

“Conditioned to Pray”

Isaiah 2:4; 11:6-9; 32:16-20

Matthew 14: 22-33

This past week, Kathleen and I had the privilege to attend the RE:Create: Arts, Recreation, and Worship Conference in Montreat. We had the chance to dig in and learn all kinds of things about being “At the Table” with one another. We discussed different kinds of tables, the diversity of people at the table, and the endless possibilities of things that happen at the table. In the midst of it all, there was one word that really stood out to me by the end of the week.

“*Tangibilitate.*” In a TED Talk centered around the true nature of compassion, this is a term used by Dr. James Forbes. As a pastor and philanthropist, the charge of the talk was the need to “*tangibilitate;*” or make real the gospel, and love, and peace of God. It is not enough to just hear it and know it, we must “*tangibilitate;*” or embody it, use it, share it. It is a fun word isn’t it? “*Tangibilitate.*”

The more I let that term sink in, the more it was clear that is what we hope for in our prayers to God. We pray to God because we were created to. We pray to God because we recognize that God knows something we don’t. We pray to God because we want and deeply long for things that are greater and better than what we are experiencing. We pray to God because we believe and have faith that God can and will deliver in making the good news of the gospel, namely God’s love and peace, a reality for us, and not just sometime, but as soon as possible.

And even more poignantly than with our general prayers, when we pray the prayer Jesus teaches us, the Lord’s Prayer, we express our longing for “Thy Kingdom to come.” So, in the Lord’s Prayer, we first pray acknowledging that God is both approachable (as a father and/or mother) and heavenly; and therefore, hallowed be God’s name. Then, we petition to God for “God’s Kingdom to come.” We say these words because we believe and have faith that God’s Kingdom will surely come. We pray these words because we desire for God’s Kingdom to be an experienced reality, and not just some fantasy we wander about.

As we closed last week, I quoted Shirley Guthrie, from his book *Christian Doctrine*, and I am going to return there as we start our conversation today. Here is the thing, Guthrie writes, “The world is not self-explanatory. When we look around us, we ask, where did it come from? What holds it together? There must be a God who is the source and ground of all things. Behind all the change and decay we see around us, there must be an Ultimate Reality that is eternal and unchanging. We are born; we work, love, hate, suffer, and die. But we may find comfort, strength, and hope from the fact that we do not come from nothing and return to nothing. We come from God, live in a world created and governed by God, and return to God.”

I think Guthrie is on to something when he declares that “there must be an Ultimate Reality that is eternal and unchanging.” I think he is referencing God’s Kingdom. In our belief that we are all created in the image of God, we honor that we do indeed come from God, who, in order to be God, must reside or claim a Kingdom. And even though humanity has tainted and disrespected it, the world we live in is God’s creation and God is still governing (we just don’t always see that on the news). It is in our tainting and disrespecting that we become the products of our own struggles, causing more and more stress and hostility and fear, to the point of which we can’t help (because we weren’t created that way) to long for relief and peace. And as children of God, we hope for those things through God. If possible, we hope for those things from God while we are still upon this world in which God created and governs, but if not then, we definitely hope that we do indeed return to God for an eternal rest within the realm of God’s eternal Kingdom.

The Heidelberg Catechism stresses that to pray “Thy Kingdom Come” is to express a longing for God’s peace. To expand the three word prayer in its meaning, we are offering a prayer to God that reads: “Rule us by your Word and Spirit in such a way that more and more we submit to you. Keep your church strong, and add to it. Destroy the devil’s work; destroy every force that revolts against you and every conspiracy against your Word. Do this until your kingdom is so complete and perfect that in it you are all in all.”

The Westminster Confession also unpacks the meaning of “Thy Kingdom Come:” “We pray that Satan’s kingdom may be destroyed and that the kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it, and kept in it, and that the kingdom of glory may be hastened.”

In a nut shell, to pray for God’s Kingdom to come is to pray for the things that have their origin in God: love, peace, light, mercy, to name a few. We don’t long for these things by accident; they are what make up God’s intended nature for humanity. We learn to pray for these things not just because Jesus teaches us to as he did the disciples, but because we experience so much of the opposite in and through our lives.

There are some scripture passages that help us to know that humanities’ longing for God’s Kingdom, including God’s love and peace, has deep roots.

Isaiah paints three portraits as the Israelites longed for the Promised Land:

“God shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (2:4)

“The wolf shall dwell 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. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. The will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” (11:6-9)

“Then just will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places. The forest will disappear completely, and the city will be utterly laid low. Happy will you be who sow beside every stream, who let the ox and the donkey range freely.” (32:16-20)

And I won’t read the whole thing now but a story we might be familiar with is Matthew 14:22-33: after just witnessing the miracle of feeding the 5000+, going from no food to having left overs, the disciples have gotten into a boat to cross the sea and while they are far away from the shore, the waves begin to batter the boat and the winds become strong enough to cause terror and fear in even the greatest of fisherman; from the water, they see what they describe as a ghost, but soon recognize it to be Jesus walking on the water toward them; for assurance, Peter asks Jesus that if it is him, instruct him to come out onto the water; Jesus tells Peter to come and Peter does; Peter’s first few steps appear to be good, until he stops walking and takes his focus off Jesus; Peter begins to focus on the waves and the wind and begins to sink; Jesus reaches out and pulls Peter back up into the boat, settles the sea, and peace is upon the disciples.

Our longing for peace, comes from the condition of stress, hostility, injustice, and war (much of which we create ourselves). We need to know God’s love, peace, grace, and light are real. We need for God to reveal to us “Thy Kingdom.”

It is Mother’s Day, so I think it is only fitting to close with “A Parable for Mother’s”. I encourage you to listen for the Kingdom language embedded throughout:

A young mother set her foot on the path of Life. "Is the way long?" she asked. And her Guide said: "Yes, and the way is hard. And you will be old before you reach the end of it. But the end will be worth it."

But the young mother was happy, and she would not believe that anything could be better than these years. So she played with her children, and gathered flowers for them along the way, and bathed with them in the streams, and the sun shone on them, and

life was good, and the young mother cried: "Nothing will ever be lovelier than this".

Then night came, and storm, and the path was dark, and the children shook with fear and cold, and the mother drew them close and covered them with her mantle and the children said: "Oh, Mother, we are not afraid for you are near, and no harm can come." And the mother said: "This is better than the brightest of days, for I have taught my children courage."

And the morning came and there was a hill ahead, and the children climbed and grew weary, and the mother was weary, but at all times she said to the children: "A little patience and we are there." So the children climbed, and when they reached the top, they said: "We could not have done it without you, Mother." And the mother, when she lay down that night, looked up at the stars and said: "This is a better day than the last, for my children have learned fortitude in the face of difficulty. Yesterday I gave them courage, Today I have given them strength."

And the next day came strange clouds which darkened the earth - clouds of war and hate and evil, and the children groped and stumbled, and the mother said: "Look up! Lift your eyes to the light." And the children looked and saw above the clouds an Everlasting Glory, and it guided them beyond the darkness. And that night the mother said: "This is the best day of all, for I have shown my children God."

And the days went on, and the months and the years, and the mother grew old, and she was small and bent. But her children were strong and tall and walked with courage. And when the way was hard, they helped their mother; and when the way was rough they lifted her, for she was as light as a feather; and at last they came to a hill, and beyond the hill they could see a shining road and golden gates flung wide. And the mother said: "I have reached the end of my journey. And now I know that the end is worth it, for my children can walk alone, and their children after them."

And the children said: "You will always walk with us, Mother, even when you have gone through the gates."

And they stood and watched her as she went on alone, and the gates closed after her. And they said: "We cannot see her, but she is with us. A mother like ours is more than a memory. She is a living presence."

May God, and God's Kingdom, be a living reality for all us as we pray: God, "Thy Kingdom Come." Let all God's people say... Amen.