

The kingdom of God is....

“A new society, a renewed Israel open to all... a realm of God’s extravagant grace, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion... a place where those labeled unworthy or impure are received unconditionally... a world of abundant manna shared by all... a reality worth dropping all other commitments to joyfully receive.”

~ Daniel Erlander

Forgiven, Invited, Included, Loved

In one of our confirmation classes I asked the class to choose two words, among a list of words that described how it feels, what it looks like to be a part of and witness the kingdom of God. They chose the following: forgiven, invited, included, loved, affirmed, embraced, given dignity, made whole. This lesson and these words remained with me and I shared the top four with Aurora on a Sunday where I asked the congregation to stand and go to the word they associate most with the kingdom of God. Together we discussed why we chose this word and how we exemplify this word in our church and community. As I sat with kids and elders, we discussed the simple act of saying hi and inviting someone over. The act of welcoming someone is central to our understanding of kingdom and it isn’t rocket science, but perhaps a bit awkward as we get used to it.

The weekend after discussing the words invited, included and loved I witnessed them in practice. I saw our confirmation students coming together to serve at the Steele County Clothesline and Food Shelf. Though it wasn’t glamorous work, with each shelf we stacked and bin we cleaned we affirmed the value and dignity of those who visit. I also went to the Synod lay leader education event of which the focus was on radical hospitality – hitting on all the ways in which we invite, include and love those in our community and the world.

Yet probably where I saw these words most prominently enacted was at an Owatonna CommUnity event hosted by United Way. On a sunny Sunday afternoon many of us gathered from the Somalian, Latino and Anglo community. We started by dividing up by generation. Then we were asked a series of questions including that of: Who wants to feel safe in their community? Who wants to feel as though they belong in their community? Who wants to feel a part of their community? To all these questions and more everyone raised their hand, showing us that we are all beginning with the same goal and need. I heard echoes of the words that exemplify the kingdom; we all want to feel invited, included and loved. As we broke into small groups for discussions of how we can work together and strengthen our community, we were able to create relationships across different cultural backgrounds and begin to dream about how we can work together. While we talked, folks I had only known for a few minutes offered to bring me a drink or dessert and later those from different backgrounds compared different foods as if trading recipes. At the end, each person shared what they hoped to do moving forward, the kids of course, were the most inspiring as they shared that they wanted to show compassion to others and treat everyone as important and special even though they are different. Again those words of the kingdom resounded in my heart and mind.

As we continue our journey in Lent and end this month with Holy Week, we are reminded of how Jesus lived out these words and enacted the kingdom of God. Jesus is at the food shelf, the gatherings of the church and the table with those who are different than him. It is because he offered forgiveness, invited people to the table, made them feel included and loved that he was put on trial. It is for us that he dies for our sin, including that of our inability to live as we are called, in a community defined by God’s grace, love and hospitality. However, as we well know, the story doesn’t end at the cross and ours is not defined by our sin. Instead, Christ lives and we have the opportunity each day to partner with Christ in creating the community God intended. I invite you to consider for these remaining weeks of Lent – how do you as an individual, how do we as a parish participate in the kingdom of God? How do we forgive, invite, include and love all those whom we encounter?

Pastor Stephanie Wood