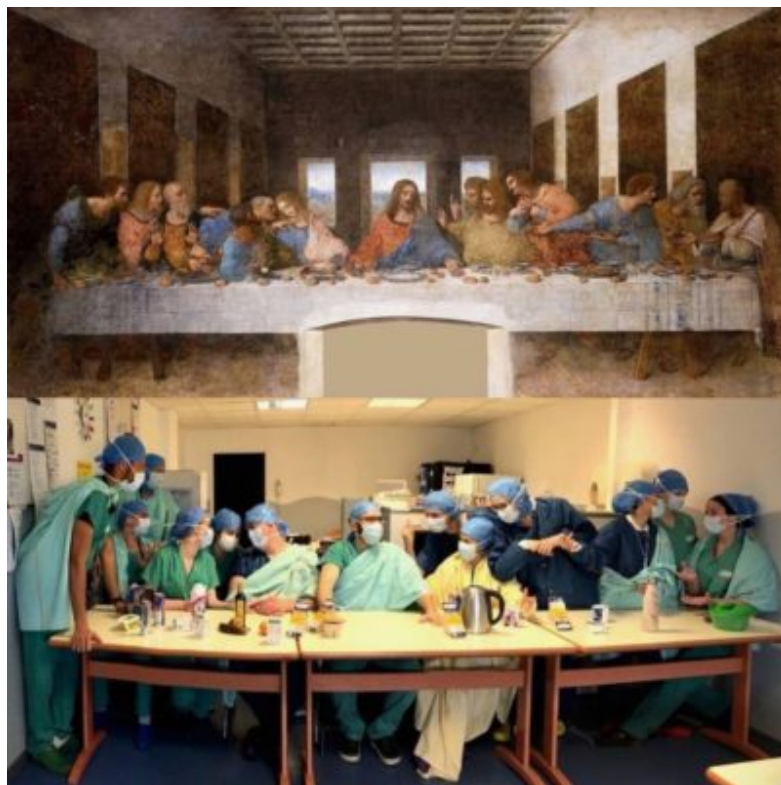


# “Training for the Kingdom” by Kolya Braun-Greiner



*Top, Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper, 1495-98. Bottom, doctors at a hospital in Paris performing a tableau vivant of the painting.*

**July 26, 2020**

## **Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

OK- I'm going to be blatantly honest. It would be disingenuous for me to barrel around the fact that I am not feeling very comforted these days. In fact, a more apt description would be disturbed, disquieted, troubled and here's the hardest admission – frightened by recent events. I'm guessing that I am not alone in this – especially this past week as Corona virus numbers soar, people are teetering near the edge of homelessness if they don't get housing assistance, a rogue

president acting like a dictator is implementing what looks like a militarized police state along with a slowing down the postal delivery system, upon which, of course, mail in ballots will depend. What a week! It is hard for me to admit whenever I feel powerless, uncertain of what to do and where to apply my energy for some degree of positive change. So I struggled for quite some time to find a pastoral or prophetic message to address this volatile situation. My usual modus operandi for preaching is to offer a words of hope and possibility with the aim of leaving you less discouraged than when I began.

And that confession is an affirmation that I am being trained by this community in the ways of kindom. One of the most potent lessons I am learning is through the example of others, the power of vulnerability. Being preceded by preachers Amy Moffit and Mary Mahala, I am humbled by their openness and deep sharing of personal experience during their sermons. This is a growing edge for me! So there it is, I have broken my own pattern, inspired by others within this community to begin this sermon admitting my own weakness rather than my accustomed soldiering through.

So with fits and starts, I meditated on these scriptures, using Lectio Divina. And when came to the last verse of today's gospel reading, The one that shimmered off the page above all others was this enigmatic phrase in Matthew 13:52 "training in the kingdom." I don't recall ever noticing before. In keeping with my theology I will be using the word "kindom" instead and I'll unpack what that means to me, followed by some closer examination of what "training" may mean in this context and for us today.

So in retrospect, I admit of course! – the word "training" would catch my eye, mind and heart, since that's what I'm so passionate about doing! I have been a trainer/ facilitator for over 30 years. I have been fortunate to be mentored by many excellent examples along the way most of them through my church connections, and it is work that I feel called to. In

spite of my own resistance, I recently passed through what felt like a trial by fire of training myself by necessity how adapt a full blown 6 hour in-person Faithful Green Leaders Training to go virtual. The whole curriculum that I helped develop had to be conveyed through visual and auditory methods that I'm not accustomed to using, nor had those methods been essential for the training to be effective. In spite of the challenges I'm delighted report that your generous Domestic giving is supporting the ongoing work of Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake. We recently trained over 80 people from over 30 congregations in 3 90-min Zoom sessions how to form and sustain their teams, to discern effective action planning, and learn ways to heal the earth at a very local level of the land, air and waters of their communities. Thank you. I experience that people of faith are yearning for training in a kindom way of living and I like to boldly think that, though it may seem small, perhaps in a big way, the work at Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake is contributing to training for the kindom.

I'm both puzzled and enamored by what Jesus ... or Matthew, the gospel writer, meant by this phrase "trained in the kindom." We've just heard another series of parables offered by Jesus – the mustard seed becoming a great shrub, the yeast mixed into the flour becoming leavened for bread, the treasure hidden in a field, a merchant finding a magnificent pearl and buying it, and lastly a net which caught fish of every kind. The kindom is like... At this point, I imagined us turning to the person sitting next to us in worship at our church building, sharing with each other one answer or example of this we see today. Instead I invite you to consider this question – The kindom is like... for your own reflections and with each other, perhaps as a prompt for a spiritual report.

For starters, what all of these have in common is the now and not yet, something hidden, but perhaps foreshadowed, yet to be revealed. They contain a seed yet to flower, the acorn yet to

become a tree, a baby yet to be a fully grown human being. They have a kind of punch line, what we called in popular education an “Ah-hah” moment of realization and realized reality.

So what does training in the kingdom mean to me? The kingdom becomes real for me as the “Beloved Community” with all its gifts, warts, and all, as a place where “training in the kingdom” happens. As Martin Luther King Jr. said: *Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.* I’m convinced that John Lewis was yearning to be trained for the kingdom when he wrote that letter to MLK at age 15 seeking to join the movement to end racial injustice, Jim Crow, our own version of apartheid and replace it with some version of the Beloved Community.

A “Beloved Community” a term first coined by Josiah Royce, founder of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, communicates belonging, welcoming, just and equitable relationships. Brene Brown has said one of the most basic human needs we have is that of belonging. And belonging has not come easy for me. I wasn’t trained in how to belong, or be part of a community, which is what I experience Seekers Church is about. My family moved to five different states before I was 5 years old, due in part, I’m sure, of my father’s wanderlust, emotional volatility and inability to keep a job. Being rooted in a community in which I could make and keep friends was nearly impossible. I was also a very shy and quiet child. An unpredictable emotional home environment trained me to be watchful and wary, carefully vigilant and cautious about when I spoke up.

My parents divorced when I was 7 and near as I could tell my mother had no friends. We never had people over for dinner, nor did we belong to any church or group, so school was my only social life. In short, we were a very isolated family of introverts. My happiest years were when we lived with my

grandmother, not a warm and fuzzy grandmother, but she made it possible for me to join groups like Girl Scouts, where I basked within a structured kind of belonging. Fast forward, God guided me to begin joining my own “family of choice” when I became a Christian at age 25. The United Methodist Church became a place where I was seen, heard and felt valued. And United Methodist Women snatched me up as a young woman passionate about faith-filled social action and I was blessed with having many mentors through that organization.

I’ve experienced our own beloved community of Seekers training me in the kingdom as I reflected on our most recent liturgical theme of comfort. In the vein of David Lloyd’s helpful reminder of com-fort meaning with strength, I can now name some of the ways that Seekers has brought comfort by strengthening me recently. Through Seekers I learned of the online Hildegard class hosted by Mepkin Abbey and offered by Marjory Bankson who posed this question to the participants: Where is your call supported? For me it is with Earth & Spirit, my mission group in which I am the celebrant of Centering. 2 weeks ago we organized a nature walk at which I offered spiritual exercises as we experience the natural world. Together we support each others call to rejoice in the comfort we gain through nature and share with the community opportunities for spiritual connection with God’s Creation. Another way of training for the kingdom.

A few other examples of how I’m personally receiving training for the kingdom here at Seekers.

Feeling exasperated at the political climate and unsafe to participate in rallies like a used to, I’m grateful for the Friday opportunities to bear witness, expressing our support for Black Lives Matter. And feeling even more alarmed about how all the current challenges that have eclipsed perhaps the most existential threat – climate change – I began reading a book, *The Future We Choose* – sounds like training for the kingdom to me! One of the authors, Christiana Figueres, was the

firebrand dynamo, the UN Executive Secretary for Climate Change when at last the Paris Agreement was accomplished in 2015. The three “mindsets” that the book posits to guide us toward the future we choose are:

1. Stubborn Optimism
2. Endless Abundance
3. Radical Regeneration

Time doesn't permit me to unpack these right now. Right now I want to share that I skipped ahead to the end of the book: “What You Can Do Now.”

Here are the first two steps of an action plan:

- Take a deep breath and decide that collectively we can do this, and that you will play your part. You will be a hopeful visionary for humanity through these dark times. From this moment despair ends and tactics begin. And now for a tactic:
- Decide that you will be a part of the politics of the future. You will vote for, campaign for, and support candidates who champion emissions reductions.

I decided that I needed participate in the “politics of the future.” But we can't go around knocking on doors as I did on many weekends leading up to Obama's election. That was the impetus to recall another lesson from Seekers in kindom building. Marcia Sprague mentioned writing postcards for Getting Out the Vote, which inspired me to start writing Letters with Vote Forward, and Postcards to Voters. I realized this was one concrete thing I could do during COVID to act on our climate policies and promote change for the kindom.

And while I did not take the class on “Hard Questions,” hearing how it touch others to “do the significant thing” before they pass on to the next world inspired me to write a letter of gratitude to one of my most beloved seminary

professors Dr. Larry Rasmussen, now in his 80's, whose work on environmental ethics continues to inspire and inform my work. His gracious and generous response of appreciation included his recent writing of letters to his young grandsons as if they were teenagers.

A vision of the kingdom is expressed by in his book *Earth-Honoring Faith*:

What is an Earth-honoring faith?

What kind of faith is life-centered, justice-committed, and Earth-honoring, with a moral universe encompassing the whole community of life, the biosphere and atmosphere together as the ecosphere? ...What kinds of faith illumines our responsibility, offers wellsprings of hope, and generates renewable moral/spiritual energy for the hard seasons ahead?

Herein lies the question – what realities seem hidden and when sought are found to be evidence of the kingdom building here in the present? And what kind of training opens us to these hidden realities. As I waited last week for the delayed delivery Cynthia Bourgeault's deep little book, *Mystical Hope* for the School for Christian Growth class, I revisited another one of her books *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*. I was amazed to discover that she reveals the nature of Jesus as teacher, a "moshel meshalim," a master of Wisdom. Today's scripture is a prime example of Jesus teaching by way of mashel, parables and Wisdom sayings.

This "hidden in plain sight" quality of these sayings and parable that point to the kingdom are embedded in the special type of training that Matthew expressed through Jesus' words. Matthew may have been one of those "scribes trained in the kingdom" who ends this passage with parabolic ending about the nature of these parables: "like a master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is old and what is new." Jesus parables contained within them references to the old while

pointing to the new. In the words of Cynthia Bougeault says "He came to help people awaken." And what were they awakening to? She describes Jesus' Wisdom way taught "a vision large enough to contain not only our minds but also our hearts and souls; an understanding of our place in the divine cosmology large enough to order and unify our lives and our planet."

I personally experience these as "Ah-hah" moments, when as if the scales fall from my eyes, I see something that was there right before all the time but hidden by my perspective or attitude. My own most satisfying teaching moments are when I've intentionally used an old and familiar medium – like Vacation Bible School with a new message – like watershed literacy – resulting in someone shouting "Wow, we are all connected in a watershed!"

In the process of awakening, then we ask how to manifest the kingdom and it seems that Jesus is saying "act as if" or live into it!

On an interview of Congressman John Lewis by Krista Tippet in 2016 he broached this hidden but not yet reality: "I discovered that you have to have this sense of faith that what you're moving toward is already done." He was calling for living "As if" the kingdom of the "beloved community" were already our reality.

It seems to me that the type of training we need is this – the "Act as if" school for building the kingdom of God. That said, I confess feeling beleaguered, stymied and restricted by our present political and health climate. Even so, I refuse to let that prevent me from taking action.

And yes, it's been quite a week – of kingdom events

Joe Biden announced a significant, substantive Climate Action Plan including many of the proposals found in the Green New Deal and endorsed by the Sunrise movement of young people.



Alexandria Ocasia-Cortez's speaking out brilliantly for the women and girls of our society in her scintillating oratory response, to being accosted by misogynist abusive language of Rep. Yoho.

And the Wall of Moms, recently joined by the Wall of Vets, bravely standing guard defending the BLM protesters.

This week Morgan Stanley announced that it would rate all its investments for their climate impact.

And locally, Interfaith Power and Light, is now launching a Community Solar program, a kind of cooperative purchasing endeavor to support more people using Solar powered electricity in our region.

Training... for the Kindom rooted in personal stories, equipped to engage others in meaningful conversations, practicing disciplines of organizing, and praying for decisive discernment which informs our actions.

And when we feel overwhelmed, under resourced, at our wit's end about what to do and how to do it, the passage that Paul in Romans 8:26 reminds us:

*The Spirit helps us in our weakness even when we know not how to pray and intercedes with sighs too deep for words.* My sighs run deep when I grow weary with concern for the health of our democracy, the relentless deterioration of our environment and the condition of the world that we are leaving to present and future generations. Knowing that my sighs are heard by the Spirit, I'm buoyed by the Wisdom teachings of Jesus that point to the kindom, the beloved community.

Vincent Harding, occasional speechwriter for Martin Luther King lifted up these 3 C's to carry us forward in the manifestation of the beloved kindom: Courage, Creativity and Compassion. Brene Brown said, *Courage is contagious. Every time we choose courage, we make everyone around us a little*

*better and the world a little braver.* The etymology of courage is heart, the seat of feelings, as the basis of courage. These are qualities of Christ Jesus in the Spirit who intercedes for us, guides us and sustains us in love, and from whom nothing can separate us. They are qualities that can happen in a beloved community manifesting the kingdom.

One of the sayings Jesus may have recited is this line from Psalm 51:6 *You desire truth in the inward being, therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.* Wisdom of the secret heart is the kind of training for the kingdom of love, healing and restoration that Jesus was teaching, truths hidden in plain sight.

These lines from Celtic Benediction by John Phillip Newell are a prayer I leave with you:

*At the heart of the brokenness around me  
and in the hidden depths of my own soul  
I seek your touch of healing, O God,  
for there you reside.*

*In the hidden depths of life, O God, there you reside.  
May it be well within my own soul and part of the world's  
healing this day. Amen*