not in this country but in God's kingdom. Set your heart on God's kingdom, not on a kingdom of this world.

SEEK GOD'S KINGDOM

I thought we are already part of God's kingdom. We've found it, so why do we need to seek it? Not seek it to find it, but seek it in the sense of make it the object of your passion and your pursuit the way people in this world make the stuff of this world the object of their passion and their pursuit. Seek to see the kingdom of God expand in this world.

So how do we do that? We don't try to use power and force to make people do what God wants. That has been tried in the past, and there are people in the world today thinking they can force others to live by God's ways. They may try to do that by the power of politics or the power of the gun, but that effort always misses a hugely important truth.

Jesus said the kingdom of God is within you. It is internal, a thing of the spirit, and you cannot force people to have something inside or make it be there through the use of power. For your consideration I give you...cheerleaders. Cheerleaders practice every day to have their routines down. They work hard so they can do

their thing at football games, and to a lesser extent basketball games. They do all sorts of things to support the football team. They have rallies for them and paint signs for the players to run through when they come onto the field. Their dedication is admirable. Do you know how often I saw cheerleaders at our games when I was playing baseball for my high school? Once. A couple of them came to a game once because one of them was dating a guy on the team. I understand that cheerleaders are now often required to go to games for other sports like volleyball, soccer and even baseball. So they force them to go, but do you think they display the same level of enthusiasm, activity and dedication that they do at football games? You can force their body to go, but that doesn't mean it's in the heart.

You cannot put the kingdom of God in people's hearts. You can't do it with rules, laws, votes, guns, threats, or even peer pressure. The kingdom of God is inside, and it has to come about as the work of the Spirit of God. So what can we do to help the kingdom of God grow in this world? We can care. We can take an interest in expanding the kingdom, keep up on what is going on in the kingdom throughout the world. We can give money. We can build a church and make sure that God rules in this church, that here people actually experience the kingdom of God. We can tell people about the kingdom and care about them finding their way into it. The most important thing we can do is pray. That's what Jesus commanded us to do. Pray that God's kingdom will come.

But there is one other way we can expand God's kingdom. That is by more and more letting him have his way in our hearts and lives. We've been learning in our marriage refresher course that in all of us there is a war going on. Will we live for our own little kingdom, the kingdom of self, or will we live for the kingdom of God? The best way to see the kingdom of God expand in this world is for it to take over our hearts.

We came home late Friday night. We unpacked most of our stuff and Laurie couldn't find her knee brace. She has to wear this brace when we play tennis but it didn't seem to be in our stuff. She had put it on the balcony of our hotel room with the rest of her tennis clothes to air it out before we packed it all. She said, "When you brought my tennis clothes in you must have left it out there." My immediate thought was, "she's going to blame me for leaving it." Without conscious thought I began marshaling my defenses. That's because I am more committed than I'd like to admit to the kingdom of Rick. As it turned out, Laurie didn't blame me, in fact she didn't make an issue of it at all. She just said, "well, it was pretty stinky. I'll just replace it." Whew. But my initial reaction was another reminder that I'm awfully committed to the kingdom of Rick. I tend to be about making sure Rick is

noticed, approved, defended, and is comfortable. That problem of the kingdom of self is what keeps us from experiencing the glory and joy of the kingdom of God. Let's seek first God's kingdom, because it is a kingdom of peace. It is where we can find real security and peace, where the outcome of the election may well matter, but it won't affect our sense of peace, nor what we live for in this world. We are living for the kingdom of God no matter what!