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Matthew 6:5-13

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

There is a lot that divides Christians. How we read and interpret the Bible divides Christians. Our theological beliefs divide us. Our styles of worship, the structure of our liturgies, the kind of music we prefer in worship can divide us. Even the communion table, Christ's great gift to us of love and grace, even the communion table becomes a place where some are welcome and others are not. But on any given Sunday, in churches across this land and across the globe, most Christians can be heard reciting the Lord's Prayer. We don't always use the exact same words in the prayer—some of us preferring *debts* and *debtors*, others using *trespasses* or *sins*—but the prayer itself is something that unites Christians of all traditions. In fact, the prayer unites us with all those Christians who recited this prayer down through the centuries.

Most of us have this prayer memorized. And when it comes to that point in the service, we dutifully murmur it aloud maybe without much thought. Sometimes it can be helpful to take a fresh look at something that has grown so very familiar to us. I thought we'd try to do that today with the Lord's Prayer.

On the surface, this is a simple prayer, easily memorized. And yet, entire books have been written about it. There is indeed much packed into this short prayer. However, today, I direct our attention to one line in particular: *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* After beginning the prayer by acknowledging God as our loving Parent, after recognizing God's holiness, Jesus offers this first petition. "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." And a case could be made that the rest of the prayer is really

expounding upon this first and most significant petition, this petition in which we pray for God's will to be done on earth.

This petition is significant because quite honestly, God's will is clearly *not* always done on earth. If ever you encounter someone who, in the aftermath of something bad or tragic says, "Everything happens for a reason," or who states, "It must be God's will," please, *please* direct them to the Lord's Prayer. Because right here in this prayer Jesus acknowledges that *not* everything is God's will. In fact, a great deal of things in this world are not God's will. Racism is not God's will. Mass shootings are not God's will. Cruelty and warfare, violence against women and children are not God's will. We teach our children to look both ways before crossing the street because we want to protect them from a tragic accident. Why bother doing that if everything that happens is God's will? If everything that happens is God's will, we would no longer need to buckle our seat belts when getting into a car, avoid smoking, ensure there are building codes for our buildings or bridges, or work to improve the welfare of others in society. The prayer Jesus taught us acknowledges that God's will is not always done on earth as it is in heaven.

And the rest of the prayer supports this petition in seeking the establishment of God's realm on earth. The next petition, *give us this day our daily bread*, carries with it the implication that daily bread is sometimes lacking. Food deserts, like the one surrounding the Tops grocery store here on Buffalo's east side, exist in other urban cities. Food pantries, like the one we operate here at UPC, serve people who do not have enough resources to purchase their own food. Across the globe, people suffer from famines and droughts and flooding which rob them of growing their own daily bread. People are hungry in body. But people are also hungry in spirit. When people lack hope, they hunger for daily bread. When jobs are not available, when housing

is not affordable, when schools are crumbling, when violence instills fear and robs people of peace of mind, people are hungry in spirit. *Give us this day our daily bread* is a prayer for sustenance in body and spirit. We pray this prayer today for Buffalo. We pray it for those who lack something as basic and necessary as a sufficient number of grocery stores in their neighborhood. We pray it for those whose spirits and sense of wellbeing have been shattered by a white supremacist with a gun. We pray it because hunger in body or spirit is not God's will.

So too is the petition, *lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*. Some versions of the prayer will state, "save us from the time of trial." We are all tested, tried, tempted to go ways that are not consistent with God's will. The prayer recognizes that we are vulnerable to forces that would have us act against God's will—sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. We are tempted to hate. We are tempted to seek revenge. We are tempted to talk unkindly about others. We are tempted to be tight-fisted with our money. As a nation, we have been tempted and succumbed to the temptation to steal from other people—to steal their lands, to steal their resources, to steal their very bodies for our purposes. There is a growing temptation in our country to resist acknowledging or studying our nation's own difficult history around race or the on-going legacy of racial injustice.

The Lord's Prayer acknowledges the trials and temptations we all experience that can lead us in the pathways of evil. Obviously evil, which the prayer acknowledges, is the very *opposite* of God's will. We in Buffalo have seen evil. Evil showed up a week ago at a neighborhood grocery store. But evil also exists when white supremacist ideologies go unchallenged and when they are permitted to become part of mainstream rhetoric voiced by politicians and media personalities. When good people decry hatred and violence and show up to peace vigils but do nothing to ensure decent wages and jobs for all people, do nothing to

ensure affordable housing for all people, do nothing to develop relationships across the racial divide, do nothing to counter hate speech, they permit conditions in which evil and harm can grow. Evil can take root in our hearts and in our society and we might not even be aware of its presence. We pray in the Lord's Prayer for God to save us, to rescue us, from the power and presence of evil.

It may be comforting to adopt a world view that "everything happens for a reason" and that "everything is God's will," but that mindset is not honest and it is not biblical. The Lord's Prayer tells an honest story of humanity's brokenness and our desperate need for God. It is a prayer we in Buffalo pray today because we have been shocked into awareness of humanity's brokenness and our desperate need for God's will to prevail.

But while the Prayer recognizes humanity's brokenness, the Lord's Prayer also anticipates the very best from us. Recall the line in the Prayer: *And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*. Different Christian traditions use various other words to express this part of the prayer: "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" or "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Each of these differences offers a slightly different nuance. The words *debts* and *debtors* carries economic connotations. In Jesus' world, indebtedness was a significant social concern and failure to pay off debts could land a person in prison. To forgive a debt freed a person and their entire family from a great burden, and thus was a gift of significant proportion.

The word "trespass," might bring to mind signs we see on some properties: "No trespassing." To trespass is to enter a space you have no right to enter. That is the essence of sin, isn't it? Sin is when we stray into behaviors and attitudes and actions that are not in within the boundaries of God's realm. When we sin we trespass into places where we do not belong.

The young man who killed 10 people in our community trespassed not because he was a white man who walked into a black neighborhood. He trespassed because he was a white man who walked into a black neighborhood with hatred and the intention to kill. He trespassed when he entered online hate groups and when he permitted white supremacist ideas to enter his heart and mind. We sin when we trespass into places where we as God's children and as followers of Jesus Christ do not belong.

Whether we use the words *debts* or *trespasses* or *sins*, Jesus is addressing the issue of forgiveness. But notice how he phrases this part of the prayer: *forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*. Jesus doesn't say "you must forgive others." Instead, he states this as though we *always do* forgive others. The prayer asks God to forgive us *as we forgive others*. Like a parent who praises the child for being kind and caring as a way to encourage them to grow into being kind and caring, Jesus anticipates the best from us. We have the capacity to forgive. We have the capacity to live in harmony with God's will.

The Lord's Prayer beseeches God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. But implicit in this prayer is this message: Let your will, O God, be done in and through and by me. Let your will, O God, be done in and through and by me that I may be a sign of your realm.

Jesus anticipates the best from us. You and I can become signs of God's realm.

This world, this city, desperately need signs of God's realm. Our city needs you to be a sign of God's realm.

But a word of clarification. There is a tendency among liberal Christians to think that with enough effort we can bring about God's realm. If we work hard on our own flaws, if we work hard on social problems and issues, we can bring about God's realm of love, peace, and justice. But that tendency is itself flawed. We are not God. We are imperfect, broken people.

Only God can bring about the kingdom, the realm. But we are called by Christ to *join* in God's activity. We are called by Christ to become *signs* of God's realm of love, peace, and justice.

And such signs are greatly needed right now. Buffalo needs signs of God's realm of love, peace, and justice. The United States needs signs of God's realm of love, peace, and justice. The world needs signs of God's realm of love, peace, and justice. In this past week here in Buffalo we've seen some of these signs emerge. We've seen signs of daily bread being offered to one another. Signs of a community responding to needs. Signs of love expressed. Signs of God's will being done in the midst of unspeakable pain and suffering.

But let us also pray that those signs continue in the months and years to come. Let us pray that you and I will be those signs of hope, and daily bread, and generosity, and justice. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, you and I commit ourselves to being just such signs of God's realm. And we can do so with confidence knowing that Jesus anticipates the very best from us.