

**Sermon: Building for the kingdom**

**Scripture: Matthew 6:1-15**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

**Date: November 7, 2024**

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Our small groups called Roots and Branches are meeting these days and engaging together line by line this prayer that Jesus gives to his disciples mid-way through his most famous Sermon on the Mount. My own experience of the prayer is that it's one I grew up speaking it all the time in my church in Virginia, using the words "trespasses" instead of "sins" like we use here or "debts" like we used in Vermont.

It popped for me one day though at an interfaith gathering where there was a panel with a Christian scholar, a Jewish scholar and a Muslim scholar. It was given to the Jewish scholar, Rabbi Shevack, to close the gathering and he said to us, "there's a beautiful prayer that my Rabbi brother taught and I'd like to invite you to pray it with me" and He began "Our father, who art in heaven...." I was so moved by the experience of having a rabbi share the prayer with us as though I was hearing it from Rabbi Jesus himself and it dawned on me how beautifully universal the prayer is, that is says nothing that a Christian, Jew, or Muslim could not say together - honoring God as holy and as parent, beseeching for God's reign of justice and righteousness to come, asking for the basics of life to be given, like daily bread, seeking forgiveness from God and noting how important it is for us to forgive others, asking to be kept on the right path and away from temptation and evil. It's a beautifully universal prayer that any person with belief in a higher power might say freely and fully.

But we have to beware, because the prayer is also political in that it refers to the supremacy of God and prays for God's Kingdom to come into the Kingdoms and empires and nations of this world. In Jesus' time the man who had emerged triumphant from a series of civil wars in Rome was Octavius Caesar who had defeated the senatorial cabal who killed his father Julius Caesar. As he gained ascendancy in power all the Roman elites rushed to honor him with consulships, enrolled him in priesthoods, held festivals in his honor, built temples to him and bestowed honorific titles upon him such as Augustus which means "venerable one". Caesar Augustus, yes the one who "issued a decree that all the world should be taxed", which might ring a bell with you. It was this taxation of the Hebrew people of the Roman Empire in Palestine that led to two revolts led by Judas the Galilean just before the turn of the millenia and just after in 6CE. They meant to throw off the shackles of Roman control and taxation specifically on the premise that the Jews had no King but God. Both rebellions were brutally suppressed by the Roman army who swept through the region bringing bloodshed, destruction, murder, rape, plunder and enslavement. And this is the world within which Jesus grew up.

So when in the Gospels some of the first words out of Jesus' mouth are that the time is fulfilled and God's KINGDOM is arriving, God's REIGN is dawning, he was in no way suggesting a spiritual promise of a heavenly reward, but that through him, as the writer NT Wright says" "Jesus was saying that.. God was coming and coming as King. The kingship of God was being manifested through the things Jesus himself was doing... and that the empires of this age would be eclipsed and judged by the kingly power of Israel's God.<sup>1</sup> And this turned out to be true. Eclipsed they were.

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<sup>1</sup>Wright and Bird, p. 19

The great Caesar Augustus in the annals of history is mostly a side character in the great drama of the poor carpenter's son who lived at the same time, Jesus of Nazareth.

So it was political and politically subversive for Jesus to say that he was ushering in the TRUE Kingdom in the face of Caesar's false one or, at the very least, ephemeral one. What a crazy crazy thing to say in the face of the Roman Empire at the time! And so in this prayer that we pray privately and devotionally every Sunday there is laid this subversive core that professes the true Kingdom is not here but it is to come. It was a controversial statement to say in the face of the Roman Empire and even today has its subversive quality when we repeat it in America which some claim as the manifestation of God's destiny for humanity... but we say in the church "thy Kingdom Come O God, cause this aint it!"

And President Biden hasn't been the savior and believe it or not neither will President-elect Trump, as much as he seems to be the strongman that so many in our country think is the way forward, he won't be the savior or the King that we are awaiting. For we await another. We prepare for another. Our allegiance ultimately lies with another and that is Jesus and His Kingdom. And it is for that Kingdom that we labor. For sure such labor benefits our country but it is not co-equal with our country.

In the book "Jesus and the Powers", the co-authors NT Wright and Michael Bird speak of it this way: "the early church understood itself as a kingdom movement. Not a kingdom in the sense of an earthly empire or an ephemeral spiritual state, but a vision and vocation for faithful action that works to bring God's kingship over every facet of human life..." and they want to make it clear, that this is God's grand project in the end, not a human project so they say, it's not about our "building the kingdom, but our

building FOR the kingdom.... We are, by our kingdom-labors, preparing to meet the bridegroom, setting the table for the wedding supper of the lamb, and curating creation for the day when God will be all in all.”<sup>2</sup>

So this is our work that arises out of our praying in the Lord’s prayer “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” And “for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever!” Our work is in each of our small ways building FOR the Kingdom, which would be our work regardless of who won or lost the recent election. It’s our work regardless of which side of the aisle we are on, whether we are winners or losers this time around. There’s a beautiful analogy that Wright and Bird use for these Kingdom-labors which we are tasked with to build FOR God’s Kingdom and I’d like to quote the passage for you in full cause they say:

The image we should use in trying to explain this strange but important idea is that of a stonemason working on a part of a great cathedral. The architect has already got the whole plan in mind, and has passed on instructions to the team of masons as to which stones need carving in what way. The foreman distributes these tasks among our team. One will shape stones for a particular tower or turret; another will carve the delicate pattern that breaks up the otherwise forbidding straight lines; another will work on the gargoyles and the coat of arms, another will make the statues of saints, martyrs, kings and queens. They will be vaguely aware that the others are getting on with their tasks; and they will know, of course that many other entire departments are busy about quite different tasks as well. When they are finished with their stones and their statutes they’ll hand them over without necessarily knowing very much about where, in the eventual building, their work will find its home...nor may they live to see the entire completed building with their work at last where it belongs. But they will trust the architect so that the work they have done in following instructions will not be wasted. They are not themselves building the cathedral but they are building FOR the cathedral.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 9

When the cathedral is complete their work will be enhanced and ennobled, and will mean much more than it could have meant as they were chiseling it and shaping it down in the stonemason's yard.<sup>3</sup>

Isn't that a beautiful image for the work that lies ahead of us. We cannot know the scope of God's Kingdom, what the end result will look like, what the others who God calls are doing for their part, but we've received our call and we've been given our instructions so we must go about doing all the good we can for all the time have we been given.

So Katherine keep working for climate justice,  
Carolyn keep teaching our children and with compassion and care,  
Bruce and Linda keep tending to the immigrants among, Lord knows they are going to need it, and  
Deirdre keep helping them through our legal system and  
Michelle keep making those meals at the Dwelling Place and  
Lisa keep praying with the homeless and  
Julianne keep building that bridge between financial markets and social justice,  
Susan keep tending to the mental health of those who are hurting and struggling,  
Matt keep healing people's eyes and helping them to see....

And those of you called to parenting, parent your best and those of you who feel particularly called to prayer, pray deeply, and those of you still wondering how God is calling you, listen, listen carefully for what your role will be.

We cannot know what God is building exactly but it is something beautiful and grand and we each have our part to play and the Kingdom arrives on earth in these little ways momentarily even as one day it will reach God's grand designs and the Kingdom finally will come on earth as it is in heaven, world without end, amen.

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<sup>3</sup> P. 87