

“On Earth as it is in Heaven”

July 10, 2022

The Prayer Jesus Teaches series

We need new verbs. Like, what would the combination of complete heartbreak and absolute rage be? A family member sends me a screen grab from a security camera at Robb Elementary in Texas. Forty minutes before they put an end to it. There were police in the building. With riot gear, and rifles. In the building.

Didn't Mr. Rogers always say, look for the helpers? What are we supposed to do when the helpers stand around? How can this happen? Why, why, why God why?

And so we revisit very familiar words: Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

Yes, please come, make on earth as it is in heaven, because some days it feels like it is more like we're living on earth as it is in hell. May your kingdom come, and come quickly.

How many times have you prayed this prayer? I did the math. If you prayed this once, even every other week, anyone my age or older will have said these words, literally, more than one thousand times. Staggering. One of the reasons we are walking through this well-known prayer line by line is to slow down, and carefully consider what we are saying.

As Pastor Mary pointed out last week, on earth as in heaven is connected to God's name being holy. God's name is holy, in heaven, God's name is holy on earth.

This morning, let's dive deep into what we say when we pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as in heaven. How many of us, when we recite or read these words, find ourselves thinking first of something along the line of “not my will, but yours, be done.” You know, like from our Gospel lesson.

Praying with Jesus. He invited his disciples twice to pray (with him) in Gethsemane. He invites us to pray with him now. And in our prayer this morning, the one he gives to his followers, he gives us powerful words. Your kingdom come.

Jesus models this. He begins by acknowledging where's he's at. What he'd want. Honestly. “Remove this cup from me.” But then offers in humility, “not my will, but yours, be done.”

One of the most powerful things that prayer does it helps us get out of our own way. Jesus gives us a vocabulary for approaching God with honesty and humility. A humility that acknowledges this is not about us. Not our will, not our desires. As a contemporary lyric put it, “God is God and I am not.”

Christianity, that is, striving to become more like Jesus daily, is not primarily a self-improvement project. We will invariably become better versions of ourselves as we follow Christ's teaching and his example, but this is not the central point. We are invited to join God in making the world better.

It might just be in the little things. We were at Meijer and the water filter machine was broken. "Daddy!" (rolling up her sleeves.) "We can fix this. Make the world better, right?" We always take any litter with us when we are at a park, but we also try to find something left by someone else. Always leave a place better than how you found it. It's the little things.

Or it could be being the one who stops on the side of the road. Or the one who shows kindness to someone in a store. Or extending grace to a grumpy neighbor. Or taking a week of your summer and helping people in rural Appalachia. All of these are really good things. Let's keep doing them. And as we do, and reflect on Jesus' prayer this morning, let's see how this connects us to something truly miraculous.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

This is more than becoming better versions of ourselves, though it will involve that. This is more than making our corner of the world better, though that will be an inevitable result.

When we pray "your kingdom come" and the words that follow we are literally praying that God's kingdom will be ushered in, overpowering the order of our world and replacing it with an order of justice, of hope, of a preference for the oppressed, of a lifting up of the downtrodden.

As the prophet Isaiah wrote, "Make the high places low, and the low places high."

We'll come back to that, but first, a quiz. When we pray for God's Kingdom to be brought to earth, how would you answer the question, "by whom?" Your kingdom come...who's doing it?

If you came to church hoping that we would be getting back into a little Greek grammar this morning, well, you'd be right. Like Pastor Mary said last week, these first phrases, being a prayer, are in a mood called the imperative. This is used for direct commands, for requests, for polite invitations and, yes, for prayers and supplications. No, it doesn't mean we are telling God to do something. Imperative has the flavor, the sense, of simply requesting.

Here's where it gets really cool. Anyone else here know a foreign language? One of the greatest things about learning another language is when we encounter something that we don't have in our native tongue. Scandinavian languages have ways of describing snow that we do not. Sanskrit has 18 cases, different ways of thinking about how a noun and verb interact in a sentence. Greek has third person imperatives.

If you remember from English class, person describes who does the action. I ate the pie, first person. You ate the pie, second person. She or he ate the pie, third.

In English, when we use the imperative, those commands and requests, it is always second person. "Go outside" means "You, go outside." "Don't eat yellow snow" means "You don't eat yellow snow."

Greek has third person imperatives. What does that even mean? It's a challenge to translate since we don't really have the concept in English. Older attempts would use a phrase like "Let it be" or "It shall be done." Something like that.

The closest we have in English is from a familiar piece of children's literature: Mama called the doctor and the doctor said, "No monkeys jumping on the bed." Is it to the mom, is it the Doctor, the monkey themselves? It is a statement of what should be to the universe. There should be no more monkeys jumping on that bed.

We see a third imperative in one of the most harrowing scenes in the Gospels. The crowd. "Let him be crucified." The crowd is speaking in the third person imperative. It is not just the Romans. It is not only Pilate. It's not just the agitators. It's also the crowd. It is every person there who is complicit. That is what hell on earth can look like.

Here we get a taste of what heaven on earth can look like. "Your kingdom come" works really well as a translation because it embraces the deliberate ambiguity.

Is it God, make your kingdom come? Yes. Is it we should help make God's kingdom come. Also, yes. God's business is kingdom bringing business, and it is a business we get to join.

Since the beginning of creation when we are instructed to tend the garden, to cultivate it, to make it better. To the vision of the end when it is human beings, diverse in their speech, the nations, praising God in multiple voices, together. The Bard wrote, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players."

Praying your kingdom is this idea on a universal schedule, expanded to infinity. God's whole kingdom is coming in its fullness. And everyone, men and women, get to play a part!

When we pray, we pray not simply how Jesus taught us. We pray AS Jesus taught us. We pray with him. Jesus participated in our human life and a human death so that we can participate in a Divine life, in bringing the kingdom. Now and through eternity. To paraphrase John Wesley, it is heaven, starting right here, right now.

He explained it this way in *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, "It is not the soul's going to paradise, it is not a blessing which lies on the other side of death, or in the other world... [Scripture says you] 'are saved.' It is not something at a distance: it is a present thing ... Salvation might be extended to the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory."

Because the stakes are heaven and hell, and we choose heaven. We choose heaven, here and now. What does that look like? On earth as it is in heaven? What does God' kingdom look like, here and now?

I can tell you what it doesn't look like. It doesn't look like a CEO making more on a coffee break than his worker makes in a lifetime. It doesn't look like prisoners shackled by the road working for 10 cents an hour in the Alabama summer. It doesn't look like 4th of July parades punctuated by gunfire.

Sometimes I just need to turn the news off. I just want to run into my room, stick my head under my pillow and scream into it as loudly as I can manage. Because it looks sometimes like there is a lot of hell on earth.

Anyone getting uncomfortable yet? I hit a bit on wealth disparity, the gun debate. Where should we go next? Abortion?

I am not here to propose what I think are solutions. That would be politics and that is not my area of expertise, nor would it be appropriate in this venue. If anyone would like to talk to me privately, I would love to listen and have a conversation.

But if even bringing up controversial topics is making you uncomfortable, good! Because here's what God's Kingdom is like. It is, by definition, uncomfortable and dangerous. Think about it. Jesus was dangerous enough that the Roman government ultimately had him executed. And many of his followers, for decades. The Romans did not really care a lot about what someone believed. In our New Testament, Paul observes a temple to an unknown God. The Romans were actually pretty accepting of a diversity of belief systems and gods. They had an actual

list of religions that were accepted and to some level protected by the government. They even had a term for it in Latin, *religio licita*.

The Romans didn't try to wipe out Christians because of what they believed or who they believed in. They wanted them wiped out because they were a threat to law and order. To the Empire. They were dangerous.

Here is my challenging question for us this morning. Is your Christianity dangerous? Is it challenging the status quo? Should it? These are questions. Not answers. But it is a challenge. How can we push a little (or a lot) outside our comfort zones when it is so easy to practice our faith comfortably.

Does how you follow Jesus challenge the order of the world around us, or is it complicit? That might sound a bit harsh, but with a lot of this stuff, it really is one or the other.

If we start to see our following Christ as an invitation into God's kingdom, then God's kingdom becomes so much bigger than our discomfort, our fears, even our personal opinions. God's love covers all kinds of people. And I'm not just talking about people who may look or talk like me but basically think like me. That's actually not very hard, especially for us Methodists. God loves people who think different from me, and that gets harder.

I was at Meijer again and had another opportunity to do a little kingdom bringing. I was putting my steak in the cart and I heard behind me, "Yeah that's it. Father's Day is coming up, go with the big one."

It was Pastor Tim. The minister who leads the church a block from my house, who just broke ties with the Reformed denomination over taking sides on the gay marriage debate.

"Hey Tim, hope you have a great weekend, yourself. Oh, I saw your interview on MLive about leaving the RCA. I really appreciated your words."

Tim seemed surprised, "Oh. I didn't know it made it that far."

I went on, "Yeah, you know if you and I sat down for coffee, I can bet we'd probably come down on different sides of that issue, maybe a lot of issues. But I wanted to let you know I respect that you are standing up for what you think is right and trying to do so in the most loving way you all can."

"Well, that's all any of us can do, right?"

"The way I see it, that's why there's your church, and there's St. John's Episcopal. God's in both places. And Harvest Bible. And whatever the Unitarians are

calling themselves now. God is bigger than a single church, I think there is room in the Kingdom for all of us.”

Tim looked at me and smiled, “Amen.”

The cynic might say it’s just a bunch of words in a grocery store. When I saw his college age kid nodding vigorously behind him, I like to think it’s part of something much bigger.

You know, Kingdom bringing.

Like at a Starbucks, in Uvalde Texas. A customer goes up to get her latte and the barista asks, “How are you doing lately, really?”

“Not the best, you know. But you must hear that a lot, thank you for asking. But, how are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m ok. I’m not from around here. A bunch of us in Houston came down to cover shifts at this store, so you all could have time to process everything and grieve.”

Kingdom bringing.

On earth as in heaven, maybe it is the little things.