

Meditations by Lorna Bradley

Matthew 6:8-15

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. "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. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

When Jesus taught his disciple to pray he taught them to ask for God's kingdom to come. What does it mean for God's kingdom to come? Is that only some far removed event that will occur at the second coming? Of course not! The kingdom of God is present now and was inaugurated by the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. The rest of the prayer teaches us how the kingdom has come and is present now. It is when God's will is done. We live as kingdom people when we are concerned for our needs only for the day, our daily bread. Kingdom people are not bound by worries of the future because God knows our needs before we ask him. Being kingdom people means trusting God as the Son trusted the Father. Moreover, the kingdom is full of forgiveness. Holding on to hurts creates boundaries and divisions in our lives. We are to forgive even as God offers us forgiveness. God's grace toward us is unmerited and unconditional. What would our lives be like if we embraced grace for others as well? How might the world be changed? In Jesus' ministry he teaches servanthood, unconditional love that breaks boundaries, and reaching out not to the greatest, but first to the least, the last and the lost. Jesus lived out the kingdom in his ministry and left behind a community of kingdom people who were his faithful witness in bringing about God's kingdom of peace and love. We participate fully as his disciples when we embrace and live out the message of the kingdom that Jesus taught.

Luke 4:14-30

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Why did the crowd become so angry? Jesus announced the inauguration of the reign of God was fulfilled. What wonderful news! At first the people respond graciously, yet by the end of the story they are seeking to murder Jesus. Why? Jesus did remind them that Israel has rejected the prophets who bear God's word of direction and correction for the people. Yet this is not what angered the crowd. It was the reminder of the widow at Zarephath and Naaman that left them "filled with rage." The prophet Elijah told King Ahab that the skies would be shut to rain and dew and then fled for his life. God sent Elijah to a gentile widow in Sidon and then blessed her with endless flour and oil with which to feed her family and Elijah. The prophet Elisha healed the leprosy of Naaman, a gentile army commander of Aram. Jesus outraged the crowd by reminding them that God showed favor on gentiles when Jews were also in need. Widows in Israel were starving, yet God showed favor to the gentile. Israelites suffered from leprosy, yet God healed a gentile army commander. Had they perhaps embraced God's election of Israel as showing that God loved Israel exclusively? Was it hard to be reminded that God's love extends to others outside the boundaries set by humans? Jesus was rejected because when he announced the good news for the poor, it was not just for the poor of Israel. Jesus' mission was too big for their standards. God's love and mercy is unlimited, even for those who do not know him. This is good news indeed!

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Jesus is sending his disciples on a ministry very different from what they expect by sending them to the Gentiles. How can Jesus do this? He can because the Father has him given all authority over both the temporal world and the spiritual world. It is with that authority that Jesus sends his disciple and this "sending" is packed with rich meaning that gets lost in the English. The word "go" comes from the Greek verb *poreu, omai* and is in the form of an aorist passive participle, which translates better as "going." But the verb has a much deeper meaning than simply "go." It alternatively translates as "proceed; travel, journey; leave; live, conduct one's life; die, go to one's death." The full meaning of this word demonstrates what Jesus expects of his disciples. He is not telling them simply to travel from point A to point B. Rather, Jesus has an all encompassing understanding of discipleship that includes ordering the disciple's life to the point of obedience in the face of death. This is the true meaning of "going" in the name of Jesus. While the disciple is "going", Jesus makes a command "make disciples". This is in the imperative, a direct order from one in authority. Again, the Greek offers nuances missed in the English. *maqhteu, w* translates alternatively as "make a disciple" and "be a disciple." Thus Jesus' command is two-fold: *make* disciples of all nations and *be* a disciple to all nations. In other words, live as an example while making disciples. How on earth are they to do this? Breaking boundaries, living obediently, proclaiming the good news and making disciples. Jesus is asking so much! Yet, it is possible because he is with them, and us, always.

4) Matthew 18:12-14

What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

Jesus' teaching would not have made sense to first century shepherds. They would not leave their sheep unattended while they leave to look for just one. They would look to the well being of the whole herd first and then go find the lost one when they could. To someone who already had one hundred sheep, how much difference did one more or less make? What is Jesus getting at? Jesus is speaking against exclusivity and complacency. It is not alright to sit idly saying, "Well, we're fine. Let the others take care of themselves." It is not alright to look around at pews filled with a fair number and decide there is no need to look for more people for God's kingdom because it's already been filled. Rather, Jesus is sending the shepherd out of the fold to find the lost one. The shepherd isn't looking for a whole herd, just one more. Every single one is of great value no matter how large the flock gets. This ties to Jesus' message to his disciples after his resurrection, "Go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:17), the lens through which we read Matthew. We're not meant to rest content with the flock we have. We're meant to go and find the lost sheep.

5) Matthew 5:43-48

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Jesus seems to be quoting a popular saying of the day, rather than something directly from Scripture. Yet this condition of wanting vengeance is seen in Psalm 118:7, "The LORD is on my side to help me; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me." In this psalm we see the anguished human response to oppression and pain, that is, wanting to strike back, wanting revenge. Moreover, humans like to assume that God has to have chosen sides. It's us or them. My way or no way. But Jesus is teaching that is not God's way. God loves all creation. The land is not fertile only for the righteous. Rather God sends the rain over all the earth. In his loving grace and abundance he cares for every person. Would it not be in God's power to cut off those who are enemies of his people? Of course he can! Then why doesn't he? He doesn't because God's way isn't a way of division or isolation. Rather God offers compassion and wants us to be reconciled to our neighbor. He does not want his people separated and exclusive, seeking vengeance. Rather he wants his people to live as kingdom people, people of love and of generous hearts, especially for those who hate us. When people mirror hatred back toward hatred, hatred grows, bouncing back and forth and multiplying. When people love those who hate them, they absorb the hate and dissipate it, and in its place there can be dialogue, reconciliation and healing.