

Several years ago there was a wonderful movie called “Pay It Forward” in which a young school boy conducts a class experiment to change the world by teaching people to “pay it forward” – to do acts of kindness and good deeds to others without asking for repayment, but rather by asking them to also pay it forward to someone else. It is a lovely idea, and most of us can tell wonderful examples of people whose acts of kindness have been given freely to others, thus inspiring a whole series of such acts.

I have been thinking how that same principle can apply to our prayers, and I have even noticed that the Lord’s Prayer makes that explicit. Allow me to explain.

Often our prayers are focused upon the past or the present. We pray for forgiveness of the past, and we pray for our immediate needs. Such prayers are always appropriate, and in fact the Lord’s Prayer of Jesus teaches us to pray “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” and “give us this day our daily bread.”

While praying for the past and the present are appropriate – and in fact Jesus teaches us to pray for both – it seems to me that we often neglect the other aspect of the prayer of Jesus: “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” This kind of praying for the future can sound distant and remote, or perhaps naïve and overly-optimistic. But what if Jesus is really asking us to “pray it forward”?

Jesus may be asking us to pray for the future, but also to help make that future a reality. Such “praying it forward” might lead us to actualize the very future for which we are praying. Do you want a future with peace? Then pray for peace but start making it a reality now by living in peace with the people in your lives. Do you want a future of righteousness? Then pray for righteousness, but start making that a reality now by living your own life of righteousness obedience to God’s truth. Do you want a future in which hunger and disease are eliminated? Then pray for that new reality, but start working right now by living a healthy life and providing for the good health of others. Do you desire a future in which all people know Jesus as Lord and Savior? Then pray for that future, but start living your own life right now as a witness to Jesus as Lord and Savior.

When I first entered ministry, we United Methodists celebrated this part of the Christian year as the season of Kingdomtide. That always seem a bit audacious to me, as if we could somehow build the Kingdom of God on our own – and indeed it often seemed as if the days of the “Social Gospel” and the activism of the 1960’s fell into that misguided effort. It was easy for us to become do-gooders who tried to change the world by our own efforts and our own agenda, rather than being faithful disciples of Jesus who relied upon the guidance and power of God.

However the deeper meaning of Kingdomtide might be “praying it forward.” We are called to make the reign of God a reality in our lives by praying for God’s powerful transformation and by living within that transformation already. Our own faithfulness helps to make the reign of God a present reality, even as we pray and anticipate a future fulfillment. Isn’t that why some people’s own lives seem “holy” or “saintly” – because we sense that they are already living within the reality and power of the reign of God? I have known many such people, and I am always amazed to stand in their presence and to sense that they are already a part of God’s future Kingdom. Always such persons are persons of prayer, but they go beyond prayer to do what I am calling “praying it forward.”

And so I am called to pray it forward, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” And I am called to live in that reality.

