

PENTECOST 8
THE PRAYER THAT JESUS TAUGHT US
JULY 3, 2016
Revelation 21:1-7; Luke 11:1-4

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Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator, from our Savior Jesus Christ and from the life-giving, in-dwelling Holy Spirit. AMEN

Those who like to doodle or keep their hands busy while they listen, I hope you'll draw a picture of what you think the world might look like if we could all live in peace, enjoying together the reign of God among us on earth as it is in heaven.

A lot of people, for their vacations, do things that are relaxing. Especially for an occasion like a 20th Wedding Anniversary, we might expect a romantic get-away to an exotic locale.

For our 20th Anniversary vacation, Brian and I opted not for Greece, though we'd talked about that for several years. Rather, we took an enormous, circuitous car tour over a large chunk of North America - including Canada - only to return to a little spot between Glenwood and Starbuck, Minnesota, where last spring we bought a piece of land and this summer started building a hunting shack. We lived for five nights in a fairly grubby hotel room while we spent 9-10 hour days in the sun

CLICK - HOLES

...digging four-foot holes,

CLICK - POSTS

...planting eight foot 6"x6" posts in those holes,

CLICK - DECK

...refilling the holes, building a "deck", sheathing and insulating it,

CLICK - WALLS

building four walls, putting up another deck for the second story,

CLICK - WINDOWS

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and finally getting in four of the planned five windows. We basically built a house - rudimentary though it may be - in five days.

CLICK - CLEAR

It was not relaxing. It was not what a lot of people would consider “romantic”. But it was a marvelous way to spend our 20th Anniversary: just the two of us - well, including Taz, just the three of us - building a hunting shack for the now, which will become a home for us in the future. The metaphors for a healthy marriage were numerous, too, so the work very much fit the occasion: the exhausting, physical labor of digging deep footings for a solid foundation; collaborating on lay-out and design to fit the beauty of the surrounding landscape; lots of creative problem-solving to tackle obstacles with only the tools on hand; being mindful and careful so that neither of us got hurt - or hurt the other; recognizing that Brian’s research and experience meant that he usually knew best what to do, while my creative juices sometimes offered up ideas he hadn’t considered; that his brute strength can accomplish feats that I will never attempt, and my meticulous and annoying attention to detail occasionally saved us hours of frustration and work - and learning throughout these processes that given our different experiences and gifts, we approach challenges with very different mind-sets and often come up with very different solutions. Yet, both of us were valuable contributors and neither of us could have done it without the other (okay, Brian would have gotten a lot further along than I would have by myself, but he did need me for some things).

At any rate, building this hunting shack together strengthened and deepened our love and commitment to one another, showed us new parts of one another and ourselves that we hadn’t recognized or noted before, and gave us a glimpse of a future that both of us look forward to enjoying even more, knowing that we are building it together.

And this is what we are praying when we pray this Second Petition of the Prayer that Jesus Taught Us: that the reign of God would be built in and among us, with its foundations deep in the Good News of Christ's grace and the strong walls of God’s will for justice and mercy standing steadfast against the furious “storm and rage” of what Martin Luther refers to in his Large Catechism as “the devil and all his host”.

In deference to Luther, we should all ask ourselves, “What does that mean”? What does it mean to ask for God’s reign to come among us, for God’s will to be done here as it is throughout the cosmos?

To answer these questions, we ought to revisit the key word, “kingdom”. It should come as no surprise that I do not find “kingdom” to be the most helpful metaphor for God’s reign among us. While the image of Christ as King was originally a counter-cultural and anti-*status quo*, intentional rebuttal of the rule of Rome’s Caesar, “kingdom” - in the hands of King James’

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translators and with James' explicit instructions - became so over-used that the term has become perilously synonymous with the divine ordinance of white male rule, a social construct Christianity would be far better off subverting, rather than supporting.

CLICK - basileia/"kingdom"/oikonomia

Progressive scholars recognize that "kingdom" is neither a helpful nor exactly accurate translation of "basileia", which can also be understood as pertaining to an "oikonomia" or "household", specifically, the household of God. Basilicas - houses of worship - around the world - get their names from the same Greek root. Today's Christian thinkers are moving away from the King James translation of "kingdom", favoring terms that are more in the vernacular of contemporary readers. As Luther pointed out several times, translating idioms and metaphors is particularly challenging: the term "kingdom" will never mean to contemporary Americans - who celebrate their democracy's anniversary this very weekend - what the original Greek word once meant to Jesus' first followers.

Let's experiment with that for a second:

Create an image of a kingdom in your mind...

CLICK - GAME OF THRONES

I'm guessing some of us go directly to Game of Thrones, with its constant war and turmoil, where fear, hatred, and death are the norm.

CLICK - FEUDAL SYSTEM

Some of us will see the Old World feudal systems - not unlike those depicted in Game of Thrones - where nearly all of us would be on the peasant end of business.

CLICK - DISNEY

Some of us will undoubtedly picture a Disney movie, with its gleaming castle and the handsome prince who rescues the helpless maiden.

CLICK - FOURTH OF JULY/AMERICANA

But if we're honest, we'll admit that having never lived in a kingdom (Happy Independence Day Weekend!), we are clinging to a term and a metaphor that is so foreign that it hinders our ability to actually dream and envision with God what God's future for this world might be.

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Throughout the Bible, even God doesn't like the idea of a "kingdom" or "king", so let's let that one go.

Let's utilize Martin Luther's rules of translation and cast about for an image or a term that conveys more of what the Bible and Jesus' life reveal of God's reign.

CLICK - REVELATION TEXT, ITALICIZED

John's Revelation offers us a plethora of options: a new heaven and a new earth; the holy city; a bride and groom;

CLICK - REVELATION TEXT II

..God's home (or, more accurately, God's "tabernacle" or "tent"; God's mobile dwelling place, which is always in the midst of the people). The original Tiny House, says John, means God is tangibly and readily present; weeping and sorrow are no more and death has no power. The water of life is elsewhere in Revelation described as being in the midst of a sumptuous garden, with ripe fruits at all times, fruits that will reconcile and heal all peoples with one another. It is a place where all things will be made new.

It is a household where our Abba/Imma God cares for a mass of children across the globe and throughout time.

CLICK - CLEAR

What other images might we use? Jesus describes God's reign as a place in which people who are lost, lonely and least are lifted up, welcomed and cherished; in which grace, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and love are shared liberally; in which participants share out of their abundance so that everyone has what they need with extra left over; where the sick are brought to the forefront of our awareness and are given special attention; where the elderly, the despised, the young and the sinner are included as beloved and honored; where the outcast is brought in and the powerful are brought down to earth.

When I was little, my dad told me that his vision of heaven was one of endless trout streams, where all of us could fish to our heart's content. Parkinson's has kept dad out of the streams for over a decade, but he is still planning a tour of East Coast streams; he still dreams of the snags he'll find, the fish he'll catch, the fish he won't catch, and the cool, refreshing waters of the creeks.

Dad's dream of heaven keeps him dreaming of a new reality for his life here on earth, and that is theologically astute:

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Our images of God's future are intended to give us hope. Not the hope of avoiding the world's annoying people by escaping to an isolated favorite activity, but the kind of hope that includes all those annoying people.

Can we envision a place, a future, a goal in which even those who don't favor trout fishing for eternity can find peace and joy?

I caught a glimpse of God's reign as I biked around the lakes, yesterday. The sun-splattered water was shared by canoes, kayaks, paddle-boards, fisher-people and sailboats. The clear air was full of languages from around the world: Spanish and Indian, Somali and something from Asia. There was a volleyball game, football tossers, some kind of nerf dart thing and lots of hammocks hanging in trees. Light breezes carried the smell of grills and taquerias. A woman from Western Africa wore her red scarf tied in a tight knot at the top of her head, and an ankle-length red, white and blue dress. The ethnic display was as bright and colorful as the dyed hair, which presented every color of the rainbow, and was accompanied by tattoos, dreadlocks and piercings. There were straight and gay couples and couples of mixed ethnic backgrounds. A young woman breast-fed her newborn on a blanket in the shade while a white-haired elder sat on a bench basking in the sun. The Classical Actor's Ensemble was setting up for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, while skateboarders rolled by with alternative rock streaming through mini-speakers. Two homeless men stood in the same public bathroom line as the millionaires whose houses I passed. Ages, races, religions and socio-economic divisions seemed to glitter and vanish like the sunlight dazzling the lake, and all that was left were all sorts of interesting, diverse, beautiful people enjoying a glorious day in God's glorious world.

As Brian and I built our future home, I grew stronger, and I believe our marriage grew stronger. I found myself feeling more confident as we solved problems creatively and Brian encouraged me to figure out things that I didn't think I knew how to do. I found myself feeling physically stronger as we lifted enormously heavy structures and augers and I discovered muscles I haven't used in decades (okay, mostly Brian, with his Herculean strength lifted, I helped and guided heavy things into place). I found myself feeling emotionally stronger, as I learned to let go of control, trust my partner, and acknowledge his interests and likes as equal to my own. I found myself feeling spiritually stronger as we worked side by side, encouraging, empowering, supporting, cheering, helping, thinking, offering first aid, and occasionally commiserating over unfortunate missteps. As we built, we grew in our bond as life partners.

These same gifts are ours as we work together building God's household - not just in this building for us as a small part of God's family, but for our neighbors, our sisters and brothers, our fellow children of God, from Plymouth and the Twin Cities and Minnesota and the US and around the world.

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Building together we are blessed with increasing strength as we function in ways we didn't know we could; determination and commitment usher in the joy of accomplishment and achieving together what we could never do apart; we develop courage and trust in creatively working toward and realizing God's goals; we grow in compassion as we establish a safe place for all God's children; we discover new depths to our own souls and faith even as we are graced with the beautiful kaleidoscope of all God's people. Building together we become stronger in our bodies, hearts, minds and souls and in our faith as we see God's reign blossoming among us.

We are called to dream, to envision anew what God's reign in and among us might look like. As we pray this Prayer that Jesus Taught Us, we are summoned into the life of the words; we are called as Jesus' followers to be the hands that build the house in which all God's people might live in the peace and justice of God's reign.

May God's reign come and God's will be done, in and among and through us.

AMEN