

“God’s Kingdom Come and God’s Will Be Done”

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Matthew 13: 31-33 and 44-53

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

We need prayer like never before. The Reverend Doctor Stephen Cherry, who is the Dean of Spirituality and Studies in Theology at King’s College in Cambridge, England says: “At a time of change and uncertainty and widespread anxiety as we move through this time of pandemic and economic hardship, we need to discover again the freshness of our most familiar spiritual resources.” He has written a book which was just published last month, “Thy Will Be Done”, which is an examination of the Lord’s Prayer and intended to be used during this season of Lent.

Last Sunday we began our consideration of how Jesus teaches us to pray. The Lord’s Prayer is found in two gospels – Matthew and Luke. Matthew’s version is more nearly what we say together each Sunday. Listen now to God’s Word to us as it comes from Matthew 6: 9-13

“Jesus says: When you pray, pray like this:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not

bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.”

The Lord’s Prayer begins: “Our Father.” *Our* because we never come to God in prayer in isolation, without considering the needs of other people. To only ask God to respond to our individual concerns is self-absorbed at best and selfish at worst. We come before God in prayer in the midst of community, acknowledging our connectedness with brothers and sisters around this globe. Jesus prays “Father, Abba” indicating that God is not some far off deity who created the world, put it in motion and then stepped back to watch how things turn out. Our God initiates engaging with us in our daily lives, and desires to be as close to us as Jesus Christ. God is relational – loving, gracious, kind, slow to anger; I invite you to consider all the relational ways God engages us. Our Father draws near to us in order to hear our prayers. “God, who art/is in heaven.” God is holy other. God is not just an extension of who we are; we do not get to create God in our image; God creates us in God’s image. We will never fully grasp or understand God or be able to put God in a nice neat box of our own construct. So, the prayer Jesus teaches his followers to pray, begins with an acknowledgement of who God is and what it is that God desires for all of creation.

Stephen Cherry says: “The opening words of the Lord’s prayer deliberately draws our minds and our hearts to the holiness and transcendence of God and at the same time reminds us that God desires to be in relationship with us. The second part of the prayer

immediately takes us in a different direction. If the first part of Jesus' prayer has us looking beyond ourselves in an upward direction, this next phrase has us looking not down but around and about ourselves more horizontally." So, this morning, we come to the part in Jesus' prayer which asks for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven and for God's kingdom to come and dwell among us. This next part of Jesus' prayer invites us to look around us and pay attention to God's kingdom here on earth.

What does it mean to pray for God's kingdom to come?

Matthew provides us with a glimpse of what God's kingdom is like. Let's listen to what he has to say in Matthew 13:31-33 and 44-53

What does it mean to pray for God's kingdom to come?

1. It implies that there are multiple kingdoms - our human kingdoms and God's kingdom. They are not to be equated and yet they sometimes exist side-by-side. Dr. Albert Winn, in his book "The Christian Primer", says: "Kingdom" is an incurably political word. (It is a word for which Americans have an aversion.) When we pray "thy kingdom come," we are not praying to be taken out of the political order into some heavenly sphere where no decisions have to be made about how power and money and services out to be distributed among people. We are praying that God's sovereignty may come to earth and become effective in the political realm and for the political questions that plague us and divide us."

Augustine of Hippo describes these multiple kingdoms in his classic book of

theology, “The City of God”. The Christian lives in this world, Augustine concludes, as a resident alien. As a resident, the Christian takes pride in earthly achievements and is responsible not only for the stewardship of the earth but for the proper ordering of society. As an alien, the Christian knows that his or her life is not defined by this world; that is, by the world we can see, taste, touch, and handle. The Christian knows that this is not the only world there is, and that however significant it may be, it is not the most important world. In this world of nature and history, there is another order of existence, not bound by nature and history, that moves to its completion in God’s eternal kingdom. The metaphor of “resident alien” enabled Augustine to appreciate the achievements of Rome on the one hand - he lived in the empire during the end of the 4th century/beginning of the 5th - and, on the other hand, to know that the Christian community’s final destiny is not Rome but the City of God. Augustine was proud of Rome’s achievements, but as a Christian, he knew they were not only finite and limited but corrupted by human sin. The final meaning of life is to be found not in any city of earth but in the city of God. The Christian’s final citizenship is in heaven.

2. It is in God’s kingdom or city that God’s will is done. And what is God’s will?

All of scripture addresses this question.

It is God’s will to be in relationship with all of creation. That was why God created the world. It was God’s desire to create and to be in relationship with that creation. Love is at the heart of this relationship. Unconditional, unchanging, eternal

love. It does not matter how creation responds to God, God always loves what God has created.

It is God's will that creation live in peace and harmony, as one community. Power is shared and used constructively; resources are shared so that all receive what is sufficient for life; diversity is a strength that nurtures and balances all of creation. And this community is to live in communion with God.

It is God's will that we experience the joy of life and wholeness. Even in the midst of incredible suffering (even suffering on a cross) and death, new life is offered.

When we pray for God's will to be done on earth and for God's kingdom to come, we recognize the disparity between what we experience in our world and God's will for creation. That disparity is caused by our sinfulness; our desire to be God, immortal, infinite, all powerful, all knowing, instead of creature; our desire for our wills to be done and our disregard of God's will. We prefer to be lords of our own kingdoms instead of a servant in God's kingdom. This desire for self-sufficiency and security, and often times that desire becomes fear, is what destroys community and the peaceful balance in the created order. Read again the story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. When we pray for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done, we need to think hard about exactly what we are asking.

3. God's kingdom and God's will are fully revealed and reflected in the life of Jesus Christ. If we want an image of God's kingdom and to understand God's will, we

have only to look at Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ the Kingdom of God is indeed already present. God's kingdom is here and now, even though at times it may seem hidden. And yet it is not complete. The Kingdom of God is both a present reality and a future expectation.

Two analogies: Karl Barth describes the present and future Kingdom of God as a table which is covered by a cloth. You cannot see the table; it is veiled. But you know it is there. You can hear it when you tap on the table. But you do not see it. God's kingdom is like a seed buried in the ground or yeast mixed in the flour. You have only to remove the cloth to see it or see the plant that grows from the seed, or the bread that rises. We pray, says Barth, in order that the covering which still veils the reality of the Kingdom be removed, in order that the reality of everything already changed in Jesus Christ may be made visible.

Shirley Guthrie, professor of systematic theology at Columbia Seminary in Atlanta, uses the analogy of a decisive battle in a war. He says that the outcome of World War II was decided when the Allied Forces landed in Normandy, where the decisive battle of the whole war was fought. Between D-Day (the day of the invasion) and V-Day (the day the Allies' victory was finally declared) the Germans fought a number of desperate fall-back battles across Europe. Many lives were lost and much damage done before the Germans finally surrendered. But after Normandy, it was clear how the war was going to turn out. The war was won even if it was not over. In Jesus Christ the

Kingdom of God has come and is coming. We remember what God has done in Jesus Christ and so we hope for what God will do.

4. Implied in these words is our participation in the bringing about of God's kingdom and the fulfillment of God's will. The coming of God's kingdom is not dependent on us; but we are invited to participate in it - planting the seed or adding the yeast.

Dr. Winn says: "To pray 'thy kingdom come' is not to bless the status quo but to cry to God for something very different. It is to refuse to give any earthly political order the ultimate allegiance that belongs only to God."