

“Thy Kingdom Come”
Matthew 6:5-15
Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.
Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
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This petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” is the very HEART of Jesus’s prayer, for the Kingdom of God lay at the very CORE of his ministry and remained the CENTRAL theme of all his preaching and teaching. Here, Jesus is asking that his Heavenly Father’s dominion or rule might extend to and encompass the lives of his entire creation- ON EARTH as well as in heaven. It is his plea that God’s reign might be established and become an actual reality right here and now- in our lives and extending throughout the world. His very first words as recorded by the gospel of Mark (Mark being the earliest of all the accounts of Jesus’s life) were, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.” He told his followers to “Seek first the kingdom of God and all other things will be added unto you.” There was no more important message in all the Bible, occurring over a hundred times in the first three gospels ALONE. The Kaddish, the main prayer pronounced by the rabbi at the conclusion of each synagogue service, would begin, “May God establish his kingdom in your lifetime and in your days and in all the ages of the whole house of Israel soon and in the near future.” It was a common saying among the ancient rabbis that a prayer in which the Kingdom is never mentioned was then not really a prayer AT ALL.

What makes THIS petition particularly difficult is that where “Hallowed be thy name” remains very ABSTRACT, “Thy kingdom come” is FAIRLY CONCRETE. A “kingdom” is a political word; it is a realm involving monarchs and their subjects with layers of power relations in between. With these words, Jesus makes it very clear that his kingdom has to do with much

more than just spirituality and our relation to God, it takes our focus away from the heavenly and places it squarely into the earthly and the mundane. It impacts the structures of power and money and bread, of our jobs and the services we rely on and participate in. It influences our stance on politics and economics, on decisions about education, health, employment, the environment, and all the other things which shape a person's life. Hence, to pray "Thy kingdom come" is to ACTUALLY pray, "Take over, God, and rule over the affairs of your people and nations RIGHT HERE AND RIGHT NOW." To be a part of this kingdom is to acknowledge who is in charge and whose will shall ultimately count in this world.

But there's always been so much CONFUSION concerning the "kingdom of God" (or the "kingdom of heaven" as the gospel of Matthew refers to it). Jesus refuses to come straight out and define it, preferring instead to make HINTS about it in his teachings and parables. He says that beginning like a mustard seed, it will continue to grow until it eclipses EVERYTHING ELSE. At other times, he describes it NOT as a PROCESS but as a FUTURE EVENT, at a time when people least expect it. Then there are occasions when he says the kingdom of God is a PRESENT REALITY, that it is AMONG them and even WITHIN them such as when he said, "Behold the Kingdom of God is within you!"

In the Old Testament, the Jews had a very narrow view of God's kingdom. They thought that it was simply a POLITICAL SYSTEM to be set up in Jerusalem- a monarchy established by God under which the Jewish nation would be liberated from Roman rule and her territory restored as the home for the descendants of Abraham. For hundreds of years, prophets like Amos and Isaiah anticipated the coming of the Messiah who would herald that great day. In the early part of the Twentieth Century, there was an influential movement in the church

called the “social gospelers” who believed that like yeast, the message of God’s love would permeate the structures of our society and gradually transform it into a version of heaven on earth. They maintained a very OPTIMISTIC view of the future and of human nature, that is, until World War I broke out followed by the horrors of World War II twenty years later. Then the social gospelers began to doubt whether such a scenario would or even COULD take place.

On the other hand, there were always those who believed that this kingdom Christ spoke of was NEVER INTENDED to become a social/political reality here on earth but merely a SPIRITUAL entity, that it referred solely to the sovereignty of God over the human heart and NOT over the structures of society. THAT, they believed, could not take place until the end of history, when Christ returned and put all things under his feet. According to the Apostle Paul, the Kingdom of God was not meat and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. It was not to be some VISIBLE kingdom seen by human eyes but rather a SPIRITUAL dominion in which Christ takes up residency over HUMAN HEARTS and WILLS. Thus, for many Christians throughout the centuries, the idea of God’s kingdom alternated between these two views- that of the hope for a new earthly, human society grounded in justice and fairness, and that of a reconditioned heart with Christ at the center based on love and forgiveness.

THAT becomes the question we need to answer this morning: What IS this kingdom and how does it relate to the present orders and powers of this world. How does our loyalty to Christ affect our relation to human powers, social systems, and cultures? How do we pray, “Thy kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven,” when we are constantly being pulled in so many OTHER directions whether it is our society’s worship of consumerism or militarism or to rampant individualism? It is certainly one of the most difficult questions in all of Christendom.

After almost half a century of trying to figure this out, I am convinced that the answer is NOT “either/or” but rather a “both/and.” Sure, the Kingdom of God IS in essence a SPIRITUAL kingdom or at least it BEGINS there with the reign of God over the human heart. It is the dominion of Christ over our thoughts and affections and wills, and as we continue to SUBMIT our hearts to him, his influence over us deepens and expands until HIS character slowly starts to transform our OWN. BEGINNING inwardly, it gradually works its way OUTWARD to be reflected in our habits and daily activities- from the way we treat our neighbors to the way we spend money and EVEN HOW WE VOTE. Hence, the “spiritual” eventually becomes “material” in and through every one of our actions and commitments- Christ’s concerns become OUR concerns and his desires, OUR desires. We become a sign of his rule in the world with the result that step-by-step, his kingdom slowly advances. With the Christian’s presence in the world, it becomes more MORAL, more LOVING, and more PURE so that BY DEGREES the vile becomes less vile, the cruel less cruel, and the greedy less greedy. Such a world can ONLY come to pass when it is filled with the knowledge of God and ruled by his law. Only as we come to know him better and obey him more perfectly will God’s kingdom finally be established.

The PROPHET ISAIAH looked forward to the day when such a dream would in fact become a reality, when all the nations would stream to his holy mountain and they would each know the Lord. No more would there be the sound of weeping or suffering for sickness and death would be no more. In that day, the wolf and the lamb would feed together, giving way to a period of unending security and happiness. This was the same picture God showed JOHN in the book of Revelation when he gave him a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. John said

he saw the Holy City, the NEW Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. God will then make his dwelling place with humanity whereby they shall be his people and he shall be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain for the former things will have already passed away.

Of course we're all aware that such an ideal world does NOT YET exist and it WON'T, at least not until CHRIST has returned. ONLY THEN, when he brings history to a close, will there exist "peace on earth"; only THEN will that day arrive when the lion lays down with the lamb and our weapons are turned into plowshares. However, it doesn't mean that because WE'LL never complete a perfect world that we should then STOP struggling to change things in that direction. REGARDLESS how imperfect we may be or as limited as our accomplishments are, we must STILL strive to make that dream a reality, for with every act of love or justice you and I perform, REGARDLESS how insignificant it may seem, IT POINTS OTHERS to the reality of that kingdom and ULTIMATELY to JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF.

Let me remind you again that the Lord's Prayer comes straight out of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, and that sermon, MORE THAN ANY OTHER of Jesus' teachings, offered a detailed summary of what that kingdom looked like. He told them:

Blessed (or happy) are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are

persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Yes, God has given the church a specific vision to advance- the vision of his righteous kingdom grounded in love, one in which all slaveries are ended, civil rights are achieved, freedom is established, and compassion is implemented. It is one in which justice is advanced, human rights are defended, and peace is made among all persons. When we NEGLECT that vision, then GREED TRIUMPHS and SELFISHNESS ERODES OUR COMMON LIFE with the result that our DIVISIONS INCREASE, our WEAPONS EXPAND, and our CONFLICTS MULTIPLY.

Thus, when we pray “Thy kingdom come,” we are SINCERELY praying that God’s righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit may begin here on earth and that it may begin in and through each of US. It is to pray that the WHOLE WORLD may grow better and brighter and that PEOPLE EVERYWHERE may become gentler and kinder and just and happier year after year. This is not the ethic of some namby-pamby liberal or mushy-headed idealist but the real and practical principles of our Lord himself upon which his kingdom was founded and his entire ministry was based. Hence, to pray “Thy kingdom come” is to pray for a VITAL FAITH, one that is every-bit engaged in the world. It's not merely a privatized kind of faith, one that professes, "Only me and Jesus- he's all I need," but a faith that LOOKS BEYOND ITSELF to the needs and issues in the larger world and asks "What can I do? How can my Christian commitment make a difference in my home, my community, my nation, my world?"

Hence, Christianity must be a RELEVANT faith attempting to apply itself to the world's problems, a faith that strives to not only bring health and wholeness to people’s hearts, but which seeks to raise the QUALITY OF LIFE around them AS WELL. It must be a CONCERNED

faith- one that not only says "we need JESUS" but also affirms "we need EACH OTHER and I'm there to help you when you need me." It must be an EXPANSIVE faith looking at the struggles of people--Christian or non-Christian--beyond our own borders to the plight of struggling people IN OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD and becoming their advocates. And a real faith must be a SOCIAL faith for we all live in a global community and what affects the rest of the world will inevitably have some affect upon ourselves. Christ demands that if we are to live and walk in his name, then ours must be a faith that is not only "inclusive" but one that is "just and fair," a faith that argues on behalf of women and children, the poor and the handicapped even as HE did.

That is precisely what I love about our denomination- the Presbyterian Church (USA). In the years after World War II, we were derisively referred to as "the Republican Party of Prayer." TODAY, we have broadened our constituency to become the denomination that "cares," that seeks to be just and inclusive and representative to all, that strives to take a private faith and impact public life with it. Where social convention is always insisting that we should never discuss controversial matters such as religion or politics in public, let me say that any faith that is TOO private to speak about is NO faith at all, and any politic TOO private to discuss is NOT worth listening to. Christ demands from us a faith that IS "political"- one that is SOCIALLY ACTIVE as well as spiritually nurturing.

Earlier this week, *The New York Times* published a wonderful colloquy or dialogue between two of the most important evangelical spokespersons in America- the Rev. Jim Wallis, a Christian theologian and activist whose books over the past half-century have impacted and influenced my OWN thoughts and writings as much as any other; and the Rev. Kyle Meyaard-Schaap, Vice-President of the Evangelical Environmental Network, an organization created to

inspire, equip, educate, and mobilize Christians to reclaim the Biblical mandate that this world is our home and we are therefore to care for God's creation. Both men agree that two of the greatest hungers in our world today are the HUNGER FOR SPIRITUALITY and the HUNGER FOR SOCIAL CHANGE. What has divided the church for SO MANY generations has been the belief that as professing Christians, we must either be of one camp or the other, that is, either view our faith as primarily SPIRITUAL in nature, that is, a "Christianity of the heart," or one that is grounded in SOCIAL CHANGE, a "Christianity of social, political and economic transformation." It is this polarization of the notion of the kingdom of God that I believe has turned many YOUNG Christians away from participating in the "Body of Christ" these days.

In CONTRAST to this view, both Wallis and Meyaard-Schaap assert that the church can ONLY recover her moral authority and thus her power when it TRANSCENDS this "inner" versus "outer" emphasis in Christianity, when it begins to see BOTH as necessary. They are convinced that a connection between them is PRECISELY what the world is waiting for with the FIRST HUNGER (spirituality) EMPOWERING THE SECOND (social transformation). We must get beyond a religion that has become rooted in STRICTLY CULTURAL issues and return to one grounded in the scripture's SPIRITUAL IDEALS; we must forsake any faith that becomes too partisan, too rigid, and too ideological and instead embrace one that is broad and deep and inclusive, a faith steeped in love and mutual understanding.

Now it was announced this past week that former President Jimmy Carter, at the advanced age of 98, has now entered Hospice care. Where his Presidency, which took place over four decades, ago has received mixed reviews from most historians, it is arguably the most productive and admired POST-Presidency of any American leader either BEFORE or SINCE.

When he left the White House in January of 1981, he retired to his small hometown of Plains, Georgia where he worshiped and taught Sunday School every weekend for the next forty years. Over the decades, he has been involved in a variety of national and international public policy issues, civil rights actions, and charitable causes. In 1982, he established the Carter Center in downtown Atlanta for the purpose of promoting and expanding universal human rights, alleviating suffering, and promoting economic and social development around the world. He has traveled extensively to conduct peace negotiations, monitor elections, and worked to further the eradication of infectious diseases like guinea worm. In addition, he has been involved with Habitat for Humanity, personally helping to construct numerous homes for the poor over the years. In 1999, he and Rosalynn received the Presidential Medal of Freedom and three years later, he would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his many selfless contributions.

The former President will tell you that his strength of character and years of dedicated service were merely an outgrowth of his deep Christian faith- a faith that has been nurtured since he was a young child, a faith that is BOTH spiritual AND social. Such a marriage between one's faith and works is one WE OURSELVES must strive for- a faith that originates inwardly deep in the heart and gradually works its way outward to effect the social/political and economic order in which our lives are situated. Such is the kind of faith that characterized our LORD'S life and the kingdom he came to establish, and it is the SAME kind of faith which WE--THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST--desperately need to recover now two thousand years LATER!

Believe me, this has NOTHING to do with a particular political agenda or ideology. We must be guided in our deliberations, not by one label or another--not by what is "conservative" or what is "liberal," what is "Democrat" or what is "Republican"--but rather by a

serious examination of the issues, through heart-felt prayer, and through a study of God's Word. Through such a combination of intellectual and spiritual disciplines, the mind of Christ is gradually developed within, enabling us as Christians to make more informed, intelligent, and morally responsible decisions which in turn lead to more positive and constructive action. And IF we do this, we will then practice a faith that is BOTH rich and vibrant, missionary and alive, spiritual and political; we will then pray the Lord's Prayer the way our Lord INTENDED us to and not only mean it, we just might actually LIVE it. Amen and amen.