

Wesley United Methodist Church
Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
Title: On Earth as it is in Heaven
Text: Acts 2:42-47
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-45

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

This very short prayer, so well-known to so many, is really a very concise statement of the Christian faith. I confess, that for most of the years that I have prayed this prayer, I have probably focused less on today's section of the prayer than on almost any other part. And yet, as I have been reflecting upon it more, it seems to me that this may be because this is probably the section of the prayer that may be the most difficult or most confusing.

What does this kingdom look like that we are praying will come?

What is the will of God and how do we understand it in our lives?

These are both difficult questions and probably ones about which we may have the most differences of understanding. Yet, the kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven is the topic about which Jesus spoke more than any other subject.

Don Underhood, in his book, Pray Like Jesus, described these 14 words as the vision and mission statement for the Christian life. He says that we are meant to live our life on earth in such a way that it reflects the Kingdom of God in heaven.ⁱ

He raises an important point early in his book. He says that we need to make an important life decision and he phrases it this way: "Either God is or God Isn't"ⁱⁱ It may seem strange for me to be raising this among a group of people who have come on a summer morning to worship God, but there

is something very important about this. There is a difference, he reminds us, between having an intellectual belief that there is a God and actually living our lives with the awareness that there really is a God. It fundamentally changes the way we view the world. Beginning a day in prayer, gives the day to a God who gives us power and freedom, a loving God, who cares about us, our day, our work, and our life.ⁱⁱⁱ

I think that Alex Philips summarized this well, a few weeks ago in his sermon on Children's Day. If you were not able to be here, I encourage you to go to the church website and read both his and Abby Maziarz's sermon. They will tell you a lot about what our young people are learning and how they are growing in their faith. Among many things, Alex said, "Faith is to have the humility to say, 'I don't know' with one's mind, but the courage to say, 'I do know' with one's heart."^{iv}

I don't want to put words in Alex's mouth, but when I heard those words, it reminds me that when we say, "I do know" with our hearts, it has to make a difference in how we live our lives. We need to live for God rather than living for ourselves.

If we are living for God, then when we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" we can start to recognize that this is more than just asking God to do something. These are not idle words telling God to do whatever God will do, but rather they are words that join us in partnership and in responsibility.

As Pastor Underwood said, this part of the prayer is the vision and mission statement for the Christian life. Praying it, is asking God to help us live our lives on earth in a way that reflects the Kingdom of God in heaven. He reminds us that companies with mission statements that they take

seriously perform at a much higher level than those for whom their mission statement is just a bunch of words.

I believe that if we live our lives praying Jesus' prayer and living out that prayer in action, we will do far more in our lives for God, for ourselves and for the rest of the world than if we keep this prayer only as words that we mumble on a Sunday morning.

So, what is the kingdom that we are praying will come? What does it look like? Underwood does, I think, a good job of describing what the Kingdom of God looks like when we read Jesus' teachings and look at his life. "The Kingdom of God in heaven is a place where justice reigns; where all people are treated and loved equally; where there is no abuse by the powerful and no patronizing of the poor; where a person's status is derived from no other fact than being a child of God. The currency in the kingdom of God is, quite simply, the love of God, distributed lavishly and without prejudice upon all those who simply choose to embrace their status as unworthy but grateful recipients of God's grace"^v

If you think about this and then think about the earthly societies in which we live, the contrast couldn't be greater. It is, if we read the Bible, God's intention that this vision of the Kingdom of God become a reality right here on earth. When we pray this part of the Lord's Prayer, when we catch the vision of the possibility of God's kingdom becoming a reality right here on earth, then we realize that in order for this to happen, we must be part of that. What would happen if we were to really catch this vision and allow it to transform the way in which we live our daily lives?

We might at first think that God could just make this happen, but there is that little thing that gets in the way called "free will." While we pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, we need to realize

that God does not just zap something and make it happen. God is not a tyrant or a despot who controls what happens in the world. God, in God's wisdom, gave humanity free will. This is both a blessing and a challenge. It means that God doesn't force us to do something; God gives us the freedom to make decisions and those decisions have consequences. Sometimes those decisions and consequences have the effect of causing things to happen that are not consistent with God's will.

Leslie Weatherhead wrote an amazing little book called "The Will of God". During World War II, Leslie Weatherhead preached a series of sermons on the Will of God and in 1944 it was published as a book that has endured and continues to be one of the best books written to discuss the Will of God. If you have any questions about what is God's will and what is not, I would encourage you to find a copy of this short book. I might even have a copy or two in my office that I would be happy to loan to someone.

Weatherhead describes the Will of God in three ways. First there is the Intentional Will of God – this is the desire of God's Heart. It is God's ideal plan for what should happen, how we should live our lives. It is, I believe, part of that description of what the Kingdom of God is like.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, God gave us free will – and we sometimes make decisions that cause things to happen that are not consistent with God's will. I don't believe that it is ever God's will for someone to drive a car while drunk and kill a child. I don't believe that it is ever God's will for a person to be abused. But, those things do happen, and we believe that God is with us even during those times. That's when God's Circumstantial will comes in. It is like Plan B.

Given the circumstances that are now being faced, what is God's will in this situation, in these circumstances? This is the place where people

can discover strength that they never knew they had; this is where healing can take place in ways we can't even imagine. I believe that it is out of this Circumstantial Will that people are given the inspiration to begin groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, or groups that work with children or adults who are abused, or community programs that help people re-enter society after having made horrible decisions and repented of them. It is God's circumstantial will in place that has birthed homeless shelters and food pantries where care is provided for those who are hungry or homeless. It is within God's circumstantial will that we find ourselves everyday asking God what we can do in a given situation.

Finally, Weatherhead describes God's Ultimate Will – where somehow God works all things together for Good. You may remember that in the Bible, after Joseph had been sold into slavery, been imprisoned, and eventually became a servant of Pharaoh's and the person who saved much of the then world – including his family – from starvation, when reunited with the brothers who had plotted to kill him and had sold him, he knew that even though his brothers had meant evil, God had been able to use even that in the long run for good. God, ultimately, is not prevented from God in spite of whatever evil people may do.

So, in the Lord's Prayer, when we are praying for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, I believe that we are praying that we will be instruments of God's will, that we will work so that God's will is done. I believe that we are praying that God's deep desire may be done on earth in and among us just as God's will is to be done in heaven.

What does all this mean for us? I think it means that we should be asking ourselves if we are doing our part as a community, and as individuals to bring about the kind of world where God would be smiling,

where God would be rejoicing in the good that we are doing and the ways that the lives of others are being transformed through our actions.

When we ask for God's will to be done, when God's deep desires are met then everyone's needs will be met.

This may seem overwhelming, but I think about the parables Jesus told about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed – starting out small and growing into a big tree. The kingdom of God is like yeast that eventually causes the entire loaf of bread to rise – it permeates every part of the loaf.

We don't need to be concerned that we can't do it all, or even that we can't do enough. Whatever we can do, will be used by God and multiplied or grown until what you do, and what I do, will come together with what others are doing and make a real difference in our world. Whatever we do that makes a difference in the life of one person will have a ripple effect and make a difference in the life of someone else and another someone.

I would invite you this week, to spend time once again, praying the Lord's prayer every day, but this week, spend some time reflecting upon this particular section of the Lord's prayer. "The Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We might each ask ourselves, how we would act differently, if we really believed that we have a part to play in God's deepest desire being done.^{vi}

Paul Meier in his book, "The Lord's Prayer: Finding New Meanings Within the Language Jesus Spoke" says this, "When we ask for God's will to be done – God's deep desire – everyone's needs will be met. Every man, woman, and child will be fed, clothed, sheltered, and tended when they are sick. There will be peace within the earth (you and me). God's kingdom comes today, one person at a time, one family at a time, one

congregation at a time, one community at a time. When the world sees it happen, they will know the Name of the One we follow by our peace, love, and harmony.

“Because we all claim the Hebrew scriptures as the word of God, the command for Jews, Christians, and Muslims is the same: *‘Hear O Israel, (Christian, Muslim), the Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.’* (Deut 6:4-5) This is the great commandment. Jesus said a second is like it: *‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’*

“They will know Christians are Christians by their love. They will know Jews are Jewish by their love. They will know Muslims are Muslim by their love. From the writings of other faith traditions, we will know Buddhists are Buddhist by their love, We will know Hindus are Hindu by their love.

“Lord, let your deep desire be done.”^{vii}

Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

ⁱ Underwood, Don, [Pray Like Jesus](#), Loc. 336

ⁱⁱ Underwood, Loc. 203

ⁱⁱⁱ Underwood, Loc. 203

^{iv} <https://wesleyumcri.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/sermon-for-childrens-sunday-alex.pdf>

^v Underwood, Loc. 317

^{vii} Meier, Loc. 1033

^{viii} Meier, Paul, [The Lord’s Prayer: Finding New Meanings Within the Language Jesus Spoke](#), Loc. 509