

Seek Ye First the _____

A Sermon by David Barker

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Scripture: Hosea 1:2-9

Luke 11:1-13

The case can be made that the urban landscape of a place reveals a great deal about the souls of those who call it home

- there was a time when, in many cities and towns, the tallest structure was a cathedral, a cross on a church...that's what dominated the landscape
- today, it's office buildings
 - if what we build says something about who we are and what we value...says something, indeed, about our priorities, what does the urban landscape say about us?
- and to the extent each of our lives is itself like a landscape, what do you see *there*... what does it say about who *you* are, what *you* value...about *your* priorities?
- imagine driving west to the foothills, getting out of your car, looking east, and there...the landscape not of Longmont or Hygiene or Niwot but of your life, right now...
 - what is the tallest structure you see?
- for the next few minutes, just stay there...find a grassy place, no ants, no rattlesnakes, sit down and, arms on your knees, look at what you see...look, and listen to these words of Jesus...

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ² He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³ Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴ And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

These words of Jesus, in Luke's Gospel, come right after he'd visited Martha and Mary

- you remember the story...Martha is running around crazily, doing all kinds of things for Jesus, while her sister Mary just sat at Jesus' feet and listens to him
- Martha, annoyed, demands that Jesus tell Mary to get off her duff and help
- but Jesus says, Martha, you are worried about and distracted by so many things when only one thing really matters...being with me
- and, mindful of that, Jesus goes on to teach his disciples—and you and me—how to pray...

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.

- notice Jesus invites us to address God with the same intimacy he does: *Father*
- hallowed* means "sacred" or "holy," so: Father, your very name is sacred
 - in Jewish tradition, you have a name not just so you can be called for dinner
 - your name represents your very being, all that you are...Father, therefore, not just your name is sacred but *you* are sacred
- Your kingdom come* means "your kingdom be active" and the verb tense means it is active both now, in the present, and will be active in the future

Give us each day our daily bread

- us*...the plural pronoun is used throughout the prayer...we are to pray for the community to be blessed, not ourselves as individuals
 - if the community is blessed, every individual will be blessed in the process
- and from where does our daily bread come? God...

And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us

- notice the order of the action here: we forgive others who have sinned against us *prior* to asking God to forgive *our* sins
 - in Jewish tradition, you have to forgive in order to be forgiven
- for post-resurrection Christians, this may seem like a strange idea: after all, weren't our sins forgiven once and for all on the cross?
 - of course...point for us is we still need to confess our sins and live into and from the forgiveness we've received...difficult to do if we're holding grudges against others

And do not bring us to the time of trial

- in other words, "God, deliver us from trial," "trial" here better understood as "temptation"

Notice the movement of the prayer:

- worship God...provision for the Kingdom first...then provision for us as individuals...forgive our sinfulness...deliver us from temptation to further sin

It raises a question...

- why would Jesus, in emphasizing the importance above all else of being with him, tell us to pray a prayer like this?
- because none of us sit in that grassy spot, the landscape of our lives before us, *alone*
 - Jesus is sitting right next to us...and Jesus sees everything we see...and everything we don't
- and so he goes on to tell us, as he told the disciples, a story...

"Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' ⁷ And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

To understand Jesus' story, we have to understand something the disciples understood, namely the rules of hospitality in Jesus' day

- before the days of 24/7 grocery stores and fast food restaurants, hospitality and its obligations were understood somewhat differently
- a friend shows up at your door in the middle of the night, tired and hungry, and you have the responsibility to feed him...but you have nothing in the house
- you go to your neighbor and in spite of the hour, pound on his door until you wake him up
 - do that at my house and I may call the police, but in Jesus' time, the neighbor would get up and give the man some food for his guest
 - why? Because it would have been unthinkable not to, because you wouldn't want your friend to be shamed in front of his guest
- so the man persists in knocking on his neighbor's door until the neighbor responds
- Jesus' point: if your neighbor will respond to your persistence, how much more will God respond when God knows what you need before you even start knocking?

And so Jesus continues:

⁹ "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Ask, you will receive...search, you will find...knock, the door will be opened

- each verb—ask, search, knock—is an imperative: *do* this
- pray this way, Jesus says...pray this prayer, Jesus says, because being with me is more than an intellectual exercise, more than a warm feeling in your heart...
 - it is faith...faith that in putting God and Kingdom first, in living your worship, living your discipleship, your needs, too, will be met

- we can follow Jesus' logic
 - you humans "who are evil," which means not so much that you and I are inherently evil but that we live in evil ways, we are sinners...
 - you humans, if your child asked you for a fish would give her a snake or asked for an egg would give her a scorpion...
 - note the parallel here with "give us each day our daily bread"
 - if you who are sinners would give your child what she needs, don't you think God, who is wholly good, would give you, God's children, what you need?

- a little later in Luke, Jesus, seeing how his disciples, how all those who come to him, who follow him, worry...constantly worry...
 - worry about what they'll eat, what they'll wear...about the present, about the future...about all kinds of threats, imagined and real...
 - worries that alter the landscape of their lives...
- Jesus says to them, your Father in heaven knows and provides for every *bird*...and you are *infinitely* more important than all the birds in creation
 - the Father knows what you need, and the Father will provide it

And so Jesus says...

³⁰ *For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them.* ³¹ *Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.*

- seek ye first the kingdom of God, as the King James puts it, and all these things shall be added unto you
- from where you sit, there in the foothills, whatever you see...whatever it is that dominates your landscape...whatever it says about who you are, what you value... where your priorities are...where you invest your greatest energy and time...whatever fear or vulnerability drives you...
 - seek first the Kingdom of God, and the Father who knows what you need, will provide it

We *will* seek something first—we always do...and what we seek first usually determines most of the rest of what we do...or don't do

- proof of that is found in the first 9 verses of Hosea
- the Israelites have not sought the Kingdom first because, from where they sat, there were other, more pressing priorities
- and the consequence of that choice is clear: the world is a mess, and God is not a happy camper

How different, instead, had the Israelites sought the Kingdom first...and today, in our world, how different if you and I seek first the Kingdom

And therein, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is the mission of God to which we are called...those who consciously seek first the Kingdom sent into a world that does not

- such is the heart of what it means to be a missional church...people who live seeking first the Kingdom
- this is why being involved in the community is not, in and of itself, missional church
- frequently, when introduced to the idea of being a missional church, of going forth to be a blessing to the community, people will say, "But we're already doing that... many of us are already volunteering"
- volunteering is important, involvement in the community is important...
 - in fact, it is *crucially* important, and a crucially important component of being missional
 - it is to be celebrated and nurtured
- but there's more to it than that...
 - people who've never set foot in a church, let alone a missional church, have no relationship whatsoever with Jesus Christ, no investment in the Kingdom, are involved in the community
- the difference is this: being missional means that the community involvement is an expression of a way of life that seeks first the Kingdom, with all that means
 - what does your life say to others is your first priority?
 - do you live in such a way that it is evident you don't worry but trust the Lord will provide all you need?
 - does your life reflect the values and priorities of the Kingdom however at odds they are with those of the world?
 - do you confront injustice or look the other way?
 - is being with Jesus the most important thing?
- it's why we say missional church is not something you do...it's something you are

This is tough stuff...these are tough challenges...choosing a way of life that seeks the Kingdom first is not a matter of just having quiet time in the morning and taking your own bags to the grocery store

- Terry and I are struggling with it, and it seems the more we figure out what living this way means, the scarier it gets
- but that's a measure of how different life is from what God intends life to be
- a measure of the truth of Jesus' words, Those who wish to follow me must pick up their cross...those who wish to save their life for my sake must lose it

There, in the foothills, in the grass, looking east, is the landscape of Longmont, of Hygiene, of Niwot not simply the collective landscapes of every one of us who calls these places home?

- and if that's true, how different would the urban landscape be if the inner landscapes of our lives bore witness to Jesus' words, *Seek ye first the Kingdom?*

The fifth element in a vision of what it means to be church, what it means to be the Lord's heart and hands right here, right now...

- Kingdom first