

**Centre Congregational Church, UCC
The Rev Dr Scott Couper
May 21, 2023
Ascension Sunday**

“Job’s Not Done Twice! Third Time’s a Charm?”

Scripture: Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11



Credit: ShareFaith Media: Ascension Day

Luke 17 reads, “Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!” For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20-21).

This scripture I believe, in part, answers the question posed by the title of this morning’s message: Was the ‘third time’ a charm? You see, before the Ascension, the disciples asked Jesus the same question that the Pharisees asked

before the crucifixion and resurrection. The disciples also asked the question, “Lord, will you *at this time* restore the kingdom to Israel?”

I do not think we can comprehend today how much of an imperative, even a directive, there is in this question posed to Jesus. I am reminded of when I was growing-up. My Mom would ask me, “Scott, can you take-out the trash?” Now, imagine the question being asked of me two, even three times: “Scott, will you at this time take out the bloody trash?!” It almost is no longer a question. It is an expression of exasperation. So, it was with Jesus and his restoration of the kingdom: the disciples asked, ‘When are you bloody well going to do it?!’

The prophets had been foretelling the restoration of the kingdom of God, which was synonymous with the Kingdom of Israel, for hundreds of years, since the fall of the northern empire to the Assyrians and the fall of the southern kingdom to the Babylonians. Since the Persian, Greek, and Roman rules, the prophets have told the oppressed people Israel to await a Messiah who would restore the kingdom of Israel and thus Kingdom of God. John the Baptist had proclaimed its coming just years ago, even saying it is “at hand” (Matthew 3:1-2). Even Jesus spoke of stuff going down during ‘this generation’ (Matthew 24:34, Mark 13:30, Luke 21:32). Yet, the centurions stood on each corner of Jerusalem with wither battle armor and swords drawn.

We can't blame the disciples for their impertinent question. The prophets said he was going to do 'it'. We repeat the scripture from Isaiah every year during Advent as we lead up to Christmas. Isaiah 9:6 reads, "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; *and the government shall be upon His shoulder*. And His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." "The government shall be on his shoulder(s)". Yet, after three years of ministry, Jesus only got himself killed on the cross and on that cross was a sign that only ridiculed him for being thought of as a king. No wonder the disciples on the way to Emmaus felt dejected. Then Jesus came back! Woah! The resurrection was amazing! Now 'it' could happen. But all Jesus did after forty days was 'appear' and cook some fish. And now, in more farewell discourses, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit who would come on Pentecost (next week, Sunday)). He declared he was leaving again. So, the disciples can't be blamed for being exasperated. He is going to do nothing a second time?! The people of Israel were still very much under the jackboot of the Romans.

In the scripture we read this morning, Jesus ascended into heaven and the angels informed the disciples that "he will come again in the same way you will saw him go into heaven". It is as if to say. He failed once. He failed twice. The third time, when he comes again, it will be 'a charm'. He will restore the Kingdom of

Israel the third time around. Then we come to the book of Revelation (that is a whole sermon unto itself for which we do not have time to go into).

Yet, I wonder if even the writer of the scriptures, both of the gospels and John of Patmos who wrote Revelation) did not still fully, or at all, understand that which Jesus taught. The restoration of Israel, the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth is **not** about a socio-political reality. It is true, we are taught and I have preached, that the Kingdom of God will “be established on earth just as it is in heaven” (Lord’s Prayer). Yet, when we do so, are we not are buying into the same trope that Jesus is the ‘Lion of Judah’ (Proverbs 30:30 and Revelation 5:5) rather than the Paschal Lamb (I Corinthians 5:7). We buy into the misconception that Jesus is a ‘king’ (very un-American, for a king is a monarchical dictatorial tyrant) rather than Jesus as a ‘servant’ (John 13:1-17). Jesus taught that the poor will always be with us (Mark 14:7). Therefore, a ‘utopian theocracy whereby Jesus wields supreme executive powers is unrealistic dated imperialist dogma derived from some nostalgic gastronomical ceremony’ – the Lord’s Supper.¹

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, what job did he intend to do? Overthrow the Romans? No. End world hunger? No. Establish global rule? No. We need only go to the scriptures to remember. The answer Jesus gave the Pharisees, which I

¹ Dennis, “Constitutional Peasants Scene”, paraphrased from Monty Python’s “The Quest for the Holy Grail”. Found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2c-X8HiBng>, accessed April 22, 2023.

began this morning's message with, reminds us. Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God was **within us**. Therefore, the Kingdom of God is established whenever, wherever, and by whomever strives to foster its existence.² Jesus said it clearly. The kingdom of God is not necessarily social, it is individual. Yet, while it is individual, it has social implications. I am a conservative because I believe the world is not made better *primarily* by social, or legal, changes. I am a progressive because I believe that my individual faith and behavior creates societal changes for which Jesus advocated. The left has it wrong when personal faith (belief/ ideology/tenets) is imposed by government. The right has it wrong when people's personal faith (belief, ideology, tenets) fails to lead to grace, forgiveness, generosity, mercy, peace, and most importantly, love.

The prophet Micah taught "Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8). Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is within you. Leo Tolstoy wrote a book advocating pacifism entitled *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1894).³ Mohandas Gandhi, arguably the greatest ethical teacher of the twentieth century, was profoundly impacted by Tolstoy's book. Mohandas Gandhi wrote in

² This is a paraphrase from my constructive theology paper written as a qualification for my graduation from seminary in 1999.

Scott Everett Couper, "A *Praxising* Theology for the Mainline", Constructive Theology II, TEC 305, Autumn Quarter, 1998, Prof. Theodore Jennings, March 29, 1999.

Note, I received an A minus for this paper.

³ Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, 1894.

his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* that Tolstoy's book "overwhelmed" him, and "left an abiding impression".⁴ Gandhi listed Tolstoy's book as one of the three most important modern influences in his life. Gandhi profoundly impacted Albert Luthuli in South Africa and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States.

Before his Ascension, the disciples wondered if he had failed twice. Even during the Ascension, the writer of Luke (and Revelation) perhaps believed that Jesus was still to complete the job if he returned a third time. But Jesus did the job. He accomplished the goal. His success is in the writings of Tolstoy, Gandhi, Luthuli, and King and Mother Theresa, Dorothy Day, and Karen Armstrong. Jesus success is in each and every one of you sitting here in these pews attending worship. Jesus' success is at work in the minister at Centre Church. "The kingdom of God is within you" and thus is found 'wherever, whenever, and by whomever strives to foster its existence'.

This is the Word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen!"

⁴ Wikipedia, "The Kingdom of God Is Within You", found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Kingdom_of_God_Is_Within_You, accessed May 22, 2023.

