

Sermon Series: *The Lord's Prayer for Today*

II. "Your Will Be Done"

Matthew 6: 5-15

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*"Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth
as it is in heaven." Matthew 6: 10*

When I was a seminary senior, I possessed less than one-tenth of one percent of the talent and good sense of Morningside's favorite seminary senior, Chris Henry. Here is a case in point. One evening my senior year, I set out for the suburban hinterlands to deliver a trial sermon to a group of people who had been assembled by our homiletics professor. I had never laid eyes on them; they had never laid eyes on me. They were coming to church on a Thursday night to do the seminary a favor. My sermon, which was perhaps the second, maybe third one I had ever preached in my life, was a passionate discourse on gun control. It was not a happy evening. They were against gun control; I not only was for it, but I indicated probably sixteen times that God was emphatically for gun control, too. There was a feedback session afterwards – may I never have to live through an hour like that again! I was glowered at, fussed at, complained about to my poor preaching professor. The next day, I lamented the disaster with an understanding friend on campus. He offered me a Kleenex and a piece of advice. "Next time, take it easy Joanna! Preach on something that won't shake people up."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Well, I don't know...like prayer. Preach on the power of prayer. That's a soothing subject if there ever was one."

Over the years I have come to realize that as pastoral as my friend was trying to be, he was wrong. Prayer is not always a soothing subject; neither is it a simple one. A lot of people have strong feelings about prayer. They are self-conscious about how to pray, or about the fact that they want to pray and know they ought to pray, but do not know how to pray. Then they get upset when they hear other people praying in ways

that they don't like, such as "Lord, we just want to thank you, and we just want to praise you, and we just want to ask you..." It's that word "just" that drives a lot of people crazy.

Prayer can be upsetting to people. I received perhaps the most vitriolic letter I have ever received from someone who had been present when I had ended a prayer at a public occasion without saying the words "In Jesus' name". The letter, full of vitriol and condemnation, was signed "A Christian".

Such things make you want to long for the days of childhood, when you were free to communicate whatever was on your mind to the Almighty, however you wanted. You could pray without self-consciousness: "Lord, help me be sweet to my brother."
"You are great, you are good, thank you for my food..."

I do love the young fellow who was overheard praying, "Lord, if you cannot make me a better boy, don't worry about it. I am having a really good time just like I am."

Then, there was the six-year old whose mother asked her just before company came to dinner, if she would say the blessing at the table. "Oh, Mother, I don't know what I would say," the child protested.

"Just say what you've heard **me** say," the Mother said.

When the food was served, the little girl bowed her head and said, "Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?"

Jesus invited the people who followed him, who had come out to have their souls nourished by him to pray in this way: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." No matter what your prayer issues are, you cannot go wrong if you pray as Jesus taught us to pray.

Sometimes we say the words, but our minds are elsewhere. There are a lot worse ways to spend 40 seconds, whether you are thinking about what you are saying or not. It is best, of course, to enter into the realm of the meaning of the prayer, into the world of the prayer, into the realm in which God's name is truly hallowed, and God's will has simply taken

over everything. My seminary friend was wrong about the soothing nature of prayer. It requires an enormous amount of courage and often results in radical change, if one allows oneself to be led by the Spirit close to the heart of God.

A lot of people really are wrong about prayer. Prayer is what God wants and has planned and is giving to our broken world through God's own son Jesus Christ. I don't know whether Peyton Manning would agree with what I just said. It is reported that he prayed long and hard last Sunday afternoon for an Indianapolis Colts victory over the New England Patriots. I can't imagine that God prefers the Colts to the Patriots. I actually **do** prefer the Colts over the Patriots...but victory on the football field is not the purpose of prayer. To come close to God is the purpose of prayer, and when you do that you come to understand that God is on the side of everyone – the saints, the sinners, the weak, the powerful. When we pray, we learn what matters to God. When we pray *Thy will be done*, we are expressing our longing for the day when the triumph of divine sovereign love will be complete. We are expressing our confidence that, as Frederick Buechner puts it so beautifully, beyond the worst life can do, is the best God can do.

Last Sunday, I spoke of the challenge presented by praying to God exclusively as "Father". Today, the word "kingdom" is our problematic word. The language of "kingdom" evokes ideas of imperialism and regimes without freedom instead of the reconciling, liberating, movement Jesus meant when he used the word "kingdom". (1) Yesterday, in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, there was an article about Brian McLaren, a creative emerging-church leader. I like the way he thinks, though he thinks differently from the way I do. He recently wrote an article in *Sojourners Magazine* that wrestled with the use of "kingdom of God" language in our day. He suggested several alternatives, one of which was "the network of God," which left me cold. I did like his idea of "the dream of God. *O God, may all your dreams for your creation come true.*

McLaren also pointed out how often Jesus compared the kingdom to a feast of a banquet. "The party of God" was a challenging thought for me; yet, instead of "kingdom of God" we could say that say God is inviting people "to leave their workaholicism, their loneliness, their isolation, their estrangement from one another, and come and join the party," leaving exclusiveness behind. God is inviting people to stop

“fighting, complaining and hating. . .” and instead begin celebrating the goodness and love of God together. (2)

Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan writes, “The kingdom of God really means what the world would look like if God were directly and immediately in charge.” It would be a place filled with joy and communion and peace.

The challenge of the word notwithstanding, there are few more important words in the gospels than the word “kingdom.” Jesus’ first public words in Matthew’s Gospel are “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Jesus **was** the kingdom come close. He had divested himself of all the trappings of heavenly power and came to share life on earth with us. And paradoxically, by humbling himself, he conquered death and all that would separate us from God and from one another.

“Your kingdom come,” we pray, expressing our expectation that the day will come when **everything** will go God’s way. Until then, we are thankful that the kingdom has already entered into the here and now in the person and message of Jesus Christ. We see kingdom here and now, alive and well, where ever his Spirit is at work, whenever you and I put legs and feet on his promises. We see it when people bear witness to God’s reconciling love in Christ and act in confidence that God’s sovereign love is the strongest force on earth.

We live in the tension between our expectation that the day is coming when all the world will be finally and fully made right, and the fact that, honest to Pete, it doesn’t look like it most days. This is called “realized eschatology”. We live in that strange land of the *already* and the *not yet*. Jesus came as a sign of the dawning of the dream of God, and we who have been baptized into God’s dream are to be signs in our day that things do not have to be the way they are. God has already acted in Jesus Christ, and finally and decisively will bring history to a conclusion, and God’s great kingdom will come on earth.

A word now about the will of God, one of the most challenging concepts in the Bible and in the Christian faith. We pray, “God’s will be done,” but how do we actually know what God’s will is? It is hard to discern, though many people claim to see it clearly. I will tell you the best place to look to discern the will of God. Look first at Christ and what his

purpose was: “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives. . .to let the oppressed go free. . .” (Luke 4:18). These things lie at the heart of God’s will: vulnerable love and compassion and a passion for justice in Christ’s name. We see through a glass dimly, to be sure, but we **can** see if we follow the light that is Jesus Christ.

I will say one other thing about the will of God. It is not God’s will to hurt or destroy. Jesus came that we might have life and that we might have it more abundantly. Don’t listen to the person who says, when something inexplicably painful and terrible happens, “It’s God’s will.” I think of the words of the late William Sloane Coffin, whose son was killed in an automobile accident. Coffin’s son had been drinking beer and took a curve too quickly, and his young life was snuffed out. Someone came to the house and said to the grieving father something to the effect that he should be comforted by knowing that the death of his son was the will of God.

Coffin replied, “When my son died, God’s heart was the first heart to break.” God’s will is not easy to discern, but you can be sure that God is about life and hope, which is what God’s own son was about.

In his marvelous book on prayer, Philip Yancey writes about the poignant scene at the last Supper in which Jesus says to his disciples, “It is for your good that I am going away.” (3)

How in the world can it be good for the disciples if Jesus is going away? Could it be that Jesus went away for our sakes “as a form of power-sharing, to invite us into direct communion with God, and to give us a crucial role to play in the struggle against the forces of evil [and death]?” (4) Your will be done, and we are here to serve your will.

E.B. White who wrote *Charlotte’s Web* once observed that he woke up every morning torn between the desire to improve the world and the desire to enjoy the world. We live in the tension between the *already* and the *not yet* and the tension between honoring the sovereign will of God and knowing that we have to exercise our human will in the service of God’s great purposes.

The Sermon on the Mount contains a startling statement of Jesus, one that is worth keeping in mind. “Not everyone who says to me Lord,

Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the ones who do the will of my Father who is in heaven.” Jesus’ life was a life of prayer. For him, the heavenly and the earthly were all of a piece. *I see your dream. Send me out to make the dream real. Your will be done through me, whatever the cost.*

I spoke last Sunday of the power of a prayer I experienced in the 1990’s during a worship service in Hungary. Today, I am remembering the words of Karl Barth, “To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising of the disorder of the world.” I am thinking of a Hungarian pastor in the 1980’s whose name was Laslo Tokes. Pastor Tokes took over a small Reformed church to minister to his fellow Hungarians who were living as an oppressed minority within the borders of Romania. His predecessor in this church had openly supported the Communist Romanian government, so much so that the pastor, on his clerical robe, had worn a red star embroidered on the sleeve. Pastor Tokes had a different message. He spoke out against oppression. He spoke out, and the membership of that congregation went from 40 to 5,000 in a year. The growth of the church, of course, caught the attention of the police and the secret service. They began to harass the pastor and his family. They told him to be quiet or he would be arrested. He kept preaching the Gospel and saying what had to be said. One evening, the police tried to evict him from the manse in which he and his family lived. Word quickly spread to the congregation, and soon hundreds of church members had poured out of their homes and surrounded the pastor’s home as a wall of protection. They did not go home when the hour became late. They stayed, and they stayed the next day, and the next day, and - I am not making this up – within a matter of two days, 200,000 people were filling the streets. Military troops were mustered. They opened fire; they killed 100 of the protestors and wounded many others. The people still would not move. Finally, the pastor stood before the crowd in an attempt to calm the situation and to avoid further bloodshed and death. All he had to say were three words: “Let us pray.” As he spoke those words, a hundred thousand people knelt and prayed, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...” Then, the people stood up, empowered as they had never been before. The protest spread to the capital Bucharest. Within days, the iron-fisted government of Communist Romania had been toppled to the ground. (5)

The prayers of the people: they are indispensable to God's final victory over evil and suffering and death. (6)

Imagine what might happen if you and I prayed, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, through me."

(1) *Sojourners*, March, 2006.

(2) *Ibid.*

(3) *Prayer*, Philip Yancey, Zondervan, 2006, pp. 142-143.

(4) *Ibid.*

(5) *Ibid.* pp. 119-120.

(6) *Ibid.*