

“The Kingdom of God”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 16, 2014**

**New Testament Lesson: John 5:1-9a
Old Testament lesson: Psalm 41**

I pray the Lord's Prayer about 6 to 8 times a month, in addition to praying it with all of you here in worship each week. It's one of the blessings I receive in attending our committee meeting, since each one ends with the Lord's Prayer, everyone circled up and holding hands.

It's really great – I would recommend it for you and your families, your study groups, your friends, or whatever group it might work for.

The blessing for me comes from the repetition of the prayer in various groups at various times. Each time the prayer speaks to me differently depending on our discussion and interaction. It's like hearing directly from God.

Most of the times the line that speaks to me is either “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” or “... for Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory.” Well this past Tuesday after the New Life Committee meeting, we circled up as usual, and a strange and powerful thing happened. A new line from the prayer spoke to me. It was: “Thy Kingdom Come, thy will be done....” The image I had in mind when those words were spoken was of the participants at the Feb. 11 Job Fair.

Emily Hollembaek – who coordinated our Job Readiness Workshops with the help of many unsung volunteers and much community support – Emily had just shared with us the excitement she saw in the participants after the Job Fair.

One immediately got a ride to the library, hopped on the computers, and applied for a job as a fork-lift operator, another rushed off to put her name in for an opening at the Palmer Center, and a third got connected with Kelly Temporary.

Small steps perhaps in one sense – and who knows where they'll lead – but giant steps toward ushering in the Kingdom of God. Helping people help themselves, with God's help. That's what the Kingdom of God looks like. We know this by what we heard read in the Bible – what I just read and what we just heard.

As John describes it, Jesus sees a man lying by a pool of healing waters and asks him, “Do you want to be made well?” He asks him that because the man has been lying there for years, day after day. The man answers Jesus, saying, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down

ahead of me.” Jesus says to him, “Stand up, take your mat, and walk.” At once the man is made well, and he takes up his mat and begins to walk.

What just happened there? A miracle? How did it happen? Let’s take a look. The man has been paralyzed for 38 years and in all that time nobody helped him into the pool of healing waters. And Jesus comes along, sees him, and says, “Stand up, take your mat, and walk.” In other words, don’t get discouraged waiting for someone to do it for you, stand up for yourself – with God’s help.

In this country, there is a longstanding debate about the poor and unemployed – whether they could pull themselves up by their bootstraps if they only had the will and desire. The truth of it is, yes and no.

Yes, some people who are poor or chronically unemployed could get jobs if they would just exert themselves a bit more – maybe a lot more. That’s undoubtedly true, for some people who are suffering from lack of work.

For others, they have conditions that make them unable to work – or particularly given today’s economy, there are economic conditions that make it very hard to find work, if not downright impossible, for some. I’m not concerned with us debating this. As I said, there’s probably truth in both points of view.

What I am interested in is us looking at where God is in all of this. Notice that the man did not by himself just stand up, take his mat and walk (which next week we’ll see was considered work by the religious leaders at the time – by carrying your mat you were working, and that was forbidden on the Sabbath, which as I said, we’ll look at next week.

Anyway, the man did not just stand up by himself, under his own power and by his own initiative after all those years of idleness. No, the man had Jesus’s words in his ear and on his heart. He had Jesus looking down on him, looking out for him. We all have times when we need somebody looking out for us: somebody to encourage us and support us.

A small boy said to his father, “Hey, Dad, watch!” He then threw the ball into the air and swung the bat fiercely, only to miss. “Wait, Dad, watch this one,” he said. And for the second time he swung and missed. “Here’s the one, Dad!” he called out, but the result was the same. Suddenly, the boy yelled: “Three strikes – and out! Gee, Dad, aren’t I a great pitcher?” Yes, Johnny, you are a great pitcher!

None of us got where we are today all by ourselves. Each and every one of you had somebody who believed in you and supported you in getting where you are today, I know I did even on the days when we struck out. But the man at the pool had no one before Jesus happened by. That’s what he tells Jesus: “Sir, I have no one ... no one to put me into the pool.” Not only that, he also says, “While I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.”

I bet there are a lot of poor and underemployed people in this community who feel that they have no one to help them find a job. And not only that, when they try to get work, someone or something gets in the way – no transportation, there's somebody better qualified, they are belittled by family members at every step; or maybe it's that society finds it easier to blame them, because for sure, some people are abusing the system. But to leave everybody behind – even those who just need a little extra help – well that's most definitely NOT what the Kingdom of God looks like. What the Kingdom of God looks like is people helping people.

The man who miraculously stood up, took his mat, and walked did not do that on his own. He had Jesus. Now for Jesus, it was easy. He just said, "Stand up, take your mat and walk" – problem solved.

For us, however, it's not that easy. It's just as possible to help people to stand up for themselves. But it's not easy, because first we have to set aside our judgmental thinking.

Jesus doesn't judge the man. He doesn't say, "You lazy good for nothing. You could walk if you would only try. Now get up." No, what Jesus does is empower the man to stand on his own two feet, with no sense of judgment or criticism – at least none that is not also applicable to any one of us when it comes to living righteously in the eyes of God.¹ We all fall short of our best.

Helping people in nonjudgmental, faith-based ways it's what the Kingdom of God looks like. It's what the church looks like, on its best days. And for that, to God be the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory.

Later in John, in the second half of the story about the paralyzed man – which we didn't hear read today but which we will read next week – in the second half of the story, Jesus says, "My Father is still working, and I also am working." Jesus says this in response to those who criticized him for helping the paralyzed man to stand up on his own two feet. (To see why they criticized him, you'll just have to come back next week).

¹ In "The New Interpreters Bible," we read, "In John, the verb 'to sin' (αμαρτανω hamartano) occurs elsewhere only in 9:2-3. ... In John 5:1-9a the healing does not seem to involve forgiveness of sins; so it seems wrong to read Jesus' words in v. 14 as embracing the traditional linkage of sin and illness (... cf. John 9:2-3, where Jesus explicitly rejects that linkage). That is, v. 14 does not address the man's pre-healing condition. Jesus does not speak of what was required for healing but of the response to the healing already received; he urges that the man's healing should be more than physical. The man needs to be spiritually healthy also, as the expression "be made well" suggests. In chap. 9, physical blindness and sight will be played off against spiritual blindness and sight (9:39-41), and that dynamic is prefigured here."

But for now, notice where Jesus gives credit and from where Jesus gets his power: God the Father. And so it is with us. We don't have to worry about judging people when trying to help them stand on their own two feet. We don't have to worry about getting it wrong and actually doing more harm than good. The only thing we need to worry about is looking to God in all that we do. ***People helping people ... looking to God in all they do;*** that's the Kingdom of God.

If you give someone some money because they're poor, do it prayerfully, with God in your heart and mind. If you decide not to give money or to give of yourself – because sometimes giving money or transportation or whatever is just enabling unhealthy behaviors – then do that prayerfully, with God in your heart and mind.

It's not for us to worry about doing or not doing the right thing when faced with someone in need. We just need to do what God leads us to do – and then leave the outcome to God.

For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

As long as we are doing what we do in the name and manner of Jesus, we can be assured that what comes from it will be life giving –both for us and for those in need. “My Father is still working,” says Jesus, “and I also am working.” To which we respond, “Jesus is still working, and we also are working” – at least on our best days as Christians, on our best day as a church.

What's your day going to be like today? I guess that's up to Jesus – and you. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

We gather in the midst of a broken world, O God, and we strive to build ways of love.

Open our eyes, sharpen our hearing, and quicken our hearts to respond to the cry of your children.

Help us to be the light in someone else's dark world.

Help us to provide hope for those who feel hopeless.

Help us to be a friend to the lonely. And help us to avoid making excuses ... like someone else can do it better, ... I am just too busy, ... I'll do it tomorrow ... what difference does it make?

Let us not rely on excuses but do our best to present ourselves to God as one approved by him, a worker for the Kingdom who has no need to be ashamed.

And where we can be an instrument of healing, a giver from abundance, or a comforter in Christ, direct us, inspire us, and empower us.

Instill in us a sense of urgency, Lord Jesus, so that at day's end we can offer thanks for the opportunity to serve another, rather than ask forgiveness for failing to follow in your footsteps.

For you, O Lord, are the greatest servant the world has ever known, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to say when we pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.