

Your Kingdom Come
Luke 17:20-21
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First Central Congregational Church
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As we continue our series on the Lord's Prayer, today we come to the phrase, "Your Kingdom Come." Our Gospel reading is another passage in the Book of Luke where Jesus addresses the coming of the kingdom.

Luke 17:20-21

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

A few weeks ago in the philosophy class I teach at Creighton University, we discussed Aristotle's views on government. Aristotle was a critic of democracy because he felt that the masses were selfish and could not be trusted to be good and wise. Instead he defended monarchy as the best form of government, but he had a few important qualifications he put on that. Monarchy is the best form of government only as long as the ruler is wise and good and always put the interest of the people ahead of the monarch's own. Now, even Aristotle was quick to admit that monarchy could devolve into tyranny when the ruler became self-interested, and tyranny he thought is the worst form of government. I always point out to my students that one reason the founders of our nation were so critical of monarchy is because they had a couple of thousand more years of empirical experience than Aristotle did to draw upon, and they knew that his idealized form of monarchy was so rare as to be almost nonexistent. Monarchy turns quite regularly into tyranny.

After teaching on the subject, I ask my students on a quiz which form of government they prefer and why. Of course, most students defend democracy against its criticisms; which is ideally what I'm looking for. But there are a handful of students who agree with Aristotle and defend monarchy. This always surprises me when I see it.

This semester, a few days after that quiz, I read an article published by the Guardian entitled "The Americans who think a monarchy would solve their political problems."

Apparently there is a growing online community of American supporters of monarchy. The article quotes a Wharton professor who has studied the trend and tries to explain it:

“I think it’s nostalgia,” “They like the pomp and circumstance,” he said. “Maybe they’re traditionalists, and they like something that provides continuity.” He also pointed out that Hollywood, and specifically Disney, with its famous princesses, has been culturally influential when it comes to the public perception of a monarchical government.

Given that our son is currently in a Disney craze--*Tangled*, the Rapunzel film is his favorite of the moment—that alarmed me just a little.

As an avowed believer in democracy, I find this attraction to monarchy both puzzling and a little concerning.

And, yet, almost every day I pray for a kingdom to come. What, exactly, am I praying for?

The kingdom of God was one of the central tenets of Jesus’ teaching, and as a concept and image it has retained its influence and power upon the Christian tradition.

But we generally are *not* praying for some human being to be crowned monarch. When we pray “Your kingdom come,” we are speaking in metaphor. A metaphor that Jesus used before us.

In recent decades other words have been used because of our discomfort with “kingdom.” You’ll hear people say the reign, rule, or dominion of God. I often use reign, but that’s really not substantially different. It’s still smacks of monarchy.

Some people say “kin-dom of God.” That word does express some of Jesus’ idea, but it misses the political element, which seems essential to Jesus’ teaching. If Jesus wanted to talk about the family of God, he could have done that, but he did not. He explicitly chose a political metaphor. Plus, I find “kin-dom” to be cute, in the pejorative sense of cute.

What, then, are we praying for when we pray “Your kingdom come?” What does the metaphor mean?

Well, let’s first try to understand what Jesus meant when he used it. He spoke about it often, sometimes in his straightforward teachings. Sometimes he spoke of it obliquely in parables, such as saying the kingdom of God is like hidden yeast or a mustard seed. Sometimes it was part of his warnings and proclamations of the coming end of the world.

The Southern Baptist theologian W. T. Conner in his book *The Faith of the New Testament* has a thirty page chapter discussing the various ways Jesus uses the image. Conner begins that chapter by exploring what the phrase would have been before Jesus, in the Hebrew scriptures, particularly the prophets, and in first century Judaism. Conner finds three general uses for the phrase in the culture of Jesus. People were looking forward to a new political order, when an independent Jewish state was restored. These *are* the folks who were in fact praying for a human ruler to be crowned. But Conner points out that some others were looking forward to a restoration of proper religious order. While others dreamed of the end of time when God would deliver all people, judge the oppressors, and set the world right.

What all of these have in common is that they look forward to “the good time coming.” I’ve always liked that description of the kingdom of God. The good time coming. Easy for us to grasp what is meant on the most basic level. But then we do have to explore the details of what that good time is. This was the general meaning in the time of Jesus, but when Jesus himself prayed, “Your kingdom come,” what did he mean? Did he want to crown a new ruler, establish a political order, look forward to the end of time, or something else?

Well, you might not be surprised that scholars disagree on that point.

W. T. Conner argues that Jesus did not long for a new political order. Instead, Jesus took this image and gave it new meaning. Jesus’ unique contribution was to add an inner, spiritual dimension to the idea kingdom of God. And in support of that interpretation, W. T. Conner references the passage from Luke I just read, wherein Jesus says that the kingdom of God is within and among us. Conner describes this as the “spiritual reign of God in the hearts and the lives of” humankind. The kingdom comes within us when we do the will of God, which is to love God and one another. Conner further emphasizes that as a spiritual kingdom, it is an already present reality. Followers of Jesus may exist within the troubled political realms of this world, but they also live within the spiritual realm of love inaugurated by Jesus.

But other writers have rejected that Jesus’ idea was so spiritualized. They contend that Jesus wasn’t offering a radically new understanding of the kingdom of God. Instead, what he meant was something that fit the traditional ideas of the Hebrew prophets.

One of the best examples of this interpretation is the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder who in his great book *The Politics of Jesus* argued that the kingdom of God in Jesus’ teaching relied upon the priestly vision of the Jubilee when all debts were forgiven. We will get more into the idea of the Jubilee in a few weeks when we come to the part of the Lord’s Prayer about forgiving debts. But to put it simply, in the book of Leviticus, the Hebrews were instructed by God to celebrate a Jubilee every fifty years. Debts were to be forgiven, people were to be restored to the property they had lost, and prisoners and slaves were to be set free. Basically, it is a chance for the entire society to start over again once every generation.

It is this idea of the fresh new start for society, which Yoder argues influences Jesus’ idea of the kingdom of God. So Yoder describes the coming kingdom as “a visible socio-political, economic restructuring of relations among the people of God, achieved by divine intervention in the person of Jesus as the one Anointed . . . with the Spirit.”

Very different from W. T. Conner then.

Spiritual kingdom on one end of the spectrum, new political order on the other. Any options in between you might ask? Well, of course there are.

John Dominic Crossan describes the kingdom of God rather vaguely as “people under divine rule, and that, as ideal, transcends and judges all human rule.” Not very helpful, actually. But from that vague start, Crossan draws upon the life and teachings of Jesus to develop a rich understanding of the image.

It is a “kingdom of nobodies and undesirables,” as Jesus works to embrace and include the sorts of people normally left out of meaningful roles in society—the poor, lepers, prostitutes, children, etc. Crossan convincingly argues that Jesus did have a radical, political vision. But Crossan also writes that Jesus’ view was not only that.

Crossan argues that for Jesus the kingdom was not a dream of the world to come at the end of time, instead it is a world is possible here and now. Crossan describes this as an “ethical kingdom,” “an ideal mode of human existence.” He writes, “One enters that Kingdom by wisdom or goodness, by virtue, justice, or freedom. It is a style of life for now rather than a hope of life for the future.”

Crossan makes an interesting point that we don’t simply pray for the kingdom, we perform the kingdom. The kingdom comes when we live it here and now.

So, when we pray, we are committing ourselves to an ethical idea. This ethical idea is rooted in a radical, political vision, but has personal, spiritual implications.

My own thinking has been richly informed by each of these writers, all of whom grasp various nuances of this idea. But this week I was most drawn to what Marcus Borg wrote about the kingdom of God. He said, “It is God’s dream, God’s passion, God’s will, God’s promise, God’s intention for the earth, God’s utopia—the blessed place, the ideal state of affairs.” And that ideal state of affairs, as made clear in the prophets before Jesus, is “a transformed world, a world of justice and plenty and peace, where everybody has enough and where” no one shall be afraid. Think of the beautiful words of the prophet Isaiah that we read earlier in the service.

What is your ideal state of affairs? What would a transformed world look like for you? When you pray, “Your kingdom come,” you get to dream what that means.

Borg calls this “participatory eschatology.” We aren’t just awaiting some divine act at the end of history, we get to participate right now in making the kingdom of God a reality. Borg concludes his discussion of the idea with these words:

Jesus’ message about the kingdom of God, it seems to me, is not that complicated. God’s will for the earth, God’s passion for this world, is very different from what we see around us. To his hearers [Jesus] said, ‘Can you see that?’ And he sought to open the eyes of the blind, to set free the captives and oppressed, to proclaim the jubilee of God.

Can you see that God’s will for the world is different from the status quo? I bet you can. I hope you can.

When we pray “Your kingdom come,” we are acknowledging that all is not right with the way things currently are. We are imagining and dreaming what a world transformed and blessed by God would look like. We are praying for justice, peace, and plenty.

We are also praying for ourselves to be transformed by those very dreams. For us to be inspired and encouraged by those ideals. We are, thus, praying for the kingdom to come within us, for the spirit of God to take hold of us. We are committing ourselves to a way of life.

The kingdom of God is a dream, a goal, and a present possibility, that entices us to be our very best in service to God and one another.

Then, let us pray, as Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come.”