

MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116
REV. DR. ROBIN R. MEYERS, SENIOR MINISTER
405-842-8897
cyasunday@mayflowerucc.org
www.mayflowerucc.org
© by Chris Moore

March 27, 2011

Matthew 3:1-3, 10-12 & Matthew 13:33

The Greatest Prayer, Part III: Your Kingdom Come, Your Will Be Done

"Deep below our geological earth are giant tectonic plates that grind against one another along fault lines and produce the surface disturbances of volcanoes, earthquakes and tsunamis. Deep below our historical world are the tectonic plates of *empire* and *eschaton*..." These are lines from Crossan's book The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer, which we have been studying here on Sunday evening as our Lenten Book Study. There is no better time for us to hear these words and to discuss the meaning of these two chapters from Crossan's book - "Your Kingdom Come, Your Will Be Done on Earth".

The first part of his quote is painfully obvious to us. We live on a changing, growing planet whose development often interrupts our own with horrific and cataclysmic results. Japan sits now keenly aware, as if they weren't already, of the power of the tectonic structure of our planet...as does Haiti and Chile and Burma and many other places. What is perhaps less obvious to us, maybe because we are so familiar with it, is the destructive power of the tectonic shifts of empire. Yet, we too revisit this mindset as we launch over 150 cruise missiles at Libya. Violence, the primary motivation tool of empire, still reigns supreme as the central component of conflict resolution.

Even in our everyday existence, even when we try, we seem unable to purge ourselves of violence. I was told that while they were in Nicaragua over spring break, our own Nancy Klos called our assistant youth director, Jack Knight, into her hotel room to "take care of" a 2 1/2" cockroach. She had her shoe out ready for action, but Jack refused to kill it. He chased it around the room, finally got it and dutifully carried it outside, like the most gentle of Buddhist monks. He carefully placed it in the street and as he turned a delivery truck ran right over it. We can't seem to escape violence even when we try. It's like it is a foundational element.

Crossan quite rightly describes the earliest known civilizations as having started in floodplain areas like the basin between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in modern day Iraq. There, he says, "annual snowmelts from distant mountains sent rich alluvial sediment downstream, and irrigated farming enhanced by dikes and canals which vastly increased fertility, prosperity and population...we call it the dawn of civilization." But, as Crossan points out, it wasn't long before we also got control

and manipulation of farming, land and resources. It wasn't very much time at all before the organization of the many by the few took hold. And hand in hand with that, violence ascended to the throne. We could call this the dawn of imperialism.

Empire may be something we can understand. But the first quote I gave from Crossan had this other term – *eschaton*. That's a fancy ancient Greek way of saying “the end”. But “the end” is contextual. The end of what? The end of the game, the end of the movie, the end of our friendship, the end of my new year's resolution...the end of what? When we hear this phrase in relationship to the Bible, or perhaps even to Christianity, we automatically think the end of the world. It's what we're trained to do in our evangelically tainted, post-millennialism culture. We attach that phrase to the destruction of the earth...whether you believe it or not is immaterial. But this is NOT what it means. The references in Greek to the end of something use the word *aion*, which means era but is sometimes translated “world” just as the word *kosmos* is often translated world but can mean the universe or just a certain collection of people...in other words, “world” in a very metaphorical sense.

The *eschaton*, as Crossan says, “is not about the destruction of the world, but its transformation into a place of justice and nonviolence.” Crossan's term that he coins for this is the *Great Divine Cleanup of the World*. It is an imagined future and operates as a hopeful dream for this Jesus movement, something that Jesus even announces, only he calls it the *Kingdom of God* or the *Kingdom of Heaven*.

But the followers of Jesus must have been wondering when this was going to happen. All of Paul's letters reference this sense of urgency he has, for he believes that the end - the end of this era - is coming very soon. A common theme expressed in different ways in the New Testament is this longing for the Great Divine Cleanup of the World. Rome was alive and well and the most powerful empire the world had ever known to that point - and most of the Jesus movement lived under its thumb or in its shadow. If this cleanup was coming, what better time?

Enter the messiah. The word *messiah* comes from the Hebrew and was translated into Greek as *Christos*, and both terms indicate a lord, or leader - and for Jewish and Christian concepts, one who is anointed as an agent for this *eschaton*. This agent was often pictured as a king, for who else delivered this kind of change in the world? But since the real kings failed to deliver, one became idealized as the model of this agent of change, King David. A very common and widely held belief was in the coming of this Davidic Messiah who would be the once and future king driving out the Romans and bringing a new era of peace through military victory. This so infused itself in the Jewish and soon-to-be Christian imagination that we can see it played out in the gospel of Matthew.

Open Matthew to chapter one and you see him try to tie Jesus directly to David from a genealogical point of view, and he goes to great lengths to do so. It is, if you will, his very first point. And then we get this pronouncement of John the Baptist...“his winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” John was an advocate of the David-plan. Jesus was the new David, which is precisely what Matthew has lined us up to believe.

But then something happens. Jesus doesn't quite fit the bill. After the beatitudes, his “sermon

on the mount", his healings and his strange metaphors for the kingdom of heaven, John asks him from prison - "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another?" In other words, what happened to the David plan? I was looking for the armies to start marching pretty soon, but you seem preoccupied with service and kindness and compassion.

Matthew seems to place a choice before us. We have the way of empire and the Kingdom of God...or the way that leads to more and more imperial "normalcy" versus the way that establishes true peace, where swords and spears are beaten into plowshares and pruning hooks and we study war no more. We have the "David plan" which is really just "meet the new boss, same as the old boss" or the Jesus plan which is a revolution so profound and deep that very few since he announced it have even taken it seriously. At their foundations, there are two very different assumptions being made by these plans, even though both announce the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The way of empire says, in the words of Crossan, that you garner peace through victory. We can somehow achieve peace through combat, this idea reigns supreme two thousand years later. When John the Baptist offers his description of the coming of the messiah, it is one of judgment and pretty violent judgment at that. People are to be separated, the wheat from the chaff, and thrown into the fire. That will take some serious power in the form to which we have all grown accustomed. In other words, nothing really changes but the figure on the throne. Salvation – we are told in a myriad of ways- still comes through speaking softly and carrying a big stick, the difference is only who is carrying the stick.

Jesus, on the other hand, announces the Kingdom in connection with the poor in spirit, the meek, those who work for peace. He says that the Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven - a corrupting agent. He says that it is like a mustard seed - a weed that infested the gardens of first century Palestine and grew out of control. It is not the Cedar of Lebanon, but a common weed - present everywhere and unconnected with any rewards or honor, almost a nuisance. Or he says that it is like leaven - an unclean substance in the first century that caused dough to rise but was also found in rotting food and decomposition. So it isn't military glory or a throne...it is something that corrupts us and changes us from the inside out.

In the readings today I think that you can hear the two concepts of eschaton laid out before you. John wants the conquering King, a good, "godly" conquering king, but a king nonetheless who comes to lay waste to the existing power and replace it with the same kind of power just oriented to what he agrees with. But Jesus has a different paradigm altogether. In his "Kingdom" power is transformed...actually it dies and is resurrected into something else. His model changes more than just who is in charge, it changes the whole cultural and spiritual gestalt. Far from being uniform, the Bible argues with itself, sometimes even in the very same gospel, just as we argue with ourselves today about which path to follow.

So here is our dilemma. We are both a part of this world and called to reach beyond it. We seem to be perhaps created with violence in our DNA, but compelled to evolve into something else. We cannot discount our current scenarios, but we can hope for something that is fundamentally different. In fact, I believe that this is what the Lord's Prayer is all about – a collaboration in which we work for what is God's will and we often suppress our own...not my will, but yours be done, O Lord. The

whole prayer is one of such collaboration – God does this, we do that, God even working *to the extent* that we are willing to work. Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, “Without God we cannot, but without us God will not”, which I believe to be the essence of the Lord's Prayer. This prayer empowers us to be God's agents of change in the world...right here and now...in this very moment...from a social, cultural, relational and yes, even political point of view.

I know all of this and believe it with conviction, yet I still make excuses. How do we criticize one invasion of an Arabic country and not another? Is it because we voted for this instigator and not the previous one? Is it because the details are slightly different? Is it because we think that the current violence is somehow “righteous” and previous violence was not? Why is this suffering worthy of violent intervention but other suffering isn't? How is it that Qaddafi's aggression is madness, but air assaults on Palestinians is not?

Edward Said (Saa-eed) was a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University and one of the major voices of postcolonial thought. He once defined imperialism as “a process of accumulation and acquisition of land, resources, labor and profit supported by an ideology that suggests that certain peoples and certain territories require domination, assistance, or 'civilization’”. It is this to which John the Baptist clings and we do as well.

But what I believe that Jesus resists is that very human impulse. Our dedication to our own self-preservation, warped as it is by our inability to see beyond our immediate future, places us often in the David-plan. But the Jesus-plan is smaller than that. Weeds do not crop up all at once, but one at a time until they have changed the landscaping...until they have altered the plan.

Think about social media. If you want a modern day metaphor for the mustard seed...I give you facebook, because it has allowed for small things to change the landscape...sometimes that's good and sometimes not, but it establishes a whole new paradigm. But I would argue that Egypt would not have happened without the role of social media, or it would have turned out very differently. It took the individual effort – people reaching out to one another, being in each other's homes and finding a common link to topple that regime. Perhaps Jesus' mission was a form of first-century social networking.

Jesus does not call for his followers to conquer the world, but to go out “like lambs into a pack of wolves”. “Whenever you enter a house”, Jesus instructs his disciples, “say 'Peace to this house'. If peaceful people live there, your peace will rest on them. But if not, it will return to you. Whenever you enter a town and they welcome you, eat whatever they offer you. Cure the sick there and tell them, 'For you, God's empire has arrived'.” There is no overthrow in that instruction, no attempt at insurrection or armed revolution...only the slow revolution of a mustard seed. He does not place the burden of defeating the empire on the shoulders of his disciples, Jesus lays that burden down so that they may be empowered to the real task at hand...so that they may be mustard seeds, infecting the system...corrupting the empire with a whole new agenda.

“The difference between God's Kingdom and Rome's Empire”, as Crossan says, “between Jesus and Pilate, between Jesus' companions and Pilate's followers is that one is nonviolent and the other is

violent. This great eschaton, the Great Divine Cleanup of the World – or the “Kingdom of Heaven” - is nonviolent, and so also our God-empowered participation in it and God-driven collaboration with it.” The difference is also what drives this new kingdom...how does it see justice, peace and honor? Living the Christian life, as theologian Mark Lewis Taylor puts it, means that we live by Jesus' criterion of care – addressing simple human need: hunger, thirst, lack of clothing or shelter, imprisonment, particularly wrongful imprisonment, and suffering amidst systems of hatred and exclusion. That is our agenda. And this is not seismic shift change, it is facebook...one person at a time...slow, like a mustard seed change. For first our own hearts must change and then we spread that by living it.

The mark of being a follower of Jesus should not be that we are somehow “saved” for an eternal life, but that we are harbingers in this life. We announce humanity's larger emancipatory struggle by practicing counter-imperial faith...resisting the pull of accumulation, required “civilization” for certain people and what Crossan calls the 'slow drag of normalcy'. We must be willing to resist that in ourselves, in our communities, in the church, in our local government, at the national level and in the world at large. The lesson of the Lord's Prayer is that we have choices to make, and some of them will test our loyalties. But as we hear this prayer again for the first time and continue our march towards Easter, perhaps we will hear anew the challenge that God's kingdom is not about the imminent divine intervention, but about the empowerment of human collaboration. Perhaps we can hear with new ears, “your kingdom come...your will be done on earth...as it is in heaven.”

AMEN.



Copyright 2011 Chris Moore