

“A Kingdom that Cannot Be Shaken”

**Bob Setzer, Jr
Pastor**

**Knollwood Baptist Church
Winston Salem, NC**

www.knollwood.org

August 25, 2019

**Psalm 71:1-6; Hebrews 12:22-29; Luke 13:10-17
August 25, 2019**

In their book, *Lord, Teach Us to Pray*, Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas write about a cold, dark night in a German POW Camp. The prisoners endured an hour's diatribe by the camp commandant and watched series of beatings. Then they were ordered to their barracks and commanded to silence for the night. They were a discouraged and defeated bunch.

But somewhere in the barracks, a lone prisoner began praying the Lord's Prayer aloud. Then others lying nearby joined in. Their prayer was overheard by prisoners in the next building who added their voices to the growing chorus.

One by one, other barracks joined until as the prayer ended with hundreds of voices raising the defiant cry, "For *thine* is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen!"

Willimon and Hauerwas write, "And then the camp was silent, but not before the tables had been turned, the prisoners had thrown off their chains, and a new world had been sighted (and) signaled."

Each Sunday, we gather to pray that same prayer bequeathed to us by Jesus: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. *Thy* kingdom come, *Thy* will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven.*” But most weeks, it seems, we must pray that prayer stubbornly, defiantly in the face of a world gone terribly wrong.

This Sunday is “Welcome Back Sunday” at Knollwood, the Sunday marking the end of summer and the start of the new church year. It is a time when we regroup and re-gather after summer vacations and travel have scattered us in all directions.

But this year we gather in the wake of deadly mass shootings that have shocked and rattled our nation. As school begins, children are more fearful than ever of what might happen at their school.

Meanwhile, economic markets are roiling from head-spinning and reckless rhetoric from the top. Savage storms have punished much of the nation while the Amazon rainforest, the “lungs of the world,” is being devoured by fire.

And on the personal front, people we know and love are facing crises of health, or family, or bereavement. Leaving many to wonder, how to move forward in a world that for them, will never be the same.

The New Testament book of Hebrews proclaims, “Since we are receiving *a kingdom that cannot be shaken*, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28). But frankly, it can be hard to believe in an “unshakeable kingdom” when you, or someone you love, or even the whole wide world is shaking like a leaf.

And yet, even in frightening, turbulent times, there are places of refuge. The psalmist, for instance, is threatened by enemies on every side. But instead of giving way to despair, he or she takes refuge in God’s word and God’s people. “O Lord . . . Incline your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of refuge a strong fortress. . . . For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, from my youth” (Psalms 71:2-5).

If we are to survive and even thrive as storms of uncertainty and fear swirl about us, we need such refuge. We need a place and a people bearing witness to a different story and truth than what dominates the 24/7 news outlets. We need people who can believe for us, and pray for us, when we can't believe in or pray for ourselves. We need people who can remind us of the good news of Jesus when our hope is collapsing beneath the weight of all the bad news piling on.

And that is why; on this "Welcome Back Sunday" we are inviting and encouraging you to find your place of belonging within this community of faith. This place of belonging might be a Sunday School class, a choir or musical group, or one of Knollwood's many mission teams. But this smaller cell within the larger body of Christ is some group where you are known and loved when you are present and missed when you are not.

The tallest trees in the world are the giant redwoods of California. The top branches of these trees brush the sky, rising to heights of 300 feet. One might expect such massive trees to have a deep root system. But the redwoods do not. In an effort to catch as much surface moisture as possible, the redwood's roots run very shallow.

So how do these trees support such enormous heights? They only grow in groves, allowing the roots of the trees to intertwine. At their foundation, these trees are locked to one another. So when storms howl and winds rage, the redwood stands firm, because it does not stand alone.

We all need a forest, a refuge, where we can grow tall and strong, even in a world where we are tempted to cower in fear. And that forest, that refuge, that life-giving community is the church.

The shape and substance of this alternative community called the "church" is given classic expression in Jesus' encounter with the stooped woman in Luke's Gospel (chap. 13). For 18 agonizing years, this woman has been bent low, peering at the toenails pushing through

the straps of her sandals. But she comes to worship that day, as many of us do, hoping to renew her faith in God and maybe, herself.

Since this bent, stooped woman is considered damaged goods, everyone looks the other way until Jesus notices her. In the gripping words of Luke's gospel, "When Jesus saw her he called out, 'Woman, you are free from your sickness!'"

Then he walked over, placed his tough, yet tender carpenter's hands upon her shoulders, and squeezed God's life and love into her trembling frame. And when he did, Luke tells us, "at once she straightened herself up and praised God."

But then the story takes an ominous turn. The synagogue president, miffed at Jesus stealing the show, declares in a huff that there are "six days on which to work. So one should come to be healed on one of those days and not on the Sabbath!"

Jesus explodes in indignation: "You hypocrites!" he cries. "You don't hesitate to untie and water your donkey on the Sabbath. But this daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound these 18 years, should she not be set free on the Sabbath?!"

And that's when we start to wonder if this woman is stooped in shame, not just because of bad osteoporosis, but because of bad religion.

Several Knollwoodians put me onto the book, *Educated*, by Tara Westover. The book tells the story of a young woman, raised in a controlling, abusive, fundamentalist family.

Eventually, Tara makes her way to Brigham Young University where she begins to imagine a new kind of life. One day, she asks her friend and fellow student, Josh--who shares her parents' patriarchal views of religion and life--about his applying to law school.

"If you were a woman," Tara wonders aloud, "would you still study law?"

"If I were a woman," Josh answers, "I wouldn't want to study law."

He goes on to explain that women are wired differently. They lack ambition to become anything other than a wife and mother.

Tara nods, like she understands, but then presses her question home: “But what if *you* were a woman and you felt exactly like you do (about studying law)?”

It doesn’t take Josh long to answer: “if I were a woman,” he intones, “then I’d know something was wrong with me.”

For a long time, that’s what Tara believed whenever stirrings of a new and better life arose within her: that something was wrong with her. But gradually, she experiences a new kind of community, a new kind of story, that tells her the deeper truth about herself: that she is a beloved child of God, a “daughter of Abraham,” a brave, smart woman who can dare to stand tall and strong.

As one of Tara’s professors and mentors tells her, “(Tara), whoever you become, whatever you make yourself into, that is who you always were. It was always in you. You are gold. . . . And even (returning) to that mountain you came from, will not change (that). It may change how others see you; it may even change how you see yourself. Even gold appears dull in some lighting. But *that* is the illusion. And it always was.”

And “when Jesus saw her, he called out to her, ‘Woman, you are free from your sickness!’ Then he placed his hands on her, and at once she straightened herself up and praised God”

What gives me hope in an unshakeable kingdom in a sometimes shaky world? Nothing short of Jesus Christ and the community called the church that gathers around him. For wherever the church is being the church, persons long stooped by oppression and shame are freed to stand to their full height as sons and daughters of God.

I see that power present at Knollwood when refugees, often dismissed and demeaned in this culture, are welcomed and blessed and empowered to become entrepreneurs and thriving citizens of this great land.

I see the liberating power of Christ at work in a church where Kids Café tutors and Bolton Buddies encourage, teach, and love at risk students into claiming their full potential as learners and achievers.

I see Christ's power to set free at work in a church where children and youth are not shamed for asking hard questions about God, and the Bible, and life but are encouraged to ask those questions.

I see Christ's promise of liberation, first sounded in his inaugural sermon in Nazareth, finding expression in people of privilege starting to care deeply about injustices that often go unnoticed, especially for people of color, a reckoning long overdue on this, the 400th anniversary weekend of the coming of slavery to America.

In short, I find Knollwood the kind of community, the kind of church, where Jesus is not just a gifted sage from long ago and far away, but a living, unsettling presence who keeps pushing us toward new frontiers of God's unbounded grace.

A recent *Commonweal* magazine article explores what many find a strange phenomenon: namely, that many millennial Christians are progressive in their politics and social action but classically orthodox in their theology. Such believers care deeply about the environment, racial justice, and just and compassionate immigration, but are also committed, for example, to the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

The article quotes Andrew McGowan, dean of the Episcopal seminary at Yale, as saying, "If Easter really (means) just that love is more powerful than death but Jesus didn't rise, then how's the love-death score today?"

At the time, that reference to "today" pointed to the terrorist bombing in Sri Lanka that killed hundreds of Christians. If the article were written now, the "today" might mean Dayton or El Paso.

But McGowan's point is clear. If the resurrection of Jesus means just the raising of a good idea, and not the raising of the church's crucified and risen Lord, then nothing has really changed in this broken world of ours.

But in fact, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who sleep!" (1 Cor. 15:20). He came kicking and screaming out of that tomb as the leading edge of God's new creation, the birthing of the brave, new beautiful world God is intent on bringing into being, even here and even now.

And that's why the church is not just one more civic organization or charitable choice. The church is the beachhead of the coming kingdom of God where those who believe in Jesus, more than they believe in despair and fear, gather to worship, be transformed, and set free as emissaries of God's liberating love for all the world.

Why do I believe in a "kingdom that cannot be shaken"? Because I believe in Jesus, and I believe in that community of faith gathered round him where miracles like the one that broke out long ago in a sleepy synagogue are still happening today.

For Jesus is, as the book of Hebrews joyfully proclaims, "The same yesterday, today, and forever!" (Heb. 13:8).

Or as one of those spunky millennials said in that Commonweal magazine article, "I've realized . . . that the world I've been working for is the world God promised when he raised Jesus from the dead. . . (So) what does Nicaea (an early Christian council) have to do with Selma?"

"Everything, it turns out! Everything!"

And that is why we can and must, not just *believe* in a "kingdom that cannot be shaken" but *bear faithful witness* to it. Because our hope, and the hope of the world, rests in nothing less.

Eternal God, thank you for sending Jesus, as the sign and embodiment of your Kingdom and the birthing of your new creation. Help us believe in him more than we believe in anyone or anything else. For thine is the kingdom and the power and glory, forever and ever. Amen!