

April 30, 2006
THY KINGDOM COME
Jeff Clinger

In the six weeks following Easter this spring Steve and I are preaching a sermon series on the Lord's Prayer – going through the prayer a section at a time and talking about its implications for us as Christian in the world today. Last week Steve began the series by talking about some of his own struggles with prayer and challenging us all to avoid the common traps of believing that there are only certain ways to pray and that the point of prayer is about getting things we want from God. Rather he pointed out, the point of prayer is about changing ourselves and bringing us into deeper relationships with our creator and with the rest of creation. He then connected those struggles and challenges to the Lord's prayer – the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray – as he looked at the opening lines, "Our Father who art in heaven" and talked about what it means for us to understand our relationship with God as that of a parent and child.

This morning then we turn to the next section of the prayer where Jesus prays – "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" and we wrestle with the question – what does it mean to pray for the coming of God's kingdom? It does not mean that we anxiously anticipate death or the end times so that we can experience God's kingdom in the afterlife. Unfortunately much of Christianity today has become obsessed with rapture thinking and the focus of God's kingdom has become otherworldly. When we pray the Lord's Prayer though, we are praying that God's kingdom will come to earth, that we will be able to experience it in the here and now in the midst of our earthly lives. And so we have to face a tough question then - if we're going to be praying it, do we really mean it? Before jumping into this question let me share a story.

This last week at open gym I was visiting with a recent college graduate who comes to help out most Wednesdays. She had just come from the first day of job training for a new position in sales and customer service and she was clearly shaken by something that had happened. We began to visit and she shared a little bit about some of the things that her trainer had said. Essentially the message was, if you're greedy you'll go far in this job – greed pays, and anyone who tells you that money can't buy you happiness is lying to you because money truly does lead to happiness. The entire presentation was focused around the accumulation of wealth and material things as a means of finding fulfillment in life. This training was running completely counter to everything that this young woman understood to be Christian ethics and in her eyes this man's presentation was sinful and greedy. She said she began to feel sick about even working within a system that so blatantly encouraged greed as a means of obtaining happiness.

One comment that she made as we spoke really stuck with me – she said something to the effect of, I'm just not used to being around people who aren't Christian and I'm not sure if it's right for me to be involved with this company. Her words really struck me because I think they illustrate the way that so many Christians function in the world today – wanting to isolate themselves away from non-believers, wanting to associate only with like minded people, trying to remain separate from the pain and the sin in the world. I shared that I thought maybe God was calling her to be a light in the midst of the darkness of this company and this consumeristic mindset and that maybe she was being called to work for the transformation of these things that she felt so strongly were sinful. She kind of humored my suggestion, but seemed more comfortable with the

idea of not working there than of trying to make a difference in the world through her work and interaction with people there.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not picking on this young woman, I think that the dilemma facing her this last week is one that faces us all at different times and in different ways and I think the way she was responding was quite usual – to prefer the comfort of being with like minded people to the challenge of working to transform or change something that we feel is sinful. However, just because it is a common human response, doesn't mean that it would be God's hope for us, or the best option.

Now, let's turn back for a minute to the question of what it means for us to pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus and many of his contemporaries were involved with systems much like what this young woman was describing to me earlier this week – greed ruled the day, people were concerned with looking out for their own selves, and there was a great deal of inequality and injustice. And in the midst of the injustices that existed, Jesus carried in his heart words from the Hebrew Scriptures, words from the book of Isaiah.

⁷How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'

⁸Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.

⁹Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

¹⁰The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;

and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

In his ministry and in his life Jesus lived and taught in ways that were about implementing Isaiah's kingdom message – about release for the captive in Israel, about the defeat of evil, and about the restoration of God's rule.

And so when we pray Jesus' prayer and say the words, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven, we are praying that we might follow in the line of Jesus and Isaiah, living in ways that will bring about God's reign so that all of the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. We are pledging to be a part of God's life changing work in the world, but do we mean it – are we really willing to take the risks and make the sacrifices that it would take to see God's will truly be done on earth as it is in heaven? Are we really willing to make ourselves vulnerable when it means potentially giving up things that we've grown accustomed to that make us comfortable? Are we really willing to step outside of our comfort zone in the name of Jesus and for the good of God's kingdom?

I read a book called *Blue Like Jazz* by Donald Miller this week. It is a memoir of sorts, a collection of essays that provide thoughts on faith and life – I highly recommend it. One of the essays is titled "confession" and provides a powerful example of this risk taking, thinking outside the box, type of discipleship that Jesus lived two thousand years ago and to which we are called today.

Miller was a student at Reed College in Portland, OR, a school constantly rated one of the least religious places in America. Each year at Reed there is a massive weekend long party where students get drunk and high and do crazy things and the campus security helps shelter them from the police. One year, as this weekend was

approaching Miller and some of his Christian friends – a very small minority on campus – were chatting about creative ways to make their presence known on the campus during this crazy weekend of partying.

Jokingly, Miller suggested that they should set up a confession booth on campus – the implication of his jest being that they would sit and take confessions from all of the people on campus who had done sinful things over the course of the crazy weekend. One of his friends loved the idea and jumped on it, but included a twist – they weren't actually going to take confessions. His friends all looked at him blankly and thought he must be crazy, but he proceeded to explain, "We are going to confess to them. We are going to confess that, as followers of Jesus, we have not been very loving; we have been bitter, and for that we are sorry. We will apologize for the Crusades, we will apologize for televangelists, we will apologize for neglecting the poor and the lonely, we will ask them to forgive us, and we will tell them that in our selfishness, we have misrepresented Jesus on this campus."

And he convinced his friends to do it. On the Saturday morning of this weekend long party, before the rest of the campus woke up Miller and his friends walked out onto the middle of campus and began to build their confession booth. As people walked by they would ask what was going on and these friends would explain that they were putting up a confession booth. They got a lot of confused looks and heard some pretty nasty comments, but they proceeded anyway. The exchange that Miller had with the first student to join him in the confession booth is really cool and includes some powerful stuff, but it goes on for several pages in the book and so I'll just share a highlight.

Once he had explained what was going on, Miller began to confess to the first student. He said the following – “There’s a lot. I will keep it short. Jesus said to feed the poor and to heal the sick. I have never done very much about that. Jesus said to love those who persecute me. I tend to lash out, especially if I feel threatened, you know, if my ego gets threatened. Jesus did not mix His spirituality with politics. I grew up doing that. It got in the way of the central message of Christ. I know that was wrong, and I know that a lot of people will not listen to the words of Christ because people like me, who know Him, carry our own agendas into the conversation rather than just relaying the message Christ wanted to get across...”

And as Miller confessed on behalf of Christianity to this nonbeliever, he said he saw this other persons eyes begin to well up with tears and he said, “I forgive you” and Miller knew he meant it. Miller and his friends visited with people in the confession booths until the early hours of the morning and as he walked off campus Miller said he felt an incredible peace. This confession booth was a bold act, it was a huge risk, it was a powerful way for a group of Christians, to seek reconciliation in the world between themselves and others that they had wronged. God’s will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...

Now, it is unlikely that any of us will ever set up a confession booth and confess to others on behalf of Christianity and this is fine. We are called however to follow the example of these bold Christians at Reed. We are called to live boldly, to live honestly, to live in relationship with God and with others in ways that lead to life. When we pray that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven we are making a commitment. As the blurb on the front of the bulletin this morning illustrates, how different would our lives be

if we prayed these words as our vow - Thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer we are making a vow to find ways to conform to God's will. We promise that we will seek to let God's will be done in our own lives as we discern God's will for us and find ways to live up to our fullest potential, sharing the gifts that God has given us. We promise that we will seek to let God's will be done in our communities, as we use the wisdom of God and the love of God to reconcile differences and to reach out to persons who are hurting and hungry and lost. We promise that we will seek to let God's will be done in the world as we acknowledge that our actions make a difference in the lives of people who are hungry in inner cities across the country, people who are working in sweatshops in Cambodia, people who are suffering from aids in Africa, and people who desperately need to experience and know the good news of Jesus Christ.

Praying the Lord's Prayer is not just about reciting some words in church on Sunday mornings or before we go to bed at night it is about lining up our lives to live in the light of the life of Christ, to share the good news of Christ. As N.T. Wright says in his book, *The Lord and His Prayer*, "What Jesus did, he did uniquely, once and for all. That is essential to the gospel. We don't have to go on repeating it again and again; and we couldn't, even if we wanted to. Rather, think of it like this. Jesus is the medical genius who discovered penicillin; we are the doctors, ourselves being cured by the medicine, now applying it to those who need it. Jesus is the musical genius who wrote the greatest oratorio of all time; we are the musicians, captivated by his composition ourselves, who now perform it before a world full of muzak and cacophony. The

kingdom did indeed come with Jesus, but it will fully come when the world is healed, when the whole creation finally joins in the song. But it must be Jesus' medicine, it must be Jesus' music. And the only way to be sure of that is to pray his prayer."

And so we are called to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" and we're called to mean it, to live it, to do things with our lives that work to bring God's kingdom into the here and now. And the good news is that Christ has come before us and that Christ goes with us working to bring about God's kingdom. And so as we work to bring about God's will on earth as it is in heaven, we aren't working alone, the power and the presence of the risen Christ journeys with us strengthening and empowering us.