

The (un)Kingdom of God: Episode Two (*The Sequel*): The Empire (doesn't) strike back

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Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

A couple of weeks ago I preached on the nature of the Kingdom of God. I enjoyed the feedback I got afterwards. It generated some lively discussion, Micah Tillman blogged about it, and it really seemed to resonate with some of you. Your responses prompted me to continue thinking about the language available to us to talk about the Kingdom. One thing is particularly clear: the only reasonable way to talk about it, as is the case with much of theology, is by simile. It is much easier to say “The Kingdom of God *is like*...” than to detail what it is and is not. That is how Jesus spoke about it — in parables and pictures. In fact, the word “Kingdom” itself is a metaphor — a word that points towards the reality, but one that cannot encompass it.

So I've spent the last few weeks contemplating metaphors of the Kingdom. I've come to realize that we tend to define the Kingdom in terms of membership and boundaries. Who is in, who is out — what the lines are; what to do when they are crossed. Most of the language we use points this direction — Kingdom, community, church and family all assume some definition of membership. I'm becoming convinced, though, that we're misplacing the emphasis when we define the Kingdom in terms of people. Part of the problem is that our assumption about “Kingdoms” is related to our understanding of citizenship. As Americans, we participate in government, hold elections and, to

some extent, consent to be ruled. When we transpose that attitude into our thinking about God's work, we miss the point. The emphasis isn't on us, it is on the one who rules — it is not *our* Kingdom, it is God's Kingdom. To use another image that Jesus employed, the Kingdom is the process of the New Creation that began with Jesus. To be a part of the Kingdom is to participate in the New Creation. The Kingdom is not the workers; the Kingdom is the work. It is not the builders, but the building. It is not the actors, but the drama.

In today's scripture Jesus gives us a rich and enigmatic image. He describes people's reactions to John the Baptist and to Jesus. John the Baptist came playing a funeral dirge — fasting and wearing funny clothes in the wilderness — and people wouldn't sing along. Jesus came playing a dance tune — partying with sinners so much that he was accused of being a drunkard — and people wouldn't dance with him. (This reminds me of the reaction of Mennonites when we try dancing in church.)

In this case, the Work of God is the music that both John and Jesus play. You can guess that this metaphor appeals to me quite a bit. Imagine that God is a composer and choir director. Jesus sings God's song. Wherever that song is, there the work of God is. We hear the song, and we can join in the choir. We become a part of God's music. We can even wander around the world listening for the song. Wherever we hear it we can join in. Wherever we go, we can sing it. Whenever we hear discord, or music that competes with or diminishes God's song, we can bring harmony. This is our alternative response.

You may remember that I outlined two traditional responses to war in my sermon a few weeks ago — Just War Theory, and two-kingdom-based pacifist non-resistance. If we are to participate in God's Work, we can not join in the dissonance, nor can we shield our ears until the clashing ceases. Our role is to actively bring harmony — to sing the new song.

What does it mean to join God's singing? What does it mean to dance with Jesus? A delegation from our congregation recently returned from a trip to Colombia. I've asked Lauren Good to speak about how he saw God at work in that country:

It's not that I didn't see the Kingdom of God at work with any of the men in Colombia, but four of the people that I have thought of a lot in the past few weeks were all women. So when Adam asked me to share a short story of where I saw God at work, I quickly thought of introducing to you four women that we met, three of whom are part of our Sister Church, Remanso de Paz.

Woman #1

Before traveling up to the northern coastal area to visit with our sister church, we spent a few days in Bogota learning more about the situation in Colombia that has contributed to the displacement of so many people in the past 10 to 20 years. We visited the Mencoldes resettlement program in Bogota, as well as the children's center in Cazuca, a large area outside the city where many thousands of displaced people have

settled. Mencoldes is a relief and development agency of the Colombian Mennonite church. If my sketchy notes are correct here, the director was Blanca Sandoval, who patiently showed us the facility. I couldn't help but make some comparisons to our congregation helping resettle the Abdul Ali family here. The difference here was that with a very limited budget and staff, the center admits 400 families each year to their program. Many of the families are women with children who fled their lands, sometimes separating from other family members with nothing more than what they could carry with them. Mencoldes provides them with the immediate needs: basic food and kitchen supplies, household goods, clothing and bedding. Impressive as the distribution program was, once the initial physical needs are met, Blanca and her staff's work is just beginning. Each family gets a medical, dental and psychological evaluation, all of which are creative partnerships with several medical schools' intern programs. Once the basic needs are met, the agency works to help find employment, something that often requires job skill training, since most of the families who participate are making the transition from farming to a city life. Through these and other programs, the families can continue to get support from Mencoldes for several years. The compassion and understanding that Blanca showed for her people was very moving, especially knowing as she does that there is no end in sight. There will be another 400 families next year, and they will likely continue to come for the foreseeable future.

I met the next three women who were evidence of God at work during our days in Sincelejo and our time up in the lands of Macayepo.

The first was Adelina Zuniga, the lead pastor at Remanso de Paz. With only a second grade education when she left their farm, she has become a leader not only in her church, but is also known in the city of Sincelejo and beyond, through social programs and her work especially with women, leading seminars on gender equality. In Colombia, about 50 percent of all displaced households are headed by women, and widows outnumber widowers 6 to 1. Many of these heads of households are single mothers whose husbands needed to relocate for safety, or who simply abandoned their families due to the stress of the conflict. Adelina now tells women that they have the same rights as the men and encourages them to take control of their own lives especially by learning how to budget and manage money. She says the crisis provided the opportunity to put into practice something that she always believed in, that leadership was not something that God called for only from men. If you want to read more about Adelina, I would be happy to provide you a link to an article in the Christian Science Monitor that tells about her progressive journey.

The third woman was Nori, a rather quiet women who along with her husband was pastor in a small village church until she moved to Sincelejo and found the Remanso de Paz community. She told us her story about standing with her husband as he was preaching one morning, when a group of paramilitary disrupted the service, took him outside and

killed him in front of the congregation. She was ordered to leave immediately with her 10-year-old daughter. Upon arriving in Sincelejo, she struggled to deal with surviving while still grieving the loss of her husband. She described how blessed she was to find the people at Remanso de Paz. It was with others who shared similar stories that she was able to begin her own healing. Nori is now part of the pastoral team and has joined with Adelina in ministering to other women who are struggling to rebuild their lives.

The last woman, I'm embarrassed to admit, I never learned her name. After our trip to Macayepo, we spent the evening and night on a neighboring farm. By the evening meal, our group included almost 100 people, including some farmers and other locals who had never left their lands. The Remanso de Paz leaders decided that it would be good to lighten things up with a campfire (even though it was still about 95 degrees and close to 100 percent humidity) and an ex temp talent show. When not enough people volunteered for the show, Adelina decided to play pass the mango: everyone clapped while the mango was passed, and if the clapping stopped when you had the mango, you were to get up and share your talent. "God has given us all talents you know," she assured us. When the mango stopped in an elderly woman's lap, she was obviously panicking. But slowly she rose from her seat and explained that whenever she felt at a complete loss as she did now, she always could talk to God, so her talent must be that she could pray. And pray she did,

starting slow, working her way up into a rhythm with emotion pouring out, imploring God to bless this group, to give us all strength and walk with them through their trials. It wasn't long before the entire circle was actively participating in her prayer.

Prior to going to Colombia, I was more aware of our cultural differences than I was of what we have in common with our sister congregation. Even though I had met Adelina previously when she visited us, I still had little notion of how progressive she and Remanso de Paz have been both in their own congregational work and with other church groups that she meets with. In a society torn apart by conflict, where indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups, particularly, are marginalized, and where machismo rules, these pentecostal churches are pushing the envelope on peace, social and gender justice, and teaching non-violent ways of settling conflict. Though Remanso de Paz is not a Mennonite church, they are truly doing the work of God in ways that felt very consistent with how I read the gospel. As Adelina says, "We stopped just praying the word of God. If someone needed food, we couldn't just pray for them; we had to give them food. That is what we learned."

What can we do to both welcome and join in the work of God? In order to hear God's song and join the singing, we need to be attuned to God. Here is where the metaphor gets very literal — we join God's song, first and foremost, through worship. Worship orients us towards God. Ideally, our whole self is

involved — body, mind and spirit — in turning and tuning to God. Our spirituality is the means by which we welcome God's singing into our beings. It is our opportunity to harmonize ourselves and our community. It is the beginning of our work with and for God. It is from that genesis that everything else is born. All of our work, all of our peacemaking, all of our feeding the hungry, all of our participation in the Work of God, is an act of worship.