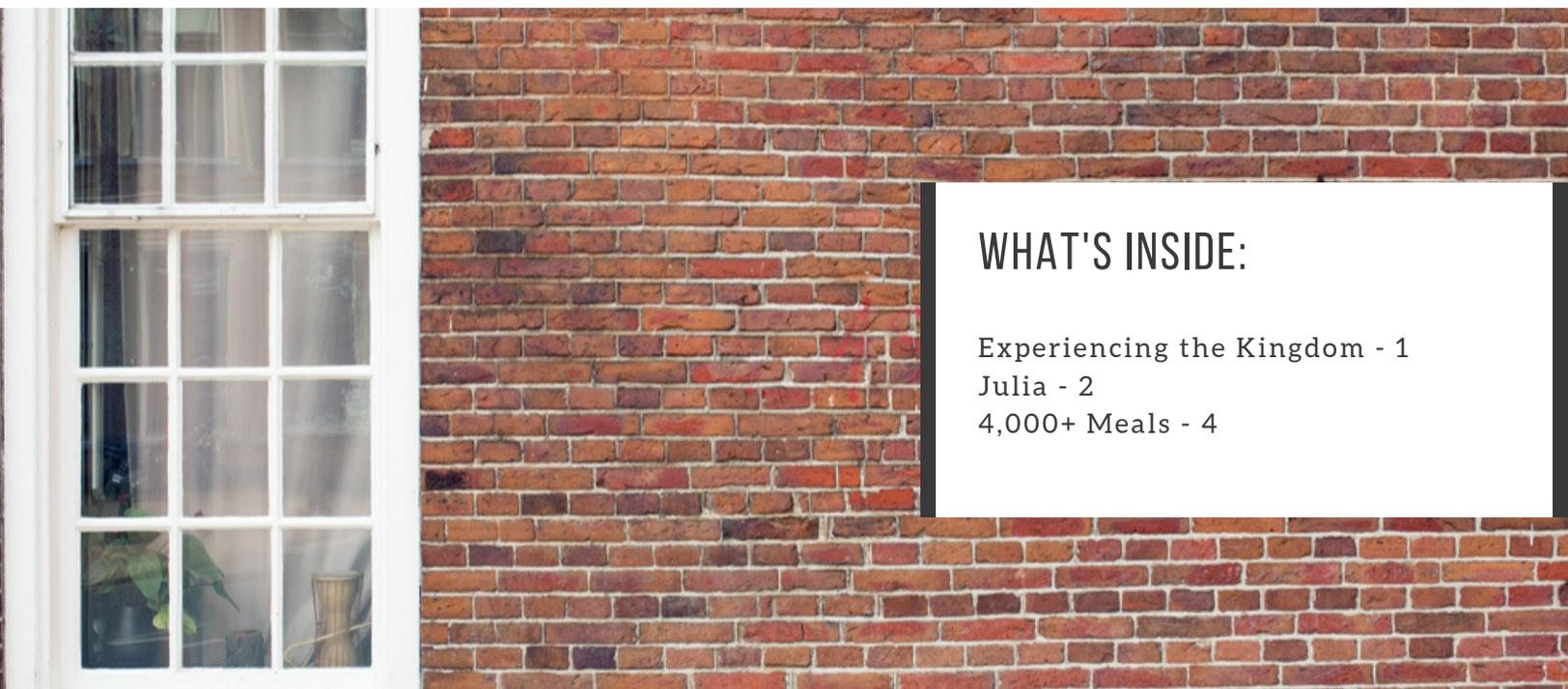


PARISH HOUSE

Newmarket Church of Christ



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EXPERIENCING THE KINGDOM

Nathan Pickard

We live less and less in a world where people are open to the work of God. As Charles Taylor helpfully articulates, we live in a world that is increasingly becoming *closed*. Taylor calls this the buffered self. Meaning, somehow and in some way our lives are becoming more and more shielded from the idea or possibility that God is (can be) at work in this world. The opposite, of course, is an *open* system/belief. Meaning, we are open to the possibility that somehow and in some way God is (can be) at work in this world.

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Julia

In April 2021 I drove into the church parking lot and saw two fire trucks, two ambulances and about 5 police cars. Clearly something had happened. I parked my truck and talked with a few neighbours. I discovered Charlie accidentally overdosed and died.

The next day a group of volunteers and people from the church worked together to pack food boxes for families struggling with food equality. Susan calls and asks,

"Do you have an extra box of food?"

"I do."

"Good. Give it to Julia. As you know, her partner Charlie died of a drug overdose yesterday and she needs food to feed her boys."

About a month goes by and Julia and I are sitting out on the shed porch drinking a coffee. I'm listening to Julia talk about her addictions, her struggles, and how the death of Charlie still haunts her. It seems her addictions are now being fed from the guilt of Charlie's death. Julia continued to struggle for several months with her addictions, all the while her family and friends stood, watched and waited for the moment when Julia would ask for help.



I stood outside with Gary. We fist pumped each other and shot the breeze with another friend named Jeremy. Suddenly our names were called out and we looked over. Walking away from the crack house was a mutual friend who recently tried to take her own life. She quickly came over and gave Gary a hug than quickly runs away. Gary tells Jeremy; *"That's a crack house and so I placed my "Narcotics Anonymous" sign out front in hopes that someone might see it and reach out for help."*

Many addicts might never reach out for help. Julia did. Julia reached out and a couple volunteers from church, alongside Julia's sister and friend moved Julia's apartment into a storage unit and now Julia is a resident in a six-month rehab clinic.

We are learning to develop a posture of standing, watching, and waiting . . . much like the father in Luke 15 stood, watched and waited for his lost son. We anxiously wait for the opportunity to welcome Julia (and many others) to a Table of bread and wine.

For those of us who are engaging Taylor's work, we continue to wonder about the implications of living increasingly in a *closed* system. For example, in a world where the culture is *closed* to the possibility of God being at work to transform our lives and the world, we are less and less likely to center our lives around God and instead center our lives around self. Taking it a step further, in a *closed* system we are left to create our own identity rather than to create an identity in Christ.

In a culture that is increasingly being buffered from God, it's getting harder to engage in revivals, restoration work or convincing people to return to God because most people are, at best, apathetic to God, and more than likely, rolling their eyes at our beliefs. So what do we do? What can we do as God's people who are *open* to the possibilities of God being at work in our midst while living in an increasingly *closed* world?

My hunch is we invite people into the experience of God's kingdom. For myself, I work under the idea that God's kingdom is God's dream for the world coming true. I know this isn't the best way to describe God's kingdom nor is it the only way, but I find it helpful. God's dream for the world is **not** for the poor to be oppressed, the homeless left out in the cold, the sick die alone, or the depressed commit suicide. God's vision for the world does not include lepers being forced to live in isolation, for the lame to sit and beg, or for Gentiles to be excluded. God's vision for the world **is** where the outsider can be welcomed, where lepers are part of the community, where the sick find healing, there is an abundance of food, the homeless have shelters, and much more.

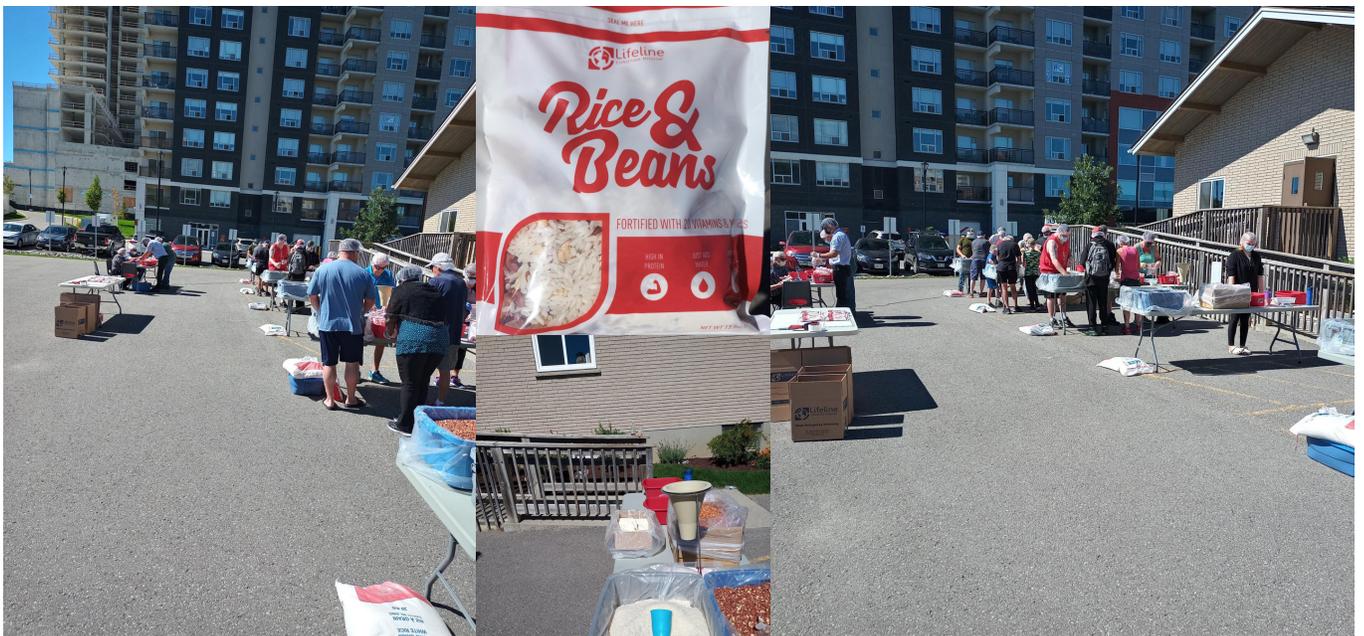
If this is what God's kingdom looks like than we have to experience God's kingdom and I think, whether people live in a *closed* or *open* system, the experience of the kingdom is available to everyone. What becomes different is our interpretation of the experience. Our difference in interpretation is not something to fear; our difference becomes an opportunity to proclaim the in-breaking kingdom of God.

On September 19th, a group of people from our faith community, alongside our neighbours (212 Davis and Longford subdivision), joined together and participated in God's in-breaking kingdom. With the help of Lifeline Christian Missions we packed over 4,000 meals for Haiti, consisting of rice, dried beans and vegetables and some flavouring. Mieke brought her grandchildren to participate in the work of the kingdom. Gary brought his sister, mother and nephew to participate in the work of the kingdom. Kenny brought his coffee drinking friends from 212 Davis to participate. Our neighbours worked alongside people who confess Jesus is Lord.

The next Sunday, just as I was about to leave the church parking lot John came up and said, "*I had so much fun packing the meals. I can't wait to do more events like this with the church.*" "Really" I said, "*What do you think happened?*" John looked at me as if I had lost mind; as if I was asking a question with a really obvious answer: "*We packed food together for some people who are really hungry.*" And John's right; that's what we did. But we did more than that; we participated with God in the in-breaking kingdom.

I responded to John: "I think something else happened. I think we were participating and doing the work of God together." John looks at me. He grows silent. I could tell his mind was thinking about what to say. "Ok. If I'm participating in doing the work of God, let me know when more of this happens."

In a culture where we are increasingly being "buffered from transcendence" we need to have experiences--we need to experience God's in-breaking kingdom and we need to interpret our experiences. For many, the interpretation might be a "fun event." But for those of us who are waiting and expecting God's in-breaking kingdom, we must interpret and give voice to the work of God: "We're participating and doing the work of God together." This kind of interpretative work invites dialogue and opportunity for others to consider the kingdom work we are engaged in and the possibility of God at work in our world.



Our faith community at work alongside our neighbours packing over 4,000 meals with Lifeline Christian Missions on September 19, 2021

"To be most effective in bringing about change in a community or a neighborhood, it helps if you live there."

Larry James, *The Wealth of the poor*

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