

**First Reading is from Psalms 145:1-3, 10-13:**

- <sup>1</sup> I will extol you, my God and King,  
and bless your name forever and ever.
- <sup>2</sup> Every day I will bless you,  
and praise your name forever and ever.
- <sup>3</sup> Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;  
his greatness is unsearchable.
- All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD,  
and all your faithful shall bless you.
- <sup>11</sup> They shall speak of the glory of *your kingdom*,  
and tell of your power,
- <sup>12</sup> to make known to all people your mighty deeds,  
and the glorious splendor of *your kingdom*.
- <sup>13</sup> *Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom*,  
and *your dominion endures* throughout all generations.

We just heard the psalmist say, “All your works speak of the glory of your kingdom, all your works make known the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom.” Yet, what exactly does the psalmist mean when he says “kingdom?” Does the psalmist think it is some geographical place? Is this kingdom here on earth or in some heavenly realm? What if the psalmist is not talking about a place at all, but a rule or a way of life, where God is sovereign over all creation from generation to generation? Walter Brueggemann, professor emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, suggests the prophetic imagination is needed for us to envision this kingdom, for this kingdom is something other than the way things are. Prophets can imagine what God intends for humanity and all of creation. Prophets call the people to return to God and God’s ways, to the splendor of God’s kingdom.

In our reading from the Gospel of Matthew we will hear these words, “Thy kingdom come.” Jesus is prophetically teaching his disciples and the generations that will follow to pray. Can you imagine God’s kingdom? Can you envision something other than the way things are? Let’s engage our imaginations as we hear the scripture read from the Gospel of Matthew.

**The Second Reading is from Matthew 6:9-13:**

- <sup>9</sup> “Pray then in this way:  
Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.
- <sup>10</sup> *Your kingdom come.*  
*Your will be done,*  
*on earth as it is in heaven.*
- <sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread.
- <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
- <sup>13</sup> And do not bring us to the time of trial,  
but rescue us from the evil one.

## **The Message is entitled, “Who Reigns”**

You have probably heard it said that politics and religion don't mix. You may even have a rule around your family table that neither religion nor politics is to be discussed during those festival days as extended family gathers, especially given our politically polarized moment in history. Yet, isn't it interesting that politics is very much a part of the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples: “Thy kingdom come!” [Pause]

It doesn't matter whether we pray “Thy,” or “Your,” or even “God's kingdom come”. These three simple words reorient the way we are to have our being in the world. These three simple words declare to others that God is sovereign. Our ultimate allegiance is to God and not to some earthly political power. This prayer definitely had political ramifications for the disciples who lived under the rule of the Roman Empire. And this prayer certainly has political ramifications for any citizen of any nation state, including political ramifications for us as Americans.

“Who reigns?” is the pressing question of the day from our text and chosen verse. This question is not something we should answer lightly. As I heard it said at Sunrise, these three simple words can be a noose! Aligning ourselves with a power that is not a principality or power of the human realm can be life threatening, like it was for those who claimed Christ in the first century and met their death in the arena. Like it was for those who risked their lives and wrote the Declaration of Barmen during Hitler's regime. They declared, “We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life.” Praying “Thy kingdom come,” is political.

Now the word political comes from the root word “polis,” which simply means “city”. Politics is simply the way humans organize communally and discussions of communal organization as a society are political. The reason this prayer is political is because God's kingdom is an alternative way to organize ourselves communally. God's alternative kingdom critiques the systems and structures of human society.

As I prepared to write this sermon, I came across a challenging transcript of a speech by Walter Brueggemann that speaks to the political ramifications of this prayer. He titled his speech, “Jesus Acted Out the Alternative to Empire.” That is, Jesus taught his disciples through this prayer that there was another way to move and live and have their being together on earth.

Before I share some of his speech, let me tell you a bit about Walter Brueggemann. He has poured his life into studying the scriptures of the Old Testament. He has been and continues to be a prolific writer. In 2007, I had the privilege of sitting at his feet, which was like drinking water from a fire house. The continuing education class was entitled, “*Mandate to Difference: An invitation to the Contemporary Church*,” based on a recent book he had published. Through his writings and his teachings, like a prophet from the Old Testament he continually calls the church to live out the alternative kingdom Jesus lived and taught his disciples, “Thy kingdom come.” Church, engage the prophetic imagination and hold fast to God's vision of human society, rather than submitting to the way things are.

Brueggemann is familiar with the principalities and powers of this world as recorded in the ancient world of the Bible. “Empires,” he writes, “intend to contain all thinkable, imaginable, doable social possibilities.” Empires define reality for their subjects by seeking total control, while monopolizing the people's imagination for another way of being. He calls this practice of empires “totalism”.

What he shares next in his speech should cause all of us to pause, because totalism is part of our faith history. He says, "In the ancient world of the Bible, totalism is represented and embodied by the monarchy of Solomon in the Jerusalem temple. The king was surrounded by priests in the temple and by scribes who did the fine print to legitimate everything. And that totalism was completely intolerant of any alternative thinking."

Solomon's totalism, "Was an economy of extraction that regularly transferred wealth from subsistence farmers to the elite in Jerusalem... the device and the strategy for that extraction was an exploitative tax system." From Solomon to the present age, empires have moved wealth from the bottom to the top. Does that sound familiar to our ears? Where empires and governments tax citizens, where the few benefit and many don't.

If you follow the money, says Brueggemann, extraction systems, whether ancient or present day, produce many grievances and cries of oppression and exploitation. We hear those grievances today in our headlines, when tax cuts seem to favor the wealthy, who simply accumulate more and more, while the rest of society has less and less, and those at the bottom of the economic scale suffer the most.

Brueggemann continues saying, "Totalism also supports a strong military. Solomon was an arms dealer: his military was for show, and partly for intimidation. The totalism of Solomon's kingship had to exercise enormous economic opulence to impress people with his wealth. While the temple fashioned a series of purity laws to determine who the pure and impure people were, those with access and those without access." The principalities and powers of totalism seek to define reality as the only possible reality. And this should not sound foreign to our ears, as citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for economic power and military might still seem to rule the day.

Are you beginning to understand just how radical of a prayer we pray every Sunday? We do not pray, "The American kingdom come." We do not pray, "The 'me, myself and I' kingdom come." We pray thy or your or explicitly "God's kingdom come," and this kingdom is a radically alternative way to organize our lives.

It should be obvious why Jesus didn't instruct his disciples to pray for a return of the monarch, for a return to the glory days of King Solomon. Solomon's reign was part of the problem. The reality is our forefather in faith was a perpetrator of totalism. He ruled with self-interest over and above the interest of all others. His rule was tribal, for he was chosen to serve chosen people and all others were excluded. We suffer these same realities today, whether we are citizens of the United States or any other nation state. We can't return to some glory days in America or any other nation state, because no nation has lived into this prayer that we pray every Sunday. "Thy kingdom come," is a radical prayer and it ushers into view the alternative kingdom that governed Jesus's life.

So, what does this kingdom look like? What are its systems and structures? Donald Kraybill suggests that, "the kingdom of God points to an inverted, or upside-down way of life that contrasts with the prevailing social order." And Scripture is filled with examples of this upside-down inside out kingdom: the first shall be last and the last shall be first, the exalted will be humbled and the humbled will be exalted, sinners are forgiven and welcomed while the self-righteous are chastised, the poor are blessed and the rich are condemned, the lost are found and the dead are made alive. In this kingdom the predator lays down with the prey in peace and weapons of war are transformed into life giving tools.

This kingdom isn't about power over, but about the power of transformation. This kingdom isn't about hate or fear, but about loving others including our enemies. This kingdom isn't about tribal superiority which perpetuates violence, but universal dignity of all people. This kingdom isn't about preserving self-interest, but about regarding others as better than ourselves with humility.

The New Testament is punctuated with glimpses of this kingdom we pray for, including some of Jesus's parables found in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. "The kingdom of God is like a seed, like yeast, like a hidden treasure, like a pearl of great price. The kingdom seems insignificant, like a small seed or a bit of yeast, yet it is endowed with great power and worth.

In Matthew, Jesus is not trying to establish a political territory. Jesus is trying to convey who is to reign in the disciples' lives. Hint, it is not the systems and structures of the principalities and powers of our day. The primary meaning of the kingdom of heaven (found 32 times) and kingdom of God (found 5 times) in the Gospel of Matthew is an alternative way of being in the world.

Do we really grasp what we pray at least every Sunday?

The psalmist reminds us that God's kingdom is not static, but dynamic: "All your works speak of the glory of your kingdom." When the disciples are instructed to pray, "Thy kingdom come," they are not praying for a static realm. They are praying for God at work in us and through us. They are praying to be active participants in the full coming of this kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven. Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew this as one of the authors of the Barmen Declaration. He was compelled to act in support of this alternative kingdom according to the reign of God. Yet doing so cost him his life.

When we pray "Thy kingdom come." We are not making a request of God. We are actually making a vow. We are willingly inviting God's will and ways to be established in and through us. I don't know about you, but my heart rate is up because this prayer messes with just about everything in my life. And Brueggemann explicitly tells us why our heart rates may be up, for he says, "Throughout history Christianity has often neglected to realize this, for rather than standing in critique and opposition to the kingdoms of this world, Christianity has imitated them because we succumb to the lure of totalism, the world's power, wealth, and success."

Brueggemann is making a confession for us, "We [in the church] are part of the system of totalism." We in the church pursue the world's power, wealth, and success, at the expense of others. And if we are honest with ourselves we know that we benefit from this system. That is why this is such a dangerous prayer.

Who reigns? Who really is sovereign of our lives and the life of this church?

Lucius Newsom felt called to feed the hungry and cloth the naked. He decided that Jesus was serious when he said, "When you do it for the least of these, then you do it for me." So, this elderly man retired and on a fixed income, began to fill his van with food and clothes and share the little he had with people in need.

A pastor in his town heard about Lucius and his church decided they would give him money to help him buy food and clothes. The head of the mission committee took a check to Lucius one Saturday. He arrived to find Lucius setting up tables in a vacant lot and placing food and clothes out for people to take. People were patiently waiting to receive his help. The mission moderator walked up to Lucius and handed him the check.

Lucius though wouldn't accept it. He said, "I don't need your money. I need your hands. But if you want to stay here and help me serve these people, I'd be obliged." That is the language of the kingdom, of acting with our hands and feet, our very lives. Lucius only accepted the financial gift after several months of observing the hearts of those volunteers. He wanted to know if they were really interested in establishing the kingdom or if they were only acting out of guilt or pride?

Do we really want to be engaged in ushering in the alternative kingdom which Jesus lived among us? Are we ready to live into this radical prayer?

Participating in the dynamic alternative kingdom of God is about humbly bending our will to God's will. It is about desiring to do with our very lives' what delights God. It is about following in the footsteps of Jesus even when it leads us to places we would rather not go.

"Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." May it be so among us. Amen.