**The Diaconal Hermeneutic**

**Session Six**

**The Dream of God**

The image of the Plumb Line is a powerful one. It is simple, clear, and constant. It does not rely on any subjective thoughts or personal feelings of the user. Its truth can be seen by anyone. It transcends culture, history, even circumstance.

The Plumb Line that informs the Diaconal Hermeneutic is not obscure. It is not some specialized element of the ordinal uniquely for deacons or derived from some archetypal or archaic moment in Christian history. It does not require an advanced degree or mastery of ancient language. [Though we do look to the work of some who mine original texts for us.] And most of all, it is not the deacon’s personal “thing” or point of view. It comes from the pleadings and prayers of the great prophets and from the heart of Jesus’ teaching and ministry.

Jesus called it “the kingdom.”

In scripture it is variously named the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven, which are for us translations from language familiar to the people of Jesus’ time and context. From our 21st century perspective, I find that some reframing is needed to help people in and out of the church to understand what this fully means.

Today some people have a problem with monarchical language and image. It connotes to them top-down rule, often enforced with violence by men. It means privilege and patriarchy, since most monarchy in our experience or perusal of history is a hereditary exercise of male primogeniture endowed with excessive unearned wealth. Its exercise in history was often arbitrary [caught for us humorously by deacon Charles Dodgson, aka Lewis Carroll, whose Red Queen runs about constantly shouting “off with their head!”]. Combine all these defects with the criticism of patriarchy in the life and teaching of the church, and there is not a lot to commend an image of a Kingdom. What I have taken to doing—which is not original with me, but I cannot now attribute from whom I acquired or learned it—is to use the term Holy Reign of God, and more recently (see below) the Dream of God.

Holy Reign can still raise questions for some. I once engaged a young person at some length who just wasn’t going to buy that God “ruled” in any way. At a certain point it was time to regroup and take a different tack.

Another alarming and complexifying element was pointed out to me this year. “Building the Kingdom” has now been appropriated by looming Christian Nationalism for whom it is a code word for a theocracy they seek to set up in the U.S. That is a prime example of what Walter Brueggemann names as “utilitarian.” That is appropriating, domesticating, and making God “useful.” And further, making God, Jesus, the church subject to the “state” or if out of power, the “party” or the “movement.”Keeping an uncorrupted vocabulary with which the deacon can speak that doesn’t bring current fractious baggage with it is getting more and more difficult.

So far not corrupted, The Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church—The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry—has been using the language of “the Dream of God.” It has some of its origins with The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. I think “dream” captures the essence of the following discussion without getting us hung up on patriarchy or privilege or toxic nationalism. And then, as Rabbi Abraham Heschel says (way below), “to pray is to dream with God.”

Another major problem has been created by the church which has over time permitted or actively encouraged a fundamental misunderstanding of the Kingdom. This, in turn, rests on a misunderstanding of what we mean by “heaven.” Jesus repeatedly spoke of the Kingdom being “very near.” All of his teaching and imagery pointed to a new, or at least greater reality which was immanent and waiting to break in to our collective life as we currently experience it. The “signs” of Jesus ministry were events of that greater reality indeed breaking in so as to help people “get it.” He also hoped that people would, thus, be enticed to follow in a way that would work to make that alternate reality the primary, dominant way we would be and live. The visions of the prophets also sought either to shake people awake or to lure them in to fully living their covenant with the Holy One. What has happened to the power and vitality of this original sense of Kingdom is that it has been relegated first to a distant and “other” place and then made a reward after death for a life of good behavior. Matthew wrote of the “Kingdom of Heaven” because his deep Jewish piety forbade any writing down of any versions of the name of God. Because popular use of language in his day saw “heaven” as “up there” and beyond what we can now see, the Kingdom moved further and further away and became less and less accessible.

There are some theological and philosophical issues to explore here. We have a window into how people dealt with shifting understandings of the world if we look at the checkered history of the church and what we now call cosmology. The punishing of Galileo for daring to alter reality by positing that the earth rotates around the sun and not vice versa is just a symptom of how shifting, new knowledge challenged—nay, frightened—the church and warped our understanding of heaven and Kingdom. That it took the Roman Catholic Church 500 years reluctantly to admit its error in condemning Galileo is another sign of how deep this issue runs.

More prosaically, but perhaps more powerfully, heaven ‘out there’ as a reward for good behavior ‘here’ can be a major tool for social control. And when wielded by this-worldly monarchs for noble “reasons of state” or personal wealth and venality, the image of Kingdom is further tarnished. It is this that Karl Marx quite rightly named as “the opiate of the people.” And the church has been culpable. Dietrich Bonhoeffer named it “cheap grace.” Other prophetic voices speak up from time to time to try to wake the church up from its opium induced slumber. I found these words in the May 2018 issue of *Sojourners* magazine: “The church must engage but never be embedded in the state.” “Politicians will try to embed the church if they can, but there needs to be a reasonable distance, otherwise you end up becoming part of empire.” [from two leaders of the South African Christian Leadership Initiative]

The core idea here, which is the essence of the Plumb Line and vital to the deacon, is that God has, from the creation of life in time and space as we know it, had a vision of how that which God creates can be in right relationship with God and with itself. In simpler terms The Kingdom is how we can be in relationship with God and each other. In the discussion of Communio theology and eschatological ecclesiology this is stated as the “fourfold goal,” reconciliation with God, with God’s creation, with each other, and with self. God’s Dream then is relational, dynamic, and realized in time and space—our concrete here and now. The verbal device I have used a lot in preaching is to say the Dream of God is how things could be, would be, should be if we were to live the vision God has for our relationship with God and with each other. God has given us a lot of help to see and understand that vision. It is the primary theme throughout scripture—old covenant and new. It is what Jesus was all about in his teaching, life, and ministry. We see this stated in another way in the BCP catechism’s definition of the church’s mission as “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.”.(BCP p.855)

The Kingdom, the Holy Reign**—the Dream of God-- is the deacon’s Plumb Line for interpreting to the church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world AND the directions for how we as God’s people are called and invited to respond.**

The Baptismal Covenant is a blueprint for kingdom building or actively dreaming with God. Making real the Dream of God is our central, gospel work and it is the deacon’s gift and obligation to help us “get it” and to take action.

One can look back over history and see times and events in which the recovery of the true sense of God’s Holy Reign emerges and God’s people act to bring it very near indeed. But this has not been the dominant experience. In a very sweeping generalization, which could be a course in itself, when the diaconate disappears or is tamed into an exclusively liturgical role, the power of the Holy Reign of God fades or even disappears. This was noted as far back as John Chrysostom in the 4th century C.E.

Just over a century ago, Walter Rauschenbusch (re)discovered the Kingdom as the agenda for ministry and action when serving as a pastor to a German émigré Baptist congregation in the heart of New York’s slums. Here is how Robert Ellsberg describes it in his mini-bio of Rauschenbusch in the book *All Saints*.

“And then suddenly in 1891 he experienced a theological breakthrough. The key was his rediscovery of the biblical symbol of the kingdom of God, the central message that Jesus had proclaimed. It was an all encompassing theme that included personal faith and social transformation; it was truly ‘the first and most essential dogma of the Christian faith,’ for basically it concerned the challenge of transforming the world into conformity with the will of God. To bear witness to this kingdom Jesus was born: ‘All his teachings center about it. His life was given to it. His death was suffered for it. When a man has once seen that in the Gospels, he can never unsee it again.’

And yet, central as this message was, it had been either forgotten or obscured in Christian history. The kingdom was identified with heaven, with individual salvation, or with the church. While it was truly concerned with all these things, he argued, the kingdom was ultimately something wider and more radical. Above all it represented the constant tension between the status quo and the world as God intended it.” P. 317.

Rauschenbusch’s work got labeled “the social gospel.” Like ‘liberation theology” today, the term and what it connoted was embraced by some and condemned by others. In my youth in mid-20th century America, and in The Episcopal Church, it was fashionable to deride “the social gospel.” We knew in some vague way that it had been embraced by the Methodists and so that fed all our intellectual and class snobbery as well. The social gospel actually caught on and generated much enthusiasm and Protestant church programs and preaching in the first decade of the 20th century. Even in times politically and economically similar to ours, Jesus’ appeal to our best possibility inspired many. It was the era of the robber barons, with the greatest gap between the rich and the poor we have had, until today. There were messy, unpopular conflicts in out-of-the-way places—Philippines, South Africa, the Middle East. Workers were fighting, and dying, to claim the right to form unions and negotiate for a better life. But Jesus’ message seemed to ring true. The onset of the first world war, however, devastated the optimism and possibility that the social gospel generated and it fell into disfavor—dismissed as naïve and shallow. The “world” wars of the 20th century showed us human kind at its worst, most evil, most lethal. If a Holy Reign of God meant anything, it must just mean a heavenly reward for enduring all the pain and suffering of this world.

But the message remains true. Like the plumb line, it never varies and is always so. And there have been heroic voices speaking and acting for God’s Holy Reign in the midst of the worst of times. And to echo my comment on the diaconate above, I find it most provocative that the 20th century renewal of the diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church started with a group of lay men in Dachau concentration camp who met and prayed and asked themselves, and later (for those who survived) the church, “how could this have happened? What must we do differently that it never happens again?” Their question would not go away and finally percolated to and through Vatican II to produce the document authorizing the restoration of the Order of Deacons in the Roman Catholic Church to keep the church ever mindful of its call to serve in and for the world.

There is another way of fleshing out the metaphor of Plumb Line. When the plumb line is the Kingdom/Reign/Dream of God, its tensile strength is made up of strands of scripture, image, scholarship, experience woven together to hold all the complexity and nuance of the central metaphor. It is also here where Brueggmann’s treatment of the prophets’ criticizing (on which we have focused a lot in our conversation) and pathos—their own and the embracing of the radical pathos of God—enriches the content and power of the plumb line as Kingdom/Reign/Dream of God.

My work in diaconal formation has given me a heightened awareness of the norm of God’s Holy Reign and the ministries to bring it near that deacons lead and encourage with all the baptized. Not as a conclusion, but as material for further thought and inspiration I will add, below, two things that have been part of my gathering of the strands of teaching, writing and experience to strengthen my understanding of the plumb line for the deacon.

1. One is a document I keep on my computer’s desktop that is simply a list of the components of the Holy Reign of God that I note as they finally hit me over the head enough to get my attention. It is not complete, nor in any particular order. I offer it in hopes that it might inspire you both to add to it and incorporate its components into your own growing description of the deacon’s Plumb Line.
2. Following that is a collection, again in no particular order, of “Kingdom quotations” I have captured over time in reading about the lives and works of God’s saints and in scripture and comment thereon. It too is partial and getting a bit dated. I am sure you can think of many powerful additions.. I add to it from time to time as yet another voice comes to my attention. Some of the comments are particularly rich and I keep in reserve to add, as and when appropriate, to my preaching.

I will ask us to work with some of these ideas and quotes in the questions for the week.

Resources for the

Holy Reign of God

The statements of the Sermon on the Mount [Matthew 5, 6, 7]

Richard Rohr, *Jesus’ Revolutionary Plan for a New World*

Jim Forrest, *The Ladder of the Beatitudes*

Metaphor in parables—“the Kingdom of God/Heaven is like . . . throughout the synoptics. The view from John comes in the form of teachings

*The Good News of Jesus* William Countryman

*Capax Dei* – the universal human capacity for God; made intelligible and available through the Incarnation. A term borrowed from RC theologizing

Relational. God abandons no one.

“Overcome evil with Good.”

Sharing and sustaining equitable abundance.

Forgiveness. Countryman, *Forgiven and Forgiving.*

Peace—non-violent settling of differences; mutual respect

Love—many ways of experiencing, expressing, living in love

Healing

Freedom: from attachment, from self imprisonment , from addiction, from oppression

Wholeness [“the Glory of God is (the human being) fully alive” Ignatius of Antioch]

Beauty: Dostoyevski, “We shall be saved by beauty.” Beauty as one of the three universals in the preChristian writings of Plato—and the philosophy that evolved in his name.

Diversity of expressions and beings in local, immediate community

Differentiation, not stratification.

Fear- less

Anger - less

Compassionate caring each for the other in community

Centrality of “the least of these” as Christ/the Judge himself

And the collection of quotations, which draws a lot (but not all) from Tom Wright on core Kingdom values. [The Right Rev. N(igel) T(homas) Wright, prolific New Testament scholar, former Bishop of Durham (CofE), and currently on the faculty of St. Andrew’s University in the Scottish city of the same name]. There are parts and opinions of Wright’s with which I differ and for those reasons some folk write him off totally. Much of his work and preaching offers a recovery of a “kingdom sensibility” [my coinage] like Rauschenbusch’s

The first of a series of quotes:

“‘Repentance’ and forgiveness of sins’ are not, therefore, simply a matter for the individual, though they certainly are that. At the heart of being a Christian is the personal turning away from sin, and celebrating God’s forgiveness, which is after all at the heart of the Lord’s Prayer itself. But these two words go much wider as well. They are the agenda which can change the world.

Today’s world is full of disputes, large and small, only a few of which get into the newspapers. Nations, ethnic groups, political factions, tribes, and economic alliances struggle for supremacy. Each can tell stories of the atrocities committed by their opponents. Each one claims that they therefore have the right to the moral high ground and must be allowed redress, revenge, satisfaction. But, as anyone who has studied the complicated history of the Middle East, Rwanda or Northern Ireland will know, it is simply impossible to give an account of the conflict in which one side is responsible for all the evil and the other side is a completely innocent victim. The only way forward is the one we all find the hardest at every level: repentance and forgiveness. The resolute application of the gospel under the Lordship of the risen Jesus, is the only way towards the creation of new hope and possibilities. The extraordinary work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, showed the way in the last years of the twentieth century. He offers a wonderful example: who will follow?”

[Closing comments on the conclusion of Luke’s Gospel in N.T. [‘Tom’] Wright’s *Luke for Everyone*, pp. 301-02]

Holy Reign of God quotes

“God’s kingdom, you see, isn’t about food and drink but about justice, peace, and joy in the ‘holy spirit.’”   
Romans 14:17 as translated by N.T. Wright in *Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 2*, page 164.

“And the name of this poem is ‘the Kingdom of God.’ This is what all Israel had been waiting for. It wasn’t a new piece of good advice. It wasn’t a new political agenda. It wasn’t’ a new type of spirituality. It might eventually lead to advice, agendas and certainly to prayer, but it was itself something more than all of these. It was the good (and extremely dangerous) news that the living God was on the move, was indeed now coming into his Kingdom. And it demanded a definite response. It was ‘God’s good news.’”  
N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* pp. 8-9 [commenting on verses 1:14-20]

“The more we are open to God and to the different dimensions of God’s glory, the more we seem to be open to the pain of the world.”  
N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* p.114 [commenting on the Transfiguration and what immediately follows it at the foot of the mountain.]

“Our faith in Christ Jesus and our mission to proclaim the Gospel demand of us commitment to promote justice and to enter into solidarity with the voiceless and the powerless.”  
The 4th Decree from the 32nd Congregation of the Society of Jesus, March 1975, of which the Superior General Pedro Arrupe was instrumental. Quoted in Ellsberg, *All Saints*, p.62

“ . . . holy people like Dorothy Day had four key commitments that every parish must emphasize: a relationship with the poor, to prayer, to learning, and to community. Once these begin to be talked about in our parishes, more parishioners will be willing to lead lives of social justice.”   
Jack Jezreel, Exec. Dir. Just Faith Ministries, quoted in *National Catholic Reporter* 10/30/09 p. 18.

“There is no unilateral, private, insulated, lonely, or eccentric Christian life. There is only one Christian as the member of the whole body; the vocation for every single Christian is inherently ecumenical; the exclusive context of biblical ethics is biblical politics; even when a Christian acts apparently alone he does so as a surrogate for the church; baptism signifies the public commitment of a person to humanity.”  
William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* p.61

“We have to see history as a book sealed and opened by the Passion of Christ. But we still read it from the viewpoint of The Beast. Passion of Christ = passion of the poor, underprivileged, etc. Viewpoint of The Beast: self-righteousness and cruelty of power. Hubris of human might and technological efficiency. But the same cruelty is bred by this hubris in the weak who grow strong by resisting it and overcoming it—to be proud in their turn. Christ remains in agony until the end of time, in his agony triumphs over all power.”  
Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Waters of Life* p.250

“Any first-century Jew, hearing someone talk about God’s Kingdom, or the kingdom of heaven, would know. This meant revolution.”  
N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, p. 28

“Deacons are the memory keepers of God’s justice. You call us all to look squarely at the truth.”  
The Rt. Rev. Duncan Gray III, Bishop of Mississippi addressing a NAAD/AED formation directors conference.

“The Pharisees knew how to take care of the poor in such a way that the poor would always be with them.”  
Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, in a commentary on “the poor you have with you always,” pp. 155-57

“If then, we repeat Jesus’ command (‘you give them something to eat’) that doesn’t just mean work a bit harder for famine relief, though that would certainly help. It will also mean that those who discover the Living God in and through Jesus must be prepared to face up to the evil structure and powers that still dominate and control much of God‘s world, and challenge them in the name of Jesus and with the power of his victory on the cross . . .  
William Wliberforce did it with slavery (and it took him and en entire lifetime too);’  
Who will do it with world poverty and starvation?  
N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, pp. 80-81 (comment on Mark 6:3044]

“The Good News of the resurrection is not that we shall die and go home with him but that he is risen and comes home with us, bringing all his hungry, naked, thirsty, sick, prisoner brothers with him.”  
Clarence Jordan, quoted in *All Saints* p.471.

“Morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.”  
Abraham Heschel

“The prophet’s word is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven.”  
Abraham Heschel

“To pray is to dream in league with God.”  
Abraham Heschel

“The whole of our existence, the whole of our lives, should cry the Gospel from the rooftops . . . not by our words but by our lives.”  
The Monastic Rule for the Little Brothers of Jesus written by Charles de Foucauld

And I am sure there are many, many more you can add to the list, now, and as you exercise diaconal servant leadership.