

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 27, 2021**

**THE KINGDOM OF GOD
Mark 3:20-21, 31-35**

I want to tell you a little bit about the General Assembly of the EPC that took place this past week at Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis. Last year, in 2020, we held our first (and last, I hope) all-virtual General Assembly, which, like so many other things in the nightmare year of COVID, was different and strange, especially in that we could not gather in person for worship, instruction, fellowship with one another, times of prayer, and mutual encouragement. This year we held our first (and last, I hope) hybrid General Assembly with commissioners and guests present in person and others joining in the worship and work of the Assembly online via Zoom.

Among those present in person at this year's Assembly were Bruce and Lois Alexander, who maintain close ties with us here at Faith even though they now live in North Carolina. It was wonderful to visit with them. Helen Franssell was there. It was nice to have the opportunity to have an unhurried conversation with her. Justin Sembler was there, too. Justin was our Youth Director from 2003 to 2007 and is now the pastor of an EPC church in Memphis. It was so good to connect and catch up with him. Several of our elders from Faith attended the Assembly via Zoom, including Stan Crow, Mike Fries, Lanah Hamrick, Lury Snyder, and Tee Townsley.

There are always "business" items to attend to at the General Assembly – things like budgets and policies, personnel changes and the election of Ruling Elders and Teaching Elders to serve in different leadership roles in the ongoing work of our denomination at the national level. One highlight of the Assembly was a special dinner in honor of our outgoing Stated Clerk, Jeff Jeremiah, and his wife Cindy, as Jeff is retiring after 15 years in his role as the "go-to guy" – the primary pastor to pastors and, in effect, the CEO of our denomination. God has used Jeff in remarkable ways during a time in which the EPC grew from a fellowship of 182 churches in 2006 to 637 local churches today.

In the Leadership Institute held in conjunction with the General Assembly, we heard inspiring messages on "Combating Biblical Anemia" in our churches, "Soul Care for Pastors," and "Kindness That Leads to Reconciliation." I wish you could have heard them all.

The "main event" at this Assembly, though, as is the case year after year after year, was worship. Worship services were held on Wednesday afternoon and evening, Thursday morning and evening, and Friday morning (with communion). These were such beautiful times of worship with music that was a taste of heaven and powerful preaching of God's Word. The worship service on Thursday evening included the commissioning of several new World Outreach missionaries preparing to go to different parts of the world to proclaim and live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are blessed to be part of a fellowship

of churches that takes the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations so seriously.

Though we are still dealing with some of the effects of the pandemic – and will be for some undetermined period of time – I was struck at the Assembly by the relational nature of the church. It was just so good to be together in the same place with so many sisters and brothers in Christ from so many places across the EPC.

We were made for relationships. We were made for relationship with God. When He made us in His image, God designed us to be in relationship with Him. And with each other. I see this truth made visible in the life of the EPC in which we affirm, celebrate, and hold fast to unity in the essentials of the faith, liberty in the non-essentials, and charity – love – in all things, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I see it in the ethos, the culture of the EPC, which is a culture of trust, a culture of grace, a culture of love for God, for the church, for one another, and for the world Jesus came to save.

I see it made visible, too, right here in the life of Faith Church. How it blesses my heart to see your love for God! How it blesses my heart to see your trust in and commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord! How it blesses my heart to see your love for one another! How it blesses my heart when I see your heart for others – for those who do not yet know the depth of God’s love for them and the power of the gospel for the salvation of anyone and everyone who believes it! How it blesses my heart to see the love of God expressed in your relationships with each other!

By its very design, the church is relational in nature. It is connectional. We were made to be in relationship with God and with others. With one another. Which is why it is such a priority, and such a gift for us to be together in person for worship, fellowship, discipleship, and service in all their forms whenever we are able. Relationships matter. It is apparent (if not intuitively obvious) when our General Assembly meets, when our pastors and elders gather as the Presbytery of the East, when we meet together as a church family, and when we come together in small groups – in Faith groups, community groups, Sunday School classes, Bible studies, or whatever you call the group you’re a part of. We need each other. We need to be with each other. As we continue to recover from the pandemic, how I pray that we will value and nurture the relationships God has given us in our church family, and welcome others into our fellowship with open arms and open hearts.

My brief summary of some of what took place at the Assembly can’t really give you an adequate sense of how blessed I was to be there, and how blessed I am – how blessed *we are* – to be part of the EPC family. Being at the General Assembly is always inspiring, worshipful, convicting, and encouraging. Without fail it reinforces and deepens my gratitude to the Lord for giving me – *us* – a home in the EPC.

There is one more thing I really need to tell you about the Assembly. Not only were Bruce and Lois and Helen and Justin there, along with hundreds of others from around the country and, including our World Outreach workers, from around the world.

Someone else was there. *God Himself* was there. His presence was evident throughout the Assembly. Not just in our times of worship, but in business meetings, seminars, break times, meals, and every other aspect of the Assembly. *God the Father* was present in His love and faithfulness, His glory and goodness, His holiness and grace. *The Lord Jesus* was there, and He was exalted as Savior and Lord and King. *The Holy Spirit* was present, as He always is with those who belong to Jesus, and His guidance was sought and celebrated at the Assembly.

* * * * *

I could tell you much more about what I saw and heard and experienced at the General Assembly, but I want to talk with you for a bit today about the *kindom* of God. K-I-N-D-O-M. *Kindom*. Not the *kingdom* of God, which is the theme of so much of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel, but the *kindom* of God.

There is, of course, an intimate connection between the two. If you are a follower of Jesus, you are a citizen of the *kingdom* of God, and every citizen of the *kingdom* of God is part of the *kindom* of God, which is just another way of talking about the *family* of God into which we have been adopted by grace.

The *kingdom* of God has to do with the sovereign and gracious rule of God in the hearts and lives of men and women and boys and girls of all ages, races, languages, and nations. It is multi-generational, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and multi-national. The *kingdom* of God is not a geographical place with territorial borders. It is found wherever Jesus is loved, honored, revered, trusted, followed, and served as Savior and Lord. It is found wherever the Word of God is properly revered, taken to heart, and put into practice in daily life. It is found, as Jesus says in this passage in Mark's Gospel, wherever people do the will of God for the glory of God. It is found wherever, in response to His grace, those who profess to be followers of Jesus live *coram deo* – which means, before the face of God, under His sovereign and gracious rule, and unto His glory. The *kingdom* of God exists wherever God is properly acknowledged as the true King of our lives and of all things.

The *kindom* of God refers to our family relationships in the *kingdom* of God. The *kindom* of God has to do with the family we are and the family God wants us to be, by virtue of our faith in Jesus, who gave to all who believe in Him the right and privilege to become children of God (John 1:12). The *kindom* of God is the God-ordained, multi-generational fellowship of sisters and brothers, children and parents, daughters and sons – a Christ-centered community of believers – who are connected to one another in a family whose ties transcend flesh and blood and DNA and race and language and culture and age and national origin, because our ties to one another in the *kindom* of God are spiritual. They are rooted in Jesus Christ and *His* blood poured out for us.

The *kindom* of God, to coin a phrase, is a place of grace where Jesus is Lord and every person counts. It is a *place of grace*, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. You don't deserve a place in the *kindom* of God. Nobody does.

Nothing you do will ever make you worthy of the *kingdom* of God. Inclusion in the *kingdom* of God is all by grace and only by grace. The church is a place of grace. If it is not, it is not the church Jesus has created it to be. The only way to become part of the family or *kingdom* of God is by grace – by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

The *kingdom* of God is a place of grace *where Jesus is Lord*. Life in the *kingdom* of God is not about trying to make sure the church does the things we want the church to do in the way that we prefer things to be done. Life in the *kingdom* is not about having everything your way (or mine). It is about *Jesus* having things *His* way. It is about asking *Jesus* what *He* wants us to do or not do. It is about asking *Jesus* how *He* wants us to do church, how *He* wants us to conduct our lives individually and together under *His* leadership and Lordship. In the *kingdom* of God it is our aim, our goal, our mission, our aspiration to give Jesus the highest place, not just in our prayers and confessions and hymns and worship songs, but in every aspect of our lives.

The *kingdom* of God is a place of grace where *every person counts*. *Every* person matters to God. Your age doesn't matter. It does not matter how old or young you are. Your income level or tax bracket doesn't matter. The color of your skin doesn't matter. It doesn't matter where you were born, or what your native language is. It doesn't matter what mental or physical challenges you have. It doesn't matter what your marital status is, or what kind of car (or truck) you drive. In the *kingdom* of God that is the church, *every person counts*. *Every person matters*. Which means, *you* matter. *You* matter to God so much that He gave His only Son for you. *You* matter to Jesus so much that He willingly left heaven to come and suffer and die for you. Sometimes, I'm sorry to say, we drop the ball. Sometimes we fail to show it the way we should. But you really do matter to our church family here at Faith.

We are a family – a *spiritual* family – in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Look at what Jesus said when He was told that His mother and brothers wanted to see Him. It seems that they were concerned that maybe He was going a little bit too far with this Messiah-thing. Jesus' brothers (half-brothers, actually) did not yet believe in Him, but Mary, His mother, should have known better. She, of all people, knew who Jesus was. We shouldn't be too hard on her, though. We all have moments of doubt or uncertainty.

When Jesus said: “Who are my mother and my brothers? Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of my Father is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:33-35), He was not dissing His family. He was not saying that family ties don't matter. He was not saying He didn't care about His blood relations. He was not saying it is okay to disrespect or mistreat your family. Nor was He addressing every conceivable family dysfunction. What we know is this: The family was (and is) God's idea. God Himself ordained and established the family as the building block of society. God takes the family seriously and has a loving and gracious purpose for it.

What Jesus is doing here is to show us that the family of God – the spiritual family God has created and called us to be as followers of Jesus – is ultimately more important than the bonds that unite us to our earthly families.

Our family histories are all different. Our family circumstances are not all alike. For some, life in your family may be one challenge after another, one disappointment or setback or hurt after another. Your family life may not have turned out the way you hoped or expected. What I want you to know today is that, regardless of the way things were or are in your family life, in Christ you are part of a spiritual family with God Himself as your Father. He has brought us together in *His* family, in His *kingdom*, and He has given us the calling and privilege of being family to one another. So, my sisters and brothers, let us be what we are! Let us more and more aspire to be the family Jesus has created us to be.

There is something else we have to see in these verses. Who is it that Jesus identifies as the members of His spiritual family? Verse 35: “Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.” In the parallel passage in Luke 8, Jesus speaks of “those who hear God’s word and put it into practice” (Luke 8:21). It is the *doing* of God’s will, not just the *hearing* of God’s word, that marks us as members of the *kingdom* of God.

Ironically, James was one of the (half) brothers of Jesus who presumably came with Mary to rescue Jesus from Himself. In the New Testament epistle he wrote years later, after coming to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and becoming one of the key leaders of the church in Jerusalem, James made it a special point to emphasize the importance of being *doers* of God’s word, putting it into practice, not just being *hearers* who let it go in one ear and out the other (James 1:22-25).

How can you tell if someone is a member of Jesus’ spiritual family? The test, says Jesus, is whether you make it your aim to *do* God’s will.

Do not misunderstand what Jesus is saying here. He is not saying: In order to qualify for inclusion in the *kingdom* of God, you must jump through all the necessary hoops by doing God’s will. Doing God’s will is not a prerequisite for getting into the *kingdom* of God. Doing God’s will does not qualify you for the *kingdom* of God. What Jesus is saying is that doing the will of God – putting the Word of God into practice – is evidence that you are part of the *kingdom* of God. It shows that you belong to God and His family. We don’t earn our way into the *kingdom* of God by living a good life, by obeying God’s commandments and doing His will. We do God’s will *because* He has welcomed us into His family by His grace. We don’t do God’s will in order to get into the *kingdom* of God. We do God’s will *because*, in His grace, He has drawn us to Himself, given us the gift of salvation, and made us part of His family. Doing God’s will is our response – the response of grateful hearts to what God in His bountiful mercy and grace has done for us.

Do you see that?

Very quickly, before I close, let me point you to several things we share in common in the *kingdom* of God:

First, we share a common experience – the experience of God’s grace. Amazing grace. Saving grace. Sustaining grace. Preserving grace. Grace that is greater than all our sin, whatever our sin may be. We share the common experience in Christ of being forgiven sinners. If that is not your experience, if you have not experienced God’s saving grace in your life, if you do not know the freedom of having your sins forgiven, it can be your experience today by simply opening your heart to Jesus, asking Him to take away your sin and to rule in your life as Lord and King. He will welcome you by grace into the *kingdom* of God.

Second, we share a common faith in Jesus, a faith that engages not just our heads but our hearts as well. It is a living and personal faith in the person and work of Jesus as our Savior and Lord, believing that He has done for us what we could never do for ourselves.

Third, we have a common hope. Peter calls it “a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3). It is a sure and certain hope that we belong to God in life and in death, and that nothing, not even death, will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

Fourth, we share a common love – love for God, love for one another, and love for the world Jesus loved (and loves) so much that He came to die for it.

Fifth, we have a common commitment to the Bible as the true and trustworthy, inspired, unerring, and authoritative Word of God, the final and only infallible rule for faith and life. As members of God’s family, we believe the holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments can make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ, and that the whole Bible, from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, is inspired by God and is useful for teaching us, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, and training us to live God’s way, so that we may grow in grace and godliness, and fulfill God’s purposes and plans for us for us (2 Timothy 3:15-17, NIV, MSG).

“Obedience,” says Jesus, “is thicker than blood” (Mark 3:34, MSG). Doing God’s will is not a requirement for inclusion in the *kingdom* of God. You can only enter the *kingdom* by God’s grace, as a gift that can only be received by faith. Faith in Jesus. But doing God’s will is the conclusive sign that your faith is real and that you really belong to the *kingdom* of God.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.