

Luke 17:20-21

“Are We There Yet?”

The week of the Fourth of July is one of those weeks where people do a lot of traveling. When I was coming up we didn't have the money to travel by air plane. When we wanted to go see grandma, or my cousins in another state it meant one thing – ROAD TRIP! Let's have a show of hands. How many of y'all have ever been on a road trip? (pause) How many of y'all have ever been on a road trip with little kids in the back seat? (pause) How many of y'all were ever little kids stuck in the back seat on a road trip? (pause) Can y'all help me out? There is this question which gets asked when you are in the car with kids on a road trip. (pause) Hmm... (pause) Church, what is that question? (pause) **Are we there yet?** Oh! Right!! Are we there yet? How could I forget? Evan has started doing this thing where it does not matter if we are going to Charlotte, Thomasville, or Bojangles here in town where before we pull out of the drive way Evan will ask, “Are we there yet?” (pause) That little stinker. =D

Sometimes being a Christian can feel a little like being on a long road trip. In Philippians the Apostle Paul writes, “Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:13,14). The author of Hebrews writes, “let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (Heb 12:1). Again the Apostle Paul says in 1Corinthians 9:24, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only the one receives the prize. So run that you may obtain it.” Brothers and sisters I am gonna be real honest with you. I love to compete. I love the energy I have when I have settled into a routine of diet and exercise, but for me, running for the sake of running is boring, painful and no fun. I do not enjoy it. I always get to a point where I start asking myself, “Why am I doing this again?” (pause) Do any of y'all struggle with that? (pause) I am certain there are many people who feel this way about the means of grace. I know I should pray more, but I just don't have time. I know I should read my Bible, but it's hard and feels too much like work. Then when the subject of the Kingdom of God comes up we find ourselves asking the questions, “Haven't I done enough?” “Where is the Kingdom of God?” “Are we there yet?”

The Pharisees fell into that boat. The Pharisees were religious conservatives. They believed in following every dotted “i” and every crossed “t” found in the Law of Moses. By the way the Pharisees attacked Jesus it appears all of their efforts to earn God's favor by being obedient to the Law had left them tired and bitter. Why hadn't the Christ come and set all of their wrongs to right. Why hadn't God run the Romans out of the land God promised to God's chosen people? This morning's passage does not give us the specific question the Pharisees asked Jesus, but I like to think it might have sounded like, “Where is the Kingdom of God? Are we there yet?”

On road trips as a kid when I would ask, “Are we there yet?” I would very often not get the answer I wanted. The answers ranged from, “No. Not yet,” to, “*We'll get there when we get there!*” However, in between Dad would say, “Almost, but not yet.” (pause) Sisters and brothers that is the Kingdom of God. Jesus says, **“The Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Lo, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you”** (Luke 17:20,21).

The Kingdom of God is that place where the Christian believer's spirit and heart connect with the heart of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. The doorway was opened through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The way through the door is provided by the Holy Spirit in the form of grace. Prevenient grace leads us to the cross of Christ. Justifying grace frees us from every sin and all of the guilt and shame we carry making us

fit to walk through Christ's door. Sanctifying grace teaches us how to walk through the doorway into Christ's kingdom so that we may live abundantly with God. This may sound like a very individual journey, but there is no such thing as a kingdom of one. Last week we celebrated Holy Communion where we connected with God's kingdom by breaking bread with all who have come before us and all who will come after us to God's table. The reason we call it Holy Communion is because it is all about being a part of a Holy Community in Christ at God's table. None of us came to God's table alone. There was someone in front of you and behind you and beside of you. Similarly, we are not alone in our desire to see and be a part of the kingdom of God.

Try and think about it this way. Think about the people in the stands at the Super Bowl who hold up those massive signs during the half time show. Each person has a sign with a piece of the larger image, but it is only when they turn their signs over together that the picture is revealed. With the kingdom of God it is less like we are all holding cardboard signs and more like we are all holding mirrors. Only when all of the mirrors are turned over is the image of God revealed and reflected out to the world. The problem is we are more like fun house mirrors than good reflectors of God's love and grace. We are marred by the Fall. We are distorted images of God.

When Christ died and rose from the grave we were given the ability through God's grace to return to the image of God we were created in. As Methodists we call this process sanctification. The virtue of being in this process is we can say the kingdom of God is almost but not yet because we are almost but not yet. Having accepted God's grace and receiving God's gift of salvation is the first step to something much bigger. What that basically means is we have been given the ability to turn over our mirror and reflect God's image, but the image is distorted. If we want to clearly reflect the greater image of who God is at work in us, at work in our church, at work in our community and throughout creation we need to continue growing in grace.

Granted. Some days that feels like work. I'll give you that. But here is what I have discovered. When I have lived just for myself I was miserable. It was the most miserable I have ever been. I was lonely, cut off and stuck in my own selfishness. Nothing would satisfy my longing and neediness. It was so bad that some days it actually hurt. That's what life without God is like. Those of us who find a deep connection to chocolate, sweets or caffeine might be able to relate to the idea of going without. How many of y'all are rough around the edges without your coffee in the morning? (pause) That is what it felt like for me to try to live for myself alone. However, when I put God first; when I make time for prayer, reflection, and the searching of Scriptures I am connected to the kind of joy it is hard to describe. Imagine that wonderful feeling you get from the first cup of coffee of the day. Think about that warm feeling. Now imagine that warm feeling of energy never goes away. In the Kingdom of God the coffee buzz never goes away. Being wrapped in God's love is absolutely wonderful. Through God's sanctifying grace we can have more of that. God's joy goes deeper than we can imagine. However, we have to be willing to do our part. We have to respond to God's grace and we have to be willing to share God's love with others. That means reaching out to people inside the church who are in need, and it means reaching to the people outside our walls who aching and do not know why. (pause) We know why. They have cut themselves off from God's grace. But they do not have to stay there. They just need a reason to make a change. (pause) Sisters and brothers, think on your lives for a moment. Where has God shown you that joy? Was it on a spiritual retreat? Was it the birth of your children? Was it Holy Communion? Where has God shown you God's joy? (pause) Now spend some time this week looking for someone who needs to see, and receive God's joy in you.

In the name of Jesus Christ,

Amen