

On Earth As In Heaven
Matthew 6:7-10 ~ Off Lectionary
July 10, 2016 ~ Welborne UMC

PRAY!

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

One of my very favorite moments in church music is from Handel's Messiah, the Hallelujah Chorus, these lines:

The kingdom of this world
Is become the kingdom of our Lord,
And of His Christ, and of His Christ;

The lyrics of the Hallelujah Chorus come from three passages in Revelation, and this particular lyric from Revelation 11:15. It is an image of this line from the Lord's Prayer at last being realized: the Kingdom of God in heaven has become one with the Kingdom of God on earth.

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

How many times these last two weeks has my heart cried out those words. In Istanbul. In Bangladesh. In Baghdad. In Baton Rouge. In Minneapolis. In Dallas. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

But what, friends, do those words really mean? When Jesus instructs us to pray them, what does he really want us to be praying for? It seems to me that centuries of repetition may have watered down this phrase, this petition, so that we have lost sight of exactly what this phrase asks for.

Thy will be done. What exactly is God's will—on earth as in heaven. There are many who throw the phrase around, "it must have been God's will." Friends, we can't presume to know what God's will is. We can assume that if the portrait Jesus paints of God through his life is real, then God is love, and God doesn't will hatred, or harm, or injustice. An incredible number of people have been deeply wounded by those words, "It must have been God's will," and we should not ever presume to say to someone what God's will is or is not. I remember clearly the first time that came home to me, in my first years of ministry. I was leaving the hospital on a Sunday morning, leaving a family in the grip of unfathomable grief at the loss of a child after a routine medical procedure, going to stand before their faith family and lead worship. And all I remember thinking as I prepared to step into the pulpit that day was thinking over and over in my head: this was NOT God's will. Do Not say this was God's will.

What exactly is God's will? We can't really presume to know the answer to this mystery. What we can do is trust that what God wills for the world and for our lives is in line with, is consistent with, the image of the Kingdom of God as Jesus shows it to us in his life and teaching. That's what this line of the prayer means—we pray for God's will to be done on earth as in

heaven, and that will is that God's kingdom will be present fully and completely in both places—that the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord.

So, what is the kingdom of God that Jesus teaches about? For what are we really asking? The phrase "Kingdom of God" appears 53 times in the New Testament Gospels. The phrase from Matthew's Gospel that means the same thing, "Kingdom of Heaven" occurs 32 times.¹ Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God a lot. Letting us know that it was coming was the central point of his message.

What is coming? What is this kingdom? It is not a place, but a moment when God's rule and reign are real. It is the moment when God's rule and reign are real in **both** heaven and earth. It is the moment when we realize that Jesus is RIGHT HERE in the middle of us by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is when we witness lions and lambs lying down together. It is when we never give up seeking the treasure buried in the field. It is when we love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

And where is it? Here. Right here. The kingdom of God is not some far away, wished for reality. We pray over and over for it to come, especially in weeks like this one. But do we notice when it does? Do we notice that our prayer, the prayer that Jesus taught us, is already being answered? Author and blogger Rachel Held Evans writes that "Church is a moment in time when the kingdom of God draws near, when a meal, a story, a song, an apology, and even a failure is made holy by the presence of Jesus among us and within us."²

Remember when we had congregation members share stories of new birth in their own lives back in May? Kingdom of God. Remember when you were volunteering at the food pantry, and greeted our guests like family—because they are? Kingdom of God. Remember when we gathered in this place to celebrate Sissy Parrett's life last week and laughed and cried together? Kingdom of God.

But if it's already here, why pray for it? Why keep praying for it?

Because it is not yet fully here. In fact, all we have to do is look around at the absence of love, the absence of respect, the absence of vulnerability in our world and see, the Kingdom has not fully come. All we have to do is name the systemic racism that is so much a part of our national life and witness one moment of hatred or one flash of anger that violates someone else's humanity to know, the kingdom has not fully come. All we have to do is walk into one public school and smell the mold and see the ceiling tiles crumbling. All we have to do is hear one more victim be told she must not have said no clearly enough. All we have to do is visit one rural community where the closure of a factory has caused a rapid spiral into drug addiction and poverty. We know. The Kingdom has not fully come.

¹ The Rev. Dr. Mark Roberts, "What Was the Message of Jesus," www.patheos.com, 2011.

² Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, Thomas Nelson, 2015.

And so we continue to pray. Jesus wants us to pray. But Jesus also wants us to act. Jesus wants us, I think, to pray ourselves into acting. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. How will God's kingdom come, if not through us?

It won't. That's the simple answer. The kingdom won't come if we don't embody it, if we don't practice it. Jesus never meant for us merely to pray, and then to sit around and wait or wish for the time when our dreams would come true, or when we would all get to heaven. That is not his image of discipleship. Go. Be the Kingdom. Bring a bit of heaven to earth. That's what Jesus invites us to do.

What will that look like here at Welborne? I will be honest—I am not entirely sure. There are already glimpses of the Kingdom all around us. And yet. I think something new is emerging, something that has to do with building bridges with refugees and immigrants, something that has to do with being church with those who are physically and spiritual impoverished. Do you have an idea about what is emerging, what God is stirring within us? Share it. Write a note and put it in the offering plate. Send an email or a text. Talk with one another.

And continue to pray. And when we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," may our prayer be a request of God—a plea for God's love to reign in our lives, our communities and our world. But may that not be all it is—may it also be a call to action that stirs deep within our hearts, a reminder that we are the ones who bear the signs of the Kingdom. If ANYTHING is God's will, it is that we kingdom bearers move out into the world and make that prayer come to life—by the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, by our pilgrimage of discipleship, may the kingdom of God come into our world.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.