

Title: "Thy Kingdom Come: Peace!"
Text: Matthew 5:43-47; Isaiah 11:1-9

This Advent season, as we continue to "re-introduce Jesus" to ourselves and hopefully then through us to the culture around us,
-we are looking at what Jesus meant when he taught his disciples to pray "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Last week I said that this is essentially an "Advent Prayer."
-It is a prayer of longing for God to set the world right.
-For God to bring to fulfillment His whole plan of redemption for this broken world.

And we are using the four candles of the Advent Wreath to "light our way" in unpacking four aspects of what we are praying when we join Jesus in praying "Thy Kingdom come."

Last week we looked at the HOPE of God's coming Kingdom. Today's candle is the candle of PEACE,
-and I want to look with you at what it means for us that this Kingdom we are hoping in and praying for is a "peaceable kingdom."

Listen to the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount which are spoken just a little bit before his teaching his disciples to pray "thy Kingdom come."
-I am reading from Matthew 5:43-47.

The Kingdom of God, my friends, is a "peaceable Kingdom."

It is a place where former enemies have not only laid down their arms but are now reconciled with one another.

Earlier in the service we read Isaiah's vision of the coming Kingdom of God,
-and he proclaimed it was where wolves were peaceably living with lambs,
-and leopards were lying down with goats,

- and lions were dwelling alongside calves and yearlings and not eating them.
- Cows were feeding with bears, and little human toddlers were playing next to cobras and viper's dens.

And through Isaiah the Lord proclaims, "They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the seas."

That's the way life was supposed to be when God created the heavens and the earth and saw that it was good. That is the way the new heavens and the new earth will look when God's great plan of redemption is brought to fulfillment.

Former enemies will be reconciled, and will live at peace with one another.

And we have all experienced little "tastes" of this kind of reconciliation between former enemies.

On Friday we memorialized the 77th anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

- 77 years ago the Japanese were our hated enemies.
- We called them "Japs" and "Nips" and "slant eyes."
- We demonized them, and carted off American citizens who were of Japanese descent and put them in prison camps.

But look at us now, Japan is one of our strongest allies in the international world.

- Just like with the Germans, who were also our sworn enemies during WW2.
- But now, they too, are strong friends and allies.
- When the weapons were laid down, we actually went to great lengths and great cost to help rebuild Germany and Japan after the war,
- and to restore those people, those cultures, their cities and towns.

Former enemies, bitter enemies, can become friends and allies.

Or how about Kyrie Irving, who is now the celebrated star point guard for the Boston Celtics.

-A couple years ago he was playing alongside LeBron James for the Cleveland Cavaliers and Celtics fans didn't like either one of them.

They would always manage to beat us.

-They were consistently winning championships,
-while we just couldn't quite measure up.
-It was easy to hate those bums.

But now Kyrie Irving looks pretty good in Celtic green.

-And we love all those points he is scoring now for us.

-Fans love to buy his Jersey and wear number 11.

-He's one of the "good guys" now.

-No one remembers calling him a bum three years ago.

Or how many of us have had moments in our own families,

-when we have been so hurt and so mad at our spouse, or
one of our kids, or our sister or brother-in-law,
-that we don't want to ever speak to them again.

So mad we don't even want to be in the same room with them, or in the same house or the same town.

-We're so mad we wish we'd never married them,
-or wish we'd never had kids.

-We want to just get on a plane and fly away and not be part of this marriage or this family anymore.

Any of you ever feel like that?

-Maybe in the car on the way to church this morning?!

But then something happens.

-A little time passes. Cooler heads maybe prevail.

-Somebody says, "Look, I was a jerk. I'm sorry. I know I hurt you, and I said things I never should have said.

-I am so sorry. Will you forgive me?"

And the anger melts a little, and the hurt recedes a little, and the relationship begins to be rekindled,

-and forgiveness is practiced and the person who yesterday seemed like an enemy, is once again a family member.

These are all examples of how former enemies can become friends and allies.

-Examples on a human scale of how wolves can lie down with lambs.

They're little "foretastes" of the peaceable nature of God's coming Kingdom.

And so when Jesus says, "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor, but hate your enemy,'

-but I say to you, 'Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you,'

-He is simply inviting us to act and behave like we are living in that peaceable Kingdom of God right now.

"The Kingdom of God is near!" Jesus proclaimed everywhere he went. "Repent and believe the good news!"

And for Jesus, "repent" meant: stop living by the ways and means of this broken world,

-and join me in living by the ways and means of God's coming Kingdom right now.

That's what "believing the good news of the Kingdom" meant for Jesus.

-It meant, start living right now like you actually believe the Kingdom is real, and is near, and is in fact present wherever God reigns and rules as King.

So if you invite God to reign and rule as King in your life right now,

-then the Kingdom of God is present with you right now.

-So live like it.

Start right now to make peace with your enemies.

Start right now to pray for those who are so mean to you.

Start right now to practice forgiveness.

Start right now to work on loving those who are not easy to love.

Jesus says here: that's how you show that you are in fact and child of your heavenly Father, and one of Jesus' disciples.

We don't love our enemies because they are loveable.

-No, we love even enemies because that is what our heavenly Father has done with us again and again.

-And we love enemies because we are looking forward in hope to that day

-when reconciliation and peace will simply be the way things are in God's peaceable Kingdom.

That will be "the norm," and not the exception.

-So we start living that norm right now, as we are daily praying, "Thy Kingdom come, Lord,...set the world right.

-Thy will be done, Lord, as above...so below."

However, since none of us, including me, are very good at this, how do we begin actually loving real enemies that we currently do not love at all?

-Well, there's three practices that I find regularly helpful that are derived from what Jesus teaches here in this passage.

1. The first is, learn to see God as the creator and sustainer of all people.
2. Secondly, learn to see people as people.
3. Thirdly, learn to see yourself in your enemy.

Now Jesus doesn't specifically say those three things, but listen to what he does say again:

"But I tell you: love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in Heaven. He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

So you see, Jesus wants us to see God as the Creator of all people, and for us to learn to see people first as people, -and not as enemies.

Because this is how God sees us.

- I mean, God has every right to look at every person on this earth as His enemy,
- because in fact, we are in and of ourselves his enemies.

We are born with a sinful nature, and we begin at the youngest ages to act on that sinful nature.

- If left to ourselves we are self-centered creatures,
- who want to be our own little gods and have the world revolve around us and to have OUR will be done on earth and in heaven.
- There's a reason that Frank Sinatra's song "My Way" was such a hit.
- We like that idea, and we wish everybody, including God, would get out of our way so that we could live our lives our own way.

So God could look at every one of us and see only an enemy to his rightful reign and rule.

- But he chooses not to look at us that way.
- Instead, He chooses to look at us as sinners in need of a Savior.
- He sees us as lost sheep in need of a good shepherd.
- He sees us as wayward sons and daughters in need of a loving parent who will welcome them home again.

That's how God has chosen to see us.

- And so Jesus invites us to learn to see others that way, too.
- Jesus wants us to model our lives on the way our heavenly Father behaves, not on the way the world around us behaves.

And so if God is generally gracious to all people on earth,

- giving sun and rain to the righteous and the unrighteous,
- Then we need to learn to choose to be generally gracious to all the people around us, too.

We need to practice seeing people as people.

- Regardless of their age, gender, color of skin, race, creed.
- Regardless of whether they dress like we do, or where other kinds of clothing appropriate in other kinds of cultures.
- Regardless of whether they are nice to us or have been mean to us in some way.

Somehow, as citizens of God's Kingdom, we begin living peaceably with our fellow human beings,
-and being generally gracious to people because they are people.

The Apostle Paul says in Romans 12, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge but leave room for God's wrath."

You see, even if that other person is mean to you, do not take revenge as though he or she were an enemy.
-Leave that judgment to God.
-As far as it depends on you, live peaceably with people.
-And if your enemy is hungry, Paul quotes from Proverbs 25, feed him. And if thirsty, give him something to drink.

Jesus would say, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

He would also say, "Take the log out of your own eye before you try and remove the speck of dust from your enemy's eye."

Or as Jesus says here in Matthew 5:46-47, "How much different are you than the tax collectors and pagans anyway?"

They are just like you in that they are good to their own.
-They like people who like them back.
-They love their friends and hate their enemies.

You and your enemy share a lot in common.
-So learn to see them first as people, and then as people a lot like you.

Nancy McLaughlin works at the Immigrant Learning Center here in Malden,
-and she gets to meet hundreds of people every week who are new to living in this country.
-They are learning English as a Second Language, and also trying hard to learn the ways of this modern American culture that is so different from the culture they came from.

As part of the process of learning English, they are asked to write a few paragraphs in English telling their own story of why they came to this country.

Nancy has shared some of those stories with me.

-And some of them are heart wrenching stories of escape.

-But all of them are human stories.

And when you read them, you discover these foreigners are not so foreign after all.

-They are just like us, and we are just like them.

They have had trials and tribulations, they have hopes and dreams.

-They have fears and sorrows, joys and thanksgivings.

-They are people...created and sustained by God and a lot like us.

Take a moment now to think of someone in your own life who is currently hard to love,

-who maybe is even like an enemy to you.

-It could be a family member at the moment.

-It could be a co-worker, or your boss, or a bully at school.

-It could be the current President of the United States,

-or the previous President of the United States.

-It could be a group of people like Muslims, or Illegal Immigrants, or LGBTQ proponents.

-It could be a drug dealer in your neighborhood.

Jesus asks us today to choose as an act of our will, to start treating that person or those persons as our heavenly Father has treated us.

-Choose to look at them as creations of God, broken though they may be.

-Choose to see them as people with a story of their own.

-Choose to see them as not so different from you, if only you knew their story and they knew yours.

In the Kingdom, God's peace will be upon us all.

-His Shalom will transform us all.

-We will be reconciled to Him, and to each other.

-Lions will lie down with lambs.

-Jesus invites us to live like that today. Let us pray.