

Teach Us to Pray sermon series
Thy Kingdom Come
March 13, 2022
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

During this season of Lent, we continue taking a closer look at the Lord's Prayer, this familiar set of words we say every week. Do we really pay attention to the power and challenge of what we're praying? Last week, we learned about the inclusivity of praying "Our Father," what it means for God to be in Heaven, and how we are called to hallow God's name with both our lips and our lives. Today, we look at "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."

This is one of the places where the language of the Lord's Prayer can trip us up. In today's world, we have states and countries and regions and regimes, but do we have kingdoms? Have you ever been to one? Actually, I have. The kingdom I visited had a giant castle and princesses and fairies. It was such a special place that it felt – what's the right word? - magical. There were talking animals and electrically lit carriages and a hats with mouse ears on them you could buy for only \$50. Yes, it was truly a Magic Kingdom. But other than that, the idea of a kingdom doesn't resonate with us.

At this point in the prayer, we are shifting from adoring God to asking for something. But notice our first request isn't for us. That will come next week when we ask God to give us our daily bread. Today, we're asking for God's kingdom to come, for God's will to be done. While these two requests may seem separate, the second one actually expands upon and clarifies the first. What does it mean for "Thy Kingdom come"? It means God's will will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. What does that look like? This is the vision we are given in Revelation 21, when the new Jerusalem comes down to the new heaven and the new earth become our home. It's a beautiful image, in which God will wipe away tears and death will be no more.

That was a far cry from the kingdom in which Jesus was living. His world was controlled by the Roman empire, who ruled with a controlling fist and kept the peace through intimidation. The Romans even established a straw king, King Herod, who was seen as a joke by the Jews who were waiting for the return of the true king as promised by the prophets. They thought the king would vanquish the earthly empire, so imagine their disappointment when the person they thought was their new king was crucified on a cross.

And yet, repeatedly throughout the gospels, Jesus makes it clear that with his birth and ministry, God's kingdom had come down. Multiple times he says, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." But this isn't a traditional kingdom with princes and knights and talking mice and flying elephants. This kingdom is more inconspicuous, more subversive. Jesus says things like, "the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed" and "the kingdom of God is like a pinch of yeast" and "the kingdom of God belongs to the meek and the children."

Then, in Luke 17, Jesus says the strangest thing, something that must have caused their followers to scratch their heads. He had already taught them to pray for God's kingdom to come, to be present on earth as it is in Heaven. My tendency would be to look up, to wait for it to descend, to watch for the laser light show and blaring trumpets that would herald its arrival. And yet, Luke tells us this: "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'"

Wow! That's a bold claim. Jesus is saying his presence represents the kingdom of God. But wait. If you look in your Bible, there's a little letter beside the word "among," and if you go down to the footnotes, it says, "among" can also be translated as "within." How does the meaning of Jesus' words change if what we said was, "For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you." Instead of looking up, we should be looking around. The kingdom of God is among us and within us.

That can't be right! Have you seen the world recently? There's no way the kingdom of God is here. If it is, why is there still injustice? Why is there still hunger? Why is there still war? There are still so many tears and so much pain and so much death. If God has already sent God's kingdom to earth, then God needs a do-over, because this world looks nothing like the kingdom of God.

That is the central challenge of this prayer and why we should really be careful about praying it. If we pray this way, we better be prepared to live this way. If we pray for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done, we better be ready to follow God's will in order to make God's kingdom real. It's tempting to heap responsibility on the state of the world for God's kingdom not being here, but we might do well to start with ourselves. After all, Jesus says the kingdom of God is within us. So, why can't we see it?

In seminary, I had to write a paper about the theology of original sin, and I made the argument that we are not born sinners, but we learn to sin. I used my infant daughter as an example. How could anyone look at this cute little ball of joy and call her a sinner? When I got the paper back from my professor, he had written, "You will know she has learned to sin the first time she says the word 'mine'."

The key to understanding our role in God's kingdom coming is in the tiniest words of this prayer: the pronouns. WE joke about the "thees" and "thys" and "thines" of the Bible, but here they make a point. There's a Grand Canyon of difference between "me, my, mine" and "thee, thy, thine," but it's something we have fought against from the very start. In the beginning, God created everything and gave humans authority over it, trusting that we would look out for each other and God's creation. Six chapters later, the world is so full of violence and selfishness that God grieves that God ever made humans, decides to wipe everyone out, and starts over with Noah. And nothing has changed since then, except that we have found more cruel and destructive ways to exercise our selfishness. We have chosen to let something else be our God and our king.

That's the radical challenge of this prayer. When we say, "God's kingdom come," we are surrendering ourselves to God's will, leaving behind our own desires and agendas in order to pursue the will of God in our lives. The Lord's Prayer is an anecdote to selfishness. It's a reminder that we have been given the incredible gift of God's kingdom among us in Jesus Christ and within us through the Holy Spirit, and that we are agents in doing God's will here on earth. This is not a pie-in-the-sky prayer. Instead of looking up, we are called to look around and see the world through God's eyes, with both deep love and deep grief. And then, we are called to get to work.

That may seem like a tall order, impossible even. How can we make a difference? This world is so broken. It would be easy to resign ourselves to fate, to believe the world is beyond saving. "That's just the way it is." "Everything happens for a reason." "God works in mysterious ways." Maybe. But here's what I see in the gospels. Jesus didn't approach a sick person or a poor person and say, "Gee, I'd like to help you, but I can't because this is the will of God." No, when Jesus saw a sick person or a poor person, he did something about it. He acted. He did his part to

make the kingdom of God real here on earth. We may think the Old Testament visions are unrealistic, like when we're told that in God's kingdom people will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, that nation will not take up sword against nation. We can read that and say, "Well, must be God's will, nothing I can do." Or we can say, "You know, the kingdom of God is within me, and that's not what I think it looks like, so I'm going to do something about it."

One book I read said this phrase is the most political statement of the prayer, that every public policy decision, every social issue, every place where humans suffer should be viewed through the lens of the kingdom of God. What is that lens? It's Jesus, plain and simple. Jesus showed us in tangible, earthy ways what the kingdom of God looks like. Radical hospitality. Expansive inclusion. Unlimited grace and love. A wedding banquet to which all the outcasts are invited. And condemnation for those who were actively working against those things. Which, if we're honest, is sometimes us.

One author described our role this way: Jesus is the musical genius who wrote the greatest symphony of all time. We are the musicians who perform it in a world full of noise and cacophony. We don't always play it perfectly, we sometimes miss notes or stray into other melodies, but we know the song by heart, because it is within us. Our job is to keep playing it over and over and over again until the world hears the notes and starts to hum along with us. That may seem like an impossible task, but I believe people from all over the globe are listening. It's a small world, after all.

The next time you pray this prayer, I want to suggest that you think about what words you emphasize when you pray this line. What would it mean to pray, "THY kingdom come, THY will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven?" If you do that, what are you acknowledging? What are you claiming? To what are you committing? There are a lot of things competing for our adoration and our attention and our worship. But according to this prayer, there's only one King, and his kingdom is within us.

I'd love to wake up tomorrow and see that God's kingdom is finally here, that we have lived out in this world what we pray with our lips and know in our hearts. But, more likely, God's kingdom is going to come one act at a time, one decision at a time, one vote at a time, like a mustard seed or a pinch of yeast. Can that really make a difference? Nothing is impossible with God. Remember, the kingdom of God is within you.