

So a man suffered a serious heart attack while shopping in a store. The store clerks called 911. The paramedics rushed the man to the nearest hospital where he had emergency open heart bypass surgery.....He awakened from the surgery to find himself in the care of the nuns at the Catholic Hospital. A nun was seated next to his bed holding a clipboard loaded with forms, and a pen. She asked him how he was going to pay for his treatment. "Do you have health insurance?" she asked. He replied in a raspy voice, "No health insurance." The nun asked, "Do you have money in the bank?" He replied, "No money in the bank." "Do you have a relative who could help you with the payments?" asked the now irritated nun. He said, "I only have a spinster sister, and she is a nun." The nun became quite agitated and shouted "Nuns are not spinsters! Nuns are married to God!" The patient replied, "Perfect. Send the bill to my brother-in-law."

OK, down to business. First, some gospel background. Pilate is a political man and he asks political questions. Herod is king of the Jews. If Jesus says HE is the king of the Jews, He would be accused of fomenting rebellion against King Herod. Then the procurator has a charge.

But a spiritual person answers political questions in a different way, a spiritual way. Jesus' basic self-understanding is that people are drawn to Him in order to receive divine love. If Pilate is asking this on his own, then he could be one of those being drawn. Attraction to Jesus is not confined to Jews, and the title "King of the Jews" could be understood as the unsurpassed love that Jesus reveals. But then again, it might not be Pilate's question. He might have heard it from others, and he is checking it out.

Political persons stay political. Jewish kings are a question for Jews, so most likely Pilate heard it from Jews. It is Jesus' own people who have told him that Jesus is claiming to be a king. They did it in order to provide grounds to execute Him. But since Jews turned against a Jew and handed Him over to a Roman, Pilate wants to know why.

Jesus tells Pilate that He is not a pretender to the throne. The social-political kingdoms of this world are built on violence -- and maintained by force. Jesus' disciples are not fighting to keep Him out of the hands of the religious authorities who have brought Him to Pilate. The reason is the kingdom of which Jesus is the highest member is not this alienated world of conflict and fighting.

Pilate catches none of this distinction between an earthly realm and a heavenly one. He is back to what he knows best. He heard the word kingdom, so it should be clarified. Is Jesus saying He is a king or not? This is what the political man wants to know.

Political men reduce everything to political terms. "King" is Pilate's word; he is the one who is using it. Jesus, the spiritual man, has another self-designation. He is a witness to the truth. He lives within -- and reveals the ultimate relationship to God and creation -- the truth about the world. Those who are fixated on political power cannot open to this spiritual depth. But those who are aware of the spiritual will hear Jesus' voice. The truth they know will draw them to the truth He is. (adapted from Shea, EATING WITH BRIDEGROOM, p. 275-276)

OK, I know that's a bit heady. Let's go for the concrete of the kingdom. The kingdom that Jesus speaks of is a kingdom built in the human heart -- it is of the heart, in the heart, and only can be built in a heart that is open to love. This kingdom has to do with how we pray and stay connected to God; how we die to ourselves in a world that says grab all that you can, and how to live in simplicity in a world overstuffed with -- stuff!

But how does the kingdom that Jesus envisions get built? Well, what we are doing right now is part of it. Sunday mass. We take our usual seats (God help the poor soul who might have 'taken OUR SEAT'!), we pray the responses, we sing our parts and the hymns for the day. We consume bits of bread in which we discover a living God. But we also come here *as we are* -- with the highs and lows of the past week and the problems and concerns that are ahead and weighing upon us. But no matter where our heads are at, our hearts are engaged: God is here; Jesus is remembered; a glimmer of the holy illuminates our ordinary lives. Generally no big surprises, no great awakenings. We're doing what saints and sinners have done for centuries, who came together to offer the same prayer: *Remember us, O Lord. We need a Savior to make sense out of our lives. Please come. Thank you.* (adapted from DIARY OF A PASTOR'S SOUL, Craig Barnes)

This is the kingdom of God in our midst: a family struggling together through life's challenges, trusting that God's love for them – and their love for one another -- will enable them to make it through the darkest nights and the most treacherous roads; a community of souls gathered around the church's table to remember Jesus and re-connect with God in word and sacrament, as Jesus Himself asked us to do. In the figure of the Gospel Jesus, we realize the 'truth' that we are loved by God to a degree we cannot even begin to imagine. We are loved by a God who refuses to give up or reject or destroy His beloved creation – a creation that has hardly lived up to its promise; a God who humbles Himself to become one of us in order to make us like Him, to realize that we have been created in His image, created by His very breath blown into our hearts. The kingdom of God is not found in the world's centers of power but within human hearts; it's built not by the powerful and elite but by every parent and child whose love for one another and for others struggles to be more complete, and unconditional. Christ reigns neither by influence nor wealth but by compassion, humility and justice. The kingship of Jesus is realized in our embracing a vision of humankind as a family made in the image of God, a vision of one another as sisters and brothers, a vision of the world centered in the gratitude and compassion mirrored in the life of Jesus Christ. (adapted from CONNECTIONS, 21 November 2021)

A story to illustrate the kingdom, and conclude. Many years ago, there was a village synagogue served by a rabbi beloved by his congregation. But the villagers became concerned because the old rabbi began to disappear from the synagogue after the opening of the Sabbath. Some were afraid that he was forgetting his responsibilities; some even worried that he was actually breaking the Sabbath; but some insisted that their holy rabbi must be being spirited up to heaven by Elijah himself, to discuss the holy books in the presence of the Holy One.

One Sabbath night the villagers dispatched one of their number to follow the rabbi.

No sooner had the Sabbath candles been lit when the rabbi slipped out of the synagogue, walked quietly down the path and through the woods and up a tall mountain. The villager followed at a distance, careful not to be seen. The rabbi finally arrived at a small cabin. The spy watched as the rabbi entered the cabin, illuminated by a dying fire.

From a small window on the side of the cabin, the spy saw an old Gentile woman lying on a cot, her breathing slow and her face sallow.

The villager was stunned by what he saw next. After greeting the sick woman, the rabbi swept the floor. Then he chopped wood and fed the fire. Next, the rabbi drew fresh water from the well and gently helped her drink. Finally, the rabbi made a kettle of fresh soup and set it by a small table near the woman's cot.

As the rabbi was preparing to leave, the villager immediately raced down the mountain and through the woods back to the synagogue where the congregation waited.

“Well,” they asked, some with disdain, some with hope, “did our rabbi go up to heaven?”

Their spy stopped for a moment before answering. Then he said, with respectful awe, “The rabbi did not go up to heaven. Our rabbi went much higher than that.” (from WELCOME TO THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD, Joan Chittister)

The kingdom of God is realized here on earth when the compassion and generosity that God envisions for His beloved humanity is lived out. We end this liturgical year celebrating the kingdom of God – but this Messiah’s reign is not some far distant future, a cosmic event – but rather something that has already begun in every place in our world. In every home, in every heart heaven becomes a reality when we embrace God’s vision of humankind as one family made in the image and likeness of God. A vision of one another as sisters and brothers, a vision of the world centered in the spirit of hope and compassion taught by the Jesus in the Gospels. And guess what? We all get a chance to practice living out this kingdom vision on Thursday --when we gather with our FAMILIES for Thanksgiving! May we be about the work of the kingdom as the old rabbi understood: to serve God by service to one another, to honor and care for and about one another as fellow citizens and heirs of the kingdom of God – including the family members who drive us nuts. Especially the family members who drive us nuts! Amen. (adapted from CONNECTIONS, 21 November 2021)