

The Unexpected Kingdom
A reflection on Mt. 29:13:31- 13:52
The Rev. Este Gardner Cantor

I went on a pilgrimage recently, and the more I think about it, the more I realize that I had an experience of the Kingdom of Heaven in the most unexpected places.

The destination of the pilgrimage was supposed to be the gigantic Cathedral of St. John the Divine, where one would expect to have a revelation. But my first unlikely glimpse of the Kingdom was in the huge and dilapidated Methodist Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew on 86th and Broadway. I stayed there for 8 days with my fellow priest, Father Richard, the other adult chaparone, Gay Johnson, and 7 of our wonderful high school youth.

There is no denying the fact that the church was a daunting place to live. We shared a shower with the homeless shelter, and after my first look, I attacked the stall with a long brush and some Comet and strove to make it look clean. But for all my scrubbing, this was not really possible. There was also a considerable population of mice in that church. We took to adopting the habits of wilderness campers who hang their packs high in the trees to keep them from the bears. We hung our bags from the wall lamps to keep them from the mice. Our youth group was housed in two fine rooms the first night- until a huge youth group took over one of our rooms, and then, later in the week, a third youth group was welcomed in, and even our plan B space became endangered.

There were always meetings going on in our room when we wanted to be there to rest. We soon learned that obtaining a set schedule for these meetings was not possible. When we wanted to use the kitchen, we would often find it occupied by some darn program feeding the homeless. It was an amazing experience to be there, but it certainly was uncomfortable. We actually considered leaving at one point, and then one of our youth pointed out to us we were on a pilgrimage, not a vacation.

I slowly began to realize that this dilapidated church we were camping in resembled nothing so much as the radically welcoming branches of the transformed mustard seed.

This church runs a women's shelter. They host a food pantry, run by former clients, who are now happily employed there. The church sends out hundreds of Meals on Wheels packages every day. They have a mothers and babies group. They have a martial arts class for youth. They have a tutoring program. They have music classes in the sanctuary. The night we arrived there was a huge and joyous Indian flavored rock concert in progress, also in the sanctuary. They have a beautiful theatrical stage on the 2nd floor, which was used by no fewer than six theater groups. They have dozens of 12 step programs going all the time, and they often happened in the room we were staying in! The church houses a very large and rather famous radical synagogue, B'nai Jesurun. It also houses a Presbyterian church whose usual space was being renovated. During the Sunday service on Gay Pride Day all of the marchers were welcomed to the center of the church, and everyone laid hands on them to bless them on their march. They used inclusive language in every prayer- God was never a "he."

Everyone was welcomed in- even us- even the mice. It seemed that no bird would be turned away from building a nest in this great tree, and if a place could be said to have a great heart, this one sure did.

It seemed to me that the blessing and the curse of being part of this great teeming Kingdom was the same thing- we were automatically part of the hospitality because we were given hospitality. We had to accept that our nest was just one of hundreds, and not the center of the tree. And after a while we found that even if we were bumped out of our room there was always somewhere for us to perch, and we found some rather lovely places. We could always camp on the cool and quiet balcony of the vast sanctuary, sometimes hearing the beautiful strains of music from some of our neighboring birds. It did feel a little like heaven up there.

The Kingdom of Heaven popped up unexpectedly again for me in quite another place- this time after the planned part of the pilgrimage was over.

My husband joined me after the pilgrims went home, and after a few days in New York, we decided to go to Washington DC to see the fireworks on the 4th of July. I had lived in Washington for many years, so I called an old boyfriend of mine, Art Grosman, who still lives there, and I asked if we could stay with him. He was delighted to offer us a

room at the big brownstone he shares with his girlfriend. I hadn't seen him in 20 years, but he hadn't changed a bit. Long ago, when we were both professional hippies, we had crossed Canada together in our VW van, resplendent with tie-dyed curtains. When I saw him on this recent visit, he still had all the photos from that trip, which included the many and sometimes motley hitch-hikers we picked up along the way.

I left this man because he was always doing exactly what he had done for those hich-hikers and for my husband and me. He was always inviting anyone and everyone to stay- every derelict old friend of his was welcome at the table. Art's particular call was providing services for free that usually cost something. He started the Washington Free Press. He started the Washington Free clinic, and when he got together with his girlfriend, they housed the Washington Free School. I now realize that I had to leave him because my heart was not big enough. But I got to know his girlfriend Marty for the first time on this trip, and realized that this time he had found someone whose heart was big enough. Before he met her, Marty had already adopted two kids whose parents had been institutionalized. Nobody else wanted these kids. Then, once they got together, they spent the next 20 years, taking in emergency foster kids- kids whose parents were in prison, or on crack, or just not there. Some of these kids stayed for 10 years or more. During this time they managed to have two of their own biological kids as well.

Art is a Jewish atheist (like all my friends were in Washington), and so I was surprised to see an obituary tacked up on his wall for Kenneth Taylor, the man who started the huge Christian publishing house, Tyndale Press. Kenneth Taylor created "The Living Bible" which I have on my shelf because my grandfather gave it to me. This was an early attempt to put the bible into understandable English. I was told that this titan of the Christian publishing business was Marty's father. He used to read the bible to his children every night and explain what it meant. One time Marty said, "Well, if that's what they mean, why don't they just say it?" This was the catalyst for the creation of "The Living Bible."

Art and Marty never married during their 30 year old courtship, and this was hard on Marty's father. But I understand that before he died, he came to realize that Art and Marty were married in the eyes of God. And I hope he realized that contrary to appearances, the words of the

bible he had read his daughter all those years had not fallen on deaf ears. Married or not, Marty and Art were doing the work of the Kingdom of Heaven-- taking in the homeless orphans, providing for the poor, opening their house to everyone who needed it- even me and my husband.

Being part of this bustling kingdom must not have been easy. I'm sure there were hardships for their birth children, navigating between so many little sheltered birds, and probably difficulties among the many foster children. And surely there were stresses between the two parents. But they too, apparently recognized that they were on a pilgrimage, not a vacation.

This led me to consider that life is, or should be a lot more like a pilgrimage than a vacation. And if we believe what Jesus tells us, that the Kingdom of God is at hand, maybe that Kingdom isn't supposed to be entirely comfortable either. Or maybe in the Kingdom of Heaven we are transformed in a way that changes the meaning of being comfortable all together. How comfortable is the wolf when she lies down with the lamb? And if the lamb is comfortable, it is in a way we can't yet fathom.

I read that if we wanted to have every human being on earth enjoy the lifestyle of an affluent North American, we would need four planet earths. I wonder if the bustling and rich kingdom of our New York City Methodist church, or the loving chaos of Art and Marty's house could be microcosms of what life might be if we evened out the score on a global basis. It might not be comfortable in our own present terms, but it just might be our introduction into the Kingdom of Heaven.

I believe that in the Kingdom of Heaven, we all get enfolded in the great green branches spawned from that tiny mustard seed, we all glory in the abundance of unconditional love. And, if we can bear it, we get to bring out our treasures, both old and new, and scatter them out from our comfortable households throughout the whole of the Kingdom.

Amen.