

Thy Kingdom Come

Matthew 6:9-15; Matthew 13:11-16

Good morning again friends and good morning to those watching on the livestream- it's good to have you with us.

Today, we're continuing our worship series on the Lord's Prayer. What does the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray have to teach us? As we dig a little deeper into a prayer that many people can rattle off without much thought; what does this prayer have to tell us about who we are in our relationship to God? The focus of our first Sunday of this Series was the phrase, "Our Father, Who Art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thine Name.", This phrase reminds us that we are in familiar and familial relationship with the God of Heaven and Earth.

Today, we're turning our focus to the next section of the prayer, "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will be Done, On Earth as it is in Heaven." When I was contemplating these phrases, I realized that one of the things that trips me up in the Kingdom language. I know that Jesus preached and taught *a lot* about the Kingdom of Heaven. There is a whole set of parables that illustrate what the Kingdom of Heaven is like - a mustard seed, yeast, a very precious treasure, all which tell us something about what God's Kingdom is like. But still, Kingdoms are not something we talk about in everyday life anymore. The language feels vaguely medieval to me - the idea of warring rulers, of castles and nights, of the Kingdom's rising or falling. And sometimes, whether we are

conscious of it or not, antiquated language can limit our understanding or our imaginations.

I was trying to think of a word that captured the idea of Kingdom, but also made it more accessible, and where I landed is “Culture” God’s Culture. In a culture, there’s power dynamics, right? Whose voice gets heard, what’s the dominant story. Canada is working through this right now as we talk about the history of Settlers and Indigenous Peoples. European Culture has been placed at the center of the Canadian narrative, so cultures can carry power and influence.

Cultures also carry expectations - these can be big or small expectations, ways of living or codes of behavior, things we just “do, because that’s how it’s done.” For example, when you go into an elevator, and select your floor, which direction do you face? The door, right, everyone faces the door. Why? Just because that’s how you do it!

I had a friend who when they got on an elevator with other people in it, he would turn to face the back wall. Just to make people uncomfortable, and I’ll let you know that it worked.

In cultures, like in the Kingdom, there are also priorities; the things that we consider valuable or important. Take Mennonite Culture as an example. A couple weeks ago, I visited the Mennonite Historical Society Archives in Saskatoon for Canadian Mennonite Assignment and I was given a very thorough tour of the archives and the materials there by some of the really amazing volunteers. One particular section of the archives is

devoted to books written by Mennonites, and there were *a lot*, what feels like an outsize quantity for a relatively small group of people. I asked the volunteer about this, and he said that his theory is that Mennonites place a very high priority on education, especially higher education and writing because the earliest Anabaptist faith (which we talked about last week) was formed by people reading the scriptures and thinking critically about what they were reading, often in defiance to the Catholic Church. We've inherited that value from them. So, in a culture, like in an ancient Kingdom, you have power dynamics, you have cultural expectations and you have priorities.

Cultures can also be built. Intentional steps can be taken to create or foster positive or negative cultures. I think about this in our own household. Sometimes culture-creation is about adding value, like I want our family to be a place where our kids can ask any questions they want, without fear of judgment. Or cultures can be built in opposition to something, like I don't want to create a culture of constant busy-ness in our lives, of never being home together.

So when we talk about Kingdom building this morning, let's try subbing in the word culture. "Thy Culture Come, Thy Will Be Done, on Earth as it is in Heaven"

Has anyone ever played the word association game? Where someone says a word and then the other people have to say the first word that comes to mind? So when I say culture, what's the first word that comes to mind? For me, the first word that comes to mind is Culture War: a very common turn of phrase within the United States context.

The culture wars in government, in school and even churches. Another common theme of culture wars is the church against the world. And while I don't think an Us vs Them mentality is aligned with the teachings of Jesus, which was more of God gives *all* of Himself to *all* of us, this idea of warring kingdoms, or culture clashes is present in scripture,

In Ephesians, Paul talks about humanity be slave to one culture, and then saved into a new one, "All this for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." -that's Ephesians 2:1-10.

When we talk about wars of kingdoms or culture wars, and how that intersects with the Culture of God, we can feel the pull in any number of directions.

First, there's the pull of God's Culture versus our own as a person, or as a household.

At our council meeting on Monday, Ed shared some beautiful and really vulnerable parts of his story. At one point, Ed and Erna owned a property and they were spending a lot of their resources-time, money and energy -- growing and establishing that property.

Building buildings, landscaping, etc. At the same time, they were involved in a really intentional small group through Wildwood Mennonite Church. Ed said they and some other people in this group began to question if all this work and energy into building their own individual "kingdoms" was worth it; why not share more of a life and a space in common? So they bought a house together with two other couples and lived life in community. Sometimes it's our own cultures that butt up against God's culture.

There's also the pull between God's culture and the World's Culture, and that's also in play, I think, in Ed's story. The dominant North American culture says that each nuclear family should own their own home, provide for their own needs, and raise their own children. Sometimes this culture of individualism runs counter to the communal approach that was exemplified by the early Church.

Lastly, and this is the cultural challenge that is perhaps the most slippery, and that is what we think God's Culture, or God's Kingdom should look like. Because we all have our own ideas, our own understandings, or our emphases. One day recently, Junia asked me: "Mom, what's the meaning of life?" I told her, "I think the meaning of life is to love God and love people." Good answer, right? Parenting gold star. But what does that

look like on Tuesday morning- does loving God mean protesting a pipeline? Does loving God mean sharing the gospel message with a neighbor? What does it mean to build God's culture in our world, and how do we keep from getting this culture all tangled up with our own?

The disciples struggled with these questions too. I've been reading this wonderful little book, *The Lord and His Prayer* by N.T. Wright. Wright addresses what the disciples thought and hoped Jesus meant when he said the Kingdom of God was coming, "Jesus' contemporaries were longing for God to become King. Putting it bluntly, they were fed up with the other things they'd had for long enough. As far as they were concerned, the Roman emperors were curse, and the Herodian dynasty was a joke. It was time for the true God, the true King to step into history, to take the power and glory, to claim the Kingdom for his own." And Jesus' Kingdom, Jesus' culture was fulfilled, but not in the way disciples expected. It makes me wonder- if Jesus's disciples could miss understand the culture that Jesus was trying to create...how can I be sure? How can I be sure that I'm building God's culture and not just what-Emily-thinks-is God's culture?

The answer is prayer. As simple and as hard as that sounds, the answer is prayer. Wright says this, "What Jesus did, he did uniquely, once and for all. That is essential to the gospel. We don't have to go on repeating it again and again; and we couldn't, even if we wanted to. Rather, think of it like this. Jesus is the medical genius who discovered penicillin; we are doctors, ourselves being cured by the medicine, now applying it to those who need it. Jesus is the musical genius who wrote the greatest oratorio of all

time; we are the musicians, captivated by his composition ourselves, who now perform it before a world of muzak and cacophony. The Kingdom did indeed come with Jesus; but it will fully come when the world is healed, when the whole creation joins in the song. **But it must be Jesus' medicine; it must be Jesus' music. And the only way to be sure of that is to pray his prayer.** This is the reason why we pray, Jesus, your kingdom, your culture come, your will be done, here in this place as we know it already is heaven where your total reign has begun.”

Prayer gets us on the right track, prayer keeps us going in God's ways. Recently, I went cross country skiing for the first time. My friend Elya was kind enough to take me out. She showed me how there are two tracks that you sort of fit your skis into and then you just shuffle/glide along in those tracks. She noted that you don't have to be in the tracks, you can definitely go alongside the track on the packed snow, and you'll get where you want to go, but it will be a lot more difficult. Prayer helps us to find those tracks, to find the path we're supposed to walk in, we can go our own way, certainly, and we'll make some progress, but is progress really the goal? Sometimes I think culture building is more of a shuffle, shuffle, glide sort of pattern.

So prayer lays these tracks in the snow, packs things the way down, so that we can travel along that path. So we can stay in the culture of God, in building that culture, not going off in our own direction, building our kingdom in God's name. Once those tracks are laid, it is *then* that we are called to action, it's then that we begin to shuffle, shuffle,

and glide the ways of our Lord.

I think for Modern Mennonites (does that sound like the title of a TV series?), or maybe just people in general, laying a foundation for culture building through prayer can feel really hard. Most people, and definitely me, would rather feel like we're *doing something*, like we're taking action. We want to start skiing before the trails have been groomed. Yet in scripture, time and again, before Jesus went out and took action in his ministry, "teaching, healing, performing miracles" he would retreat to pray, he would spend community with the Father, aiming to seek his kingdom, his culture.

I think it's significant that in the Lord's Prayer, this line "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done, On Earth as it is in heaven" comes right at begin, before all the needs, before all the "work" of forgiveness, we're praying for God's Culture to come among us and to show us the way.

So Friends, as we seek to build God's Culture, God's Kingdom in this world, we are reminded that prayer is essential. Prayer is the foundation that ensures what we are building is for the Lord, not for ourselves. Prayer directs us and calls us into submission. Prayer opens us up to new possibilities and prayer turns our attention to Jesus, the one who showed us the way from the very beginning.

I'll close this week with another version of the Lord's Prayer, this one is from the

Message Paraphrase:

"Our Father in heaven,

Reveal who you are.

Set the world right;

Do what's best—

as above, so below.

Keep us alive with three square meals.

Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.

Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.

You're in charge!

You can do anything you want!

You're ablaze in beauty!

Yes. Yes. Yes."