

Matthew 6:9-15 (MSG)

“With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this:

Our Father in heaven, reveal who you are.

Set the world right; do what’s best—as above, so below.

Keep us alive with three square meals.

Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.

Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.

You’re in charge!

You can do anything you want!

You’re ablaze in beauty! Yes. Yes. Yes.

“In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can’t get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God’s part.”

Matthew 16:13-20 (NRSV)

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah,^[a] the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter,^[b] and on this rock^[c] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was^[d] the Messiah.^[e]

“On Earth As It Is In Heaven”

It was the beginning of June in 1985 when United Methodists of the former Wyoming Conference began to gather for Annual Conference at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania. Folks were coming from as far north as Cooperstown, NY, and as far south as Hazelton, PA. They came from Deposit, NY in the East, and from Waverly, NY in the West – all to the registration area where we would receive our packet of material and the keys to the dorm rooms in which each one would sleep. But, Russ Riley came from just across town, as he was serving a congregation in Scranton in his early retirement. Now, you need to understand that registration at that Conference was always like the first day of a four-day family reunion. Folks were gleefully greeting one another, catching up on the events of the year and the wellbeing of family members. And we could always count on a few to arrive with new jokes to tell. Well, Russ Riley was one of the well-known jokers, so no one was surprised when he walked up to the registration table and boisterously asked, “Is this where I get the keys to the Kingdom?” But then he keeled over. Bob Herrala, the registrar, had work for the first 15 years of his adult life as an EMT, so he sprang into

action – but to no avail. Russ was gone. He had indeed received his keys to the kingdom in that moment.

That was the year of my first ordination at Annual Conference, and Bishop Felton May asked if I would attend Russ’ memorial service representing and speaking on behalf of the ordination class and clergy. As I pondered what I had witnessed in the registration area that day, and have experienced many times since, I recognized that at the moment of one’s passing from earthly life to eternal life, the veil that separates earth from heaven is most perceptibly thin. For the passage of one’s soul from this temporal existence to eternal life is but a whisp of Spirit infused wind.

Besides one’s passing from this life to the next, prayer is one of the few mechanisms to bridge the gap between our earthly existence and the Divine of all eternity. So when Jesus taught the disciples to pray, he included the request from humanity to God that, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.” In Luke’s version of Jesus’ teaching moment with the disciples, he follows the model prayer with a story pointing out that “everyone who asks receives.” Yes, God wants to shower us with blessings and answers to our prayers. And, God asks that we follow Jesus as partners in bringing about God’s will and the signs of God’s reign in us and on this earth. In order for that to happen, we need to believe in God’s creative, saving, redeeming power. We also need to believe that God created us with the capacity to be partners in this divine plan. AND, we need to catch a glimpse – a vision – of what God’s will, God’s reign, and heaven look like!

I love Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of II Corinthians 4-5. In the first paragraph of chapter 5, we hear: *“We’ve been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home, our resurrection bodies! The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what’s ahead. God puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we’ll never settle for less.”*

Jesus’ ministry offered tangible, visible signs of right relationship and pointed us toward God’s will for “a little heaven on earth.” That right relationship piece is what has prompted some of us to adapt the word “KINGDOM” in the Lord’s Prayer to “KIN-DOM.” The traditional Kingdom carries with it a connotation of a human constructed rule of law and governance in a set region with distinct borders or boundaries established through war. Kin-dom refers to associations based on relationships which are more familial. Kin is defined as a group of persons descended from a common ancestor, or constituting a people, clan, tribe, or family. Remember, Jesus started this prayer addressing his “Abba,” “Daddy.” And we heard that we are all children of God. That makes us one family in our faith seeking God’s kin-dom!

When we focus on partnering with God to bring God’s will and kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven, we are asking for guidance in bringing right relationships in the world as a **prayer of action** every day. Sort of like, “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me! Let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be.” That partnering does not end with the utterance of words in prayer. The partnering must include our action to follow through on the requests made in prayer.

After Jesus gave Peter the discipleship imperative to live out his love for Jesus in proclamation and relationship-building faith, Jesus named Peter the “ROCK” upon which the church would be built. And then Jesus gave Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Peter had no idea what was yet to transpire in that church. As followers of Jesus endeavored to establish a church, rules and arguments, disagreements over giftedness, authority, God’s will and human

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construct detracted from the faithful work of the church – just like today! Peter must have been tempted to take the key to the **Kingdom** and gain shelter from the chaos in that holy haven of peace!

Someone once reminded me that keys are good for gaining entrance, as well as for locking what is deemed to be undesirable **out** of one’s space. **BUT**, a “key” in music guides one to the appropriate notes to be sung or played. And to the cartographer, the key is that which allows those who view the map to understand the symbols and signs in order to reach their destination safely.

Friends, the key to the **Kingdom** for us, is prayer of words followed by prayers of action, that God’s will may be done, and God’s **Kin-dom** may come on earth, as it is in heaven. Yes, Russ, this *is* where you get the keys to the **Kin-dom**! Amen.