

Sermon Notes for 10/18/15 (Pentecost 21, Week 2 of stewardship emphasis)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Mark 10:35-45

Theme: “THY KINGDOM COME” – A DANGEROUS PRAYER!

Hymn: “Jesu, Jesu” (Spirit Freed leading)

Introduction: “Thy kingdom come” is a very dangerous prayer. It is a prayer that detaches us from our own dreams and hopes that may be in a very different direction from our Lord’s plans and intentions. It is a prayer that invites God to overrule our own agendas in favor of His own purpose and direction for His creation and His creatures. It is a prayer that humbly acknowledges that we may not have the ultimate understanding of the way things are and the way they ought to be. It is a prayer of submission to God’s movement in this world. In today’s Gospel lesson, James and John showed that they needed that lesson. What do they learn that may be instructive for us as well?

James and John thought they could pull one over on the rest of the apostles. They figured, if they were the first to ask about positions of influence, they would have a leg up on the others. They wanted the seats of power and influence – “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” Those were the positions that people would most desire. They wanted to be chief of staff and secretary of state in the new administration, calling the shots in an Israelite-dominated kingdom, Jesus Himself being the king, of course.

Maybe they thought they could do the job better than any of the other ten apostles. Maybe they thought they could modify some of the zeal of the Zealots, who were represented among the Twelve. Maybe they imagined themselves fit for leadership after involvement in dad’s successful fishing business. Whatever their reasoning, they completely missed the point about Jesus and His “glory.” They missed the point that Jesus’ “glory” comes into play most fully when He is on the cross. The ones who were at Jesus’ right and His left in His glory were the two criminals who were crucified with Him. One of them received that joyful last-hour promise, “Today you will be with Me in paradise.”

That is the way that Jesus lived as God’s suffering Servant. He lived constantly inclining toward His suffering and dying because that was necessary for your salvation and for mine. He knew well the words of Isaiah (read to you earlier), and He knew that they were speaking about Him, but aimed at your hearing. “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Luther put it so beautifully in his book, *The Freedom of a Christian*, “By the wedding ring of faith he [Christ] shares in the sins, death, and pains of hell which are his bride’s. As a matter of fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own and as if he himself had sinned; he suffered, died, and descended into hell that he might overcome them all . . . Thus the believing soul by means of the pledge of its faith is free in Christ, its bridegroom, free from all sins, secure against death and hell, and is endowed with the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of Christ its bridegroom” (LW 31:352) When we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” we are asking that God reinforce in our hearts and lives the experience of knowing Christ as our faithful all-giving Bridegroom.

.Jesus knew that His path was heading directly to the cross. He had predicted that several times to the disciples, none of whom seemed to be tuned in to Him enough to really get what He was saying. But His life was designed to absorb all the punishment and suffering that our sins had piled up. He took your pain, your suffering, your sin, and bore it all to Calvary. He prayed, “Father, thy kingdom come, thy will be

done.” And for Him it was indeed a dangerous prayer. It led Him to crucifixion, and all for our sake, so that we would be forgiven and reconciled to God the Father.

William Barclay summarizes the nature of forgiveness in these memorable words: “There is one eternal principle which will be valid as long as the world lasts. The principle is -- Forgiveness is a costly thing. Human forgiveness is costly. A son or a daughter may go wrong; a father or a mother may forgive; but that forgiveness has brought tears . . . There was a price of a broken heart to pay. Divine forgiveness is costly. God is love, but God is holiness. . . Sin must have its punishment or the very structure of life disintegrates. And God alone can pay the terrible price that is necessary before men can be forgiven. Forgiveness is never a case of saying: ‘It’s all right; it doesn’t matter.’ Forgiveness is the most costly thing in the world.” (William Barclay in *The Letter to Hebrews*) Jesus willingly plunked down on the counter the full price of our sin, His totally innocent, absolutely undeserved suffering and death.

It is no different for the followers of the Messiah. The brothers James and John needed to realize that to follow after Jesus as His disciple would expose them to danger and death. So Jesus asked them, “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” Their quick, unthinking response was, “Sure. We are your guys.” Little did they imagine at this time just what that would mean for them personally. Jesus prophesied that they would indeed drink from His cup and be baptized with His baptism. And so it happened.

It is interesting that James was the first of the twelve to die, beheaded by Herod’s orders, and John was the last of the twelve to die, according to the best of tradition the only apostle to die a natural death. But the seats of honor and power were not doled out by Jesus. He had not come to set up some sort of pecking order in the kingdom. We can little imagine just what may be required of us today and tomorrow as we seek to live as followers of this Suffering Servant Messiah. But we can be sure that when we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” we are asking God to help us focus more on the needs of those around us than on our own aches and pains and griefs.

Earthly kingdoms and rulers operate according to standards of power and authority, while God’s kingdom calls us to servanthood. How does this play out in our practice of stewardship? Well, one thing that could happen is that we can see ourselves as the “power brokers” in the church. I have experienced times in my ministry where a person or a family said, “Unless the church does thus and so, we will take away our gifts and send them someplace else.” What does that amount to, but an attempt to put the church into my debt? I want to call the shots, to be the controlling agent, and the church (or the pastor or the church leaders) become beggars who appeal to me for their support, rather than being partners in mission and ministry.

If my giving and serving and loving are ways of exercising control, then I have really not learned to pray “Thy kingdom come.” My real prayer then is “My kingdom will come when and where I please.” Think of the mother or father who, having been seriously disappointed by a son’s rebellious and selfish actions, speaks to him this way: “How can you act like this, after all I have done for you? Doesn’t my love mean anything to you? Do you think I have cared for you, housed you, fed you, provided for your needs, nursed you to health, all so you could act this way?” Do you suppose that guilt will accomplish what love and service failed to get across? Oh, perhaps it might – for a little while, but that son will soon enough realize that your service to him amounts to a sort of personal blackmail. Real love does not demand anything of the other. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us,” is the amazing truth that we find in our Lord’s actions on our behalf. He does not try to control us with guilt and fear, but He invites to live fully by faith in His priceless promises.

When we live in that way, when we are controlled by God’s Spirit, when we celebrate the truth that the Son of Man came, not to be served but to serve, then life springs anew. One teacher of the faith (Martin

Lohrmann) puts it this way: “What does a free and clean soul feel like? It is like being loved absolutely with no strings attached. It is being able to breathe deeply again and stand before the world in confidence. It is having the courage to know that we have nothing to fear. In this freedom of the soul, the hardships of the world will still approach us and oppress us, but we do not need to fear them. Knowing who we are in Christ, we can repent of the past ways we hurt others, both individually and socially. We can work with courage for the good of our neighbor, because we know that we ourselves already have all we need, namely, our Savior who sets us free. In this healing love of God, the world becomes a place of life again.”

Praying “Thy kingdom come” may well bring you into positions of danger, but it will also lead you to the most useful place that you can serve God. The friends of Mary Slessor, missionary in Africa, were amazed when they saw that she, a weak and frail woman, had been able to mold savage chiefs to her will. One of the chiefs explained, “You have evidently forgotten to take into account the woman's God.” (*Westminster Quarterly*) Will you take into account the woman's God? Will you take into account the power and authority and will of your heavenly Father, who desires that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth? Will you take into account in your daily plans and actions the promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against His Church? Will you take into account the sacrifice of Christ that has opened heaven's doors to you?

A pastor told this story in thinking about our service to God. “A young woman, a member of my church, worked in a large umbrella factory (in Philadelphia), at that time considered the largest umbrella factory in the world. She said to me one day, in a discouraged manner, ‘Pastor, I'll have to hunt another job.’ ‘What's the matter?’ I asked her, ‘have they discharged you?’ ‘No, they haven't discharged me.’ ‘Well, hasn't your factory enough orders to keep going all the time?’ ‘No, not that at all. They have more orders than they can fill; but they haven't enough electricity to keep all the machines going at once, and my machine has to lie idle part of the week, and I lose so much time and pay. The trouble with the factory is, they have more machinery than power.’ *Let us not forget that the finest machinery made is useless without power, and it is God's power which is ESSENTIAL to the carrying out of the Great Commission.* (L. S. Bauman)

That power is unleashed when God's Spirit works repentance and faith in the hearts of people like you and me. That power is working here this day as you hear the promise of your Lord, “I forgive you all your sins.” That power has been at work here this day, bringing transformation and new life into the heart of little Noah. That power is at work here this day as you share in a few moments in the body and blood of Jesus pledged to you in His holy Meal.

Conclusion: Human power, might and authority often lead to tyrannical oppression. We have heard the expression many times, “Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” And we have seen it played out on earth's stage many times over. But Christ's kingdom is indeed (as He put it) “from another place.” The coming of Christ's kingdom means the renunciation of power and control. Jesus is King, primarily at the cross, where He gives up all earthly authority and power and puts Himself into the hands of those who desired that power for themselves. He rules as the Suffering Servant. In the process, God's kingdom comes. It comes as the handing over of the need to control things so they go our way. It comes as the embracing of Christ's path of self-renunciation. It comes as we live by faith in the Bridegroom who has pledged Himself to us fully and wholeheartedly so that we could serve in His Spirit's power. AMEN!