

Pastor's Wednesday Reflection

June 10, 2020

Now and Not Yet

A blessed Wednesday to my faith family,

Geerhardus Vos. Does the name ring a bell? Vos was a big name in Reformed church theology circles years ago. A native of the Netherlands, Vos came to be known as the Father of Reformed Biblical theology. He was educated at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan about 15 miles north of the congregation I served for 9 years before coming to Evanston. After having earned his doctorate at the University of Strasburg, Vos returned to the United States where he took a position at Calvin Seminary before moving on Princeton Theological Seminary where he taught for some 39 years and assumed the chair of the department of Biblical Theology.

Vos is widely thought to be the first to have used the phrase “now and not yet” to describe of the Kingdom of God. That is to say that while we wait for the coming of the fullness of the Kingdom of God (in the eschaton), we are already living within that kingdom. The power, the love and the redemption of God are already at work in this place and already hold sway.

Now and not yet, That, I think, is an accurate description of our lives vis- a -vis the kingdom. But it is also accurately descriptive of our lives and our society in a broader sense. I would suggest that in these days, it feels like our world and our lives are tilted much more to the “not yet” than to the “now”. It is hard to shake the sense that we are waiting to fully become, more than that we have realized what will be, and what we are intended to be. The world feels so very “provisional”.

As the pandemic drags on, it has become difficult to ignore just how diminished and choked off our lives are. It feels as though we are waiting to really live. We chafe under public health strictures and stay at home orders. We can't socialize as we want. We can't gather up friends in our homes and beloved family in our arms. We can't travel as we would like. We can't mark milestones and life passages as we'd like.

This Friday, for instance, as my daughter Erica, graduates from the University of Chicago, we will “celebrate” the occasion by sitting in our homes independently watching a virtual representation of “kind of” a graduation. Now, in the larger scheme of things, that's hardly a tragedy, but it's also not really much of a celebration - not yet anyway.

As I talked through the fence with my neighbor to the East, a few weeks ago, I learned that his son, who was to be married this weekend, was forced to reschedule his wedding to next June. They'll get married, but not yet. I have read in more than one obituary “there will be a private graveside service for immediate family and a fuller celebration of

life at some point in the future.” These are times in which there is this overwhelming sense that we are waiting to be able to live in fullness; that there is much more “not yet” than there is “now”.

June is “Pride Month” - a time to focus with some intentionality on our LGBTQ+ friends, family and neighbors. As we hear their stories, and take in the history of the movement for LGBTQ rights, we hear a story of now and not yet, with an emphasis on the not yet. We hear the story of Folks who for long years had lives that were “on hold”; who feared living their truth openly, feeling as though they had to wait to live into the fullness of who they were. Though much has changed over the years, it is clear that even now LGBTQ+ folks live between the now of greater inclusion and some protections and the not yet of full acceptance and absolute inclusion. Even now there are some expressions of church where scripture is used to beat down and scatter such folks rather than welcome and draw them into the family. It’s a now and not yet situation...with lots of not yet.

As Pride Month pushes forward in a different way this year, LGBTQ communities are elevating black voices in solidarity with a community that has been shaken to its core. Communities of color have once again seen events that have made clear that for them, the egalitarian promises of this free society are more heavily weighted toward the not yet.

In the days and weeks following George Floyd’s murder, we find our nation focused on the not yet that has always been the experience of communities and people of color in this land. 16 days of large scale protests all across the country and around the world testify to a growing rejection of the idea that people of color should have to continue to accept the “not yet.” We have been reminded once again that from the day the first African slave landed on the shores of this nation 401 years ago, African Americans have felt a powerful not yet. The Emancipation proclamation provided a huge step toward the “now” in 1863, but there was still more not yet than now. The nation suffered through years of “soft slavery”, Jim Crow, segregation and ugly discrimination, and all of those things shouted “not yet”. In recent years we’ve slid backward morally as powerful voices express open hatred for minorities, and fringe racist groups are emboldened to come out of the shadows shouting angrily, not just not yet.... But not ever! You will not replace us!

As Geerhardus Vos observed, scripture is clear that the Kingdom of God is experienced now and a not yet. The book of Revelation speaks to the power and presence of God in the midst of the people’s suffering, even as the people of God look forward to the coming of the Kingdom in full fruition when *“(God) will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, (and) the first things have passed away.”* (Revelation 21:4). In the midst of the exile, God shares a vision of hope intended to give life immediately, and pull God’s oppressed people forward to a time of full kingdom experience. ⁴ *He shall judge between the nations, and*

shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (Isaiah 2:4) St. Paul writes of the now and the not yet experiencing of the Kingdom in 1 Corinthians 12 when he notes, For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.

We live in times that threaten to obscure the Kingdom of God among us now. You need to know the good news: In all that drives us apart, all that is broken, all that is hateful, shameful and unfair, in all that brings illness and fear and all that militates against the biblical standard of grace, love and mercy for all...in all of that, the Kingdom of God is still present. In all that screams out to your soul, NOT YET, God says NOW!

Now I am present with my healing. Now I am present with hope in your despair. Now I am present with new life, though yours seems to have tanked. Now I am there with forgiveness, though you feel nothing so much as the shame of your failing. Now I am with you as you struggle for a more just society and as you deal with the ongoing scourges of racism, sexism and homophobia. Now I am with you as your world brings threat, fear and pandemic to your doorstep. Rest secure in my love and know that even as you look forward to the coming of the kingdom in all of its fullness, I am with you NOW.

Thank you Geerhardus. Thank you Jesus! Amen!

Pastor Brown