

March 12, 2017
Second Sunday in Lent

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Divided”

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*Pray as if everything depends on God,
and work as if everything depends on you.
~Augustine*

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1 Samuel 8:4–11, 16–20

⁴Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, ⁵and said to him, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” ⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the LORD, ⁷and the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. ⁹Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.” ¹⁰So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹⁶He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.” ¹⁹But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, ²⁰so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.” ²¹When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the LORD. ²²The LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to their voice and set a king over them.” Samuel then said to the people of Israel, “Each of you return home.”

Matthew 6:1–13

⁶“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ²“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 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. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread. ¹²And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

“Divided”

1 Samuel 8:4–11, 16–20, Matthew 6:1–13

The day after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, Jane Elliott, a white third grade teacher in Iowa, watched her white students come into the classroom looking confused and upset. Why, they asked, would someone murder Dr. King, whom they had been taught was a hero? Knowing that experience is the best teacher, Jane Elliott decided to conduct an experiment.

First, she divided her students into two groups *based on eye color*. On the first day, the blue-eyed kids were treated as **superior**, getting extra recess time, extra food at lunch, and an extra dose of kindness from their teacher. The brown-eyed kids had to wear collars so that they could be *easily identified*. All day long, Ms. Elliott peppered her speech with derogatory comments about these kids and their **laziness** and **forgetfulness** and all around **lack of ability**. Within hours, not only were the brown-eyed kids looking and acting thoroughly demoralized, but the blue-eyed kids were playing up their superiority, *taunting their classmates* and carrying themselves as though *they were better* than their brown-eyed peers. Not surprisingly, when it came to their classwork that day, the blue-eyed kids performed markedly better.

The next day, Ms. Elliott reversed the experiment and treated the brown-eyed kids as superior. After these two days, she led her class in a conversation about the experience. What she heard from them was that creating such a stark contrast between *who is favored and who is not, who is in and who is out*, left everyone feeling **lousy**. The kids spoke about feeling **confused** and **powerless** and how those feelings made it difficult to focus on their school work. They also observed that when they were part of the superior group, the way they treated those deemed inferior left them feeling **uncomfortable** and **guilty**.¹

¹ Irving, Debby (2014-01-16). *Waking Up White: and Finding Myself in the Story of Race* (Kindle Locations 2265-2287). Elephant Room Press. Kindle Edition.

Jesus begins the prayer we call the Lord's Prayer with a reminder that there is only one being in the universe who possesses true superiority: God. *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name.* In this prayer we learn and affirm that *all* of God's creatures are worthy to address God as *Abba, Father*, to name God who is as near to us as the air we breathe, who knows each one of us and loves us completely. The problem is that we human beings have found all sorts of ways to divide ourselves, to categorize people as more or less worthy. Which is perhaps why the very next thing Jesus tells us to pray is *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* Having figured out that God is both our intimate and wholly other creator, Jesus instructs us to pray that **God's kingdom** and **God's will** would be realized amid all the *chaos* and *challenges* and *injustice* of everyday human life.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. With these words, Jesus introduces two incredibly complicated theological concepts: God's kingdom and God's will. These concepts are inextricably linked; *God's kingdom* is the place where **all things unfold** according to *God's will*, which is God's desire for love, mercy, and justice to reign in all creation. Once again, Eugene Peterson's translation of the Lord's Prayer helps us hear this request anew. This is how Peterson puts it: "***Set the world right. Do what's best--as above, so below.***" "*Set the world right.*" In this prayer we find ourselves **begging** God to make our world look more like that place where *God's ways rule*.

In the 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression, a young couple looking for a beautiful and affordable home put a challenge to the architect Frank Lloyd Wright: could he build them a nice home for around \$5,000 – about \$85,000 in today's money? Wright's response: *I've been waiting for years for someone to ask me that question.* Frank Lloyd Wright relished the challenge of building an affordable, beautiful custom home in part because he had long had a vision to make custom homes more democratic, available to people in any price range, including middle and working-class Americans. Wright called his vision *Usonia*, a word that for him was an idealized vision of the United States at its democratic zenith. *Usonia* would be a nation filled with modest, but also comfortable and well-made, homes for the middle and working classes. Wright would fill these homes with natural, local materials, build them to exist harmoniously with the landscape, and create spaces in them where people regularly encountered the beauty of the natural world. Wright's vision was grounded in his firm belief that *the buildings we live in shape the people we are.*

Sadly, the Usonian vision was never fully realized. After the Depression, Wright moved on to other, bigger projects and commissions. But the influence of his Usonian dream can be seen in the long, low-to-the-ground architecture of the many suburban ranch homes that were built starting in the 1940s. Of course, these homes, which often use inexpensive, off the shelf materials and feature plaster and painted surfaces, are very different from the natural materials and organic aesthetic of Wright's original vision.²

We live as we pray. Just as Wright recognized that the places we live shape who we are, Jesus knew that our prayers shape the world we live in, the communities we worship in, and the people we are. And so we pray: *Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* When we pray for God's will, God's desires to come to earth, Jesus is offering us a **vision**, even as he highlights *a great divide* between the reality of God's realm and the reality of life on earth. *Set the world right – as above, so below!*

New Testament scholar Brian Blount argues that when Jesus walked upon this earth, he enabled the kingdom of God to break in, to be manifest. Jesus' very life puts flesh and bones on this vision of what our world, our communities, our churches, and we as individuals could be. R.S. Smith's poem "The Kingdom," offers us a glimpse of what this world looks like:

*It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. **It's a long way off**, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is **free**, **if** you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.³*

² 99% Invisible Podcast, episodes 246 "Usonia 1" and 247 "Usonia the Beautiful." <http://99percentinvisible.org/episodes/>

³ R. S. Thomas, "The Kingdom," from *Collected Poems*, 1945-1990.

This is the vision of God's kingdom revealed in the life of Jesus: a place of acceptance, especially for those whom our societies have cast aside a place of healing for all those who are broken and hurting; a place where all of God's children are welcome and will be made whole, but where we must first be willing to sacrifice the power and privilege and material things that give us a false sense of comfort and security.

The Bible is filled with communities of God's people seeking, with varying degrees of success, to align life on earth more closely to life in God's realm. In today's first reading, the Israelites approach Samuel with idea to achieve this: they want a king. Since the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites have been functioning as a tribal society. Leaders would rise from among the people, especially when they needed to go to battle against their enemies.⁴

Judges, including Samuel, were appointed to help settle disputes. But Samuel is getting old; he doesn't have much time left to lead. Everyone, even Samuel, agrees that his sons are not good prospects for leadership, and so the people, having noticed that all the countries around them do this governing thing differently than they do, come to Samuel and share their vision of what the Israel could be: a monarchy, ruled by a powerful human king. Samuel warns them that a king is likely to do all kinds of things that aren't in their best interest, including conscripting their sons into military service, taking the best of their resources for himself, taxing them heavily, even making them *slaves* – and slavery, by the way, was the very thing God had rescued them from in Egypt. The people have a vision to *set the world right* – to make life better for themselves and their children. But Samuel recognizes what the people do not: that when they give power to a human king, there is a grave risk that the divide between God's will and the king's will, between heaven and earth, will *increase*, not decrease.

The Netflix series *The Crown* tells the story of Queen Elizabeth II, the current queen of England, who became the head of the British monarchy when she was just twenty-five years old. In the episode about her coronation, we flashback to when Elizabeth's father, King George, asks her to help him practice for his coronation. "You be the archbishop," he tells his young daughter, "and let's practice the anointing." Seeing her confusion, he explains: "When I am anointed I am transformed. Brought into direct contact with the divine. Forever changed. Bound to God. It is the most important part of the entire ceremony."

⁴ Karla Suomala, Commentary on 1 Samuel 8, Working Preacher, June 10, 2012.

For Queen Elizabeth's coronation, her husband Philip, the chair of the coronation committee, lobbies hard to have the event televised, so that the common people who are not permitted to attend, can see what happens and feel they are part of this grand ritual. The event is televised, but when the time for the anointing comes, not only is there a cloth tent placed over the young queen to shield her from view, but the cameras cut to a static image. The anointing is considered too sacred to be seen by mere mortals. Fortunately, in *The Crown*, we get a view that is up close and personal. We see the archbishop as he places drops of holy oil on the queen's hands and head. We hear him say, "As kings, priests and prophets were anointed and as Solomon was anointed king, so be thou anointed, blessed, and consecrated queen over the peoples whom the Lord thy God hath given thee to rule and govern..."⁵

Human kingdoms are founded on the idea that one person is granted special power and privilege, and a unique connection to the divine – often simply by being born into a royal family. But *God's kingdom* is founded on the paradox that **every** human being is granted power and privilege and a unique connection to God – simply by being born into the **human** family. And God's kingdom is ruled by one who became human only by giving up his divine privilege, one who gave his life to bridge the divide between heaven and earth.

God's kingdom exposes the false divisions created by all kinds of human societies, no matter how democratic we think we might be. And so we pray: *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* When we pray these words, we do not just call on God to intervene and **set the world right**. When we pray these words, *we offer ourselves* to God in service to this radical vision of *God's kingdom* and *God's will*, where all people have a place, where all are deemed worth of God's love.

Now I am not naïve. I know, I know, that the divisions in our society, in our churches, in our families, run very, very deep. These divisions are the result of centuries of history, caused by viewpoints, behaviors, and assumptions passed on so effectively from generation to generation that often we are completely unaware of how tightly we hold them. For many of us, the result is that we feel simply overwhelmed by the challenges we face in our world, in our churches, in our lives. Most days it feels like the divide between earth and

⁵ The Crown, episode 4, "Smoke and Mirrors."

heaven is too great to ever be overcome. But remember: we live as we pray. And when we pray for God to set the world right, for God's kingdom and will to come to earth, this prayer is the first step in doing what we can, moment by moment, step by step, loving action by loving action, to bridge the divide between God's desires for us and our world and the mess we tend to make of things. *God, set the world right!*

We live as we pray, and this prayer is a call to action. Imagine what could happen when we align our actions with God's desire for justice and mercy and love. When we do that, well, there will be no stopping the coming of God's kingdom to this earth.

Amen.