



LESSONS IN LIVING

Insights from the Mystics

“Part 2: Heaven is Within You”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
June 14, 2026

Scripture Reading: Luke 17:20-25

Being asked by the Pharisees when the kindom of God was coming, he answered them, “The kindom* of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Lo, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kindom of God is within you.” And he said to the disciples, “The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Human One, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, ‘Lo, there!’ or ‘Lo, here!’ Do not go, do not follow them. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Human One be in that day. But first, suffering many things and being rejected by this generation.”*

**The word ‘kindom’, often used by mujerista theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, replaces ‘kingdom’ because it represents an egalitarian realm and emphasizes our familial relationship with each other.*

Sermon

Well, happy Trump's birthday, everybody. (*laughter*). This may be the most important day ever in the history of our nation. You know, it's just a shame, and I'm not criticizing Thomas Jefferson, but he didn't think of gladiatorial combat on the White House lawn, which was a major oversight, I think.

Caligula never made that mistake. And you know that an empire is in really great shape when they're buying golden palaces and having gladiators fight on the lawn. It's such a weird time, I think, for all of us. It's hard not to go numb, I think, for most of us.

Our passage today reminds us that there have been bullies all through history. So this is really nothing new. What is happening in our nation right now is really nothing new. In fact, the scripture story is the same thing where people are expecting a militant Messiah, which is why they don't choose Jesus, they choose Barabbas.

The MAGA movement is people who call themselves Christian who are choosing Barabbas. They're choosing power. They're choosing riches, wealth. But that goes all the way back. In Hebrew, the word for covenant is like Brit, and the word for human being is like ish.

So there were, there were preachers in England who said that the British were the new Israel, Brit-ish, people of the covenant. So there are people who are able to look at scripture and see themselves. It's called narcissism in every other field, but in Christianity we call it exegesis (*laughter*) where you look at a text and you kind of make it whatever it is you want to be. That you look at a word like sin and think that applies to your enemies but not to you.

The focus on masculinity is also a very historical part of the malady. May I just say, if you are in the MAGA movement, you are not an alpha male. You have to realize if you surrendered responsibility to one person, you are not an alpha male. So this focus on muscles. There's a conference called Muscular Christianity. And I really kind of want to go to it just to see. (*laughter*)

But the interesting thing is everybody who's speaking is a kind of pasty white guy who looks like they were beat up in high school. So there's something very sad about this time and to realize there are people really deep in grief and they don't have the tools to put together a worldview that's worth living in. So as much as we are called to protect people from oppression, we need to understand where the pain is coming from, and not hate people because they don't have the tools to do what needs to be done.

If you didn't get to go to college, you didn't get to go to grad school, you may not be able to put together a worldview that's based on science. And to realize that and to realize the privilege that made it possible for you to understand physics enough and evolution to put together a worldview that still has meaning.

We may have to step out of our privilege in order to be servants to the people who need it.

Before I left for college, I ran across mystics. Tolstoy was very important to me. He was the first Christian I'd ever seen that praised heresy. The mystics are always considered to be heretics. And when you look at the history of Christianity, you've got the Orthodox Christians who think what gives them the credentials to speak for Jesus is that they were able to kill the mystics. Or drive them out.

So I think you could also make the opposite case, that someone who taught loving your friends and your enemies alike probably would not be really happy with the Christianity that's based on bullying people who are different. Tolstoy said this— this is where I started falling in love with the man. But he's dead, so if you're MAGA, don't turn me in.

Strange though it may seem, only what we call heresy was there any true movement, and that it only ceased to be so when those heresies stopped short in their movement and also petrified into the fixed forms of a church.

So to realize that Jesus would be just as much of a heretic today as in the past, that in Europe, the entire message was reframed away from the Sermon on the Mount in favor of these salvation schemes that propped up empires.

I hear our passage today saying that when you're looking for the sacred, it may start within you. That statement that Tolstoy made, that the kingdom is within you, and that's the translation we're looking at today. The kingdom of God, the kingdom of God is within you. I think for introverts, that's true. If you're extroverted, you may need to start loving somebody else and then realize you deserve the same love.

But if you're an introvert, instead of looking for what the preacher says, which may or may not be helpful, I mean, one of the most basic truths of every mystic is you start by knowing yourself. You can understand everything I say, and that's not gonna help you in the least if you don't find that same voice within yourself. So the calling is not to accept somebody else's belief, but to find your own awareness, the core of your own being. Christianity became a kind of racket where if you weren't like the preacher or the priest, you were seen as less than. In the original message, you would have this sense of the sacred, but you got to shape what that looked like. So we have to get back to that.

If you want to be an alpha male or female, you've got to stop deferring to religious leaders. Now, in this case, in this church, it's easy because I'm incompetent. *(laughter)* So you just kind of figure that out, that the church would go down the tubes if they listen too closely.

But probably in Sunday school, you were predisposed not to trust the voice inside you. And that may have had debilitating effects on your life. It's been said that traditional Christianity is like somebody picking your pocket and then selling you the wallet. As a clergy, I can tell you that's terribly unfair, but if you do not hear the sacred within yourself, it's gonna be very hard to find it anywhere else.

But the image you were given of heaven as a child is probably by its nature a carrot on a stick. When you talk about getting to heaven, that kind of plants the seed that it's not already inside you. So our passage today is reminding us is that word in Aramaic can mean in or it can mean among, and they're both true. There's a huge ambiguity in the original languages of scripture. People who only speak English think that the message is incredibly clear.

And people who speak the biblical languages are then seen as heretics because we muddy the water. But Aramaic is different than Greek. Greek is different than Latin. Latin is different than English. So looking at an English translation, you don't realize the contortions that were taking place before you even showed up.

So that's the first thing. Instead of thinking of the kingdom of God, of heaven, as someplace far away, to listen within your own life for where the sacred shows up.

The second thing that is also critically important that you can't see in English is that this word, this concept of the kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven, It's an adverb, not a noun. This is

critically important to realize because if it's a noun, you're going to look for it like a place. If it's an adverb, then it's the qualities of your life and your experience.

The image I always think of is if a fish is trying to find the ocean, it's kind of hard to find something that's everywhere. Yeah. But you would experience it as warmth, as buoyancy, maybe as saltiness. I don't know. I don't spend that much time with fish.

But if instead of looking for a place, you realize that the qualities of your existence are sacred things, then perhaps it would be easier to find that place. When Jesus is describing it, remember he's saying it's not here, it's not there. It's not something that you can observe or point at. He even said if some minister comes down the road and tells you it's here, don't believe them. So much for Crosspoint. So much for MAGA. So much for a whole lot of the organized Church.

So to realize that whatever the creative principle of the universe is, it had to be what knits you together. When you look at an egg, the bird inside it has written in its DNA a map so it can migrate. It has written within it how to build a nest. It has written within it a song. No creature in all of nature is born stupid, and neither are you. This word is written inside you, can guide you, but you have to trust it. You have to listen to it. You have to know it's there.

The image I think of is of an algorithm. If you're on Facebook, you know that algorithms can be deadly. They can shape everything, but they're always behind the scene. You can't see them. That may be what heaven is like to a modern mind. There's some intelligence that's shaping things and it never comes out from the background where you can see it.

But when you harmonize your mind to nature, when you harmonize your heart to nature, There's a beauty and a truth and a goodness that is available to you, and it's kind of born through you. It's qualities that you experience. This is how Tolstoy put it. He said,

The Christian doctrine shows humanity that the essence of our soul is love. That our happiness depends not on loving this or that object, but on loving the principle of the whole. God, whom a human recognizes within themselves as love, and therefore they love all things and all people.

Tolstoy was the first thinker I ever saw that said love is your touchstone to God. Caring, compassion, openness. Fear shuts it down. Hatred shuts it down. But compassion opens you to this incredible interconnectedness of things.

I've told you this story before. When I was trying to figure out what religion would look like, I'd been raised in Dallas, Texas with predictable limits. And I finally realized that whatever the symbol 'God' means has to be true for everybody, everywhere, all the time. Everybody, everywhere, all the time, or it isn't the sacred source of us all. That universality, that realization that the umbrella opens up to the whole of life, to the whole web of life, is very helpful as you're guiding yourself through.

Now, here's the one part that none of us are going to like. The passage ends up by saying, but the human one, before all this wonderful stuff happens, has to suffer. Now, if you were raised with neurotic theology, that may sound like it's saying that until Jesus goes on the cross, that our sin

can't be overcome. But a different way to look at that is the simple fact that it hurts to love, that love when it enters this world of confusion and pain, can expose us to harm. You think how this church became visible to the radar of hatred and just kept focusing and looking for mistakes and trying to magnify those. It's people who are afraid. It's understandable if anybody would think, I just need to run away and hide. That's very understandable. The problem is there is no place to hide.

I think it may have been Tolstoy who was the first person who I saw using the word '*memento mori*.' Remember you're going to die. Because until that point, you can't know what's important until you face that moment. There are people who think that hoarding wealth is where their happiness comes from. The Earth has its first trillionaire.

Now think of the inner poverty of somebody who hoards that much in a world of dying, suffering, sick people. What poverty all of us were taught when we learned this economic system. Remember you're going to die. Because when you do that, you realize that you can pile up wealth, but it's not worth anything in the long run. So what is worth? What does make life worth living? Loving, compassion. Those are things that don't die with us. We're part of a larger life, which is what all the mystics have tried to share with us.

And so the real courage, the real alpha males and females are not those who are good at inflicting pain, but those courageous souls that are willing to suffer pain rather than shut down. Again, that message is not for everybody. If you've got little kids, put this one on the back burner. If the message is too frightening, you're too traumatized, you've been hurt and hunted in your life. But there are people who hear this as the meaning to the question of what is the purpose of my life. Become ambassadors of love in a hateful time. Become ambassadors of truth in a time of AI.

You have this false masculinity. You have all these pictures of Donald Trump as Rambo. How sad is that? You need big biceps, even if they're AI. But what a gift to know what makes life worth living, to know where our true worth comes from.

There's a story in scripture, and we don't know what parts of scripture are mythological, legendary, parable, but there's a story of the two thieves on the cross, and one of them says to Jesus, "*Remember me when your kingdom comes.*"

He may have just been being nice. You know, here's this crazy preacher guy, we're all dying, I'm going to at least try to say something nice to them. And Jesus says, "*On this day you will be with me in paradise.*" Now they're going to spend that day being tortured. They're both going to die. For neither one of them it's going to be a success story. But the love still lives in that story.

Love transforms our suffering into beauty. If we choose fear and hatred, suffering is just hell. Paradise or salvation is not avoiding pain our whole lives, because you can't, but learning the secret of transforming it sometimes, not always, but sometimes. That sometimes without changing your external environment at all, by remembering who you are, remember that the kingdom is within you. You're able to at least spend that moment in paradise. This is important because the United States is in a spasm of religious insanity, and we don't know where it's going to stop.

But you can live the rest of your life with meaning, joy, and peace, if you remember the lesson today, that you carry something inside you that is so important that the world is thirsting for it. Remember, that's inside you. It's your heritage. You're born with it. You don't have to earn it. Remember that it opens like an umbrella to include the whole world, all of life.

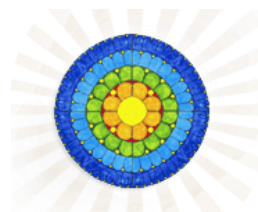
And finally, realize and remember that your suffering is not in vain, that the courage to love in times of cruelty plants the seeds of hope for a new humanity. The story is as old as humankind. Christianity has no copyright on it. But you can take this message out to the world, that every step you take in fear and hatred moves in the direction of hell. There may not be a hell externally, but that's what it's gonna feel like. Conversely, every word, every deed you do in love and compassion may or may not change the world, but you will spend that moment in paradise.

Benediction

Rev .Erica Knisely

Beloved. May you return to your self, your source. And find the treasure that lives both within and without. May you tune your life to the chorus of heaven and let that music guide your steps. And may we all be brave enough to make way for love to be born in the world. For it is in being willing to lose our lives, that we might find Life. Go in peace. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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