

Seeking The Kingdom Of God Through Theological Education

"He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:2 RSV).

The Theme for this year's observance of the Phillips Schol of Theology Founders Day is the title of this sermon. It's an adaptation of the theme of the 1982 General Conference to this anniversary celebration and the formal installation of our dean, Dr. William C. Larkin. The use of such a theme gives us a splendid opportunity to re-examine the purposes of this seminary and dedicate ourselves anew to their fulfilment in a greater and more useful academy for the preparation of ministers for the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

Jesus Christ was the living embodiment of the idea of the kingdom of God that he preached and taught. It was an integral part of His Jewish faith and heritage. This theme of the kingdom extended from Abraham leaving his kindred to seek a city whose builder and maker is God, through the liberation of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage, through the nation building leadership of Moses and Joshua and other national leaders.

It continued through the prophecy of Isaiah who spoke of the coming of a Messiah, "of whose rule there would be no end." It was the idea of a people of God called and covenanted to live under His rule and sovereignty and the vindication of that rule at the end of history. The idea of the kingdom of God became the very heart of the faith of the Jewish people. Thus it was at the very heart of the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

John Bright in his book The Kingdom of God refers to Mark 1:14-15 ("The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel") and writes:

Mark makes it plain that the burden of Jesus' preaching was to announce the Kingdom of God, that it was the central thing with which he was concerned. A reading of the teachings of Jesus as they are found in the gospels only serves to bear out this statement. Everywhere the kingdom is on his lips, and it is always a matter of desper-

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ate importance. What is it like? It is like a sower who goes forth to sow, it is like a costly pearl, it is like a mustard seed. How does one enter? One sells all that he has and gives to the poor, one becomes as a little child. Is it a matter of importance? Indeed it is! It would be better to mutilate yourself and enter maimed than not get in at all. So paramount was the notion of the kingdom of God in the mind of Jesus that one can scarcely grasp his meaning at all without some understanding of it.

Since such was the case it would seem to be not only inevitable but imperative that Jesus would send His disciples into Israel (as Luke describes in our text: "He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God.") Professor Bright also emphasized that the New Testament affirms that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of the Old Testament hopes and yearnings for the kingdom, that in Christ, the kingdom of God becomes the kingdom of Christ. As Dr. Bright states it, "Jesus is, indeed, the Promised Messiah, fulfillment of all the hope of Israel, who has come to set up the kingdom among men." Thus, the church in its doctrines, proclamations and rituals understands the kingdom in terms of the life, death, resurrection and the expected return of Jesus, the Son of the living God.

What does this mean for this auspicious occasion? I am bold to assert to you this evening that theological education must be an experience in which the seminarian is initiated into a life-long process that will yield understanding, sensitivity and commitment to ministry for the kingdom of God. If Phillips School of Theology does not provide that kind of experience for all of us related to it, then we are not worthy of the name of Jesus Christ.

Is Phillips School of Theology an "ego trip" for trustees, faculty and administrators? Is it a mere step to a "good appointment" and ultimately to power and status in the church? Is it a mere factory for the production of ministerial mediocrity? Is it mere window dressing for denominational respectability? Or is it a Christian Community dedicated to educating men and women for leadership in proclaiming and promoting the sovereignty of God? Do we not remember what Luke said about Jesus? "He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God."

If the kingdom of God was the business of Jesus Christ, and if it was upon that business He sent out His disciples, then how could it be anything less for us who constitute the family known as the Phillips School of Theology? How then do we seek and promote this kingdom as a constituent seminary of the Interdenominational Theological Center?

Perhaps I can begin our exploration of this question by sharing an experience I had during my eleven-year tenure as a pastor in Harlem, the largest black community in this nation. On one occasion I heard a fierce argument near the corner of 125th Street and Seventh Avenue. A black Muslim was arguing with a young black Christian minister. During the course of the argument the Muslim predicted his group would assume economic and political leadership in Harlem. He also attacked

the Christian Church as being a theological fraud, an offense to black dignity and an obstacle to black liberation.

The young minister defended his faith by telling the story of his conversion from drug addiction and crime to a life of Christian decency. However, when questioned about the relevancy of his faith to the rule of God in Harlem, he simply kept repeating the story of his conversion.

Over and over again he told the story of the victory God gave him over drugs and crime. It was powerful and moving. It was a glorious testimony to the saving power of God. Without question this is an experience that is basic and fundamental to the kingdom of God. Without conversion there is no citizenship in the kingdom of God. For, as Jesus said to Nicodemus: "Truly, truly I say unto you, unless one is born of the water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

The young Christian minister did not seem to understand the implications of his conversion experience for the squalor, violence, poverty and crime afflicting the Harlem Community. Harlem was (and is today) groaning for the kingdom of God. However, the young Christian minister understood the deeper meanings of his faith for the kingdom of God.

This, I believe, leads us to an understanding of the task of theological education: to clarify as much as is possible the meaning of Christian message for the rule of God in the earth. For how can the preacher preach the kingdom according to the wisdom of God without some understanding of it for this life and the life to come?

The kingdom demands knowledge, and knowledge presupposes questions. It is the business of theological education to help us raise the proper questions and search for their answers.

The questions spring from man's yearnings to find meaning for his existence, to find resources for his trials, to find both the ground and the opportunities to give expression to his capacities for faith, love and service, to find grounds for hope that keeps springing up in the soul of humankind, to find victory over brokenness, sin, and death. The search for answers in the Christian faith leads to Jesus, and Jesus leads to the kingdom. For: "He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God."

In the search for answers to the eternal questions the seminarian's mind is disciplined and equipped to defend and impart the faith. In the study of those professional disciplines that make him or her competent for the task of proclaiming and promoting the rule of God in Christ the seminarian is prepared to "equip God's people for work in His service, to the building of the body of Christ and to do battle against those forces of mind and spirit that would deter the kingdom's progress."

What else should we expect from theological education as we prepare men and women to answer God's call to service? Let me respond to that question by describing a scene from a recent movie called, "Whose Life Is It Anyway?" It is a movie about a young man's right to choose death

over a life that appears to have been made meaningless by a tragic automobile accident. The story takes place in a New York hospital.

The scene I bring to your attention is one in which the chief Surgeon, with a group of medical students, enter the room of a cancer patient. As the group looks upon the emaciated body of the patient, the Chief Surgeon looks at one of the students and asks, "What do you see here?" The student answers, "I see a patient whose condition requires chemotherapy." The Chief Surgeon impatiently ask, "Don't you see more than that? Don't you see a human being in pain - a man suffering? If you can't see a human being, a man lying here, all you will ever be is a moneygrubber." The scene has tremendous implications for theological education.

How can one who has been called to preach and promote the kingdom do so without a real sensitivity to those who, in their pain and suffering, cry out for the rule of God? James Cone in his book, God of the Oppressed, reminds us that God chose "as his holy nation the Israelite slaves instead of the Egyptian slave masters . . . Here God disclosed that he is the God of history whose will is identical with the liberation of the oppressed from social and political bondage." The yearning for this liberation is heard in the Psalmists' cries for deliverance; it is heard in the voices of the prophets who condemn Israel for refusing to do justice to the poor; it is heard in Jesus' declaration that He came "to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind; to let the broken victims go free." God's kingdom is revealed as a kingdom of justice where the brokenness of suffering humanity is made whole. The problem is how do we in theological education sensitize those called to preach and promote the kingdom to that suffering that we and they may not be "moneygrubbers?"

The problem is made more acute by the fact that our highly politicized denominational polity, with its hierarchical structure from the local pastorate to the episcopacy, can encourage a stronger focus on personal ambition than on human need. In addition to this problem there is the danger that those who themselves come out of deprivations of poverty and oppression can be more encouraged to seek security and status for themselves than work for the security of the hungry and the liberation of the oppressed. There are too many examples of this tragedy in the ranks of the ministry of the black church.

A black theological seminary cannot ignore these dangers. Black America is in trouble. Nearly half of our babies are born out of wedlock to teenage mothers. Twenty percent of our adults are unemployed. Over forty percent of our work-age youth have no jobs. One third of our people live on public assistance. We have more young men in prison than we have in colleges. Infant mortality is twice as high among black infants than among white infants. Drugs and alcoholism stalk black communi-

ties. This listing could include much more, much, much more. Black folks are in trouble.

Jesus saw similar conditions among his own people and Matthew says, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Can compassion for and sensitivity to the sin and pathology of humankind be developed at the Phillips School of Theology? How can we send out men and women to preach and promote the kingdom of God without trying? Thank God, we are trying, but we must try harder!

How much exposure do seminarians get to the pain of life in hospitals, jails, mental institutions and in the streets of the city? How many opportunities do they get to hear the voices of the poor, to smell the stench of the dying, to feel the anguish of the tormented, to look in the hopeless eyes of young people in trouble?

What are the opportunities for seminarians to participate in ministries really directed to meet human needs in every area of life? What are their opportunities not only to experience great scholarship but moral and spiritual greatness in faculty members, administrators, trustees and invited guests whose lives and ministries serve as role models for those who would preach the gospel? Is there in the very atmosphere of Phillips School of Theology a spiritual climate in which students can catch, as it were, a dedication to ministry that meets human needs and proclaims the rule of God? We are trying. We must try harder.

The hymn writer catches the sensitivity and compassion we speak of when he writes:

Where cross the crowded ways of life,
Where sound the cries of race and clan,
Above the noise of selfish strife,
We hear Thy voice, O Son of Man!

The cup of water given for Thee
Still holds the freshness of Thy grace;
Yet long these multitudes to see,
The sweet compassion of Thy face.

Finally, ministry for the kingdom demands a commitment that springs from the minister's own spiritual growth and deepening faith. For how can one proclaim the rule of God without growth in those qualities of heart and mind that characterize the kingdom? "The kingdom" says Paul, "is not meat and drink but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost" (Romans 14:17). How can one persist in its promotion in a world hostile to its mandates without faith in its ultimate triumph? Such a commitment of faith and growth must of necessity be the result of the minister's openness to the presence of God, an openness made possible only by spiritual discipline.

This means that the theological education must 'not' be addressed

solely to the seminarian's mind. It must also be addressed to the seminarian's soul. Scholarship is essential, but scholarship is not enough. Cultivation of the mind is needed for the kingdom, but cultivation is not enough. Jesus said, "Some things come by prayer and fasting." The demands of the kingdom are not purely intellectual.

Some years ago while pastoring a local church I received a telephone call from a colleague who frantically told me: "Joe, I've got to see you, man. I don't think I can take it any longer." Within the hour he was sitting in my office pouring out his soul. My colleague had been pastor for three years of an urban congregation suffering from spiritual retardation, located in a community afflicted by dope addiction, alcoholism crime, and all the other products of despair and meaninglessness.

He could not move the congregation beyond fashion shows and mammoth teas. His ministry to the community bore no fruit for the kingdom. Refusing to reduce his ministry to money grubbing, entertainment and housekeeping he persisted in the priorities of the kingdom. The frustration was more than his sensitive soul could bear. He was not prepared for it.

In a certain sense no minister can ever be prepared for it. But his tragedy was that he had no anchor for such a storm. The only strength he depended on was his own.

He had no discipline by which his "inner man" was renewed. He confessed that he did not know how to pray, how to commune with the eternal. He was educated for the work of the intellect. He had no education for the need of his soul.

Prayer was not the total answer to his problem, but how dare we do the work of the Lord without the Lord. Prayer is not a "cure all", but there can be no sustained commitment to the Christian ministry without it. How many times did Jesus go to the mountain to pray? And let us not forget that on His way to Calvary He tarried for a while in Gethsemane.

Can we who lead Phillips School of Theology work to create in our seminary an environment of spiritual nurture? For how can we preach Jesus and never talk with Him, never listen to His words to us? How can we proclaim the kingdom and never walk with the King? In the final analysis ministry for the kingdom depends upon the minister's personal relationship with God. This relationship is well expressed in the words of the hymn:

Breathe on me breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what thou dost love
And do what Thou wouldst do.

The record shows that for those who live in communion with God — those who feed on His word, who drink from the fountain that never runs

dry — to those He will show the kingdom. When storms are raging, when the foundations of the earth shake, when dark clouds hide the sunshine of victory, God will show them His kingdom.

When Israel was in captivity under the heel of Babylonian oppression, in fear and despair, doubting the very power of God to deliver them, it was then God gave Second Isaiah a vision of the kingdom:

In the wilderness prepare the
 way of the Lord
 make straight in the desert a
 highway for our God.
 Every valley shall be lifted up,
 and every mountain and hill
 be made low;
 the uneven ground shall become level,
 and the rough places a plain.
 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
 and all flesh shall see it together,
 for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Isaiah 40:3-5

When the church was under the terror of Roman persecution, when Christians were being devoured by lions and burned on stakes in Roman arenas, in that dark hour God gave John the Revelator a vision of the kingdom. He wrote:

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet (Rev. 1:10). "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them; He will wipe every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.' And he who sat upon the throne said, 'Behold I make all things new.'"

Martin Luther King, Jr., who even on the eve of his death in Memphis saw the kingdom of God beyond the threatening circumstances of this world, cried:

I have been to the mountain top, I have seen the promised land—
 'Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.
 He is tramping out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.
 He has loosed the fateful lightening of his terrible swift sword
 His truth is marching on!'

As Luke said of Jesus when he dispatched his disciples, "He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God."