

“Thy Kingdom Come”

Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18, Philippians 3:17—4:1, Luke 13:31–35

**Part III of VIII in the Lenten sermon series,
“The Lord’s Prayer”**

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From the Pulpit

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A Baptismal Mediation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent II, March 13, 2022, dedicated to Graham Michael Bukach on his baptismal day, to the blessed memory of Ruth Allred and Paul Flocken who entered eternal life Sunday, March 6th and always to the glory of God!

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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.

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In his little book, *The Prayers of Jesus*, published in English for the first time in 1967, German Biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias shared his findings on The Lord’s Prayer. He wrote:

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.

So the prayer was prayed with your face in the dust, whispering, hoping only God would hear. Having scoured thousands of prayers

written and spoken for more than 5500 of years, Jeremias proclaimed this startling truth: “Nowhere in Judaism, until the words of Jesus, had God been addressed as ‘Abba’ or ‘Father.’ Jesus did this for this for the first time,” so that intimacy comes out of this prayer.

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 could grasp the awesome reverence needed to speak each word.

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. You had to be a “mature” baptized Christian to speak this radical prayer out loud.

This remained the way the prayer was prayed until 350 A.D. The first 350 years of our faith.

Why all the secrecy and veil of separateness related to this prayer?
The answer is 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 been political suicide for Jesus to teach his disciples to pray for the coming

of this “new empire” given the Roman empire of the time. But that is exactly what he did when they asked him how do we pray!

This prayer is tantamount to treason in the Roman Empire because this prayer’s “prayers” 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?

The Kingdom of God was not a creation of Jesus. It was the fulfillment of God’s plan going all the way back to the Hebrew prophets. Daniel sees night visions of God’s kingdom coming to earth. *“Behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like the son of man, whose everlasting dominion shall never pass away”* (Daniel 7:13-14). Daniel poured out his heart in explaining it was heaven coming to earth when the kingdom of God arrives (Daniel 7:27).

Jesus picks up on this theme right at the beginning of his mission. In Mark 1:15, we read, *“The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand....”* In Luke 17:21, Jesus declares, *“The kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”* For Jesus, the kingdom is not so much a place that is to be marked on the map of the universe, but an **event** that touches everything that exists in the universe. From the beginning of scriptures, to our current day, God’s kingdom coming is the ultimate goal. God’s kingdom requires nothing less than a complete change of heart, if we are to name it for what it really is.

Jesus spent his entire ministry teaching, preaching, embodying the kingdom of God. And we have spent the very best hours of our Christian faith through the past two millennia attempting to grasp this and his intentions for the kingdom coming. We know that it means justice is coming for the poor, peace in our hearts and then

peace will come for the earth, righteousness for all people, equality for every human, dignity for every living thing, and hope for the world. That's a lot.

By the end of his life, Jesus had taught us everything we need to know about the kingdom of God. He taught us how to look for it, how to find it, how to create it, how to embrace it and how to live it. His lessons range from seeds in fields (Mt. 13:24), to rewards for the poor and poor in spirit for justice's sake (Mt. 5:3-10), to the demanding, but absolutely necessary practice of compassion (Mt. 25).

“Thy Kingdom come” was shorthand for all he stood for and for the ultimate arrival of God's perfect way on earth. To seek God's kingdom proceeds everything else in his teaching and his model for seeking to do God's will is the children. He says, *“Become like them.”* If you become like them, then you will enter the kingdom of God. We hear that in the baptismal liturgy, become like children in order to enter the kingdom. He says that when the children are coming to him, *let them come unto me because the kingdom of God belongs to them.* He tells us an offering to his disciples and each one of us that so much needs to be improved in our spirituality, in our moral codes, in our freshly crafted theology. He offers us everything – the whole package, it about the kingdom of God.

In his book *The Lord's Prayer*, Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff presents three main characteristics of the kingdom of God, as he announced Jesus's way to keep in mind.

First, God's kingdom is universal. It embraces everything and everybody. It brings liberation to the infrastructures of society, such as sickness, poverty and death. It also restructures all relationships. They will be based on the absence of hatred and the plentitude

of friendship and fellowship. And the relationships with God will be changed as well. It will be a loving (not a punitive) relationship between a father and his children. God will no longer be seen as a beat down kind of God. God is a loving God and that's the kingdom of God coming in Jesus' model. He is clear throughout Matthew's Gospel that the kingdom can't be reduced to a certain segment of reality, whether 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 of God's children (Boff, *The Lord's Prayer*, Orbis Press, Maryknoll, NY, 1983, pp. 58-59).

For you or me or anyone to spiritualize God's kingdom coming, doesn't get to the root of Jesus' message. God's coming reign changes everything on earth and in heaven. Most radically, it is about changing relationships. It means that we take each other seriously and embrace each other joyfully. It changes structures that take advantage of others. And it is final perfect way it is definitive. There are no more tanks rolling into Ukraine or missiles being fired into apartment buildings where innocent people live. No more of any of this by anyone, anywhere, anytime. No more empires. No more wars. No more pain or abuse for any one person.

God's kingdom coming balances life. Now can you see why "immature" Christians in the early days of our faith were not allowed

to pray this prayer out loud to start of their walk with Jesus? Can we even come close to attaining the kingdom of God in our times? In any way?

We can come close if we return to the three characteristics mentioned above – God’s kingdom being Universal, Structural and Definitive. I was thinking about the words it would take to bring about the kingdom of God. The words I came up with – BREAD. To be builders of respect, equality and dignity, we have to begin by seeing one another as in need of prayer. As St. Francis says, “we need to seek 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?

I caught a glimpse many years ago. For more than 20 years, I volunteered each Friday at Bluffsvew Elementary School in Worthington. One year, I had an incredibly challenging third-grader with whom I worked. He fidgeted constantly – he kicked, pinched, and punched his classmates. He was in constant motion – it’s no wonder some of his motion collided with other people. I often thought how tough it must be to be in his little body which had no “Stop” button in it. But honestly, I found him irritating – and I only had the pleasure of being with him for one hour each week.

One week, I saw a whole other side of this child of God. We were joined for our spelling test by one of his classmates. As we sat down, he told me about the tough times she was facing at home and in school. As she sat quietly, he knew all about her challenges and explained them all to me. While doing this, he also reassured her that I was “okay and that the two of us were friends” (which made me feel bad for all the comments I just shared). He told her I was

a pastor and then, without any segue, he launched into The Lord's Prayer as he grabbed her hand and started praying for her. He prayed the pray for her.

As the prayer ended, he didn't even stop to say amen, he just kept talking. He told me how he stood by her when she was being bullied. He told me the day I saw him being carried off to the principal's office, he had defended her on the playground. That's why he was going to the principal's office. He saw her with loving eyes, and I saw him with fresh eyes. I saw him as a good friend, a prayer-filled friend. I saw him standing beside someone who no one else was being kind to in his class, as they were not kind to him either. I saw him standing with this girl who was frightened and treated cruelly by others. And there she was with tears in her eyes looking at her friend, her defender.

Whether he realized it, my fidgeting third grader was bringing in the kingdom of God, the value of love and respect and justice for his classmate as a true friend when she needed one.

Although he was still a fidget machine, he was fidgeting for justice and for Jesus and I liked what I saw. A lot of us are fidgeting machines. How many of us fidget for justice and for Jesus? How many of us break into The Lord's Prayer when we see a friend in need and we hold their hand and pray the prayer like it's the last and only prayer they have? How many of us pray our Lord's Prayer in such a radically inclusive way?

We are in the season of Lent. This is the time to pick our faces out of the dust where we've been whispering this pray silently so no will hear it and pray it like we mean it. This is the time to lift our faces and to face our brokenness and bring in the kingdom of God. The

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