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St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Seventh Sunday of Easter; May 28, 2017

“Whose Kingdom? Whose Will?”

Scripture: Acts 1:6-14; 7 Easter A RCL

One of the best parts about being a kid growing up in central Florida in the 1960s and early 70s was... rockets! I knew the names of most all the early astronauts. I knew the stories of the Mercury and Apollo missions and drew pictures of the Saturn rockets. And on launch day, my brothers and I would stand in my living room at home and watch the countdown on the TV, live from Cape Canaveral on the Florida Space Coast. We would hear the announcer for Mission Control say the words “lift off!” and then we would run out my front door and watch with amazement as a blazing fireball pushed its way up, up into the sky, giant it seemed at first, then slowly shrinking and shrinking as it got farther and farther from the earth, until in a twinkling it was gone, and my brothers and I could see it no longer. Poof! But we knew it was up there somewhere.

And, believe me, those rockets came to mind whenever my Sunday School teachers talked about the story from the book of Acts with Jesus ascending to heaven right before the eyes of his friends. I remember thinking: “Was Jesus just flying up there like those rockets? Did he go even higher than they did? Did he sort of shine

up there in the sky and get smaller and smaller while he went higher and higher? Was it a cloudy day in general, or was it pretty clear with that one special cloud that took him away?” Hey, I was kid in Sunday School. We thought about these things.

In a way, I guess I still do. Look, I’m not at all settled on the details of the Ascension. It seems a whimsical idea at best in this day and age when we know that on the other side of the edge of the sky lies some 14 billion years of universal expansion, countless stars and worlds, and nearly unfathomable miles and miles of empty space. I don’t perceive the story of Jesus’ ascension as some tale of a celestial voyage really. I don’t think about it like it was a trip, some prolonged journey to a place that is beyond our sight. In fact, Jesus’ Ascension is to me a story that shapes our world, here and now, in plain sight. The Church is the evidence. We are the Body of Christ *still on the earth*. Over the ages since Jesus walked with us, kingdoms have risen... and fallen. Rulers have acted... and passed away. Ideologies and beliefs have seen their day... only to dissolve into the archives of ancient history. But the Church is still here, sometimes struggling and sometimes vibrant. Sometimes faithful and sometimes falling very short of faithfulness. But the kingdom of Jesus remains.

And just as the “two men in white robes”, those angels of God, chided the disciples for standing and staring into the heavens looking up there for Jesus, I think they are reminding us that our sight isn’t to be solely trained on heavens or on the

hereafter, rather we have work to do in the here-and-now to reveal the kingdom of God in our place and our time. The Ascension isn't about Jesus leaving, rather about the Holy Spirit coming. And when his followers realize that Jesus is no longer *somewhere*, they come to understand that he is everywhere. His Ascension is no departure. He ascended to the proverbial throne of God, which encompasses all places and all times.

And that is why I want to talk with you today about the Lord's Prayer. I know, I know... that's a rather sharp segue. But when we consider Jesus' Ascension not just as his departure from the earth, rather as the expansion or a fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, well, it starts to make more sense when we pray, "Thy *kingdom* come..." or what we say in our creeds week by week: "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father."

Now, I've been in the church in many places around the world, and I have come to notice that many people and congregations use a particular cadence when saying the Lord's Prayer. Our voices rise and fall almost in a way that seems instinctual. Bear with me, listen with me...

"Our Father, who art in heaven: hallowed be thy *name*. Thy *kingdom* come, thy *will* be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Familiar I'm sure. But the way we offer that prayer makes it sound to me as though we are praying about kingdoms and about will, --- Thy *kingdom* come, thy *will* be done, --- when we know that "kingdoms" are proliferate, and they rise and fall with the tides of time, and "will" is evident and all-too-often exhibited by humankind without kindness or honesty or humility or faithfulness or anything remotely resembling the mind of Christ. Jesus' Ascension to the heavenly kingdom, his father's kingdom, reminds me that when we say the Lord's Prayer, we aren't just talking about any "kingdom" or any "will." In fact, we are quite specific; we speak about a particular kingdom and a particular will, and neither are our own.

"Our Father, who art in heaven: hallowed be *thy* name. *Thy* kingdom come, *thy* will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Kingdoms will surely come; will is a constant. The question for us witnesses to Jesus that we answer boldly and profoundly each and every time we utter or sing the Lord's Prayer is: "Whose kingdom do we say is coming? Whose will do we seek to follow?"

I know it may seem too simple, maybe a little silly even... but I sometimes have this notion that were we Christians to adjust the cadence of the Lord's Prayer, were we to put emphasis where it belongs ---not upon kingdoms and wills, but upon *whose* kingdom and *whose* will, that this world could not help but be changed for good. Well-meaning Christians pray the Lord's Prayer day by day, but the words are no

sooner out of their mouths before the actions of the kingdoms of this earth seek to overwhelm the kingdom of peace and justice that God has established, and God's will drifts into the background before the will of unscrupulous or uncaring people.

I hear the Lord's Prayer in that new cadence --- and it helps me understand that the Ascension is not about Jesus going away somewhere up there in the sky, but as Jesus taking his rightful seat in our hearts, in his kingdom, everywhere, in this world, here and now. "*Thy* kingdom come, *thy* will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

You know, those rockets I so loved as a kid... the higher and higher they went into the sky, the farther and farther away they were. Not so with Jesus' Ascension. It's as if the higher and higher he rises, the closer and closer he gets.