

FOUNDATIONS FOR
LAITY RENEWAL

Transforming Daily Life

719 Earl Garrett Street
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Three Sermon Outlines on

Work and Faith

“Calling. Kingdom. Identity.”

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SERMON NOTES

*The
High Calling
of Our
Daily Work*

*Making a real living connects you to a bigger picture,
a grand design, an abundant life.*

*Each of us has only a small part to play, but what a part!
It's the high calling of our daily work.*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge
TheHighCalling.org

3:11-4:13). I briefly recounted Moses' five objections along with God's response to each objection.

Moses repeatedly protests, "God, I can't do it; it won't work; I'm not the one you need here." But God patiently persists, "Yes, you can, Moses; I'll be with you."

What happened to Moses also happens to people like you and me. In our families and relationships, our work, when we're facing personal decisions, or dealing with change, now and then there's a bush that burns and a Voice that speaks. "Come, I will send you. I'll send you to a neighbor down the street, to a friend who needs you, to a child or aging parent, to someone who is sick or dying or lonely." However daunting the task may seem, however inadequate we feel, the Voice says, "You're not alone. I will go with you." Moses eventually said yes. He went, and history was changed forever.

C. Our Response

Having spoken of the "new world" and the call Moses faced, and the new world and call the church faces, I was now ready to talk about our response. The story of Moses' call raises at least two questions for us. First, what is it that God might be calling each of us to in our personal lives? What task, large or small, may God have in store for us? Second, what is God calling us to do and to be as a church in this changing culture? How do we reach out to future generations of families, their children and youth, and to young adults who are outside the walls of our churches?

At this point in the sermon, I spoke about our church's new long-range plan and its strategic goals that constitute part of our mission as a church. I specifically named each of the goals as examples of our calling as a church to address the "new world" in which we find ourselves. I noted that we have much work to do to determine how each of these goals translates into missional action in a post-Christian culture.

I then spoke about the challenge of change. Like Moses, at times we may find ourselves questioning God's call. We may think of many reasons our church should not try new things. Like Moses' fears and concerns, I said, these are valid concerns. We need to talk about them with each other and with God.

Conclusion: The Promise

I concluded the sermon by noting again God's responses to each of Moses' objections. In five different ways God said, "Don't worry, Moses. I will be with you!" The promise is that when we respond to God's call, God will be with us.

So what is God calling you to in your life? What is God calling us to as a church? If the story of Moses tells us anything, it tells us this: God never calls us without promising us, "*I will be with you.*" And that makes all the difference.

Notes

¹See Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), pp. 11-13.

²Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, pp. 12-22.

³Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999), p. 137.

⁴Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, pp. 40-63, quoting pp. 44 and 59.

⁵Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, pp. 40-41 and 17.

Sermon 2

Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done

Matthew 6:9-10

"Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Theological Focus: Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done..." What does that mean? Why do we pray it? Jesus taught that the kingdom (reign) of God was "already" here in his own life and ministry, but is "not yet" fully here. What does it mean to pray for the full coming of God's kingdom?

Introduction: A Work in Progress

A. The Kingdom of God: Already/Not Yet

B. “Thy Kingdom Come”

C. Stitch by Stitch

Conclusion: Trusting God

Introduction: A Work in Progress

About a year ago, I was preparing a sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer from Matthew’s Gospel. As I studied the second and third petitions of the prayer, I began thinking about how I could talk about the “kingdom of God” in a simple way that would help hearers gain some better understanding of the concept. I also spent some time thinking about how I could talk about what some scholars call the “already/not yet” aspect of the kingdom.

In the Gospels, Jesus often speaks of the kingdom of God in simple everyday terms: a sower sowing seed, yeast leavening dough, a merchant buying pearls, a farmer plowing in the field. About a year ago, my wife took up the craft of knitting. She quickly became an accomplished knitter. One night we were sitting in our living room talking while she was knitting. She had just begun a new project. I asked her what she was making. She said, “It’s a sweater.” I looked at the three or four inches of knitted wool in her hands and jokingly replied, “It sure doesn’t look like a sweater!” All she said was, “Well, it’s a work in progress.” In that moment it dawned on me. I had the focusing metaphor for my sermon.

When I did the sermon, I opened it with these words: *Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” What does that mean? Why do we pray it?* Then I began telling the story of how my wife had begun knitting and how it had changed our lives. It was an opportunity to let the congregation into our personal lives and have some fun with our story. Given the popularity of knitting these days, many knitters and their spouses could identify with my comments. But I did it in a way that they couldn’t tell where I was heading with the sermon or how it might relate to “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.”

Here are some of the things I said about my wife and her knitting. Over the past eighteen months, knitting has become an important, if not obsessive, part of Debra’s life. I love watching and listening to Debra as she knits. I love the joy and pleasure it brings her. I admire the beautiful things she knits. Living with an obsessive knitter has made knitting an inescapable part of my life too.

Debra’s knitting has introduced me to strange new words. Phrases like “knit and purl,” “drop a stitch,” “knit two together,” “reverse stockinette,” and words like “blocking,” “felting,” and “cabling,” are now common in our household. There are strange little tools around our house like stitch and row counters. I had no idea how many different kinds of knitting needles there are!

There are also regular trips to the local yarn shop. I’m now on a first-name basis with the shop’s owner, Sheila, whom Debra refers to as her “supplier.” I’ve gotten used to Debra’s “yarn stash” all over our house. There are bags and balls of yarn in every cupboard, chest, drawer, and closet. Squishy little packages arrive in the mail all the time from people all over the United States. They’re little bits of yarn Debra has bought from people online. Knitting is addictive.

When all this first began, I was helped by a little book given to us by a friend. It’s a book called *At Knit’s End: Meditations for Women Who Knit Too Much*, by Stephanie Pearl-McPhee.¹ I had some fun in the sermon quoting this humorous little book and talking about how true it was at our house. According to the playful criteria in the book, my wife had become an obsessive knitter. Did you know there’s an extensive website devoted to knitting? It’s called “Ravelry” and has over 2 million participants worldwide. Debra is on that website almost every day.

I concluded my knitting story by mentioning two things I have learned as a non-knitting spouse. First, all knitting is constructed of only two basic stitches: knit and purl. No matter how big or small, simple or complex the project, each item is made with just two little stitches. Second, for truly avid knitters, knitting is always a work in progress. They finish one project, but they’re never “finished.” There’s always more to be done. Debra has four projects underway right now.

When I ask Debra what she's knitting, she says for example, "It's a sweater." Now I look at that little piece of fabric and I think, "In her mind that's a sweater, but in my mind it's *not a sweater yet*." All knitting comes down to two basic stitches. It's stitch by stitch and it's always a work in progress. With those phrases, "stitch by stitch" and "a work in progress," I had introduced the metaphors I wanted to use to talk about the kingdom of God.

Knitting is, of course, just one metaphor that could be used in a sermon like this. Choose something you do or that you are familiar with—something that has a step-by-step "work in progress" quality to it. It might be cooking, painting, writing poetry, building birdhouses, exercising, planning a trip, household chores, or something else you enjoy or find challenging.

A. The Kingdom of God: Already/Not Yet

Jesus said the kingdom of God is a work in progress, but not yet finished. That's a lot like knitting (or many other things in life). The kingdom of God, Jesus said, is already a reality among us in this world, but it is not yet complete. It's something God is doing now, but it won't be completed until the end of time. We live between this present "already" and God's future "not yet." So Jesus taught us to pray for that future, saying "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

How odd, one might think, to compare the kingdom of God to the ordinary task of knitting. But in his teaching, Jesus did a very similar thing. He said, for example, that the kingdom of God is like a sower who went out to sow seed in his field. The seed fell on various types of ground, but the seed that fell into good soil brought forth much grain, yielding a hundredfold. Jesus said the kingdom of God is like yeast a woman mixed in with three measures of flour until all of the dough was leavened. Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed someone sowed in his field; when it grew, it became a large shrub, a tree, in which the birds of the air came to make their nests.²

Jesus was saying that the kingdom of God is *already* a reality, but *not yet* a completed reality. So Jesus taught us to pray for the kingdom: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." Maybe it's not so strange after all to liken the kingdom of God to knitting. I can imagine Jesus saying, "The kingdom of God is like a woman who sat down to knit. She knitted stitch by stitch and row by row until she finished a shawl that gave warmth and comfort to one who needed it."

Stitch by stitch, row by row, *already but not yet*. Think about the unfinished things in your own life. Think about unresolved conflicts, unhealed pain from the past, uncertainties about relationships. Think about the things that worry you—like concerns you have for children or grandchildren. Think about the unknowns in your future.

The unknown and unfinished things in our world are reasons Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." He was saying to take our lives, the lives of those we love, and the well-being of this world, and place them in the hands of God—trusting God for the future.

B. "Thy Kingdom Come"

But what exactly did Jesus mean by "kingdom"? The kingdom of God was central to Jesus' teaching. In the Gospels, the word "kingdom" appears 123 times. Jesus himself uses the word 98 times. It is at the heart of his message. Jesus announced that God's kingdom—God's promised "rule" or "reign" long-awaited by the Jewish people—has now broken into history and has begun. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is here! Repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). The kingdom, Jesus said, was already present in his own person, work, and ministry. To become part of that kingdom today is to respond to Jesus' message now. But Jesus said the kingdom will also emerge in its fullness only in the future. It's a work in progress.

The kingdom of God, begun in the life of Jesus, continues to spread in and through the lives of people who follow Jesus. But this world is still filled with suffering, evil, and violence. All of creation does not yet enjoy the fullness of God's presence. As God's people, we pray for God's kingdom to come in its fullness.

When we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done," we're praying about all those things in this world that are not yet right, healed, or whole. We're asking God to come free us from the sin, evil, and brokenness that holds us

captive. We're asking God to come clean up the mess we've made in this world. We're asking God to heal the pain and conflict and free us from the suffering and tragedy that distort and destroy life. We're asking God to bring God's reign of love, justice, peace, and prosperity to all people who live on this earth.

C. Stitch by Stitch

When we pray this prayer, we're also praying that God's kingdom would come *in and through us*—that God would use us to be part of the healing of this world. We're asking that God enable us to help bring about God's kingdom of well-being for all God's people on earth.

When we pray “thy will be done *on earth*,” we are praying about where we live right here on earth. Thomas Long says this prayer brings us right back “to the pew where we sit, to the shop where we work, to the relationships where we struggle to be responsible, to the place where we try to serve.” There is in this prayer an inherent connection between God's work and our work here on earth. We pray that we will be faithful to our calling to be part of God's work. “...A cry to the God of salvation,” Long says, “leads us in God's name to our neighbor in need; a plea for the heavenly God to save empowers us to be earthly agents of reconciliation.”³

So this prayer leads us to ask ourselves: Who is my neighbor in need? How can I bring healing in relationships? How am I called to be God's person in someone else's life right now?

As I've watched Debra knit, I've also been struck by how much knitting is like writing. Writing is word by word, line by line. Writing is often slow and agonizing. Anyone who has ever written anything can identify with that. Living in this world of pain and suffering, with huge gaps between the rich and poor, the hungry and well-fed, the hurting and the well-off, we can easily feel overwhelmed. But the good news of the gospel is that God's kingdom is already at work among us and will finally come in all its fullness. Meanwhile, our role is to pray for the coming of the kingdom and to do our little part stitch by stitch, row by row, or in the writer's parlance, word by word and line by line.

Conclusion: Trusting God

To conclude this kind of sermon, one might talk about the Lord's Prayer as a prayer of trust and hope in God's future. For God's people, hope lies in trusting that God is not yet finished with us or with this world. The *already of God's kingdom* we experience now will one day give way to that glorious reality of *the not yet of God's future*. No more suffering, no more tears, no more death. “Mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Revelation 21:4). On that day all the morning stars will sing for joy, and God's people will say, “This is our God; this is the Lord for whom we have waited. Let us rejoice in his salvation” (Isaiah 25:9).

In the meantime, until that day, we place our lives and this world in God's hands. We take it stitch by stitch, row by row, word by word, line by line, one day at a time. And in trust, we pray the prayer Jesus taught us, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Notes

¹Stephanie Pearl-McPhee, *At Knit's End: Meditations for Women Who Knit Too Much* (North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing, 2005).

²Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23; 13:31-33 and parallels.

³Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 70.

Sermon 3 Do You Know Who You Are?

1 Peter 2:9-10

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Theological Focus: Who are we? As individuals, our self-identity is important to us. It tells us who we are and where we are going. Understanding our identity as God's people, the church, is also critical. It guides and motivates