



“Praying Like We Mean It”
Scripture – Matthew 6:7-13
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, July 24, 2016

Each week across our nation, millions of Christians pray the Lord’s Prayer. How many times have you prayed it? More than a thousand? Such repetition engraves the words on our minds and seals them in our hearts. However, such repetition can also numb us to the consequence of our words.

Today I want to run a highlighter across one line of the prayer because it states succinctly what Jesus expects of his followers. The prayer begins by addressing God as our loving Father who is holy, and then Jesus strikes to the heart of the matter: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Say it with me, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

One evening a family gathered around their dining room table for a feast, and the nine year-old son blurted out, “It’s my turn to say the prayer!”

Mom replied, “Terrific. Go for it!”

Instead of his usual, “God is great, God is good,” he asked if he could say the Lord’s Prayer. “Of course,” Dad said.

The family bowed their heads and he began to pray. “Our Father, who art in heaven.” He stumbled a bit over “hallowed” but kept going. “Hal – o – wedded be thy name.” Then, he said what he thought he heard: “My kingdom come. My will be done.”

His parents smiled at his youthful mistake. But, after dinner when the parents were alone, his mother said, “Our son’s mistake made me think. How many times during the day do we act as if we are praying, “MY kingdom come, MY will be done?”

My or Thy, such tiny words, such an enormous difference. In fact, those small words may represent the basic difference between people of faith and people of no faith. Is it all about me and what I want, or is life richer, happier and more hopeful when I live God’s way? It might not hurt any of us when we pray the Lord’s Prayer to place extra emphasis on **Thy**” to remind us of whose will we are praying to follow.

When it comes to prayer, I’m afraid that some are still in kindergarten. When many people pray, they sound as if they are reminding God of what God needs to do. “Get with it, God! The world is a mess, fix it!”

Of course that is not what we are saying. Did you catch what Jesus said to his followers immediately before he taught them this prayer? He said that God knows what we need before we pray. So, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,” is not pleading for God to do all the work of ushering in the kingdom. It is really more of a pledge to be a partner with God in spreading God’s kingdom. Prayer is not intended to tell God to jump to our demands, but rather to move us beyond ourselves. It is supposed to broaden our vision so that we see the world from the divine perspective. And then fulfill our responsibility to be the hands and feet of Jesus.

We may wish to avert our eyes from those who are poor, but God expects us to feed the hungry and house the homeless. We may want to fill our calendars solely with family activities, but God reminds us to sit down with a friend who has recently lost a loved one. I may be enamored with a huge vehicle that gets 12 miles to the gallon, but my responsibility to care for God’s creation reminds me that the way I live has an impact on the health and well-being of the earth. Praying THY, rather than MY, is first, a statement of our determination to catch a glimpse of God’s vision for the world; and second, it is a pledge to do whatever we can to make that vision a reality.

These days, the world is calling out – it is screaming – for healing. Racial strife, a widening gap between rich and poor, mean-spirited rhetoric, demonization of opponents, terrorist attacks – we are going through a rough stretch. There is more divisiveness, violence and fear in America than there has been in decades. To find a more volatile time, we have to revert to the sixties. If you’re old enough, you remember the assassinations of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. You can recall the tremendous racial tensions and violence – including the white supremacist bombing of the African American Church in Birmingham that killed four young girls. There was a contentious divide throughout the land over the Viet Nam War – a faraway conflict that in the end took the lives of more than a million people. It seemed that each week of the war the fabric of our nation was further torn and many lived with a sense of doom.

We survived those tumultuous days and experienced several good decade until recently. Most of us did not think much about the threat of terrorism prior to September 11th. Even though the actual odds of an American dying in a terrorist attack are less than the odds of being killed by lightning, the constant talk of terrorism makes it seem more likely and puts many on edge.

Some are buying into a narrative that says: “We need to be wary of anyone who is different. We need to be suspicious of anyone who is “other.” The world is a frightening place with mean-spirited people who want to do you in. You had better arm yourself to the hilt and keep your finger on the trigger, because our only defense is to be more brutal than our enemies.”

Is that how God wants us to respond to the darkness in our world? “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done” means to be on the side of light rather than darkness, on the side of healing rather than destroying, on the side of connecting rather than dividing.

Each day, while the media hypes the violence at some spot on the globe, in this land there are millions of acts of kindness. Small acts – holding the door for someone, feeding a neighbor’s pet while they are away, giving someone a lift to the store, sending a Get Well card. Having recently received so many cards, I can attest to the power of kindness. Each card prompts a smile, a warm feeling, and a reminder that we care about each other and we want the best for each other. Acts of kindness serve as a great antidote to any mean-spirited rhetoric the media is blaring. There is healing power in kindness.

It is precisely such small acts of kindness that form friendships and deepen bonds. During weddings, I often challenge couples to engage in a competition to outdo the other in performing small acts of kindness. This competition will keep their marriage healthy and thriving. The same goes for a healthy and thriving community and country. Small acts of kindness are positive connection points that remind us that the best way to rid darkness is to turn up the light.

Racial tensions are simmering in our nation. We have seen too many videos of black men killed by white police officers. The recent murders of police in Dallas and Baton Rouge have heightened tensions and reminded us that violence is not the way forward. Some police training and tactics must change. But it is not only policies in police departments that need to change. All of us need to commit to making this melting pot nation of ours succeed. And not only succeed, but be the envy of the world.

Many of us remember how oppressed blacks were in South Africa during apartheid. The religious community in South Africa played a vital role in healing the deep rift between the races. The church created an affirmation of faith that continues in use today, and it could serve as a beacon of hope for our nation.

Here is how it reads:

“We struggled against one another:
now we are reconciled to struggle *for* one another.
We believed it was right to withstand one another:
now we are reconciled to *understand* one another.
We endured the power of violence:
now we are reconciled to the power of *tolerance*.
We built irreconcilable barriers between us:
now we seek to build a society of *reconciliation*.
We suffered a separateness that did not work:
now we are reconciled to make *togetherness* work.
We believed we alone held the truth:
now we are reconciled in the knowledge that the truth holds *us*.”¹

Some are doing their best to focus our attention on what divides us. We must focus on the things that unite us. Making a commitment to live by these words is a way to make concrete “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.”

Some of us need to spend more time with people of another race. In many cases, it will help those of us who are white to listen to someone who can tell us what it is like to grow up black in this country. We can listen to what it’s like for a black parent to have “The talk” with their teenage children. For whites, it is usually a talk about how to avoid pregnancy. For blacks, it is a talk about how to avoid getting shot. Listening to others is a solid way to break down walls.

One thing certain to unite us is coming up in less than two weeks. Have you marked it on your calendar? The Olympics.

When the American team marches together in the opening ceremony we won’t be thinking about racial divisions, we will be cheering everyone on our nation’s team. When Americans step onto the track or the gymnastics floor or the basketball court, to compete against other nations, we won’t be focusing on things that could potentially separate us from one another. We will be cheering U-S-A!

Perhaps people around the world will be reminded that one thing that makes the United States such a powerhouse is our diversity. We are a diversity of races and religions and ideas. And our core values of liberty and justice for all, serve as a shining light to many.

I confess there is another Olympic team I’ll also be rooting for in addition to the U.S. team – the Refugee Olympic Team. Comprised of refugees from Syria, South Sudan and the Republic of Congo, among others, this tiny team of refugees will have people from all over the world cheering for them.

That is because most people are not mean-spirited. The overwhelming majority have a heart for their fellow men and women. Most are repulsed by violence and know in their core that we are meant to live together in peace. Despite the principalities that thirst for power, and are prone to selfishness and greed, most people know in their heart of hearts that we are all meant to live together in peace.

We dare not let anyone turn us against each other; we dare not give in to threats or violence; and we absolutely *will* not allow mean times to turn us into mean-spirited people. We will keep praying the Lord's Prayer like we mean it, and we will spread God's kingdom with our utmost determination.

NOTES

1. Desmond Tutu, *An African Prayer Book*.

Prayer by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Holy God – In Christ you taught us how to pray, and to offer our petitions to you in his name. So we come before you with the confidence of children, trusting that you hear our prayers. We bring with us wholehearted gladness, acute sorrow, overwhelming fear, profound hope ... With gratitude and grief, we entrust our deepest joys and longings to you. We do so not because you need us to give voice to our petitions; you, O God, have searched us and know us, and are well acquainted with the concerns of our hearts. We give voice to our collective pain and praise because we hope – we trust – that you will transform our words into action. Align our wills with *your* will, we pray, and use us to help build your Kingdom on earth.

So much weighs heavy on us, O God. We come to this sanctuary seeking refuge from the chaos of this world, but we cannot escape the sorrow and fear that grows with each report of violence. We lift before you the cities you have heard named so many times before – names that bleed together into a litany of lament: Orlando, Istanbul, Dhaka, Dallas, Medina, Munich, Minneapolis, Kabul, Nice, Baghdad, Baton Rouge. Be with these conflicted communities, and with the countless families who are reeling from the loss of loved ones. We know that, for each of these families, there are those closer to home – those within our own communities – who are grieving losses that are not deemed newsworthy, but which are no less poignant. Surround them with your love, O God, that they might find healing in your embrace.

God of the Empty Tomb - Help us to remember that – through Christ – violence *will not* prevail, destruction *will not* have the last word. For you have won victory over death, and opened the way to eternal life. We give thanks that this promise is for us – not only in heaven – but on earth. For you have entered into this broken world, and transformed our darkness into light.

By your Spirit, help us to live as children of the light. As you continue to usher in your reign of peace, empower us to participate in your creative work through acts of kindness, both great and small. When we see injustice, give us courage to advocate for the 'least of these.' When we see suffering, give us hearts of compassion. When we see despair, give us the faith to proclaim hope. God – We long for a world where the lion lies down with the lamb, and a little child leads us in the way of peace. Help us, O God, to channel this longing into action. Renew us. Strengthen us. Embolden us. And send us out to labor with you in your vineyard until justice and peace reign, and all creation finds *Shalom*.

We lift this and all our prayers in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, the one who taught us the familiar words we offer now: **Our Father ...**