

LESSONS IN LIVING

The Disciples' Prayer *Part IV: Thy Kingdom* Come*

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
February 28, 2010

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:25-31 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

If I had to give a one sentence definition of prayer, I think my definition would be “tuning the heart.” Whatever you do that tunes your heart is how you pray. Now, there's a problem with that, in that when you come to realize that prayer doesn't change God, it changes us, many, many people will just stop. As children, we're taught that prayer is asking favors from the Santa Claus in the sky. For most of you, that breaks down and you stop doing that until you have children that you want to brainwash (or whatever nicer word we choose for that). You want them to fit into the culture, so even though you've had *major problems* with the way religion was taught to you, you pass that on. We're trying to get beyond that here, but it's a challenge.

We're looking at how Jesus taught us to pray. It's a textbook that in many ways lies unopened, or at least misunderstood. It starts with our common parent: Our Father, our Mother, our Parent. That's a very different kind of prayer than when you're having a personal relationship with someone. It's a different prayer. When you're taught religion as a one on one relationship, then it's not too hard to mistreat other people, and not realize that violates something, but when you pray to “our” heavenly parent, you have some way of realizing a call that's there for you.

The reason I often use scriptures from around the world is because if we do not get beyond the tunnel vision of one religion, one language, one culture, it's almost impossible to realize what any of them mean. By reading other people's newspaper, you begin to understand politics. By reading scriptures from around the world, you can kind of understand what somebody like Jesus, who was beyond any of us, meant beyond the culture.

So it says, *Our common parent, who art in heaven*. That means it's beyond our tangible experience. If something is everywhere, then it's not anywhere specifically. That's what transcendence means – that if the sacred is everywhere, then you don't necessarily find it anywhere. Then *Hallowed be thy name*--we saw as the divine name, the mystical experience that Moses has at the burning bush, forever symbolized (until the church took it over) that mystical experience. Not the word “God” but what the word God points to, which is the experience that Moses has at the burning bush – very different than orthodox religion...anybody's orthodox religion. And today we're coming to *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*.

This was dropped from the prayer about the time of Constantine. *On earth as it is in heaven*. That means the purpose of the church is not to get people in heaven, but to get heaven into people. Not to get to heaven “up there” while this world goes to hell, but to express the kind of love we experience in a pure form of this mystical experience, and bring it into our personal lives however far we can.

I see this as the call to activism, but there’s really two choices here. Let me give you the other one first, (and I’ll be very fair...you know that.) (*laughter*) One prayer is “God, here on earth, things are problematic. You could help us, but you’re really not doing that, so this is some constructive criticism. And we, from our incredible vantage point – something you can’t see obviously, see something that needs to change about the world.” That’s one possible understanding of *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. We’re asking God to do something different, because God knows that we’re not the problem.

The other way – if *God* is not the problem, then that means *we* are. There’s a way we need to be different, to live different, to think different, to see different, to hear different...and prayer takes us to that place. I think it was last week that I pointed out that the word “God” in scripture, this mystical word, is not a noun, but a verb. That’s very important. It’s very important to realize that the word “heaven” is an adverb. It’s not a noun. And when Jesus uses this *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done*, it’s what is called a *couplet* in Hebrew, where you’re saying the same idea in two different ways. The “will of God” and the “realm of heaven” are two different ways of saying the same thing.

The native intention of reality – if you believe that heaven is someplace else, if it’s a noun for you, and you’re groping to find your way there, that’s a different situation, and you’re so afraid of making a mistake that you hold back. A wonderful question I heard asked is “*if you’re not giving your best to the world, what world are you saving it for?*” I do not believe that you were put here to get someplace else. Now, hopefully, you’ll go someplace else, but that’s not what’s being talked about here. *On earth as it is in heaven* is talking about **your life now!**

But Jesus says this in an incredible way. Most people, when they want to call others to activism – myself included, point out the problems of the world, and they say “don’t you care?” And what happens? You shrivel, right? “I’ve got my problems, I’m barely coping now, don’t tell me about Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, don’t tell me about it” Jesus takes a very different tack. (which is why we come to listen to Jesus, and not to me.) He said, “Don’t worry...stop worrying about what you’re going to eat, what you’re going to drink, how you’re going to make a living...stop worrying about that, and making that your life.”

Wow...we’re going to walk backwards to get to where I think he’s leading us on this. But let’s start back with the guilt stuff again, and we’ll work backwards. When we look at the world and we see the violence, almost anyone can realize there’s something wrong, but we can’t figure out how to not do it. When Jesus was going into Jerusalem, there’s a very powerful scene where he stops and breaks down and starts crying, and the reason he’s crying, it says, “they don’t know what makes for peace.” It’s not that we don’t want peace, it’s not that we don’t long for peace, but we don’t know where it comes from, and so, we end up fighting in our homes, our families, our workplaces, and in the world.

Did you read that we have now reached 1,000 casualties in Afghanistan?...*a thousand young people*. That should be staggering. It should be front-page news. Why have we gotten numb to that? Now, the Pentagon said it’s not a thousand, it’s 996, or something like that, so I want to be fair. (*laughter*) Very often, people say, when I talk about war, that somehow, that’s disrespectful to the troops. The other day, somebody said, “it almost sounded like you were angry in your sermon.” (I thought, “You have no idea (*laughter*) how I calm down and do breathing exercises.”)

I want to read you something that most of you will not want to hear. It's a message from a soldier. It was an article in the *New York Times*. I find it very powerful, and I think, if we talk about prayer, I think it's deep listening, and it's listening not only to people on your side of the divide, but also to people with whom you disagree to the core of your being. But this is a soldier. Please listen to his words:

Distant Wars, Constant Ghosts
By SHANNON MEEHAN

In 2007, I was an Army lieutenant leading a group on a house-clearing mission in Baquba, Iraq, when I called in an artillery strike on a house. The strike destroyed the house and killed everyone inside. I thought we had struck enemy fighters, but I was wrong. A father, mother and their children had been huddled inside.

Killing enemy combatants comes with its own emotional costs. On the surface, we feel as soldiers, that killing the enemy should not affect us – it is our job, after all. But it is still killing, and on a subconscious level, it changes you. You've killed. You've taken life. What I found, though, is that you feel the shock and weight of it only when you kill an enemy for the first time, when you move from zero to one. Once you've crossed that line, there is little difference in killing 10 or 20 or 30 more after that.

War erodes one's regard for human life. Soldiers cause or witness so many deaths and disappearances that it becomes routine. It becomes an accepted part of existence. After a while, you can begin to lose regard for your own life as well. So many around you have already died, why should it matter if you go next? This is why so many soldiers self-destruct when they return from a deployment.

I know something about this. The deaths that I caused also killed any regard I had for my own life. I felt that I did not deserve something that I had taken from them. I fell into a downward spiral, doubting if I even deserved to be alive. The value, or regard, I once had for my own life dissipated.

Five weeks ago, my first child, a son, was born. Not surprisingly, my thoughts often race back to the children I killed. With the birth of my son, I received the same gift I destroyed.

The fact that soldiers are trained and expected to kill as part of their job is something that few people wish to talk about. Many men and women coming back from war don't risk telling the stories that have so profoundly changed their lives.

In recent months I've been trying to honor the lives I took by writing and speaking in public about my experience, to show that those deaths are not tucked neatly away in a foreign land. They may seem distant, but they are not. Soldiers bring the ghosts home with them, and it's everyone else's job to hear about them, no matter how painful it may be.

The Bible says the root of war is not in hatred, although hatred can be a part of it – that no war lasts long for hatred alone. The motivating force that keeps nations at war for 40,000 years has been greed. War is the most lucrative business in history – it always has been. And so, when you live in an economy that's simply based on making as much money as you can, it will lead you to war every time. And the people who love you and trust you go out in your name to protect you, and the faces behind that sad drama are

never present for us to see. You and I are called to seek out those faces, to name them, and to realign our economy into a way that doesn't require violence.

I ran across a very strange statistic. It said that an average person in the United States consumes 250 times as much as someone in Nigeria does in a given year. Think about the violence that it takes to maintain that discrepancy. We consume 531 times as much as people from Ethiopia. It changes how we see things when our economy and our structure and our politics is based on rights of possession and not on human rights. When you organize a power system around rights of possession and power, you will inevitably go in one direction. When you organize it around human need and human dignity, you will inevitably go a different direction.

Again, to be fair to the Pentagon, they decided – because we're trying to win the hearts of the people in Afghanistan – to give \$2,000 to the parents of any child killed. *(To the congregation)* How many people here have had young children in your life? *(Many hands raised)* How many people, if someone killed one of your children, and offered you \$2,000, would consider that a fair deal? *(No hands raised)* How many of you would be so angry, that you would want those people – those smug people – who live comfortably behind that violence, to feel your pain? \$2,000 doesn't even buy a casket over here...much less, replace the pain.

So Jesus did something very strange – I'm getting back to Jesus now. He took the people who had been brainwashed with their culture, and their religion, and their economy, and he took them outside the city to the Sea of Galilee and gave a sermon that we remember as The Sermon on The Mount. The setting is vital – away from the city, away from commerce, wildflowers everywhere, the wind, the sea, and he said stop worrying about how you're going to live. Of course, you have needs, of course. But don't make that your life. If you've lost direction, look at these wildflowers. That's what lilies are...just wildflowers. There's a place for them in the universe. Now, there's not a place for them in capitalism or empire, but that's a sermon for another day. In terms of finding your own soul, your own heart, these words, to me, have always felt like medicine, like healing ointment. Don't worry about what you're going to eat, or what you're going to wear. Your life is much greater than that, much more important than that. People without trust in life go after those things. See, what Jesus realizes is we do these things not because we're mean, but because we're afraid. The violence follows the grasping, but the grasping comes because we're afraid.

We don't trust nature, we don't trust life, we don't trust ourselves. And so, Jesus says, "Give your life to trust. Seek ye first the realm of God." What does that mean? It means nature – we're talking about the will of God, nature, that's pretty obvious to see, life, and humanity. So nature, a reverence for life, a celebration of human rights across the globe – these are very clear ways that we make it "on earth as it is in heaven." To make this universal kindness the operating principle of your life is what's being talked about here. But we're going to have to take religion back for love. It's not going to happen in traditional structures, believe me.

When I was in Seminary, I read Rabbi Heschel, who was a mystic. I didn't realize he was a radical. Listen to this:

Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods. The liturgical movement (which is a movement to renew worship) must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision.

Now, does this seem like a burden? The greatest friends of humankind have known the greatest peace. I learned this from survivors of the Holocaust. I met a few of them, and that led me to the book by Viktor

Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Talk about some really remarkable moments - they are in a concentration camp, often times in utter despair, and somebody comes running in and says, "Look, there's something out here." They run outside and he's talking about sunlight on a pool of water. Listen to Frankl's words:

We stood there, marveling at the goodness of the creation. We were tired and cold and sick, we were starving to death, we had lost our loved ones and never expected to see them again, yet there we stood, feeling a sense of reverence as old and formidable as the world itself.

When you consider the wildflowers, the animals, when you consider nature deeply, you will remember you are an expression of that. And you begin to put your human affairs in that context. Do you remember we began with the burning bush...what does God say to Moses? "I have heard my people cry." The religion that is simply a personal relationship with God is no religion at all...is false religion. You worship the common Parent of every being on the planet...human, plants and animals, Jewish, Islamic, gay, straight, black, white, brown, and every hue in between. To come to this prayer means to worship that God, the common source of us all.

Martin Luther King once said that what hurt him most, sitting in jail, was not the bitter words of his enemies, but the silence of his friends. And what most hurts your brothers and sisters, scattered around the world, is your silence about the sweatshops...about the conditions outside this country. To pray for it to be "on earth as it is in heaven," means to give ourselves to that voice we hear right now calling us to care – to be an ambassador for another kind of world. It's a promise of a peace the world cannot give you, and cannot take away.

If you've been saving your gift and not giving it to this world, this prayer is asking you, "what kind of world are you saving it for?"

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

**We use the word "kin-dom" (coined by theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz) because God transcends gender, and to emphasize our familial relationship with each other, both here and world-wide.*

The Disciples' Prayer Series

Part I: February 7, 2010, Matthew 6:7-13 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part II: February 14, 2010, John 14:1-4; 8-19 (*The New Oxford Bible*);

World Scripture: Chandogya Upanishad

Part III: *Hallowed Be Thy Name.* February 21, 2010, John 8:30-59; Exodus 3:13-17 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part IV: *Thy Kingdom Come.* February 28, 2010, Matthew 6:25-31 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part V: *Our Daily Bread.* March 7, 2010, Exodus 16:13-21 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part VI: *Forgive Us Our Debts.* March 14, 2010, Matthew 18:21-35 (*The Inclusive Bible*)



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