

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, March 13, 2011, Lent 1, dedicated to our new members and their children who join today, to the BREAD Justice Ministry Network, to the people of Japan in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami, and always to the glory of God!

“ . . . Thy Kingdom Come . . . ”

Matthew 6:10

**(Part II of VIII in the sermon series
“The Lord’s Prayer”)**

On Ash Wednesday, we began a journey into the heart of The Lord’s Prayer. We explored the foundation of the prayer, its presence in our daily lives and the power of its opening words, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” Opening each word and phrase, we explored the mystery and power of our Savior’s prayer, which saves lives and helps us walk into the radical and real presence and purpose of God in our lives.

I did not fully explore “Hallowed be thy name.” Let me say that reverence and holiness is sadly missing in too much of what we do and say in our times.

Too many have come to confuse reverence with stuffy solemnity and stale spirituality. Reverence is made manifest when we show respect and love for all life (from the smallest fly to the greatest whale); when we cultivate special love and care for the human relationships that God has given us, and when we acknowledge God’s power and presence in one such as Jesus the Christ (and bow gracefully and graciously to God in thanksgiving to God in Christ). While this doesn’t fully explicate the depth of reverence to which we yield in God’s

name, it is a starting point for “hallowing God’s name.”

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

For the first Christians, The Lord’s Prayer was a dangerous prayer. They stopped, knelt and placed their faces to the ground when whispering this prayer. They knew it could result in their death. They knew it was radical and anti-establishment. They knew that emperors and kings would slaughter them if they discovered it was being lifted up to God.

If you don’t believe me, listen to one of the foremost New Testament scholars of the last century, German scholar Joachim Jeremias.

In his little book *The Prayers of Jesus*, published in English for the first time in 1967, Jeremias shared his findings on The Lord’s Prayer. Having scoured thousands of prayers written and spoken over thousands of years, he proclaimed this startling truth: Nowhere in Judaism, until the words of Jesus, had God been addressed as “Abba” or “Father.” Jesus did this all the time (as I shared last Wednesday).

Moreover, Jeremias revealed that The Lord’s Prayer was not commonly prayed in regular worship during the early centuries of Christian faith. In the *Didache*, written in the first century, The Lord’s Prayer is referred to as the “Holy treasure of the church.” It was not taught to members until they understood its full implications and were able to grasp the awesome reverence needed to speak these words.

Cyril of Jerusalem speaks of its use in worship only in the portions of the service in which “the baptized” could speak, thus reserving its use for full members of the faith only. Candidates for baptism (adults only at this point), were

instructed to learn The Lord's Prayer on Good Friday when the catechumens were in their last days of preparing for baptism at the Easter vigil, just as they prepared to be immersed in the waters of holiness. This remained so until 350 A.D.

Why all the secrecy and veil of separateness related to this prayer?

The answer may be found in the phrase before us today - "*Thy kingdom come . . .*" The biblical notion of "kingdom" has definite political overtones. The word for "kingdom" is "*basileia*," (which forms the word "basilica"). It can also be translated "empire." It would have political suicide for Jesus to teach his disciples to pray for the coming of a "new empire" given the hegemony of the Romans in his world. But that is exactly what he did! This prayer is tantamount to treason because this prayers' pray-ers were serving notice - out loud and in a not-so-subtle way - that the imperial reign of Caesar no longer held an ultimate claim on their lives.

With notice served, what was God's reign on earth going to look like and how was it going to get here?

In his book *The Lord's Prayer*, Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff posits that three main characteristics of the kingdom announced by Jesus must be kept in mind.

First, God's kingdom is universal. It embraces everything and everybody. It brings liberation to the infrastructures of society, such a sickness, poverty and death. It also restructures interpersonal relationships. They will be based on the absence of hatred and the plentitude of friendship and fellowship. And the relationship with God has changed as well. It is a loving (not a punitive) relationship between a father and his children. Jesus is clear throughout Matthew's Gospel that the kingdom can't be reduced to a certain segment of reality, whether that be political, religious or miraculous (Mt. 4:1-11).

Second, God's kingdom is structural. God's kingdom not only embraces everything and everyone, but it calls for a revolution in structure. God's kingdom brings total freedom. It is a kingdom of love and justice, not a kingdom like in the past for "just us." It is for "just everybody."

Third, God's kingdom is definitive. It will bring a new heaven and a new earth in which peace, justice and concord will reign between and among all God's children (Leonardo Boff, *The Lord's Prayer*, Orbis Press, Maryknoll, NY, 1983, pp. 58-59).

In other words, to spiritualize God's kingdom coming, doesn't get to the root of the totality of this message. God's coming reign changes everything, on earth and in heaven. Most radically, it is about the change of relationships. God's reign changes interpersonal relationships and well **as intra- and inter-** national relationships. It means that we have to take each other seriously and embrace each other joyfully – including God.

It changes structures that take advantage of others, as opposed to building up relationships between them. God's kingdom coming balances life.

Now do see why "immature" Christians in the early days of our faith were not allowed to pray this prayer out loud at the start of their walk with Jesus?

Can we even come close to attaining the kingdom of God in our times? In any time? We can, if we return to the three characteristics mentioned above. We must begin with each other. We must build respect, equality and dignity – BREAD. To be builders of respect, equality and dignity, we have to begin by seeing one another as in need of prayer. St. Francis names this as "seeking to understand rather than to be understood."

What is it that makes someone who they are and what they are? What brings out their core values in trying times?

As many of you know, I volunteer each week at Bluffsvie Elementary School in Worthington. This year, I have an often challenging third-grader with whom I work. He kicks, pinches, talks when he should be quite and is generally moving all the time. Quite frankly, he can be irritating sometimes. But this week, I saw a whole other side of him. As we were joined for our spelling test by one of his classmates, he told me about the tough times she was facing. As he talked, he reassured her I was okay. He told me how he stood by her when she was being bullied. I saw him as a good friend to someone being frightened and treated cruelly by others.

Whether he realized it, he was bringing in the kingdom value of justice, love and respect for his classmate by a friend when she needed one most of all. Although he was still fidgeting, now he was fidgeting for justice (and thus for Jesus). I liked what I saw.

How many of us fidget for justice (or for Jesus)? How many of us pray our Lord's Prayer in a radically inclusive way?

Perhaps, we can enter into a more powerful connection to God's coming kingdom through confession and OTHER prayers. It's the season of Lent – what better time to face our brokenness and start to bring in the kingdom of God?

The kingdom of God will begin to come to earth when we believe what Jesus was saying and act upon it. When we become bearers and bringers of justice through real and growing relationships with one another, the kingdom has a chance to come. If we pray to God for his kingdom to come and then we fidget for justice, the tide may turn. "Thy kingdom come . . . on earth as it is in heaven." Amen.

I shared this prayer in the early service.

On any given day, I find myself reading Children's Defense Fund founder, Marian Wright Edleermann's little book, *Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations of Loving and Working for Children*. One prayer asks for God's forgiveness.

O God, forgive our rich nation where small babies die of cold quite legally.

O God, forgive our rich nation where small children suffer from hunger quite legally.

O God, forgive our rich nation where toddlers and school children die from guns and sold quite legally.

O God, forgive our rich nation that let's children be the poorest group of citizens quite legally.

O God, forgive our rich nation that let's the rich continue to get more at the expense of the poor quite legally.

O God, forgive our rich nation which thinks security rests in missiles rather than mothers and in bombs rather than babies.

O God, forgive our rich nation for not giving you sufficient thanks by giving to others their daily bread.

O God, help us never to confuse what is legal with what is just and right in your sight. (*Guide My Feet*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1995, p. 88).