

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.” You may be seated.

Good morning sisters and brothers. Has the Kingdom of God ever come near to you? When I asked myself this question, one place immediately came to my mind. It's a non-profit residential program serving homeless women in Baltimore City called Marian House. I worked there many years ago.

Marian House is a safe home for women who have suffered trauma, addiction, and/or mental illness. Most Marian House residents have been living on the street for a long time or have been released from prison with nowhere to go. The program includes a main house and three other buildings for women who've graduated from the entry phase and are living in long-term subsidized apartments.

Marian House is a place where women heal. It's a loving community of acceptance, respect, encouragement, challenge, and courageous honesty. Residents there find hope, experience peace, and feel the joy of knowing that second chances are possible in this world.

Every year, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, the community comes together to share a big meal and express gratitude. Being there is a deeply moving and satisfying experience. Residents stand up to tell their personal stories and explain what being at Marian House has done for them. Here are a few examples of what the women say.

“I’m just so grateful because all I could see is me going downhill. I never even thought I could accomplish what I’m accomplishing now. Marian House taught me how to get my self-esteem up. And, they also taught me how to love myself as well as others.”

“Marian House has transformed my life. I’m not alone anymore.”

“Marian House gave me not only my life back but a life that I really didn’t expect.”

“One thing I can say is that God knew what he was doing when he put these walls together. There’s nothing like Marian House.”

Even though I didn’t work directly with the residents, because my job was to raise money to cover the cost of support services, I did get to know some of the women and I got to know some of the committed donors to the program. In both ways, I was blessed. As far as I’m

concerned, the community of Marian House points to the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is a complex concept. It means God's sovereign reign and rule - the domain of God. In the Kingdom of God, all things are as God wants them to be. The fullness of the Kingdom can only be realized in the future – beyond this life. However, in some sense, God's Kingdom appears in Jesus. Jesus has the power to make things right – to make things whole. His life is a manifestation of God's will for the world.

In our Gospel reading from Luke this morning, we hear that Jesus wants his followers to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom and show people what the Kingdom is like. The story of the seventy disciples going out before Jesus to various towns to interact with the inhabitants focuses on four important elements of the Kingdom of God: justice, peace, healing, and joy. We're looking at: justice, peace, healing, and joy.

Before sending the disciples on their way, Jesus says, “See, I am sending you out like lambs in the midst of wolves.” I’ve discovered that there is an ancient fable about a wolf who comes across a lamb. The wolf accuses the lamb of various offenses. The lamb refutes them all, but the wolf kills and devours him anyway.

The moral of this fable is that the unjust will not listen to the reasoning of the innocent. Considering this tale, a Scottish poet in the 15<sup>th</sup> century wrote that there were wolves in his day who oppressed the poor: dishonest lawyers, landowners intent on extending their estates, and aristocrats exploiting their tenants. Through the centuries, interpreters of the ancient fable have applied it to injustices prevalent in their own times.

By comparing his disciples to lambs going out among wolves, I believe Jesus means that in their travels his disciples will confront injustice. Part of their mission will be to open the minds and change the hearts of the unjust, so that innocents are freed and those who once oppressed them can turn around and become citizens of the Kingdom.

Peace is the mainstay of the Kingdom of God. Jesus' common greeting to the apostles is "peace be with you." In our Gospel reading today, Jesus tells his disciples to declare peace in any house they enter. He assures them that their declaration will have an impact on any person who is open. Even when people are closed to the blessing, Jesus states that peace will return to the disciples.

Another important element of God's Kingdom is healing. On earth, Jesus spent a great deal of his time healing people who were ill in body, mind, or spirit. In our reading from Luke, Jesus tells his disciples to accept the hospitality of strangers and to cure all those who are sick. Healing channels God's power to restore human beings.

The last element of the Kingdom that we're looking at this morning is joy. When the seventy disciples return to Jesus after their journey, they are jubilant. That's a bit of a surprise when we remember Jesus warned them that they would face rejection along the way. Apparently, the disciples experienced the ability to heal people and release them from the grip of demons. The fact that they could command the demons caused them to be joyful. But, Jesus explains to the disciples

that the true reason to rejoice is knowing that through your service you have become a citizen of the Kingdom. You will flourish. You will experience life to the fullest.

Pandita Ramabai, a social worker, scholar, and an influential female reformer from India during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, wrote the following. “People must not only hear about the kingdom of God, but must see it in actual operation, on a small scale perhaps and in imperfect form, but a real demonstration nevertheless.”

Where have you come close to the Kingdom of God like I did at Marian House? Can you or I be instrumental in demonstrating the Kingdom? Yes – I believe we can if we pursue justice, peace, healing, and joy. Jesus sends each one of his disciples out to show the world what the Kingdom of God is like. He needs all of us for this task. Let's pray that we can see the opportunities and step out in confidence, as individuals and as the community of Christ Church. After all, we are completely in God's hands.

AMEN