

Heaven Is Near (Part Two)

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”

Reflection 4 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

With Jesus and faith in Jesus, heaven is always near. Jesus takes us where we are in our fears and narrowness, and he invites us into a world that is larger and kinder. He summons us to a new world that is struggling to be born: a world where God reigns, a kingdom of love, where people learn to trust, where people learn to forgive, and where people quit judging and begin to see their thoughts as just that – their very fallible thoughts. He summons us to a new world where people learn to live a life of love. And this is the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, heaven’s reign on earth, where God’s loving will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus preaches, “Repent, change your orientation in life, change your direction in life, for heaven’s reign on earth is near, in fact, all around you. It’s yours for the taking. End the fear. End the greed. End the lust. End the anger. Instead, enter the timeless zone of God’s kingdom of love. Tap into eternity. Live in the moment, casting all your fears upon God. And experience bliss, freedom, carefreeness, peace of mind, and centeredness you’ve never known.

What Jesus is calling people to, here at the beginning of his ministry and all the way to the end, is his last great new command – that they “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” But none of this just happens. It has to be learned. And so drawing in part on Brian McLaren’s *The Great Spiritual Migration*, we are to learn the many life skills of loving. We develop deep soul gratitude. We learn how to admit our weaknesses and failures, how to express our hurt and disappointment, how to confront when we need to, how to forgive when we need to, and how to ask for help. We learn to differ graciously. We learn how to negotiate all our competing desires. We learn how to take the first steps to resolve conflict. And we form groups of people where this life of love is learned.¹

Why? Because none of this comes naturally. We learn how to win and lose graciously. We learn how to uphold wise boundaries. We learn when to say yes, and when to say no. We learn how to speak truth in love. And we learn to contest what’s not loving and what appeals to fear and hate and violence. We even learn how love manifests itself differently in different personality types. And then we learn to teach these things in ways that are age-appropriate to toddlers, young children, preteens and teenagers, in ways that are life-appropriate to young adults, engaged couples, married couples, young parents, parents of teens, parents of adults, grandparents, widows and widowers. Who’s teaching this stuff? And where?

So we learn what it means to love strangers, the aliens in our land (as God reiterated over and over to ancient Israel). We learn what it means to love enemies in our particular economic and political context. We learn – because by nature we do not know – how to process feelings of anger, prejudice, revenge, fear and resentment, and we find somehow

a way to move toward love. And we learn to draw on worship patterns that help us live lives of love. We draw on music, rituals, prayers and daily devotional practices that contribute to the development of loving people. And when people wander from the ways of love, we find the best ways to bring them back.ⁱⁱ

And we do all this together, but no one of us knows how. What we do know is that it takes repentance. It takes focus. It takes discipline. It takes right intention. It takes learning. It takes a place where these things are learned. And it takes a group of people with whom it is learned. But, oh, the possibilities when we repent, when we change direction, as Jesus came into Galilee teaching. Our hearts are refashioned. And the kingdom of God – where God reigns in love and grace and trust – is very near to you. It is at hand.

These thoughts are not of course second nature to us. They don't just happen. But go back and read the Gospels and see how very often these are the very points Jesus is making. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink. Forgive seven times seventy. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. You are troubled and worried about many things, but only one thing is needed. And with such teachings, he inaugurates heaven's reign on earth, a personal peace that is simply there for the asking, and a peace between people that can only be built on such foundations. And heaven is near. Or as our text says: A light has dawned. People living in darkness have seen a great light. The world can find what it so urgently needs – a place where we're helped to live a life of love.

You know, we've talked here about how things are in our time, and the rise of the Nones and people still spiritual who never or hardly ever go to church. Here's part of what's going on. A lot of people don't see the point in church. Maybe they're not trying very hard, but they don't see the point. They don't see why church matters. But what if this church, our church, filled as it is with good people, becomes and is seen as simply a place that helps us live a life of love? So then when the question is, "What is your church like?" the answer is, "It's a place that helps us live a life of love." People – a lot of them – will get that. They know they need that. They see the point of that. And when they stop and think they realize that's happening almost nowhere else.

Imagine then this being who we are and what is done here. God is calling us into a world larger and kinder than the one we were born into. It's nothing less than heaven's reign on earth. It takes living a life of love, learning how to do that, in a community of people learning it together. You will glimpse eternity. You will sense energy in your life you've never felt before; you will feel you can touch the heavens. You will experience clarity and insight you've never had before. Perhaps for the first time, you will feel really alive. It's very near you, so close that one day you may realize in the words of a song some years ago:

All the time, all the wasted time
All the years waiting for a sign
To think I had it all

All the time.

But it takes being born again from above. And now we can grasp what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus that night in John 3. Unless you are born again (and John does connect this to water baptism), unless you start over in life, with a mind completely transformed, you will never see this kingdom of love, this kingdom of God. It's so close to you. It's all around you. It's yours for the taking.

But it takes, Jesus says, repentance.

– Dale Pauls

ⁱ McLaren, *Migration*, 58.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 242.