

Sermon for Sunday, March 24, 2019

United in God's Cause

"Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." These are the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer, three petitions which confess who we are in relationship to "Our Father, who art in heaven," which declare our faith in God's purposes for us and for the world, and which proclaim our intention to be enlisted among those who are God's servants on the earth. Taken together, these petitions declare what is the cause of God in human history, which is, that God's name be held in honor by all whom God created in everything that they say and do, that God's lordship over heaven and earth be recognized and accepted, and that God's will be known, obeyed, and fulfilled on earth just as it is fulfilled in the harmonious communion of heaven. In these first three petitions, we are reminded that God has not only revealed the divine purpose to us, but has invited us to participate in its fulfillment. When we pray them, we sign on, as people united in God's cause.

German theologian, Joseph Wittig, once said that a person's biography should begin not with one's birth but with one's death, because a person's life is revealed only by its end, its goal. It's what makes the funeral eulogy the most poignant and telling biography of all. In the same way the secret of history is revealed only as we see its end. The Bible is written from this perspective. From the first words of Genesis to the last words of the Revelation of John, the Bible declares that the world and its inhabitants are heading toward the end which God has ordained, and the end that has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ is the victory of God's cause when the kingdom of love and justice has come in all its fullness and joy. The Lord's Prayer begins by inviting us, again and again, to live in the name and in the promise of that glorious end, no matter what, to recognize that God's cause and our cause are intimately united. To wit, the truth of the gospel is that God's cause and our cause are made one, in Jesus Christ.

The first petition, "hallowed be thy name," causes us to confess who we are in relationship to this God we have dared to call upon as our heavenly father. Underneath its surface is a prayer of repentance, and a confession of sin. We not only appeal to the heart of our divine parent, but we also beat our own breast, saying like the prodigal son, "Father, I do not deserve to be called your child." "I have not hallowed your name; I have sought to hallow my own. I have not honored your name; I have betrayed it a hundred times. Lord, be merciful to me." In fact every petition of the Lord's Prayer has this double edge of appeal and confession to it. We cannot pray the Lord's Prayer to the glory of God without at the same time praying it against ourselves.

Is there any doubt that we seek to hallow our own names? From engraved stationary, to listing them in the Sunday bulletin, to pasting them on trucks and billboards, to getting them published in the newspaper, to having our own Facebook page, to having them on our tombstones, and recorded in God's book of life, we want our names hallowed. And woe to the one who takes our name in vain, who maligns it, or challenges it, or questions it. Such actions are regarded as personal affronts of the highest order, which is one of the reasons we sit ill-at-ease when the politicians crucify each other's names with impunity. Which raises the question: who is there to defend God's name when it is crucified with impunity?

The answer to that question is given in the appeal of this first petition. We are. We are asking that we be empowered by God to hallow God's name, to honor it, and defend it, because God's name, and God's name alone, is holy and worthy of our hallowing. Note that we don't ask to make God's name holy. God's name is already holy. We simply ask to be empowered to hallow it in the way it deserves, to hallow it in our speaking, and in our living.

Now to hallow God's name in our speaking and in our living does not mean that we are asking that God sanctify us into perfect, devout, God-fearing persons. If we have learned anything from our relationship to God it is that we cannot be God, that we cannot be perfect, that we cannot be moral, and that despite our best intentions we will continue to do the wrong things. A person cannot become a new person by deciding to become one. We become new persons only in Christ; we become new persons only in relationship with God as the Lord of our lives; we become new persons, changed persons, redeemed persons, not when we pray, "hallowed be my name," but only when we pray from the depths of our surrendered hearts, "hallowed be thy name." Jesus turns our attention away from ourselves, even from our pious selves, and focuses it upon God alone. We begin our prayer not in our own holiness or in our own moral advancement, but rather concentrating on this one thing, that God may become holy to us, that God may occupy the ruling place in our life.

The thing that should give us pause as we repeat this first petition is that despite the pervasiveness of our sin, we have been hallowed by God; we have been baptized with God's name. Everyone who has been baptized shares the surname of God Almighty, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are not worthy of receiving the holy name

of God, but God has made us worthy through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Without Jesus Christ, we cannot even begin to hallow God's name, because without him we don't know who we really are. In him, we discover forgiveness and reconciliation, surrender our hearts to the God who so loves us, and are made new to carry with us and bear witness to the most precious and holy name of God which we have inherited. Which also means, however, that when someone takes the name of God in vain, they take your name in vain, because you bear God's name by virtue of your baptism. We need to start defending the name of God, by hallowing it in our speaking and in our living.

With the next two petitions of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we declare our faith in God's purposes, and proclaim our intention to be enlisted among those who are God's servants in the world. I cannot begin to unpack the depth of meaning that is contained in these two petitions, but when we say them we admit at the very least two things. First, that the future belongs to God and to God alone, who is intervening in history to reorient human lives and all of creation according to the divine purpose. And second, that we are committing ourselves to those purposes and desire to share in their unfolding.

"Thy kingdom come." Whose kingdom? God's kingdom. Not my kingdom, not your kingdom, not the American kingdom, not anyone's kingdom, but God's kingdom. And that kingdom is both here and not here; it is both now and not yet.

The kingdom is here in the sense that we recognize by faith that Jesus is alive among us. In him we have a foretaste of the kingdom of God, a kingdom that is best understood by understanding the very character and faith of Jesus himself. When John the Baptist was in prison, he asked of Jesus whether he was indeed the Messiah. No doubt John, like most of his contemporaries, expected a Messianic state of order, peace and prosperity. But something he saw in Jesus made him question his assumptions. So he asked, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered, "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news brought to them (Luke 7:22)."

The kingdom of God appears precisely at the place where there is blindness, lameness, leprosy, and death. It is not too lofty to sully itself with such degradation. On the contrary, its purpose is to eliminate such degradation, to heal the broken hearted, and to bind up the wounded. Its light comes to the very places where the darkness is the deepest. That is its remarkable character, its enduring nobility, and its unfathomable power. Its power is made perfect in our weakness, such that the more desperate our lives become, the more fervently we pray, "thy kingdom come." In Christ, who lived with us, and who abides with us still even in our darkest moments, we know to our great joy that the kingdom of God is in the midst of us. God reigns, no matter what. Victory over everything that makes our lives desperate is assured.

But the kingdom is also yet to come. We who have tasted it, still await that day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. Does that mean that the kingdom will come on that day when we who have seen the light have managed to bring every person to faith? Does that mean that the kingdom comes more fully each time we find another person to join the church? Does the kingdom of God rest finally on us gradually Christianizing the world? No. The kingdom of God is an established fact. God reigns now. The only question is when the world will wake up and recognize it.

You and I have recognized it by coming into the presence of Jesus Christ, through whom God has chosen to rule. For us to participate in the unfolding of God's kingdom to the world, we are invited to help make Christ present in the world. We do that as we speak with his voice and act with his heart, and as we seek to make Jesus present and alive in every dimension of our personal lives. That is accomplished when we seek to do God's will, as Christ sought to do God's will, that is, when we do God's will on earth, even as it is done in the eternal and blessed fellowship of heaven. Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of my Father in heaven (John 4:34)." Note that he said my food, not my dessert, not my snack, but the principal, sustaining meal of my life is to do the will of God. That's what it means to pray, "thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

God reigns. That is our confession in the beginning of this prayer. God's cause is the future that will be, no matter what anyone else claims. And the good news, is that God's cause is our cause; God's cause is to save us from the darkness into which we have fallen, by joining us there to lead us into the light. When we have taken hold of God's extended hand, and joined him in the adventure of faith, we pray that we may be allowed to reign with him in the communion of his love. We pray no less than that, when we pray, "hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

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March 24, 2019  
Luke 7:18-23  
THE LORD'S PRAYER #3