

Thy Will Be Done

Menno Mennonite Church

June 16, 2024

Purpose: To place God's kingdom intent as central to our sense of internal peace.

Message: Seeking the kingdom of God to which we belong lodges us within God's good work for God's beloved creation.

Scripture: Matthew 6:5-13 (I will read); Ezekiel 17:22-24 [Please read]

Synopsis: Seeking peace can seem personally demanding. There are big cultural influences at work that seem well beyond the ability of us as individuals are able to work with, let alone be effective. Yet time and again it is the named desire of large segments of the population: let us have peace. Building peace is spiritual work as much as it is practical work. Coming to peace is a working of God within us, forming the foundation of God's good work. It must be said that God's kingdom intends peace. Connecting to that intention and embracing it for ourselves is a discipline and a gift to us each. As we pray this into our lives, we more fully embrace God's kingdom.

Matthew 6:5-13

5 “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

7 “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

9 “Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

10 Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

11 Give us this day our daily bread.

12 And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

When you consider the future, do you get excited? I am not talking about the near future excitement of looking forward to a nice Father's Day lunch today, or the nap waiting when you get home. Rather what comes to you in the long-term imagination of what might be possible? For the longest time the future was this optimistic reality where things would look like the Jetsons and everyone would have their own flying car and robot butler. The future was an opportunity waiting for progress to fill in the reality that was waiting to be. Promise reigned. But I am not sure that is really the case any longer. The future holds a bit of fog at the very least, foretelling at least challenge if not outright fear. We may well be closer to the all encompassing computer butler that we were promised within the prospect of Artificial Intelligence but we are fairly convinced that it is more likely to do us harm than good. (AI is really just an insanely large set of guesses honed by computer observations of probabilities—not so much intelligence—but that is another conversation for another time). If you need convincing that the future is bleak, think about the stories that we tell: most everything set in a distant future broadly carries the message that nothing good is going to happen, or at least if something good does come together, it is at least not going to be anything easy.

This matters because what we anticipate matters. No matter the future we want to concentrate on, or how we might prefer the outcome to take shape, there is a fairly basic need to consider what we expect things to become. Not in a naïve happy go lucky sort of way that would ignore the real challenges we face in our times, challenges that can feel foreboding more times than not, but in a way that holds open the expectation that the future exists out there somewhere, and that there will be good within it, even should that good come alloyed with difficulty. I don't bring this up out of an unbridled wave of pessimism either. There is a fairly large sector of those living life now that wonder openly or not whether the future is a place they wish to be. When we were expecting with the kids, I was taken aback a bit by the number of rather snide comments wondering what we might be thinking bringing life into a world such as this. I am sure that this has been a thing for time out of mind, and every generation has its shadow that gives it pause. But for me it was more than a few asking the question, and more than a few times I got to mention that our children happen to be our contribution to making things better—something that they start doing from day one. We shape a future we want to live in even as we are shaped by our active imagination of what that future might look like.

This summer, we are working out of a set of materials provided us by Menno Media. What they are offering is a set of materials for worship and learning aimed at everyone across the whole congregation. There are worship materials, study materials, kids materials all geared toward the same theme: Seeking Peace together. We will be drawing from the materials broadly across the units that they offer. If you would like to participate with the materials more directly, just let Emily and I know and we are happy to share what is there within them. This active seeking of peace begins with the foundation of it all: seeking peace with God, and specifically, seeking peace through prayer.

Prayer is a personal thing. It is where you come before God with a laundry list of what you need, desire, and want to implore God to be about in the coming days. The stuff we ask for in the world in which we live and we hope that God might move. If you survey the public broadly this is what we most often mean by prayer, and hope is the end of our piety. We pray that God might move in our lives and in the lives of those for whom we hold dear and hold them up to God. Sometimes, when we are honest, or when we have prayed and prayed and still the situation that we pray around remains unchanged, or worse, appears to have descended beyond our best hopes and expectations for the prayers that we did say. When we look at the prayers of Jesus himself it seems to take the same form—praying that the disciples might be held in the love that has held him at the end of his life, that the cup that he knew that he knew he must drink might, somehow, might pass him by. Yet not my will, but thine; come the end.

Which is a mighty big prayer right off the bat. Over the years it has been this fundamental phrase that has caught my ear time and again, and, really, has caught my heart. That is why I keep playing with it in my prayers public and private as you may have noticed. Basically because I struggle to think of a more fundamental prayer than this. Sure we want things; sure we desire to be taken care of, provided for, healed from that which ails us. All of this is natural and positive. But where the real work of the praying comes in that work of wishing the kingdom's desire, heaven's own image to be made known. We know this well, and we pray it well, but I am not always sure if we know what we are praying for really. There are a lot of layers to that particular onion that need to be peeled along the way.

The first largest layer is knowing that God's kingdom does and is coming. It is a statement of the future, casting beyond what merely is on our calendar or within our expectations of the problems of the world continuing in a more-or-less 'better' way than what was there. This

prayer invites us to root our outlook beyond what is and embrace what will be. In other words, it is giving us a story about the future that is profoundly important and relevant to our sense of what is possible. Instead of remaining constrained by the limited human possibilities for outcomes, which can be rather bleak, we are invited through prayer to be continually reminded of a future that is ours, but is well beyond our hands and expectation. There is peace in that trust, and there can be peace in the sense that the working of the world need to rest solely on our shoulders, but relies on God's good kingdom.

The second layer is far harder. It demands we work within our sense of will. By in large we operate under the assumption that our will and God's will operate in close tandem. I don't know anyone who really thinks that the opinions that they hold or the preferred future that they have in mind could be possibly superseded by the almighty. Think about it—has it ever occurred to you that it could be the case that the future that you envision and prefer might not be the one that the kingdom on Earth as it is Heaven has in mind? Where might it take us when we allow ourselves to begin to pray a prayer such as this? Dare we allow God's will to rest outside of our own long enough that we might learn from and of that will? In all honesty this is a big enough shift in thinking that I don't think that most people grasp it, and this departure alone can take you a long time to master and know well. It is a discipline that is never ending; knowing what is God's will outside our own, and working to align our own will into harmonizing with that will even when it might be something beyond us. There is much work in contemplating the will of God not as a function of what I want, but of what God wants along the way.

This summer, it has suddenly occurred to me that I have held an acquaintance with Menno for 20 years. In 2004 I spent the summer with you and Pastor Terry at your invitation to come, to be an learn about being a pastor. But leaving here that summer I must admit to carrying with me a remaining hesitancy about whether pastoral ministry was really a calling that I would find a way within. A rather long story short, I struggled to imagine a future where I would successfully fit within this role for a whole variety of reasons. My student learning here helped me visualize the possibility of it being technically possible, but I still had work to do in wondering whether it was something held within my particular future. After some time and much struggle, internal and external, I arrived at a solution: This will be if God wills it to be. Getting there allowed me to find a future beyond my various expected fears that might come to pass and to reframe what I do and the future that I live into the way that God makes a way for it

to be. Of course, that also leaves open the possibility of God's will leading away from this shape of ministry as well in the hypothetical future too. Living into this will—explicitly and implicitly—has been and continues to be a gift that is well beyond anything I was prepared to imagine 20 years ago.

Prayer, all prayer, allows us to connect with the one who holds the future in good hands, and to cast the cares and worries of then onto the one who holds them fast. The stories we tell of what is possible are important if for no other reason than it allows us to imagine the possibility that there is something beyond our all too bleak imagination. Among the most peace-building, bold things that you can do, I think, is to persist in the vision of the future that is far beyond that is here and now but captures the possibilities of God's kingdom coming. It is this future that we hold, and this promise that we cling to, knowing that in our praying our vision is sharpened and the story of what will be is rehearsed, calling us time and again into something that can go well beyond that which we can ever imagine.

May we each hold God's future, the true future, tightly, knowing God's goodness to make all things well even where we least expect it. Amen.