

Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
June 9, 2013

Psalm 30
Matthew 6:9-13

**“Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done, on Earth as it is Heaven”
(2nd in a series on the Lord’s Prayer)**

Two weeks ago I started a short sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer. You can read it on the website if you’re interested.

Today we’re going to talk about “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” The two questions we’re going to focus on today are: What does it mean to pray for God’s will to be done and God’s kingdom to come? And, perhaps more importantly, do we really want God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done? Because honestly, to have that happen, may not be in our own best interests.

While you ponder that last question, let me share with you some prayers that children wrote that speak honestly to the anguish one can feel when his or her prayers don’t match up with God’s will.

If you’ve never read the book “Children’s Letters to God” I highly recommend it. It’s short, frivolous, and very funny. But some of the letters-or prayers-can really hit home. Here are just a couple of them that concern God’s will.

- Dear God, it rained for our whole vacation and is my father mad! He said some things about you that people are not supposed to say, but I hope you will not hurt him anyway. Your friend. But I’m not going to tell you who I am.
- Dear God, thank you for the baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy.
Joyce

Now, those prayers are funny and typical for children.

But it turns out that their parents are not that far ahead of them, theologically speaking. When children are asked to draw God, they come up with a variety of images -- a man on a throne, a smiley face, a shining sun or maybe a cross-legged Buddha type, their parents visualize the same things too.

According to a 2010 book called "America's Four Gods" the way Americans view God falls into four categories, of which the largest category is the authoritarian God. This God is very judgmental and very involved in the world.

This is "the man on the throne" God the kids drew. This God has a magical wand that he can wave around that makes everything happen according to his will.

Now, this may sound like a rather child-like view of God to some of you, but how many times have we heard people say after someone dies, "It was God's will." Or after a tragic accident, "It was God's will." Or when something didn't go our way (like a job promotion or longed-for vacation), "It was God's will."

In a seminary class I took on Ministry with Older Adults one of our assignments was to write our own obituary. One of the women in the class commented that when she got to the part of listing her survivors, she had to think long and hard. She started thinking about her husband, wondering if he would survive her. And then she started thinking about her 2-year old son, and she said, "You know, I don't ever want to think that I could possibly outlive my child. It's unfathomable to me."

An old family friend of my grandma's will celebrate her 103rd (or is it her 102nd) birthday this summer. She's in very good health. A couple of years ago her son died-he was at least 75. I can remember going to see her a couple of months after he died. It was a bittersweet meeting-his name was Henry and I had just given birth to my Henry. She was so sad, and her biggest question was "Why didn't God take me? I'm 100 years old. Why not me?"

Roberta Bondi, in her book "A Place To Pray-Reflections on the Lord's Prayer", writes of this need to blame all disasters on the will of God. She says,

"It isn't hard to speculate on where this need to pin disasters on the will of God comes from in us. Part of it, I suspect, is that we can't bear the idea that anything in our lives could simply be the result of human freedom and the way the universe is put together.

We need to believe that the significant events of our lives have meaning and are not simply random, are not just bad luck. If disaster strikes us down, perhaps it is better to have a God whose actions we can't understand and who hurts us but is at least in charge."

I have shared with you before my increasing difficulty with that theological belief, and also my struggles with letting it go. But that doesn't mean I don't understand people's need to believe in a God who is completely in charge, even if the downside is assigning

all disasters to God. So I get why the majority of Americans believe in the authoritarian God.

But when we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "thy will be done," we're not passively resigning ourselves to the belief that everything is up to God to decide and we are merely pawns on God's chess board.

What we are acknowledging is that there are contending powers in the world; there are forces at work that destroy life; destructive forces-such as terrorism, or addiction; selfishness or greed; violence or prejudice. We're acknowledging that we don't live in a neutral space; that things compete for our time and attention that go against God's will. Every day in small ways or big ways we're met with the question, "Whose will, will be done today?"

But in the Lord's Prayer, we're praying for God's will to be done today and every day. And we know what that looks like; Jesus's life gives us a model for what that looks like. But also Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, of which the Lord's Prayer falls smack dab in the middle of, gives us a blueprint for how to live according to God's will.

The Sermon on the Mount demonstrates for us an understanding of God's will that is both merciful and justice-seeking. It doesn't instruct us to sit passively on the sidelines of life and say to people, "Oh, well, it must have been God's will." God's instructions for our lives-God's will for us found in scripture is saying just in the opposite: Hey, get in their and do something. Help to make my world a better place, *like it is in heaven*.

We have a responsibility to work for God's will to be done here as it is done in heaven. It isn't enough to sit passively by.

However, this doesn't mean that we should be so arrogant as to think that the Kingdom won't come without our help.

Getting back to Bondi's book, she writes about this type of arrogance which she exhibited during her years of protesting in the sixties.

She writes. "We believed that we were personally responsible for determining whether (God's will) was or wasn't done (and that) God could act only through us. Without us, justice and racial equality would not roll down like waters, nor righteousness like an everlasting stream.

Of course, we were partly right: God does not customarily rain clothes, food, medical care, and jobs from heaven. (And) it seems to me that many of us Christians have lost our ability to understand that we really are responsible to see that our society is just, and

that those who are in need are satisfied. At the same time, in those days there was something dreadfully arrogant about our . . . conviction that without us, God was helpless to achieve God's purposes."

What shall we think of, then, when we pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is heaven"? What metaphor, what image encompasses everything we believe about this prayer?

One image that comes to my mind is that of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, the night before his crucifixion, wrestling with God in prayer. Like any person, Jesus did not want to die. He knew his own heart. And he knew what was in the hearts of others. He did not doubt what waited for him the next day. And yet he prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." In essence, Jesus was praying for something that went against his own self-interest. Likewise, when we pray for God's kingdom to come, and God's will the done, we're bending our purposes and our desires-to a purpose and a desire greater than ours. Which means that sometimes, we're praying for something that is not in our own best self-interests.

Are you ready for that? Because praying for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven will require us to make some changes. These petitions from the Lord's Prayer are actually demands that require us to be ready to change everything about ourselves: how we relate to our money, how we relate to strangers and enemies, how we spend our time, how we work, how we worship, how we eat, how we dress. Is there any part of your life that would not be changed if God's will was done on earth today as it is in heaven? And if God's will were done in our political or socio-economic systems, think about how that would change our lives.

There's an old saying, "Be careful what you pray for." That's an apt statement for the Lord's Prayer. So get ready for the response; it could come the next time you pray the prayer.

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

May it always be so.

Amen.

Sources:

Rev. Tom Harris, "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done"
www.workingpreacher.org, Narrative Lectionary commentary
www.abcnews.com

Roberta Bondi, [Reflections on the Lord's Prayer](#)

Prayer: Your Kingdom Come

The Kingdom of God is at hand – You proclaimed it, Jesus;
But, it often feels like it's a million miles away.
You demonstrated its grace and showed its power,
but the signs often appear faded or absent in our world.

We need Your Kingdom to come, O God,
in all its fullness, in all its glory;
This waiting, this “now and not yet” experience of Your reign
is hard and frustrating.

And so we pray for Your Kingdom to be revealed in our lives,
turning our sickness and sin, our brokenness and fear
into friendship and compassion, wholeness and joy.

May Your Kingdom come to us now.

We pray for Your Kingdom to be revealed in our neighborhoods,
turning our division and suspicion, our judgment and our competition
into fellowship and care, compassion and service.

May Your Kingdom come to us now.

We pray for Your Kingdom to be revealed in our world,
turning our war and our disparities, our consumption and our self-interest
into peace and collaboration, stewardship and reverence.

May Your Kingdom come to us now.

Your Kingdom is here, and it is coming, O God.
Make us faithful heralds of its message
and tireless practitioners of its ways.
For Christ's sake, we pray together the prayer he taught us . . .

~ written by John van de Laar (copyright © 2008), and posted on his excellent website, Sacredise.com.