

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

13th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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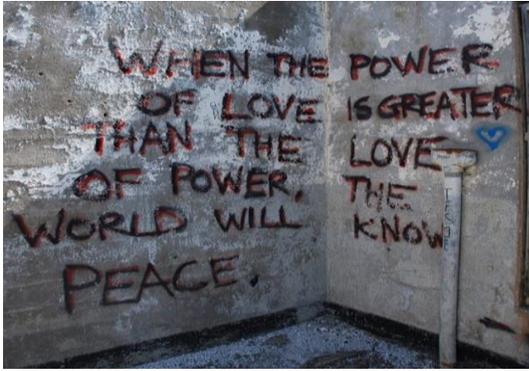
Text: Matthew 6:10

Title: “The Prayer of Jesus: On Earth as it is in heaven”

A reporter on CNN interviewed a French filmmaker who set out to record interviews with survivors of suicide bomber attacks. When he discovered that multiple survivors described seeing smiles on bombers’ faces before they detonated their explosives, he became intrigued. His focus then shifted from surviving victims to would-be bombers who failed in their missions and were imprisoned.

When asked why he would give his life and take others in this way, one man said Allah would give him a bonus in the afterlife. Another said he would be able to marry 72 virgins in the afterlife. The film-maker discovered that everything that is forbidden on earth—drinking alcohol, free contact with the opposite sex, and so on—is permitted in heaven with Allah. One man said that had he been successful in his attempt at martyrdom, his mother would have been proud of him. In his world it seems it’s okay to kill Jewish men, women and children, but not okay to drink alcohol. Only in the afterlife, apparently, is that permissible.

In the prayer Jesus taught the disciples to pray, the first intercessory part of that prayer is to ask God to bring God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. As I listened to these men describe what they hoped for--what they desired--and as I pondered the text for this morning, I wondered what is the kingdom of God? How could a person identify it? What does it sound like, feel like, look like? Is it about being rewarded in the afterlife for faithfulness in this life? Is it about freedom to enjoy in the afterlife what is forbidden in this life? Or is it about peace and harmony in this life? Is it a perfected United States of America or European Union or African Congress or communist China? Is it the fulfillment of someone’s Facebook post I saw this last week:



Is God's kingdom about the entire world experiencing finally this kind of peace? Where no nation has a defense budget or the need for standing armies because everyone trusts each other and everyone is free from fear? Is the kingdom of heaven a perfected societal state? Is it where everyone has equal access to healthcare and education and opportunity? Where no one is hungry and no one locks doors at night for fear of being robbed or hurt or worse? What in the world, Lord Jesus, is the kingdom of heaven? Tell us. Plainly. Please. And what is it about that kingdom that causes you to give it first place in the list of requests in the Lord's Prayer?

We might hope for a clear definition, but all we have are illusive parables. Jesus never clearly defines it. At least not enough for our culture's demand for precision and clarity. Jesus used parables when he talked about the kingdom of God, or as the more Jewish Gospel According to Matthew prefers to call it, "the kingdom of heaven". As I mentioned last Sunday, devout Jews would not and still do not speak the name of the Divine out of respect and awe: "Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain."

Jesus used parables. According to my Greek-English lexicon, the Greek word, "parabola", from which parable is derived, means: "a short discourse that makes a comparison." (p.612, Brown, Driver, Briggs.) Jesus drew symbols, stories, illustrations from everyday life to explain the mystery of the kingdom of God that eludes explanation or precise definition.

This morning I want to consider three of those parables. The first two are similar to each other.

The first is that God's kingdom is like a man plowing a field who accidentally finds some kind of treasure. So heavy he can't lift it. He covers it back up. He's so happy he can hardly contain his joy. Has a living estate sale. Finds a realtor and buys the field. He wasn't looking for it. Didn't ask for it apparently. It was simply his good fortune to come upon it.

The second is that God's kingdom is like a merchant who found a perfect pearl for which he'd been searching. When he finally finds it, he too has a living estate sale and buys the pearl. Unlike the plowman, however, he was searching, active in pursuit of the object of his desire.

Maybe you've seen the trailers running for yet another Star Wars film, *Rogue One*. I am not a passionate fan of these films but our son is. I remember when the ticket sales for the very first screening of the Star Wars film, *The Phantom Menace*, was announced, in some parts of the country people began camping out on sidewalks days ahead of time in order to get those first tickets. Fans were buying them at highly inflated prices, upwards of \$100 for one ticket! I paid \$8.50 for two. I took Josh to see it. First time for me. Second for him.

The film grossed \$200 million in only 13 days, eight days sooner than the previous record

holder, “Independence Day”. A lot of people placed a high value on seeing this film for the first time, and they were willing to sacrifice a great deal in order to get there: camp out on a sidewalk, pay an exorbitant amount of money for a ticket. For some the price simply wasn’t the point. Getting first shot at that film was worth it. No doubt there will be some who will do the same for Rogue One.

As I read about the lengths to which some were going to get tickets for the Lucas film, I wondered if Jesus would have used it as a parable:

The kingdom of heaven is like the child who is willing to sell anything he has in order to get one of those tickets to the screening of The Phantom Menace.

What is it that we value so highly that we’d gladly forfeit everything we have in order to get it? When disaster strikes – a devastating flood, a tornado, a hurricane, a home fire – and the reporters start the interviews, how many times have you heard: “Things can be replaced. People can’t. Everyone in the family is safe, and that’s what really matters. We’re just thankful nobody was hurt.” God’s kingdom, God’s reign is like that. It’s so valuable that once we find it—whether by accident or intention, we’ll gladly give up anything we own to be able to enjoy it.

When John F. Kennedy, Jr., his wife Carolyn and her sister Lauren died some years ago in a plane crash, public grieving again revealed what is important to people. As in the death of Princess Diana in which public grief was profound, people brought acres of flowers to places in which the three were remembered. People left notes and prayers. One woman brought some flowers to the Kennedy apartment building where a sea of flowers already lay and a reporter asked her why she was doing so. The woman choked with emotion and said: “I can’t say. I don’t know.”

Republican Senator Orin Hatch stood on the Senate floor and said that as a father, he could only imagine the pain of losing a child and then went on to address Senator Kennedy: “The people of the United States mourn with you and the United States Senate mourns with you.” Years of deep political rivalry dissolved in that moment.

Maybe part of experiencing God’s kingdom is the joy of remembering that at the root of our existence, relationships matter more than things, more than 401K plans, more than inheritance disputes or political differences. When we find ourselves overcome by that reality—when we truly “get it”, we’re ready to give up anything we own in order to get it.

The third and final parable I’d like us to consider has to do with leaven. In the Gospel According to Matthew Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven, hidden in dough. Its presence is obvious, yet not visible.

I thought about this as we’ve been watching the Olympics. Every 4 years it is simply amazing to watch human beings do what some of the world’s best athletes can do. The women gymnasts!!! How do they do that with their bodies? How do they do flips on a 6 inch beam and land on their feet? How can they do full body flips and twists and turns off the thing and stick the landing? 4’8” Simone Biles is a wonder to watch! And Michael Phelps? Wow! 28 Olympic medals, 23 of them Gold!

That’s only two of the amazing athletes competing. I am often inspired watching all of

them. Sometimes it's the feat they accomplish, sometimes it's the story of sacrifice on the part of their families, sometimes it's the dream come true speech some of them tell when being interviewed, sometimes it's just the joy on many of their faces and the gratitude they express for others that leaves me feeling joyful myself.

As I was watching the other night I wondered if I saw Simone Biles walking down the sidewalk would I have any clue who she was and what she is capable of doing? Would you? I wondered if sometimes what is best in us is hidden from sight until there comes a time that it isn't. There is always the potential of the hidden greatness to be seen. That, it seems to me, is like the kingdom of God.

Rachel Naomi Remen is a Clinical Professor at the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine. As one who struggled with serious illness personally, Dr. Remen became interested in the physical effects of psychological approaches for people who suffer life-threatening illness. She wrote a book entitled, Kitchen Table Wisdom. In it she tells a story out of her childhood. I'll let her tell it in her own words:

When I was small, God was still discussed in public schools. I remember one assembly in which our principle...delivered a fire-and-brimstone kind of sermon to the entire grammar school. She read a passage from the Bible to us and told us it was important that we kneel and pray three times a day because we needed to remind God that we were there. Thinking back, she may not have said this in so many words, but this is what I took away. You prayed because you had to make Him look at you. If God turned His face from you, she told the hushed assembly of children, you would wither up and die, like an autumn leaf. And this part I am sure of, she actually held up a large dried and withered leaf. Even as a five-year-old it seemed to me that God had a lot of other things on His mind besides me. And in between the times that I was praying, He might blink and then what would become of me? I remember the fear, the enormous terror. *What if God blinks?* I became so obsessed with this question, so fearful, I was unable to sleep.

Fortunately she had a grandfather with whom she had a special connection. A few days after the incident, he visited her. She told him what had happened and asked her fearful question:

“What if God blinks?” and at last[, she writes,] my terror overwhelmed me and I leaned against his shoulder and began to cry. My grandfather stroked my hair to comfort me. Despite his gentleness he seemed distressed and even angry.

But in his calm way, he answered my question with some questions of his own. “[Granddaughter], . . . if you woke up in the night in your room, would you know if your mother and father had gone out and left you alone in the house?” Still crying, I nodded yes. “How would you know that?” he asked. “Would you see them and look at them?” I shook my head no.

“Would you hear them?”

“No.”

“Could you touch them?”

By then I had stopped crying and I remember puzzling over his questions because it seemed obvious to me that I would simply *know* that I wasn't alone in the house. I told him this and he nodded, pleased. “Good! Good! That's how God knows you're there. He doesn't need to look at you to know that you are there. He just *knows*. In just the same way you know that God is there. You just *know* that He is there and you're not alone in the house.”

God's presence in the house is an inner experience that never changes. It's a relationship that's there all the time, even when we're not paying attention to it. ...Like gravity, if it ever stopped we would know it instantly. But it never does.

This inner knowing is a way in which I orient myself, an unfailing point of reference. Its effect on my life is as profound, as deep as gravity's influence on my body. More than anything else, my sense of not being alone in the house has been what has allowed me to accompany people as they meet with pain, illness, and sometimes death. (Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal, p. 263ff.)

The kingdom of heaven, God's reign, is knowing you're not alone in the house. You can trust God's presence though hidden from sight. You just know....

So be open to the ways in which God's kingdom works and is made known. Jesus told people once we find it, it's worth everything we have. Nothing else is more valuable. And though it's often hidden from human eyes, God is at work whether or not we perceive what's happening.

I was tempted to ask you to stand and say to each other, “God is at work and there's nothing you can do about it.” But that's not quite true, is it? Because there is something we can do about it. We can respond, become a part of God's action. God is active and alive. Let your kingdom come, O Lord! Let your kingdom come!