

**“The Kingdom Is Spread Upon the Earth”©**  
**by**  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

There is an Hasidic Jewish proverb that says if a single person would say one prayer perfectly the entire world would be transformed into heaven in an instant. All the world would become peace. There would be no more hate. Greed would disappear. And love would be the single emotion that guides the affairs of the world.

What if that has already happened, but we just don't know it? Some people think that is true. Many Christian mystics think that. A friend of mine who was dying of cancer found that when confronting his death all concerns fell away and all that was left was the single realization that heaven was here and now. If we are to believe the sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus thought that too when he said, “[The kingdom] will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, 'Look, here!' or 'Look, there!' Rather, the Father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people don't see it.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Nearer to Me Than Myself**

The Christian mystic and Catholic Dominican priest Meister Eckhart, who lived from 1260 to 1327 in Germany, said it this way in one of his sermons—over 600 years before the Gospel of Thomas was discovered in Egypt:

*We should know first of all how near the kingdom of God is, and next when the kingdom is near us. . . . I am as certain as I am that I am a man that nothing is so “near” to me as God. God is nearer to me than myself. . . . Never has a person longed after anything so intensely as God longs to bring a person to the point of knowing him. God is always ready but we are very unready. . . . God is within but we are outside. God is at home in us but we are abroad . . . . God help us that we all follow him so that he can bring us to the point where we truly know him.*<sup>2</sup>

Julian of Norwich a Mother Superior in a Catholic convent in England in the fourteenth century wrote of her God-inspired visions of the kingdom of God in her book “Revelations of Divine Love” with these words:

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<sup>1</sup>Th 113

<sup>2</sup>Eckhart, M. Sermon 9. Breakthrough. Edited Matthew Fox. 137ff.

*God is nearer to us than our own soul, for he is the ground in which it stands. . . .<sup>3</sup>  
. . . our Lord opened my spiritual eyes, and showed me the soul in the middle of my heart. The soul was as large as if it were an eternal world, and a blessed kingdom as well.<sup>4</sup>*

That eternal world and blessed kingdom she saw in the middle of her heart was the Kingdom of Heaven and it is nearer to us than our own souls.

Julian of Norwich and Meister Eckhart were but two of many who saw “the kingdom spread out upon the earth” and within the human soul.

### **“Love the People Around You”**

My friend Kit Howell knew that too. He had a similar revelation. Kit—short for Kitchell—was minister of the Unitarian Universalist church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. In his early forties after fifteen years as a UU minister, he had found the church he had been looking for. The church grew in six years from a little under four hundred members to over six hundred.

Then Kit got lung cancer. He had surgery. I visited him and filled-in in his pulpit while he was recovering. After a couple months he was back at church but not long afterwards came the bad news that his cancer had spread to his bones and then back to his lungs. Kit knew he was dying, and he confronted the knowledge of his death with as much courage and awareness as anyone I had ever know.

In the knowledge of his coming death, he let all of the small things be stripped away. He looked straight into the abyss and saw the mystics’ vision. I wish we had an audio visual set-up so I could show you an interview that he had on the Lancaster television station the Christmas before he died. He sat being interviewed with his hair gone from chemotherapy looking like some skinny Buddha and he said these words:

*Life is good for me. It tastes good. One of the Psalmists says, “Taste and feel that the Lord is good.” What the psalmists said is absolutely true for me now. Every moment is precious. Every moment is filled with delight. Even if its filled with pain, I get to feel the pain. Feelings are precious. . .*

*When it was clear that I was going to die, then I got a grip on how precious life is. I called my father one night right after I got the prognosis that I was going to die. I had been weeping for about a week. So I called my Dad and I said, “Pop, I’m not dealing with this too well. What do I do?” My father said, “What you do is love the people around you as best you can.” After he said that I felt this sense of calm. I knew that is what I am here to do. I do think that people who are dying live in a*

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<sup>3</sup>Julian of Norwich. Revelations of Divine Love. 161f.

<sup>4</sup>p 183

*different world than most people. The world is more sharp; things are more clear. The moment is more precious because you know that there are not as many of them left anymore. . . . Death clears a space, a space in your psyche, so that you see things more crisply and clearly. What I have said to the people in my congregation . . . . If you can't see that your husband's nose is precious, if you can't see that your children's whining is precious, if you can't see, look through the space in my head that has been cleared. Look through my eyes and see it because it's true. People who are dying know what to look for."*

And Kit did know what to look for. Not long after that interview, he was sitting at a minister's meeting, and there was all of the usual stuff of meetings—minutia of details and time spent on things that will not be remembered next year not to mention tomorrow. Kit blurted out unable to tolerate the waste of his precious moments: "Don't you see people. You are caught in the details that don't matter a hill of beans! All of this is just trivia. And meanwhile what is important is passing you by. I see it now so clearly—because now I am dying. You see the kingdom of Heaven is not some myth that Jesus talked about, nor it is not some end of time or after death thing. Heaven is right here. Sometimes we have to be hit over the head with a two by four, like my dying, to see it. This stuff is just busyness—most of it doesn't matter at all. What matters is the love you live by and how you share that love with the world. That's heaven—that's God's kingdom!"

The last time I talked to Kit was two weeks before he died, as we closed our conversation about ministry he said to me, "I love you Paul." Those turned out to be the last words he spoke to me. And another thing about Kit: He always ended his sermons with the phrase, "In a world without end. Amen." Since then, that is how I end my sermons remembering him and his revelation that the kingdom of heaven is here, now, spread out on the earth, in your loved one's eyes and without end. Why because it's love and true love never ends.

### **The Truth that Overcomes Fear**

Yet the message that Kit spoke so clearly about finding the kingdom within and among us is not always easy to accept or even understand. This looking within to find God can be scary stuff. Aren't we told that we should fear God? And what if when we look deeply within we don't find light and good but we find nothing or worse—darkness and evil? I remember several years ago, a teacher in Pennsylvania brought a program of meditation into the public schools. The teacher wanted to introduce meditation to students who were troubled as a way of getting them to calm down and get in touch with themselves. A newspaper got wind of it and printed a feature article in the Sunday edition. The local fundamentalist Christians launched a letter writing campaign against the program. One fundamentalist Christian minister wrote a letter to the editor calling meditation "the devil's work." He said that humans are evil through and through, and when we look inward all we will find is the devil. Under such pressure, the program was cancelled.

I was incredulous when I read that letter. The experiences of mystics throughout the world and throughout history said that to find God, to find salvation, to find a peace beyond

understanding go within. Jesus said it, “the kingdom is within you and it is outside you.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus began his public ministry with the words, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” “Repent” is the Greek word *metanoia*—meaning to have a change of heart or mind. For Jesus was saying, I think this so strongly, “have a change of heart—fear not the darkness—for the light has come. The kingdom is near, at hand for it is within you and among you and in your hearts.”

That message of the goodness of the light within and the kingdom of God in and among us is a fundamental Unitarian Christian belief. Hear these words by William Ellery Channing, who, along with Nathaniel Thayer—minister of this church—and others founded Unitarianism in America. Channing in a sermon preached in 1828, titled “The Great Purpose of Christianity” observed:

*[Jesus] came. . . not to be an outward, but an inward deliverer; not to rear an outward throne, but to establish his kingdom within us. . . .*<sup>6</sup> [. . .] *Look not abroad for the blessings of Christ. His reign and chief blessings are within you. The human soul is his kingdom. There he gains his victories, there rears his temples, there lavishes his treasures. . . .*<sup>7</sup>

## The Kingdom Among Us

The message is clear. If we but go within ourselves through spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, reading and reflection on sacred scripture, worship and religious ritual, we will find God there. We will find a peace that passes all understanding.

Yet there is more here too—not only is the kingdom within us, it is among us. Inward focus is not enough. We need each other; we need community. When Kit was lost in his fear of dying, his father told him just to love those around him—that was his salvation and his bequest to everyone who knew him. Jesus said it: the two greatest commandments—love God and your neighbor as yourself.

Oh sure, there is always conflict and disagreement (and there has been), but our faith calls us to hold fast to the love for one another. In that way, every one of our relationships can become a holy relationship, and we can begin to create a kingdom of heaven in the here and now of our relationships with each other. Despite it all and because of this certain knowledge in my heart, I can honestly say that I love all of you here and cherish you for the goodness that you carry inside. When I leave, I will miss you. You have been part of my life for over seven years, and I love you.

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<sup>5</sup>Th 3

<sup>6</sup>Channing, W.E. Channing’s Works, Vol III. 209

<sup>7</sup>p226

## **CONCLUSION**

So there it is. All we would ever need is found by asking for it with a loving heart. The Gospel of Thomas tell us that the kingdom of Heaven is found within and among us—here and now. The Christian mystics said it and the founders of Unitarian Universalism said it. And yes Kit, the kingdom of God is truly spread out upon the earth—a world of love without end. Amen.