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SIGNS OF THE KINGDOM 2017 **A Spiritual Exercise**

A Faithful reader: I begin with this posting a new occasional series of Spiritual Exercises. I've often been asked during my years in ordained ministry to serve as resource person or leader of retreats. And during my years at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary I taught a course on Spirituality for Pastors. The result is I have a file full of ideas and suggestions for deepening your spiritual life. And they're worth sharing more widely. Before I cash in my chips. So to speak.

B Anyhow, here's the first of what I hope will become a regular series, but posted only occasionally, as the Spirit moves me. Herewith: Signs of the Kingdom 2017.

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1 My Dad, a life-long Lutheran pastor, had an incredible gift. He had the ability to seek out and to find the single positive characteristic in an otherwise totally obnoxious person. He had the ability to point out the best in a person, even in a hopeless annoyance. Although I never heard him cite this reference, it was as if his personal motto were *Philippians 4:8*: "...Finally, beloved, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things..."

2 In shorthand: Don't bother with the negative. Seek the positive. In all circumstances. And in all people.

3 That has always seemed to me to be good advice. Life-changing advice, even. In that spirit, let me propose to you a perhaps unlikely Spiritual Exercise. I'll describe it below.

4 For four decades now, or more, once year at Easter, usually in April or May – the Season of Resurrection and of New Beginnings! – I choose for myself what I call Signs of the Coming Kingdom of God. I usually select five of them, from my own observations of the world around me. Five signs that the world is not going to hell. Not permanently. They're my own private annual evidence for optimism. My own personal rumination or reflection on that verse from *Philippians*. I commend the practice to you, as a Spiritual Exercise that will enrich your life. Guaranteed.

5 I usually try to select my Signs from several disparate categories. Some of my Signs of the Kingdom have been social, some political, some technological, some purely personal. And most of them have not been genuinely new, but merely new to me. So in your own personal list. Your choices need not be actually new. Simply new to you, in your own personal experience.

6 For example: One year, after an extended visit to New York City, I selected that glorious new public space in Manhattan, the NYC High Line Park. You've heard of it: An abandoned elevated railroad bed, running a full story and a half above street level for blocks and blocks through the heart of NYC's West Side, now transformed into a splendid pedestrian public park, with breath-taking views of the Hudson River to the West and of the towers of Manhattan to the East. It's one of the city's newest gems, and a preview of what other cities can be like at their best and most humane.

7 Without further ado, then, here's my list for this year: my Signs of the Coming Kingdom of God for 2017. I urge you to compile your own list. A Spiritual Exercise to enrich your life.

8 My first Sign of the Kingdom: The Cassini Space Craft manoeuvring *between* Saturn and its rings! And sending photos and other data back to our earth along the way! Surely one of the great technological marvels of our age. Certainly worth celebrating in 2017 as a Sign of the Kingdom.

9 Here's my Second Sign of the Kingdom for 2017: Ontario's experiment with Basic Annual Income (BAI). Readers south of the border may not have heard that the province where I live, Ontario, is experimenting with the notion, tried with great success in Finland, the Netherlands and even Kenya, to provide all citizens, whether they work or not, with a guaranteed annual income. Ontario's system would provide up to \$16,989 for single people, and up to \$24,077 per couple.

10 Citizens in the metropolitan areas of Hamilton and Thunder Bay will be the first to profit from this new provincial experiment. Experience in other jurisdictions has shown that the BAI can reduce poverty, lower the costs of medical care, and provide a host of other social advantages.

11 I say: Terrific! Here's evidence that governments can actually resist the malevolent influence of today's selfish individualism and encourage a sense of neighbours helping neighbours. "Socialism!" I hear you cry. To which I respond: "Absolutely! And it's about time!" See *Acts 2:44-45*.

12 Here's my Third Sign: The almost universal acceptance, nation-wide in Canada, of same sex marriage. Readers of this post in USA will hardly believe the difference in social attitudes north of the border. I regard this as the work of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit is doing a New Thing among us. As surely as that Spirit accomplished a New Thing among us in the abandonment of human slavery in the previous century and a half. "See, I am making all things new," says the Seer of Revelation. (*Revelation 21:5*)

13 It was an Ontario Supreme Court – completely secular! – more than ten years ago, that first legalized same sex marriage in North America. I regard this as fulfillment of the promise of the prophecy of Pentecost: “...I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh...” (*Joel 2:28*.) God’s Spirit has been promised, not just to the Chosen People, not just to the Christian Church, but to all people.

14 For far too long, the Christian Church has been hung up on sex, preoccupied to the point of paranoia with the account of Creation you can find in *Genesis 1*: “...Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it...” (*Genesis 1:28*) The Primacy of Procreation has been disastrous for the health of the planet and for the institution of marriage. And for the status of women. Women have been little more than baby-making machines, in too many sectors of Western society. And in too many deliberations of the Christian Church

15 But there’s another account of Creation, in *Genesis 2*, that’s actually older, Bible scholars maintain. There’s nothing here about sex as procreation – as the perpetuation of the human species. The first human couple are simply partners worthy of each other. “I will make him (Adam) a helper as his partner...” *Genesis 2:18*. That verse opens the door, in my view, to same sex marriage. We humans – of any sex – are simply companions worthy of one another. That conviction is surely a New Thing among human societies.

16 Certainly, there are those in Canada who find the notion of same sex marriage unsavoury, who consider the thought of sex as other-than-procreational deeply offensive. But it’s largely a generational divide. On both sides of the border. Young people almost universally find no problem with same sex marriage. They regard it as a simple matter of justice. Justice long overdue.

17 So acceptance of same sex marriage is for me the work of the Spirit of God. A Sign of the Messianic Age to Come. A Third Sign of the Kingdom for 2017.

18 (In a separate but related note: It’s said that Mahatma Gandhi, on his first visit to Europe from his native India, was asked by a reporter, “Mr. Gandhi, what do you think of Western Civilization?” To which Gandhi is supposed to have replied, “I think it would be a good idea.”)

19 My Fourth Sign of the Coming Kingdom of God: The almost universal revulsion over Arkansas’ barbaric application of the death penalty in recent days. The Emperor kills people who kill people to show it’s wrong to kill people? Not a very persuasive deterrent, in my view. Every civilized country in the world has long since abandoned the death penalty. Except the USA. Medieval barbarism. I’m glad to hear the contemporary outcry against it.

20 My Fifth and Last Sign of the Kingdom for 2017: My daughter's Presbyterian Church in the USA. I was stunned on a recent visit to her parish to note an announcement in the Sunday's printed bulletin to the effect that Holy Communion is celebrated every Sunday at the 8 am service in the Chapel, and on the first Sunday of every month at the 11 am service! At the risk of sounding condescending: That's where North American Lutherans were a generation ago! (And in the Lutheran church of my own childhood, we had Communion four times a year! My present parish schedules Communion every Sunday, following Apostolic practice.)

21 That's heartening evidence to me that – as I call it – the Great Ecumenical Consensus of the 'Sixties and 'Seventies is indeed catching hold in all the mainline churches! More than that: On this Sunday in my daughter's parish, you did not receive Bread and Cup in your pew. You walked forward to commune at the Table! (A more persuasive signal of intentional discipleship!) And it was real bread! I tip my hat to that parish leadership!

22 Thus almost always does the *pleroma* – the fulness! – of the Kingdom of God emerge among us. In little increments. In small steps.

23 But it's on the way! Among all people! Even the secular Ontario courts!

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24 Now it's your turn. You choose your own Signs of the Kingdom, each year, as a Spiritual Exercise! You'll find it worth your while.

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