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*The Prayer Jesus Taught: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."*

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*Matthew 5:43-48*

Last Sunday we began our Lenten exploration of the prayer Jesus taught. During this season we want to awaken within us the meaning and power of this prayer that can too easily become merely a rote spiritual practice done over and over and over again.

We looked at the words *hallowed be thy name* in the first line and remembered that prayers are addressed not to ourselves or to others listening to us, but to the One who is Holy and Other. Prayer begins with praise of God.

We looked at the male language Jesus uses to name God and asked if it might get in the way of our praying to God

because of evolving imagery for the divine and shifting use of gendered terminology. We explored other options for naming God. I received a note this week from a parent telling me that after last Sunday their four-year-old is now starting their prayers each night with “Our Mother, our Father...”

Language matters because it shapes our understanding of the world – and, as people of faith, it forms our view of the One we worship and serve. That’s true for children and adults, although it may be more difficult for those of us who’ve been using the same language for decades to make changes when we sense they may be needed. The prayer Jesus taught has wording so ingrained in us that we barely notice it as we say it. Occasionally on a Sunday I mouth the words to the prayer silently – not saying a thing – so I might listen to others, as if hearing it for the first time.

The one phrase in the opening line of the prayer Jesus taught that we did not look at last week is the reference to divine geography: *who art in heaven*. The wording intentionally distinguishes our location from God's. The phrase acknowledges that we are on earth, while God inhabits a cosmos not bound by temporal or spatial parameters. This difference becomes more important in the second line of the prayer: *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*.

The wording here is not pushing us to think of heaven and earth as separate, competing realities. Jesus is not endorsing a dualistic view of humanity and divinity. On the contrary, he's inviting us to do the opposite: to imagine that heaven and earth may be one and the same – on *earth* as it is in *heaven* – a truly far-reaching vision. It recalls the prophet's imagination:

“The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
The leopard shall lie down with the kid,

The calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
And a little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11:6)

The prayer Jesus taught is an incitement to rebellion against the way things are on earth because they do not reflect the ways of heaven. Each Sunday we blithely say this prayer together, when its powerful and unsettling meaning should cause us to squirm in our pews.

Justo Gonzales says that when we pray this line,

“What we are calling for is not so much a different place as a different order. It is a new order in which, as Jesus promises, those who have been last will be first.”

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

Some may chafe at the use of outdated terminology in this line. In another email I received this week someone said,

“I struggle with...‘thy’ and ‘thine.’ Those (words) come across to me as over pious, kind of like the words Jesus warned his disciples against. Other than in Shakespeare, they just aren’t words I hear or use in my daily life.”

How true that is. No one talks like that anymore. The most common English version of the prayer Jesus taught *does* use the idiom of Shakespeare, which is not surprising, since the King James Version of the Bible, from where we draw this prayer, was written in 1611 – a few years ago! We do not use such pronouns today, so why do they continue to appear in the prayer? Many recent versions of the prayer have shifted to the words “you” and “yours.”

The biblical Greek makes a distinction that today’s English cannot replicate when it comes to the second person pronoun. In English the word *you* is *both* singular and plural – which is a good argument for more of us starting to use y’all. The Greek term Jesus uses here is only singular to make it abundantly clear to his listeners that

anyone praying this prayer is speaking to *the one God who alone is worthy of our prayer.*

The traditional English wording tries to respect that by using “*thy kingdom.*” Its formality highlights the distinction in Greek, but it may not be worth making the grammatical point, especially if it introduces wording that comes between us and the one to whom we pray. If that’s the case, modern English would be preferable. Feel free to give it a try:

*Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

There are other challenges with this line. It echoes the male language of the opening words of the prayer with the word “*kingdom.*” The word rendered *kingdom* in our English Bibles translates the Greek *basileia*, which, ironically, is a feminine noun. We *could* follow the Greek

and simply insert “*queendom*” in the prayer, but that may not resolve the issue.

Some are using the word “*kin-dom*.” *Kin-dom* has the advantage of no gendered reference, and highlights the familial nature of God’s hope for humankind.

Yet, the term *kin-dom* softens the political implications of the words of Jesus. He could have found terminology more expressive of family relationships, but instead Jesus leans into the political and chooses language that embraces the sovereignty of God within the human community.

There are other options for wording that capture the intent of Jesus to ground the hope of his prayer in our communal life together. The word “*dominion*,” for instance, refers to a political realm that could reflect divine hopes for human community. But to our ears *dominion* sounds a little too

close to *domination*, and we do not want to pray for any more of that in our world.

The word “reign” might be the best alternative. It carries the political connotation Jesus wants and preserves the sovereignty of God. In fact, the two terms – reign and sovereign – are cognates. Feel free to try that alternate wording:

*Your reign come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

This line is the heart of the prayer Jesus teaches. It’s his personal mission statement. It names the purpose of the incarnation. It sums up the gospel. When the ministry of Jesus begins, both John the Baptizer and Jesus say that “the *basileia* of God” – the reign of God – “has come near.”

What exactly is the *basileia* of God? How do we describe the *reign* of God? Writing in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, John Calvin argued that one could not know the *reign* of God apart

from the *will* of God and argued that's why Jesus added to the prayer the phrase *your will be done*. (Quoted by Justo Gonzalez in *Teach Us to Pray* [Grand Rapids, Eerdmans; 2020], p. 92)

Praying that God's reign would break forth, then, is the same as praying that God's will might be known. To know God's will and to pursue it has been the calling of every follower of Jesus in every age, including our own.

In North Africa in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Bishop Cyprian of Carthage wrote persuasively about the prayer Jesus taught, particularly this line. The will of God, he said, may be seen in what Christ did and taught. This bishop's words from 18 centuries ago about the prayer Jesus taught seem to be addressed to us in our time. To pray that God's will would be done – which is what Christians pray every time they use the words Jesus taught – means, according to Cyprian:

“Humility in conversation;  
steadfastness in faith;  
modesty in words.  
Justice in deeds;  
mercifulness in works;  
discipline in morals;  
to be unable to do a wrong and to be able to bear a  
wrong when done;  
to keep peace with all;  
to love God with all one’s heart.”  
(Quoted in *Teach Us to Pray*, p. 92)

*Your reign come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

To pray as Jesus taught is to long with all our being that God’s desires would be implemented on earth as they surely are in heaven. Each time the prayer crosses our lips we commit ourselves, again and again, to take an active part in the inbreaking of God’s hope for the world.

If we really want to know what the will of God in heaven is, we need only read the words of Jesus and watch and learn from his ministry. Jesus spends a good deal of the Sermon on the Mount getting into specifics, about justice, about lying, about anger, about insults, about hypocrisy, about lust, about generosity, and so much more. The Christian gospels could be sub-titled, *what the reign of God looks like on earth.*

The parables of Jesus are another way to creatively tell what the will of God is. The stories about the mustard seed and the lost coin and the good Samaritan and the woman at the well all offer insight on the will of God for the human community. Every time Jesus heals someone it's as if the reign of God has splashed down on earth.

When Jesus ignores norms and expectations and includes someone that others are rejecting, God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

*When the sun rises on the evil and the good and it rain on the righteous and the unrighteous, we catch a glimpse of God's ways on earth as they are in heaven. And*

When Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of God in heaven," he makes it clear that the standards in his prayer for human relationships, whether personal or communal, are not the standards of the world.

All the words and deeds and stories of Jesus come rushing into view when we pray the prayer he taught. "Be perfect, therefore," he says, "As your heavenly Abba is perfect."

As if that were possible.

Jesus has high hopes for us – but he knows, as do all of us, that we will fall short. A bit more modest approach might be: *Help us, O God, to be as perfect as possible in our living so*

*that we might reflect your will in heaven – however imperfectly  
– on this earth.*

The prayer Jesus taught is not to be taken lightly or glossed over. It is, after all, meant to turn the world upside down, and all of us with it.

*Your reign come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

To God be the glory.

Amen.