

“The Portal of Prayer”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
7th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12C) – 27 & 28 July 2019
Genesis 18:20-32; Luke 11:1-13

“Your kingdom come.” That’s the fulcrum of the entire prayer, a simple yet pregnant three-word phrase that serves as both a hopeful plea and as a statement of fact. “Your kingdom come.” It arrives gradually moment by moment with every prayer we offer, every person we forgive, every time we accept forgiveness. Each time we awaken to the reality that every bite we eat comes from God’s abundant love, another sliver of the kingdom enters our world. When we’re delivered from trials and tribulations, or receive the strength to overcome them with dignity and grace, there’s another piece of the kingdom falling into place.

“Your kingdom come.” We rattle off the Lord’s Prayer so frequently that it’s easy to miss how radical that invitation is, how revolutionary the words we speak are, but when we focus and pray with wholehearted sincerity, “Your kingdom come,” we open a portal. We make room for a realm so utterly different from our daily experience, it’s scarcely imaginable.

But we sense in our souls a quiver that gives the slightest hint of what “Your kingdom come” means, and that tiny clue suffices. That little twinge of intuition empowers us to persist, like the man who needed bread from his friend in the middle of the night, and so over and over again we whisper, “Your kingdom come,” despite not knowing exactly what we’re asking for, despite the sensible suspicion that the fulfillment of the prayer will bring change, some of which we might not like.

But the more we pray, the less we care about whatever upheaval the kingdom might bring, because through prayer God changes us, shapes us into people ready to slough off who we think we are and what we think matters most, so that we can be made new.

God lures us into prayer through our assumption that prayer is principally designed to change His mind, persuade Him to give us what we want and need, and sometimes our requests are answered in ways that alter outcomes to meet our needs and desires. Just look at Abraham, who like an auctioneer running in reverse. “50, do I hear 45? 45 from man in the gleaming white robe. 45, do I hear 40? 40? 40 from the man with the long white beard. Do I hear 30? Abraham bid God down from fifty to a mere ten righteous people for the salvation of those sinful twin cities God was eager to smite. But it’s when we pray, hearts open wide, that God gets His best shot to fiddle with us, to smooth out the edges and sharpen what’s dull.

To borrow from the book Father Melancholy’s Daughter, “Through prayer, through the very nature of prayer, we are able to speak and listen in new ways. Because in prayer, we are not just talking to ourselves, but admitting another. By entering into a passionate dialogue with this other, we are sometimes able to hear our truest voice speak back to us clearly . . . and tell us what to do next . . .” [p. 242]

That’s probably why prayer is hard to practice and easy to neglect. It’s more than just the sensation of sitting somewhere doing nothing productive in our busy world with all its demands and our long to-do lists. I think we suspect, and rightly so, that God is out for us, waiting patiently for an opening, for us to ask and search and knock. Now that may sound sinister, but it’s not, because we worship a God who loves us so much He will stop at nothing to heal us and bring us home. We’re dealing with a God who sent His son to a cross, so don’t be surprised that He will take every advantage, exploit every vulnerability.

So we ask and receive, search and find, knock and the door swings open. But what do we receive and find? What’s on the other side of that door? Jesus doesn’t say specifically, because it depends. Like a good Father, God won’t give a snake when we ask for a fish or a scorpion

when we need an egg required, but sometimes we ask for things that harm us, that poison us – unaware of the danger. And occasionally, for some mysterious reason God obliges, perhaps to help us learn how to refine our prayer, to redefine our needs and desires.

But most of the time, what we receive and find behind the door isn't what we expected, though it's usually what we really need. This is God's way of shaping his clay to conform to what matters most. "Your kingdom come." Prayer is a process of asking ever better questions, of making ever more faithful requests that accord with God's Will, so that each one – in their infinite variety – spring from a solitary hope and desire. "Your kingdom come."

To the extent we align with that most sacred of purposes, we will receive what we ask, find what we're searching for, and when the door opens and we step inside, we'll be transported to a dimension of reality we thought not possible. We'll be given things we would have never thought to ask for, things we didn't even know existed. And the best part of it all is that it's not up to us. We need to add that to our liturgy, a robust chant every Sabbath. "It's not up to us! It's not up to us!" That's a lot better than some chants going around nowadays.

All we need to do is make a sacrifice of time to God and pray and pray and pray, and allow God access to craft us into creatures who want nothing more, who want nothing else, than for God's kingdom to come. It's through this process of persistent prayer that we grow in wisdom and figure out who we really are, who God is, what He wants, and when we know what God wants, we finally figure out what we really want. By opening our hearts to God, we humbly submit to a transformation that brings a more mature faith, a peace that abides "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," a joy that cannot be punctured easily.

Because to the extent we can even begin to understand it, that's the kingdom bleeding into the world one prayer at a time. That's the kingdom we beg for, to arrive in the fullness of its

glory. It is a realm of perfect, everlasting love, where the nonsense that plagues us so, the bitterness and envy and resentment, the regret and blame and shame – none of those shadows can survive the brightness of God. And no one will be lonely or outcast or afraid.

If we look closely, we can see glimmers of it, little flashes of the Kingdom, subversively undermining the pompous rulers and principalities, offering precious glimpses of hope that the world can be different, that the world will be different, and that we can play a role in turning the world upside down by praying persistently, “Your kingdom come.” It’s not a magical formula. It’s a statement of faith in a God who created reality and is determined to work through us, sinners that we are, to restore creation to how God always meant it to be.

Those little glimmers, the random acts of kindness, the withholding of scorn, the mercy of forgiveness, moving from mere tolerance to acceptance, a family’s lengthy vigil at a deathbed, they eat away at the darkness that shrouds our world, answering the daily prayers of millions, “Your kingdom come.” Some days, we just can’t see it, hard as we might look, desperate as we might be catch a glimpse, but someday, someday that brightness will shine through, our persistent prayer answered in full. “Your kingdom come.” Amen.