

THY WILL BE DONE

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, June 30, 2019
Based on Luke 17:20–21; John 6:38; Hebrews 10:5–9a***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Teach Us to Pray—the Spiritual Journey of the Lord’s Prayer.” Previously, we have noted how the prayer begins. Although the starting point for prayer for many people is some problem or need in their life, the Lord’s Prayer teaches us to begin with God. In the opening petition—Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name—we are drawn to focus on who God is, to recognize that God is loving, powerful, and good, and to lift our praise to God. This focus upon God continues in the next petition of the prayer—“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” {prayer}

In ancient Hebrew, and also in the Aramaic language that Jesus spoke, if you wanted to really emphasize something, you would say it twice, but in two somewhat different ways. It is like a mother saying, “Stop hitting each other! Put the pillows down and be nice!” Two different lines, each saying the same thing. This is called parallelism, and in the Bible, where it comes to more poetic expression, it is a literary technique used throughout the Psalms and throughout the writings of all the Biblical prophets. Jesus used this technique in the Lord’s Prayer, in the verse we are considering this morning. Two lines—thy kingdom come, and thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven—are two different ways of saying basically the same thing.

The kingdom image is one that Jesus used frequently. I did a sermon series last Advent on the whole idea of the kingdom of God. In a kingdom, there is a king—a ruler—who is the ultimate authority. There are laws, grounded in the authority of the king, which govern how people live. There are people, who are citizens of the kingdom and who live by its laws, and there are boundaries of some sort which distinguish what is inside the kingdom and what is outside. So the kingdom of God is a realm where God is king—where God reigns, where people are living in allegiance to God, where they are following God’s laws, and where they are distinguished in some way from what is beyond God’s kingdom.

Sometimes Christians have imagined that this kingdom of God is something that must be purely in the future. That idea is at the center of the whole Jehovah’s Witness world view, and it is part of the thinking in many fundamentalist churches. The idea is that this present world is a hopeless rotten kingdom of evil, but that God’s kingdom will arrive and replace it all. The boundary line between this world and God’s kingdom will be a moment in time, soon to arrive. With the second coming of Christ, God’s reign will finally be established, and all believers will become part of that new glorious kingdom. Believers are called right now to simply wait in expectation for the kingdom which is to arrive. If that is the perspective that believers are to have, then the prayer, “thy kingdom come,” would be a way of saying, “Bring it on Jesus!” Believers can sit back, undisturbed by the fact that the world is going to ruin,

because they are thinking about the kingdom to come.

But that is not the teaching of Jesus. According to Jesus, in words that he spoke in the first century, the kingdom is, in some sense, already here. As he said, “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” (Mark 1:15) Likewise the gospel of Luke, in the passage we heard earlier, reports: Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed . . . for in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.” (Luke 17:20–21). Or it could be translated, “the kingdom of God is within you.”

According to Jesus, the boundary line between God’s kingdom and this sinful world not a point in time or a line on a map. Instead, Jesus says that God’s kingdom *overlaps* right now with the kingdoms in this world. In his day, the obvious kingdom was the empire of Rome, where the king was Caesar. Its citizens lived by Roman law, and there were expansive national boundaries. But Jesus proclaimed, smack in the midst of the empire, that there is another king, and there is a higher law, and there is an allegiance that people might give that surpasses the claims of even the most impressive earthly kingdom; This is why the Roman authorities and the entrenched Jewish leadership perceived Jesus to be a threat, because the kingdom he announced was a direct challenge to their rule,

The same scenario exists today. There are all sorts of earthly kingdoms, which consist not only of political structures but economic systems and cultural values, and they all have various rulers and laws and boundaries that demand allegiance. But the gospel proclaims that there is a kingdom of God that transcends it all. There is a kingdom which, as Jesus said, “is not of this world” (John 18:36); but at the same time it is right here in this world. The Kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom in which people are acclaiming Christ as king and are living under his reign. All people on this earth must live within some earthly kingdom, and they are expected to live by its customs and follow its laws; but the followers of Jesus are giving their utmost allegiance to a higher authority. This has put Christians into conflict with absolute rulers all through the centuries, and it has also led Christians to continually stir things up in the societies in which they live, because they are never satisfied with the present state of affairs but are always following a Sovereign who challenges the imperfections and the wrongs of the present age, and who leads them to change the world for good.

All this means that Christians are a part of two different kingdoms at the same time; or as St. Augustine famously expressed it, Christians are simultaneously members of two different cities. They are a part of an earthly city, which is flawed and fragile and passing, and they must seek to function as well as possible within it; but their real citizenship is in the City of God. They are following a higher power and are living by a different set of rules from everyone else. This can clearly be seen in our society today. Our culture says that you should focus your life on acquiring as much as possible. Christians say you should focus your life on giving as much as possible. Our culture celebrates people who are rich and famous. Christians celebrate ordinary people who have offered themselves in service. Our culture

says that you should just do your own thing and take care of your family. Christians say that we are part of a family of God, and we are meant to care for everyone and make a difference in the world at large. Our culture divides people into warring factions. Christians strive for a unity in Christ. The kingdom of God does have boundaries, but the boundaries are drawn differently from how the rest of the world does it. In the kingdom of God, we no longer have boundaries over race or nationality or gender or social status; for as the Scripture says, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) The boundaries in God’s kingdom are spiritual. People cross over into God’s Kingdom not because of who they are, or where they are from, or how much power or wealth they have, but because they come in repentance and faith. And what marks people as citizens of God’s kingdom is a set of spiritual values, the chief one of which was spelled out by Jesus when he said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples—that you love one another.” (John 13:35)

It is thus plain what Jesus meant when he said that the Kingdom of God is “at hand” or “among you” or “within you.” The Kingdom of God is present whenever people are living with Christ as King. The kingdom of God is breaking into this world whenever people are living out their allegiance to Christ by engaging in acts of mercy and making this world more the way that God intends. At the same time, it is clear that the kingdom of God is not yet fully established in this world, in that there are so many ways in which human beings continue to act contrary to God. Even if, in our own personal lives, we acknowledge Christ as King, there are still ways that we fall short of His call. When therefore we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” what we are praying is that God’s reign might become more fully established on earth . . . and more fully established in us. We are praying that we might live in greater harmony with God, that God’s values might increasingly shape how we live with one another, and that the world might come to more fully reflect God’s will for justice and peace. We are praying that we and all people on earth might live finally in greater accord with God’s will.

We are thus praying essentially the same thing that we pray in the next phrase of the Lord’s Prayer when we pray, “Thy will be done.” Why did Jesus need to instruct us to pray the same thing twice? I believe it is because he knew we would have a very hard time exactly at this point. By our natural inclinations, we don’t want to live under God’s reign. We want to do our own thing. We don’t want to follow God’s will. We want our own will. Our human inclination toward our own will is such that even when people think about God, what they often think about is how they can get God to do what they want.

This has been the human pattern in religion for centuries. Since the most ancient times, for as far back as we can track, human beings have sensed the reality of God. They have recognized that there is a higher Power at work in the universe. But as they have related to that Power, what they have often tried to do is to get the Power to fulfill their own will. This was the aim of a great many ancient religious rituals, which were geared toward trying to get the gods to provide rain or bestow material blessings or grant victory over one’s

enemy.

Jesus reversed this pattern completely. He called people to deny themselves, he defined his own mission by saying, “I came not to do my will but the will of Him who sent me,” (John 6:38), and his most distinctive personal prayer was, “Not my will but thine be done.” (Luke 22:42) Jesus knew that our core problem is that we are self-centered rather than God-centered; and so he calls us to turn and to become part of something larger—far larger—than ourselves.

Moreover, the prayer, “thy will be done,” is not simply a passive prayer, wherein we might resign ourselves to a larger working of God, or where we pray for God to act without us. When Jesus prays, “Not my will but thine be done,” it is just before he goes to the cross. He is committing himself to carry out God’s will in the most concrete fashion. The phrase, “thy will be done,” is thus a prayer which would draw us to join in God’s work, to devote ourselves wholeheartedly to be a part of God’s purpose. As Karl Barth once put it, “The prayer, ‘thy will be done,’ means nothing less than that we participate in God cause.”

Here the Lord’s Prayer relates to other teachings of Jesus about God’s will, where he emphasized that following him means that we not only acclaim God as king but that we actually do God’s will. As Jesus declared near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21) The Lord’s Prayer, in leading us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,” puts us at God’s disposal, that we might live out God’s purposes.

All this means that you had better not pray the Lord’s Prayer if you want to stay the way you are. If you authentically pray this prayer, you could end up doing something radical—like signing up for Disciple Bible Study, or showing kindness to someone who has been unkind to you, or making a big donation, or volunteering for some mission project. The Lord’s Prayer is designed to reshape our lives so that we live more fully as God’s people and so that we impact the world for good.

But, you could ask, if the Lord is King, why do we need to pray that God’s will might be done? Cannot God simply implement God’s will? The answer to this question is reflected in the final phrase of the petition as it says, “thy will be done *on earth as it in heaven.*”

Last week we noted that the term “heaven” in the Bible denotes the ultimate spiritual reality that is behind and beyond all the material stuff that we observe. God’s will *is* done in heaven in that God has created all things, and has established the laws of the universe, so that everything functions according to God’s will. When planets move in their orbits and the sun throws off light, God’s will is being done.

But here on earth, God has given human beings freedom. This also is part of God’s will, in that God desires that people would freely respond to God. But human beings therefore can choose to thwart God’s aims for human living, which of course is what people are doing all the time. This means that God’s will is going to be fully done on earth only when people

choose to respond to God's grace and answer God's call. This is why Jesus in the Lord's Prayer, after directing our focus to God, calls us to align ourselves with God's will; because this is what we most crucially need to do, so that the order by which God shapes the universe might bring right order to our lives and to our world.

Often when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we just roll through the words, and do not really think about what it is that we are praying. In fact, the Lord's Prayer is revolutionary, for it would bring us to reconstitute life according to the design of God. The opening petition of the prayer moves us to look to God and to recognize the nature of God as loving, powerful, good, and glorious; and in the next petition, we invite God to come right now into our own lives—to reign in us and to work through us—as we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”