

The Secret Message of Jesus: “Seeing the Kingdom Beyond Beauty”

February 22, 2009

Matthew 6:7-14

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. ⁶But 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. ⁸Do 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. ¹⁰Your 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.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Mark 4:11

¹¹And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables.

Robert Fulghum, author of several enchanting books, said that he was seated next to a young woman at an airport in Hong Kong. He noted that her backpack bore the scars and dirt of some hard traveling. It bulged with mysterious souvenirs of seeing the world. He could not help but notice, however, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Before long her gentle tears turned into a veritable flood, as she was now sobbing. Fulghum asked if he could be of some assistance. Through her sobbing she told him that she was not quite ready to go home, but that she had run out of money. She had spent the last two entire days waiting in the airport on standby with little to eat and too much pride to beg. But what was really upsetting her was that she now had a seat on a plane, but could not find her ticket and the plane was about to take off. Fulghum wrote: “She had been sitting in this one spot for over three hours, sinking into the cold sea of despair like some torpedoed freighter.”

Fulghum was joined by an elderly couple from Chicago, who dried her tears and offered to take her to lunch and to talk to the powers that be at the airline about some remedy for her lost tickets. Relieved at this help, she stood up and turned around to pick up her belongings, and with that she let out a loud scream. Thinking something terrible happened to her, they rushed to her only to discover that her scream was a cry of joy: she had found her tickets. Turns out, she had been sitting on them for over three hours.

Parables are stories Jesus told us in order to open our eyes to realities we are

too blind to see – as if we, too, are mired in despair while all the time sitting on our ticket. To be sightless would be difficult, but worse than blindness says Helen Keller “is to have eyes and not see.”

What a marvelous year this has been for Celebration of the Arts. We’ve been surrounded by such blessings, if we’ve taken time to see. Mark Loring, Deborah May, Lorissa Keller, the Celebration committee, and countless volunteers have done a stellar job of putting Celebration together. 150 people here for last Sunday’s special ventriloquist program. A record amount of art submitted for the jurist to judge. 293 people on Friday night for the Dave Bennett Quartet. This afternoon, the always-enjoyable First Church organists – yes, another shameless plug. Last night, our Jazz Vespers.

Sometimes there can be an abundance of riches all around us and we fail to see them. During the Sundays of Epiphany, under the revelation of the light of Christ, we’ve attempted to speak of what seems to have been a secret Jesus kept throwing in the faces of those who asked him questions. The riches of which Jesus spoke, of course, weren’t of thousand dollar-an-ounce gold or having one’s stock portfolio made whole again. Jesus spoke of ultimate reality, which is the only thing, he said, which is really worth pursuing. In Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase called *The Message*, his words come out like this:

“The disciples came up and asked, ‘Why do you tell stories?’ He replied, ‘You’ve been given insight into God’s kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn’t been given to them. Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That’s why I tell stories: to create readiness, to nudge the people toward receptive insight. In their present state they can stare till doomsday and not see it, listen till they’re blue in the face and not get it.’”ⁱ

The Kingdom of God is not obvious, to be sure. But it’s not hidden for some perverse reason. It’s all around us, but we don’t perceive it because we don’t have the readiness to receive the insights and understanding that God is very ready to give. It’s waiting for us to be ready. You can’t point at the air and have people see it, but you can speak of it analogically in stories, in parables, that create a receptivity within our hearts. Jesus continually threw odd stories down alongside ordinary lives and walked away without explaining them or giving an altar call. Sometimes we have blinders on that obscure God’s kingdom. Because of our particular values or the deluding passions within us, our eyes cannot see. And we don’t want to let our cherished illusions go. That’s where a good parable will cause us to stop and reflect and perhaps see ourselves as we really are.

Author and renowned preacher Frederick Buechner says that we all catch glimpses of God’s Kingdom from time to time. He says, “The Kingdom of God?

Time after time Jesus tries to drum into our heads what he means by it. He heaps parable upon parable like a madman. He tries shouting it. He tries whispering it... What he seems to be saying is that the Kingdom of God is the time, or a time beyond time, when it will no longer be humans in their lunacy who are in charge of the world but God in his mercy who will be in charge of the world. It's the time above all else for wild rejoicing – like getting out of jail, like being cured of cancer, like finally, at long last, coming home. And it is at hand, Jesus says.”ⁱⁱ

C. S. Lewis describes God's Kingdom as that which lies beyond beauty. In *The Weight of Glory*, Lewis writes, “We do not want merely to see beauty, though God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves,... At present we are on the outside of (God's) world, the wrong side of the door. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in.”ⁱⁱⁱ

God's Kingdom is at hand. God's Kingdom is beyond beauty, and we're on the wrong side of the door – but the witness of the Gospel, the Good News, is that we shall get in. And that brings us to the scripture we call “The Lord's Prayer” when the disciples go to Jesus and ask him to teach them how to pray. Now, we call what he told them the “Lord's Prayer.” Jesus would never have called it that. If Jesus had named it, he might well have called it “The Prayer of the Kingdom.” Because the entire focus of this pattern of this prayer – just like the bulk of his teaching – is on God's kingdom. Listen to it.

“Our Father.” – note that Jesus doesn't say “my father”! He speaks of the God who is like a father to all of us. Now, I know that while many of you have fond remembrances of your earthly fathers, that's not the case for everyone here. So Jesus clearly speaks of the One who is our heavenly Father, the good Father who cares for us as a father should care. And before this One, we are all children. And to pray this, we become brothers and sisters of one another. This God is not Jesus's God, a private God – this is *our* father, and this prayer binds us to one another. We're not like the Lone Ranger, going it on our own. God is not the private property of any one of us. This God, this Father, is available to all of us, and we need one another as we approach God.

“Hallowed be your name.” We pray to One who is not bound by the conditions and limitations of this world. God is Holy. We revere this God who is above all else. We recognize that this is a God who cannot adequately be described by our words, who is revealed in the narrative of scripture, and illuminated in the parables of Jesus. We know that this God is shrouded in mystery, but has been made known to us in love. This God is holy.

“Your kingdom come! Your will be done – on earth as it is in heaven.” First and foremost, this is a prayer expressing the heart of Jesus' secret message, a cry

for God's kingdom to break in and break through in this world. Jesus said we should seek first the kingdom of God (v.33) and this prayer makes the kingdom the very first priority. Praying for God's will to be done is simply to ask that God would reign fully and completely here in this world – not in some world yet to come.

“Give us today our daily bread.” We worry about so many things that ultimately don't matter if we have food for the day. Instead, like the birds of the air and the wildflowers of the field, or like the Israelites in the wilderness, we depend on God alone. We do not root our identity in an economy as consumers, but rather as children in a relationship with God our Father. This prayer seats us as children around our Father's table, at a feast of those things which are of ultimate importance.

“Forgive us as we forgive!” We cannot expect God's mercy if we refuse it to others. Remember that little add-on teaching Jesus put at the end of this prayer? He said, “If you forgive others, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you.” It echoes that golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you, but now it adds a warning, “for the measure you give will be the measure you receive.” In a sense, it's a key to the kingdom. If you wish to enter the Kingdom, show others the mercy, the forgiveness, the love you wish to receive from God.

And, finally, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” We pray that we would not be tempted, although we know there are times of testing for all of us. Are you ever tempted to speak a harsh or angry word to someone else? Are you ever tempted to chastise another person for their thoughtlessness? In your pain, are you ever tempted to hurt someone back because you think they've hurt you? Every day is a “time of testing” for our spirit. The important cry here is that we be delivered from evil. Because when we give in, we do evil. When we are tested, may we not choose to do evil and become ensnared by it.

The well-known line: “For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever” is not found in the original text, but is a wonderful conclusion in public settings, reminding us once again that we are praying for God's kingdom. It places in God's hands three things the Roman Empire and Emperor wanted to claim for themselves: Kingdom, power, glory. But ultimately they are God's alone.

This prayer for God's Kingdom is really the very culmination of what Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God. Jesus' parables can only hint at this kingdom. What the parables are intended to do is to stretch our vision just enough so that we realize there's a whole lot more to reality than we think there is. The parables are to make us yearn for God's kingdom, ache for God's kingdom, hunger for God's kingdom, knowing that we're on the “wrong side of the door.” And when we hunger for God's kingdom, we begin to pray for it. Thy kingdom come! Thy will

be done on this earth as it is in heaven.

My hope is that every time we pray this “Kingdom Prayer” that we would begin to remember what Jesus told us about the Kingdom of God. It’s here. It’s all around us. It may be like the tiniest of mustard seeds, but it is – and will – grow to become the biggest tree around. It’s happening now – not in some spiritual roof-garden. And we don’t need to wait. We’re invited to enter today.

As Frederick Buechner describes it: “Jesus heaps parable upon parable like a madman. He tries shouting it. He tries whispering it... Humans in their lunacy will not longer be in charge of the world but God in God’s mercy will be in charge of the world. It’s the time above all else for wild rejoicing – like getting out of jail, like being cured of cancer, like finally, at long last, coming home. And it is at hand..”

Years ago, there was a stage adaptation of the very popular Cotton Patch Gospel. The Cotton Patch Gospel, you may remember, was a translation of the Gospels into the everyday language of the rural south. In one scene, the man playing Jesus comes on stage and he points over to one side and says, “Look!” Everyone, of course, just keeps looking at him. Again he points off to one side and says “Look!” And the people in the audience just continue to look at him on stage. When one more time he points and says “Look!” and nobody even turns their head, he looks back to the audience and says “I tried to get them to look at the lilies of the field, but nobody would pay any attention!”

I hope that sometime in recent weeks, that you did pay attention. That you heard the Good News, despite all evidence to the contrary in this fallen world, that this is God’s world and God is the One who reigns. I hope you have heard the tremendous news that “though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet!”

I pray that you are no longer “sitting on your ticket” and that you are able to lift up your head from the troubles that would engulf you and remember the Lord your God, who alone embraces and owns this world.

I pray that you have been able to open your eyes to catch a glimpse of that Kingdom beyond all beauty which one day will be all-in-all in this world.

And, in the end, I covet for you that moment when you open your heart to the reality of the God that loves you.

As we close, I invite you to pray with me the Kingdom Prayer which Jesus taught to those who hungered to know how to pray. And I recommend that we savor each phrase of this prayer, allowing it to capture our imagination and inspire our aspirations, giving us a vision of the Kingdom of God. For if enough of us see the Kingdom – and in seeing it, re-think our lives – and in re-thinking our lives come to know that all things are possible with God – then everything – everything – could change. May we pray?

Our Father,

who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

iMatthew 13:10f

iiFrederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, page 118.

iiiC. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, page 397.