

sermon Nov 25

According to the lectionary, this Sunday is called Reign of Christ Sunday. The scripture passages point us towards the glorified Christ, the son of man, who is the alpha and omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end, the Lord and ruler of all creation.

I don't know about you, but I think it can be difficult to imagine the reign of Christ. I try to picture what the world would look like if Jesus was present and in charge, and my head starts to spin. It's all good and well to say poetically the lion will lie down with the lamb, but unless Jesus is going to fundamentally change human nature, it's pretty hard to contemplate.

Think about the image of Christ presented in the scripture that was read. How does one absorb that intensity? Thankfully, we don't have to endure that kind of contact with Jesus that John had to there on the island of Patmos at the end of the first century. I wonder if at first he thought he was hallucinating, or encountering some alien entity. I wonder if he was familiar with the book of Daniel in the Hebrew scriptures, where one can find a similar description.

I've decided that the only way for me to understand the reign of Christ is to think about it as conscious contact with Jesus and his will as it applies to my own life. Is the reign of Christ something that is real and operative in my life, in what I say and think and do, in my priorities, in the courtesy I show to family, friends, and neighbors? Well, sometimes. Certainly not often enough, and certainly not consistently. Can I improve? I believe so, because I want that conscious contact.

Over the past few years, I've discovered that it's good to keep it simple, so I have embraced something new in my approach to morning devotions and in my prayers, especially through what everyone calls the Lord's Prayer. I suppose if I wanted to offer something good to God as we head towards another Christmas season, it would be this: and the only way I can describe it is to call it a conscious contact with Christ through the words of the Lord's Prayer. And frankly, it's pretty powerful.

But let's reminisce for a minute. Isn't it true that many of us grew up with the Lord's prayer? When I was a kid, I could say the Lord's prayer in about 15 seconds, and I would pat myself on the back for such pious efficiency.

As an adolescent I gave up on the Lord's prayer, because I gave up on prayer, except for the occasional foxhole prayer to get me out of a jam. Then, as many of you already know, a man named Billy Graham introduced me to a very personal Christ.

And so my first couple of years in college I prayed a lot. Mostly early in the mornings while taking a walk. It was very heartfelt conversational prayer. It was good.

But as time went on, prayers became more occasional, and more selfish. I was more interested in telling God how to run things than engaging in the slow walk of faith. Attending seminary and preparing for ministry didn't do great things for my prayer life. Prayer became a subject instead of a verb. It became something I did in my head instead of my heart. There is a common notion that people who are clergy are good at prayer and have a line open to God that most people don't have. It's not true. While most clergy are pretty good at writing prayers and offering prayers for the sick, it's a whole different thing to experience prayer as one's spiritual coffee that you just can't go without every morning if the day is going to go right. It's not about having a line open to God, as if one person is more special than the next person. It's about knowing that I need help, every day, and only God can keep me on track.

The scriptures tell us that often we don't know how to pray. That is true, especially when it comes to praying about ourselves, because we are great self-deceivers. But thankfully there are two good things. The first is that the Holy Spirit prays for us with groans too deep for words. That means God knows I need help in my prayers. The second thing is this: as much as I appreciate spontaneity in prayer, I am learning that I can take something as ordinary and commonplace as the Lord's Prayer and make it so personal that it becomes truthful, powerful, and soul-changing.

Mark Labberton, President of Fuller Theological Seminary, says that when he was young he had the general sense that Christianity was primarily about quieting life's personal and social turbulence. But what shocked me in reading the Gospels was that Jesus was first and foremost a disrupter. Jesus was waking people up from a social or religious slumber and calling them to something like a new kingdom.
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Somewhere between this majestic and yet alien picture of Christ in John's revelation that we just heard, and the tiny baby born in a manger that beckons our adoration in the coming weeks, is a Jesus that walked this earth and felt in his mind, body, and spirit the same things that we feel.

He didn't leave us with any legacy except this one spiritual reality: that by faith we can exercise a conscious contact with God that can literally change our lives and mean the difference between living in fear or living in trust.

When Jesus walked this earth with his disciples, people typically found conscious contact with God through the gilded temple in Jerusalem, the annual festivals, or the daily ritual of washings and prayers. But as in all things human, constant repetition without any sense of improvement caused these rituals to lose their potency and become meaningless. So it's no wonder that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, how to really pray.

I don't know about you, but for me, prayer can be tough. It requires several things to happen all at once. First, I have to trust that someone is out there and that I'm not just

talking to the walls. Second, I have to somehow believe that what I'm expressing is making contact with that someone out there. And third, I have to have faith that God actually cares. If I can make it through those three inner roadblocks to prayer, then maybe I can reach out to make conscious contact with my God.

So what's next? I can just pour out the thoughts and feelings of my heart and let God sort it all out on the other end, and that's ok; I have to do that sometimes. Or, I can complain about life and the fact that everyone's a jerk, and that I'm a victim of everyone's selfishness. That would be my occasional pity-party-prayer. Or, I can utilize, very, very slowly, the elements of conscious contact with God that Jesus gave first to his disciples, and then, to us, in the gospels. The Lord's Prayer.

I say very, very slowly because when I was a child I was taught the Lord's Prayer and I could rattle it off in about 16 seconds before moving on to the Hail Mary.

No, I say very slowly because there are certain realities hidden within the words, and they won't become apparent unless I am ready for their implications to make my day both different and better.

And I say day because that's what I have. Yesterday is behind, tomorrow may not come; so today is what I have and what I have been given.

So, how to understand God. Not easy. Those words, Our Father who art in heaven, contain centuries of images and emotions that for some are comforting and for others are horribly traumatic. For Jesus, though, those words contained a special relationship, filled with trust, protection, and promise; and despite the painful realities of fatherhood that many of us experience, Jesus wanted our conscious contact with God to be one of a special relationship, filled with trust, protection, and promise that has nothing to do with human gender.

I speak from my experience on this, because I never knew my real father, and was abandoned by my real mother. I was adopted along with four others by two caring adults who were, surprisingly, very human. So I learned not to trust, not to count on protection, and not to hope for promise; and you can see how that might have affected the way I approached the God of the Lord's Prayer. But now, later in life, having released my petty resentments, and becoming open to the reality that is larger than words, I am very content to go to God with the words, Our Father who art in heaven.

And I know that the next phrase, Hallowed be thy name, has nothing to do with halloween, and that the actual phrase means, Holy is your name; and that it has to do with honoring that special relationship that we share in prayer. I have heard people refer to God as the man upstairs. So, ok, but I have to wonder if there is any relationship there. I don't speak of my children with neutral or derogator adjectives; they have names, and my children are very special to me. How can I can them anything but their names, and even more, with reverence? Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.

I know that in progressive theology it's not correct to use words like kingdom, because such words bespeak of a militaristic tone, and so it's better to use words like realm or domain. But whatever word one chooses here, the key phrase is "thy will be done".

Today I look around at what's happening in our country and our world, and I can't begin to see how God's will could possibly be happening on this earth, with all of the sickness and war and hatred going on. What is God's will anyway? When I was a child, I was taught that it was God's will that I be a good boy and not sin. Today lots of people think of God's will that way: that we refrain from being bad people.

Having been in the UCC for decades, and having some exposure to the Gospels, I know that much of God's will has to do with being a servant and taking care of people, especially those who suffer under the inequities of society.

But as I pray the Lord's Prayer, nowadays I always pray "thy will be done *in me*".

It is a little prayer that God, through the Holy Spirit, would change my life, my thinking, my habits, my choices, so that my life would mean something on earth before I get to heaven. That may mean sacrificing privilege and pleasure in order to live with purpose; but I know that my privilege and pleasure means nothing to 99% of the world's population. The only thing that has meaning is faith, hope, and the very real actions of love.

Give us this day our daily bread. One thing I notice about the Lord's Prayer is that the word "I" never appears in it. It's always about "us", the people that God has placed in our lives, and the people who live in the world that we don't even know.

The daily bread that we ask God to provide for ourselves and others is sustenance and resources that are meant to be shared, not hoarded; it is bread that is always enough when shared, and never enough when approached with a mindset of scarcity. When I pray this part of the prayer I think of those who are praying with me, and I think about my children and grandchild. In God there is always enough if we are willing to share.

But what if we're not willing? What if, in our humanness, we are confused or frightened or convinced that people are out to get us, to take to what is ours, or to cause us some kind of harm? What if we undertake actions that step over the boundaries of human decency and exacerbate feelings of division and hatred? Is it possible for God to forgive us our trespasses; to have mercy on us when we have crossed the line where it specifically says, stay out? In Christ, of course, the answer is always yes; if we are humble enough to see our faults, our defects of character, to ask forgiveness, and to extend that same mercy and forgiveness to others.

There's a danger in all of this, of course. The danger is called temptation. Does God lead anyone into temptation? Of course not, but there are two dangers in getting closer to God. The first comes from comparing ourselves to God and concluding that we are so awful that not only will we never measure up to God's expectations, but that we might as well not put any effort into making spiritual progress. The temptation is to underrate our personalities and our part in God's economy. And the result is that we are miserable in our Christianity, and others see and feel it, too.

The other danger comes from comparing ourselves to others, and concluding that we are something special to God beyond others. With pride we talk about our spiritual progress, and overestimate our importance in God's economy. And the result is that we set ourselves up for failure, and others are repulsed from our Christianity.

So, lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil: deliver us, rescue me, God, from engaging in thoughts and actions, even those subtle ones, that serve to destroy the work of your kingdom and undermine the work of the Holy Spirit.

And thus the prayer ends where it begins: by placing the focus and the honor where it rightly belongs: To you, O God, belongs to kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Every day that I pray this prayer, and pause to think about how each part of it speaks to my human condition, the power and meaning of the prayer turns to meet the needs for the day, and to reaffirm my conscious contact with God.

And whether it is the glorified Christ to whom I turn, or to the child in the manger, or to the one talking to the multitudes on the mountainside, the gift of gratitude that I can bring, that we can bring, is the gift of ourselves in prayer to the one who wants, more than anything else, a daily and vital conscious contact with us.