

Thine

Rev. John Allen

We have arrived now at the final week of this series of studying the Lord's Prayer. My hope in taking this much time looking at this short and simple prayer is that these words we say each week might take on deeper meaning for us.

I hope that in addition to offering us the comfort of repeating familiar and timeless words, our imaginations and hearts will also be stretched to hear God's voice in new and challenging ways.

In hearing at the first part of the prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven.

We remembered that no name for God is complete on its own, that names like father have their limitations and I invited us all to consider what other scriptural images of God might teach us, images like mother, source of life, womb of mercy, hope of the world, prince of peace.

We also noticed together the simplicity of this prayer, that it is not fancy or ornate, but rather invites us to a direct way of speaking with God, naming our needs clearly, and praising God. Don't make prayer harder than it is. Keep it simple.

Then, hearing at the second part of the prayer

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts and we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

I waded cautiously into the age old, debts vs. trespasses controversy and discussed how each of these words lifts up some aspect of what it is we seek forgiveness from. The boundaries we cross. The obligations we owe to each other and to God that we fail to deliver on.

Then I lifted up another word from the prayer, Our. Our debts. Our trespasses, and suggested that you could say whatever you like, as long as it is always ours. As long as we always remember our collective culpability and shortcoming, not just our individual mistakes.

So this week we come to the final third of the prayer.

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever.

This ending coda of the prayer is actually not in the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew, and most scholarly editions of the Bible, like the New Revised Standard

Version that we read from here, omit this line. It does appear in the King James Bible which uses less ancient manuscripts as sources.

The line also appears in the Bible in the Old Testament Book of 1 Chronicles, and it is also a part of the Lord's Prayer in an ancient Christian text called "The Teaching of the Twelve" a book that was ultimately not included in the Bible. It has however become a traditional part of the prayer that we say.

Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.

I have plenty to say about these few words, but first, I want to tell you a story.

On October 31, 1517, exactly 500 years ago on Tuesday, Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic Monk, presented to his bishop a treatise of grievances against the Catholic Church. His bold defiance sparked what has come to be known as the Protestant Reformation.

And this church, along with Lutherans, Baptists, and Presbyterians and many others trace their origins to this one moment of protest against the Catholic Church, which is where we get our name, Protestants.

Luther had several objections to the way Christianity was being represented by the church headquartered in Rome, but the one that drove him to break ranks was the practice of indulgences.

Indulgences were a fixture of Catholic doctrine in the sixteenth century. The idea was that when a person died, those destined for heaven would first enter a state called purgatory. A transitional place in which they would receive purification from the sins of their lives until they were finally truly pure and could enter heaven.

For those still living, their job was to pray earnestly for the recently departed, which would help expedite this process of purification and speed them along to their great reward.

An indulgence was a rite that the Church could grant, drawing on the abundance of grace earned by martyrs and those imprisoned for their faith, that would transfer some of that good will to a recently departed person and thus whisk them out of purgatory and up into heaven.

Theologically, it's kind of an odd conception that depends on some impossibly precise moral bookkeeping. But it's not that terrible to have people praying for their loved ones after death.

What put Martin Luther and his fellow reformers over the edge is when the church started selling indulgences. Accepting cash payments, or transfers of property to the church, as a way to improve the state of a loved one after they died. Priests told their

parishioners, often poor folks with very little money to spare, that the moment their coins hit the bottom of the box their dearly departed's souls would fly up to heaven.

To Luther this was not only transparently greedy and manipulative, praying of the fears of the dying to enrich the church, but it was also a real overreach of the church's sense of its own power. The idea that this human institution could manipulate the fates of souls in the hands of God seemed to be a clear example of church expanding its power into areas that really belonged to God alone.

As the reformation went along, taking advantage of the newly invented printing press to circulate their beliefs, it picked up steam rapidly. This movement developed several ideas that we practice today, perhaps even without giving them a second thought.

The fact that I am speaking to you right now in English, your local language, rather than Latin, is thanks to the reformation.

The fact that you have a Bible in front of you, in a language you can understand, so that you can read it for yourself and not just rely on what I say, is a thanks to the reformation.

The fact that you got to vote on who your minister would be, rather than having me assigned to you is, an outcome of the reformation.

The fact that this church votes on its own budget, and that we do not prescribe a narrow idea of God that everyone has to agree to, the fact that we trust each other to make choice on our own faith journeys, and that we share leadership of this place, all of this has its roots in Luther's reformation.

At the most basic level, the reformation sought to keep the church from thinking too much of itself. To keep the institution of the church from believing that it had powers which, in reality, belong to God alone.

Which brings me all the way back to the Lord's prayer. And those last few lines.

Thine is the kingdom. And the power. And the glory forever.

Sometimes I think we could insert too words to make the reminder a little more forceful.

Thine, not ours, is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.

Power and glory are not meant for us, they are meant for God.

This was the core insight of the reformation, 500 years old this week, the movement from which our church was born.

That God alone has the power to forgive our sins, and God cannot be bought off with a gift to the church. That God alone is worth glorifying, not princes, kings, presidents, or popes. That God alone is the source of power and authority, and that when the laws of our earthly kingdom stand at odds with the vision of God's kingdom, faithful people are not meant to bow before Earthly powers, but steel courage in their hearts and perhaps repeat the last line of the best prayer we know.

Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.

Four years after he sent the letter to his bishop which began the reformation, Luther was called before an assembly of the Roman Empire and Church called and faced with serious punishment including him being labeled a heretic, excommunicated, and stripped of his Holy Orders, he was given a chance to recant, to take it all back.

Luther is said to have replied: "I cannot and will not recant anything. Here I stand, I can do no other. So help me God."

I imagine that most of us won't face imperial tribunals, or be taken before authorities to so directly account for our faith, and yet we all face moments in our lives, when our faith demands something of us that might be difficult.

Our faith demands that we might stand up against someone powerful for the sake of someone vulnerable. Or stand in the face of a lie and speak the truth. Or stand in the face of the insurmountable, and hope boldly.

And you might think that in order to do that you have to be really confident in yourself. But that is not it at all.

You just have to take to heart the last line of the Lord's Prayer. And know that the power you face is not the ultimate power, God is.

That the thing in the world that seems the most glorious and draped in splendor would be lost in the brilliance of the glory of God.

That the future belongs to God, not to any human institution, or any individual.

So you can stand with what you know is right. And pray:

God, thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.

Then open your eyes, look forward, and say.

Here I stand. I could do no other.

