

What Johnny Taught Me About God's Kingdom

Hespeler, August 31, 2025 © Scott McAndless – Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 2:4-13, Psalm 81:1, 10-16, Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16, Luke 14:12-24

Earlier this summer, I was asked to perform a funeral for a man named Johnny. The family that requested this are not really connected to this congregation. But, whenever I am given the opportunity to minister to a family in such an important moment of their lives, I always agree, at least if it is at all possible for me to do so.

Making it Personal

But it is also really important to me that a funeral service be very personal. And so, if I never did know the person, I make a point of getting to know them by talking with the people who loved them.

So, I gathered with the family and learned about Johnny. He was a man who lived all of his life with severe disabilities. He was never able to speak. He could only walk with a great deal of help, and eventually he could not walk at all.

A Passage for Johnny

I believe that every person's life has important things to teach us about the kingdom of God. It is with that idea that I approach every funeral. And so, I spent a considerable amount of time thinking about what Johnny had to teach us about Jesus' idea of the kingdom of God. My reflections eventually brought me to our reading this morning from the Gospel of Luke.

I can honestly say that Johnny, this man that I never actually met in person, has taught me more about what Jesus was saying in this passage than all of the commentaries and sermons that I have read about it. It's kind of amazing how often that happens. And I'd like to share with you today what I learned about this passage.

A Hot Dinner Guest

Jesus made a big splash wherever he went, and people often vied with one another to invite him to dinner in their houses. You know how it works. You invite the hottest local celebrity to come and eat at your house, then you invite all the most important people in town too, so that the celebrity's fame and reputation rubs off on you. I'm pretty sure that the host of the meal that night thought that he had pulled off the social event of the season.

But at some point during supper, Jesus looked around the room and saw all of the rich and important people who were sprawling on the dining couches and he turned to his host. **"When you give a luncheon or a dinner,"** he said, **"do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid."**

A Crazy Thing to Say

That was, to be clear, a crazy thing for Jesus to say. The entire point of this dinner party had been to enhance the host's social standing. The whole point of it would be lost if he didn't have all the "right" people there! So, I imagine that the host was upset when Jesus said this. But he was about to become enraged.

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“But when you give a banquet,” Jesus went on, “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you.” Now that was just ridiculous. It was one thing for Jesus to suggest that he should not invite people who would enhance his standing. But here Jesus was suggesting that he should actively invite those who would destroy his reputation in the town!

Marginalizing People with Disabilities

In Jesus’ day, it was generally taken for granted that if you were poor or disabled, it was basically your own fault. We still sometimes think of poverty that way these days, though we really shouldn’t. We often assume that if somebody is poor it must be because they are lazy or lack ambition.

But we generally accept that we can hardly blame people with disabilities for their limitations. They did. They just took it for granted that, if you had a disability, you must have sinned in some way.

Because of those false assumptions, they pushed people who struggled with poverty or with disabilities over to the margins of society. They certainly didn’t invite them to dinner parties and, if such a person were to show up, it would have had the effect of lowering the host’s social standing.

People Were Confused

So, I am sure that everyone present was kind of scratching their heads and wondering what Jesus could mean by saying such a crazy thing. And one of the people who was there thought he had figured it out. Such a thing made no sense in the real world, so maybe Jesus was saying something about another world – a world after death.

Maybe Jesus was saying that, if you performed insane acts of charity, like feeding the dregs of society, it would earn you a ticket to another life after you died. And so he shouted out, **“Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!”**

But that wasn’t what Jesus was saying at all. He wasn’t talking about another life. He wanted them all to understand that he was talking about encountering the kingdom of God in this life.

Jesus’ Picture of the Kingdom

But their minds were too small to imagine the picture of the kingdom of God that Jesus had in his mind – the picture of a feasting hall filled with the poor, people with disabilities and other marginalized folk. And so, Jesus did what he always did to expand people’s minds. He told a story.

Jesus was a master storyteller, so he knew exactly what to do to make them feel comfortable. He opened with a scenario that would have made perfect sense to them. He described a host who does what they all would have done. He plans a dinner, and he invites all the “right” people, all the people whose presence will enhance his reputation.

The Twist

Then, just when he had sucked them in, Jesus threw in the twist. As soon as the dinner is ready, it turns out that nobody – none of the “right” guests – can make it. Now this is a crisis because there is only one thing that is worse for a host’s reputation than having the “wrong” people at your dinner, and that is if no one shows up at all!

And so, the host panics. In desperation he implores his servants to drag in whoever they can find. And so it is that the end of the story sees the dining couches filled by people who are poor, people with disabilities and all manner of people who live on the margins of society.

What was the point of that story? I believe that the reason why Jesus told this story was all for the sake of the bizarre picture of the dinner party at the end of it.

Jesus was trying to impress on them that the kingdom of God is something that breaks out in the here and now and it breaks out when we give places of honour to those who are poor or disabled or otherwise on the margins of society.

Such a thing was so unimaginable that Jesus had to tell this strange and convoluted tale of a dinner party that went so disastrously wrong that the host was forced to invite all the wrong sorts of people. He told them this story just so they could get their heads around such a bizarre scenario.

Johnny

Yes, Jesus really taught that the kingdom of God worked like that. And many struggle to understand such a teaching; I always have. But, like I said, I was given a wonderful opportunity to reflect on what Jesus might have meant earlier this summer.

I never met Johnny, but I got to know him by meeting with his family and hearing from his friends and family at the celebration of his life. And yes, Johnny had disabilities. He could not speak. He could not walk.

Johnny did not live a marginalized life to the extent that such people would have in Jesus' time. We have come a long way in terms of integrating those with such limitations into society. We probably still have a long way to go, but we are light-years ahead of how things worked in ancient times.

But some marginalization was unavoidable. Johnny did spend some time in institutions where he was mistreated in ways that I will not go into. His inability to speak also caused some serious medical problems as he could not tell the doctors what was wrong and so they often didn't know how to help him and got his treatment wrong.

So, Johnny really does seem like a good example of the kind of marginalized person that Jesus would have imagined taking an honoured position in the kingdom of God. And, as such, his life taught me a lot about what Jesus was really trying to get people to realize when he spoke about that kingdom. I believe that Johnny has many things to teach us about what Jesus was really announcing

Defying Expectations

He has taught us, for one thing, that it is the nature of the kingdom of God to defy our expectations of what is possible. When Johnny was young, the doctors who directed his care confidently predicted that he would not live past the age of twenty. Well, when we gathered to celebrate his life, Johnny was just a little bit shy of his seventieth birthday. And we gathered to celebrate a life that had been full and meaningful.

But it was not just in terms of lifespan that he exceeded expectations. Johnny's friends and family spoke at his celebration, as did some of the people who had supported him and given him care. They also counted him as their friend.

A picture quickly emerged of a man who, despite having suffered and despite many limitations, was able to radiate love and friendship. He was a man who could do little more than love you, but when he loved you, you knew it. It came to mean the world to you.

Advocate

I will admit that there was one thing that particularly took me by surprise as I listened to people share their love for Johnny. People spoke about how he would advocate, how he would argue for what was just and right and acceptable and act for those who were struggling.

I would ask you to think about that for a moment. Here was a man who could not speak, but he “spoke up” demanding action when needed. Here was a man who was confined to a wheelchair, but he “stood up” for what was right and just. Here was a man who could not walk, but he would regularly “step up” for others who needed help.

“Speak up – stand up – step up.” Have you noticed how so much of our language for activism and advocacy is hopelessly ablest? Hidden in the way we talk about it is the assumption that you have to be able-bodied in order to make a difference in this world.

How many of us excuse ourselves from taking a stand or speaking up for the injustice that we see in this world? “I’m no public speaker! I can’t take the risk of doing something! I wouldn’t know where to begin!” Johnny had all the excuses, and yet he made sure that the demand for rightness and justice was heard!

Laughter

One other theme also came up over and over as we celebrated Johnny’s life and that was laughter. He had a big belly laugh that everyone found to be infectious.

And I am pretty sure that laughter was a very big part of what Jesus was talking about whenever he described the kingdom of God. That picture of a big dinner party where the dining couches were filled with **“the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame”** was always and forever a picture of a room filled with laughter.

I know that, when we think of the kingdom of God or, as it’s often put in the Gospel of Matthew, the kingdom of Heaven, we often imagine another life that comes after this one. I am sure that that was a part of what Jesus was talking about, though probably not the main part.

So, while it is good to imagine Johnny today in a new kingdom where the voiceless speak and where those who wait upon the Lord can run and not be weary, they can walk and not faint, to take comfort in that vision of the otherworldly kingdom alone would be to miss out on the dream that Jesus was trying to put before us.

He was talking about a kingdom that can break out here and now and it will happen, Jesus assures us, when we are bold to give place and honour to those whom our society has left on the margins.