

Luke 11:2-4

Thy Kingdom Come

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This month we start a new series entitled How DO I Pray?. It seems like we should know how to pray, as modern Christians today. But prayer can be intimidating. Church prayers sound formal and fancy. When we need to pray the most we don't want to rely on a professional prayers. Before a test at school we just want to bow our heads for a second to ask for help. Going into a conference with a difficult client we want to call on God's strength. Meeting with a doctor to talk about some tests, we ask God to help us stay clear-headed. Meeting with an estranged family member we just want to remain calm. So from time to time we all wonder - How Do I Pray? Is there a trick to it or pointers? What words should I say when I bow my head? What is the right thing to say when you ask for God's help or want to enter God's presence?

In his letter to the early Christians in the 1st century, Paul gave advice and words of encouragement. In his epistle to the church in Rome he was very candid. He admitted to them how hard it was to pray. Paul says, I struggle with it myself, because none of us "know how to pray as we should." Here was this tower of faith- a man who started our Christian religion- admitting that he had trouble praying. Take courage in that. Don't worry if you have questions about how to pray.

The disciples were also confused about how to pray. They watched Jesus and tried to understand him. They were constantly on the road meeting with people. Lepers cried out to him; blind people begged him. Women grabbed at his clothing. Prominent people begged for healings. Huge crowds showed up whenever he spoke. How did Jesus keep his focus and clarity each day? How did he see what all these different people needed? How did he jump so quickly from personal interactions to

lofty debates opening his heart to the poor and engaging in brilliant debate with his mind the next? How did he find the courage to speak his truth- no matter what the cost? What was the source of his spiritual strength?

They watched him steel away to pray- before dawn. They realized that he was often praying at night, and these moments with God did not add to exhaustion. They refreshed him. So they asked him – Master, teach us to pray. Tell us because we want to know. Jesus answered their question by saying the words that we say each week. We call it the Lord’s Prayer.

Known in every language, it is one of the first prayers a child memorizes. If I visit someone who is losing their memory, they will often remember the words of this prayer. When I go to the hospital to visit a church member who is sinking into semi-consciousness, they will often rally to say the familiar phrases of this prayer.

What Jesus has given us is so much more than a prayer; it is a lesson in how to have a life-long conversation with God. Each line contains a whole message. Today we will focus on the first line of Jesus’ prayer – Thy kingdom come. What does the first line mean? And what does it tell us about how we should pray?

In the first place, prayer is fuel for life. Prayer does for your soul what exercise does for your body. Prayer gives you comfort when you feel sad. It does not change what you have to face each day, but prayer reminds you that you need never face your challenges alone.

Confirmation Class- Question: How many of you have a cell phone? Do you know where your cell phone charger is right now? Could you find it if you needed to? Do you pay attention to how long your battery will last in each of those? Why? Because unless you periodically re-charge your phone you cannot use it. Eventually it will run out of juice, unless you periodically re-charge your phone.

John Dominic Crossan has written a book on the Lord's Prayer. {Crossan, John Dominic The Greatest Prayer: Redicovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer. New York:Harper One,2010} He starts it by saying that prayer does for our souls what electricity does for our cell phones. Prayer is the source of our spiritual energy. Whether we see it or not, we have batteries too. We push our batteries. We run our spiritual batteries right into the ground. But without prayer, we cannot be at our best; no more than our cell phone can work well without a complete charge every few days.

IN THE second PLACE, Jesus says pray for things that matter to you. Don't bother with pious prayers. Don't waste your time on fancy prayers. Don't try to impress God; you cannot. What God likes is honesty. Prayer for what you really think you need. Pray for something that will make a difference. Pray for your heart's deepest desire.

That is what Jesus does here when he says **thy kingdom come**. Jesus lived in a time when the he and all the Jewish people were terribly weary of being ruled by cruel strangers. Israel is right smack in the middle of a strategic bridge between Northern Africa and Southern Europe. For hundreds and hundreds of years Israel was in the middle of fights between the empires of the world. Their land was the tramping ground for one oppressive army after another. This little country was no military match for these armies. The Assyrians ruled the region. Next the Babylonians took over. Then the Persians and they were followed by the Greeks. Finally the Romans ruled the region. Each new empire brought its own form of bitter oppression. When Jesus bowed his head he said thy kingdom come. He prayed for God to rule the world.

Jesus says it does not matter which regime is in control. We have seen them all. There will never be real justice until we run this world by God's own rules. No one will be free until we all learn to follow the Ten Commandments. No one will be safe until we have a world where people love God with their whole heart and their neighbors as themselves.

When we start each service with Lords Prayer and say together – They kingdom come, we are asking for a world that is not run by the political values of one empire or another. We are praying for a world where swords are transformed into plowshears; Thy kingdom come. We pray that droids stop being deadly instruments of war and are turned into robots with medical uses; thy kingdom come. When we pray thy kingdom come-we are imaging a time when universities establish courses and whole curriculum about peace instead of organizing history so much around the various battles and wars that shape human existence.

When we pray- thy kingdom come, we are praying for a world where every child will child can feel completely safe and secure in this world, because no children are trying to grow up as war refugees, or go to school in territory that is occupied by a foreign army; thy kingdom come. When you pray thy kingdom come you are planting the seeds of serenity that will make the world a safer place for your children and their children for years to come. Thy kingdom come.

Finally, the very act of praying changes things. The very act of praying makes a difference. This is where Jesus was so different from John the Baptist and lots of other prophets. John the Baptist also wanted God's kingdom, but he thought God would send an army to vanquish the Romans, and destroy them in a merciless bloodbath. He wanted revenge. The Jews had every reason to be angry and bitter and to want to see others suffer the way that they had suffered.

Jesus understood that impulse to pray for revenge, but when he said they kingdom come, he was not hoping for revenge. He did not expect God to change the world. Jesus thought we can all change the world, one life at a time. Jesus thought the best way to stop violence is to live with a radical kind of love. The best way to challenge the Romans was to call them on their tyranny – when they beat you on one cheek – he advised the Israelites - turn the other and dare them to do it again. Stand up to their brutality- not with an army, but with the sheer force of your character.

When he prayed Thy kingdom come, he was saying – sign me up to change this world today. When we say those words we are saying – make us instruments of your peace. Thy kingdom come. Where there is hatred let us sow love. Thy kingdom come through me. Where is injury, pardon – thy kingdom come through me. – Where there is doubt- faith – thy kingdom come. Where there is injury, pardon. Where is despair hope. Thy kingdom come in my school. Thy kingdom come in my office. Thy kingdom come in my family.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu said it in 1999 to his people in South Africa. God cannot change this world without us. God needs us to be the hands God does not have. But we need God to inspire us and challenge us and encourage us to re-fashion this world in light of God's values. We cannot imagine this kind of transformation without God, and God cannot accomplish it without us.

That is what Jesus says here. Like him we have inherited a world which is rife with inequity, and political strife and economic oppression, to say nothing of the wars that rage on several continents at any given time. But we are God's voice, and we are God's hands. When we pray let's pray as Jesus did- thy kingdom come. When we pray those words let's make it mean something.