

Godly society

We've been running a series on Real Faith – Real Life, concentrating on how to integrate the real, rich, beautifully textured and abundant life God is offering us into our everyday non-Sunday-morning lives. We were going to close out the series two weeks ago with Godly rest; after all, if God can end a week of creation with rest, a pastor can end a sermon series with it. But for various reasons I found myself thinking about how our God-filled lives are not just perfect me-God dyads but are immersed in a messy organic soup of Other People. Now I don't know about you, but I can behave very well indeed as long as I'm not thrown off-stride by Other People. And we've been trying for many generations to figure out how to live with other people and still live righteous lives and not commit atrocities against their dogs or their stereo systems. So here we are, looking not just for a way to love our neighbors (Really?! Well...maybe her, but not them and certainly not him) but to extend our sense of who are our neighbors and build a society that supports loving our neighbors. July 4 – July 14 between Independence Day and Bastille Day, two commemorations of times that people decided their current form of government did not meet the needs of society, and went for a more representative government. They've been messy experiments, and continue to be, but they remind us of our continuing attempt to create a just and godly society. And why should we do such a thing? There's a Jehovah's Witness who comes around to tell me about their beliefs. She's a delightful woman who spends all of the time she can trying to save souls, an avocation I have to respect. And one of their tenets, forgive me if I get this wrong, is that there's no point in trying to create a just and godly society here and now, that we should treat people well as individuals but that society cannot be changed and will not be changed until the coming of the kingdom, so the godly must stay out of politics and simply tell the news. I love her dearly. And I think she's dead wrong.

The Bible is full of descriptions of how society ought to be. Leviticus gets a bad name for all of the detailed descriptions of church rituals we no longer use, but it also has good stuff in it. Look at our reading from Chapter 19 and try to say it's out of date! And in Luke, Jesus is very clear – the kingdom of God is not neverland, it's not a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, it's within and among us. No, we do not wait patiently amid the evils of this world to see them all solved in the hereafter. We are specifically tasked with bringing the kingdom to fruition here, in our world. My Jewish in-laws taught me about tikkun olam, the obligation that God's people have to improve, or more literally perfect, the world. Why? Jewish theology is very nearly silent about the afterlife, but it is emphatic that this is your real life. This is not a practice run and you can laze your way through and take a do-over if you slept through your opportunities. So you take your life seriously, and you take your obligations as one who loves God seriously. Can we look around and say the world is perfect? And yet this world is God's, and ought to reflect God's standards. Clearly it's our job to right the wrongs, as we are God's hands on earth. And check out the Matthew – what you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and what you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven – we are trusted agents! I don't know whether we need to build the realm of God more for others (the realm needs to be built) or for ourselves (we need to be the kind of people who will build it), but either way we need to do it. And yet, what gets my attention most about all this is not the whole “Go build the

kingdom, the kin-dom” message, but a small part of it – what do you do when you disagree.

Note nobody says in the Bible go and never disagree again, because you are my followers you will always see everything the same way and live in eternal harmony. No, there are clear directions on how to disagree in honest respectful ways, and even clear directions *to* disagree openly rather than let resentment build. I was recently at the League of Women Voters national convention. The League allows men to join, and encourages younger members, but basically a LWV national convention is 1200 tough little old ladies in sensible shoes in the same room at the same time. Overwhelming experience. I want to grow up like them. And what struck me about that convention is that here you had people who disagreed intelligently and passionately on a variety of subjects, but their behavior in disagreeing was a model of how to do it well.

Speakers alternated between pro and con, and each listened respectfully to the others. Each was allowed the same amount of time, and closed out his or her speech when time was up. When it came time to vote, we first called aye or nay, then if it was hard to tell which dominated, we stood for a vote; if it was still difficult to tell, we called for a ballot vote. In each case, if there was any doubt, the president chose to err on the side of making things clearer, so that we all believed the votes had been fairly conducted and well counted. Now I am not saying that the kingdom of God needs to be a representative democracy, or even filled with little old ladies in sensible shoes, though I suspect it will have plenty of those running the place. I do want to point out, though, that the things that made this meeting work were not the rules for working with people you find it easy to work with but the rules for disagreeing well. So what is it about disagreeing well? How do you do it and why does it matter? I don't know what's on God's mind, but when I'm designing something, if it needs to work well in changing circumstances or if it needs to improve over the course of its existence, I can't define it too perfectly when I start or it won't be able to change. This is not metaphorical – there's an actual mathematical divide-by-zero problem if your first try is too perfect and then your system needs to change. So what you need is to insert a little disagreement and keep the system in dynamic equilibrium, the balance of a tightrope walker or dancer rather than the balance of a mountain. Then if the environment changes, things will favor one direction over another and your system can move as needed. So if God wants us to be building, changing, growing into our inheritance as Her children, we need to realize that She designed us to have different ideas of how to achieve the same lofty goals. He planned for us to have myriad visions, and for the kingdom to grow out of the cooperative-competitive struggle. This is not God as watchmaker; this is God as gardener.

So what do you do when you have a dispute with a fellow beloved child of God? Our directions are clear. You don't swallow it, say nothing to the offender, and tell your friends next time you see them “That Susan is Such a clown – did you hear what she did to me last week?” You don't even swallow it, say nothing to anyone, and carry a load of resentment because the person was so annoying, so dense, so wrong. You tell them. You hold in your head and your heart the belief that this person is also trying to follow God, and you tell them how they have offended you in a way that gives them room to amend their fault, or to explain, or simply to debate with you the very best way to achieve your common goals. Argue fairly and openly, tell the truth, and keep loving one another.

And that's how we build the kingdom. Brick by brick. Feed the poor. Shelter the homeless. Love the friendless. And treat each other with the respect to see our differences as opportunities (whoa, we've got something pushing this way and something pushing that way – I think together they could hold up a roof!), and treat ourselves with the respect to let our voices be heard. Oh, and pay attention to little old ladies.