Weekly Bible Study group – January 21, 2009

This week’s reading assignment: Matthew 5-7

Last week we listened to those first words that Jesus preached in the book of Matthew. He came onto the scene with a concise and earth-shattering announcement: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!”

As we learned, this word “repentance” that we see here is metanoia, turning from one thing to another. The fundamental choice that Jesus asks his hearers to make is the choice between two kingdoms – this world or God’s world. Either “the way things are” or “the way things could be when God is the king” – that’s the choice that Jesus offers. It’s this or that, and you’ve got to choose.

This week we come to chapters 5-7, what is called the “sermon on the mount.” This is the first extended teaching that Jesus offers to his followers. And, not surprising, it’s about the kingdom of God. In these teachings, Jesus lays out a vision for what life looks like in God’s kingdom. And life in the kingdom looks VERY different from the way the world now works.

Jesus says that in the kingdom, even those who are crushed, poor in spirit, mourning – these people are blessed.

Jesus says that in the kingdom, we forget about our own survival and wealth – God will take care of that.

Jesus says that in the kingdom, we can love our enemies instead of hating them – we have no enemies any more.

Yes, this new kingdom that Jesus proclaims is very, very different from the world that we’ve grown up in. But that’s the point. It’s SO different, it requires a choice. Either you’re in or you’re out. And if you’re in, then you’re all in. And if you’re in, then the things you find yourself doing and thinking will seem counter-intuitive and dangerous to the systems around you. And if you’re in, you lay down those weapons that you’ve used to defend yourself against pain and people all your life, and you trust that God alone will be the one to protect you.

Jesus also tells us what will happen when a community of people chooses this radical new path. They will become the “salt of the earth,” a “city on a hill,” and the “light of the world.” The community that follows Jesus in this ridiculous way will become a beacon of love and hope for the transformation of the whole world!

Questions:

1) In 5:17-48, Jesus takes some of the old Hebrew laws and makes them a thousand times more intense. Read all of these together, and think about the big picture. What is going on here, what’s the point?

2) In 6:25-34, Jesus teaches his followers to “not worry” about the mundane things in life. If your whole focus is the justice and love of God’s kingdom come to earth, other things will fall in place. Where is there fear or worry in your life that should be replaced by devotion to God’s kingdom purposes?