

Let Us Pray
A Lenten Series on *The Lord's Prayer*
by Rev. Susan Morrison

Second Sunday of Lent
March 4, 2007

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Romans 13:8-14

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Matthew 13: 31 – 33

Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in a field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

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“Teach us to pray” the disciples asked Jesus. And Jesus responded by linking words and phrases together in a prayer that has been known for centuries as The Lord’s Prayer.

“Teach us to pray” the disciples asked Jesus. And Jesus taught them, through the words of a prayer, not merely how to pray, but how to live.

“Teach us to pray” the disciples asked Jesus and Jesus taught them by saying “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Last week we pondered several of the opening phrases of The Lord’s Prayer. We reflected on the importance of this prayer being our prayer, a prayer that is intended to be a communal prayer for Christian community. It is not an “I” prayer but rather a “we” prayer. We also considered Jesus’ name for God which was Father and the importance of the name Father as a relational metaphor between a Father and a Son. I urged us not to limit our concept of God but to expand it by using limitless metaphors and names for our countless experiences of the Holy. We are to hallow and revere and honor God’s name in all that we say and all that we do.

Missing from last week’s sermon were my comments on the line “who art in heaven” because the whole question of heaven seemed more relevant this week as we ponder the words “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Let’s actually begin by unpacking the meaning of God’s kingdom and then turn to the word heaven.

How much do we actually know about kingdoms? Few, if any of us, have ever lived under the rule of a king or a queen. John Stroman (*Pray in This Way, p. 36*) points out that the people listening to Jesus truly understood such systems of government. When Jesus prayed, “Your kingdom come,” the people understood what he meant by a

kingdom. They lived under ruthless kings – especially Herod. Jesus’ audience knew about despotism; vicious, cruel power and tyranny. It was their everyday life.

By teaching this prayer, Jesus meant the opposite of the cruel reign of earthly kings. Jesus said “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36) When his disciples prayed, they were praying for the very opposite of the worldly kingdom in which they lived. They were praying for change and transformation. These Jewish followers were familiar with the Hebrew prophets and their vision of a world where God’s justice and peace would reign. Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah had imagined a world where swords would be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, a world where we would learn war no more. They had envisioned a world where justice would roll down like waters and righteousness like an overflowing stream. The kingdom of God would transform injustice into justice and there would be equity for the poor, help for the weak, and captives of oppression would be set free!

Donald Kraybill, in his book *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, suggests “the kingdom of God points to an inverted, or upside-down, way of life that contrasts with the prevailing social order.” In this upside-down kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first, the exalted will be humbled and the humbled will be exalted, sinners are forgiven and welcomed while the self-righteous are chastised, the poor are blessed and the rich are condemned, the lost are found and the dead are made alive. This is the language of the kingdom of God.

Now what Jesus’ disciples grew to understand was that Jesus himself inaugurates God’s kingdom. Everything Jesus says; everything Jesus does; everything Jesus stands for IS the kingdom of God. And yet, the kingdom is not complete. We pray “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. God’s kingdom is coming. It is here in glimpses, but not in its fullness. It is “already” and “not yet.” Even after 2,000 years, God’s kingdom has not been fulfilled. Listen to the news; read the headlines on your computer screen and you’ll agree that the kingdom of God has not fully arrived. Anyone who listened this week to Bob Woodward’s commentary on his and so many others head injuries as the result of the war in Iraq shudder to think about how God must view our world and what we’re doing to one another. God’s kingdom has yet to fully come on earth. God’s will has yet to be done on earth.

American poet, novelist and essayist Wendell Berry offers a remarkable rephrasing of the idea of the kingdom of God. He calls it “The Great Economy,” where all things spiritual and material, human and creaturely are woven together and brought into right relation with one another.

How will this happen? When we pray to God, our Father, “your kingdom come” is it merely a petition? Do we expect God to miraculously transform the world? Or might we reframe our intentions in praying “your kingdom come” and offer those words not as a petition, but as a vow. We pledge our allegiance to the reign of God and relinquish our allegiance to the kingdoms of this world. In the words of this morning’s lesson from Paul’s letter to the Romans, “we abandon the habits of quarreling and jealousy and drunkenness, or adultery and murder and stealing.” No longer are we beguiled by the advertising billboard that announces “You’ve got the whole world in your hands – Mastercard.” Rather we commit ourselves simply to love God and our neighbor as ourselves as God’s kingdom makers. Partnered with God, we vow to help bring in the kingdom day by day by day by day. We are pledged to allow God’s kingdom to be established in and through us.

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist tradition, understood this well. He linked prayer with action. His was a faith of heart and hand. It wasn’t enough to pray for the arrival of the kingdom of God; prayer, for Wesley, was preparation for action. It was listening to what God wanted him to do. He listened well and found himself outside of the formal sanctuary of his church as he went out into the fields, and out into the coal mines, and out into the hospitals where the indigent were to be found, where he could bring them the Good News of Jesus Christ.

I like to think that our current Visioning Process here at Holy Trinity is an example of how seriously we take our vow to partner with God to bring the kingdom here on earth. How will the goals which we establish bring change

and hope where change and hope are needed? What small corner of our world here at Holy Trinity or in Danvers or somewhere on the North Shore can we transform? Who needs to hear the Good News and how will we deliver it? As kingdom makers, let us always be found leaning into the future, standing on tiptoes, eager to see what God is bringing to birth among us.

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” we pray. Heaven. Where is heaven? What is heaven? Images of heaven abound! “When we all get to heaven” says the hymn writer “What a day of rejoicing that will be!” Or in the words of Isaac Watts “There is a land of pure delight where saints immortal reign; infinite day excludes the night, and pleasures banish pain.” It is in heaven that John, the author of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, envisions “a great multitude, all robed in white, gathered before the throne of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.”

For some, heaven is a literal place. It is a place in the afterlife that has been defined in the mind’s eye by scripture, art, music and poetry.

For others, heaven is not a place but rather a metaphor. It is not “up there” in the sky. Heaven is where God is and where we are totally with God. “Heaven is in the very midst of you” Jesus reminds his disciples. Jesus, the one who inaugurated the kingdom of God here on earth, also brought heaven to earth as he taught us how we are to be in relationship to God, our Creator.

What is heaven? Jesus said “Heaven is where the heart is.” **According to Jesus, we enter heaven not when we die but as we live, through the gates of Love.**

If we were to step back in time to Jesus’ day, we would find that the root word for heaven in Aramaic means light, illumination. Heaven, therefore, was that which rises and shines in space. Heaven is the light of God. Heaven, therefore, is every where, every place where the light of the Holy One abounds. It was the Greeks, and later the modern Western world, that translated the Aramaic word for heaven into a metaphysical concept and thus evolved the three story universe of heaven being “up there” and earth being “right here” and hell being “down there.” But contemporary Christians, having been influenced by the Enlightenment and scientific discourse and mathematical theorems tend to regard heaven and hell as symbolic and mystical.

Heaven. The kingdom of God already among us, wherever we see or hear or know the presence of God-with-us. Hell. The opposite of heaven. Evil here on earth. Hell is wherever there is sin, wherever there is separation or contradiction to God’s will.

And purgatory (for all of you former Catholics!). Perhaps purgatory is whenever we are lukewarm, whenever we are without care or concern for justice and peace and love, whenever we live without hope.

When I think of our Katrina Team, now in New Orleans, readying themselves for a week of mission, I know that they will bring a bit of heaven into someone’s life. For when they show up to help a family that had no insurance and who cannot afford to hire builders to raze and rebuild their home, our Katrina Team will remove some “hell” from that family and replace it with the love and compassion of “heaven.”

When I hear our choir sing on Sunday mornings or most recently at Ellie McIlvin’s Memorial Service, I am in heaven for that moment because their music puts me in touch with the Holy and with the mystery of Divine Love. This morning, as we come to the Lord’s Table and feast on the bread of life and the cup of salvation, we will have a taste of heaven. For through the sacrament of Holy Communion, we experience what it is like to feast with Jesus. And our hunger is satisfied and we are readied to be Jesus’ kingdom makers, bringing a bit of heaven to earth in all that we say and do. Through this meal and Jesus’ blessing, we become the light and the yeast and the seeds of God’s kingdom here on earth - right here, right now!

And may we be awed by the privilege and the responsibility of the vow that we take each time we pray “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” So be it. Alleluia. Amen.