

Thoughts on Prayer

Luke 11:1-13

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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The kingdom of heaven is like:

the hospitality of Sister Peg Collins at the Glendalough Hermitage;

a conversation with James while waiting for the train in Holyhead;

and talking about art and life with a couple from Dublin at the café at the National Gallery in London;

It is a half-used Hop-On-Hop-Off bus ticket from Helen and her tree-hugging friend in Bath;

The kingdom of heaven is like Teddy's mother taking the time to help me find my way in Gloucester leaving Teddy to his own devices;

It is the help of countless BritRail employees;

The kingdom of heaven is Evensong;

It is unexpected complimentary tea in an Edinburgh bookstore;

And the good humor of Andy and Andrea at Stonehenge;

The Kin-dom of heaven is like other clergy at Bath Abbey, Gloucester Cathedral, St. Paul's Cathedral, and St. Martin-in-the-Fields who understood the gift of providing worship for another pastor;

And it is my friend's 23 year-old daughter who had tea on a double-decker bus with her mother's (old lady) friend. In many ways my time away was one experience after another of the kin-dom of God. I am grateful beyond measure.

The kingdom of God is the starting point of what has become known as the Lord's Prayer, and, as it turns out, it is the whole point of this prayer.

I will say more about that, but first, I have a two-point business agenda: One, the Lord's Prayer was updated into modern language about 25 years ago; the PCUSA was among the denominations that adopted it. I first prayed it in seminary and have held to saying "your" instead of "Thy" because I feel more in touch with God using that language. They are using it in many places in Great Britain so it is in our bulletin this morning as invitation, not requirement. Overall it is a bit more clipped, like the version in our scripture this morning. I hope you will (with an open mind) give it a try.

And two, the Kingdom of God is a critical teaching of Christian faith. But, the language is not part of our experience and it's very imperialistic when the actual intent was to provide a contrast the Roman Empire. So I and many others use the word kin-dom which has a similar sound while hopefully emphasizing a kinship among the whole human family.

Now, let's return to the rather terse prayer that Luke presented to us as Jesus' own words. In addressing God's holiness, Jesus begins with "Hallowed be," and then immediately says, "Your kingdom come." And that's it, the rest of the prayer, indeed the rest of the reading is geared toward actions that bring the kin-dom; the rest are instructions on process: daily bread which is Jesus' concise way of saying fulfill the basic needs for all people; practice forgiveness, both giving and receiving; and persistence or fidelity in living Jesus' Way. With or without specific mention of God's will or human will, the concept of will or willfulness is the elephant in Luke's room. It is Matthew's version of the prayer that gives us the words, "May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (6:10).

seems God wants to know if our prayer is a short-term or one-time attempt at assuaging a guilty conscience or a true desire for life-giving fulfillments for neighbors and self.

On the flip-side, God is not a vending machine for our wants and desires. It takes the ego strengths of humility and vulnerability to pray for God's will to be done. In the back and forth of listening and speaking and listening again, we learn God's will and hopefully do it. If we pray "your kingdom come" and mean it, we must be ready for actionable change. We know Jesus' teaching, his words, his demeanor. He was never cruel. "Love one another as I have loved you," was his commandment. He was never a bully. "Let any one who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7).

But somewhere in here is the core of the person God made each of us to be – there is an autonomy and will that we must honor even if we start toward the good and find we have erred or we hope for the best and find a fault line there is a voice that must be heard. Life is about experience, things to be learned or burdens to be carried. Striving for some kind of perfection is not the same as striving for the kin-dom. Placing the burden of perfection on someone else against their will might well be a form of abuse. We are never separated from God but we will also never be without sin; Martin Luther said, "Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly." And still Jesus would say, "Come to me all you who are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

And so I come full circle, "Lord teach us to pray." Because we are all hurting and sometimes it feels harder to love. At times it feels like the kin-dom is slipping away and we steel ourselves and become willful rather than remaining soft and vulnerable as Jesus did. Jesus was himself, the kin-dom of God on earth; for us, now, this kin-dom work is critical.

There is a statue of Nelson Mandela in Parliament Square Garden in London. As I was walking through one day, I watched as a black family came upon the statue and absolutely lit up. They started taking turns taking pictures in the front of the statue. As I got close enough the woman with the camera said, "You need to take a picture of us," and handed me her phone. And the thing is, as soon as I saw them I thought, I need to offer to take a photo. As she walked toward the statue she said, "I need to be in the picture." And I said, "Of course you do, it's Mandela!" The Kin-dom of heaven is joyful and free! It can radiate across a park.

Keep your eyes open! Keep your ears open!

Your kin-dom come, Holy One!

And may your will be done on Earth ...

through our will and by our hands. Amen.