

1 Chronicles 29: 10-17

Luke 11:1-13

Celebrating and Preparing

Happy Independence Day! Today we celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776 by representatives of the thirteen British colonies on this continent. It begins---

“When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

It goes on to accuse King George of being a despot, of neglecting to protect the colonies, of waging war against them instead of providing for them, of accusing people unjustly and holding invalid trials, and many other intolerable acts.

It then declared the colonies to be free of tyranny and independent of Great Britain, and referred to the colonies as the thirteen united states of America.

It was a great day, but it was only the beginning of the Revolutionary War--- Only the beginning of establishing a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Democracy was a brand new idea 234 years ago, an experiment to see if it would be workable and successful.

I am grateful to live in a country where I have a voice, where I can vote for my government representatives and write letters to express my concerns and needs, where I can join with others to form groups that advocate for just economic and social policies, and where we can have the opportunity to make needed changes to laws and public policies.

And so we celebrate----rightfully so!----our independence from tyranny, our political freedom from human kings!

But this week, even as I was looking forward to this holiday, something grabbed me about this morning's scripture. Yes, it's the Lord's Prayer. We pray it every week. But what grabbed me this week was that we are always praying for the KINGdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

The KINGdom!

Not the Democracy of God! Not the God administration that we will vote to keep or replace after four years!

There's a song that Dale knows called "No Democracy in Heaven." I think the second line is "No democracy in hell," but that's not my point exactly.

My point is that Jesus talked a lot about the Kingdom of God. Sometimes the Kingdom of God refers to a time in the future, an "end-time" when God will reign over everything and God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And yes, that's what we pray for when we pray the Lord's Prayer every week. We often dream of this future time when evil will be gone and we will live in perfect peace---the lion will lay down with the lamb and there will be no more crying or suffering or pain.

But Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God being near to us, within us or among us. He doesn't speak in the future tense. He doesn't say that the Kingdom of God WILL BE within us or among us.

So what's he talking about? How can something off in the future be among us or near to us or within us? It doesn't really make sense. But there is a way to understand it.

If we define the Kingdom of God as a time and a place when and where God's will is done, then we can see that God's will is done to a greater or lesser degree right here and right now, at any moment by us and by those around us.

If we get too tied up in dreaming of the future, or the past, the Good Old Days, for that matter, then we might miss seeing that the Kingdom of God is here, now, among us and within us. We might not realize that the Kingdom of God is near to us even as we sit together right now if we are praying so hard for that "someday" when Christ comes back to sit on the throne.

And missing out is what way too many people did when Jesus lived on earth. Do we want to miss it, too?

I don't think so.

The thing is that we have some responsibility here. The Kingdom of God is not going to come only through prayer. We are the body of Christ, called to work for the Kingdom of God.

I want to tell you how important working for the Kingdom of God, helping to build the Kingdom of God, is in my call to ministry. And I can't. I don't really have the words. It is central to my call, the foundation of it.

And I believe it is really God's call to all of us---that we are called to do our part in bringing the Kingdom of God near to us, to establish it among us and within us, so that we can spread the Good News to all the world.

Our scripture this morning was about Jesus teaching the Lord's Prayer to his disciples. Before he did that, he first sent out the twelve apostles to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal, and a little later he commissioned 70 followers to go out and heal and to proclaim that "the Kingdom of God has come near" to the people.

He didn't try to do it all himself. He sent out his followers to work to proclaim the presence of the Kingdom of God in the world.

In a little while we will be commissioning Team Mississippi as we prepare to leave early next Sunday morning. We are sending out our own twelve, not to preach or proselytize, but to show by our presence, by our work helping people we don't even know, that the Kingdom of God has come near, that it is among us and within us.

There may be a time when we can share what God has done for us, to tell what a difference the presence of Christ has made in our lives.

Or maybe not. That's not our purpose.

The Gospels tell us of many healings done by Jesus and Luke also tells us that the disciples healed people. They do NOT tell us that all of those people came to believe that Jesus was the Son of God! In fact, we hear examples of the opposite---that ten lepers were healed and only one came back to say thank you, for instance.

And so we go, to heal some of the damage done by the world, by Hurricane Katrina, to the people of Mississippi ----

healing that does not seem miraculous until you consider the odds against twelve people from San Diego making a living sacrifice of their time and resources to help strangers in a far-off place ---not knowing if what we do will bring anyone closer to God, but knowing that we are in fact bringing the Kingdom of God among the people we will be helping. It is up to them to accept that good news or reject it. It is not up to us!

What **is** up to us is to put action behind our words, to put skin on the prayer that we pray so often, to put muscle behind it, so that the world can see with their own eyes what we heard from the book of 1 Chronicles this morning---that the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty are God's, not some earthly king's! That God is God and has dominion over all! That apart from God there is no hope, that all that we have and all that we are come from God alone!

As good as democracy is, there is something better even more free, and that's the Kingdom of God. Even while we celebrate the beginning of democracy in this country, we are working to establish God as the King, by working in Mississippi, by worshiping here at home, by living in such a way that recognizes that the Kingdom of God is near, that it is among us and within us.

Our hearts and heads bow in gratitude for the gift of freedom that has its roots in God, that our ancestors made real and tangible for us.

May we continue to make the God's reign real and tangible for others. Amen.