



March 2015

Volume 88 Number 3

Dear Friends,

Thy Kingdom come,

Thy will be done,

On earth, as it is in heaven. *Matthew 6:10*

The one element which appears in **every** Episcopal worship service is the Lord's Prayer. The thought seems to be that if Jesus gave us a prayer (see Matthew 6), then perhaps we ought to use it.

Can the Kingdom of Heaven be at hand? Every time we gather for worship, we say the Lord's Prayer. Its first petition—"thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven"—asks that the will of God might become present here and now. We do not pray that we will enter the Kingdom when we die, but that our world may be transformed now so that our world will look like, well, heaven.

This was not a new hope in Jesus' day—it appears in various ways throughout the Old Testament. And by the time Jesus came on the scene, there was a common belief among his people that God would send a special agent, a Messiah [Greek: "Christ"] who was anointed (think "crowned" or "authorized") by God to bring this world to a cataclysmic end and usher in the original New Age.

So did the world end, or not? One of the crises of the first years of the Church was that Jesus came, Jesus died, but the world looked pretty much the same in 40 AD as it had in 30. Despite the stories of a singularly bright star, earthquakes, darkening at noon, or even opening graves, the casual observer would not say that the world had come to an end. So the first followers wondered, Had they been wrong about Jesus? Was he not the Messiah after all? Should they be looking for another?

But gradually it became apparent that a number of things had changed, and that more were changing with an accelerating rapidity. The vision that Jesus offered marked a totally new way of looking at one's self, at one's body and physical being, at one's relationships not only with people, but also with money and power and governments, and, in fact, at just about everything.

The reality of this transformation of the world did not work from the outside in [earthquakes, floods, lightning, and various other special effects from our own imagined scenarios for the end of the world] but proceeded from the inside out. People began to look at the world and their lives from a new perspective. They thought of themselves as having new hearts, minds, and spirits as they looked at the world in a new way, and then began to re-make their lives, and their world, according to that vision. Consider these few representative changes:

- Jews and Gentiles? no longer so very different;
- Slaves? well, they were people, too;
- Relations between men and women? redefined in terms of mutuality;
- Power? no longer equated with physical domination;
- Enemies? the struggle now was to figure out how to love, rather than how to destroy, them;
- Real life? maybe not the same thing as physical life;
- Death? maybe not the same thing as bodily death;
- Been sinned against? the normative response is now forgiveness rather than revenge or retribution.

Taken as a whole, and compared to the Greco-Roman world view current in Jesus' day, these propositions defined an entirely new way of thinking, living, and being. They made a new world.

How the new world happens This new world came into being as a new perspective which produced widespread new behaviors and attitudes. God was, indeed, the source of this new world, but the agency was not high profile special effects, but individual human beings, responding, one-by-one, to the call to turn away from the old ways (“repent”) and embrace this new vision (“believe the Gospel”). This new world was to be built here and now and from the ground up, not dropped by magic fully fabricated from some other dimension. Its progress was gradual—it took time—and it was decentralized. The new world came about not by one spectacular event, but by the transformation of individual hearts and those people then living different lives in the existing, often hostile, culture.

Ultimately, the work of transforming the world will not be finished here and now. We cannot make the Kingdom of God, or else it would be The Kingdom of Really Smart, Good People. As soon as we think we can make the Kingdom, we start to create something very different. But what we *can* do is offer something like a foretaste, a preview, a pocket of negative entropy, in which the nature and will of God, translated into human terms, will be on display.

Paul suggests that we be ambassadors for Christ, and these various Godly acts are demonstrations of the life of our “home” country. As American pavilions in the old World’s Fairs were intended to demonstrate abroad what life here was like, churches, in their own lives and in the works that they support, create experiential demonstrations of the Kingdom of God. Part of our mission is to show what the will of God, when it is done on earth as it is in heaven, might look like. That showing forth the will of God on earth was what Jesus did, and when he turned the mission over to us, that became our reason for being.

It’s a miracle! In the Gospels we see this methodology of demonstration in what we call Jesus’ miracles, especially in the healings and the feedings. These acts are offered as evidence of something larger, not as works whose ultimate and total value is in themselves. If physical healing had been the point, Jesus would have done a lot more of it, and the same can be said of feeding.

The miracles are maybe something like the fruits and plants the first European explorers brought back from the Western Hemisphere—objects whose significance was much more what they *represented* than what they were in themselves. The distinctive fruits (tomatoes), vegetables (potatoes), recreational drugs (tobacco), and precious metals (silver in unheard of abundance) which those early explorers brought back were offered as evidence of the great wealth available in a land no one had even imagined a few generations before. The small pieces of evidence awakened in the “old” world a deep curiosity about the “new” and a deep longing in many to leave behind the familiar and seek new life in a new place.

We remember and celebrate those explorers not because they offered new vegetables, but because they pointed the way to a new world. Perhaps we might think of the miracles as tangible samples of the way life works in the New World.

Jesus healed and fed because he thought our most crippling sickness and deepest hunger both derived from our being out of relationship with God—being people who either did not know, or did not care about, God and God’s vision for us and for the world which God made. Jesus’ healing of blind people functions on multiple levels—he restores immediate physical sight, but, more importantly, he gives the ability to see who God is and how God works (see John 9 for an extended treatment of this theme). And it is that deeper level of seeing which is the focus of Jesus’ work.

Words, actions, and a dog But if all we do is *talk* about God, we are ignoring how Jesus worked. Throughout the Gospels Jesus is quite clear that hearts transformed to follow him will show forth their new vision by providing material assistance to those whose only basis of claim is their need.

If we think healing and feeding are the *most* we have to offer, then we have mistaken Jesus’ process for his product. I once knew a dog who, when I pointed somewhere with my finger, looked with rapt and completely focused attention at my hand but never quite grasped the concept of pointing. Every time Jesus does a miracle, we need to remember where it is he actually intends for us to look.

Draft proposal To follow Jesus, we will do concrete and specific actions, and those actions will point beyond themselves to something more valuable than the works themselves. We will help people to make the connection between the immediate good works and the larger Kingdom of God. The point of our teaching is not to increase our market share, but to offer people something which will transform their lives and transform the world. Christians are, after all, people who think the Kingdom of God is an upgrade from what we experience here most of the time.

Giving up a dumb idea for Lent One largely unchallenged myth of our culture is that to follow Jesus is basically about loss—giving up things that are fun, exciting, interesting, intellectually challenging and real. And in their place, this myth suggests, we are to put a life which is boring, judgmental, restricted, diminished, with no tolerance for dissent, and premised on the improbable hope of some sort of reward after death which might make it all worthwhile in the end. But in the meantime, following Jesus pretty dull: virtuous, respectable, maybe even morally good, but a hard sell in the free market of ideas and life-style options.

What Jesus actually calls us to give up is insecurity, a self-image based on appearance, youth, and job status, a world view which dismisses whatever it cannot understand or explain, a concept of peace premised on domination and violence, the toxic effects of having to conceal from others and even one’s self the true nature of our flawed characters. Jesus invites us to give up a deep misunderstanding of the role and limits of wealth, entertainment, intellectual ability and knowledge, and even physical health in the composition of a life. This list could, of course, be significantly expanded. The bad news is that Jesus calls us to give up a lot; the Good News is that it is stuff

which is not strong enough to sustain a good and interesting life. The myth of our culture about Jesus is wrong in both directions: what we think will make us reliably happy and secure turns out not to; what we dismiss as being more appropriate for the very young or simpleminded is, in fact, strong, reliable, remarkably flexible, and available to everyone at no cost.

The Kingdom of heaven is a place where people know the difference between what is plausible and commonly believed, and what is true and supportive of genuine health and well-being.

II

But how can we know? The will of God for the world is far reaching. No individual, congregation, diocese, or denomination could effectively address implementing God's will in *every* instance. St. Paul uses the image of the body as a metaphor for the Christian community. That image calls us to specific action but relieves us from the responsibility of doing everything that needs to be done: we are an organ, not the whole body. There are things we can and need to do, but there are plenty of other essential tasks for which someone else will be responsible. Paul also suggests that there are specific gifts for specific needs, and that while one might feel some guilt for not using the gifts given by God, one need not feel guilty for not having *all* of the gifts or doing *all* of the work.

St. John the Divine, near the beginning of the Book of Revelation (chapters 2 and 3), takes an inventory of neighboring congregations and is clear, and fairly unsparing, about both their particular strengths and their besetting weaknesses. The idea that congregations have a particular identity and character is as old as the church itself.

All of these New Testament images (and there are others) suggest that our responsibilities are real, specific, and limited.

Figuring out who we are Jesus suggests (cf Matthew 12:33 or Luke 6:43-44) that what we produce (rather than what we might claim) is the most reliable indicator of our actual identity. Following Jesus' observation, therefore, in order to identify St. Elizabeth's genuine gifts, we might best look to see what we produce. Phase I of the Dickinson Fund Discernment Process undertook this work over the last 18 months, and Tim Graham described their findings in his article in the December issue of *The Tower*.

Having identified our gifts as a community, we could then compare the list to what God values and desires, and the items that appear in *both* columns might be what we would best seek to nurture and carry forth. We might, for example, be very good at something of little importance to God, and while such a thing might matter to us, perhaps it does not merit a place on the list of what we should most nurture and promote. Similarly, there might be something which we think matters a great deal to God for which we show little actual aptitude, and pretending that we are good at something when we are not might be equally misguided.

The Will of God and the Will of Susan But how can we know what matters to God? A brief aside to suggest an answer. If a matter of considerable significance to both my wife Susan and to me comes to me first, I usually have a pretty good idea of how she will respond when I communicate it to her. For example, if someone came to me offering the two of us a choice of ten mid-winter days in Oslo or Honolulu, I can predict with a high degree of certainty what she would choose. While the factors which determine the Will of Susan are often mysterious to me, I can usually come fairly close to predicting what she actually desires on a wide range of issues.

That ability to discern the Will of Susan with some confidence comes from my knowing and loving Susan, from my having paid attention (ok, so probably not enough) to her, from having spent time

with her, from having watched her and in some ways even studied her so that I might know what is likely to please (and what is likely to offend) her. I do not have to explain, understand, or justify the Will of Susan, and even when I do not agree with it or like it, I am still reasonably sure about what it will be.

So if we want to grow in confidence in our ability to know the will of God, we might follow a similar methodology. I do not mean to suggest that the will of God for any situation is simple and obvious, but when we pay attention, we can begin to see some themes which span centuries of writings in a wide range of circumstances.

Our project to discern the best stewardship of the Dickinson Fund is centered on a desire to be faithful to the will of God, for St. Elizabeth's, with this resource, in this time. Using that resource in the spirit of "thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" would seem to be consistent with what we say whenever we gather for worship.

Recognizing that while we do not understand all of the will of God or all of the Kingdom, our parish story might suggest that we have some glimpses into some small parts of both. Just as it would be grandiose to think that the entire will of God was transparent to us, perhaps it would be just as erroneous to assume that the will of God is entirely opaque to us as well. So we will not give up on being a church and pretend we are a small foundation. Nor will we give up our abilities to think sharply and critically. As Jesus suggests (Matthew 10:16, Luke 16:8), the wise disciple can be both innocent and shrewd, or, put another way, can dream but can also plan.

At its annual Vestry Retreat on February 20 and 21, the Vestry, joined by members of the Dickinson Fund Discernment Committee, will discuss further St. Elizabeth's stewardship of the Dickinson Fund. We have completed the first phase, the identification of our congregational gifts and culture. We now move to the second phase, to begin discerning how those gifts intersect with God's will—and God's Kingdom.

In our part of the world and in our generation, we tend to forget that for much of its history, especially in the early days, the life of the Church has been characterized by great—sometimes explosive—growth. Growth is a characteristic of the Kingdom of God. If we do our work well, the Dickinson Fund will be more like a seed than a jewel: its power and its beauty will increase and extend long after we have gone on to the Kingdom on our own. And if we invest it in accordance with God's will, it will produce results, results suitable to be held up as examples of the Kingdom of God, seen here on earth, and an advance insight into what will be seen by all in heaven. Properly invested, this resource will produce a benefit here and now, but also draw people into the recognition of something larger and more significant than any work of our own. It will be like a healing or a feeding which is a blessing in itself, but which will point to an even greater and more lasting blessing here and hereafter.

The Rev. Canon John G. Hartnett

Rector