

Carol M. Strickland  
 First Presbyterian Church of Athens  
 16th Sunday of Ordinary Time, July 17, 2016  
 Texts: Genesis 45:4-8, Matthew 26:36-46

## **Thy Will Be Done**

### *Introduction to Scripture*

Our Old Testament reading is from Genesis. This passage is from near the end of the long Joseph story. Joseph was the one thrown by his brothers into a pit and sold into slavery in Egypt. By using his God-given gifts he rose to prominence in the king's government. In this scene his brothers have come to Egypt seeking food during a famine. They do not recognize their brother Joseph. Listen for God's word: *Genesis 45:4-8*.

Our New Testament reading is the story of Jesus and his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. Listen again for God's word: *Matthew 26:36-46*.

### *Sermon*

We are in the midst of a sermon series examining the Lord's Prayer, line by line. Today we get to the line, "Thy Will Be Done." Perhaps you recall a cartoon character whose very name is a play on that famous petition: The Rev. Will B. Dunn. He was the preacher in the broad-brimmed hat in the comic strip "Kudzu," set in the small town of Bypass, North Carolina. His creator, Doug Marlett (who also drew political cartoons), modeled the Rev. Will B. Dunn after the unorthodox, outspoken, country Baptist minister Will Campbell who was active in the civil rights movement.

The Rev. Will B. Dunn had a knack for seeing the irony in life—irony which may feel especially dark given recent events. In one strip The Rev. Will B. Dunn is answering a letter written to his advice column. The letter says, "Dear Preacher, you seem so cynical about human nature. Don't you believe in the brotherhood of man? Signed, Idealist." He replies, "Dear Idealist, Sure I believe in the brotherhood of man, but do the names Cain and Abel mean anything to you?"

In another strip the Rev. Will B. Dunn and a boy have their softball bats and gloves and are looking at their upcoming schedule. "Let's see. Catholics vs. Bible Thumpers, Muslims vs. Presbyterians, Bypass Baptists vs. Bypass Baptists. Uh-oh!" the preacher laments. "They've figured out we're our own worst enemy."

The Rev. Will B. Dunn is very insightful about us church folks and about the human condition, in general. And it is part of the human condition that we'd much rather pray, "My will be done," than, "Thy will be done." We much prefer to be in the driver's seat, or punching the buttons on the remote control, or giving our orders to God as though God were the teenager waiting on our table rather than to submit ourselves to God's will. We possess a fundamental tendency toward wanting to be the center of our universe. This orientation we expect in two-year olds. They are the center of their universe. But two-year olds outgrow megalomaniac

behavior and become civilized enough to share their toys and take turns by the time they go to school except for the few who become dictators of small countries or those people at work who make life miserable for everyone else.

Except that we don't really outgrow thinking we are the center of the universe. There resides inside us all a needy two-year old. We want to be in charge. We want our wishes to come true. In short, we are selfish. The theological word for it is sinful.

Two Sundays ago we spoke about God's kingdom, the condition where God rules in our lives. But the Christian life seems to be a constant coup d'état when it comes to who's in charge. We want to sit on the throne and proclaim the edicts. We wave our scepters and declare: "I wish this child of mine to become a doctor." "I think the committee ought to do it *this* way." "I want more and better stuff." We are full of wants and wishes to suit ourselves. We selfishly, sinfully want to be in charge. We want *my* will to be done.

In the old Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, the minister invites the congregation to pray the Lord's Prayer with these words, "And now as our Saviour Christ hath taught us, we are bold to say." It takes *boldness* to pray the Lord's Prayer, to pray, "Thy will be done." It is a risky thing to lay aside one's own will and be open to God's will. To pray, "Thy will be done," is to ask God to be God, not to do what we want but what God wants. It is to risk that our precious visions of how the world should be and even who God is may be totally off the mark. It is a scary and humbling prayer. Thy will be done.

Thinking about this petition, "Thy will be done," begs the question, What exactly is God's will? There are plenty of folks who claim to know it. "It must have been God's will to take your child. He just needed another angel in heaven." "It must have been God's will for the hurricane to strike that corrupt city or for AIDS to decimate the homosexual population. The Lord wanted to punish them." And whatever goes through the minds of terrorists presuming they are carrying out divine orders. Of course, these hotlines to heaven are delusions. The God revealed to us in Jesus Christ isn't a tyrannical despot. God is not like the bearded, robed figure in one Gary Larson cartoon (I think it was) sitting at his computer with his hand hovering over the "smite" key. We worship a compassionate God. Doug Marlett (the cartoonist) died in a car wreck. He was only 57. At his funeral Pat Conroy said, "The first person to cry when he heard about Doug's death was God."

But puzzling out what is God's will isn't easy. We are mere mortals and can't totally grasp the mystery of God's will. There are so many questions we have. Why did the house catch on fire? Who should I marry? Why did he have to die so young? What if I had taken the other path?

Theologians have come up with three different angles to see God's will which may be helpful. First is God's intentional will. This has to do with what God intends for us and for our world. Paul says in Romans that in everything God works for good with those who love God and are called according to God's purpose.<sup>1</sup> We see that it is God's intention for children not to go to bed hungry, for relationships to be healthy, for skin color not to matter, for holiday celebrators not to be mowed down by a crazed man. The intentional will of God would never cause pain or suffering.

Second is the permissive will of God. This means that we are not marionettes on a string manipulated by God. We have free will. We are able to make choices, choices that don't always lead to good things. But God permits this freedom.

Third is the ultimate will of God. This is the kingdom which will someday be fully realized on earth. This is the final outcome of human history in God's hands. It's like we are on a great cruise ship. While on board, you may choose to dance in the disco, eat the buffet, or swim in the swimming pool, but the ship is going from Miami, Florida to Southampton, England, and nothing is going to stop it: the ultimate will of God.

Now, just how God does or does not intervene in the details of our lives to shape them in the direction of God's will is still something of a mystery to me. I definitely had the sense that God called me to serve this particular church. Yet an author whose books I love and find insightful, Barbara Brown Taylor, had an entirely different experience in making a vocational decision. She was trying to discern whether or not she was called to be an ordained minister. She read books. She prayed. She searched for signs. One midnight she asked God to tell her as plainly as possible what she was supposed to do.

"Anything that pleases you," was the answer that came into her sleepy head.

"What?" she said, waking up. "What kind of answer is that?"

"Do anything that pleases you," the voice in her head said again, "and belong to me."

So for her, she gleaned that God didn't really care whether she pumped gas in Idaho, or dug latrines in Pago Pago, or served as an Episcopal priest as long as she remembered whose she was.<sup>ii</sup>

The narrator of the book of Genesis certainly sees God's providential hand moving behind the scenes in Joseph's life and not just his life but through him the entire life of Israel. When Joseph's brothers dumped him into a pit and then sold him off to the next caravan which came along, they certainly had ill intentions. But God used their actions to save the Jewish people. Joseph became Egypt's chief administrator whose wits and gift for dream interpretation ultimately kept Joseph's brothers and the rest of their Hebrew kin from starving to death. "God sent me before you to preserve life," Joseph tells his brothers.<sup>iii</sup>

God is working God's will in spite of the ill-intentioned actions of others. I like the tapestry analogy. The warp threads are the things that just happen in life, including the bad things, the things allowed by the permissive will of God. A drunk driver causes a terrible wreck. We develop cancer. A tree falls on the house. But the woof threads are the outcomes that God is able to weave. God takes those dark threads and adds to them, thus weaving a rich and beautiful picture. God doesn't will or cause the bad things, but out of them brings good things. Did you see video clip from Dallas this week? Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter protestors flanked opposite sides of the street. But spontaneously, they met in the middle of the street and embraced and prayed and joined forces. Good that emerges from tragedy is an expression of God's will.

But back to the question of knowing God's will. We may not be able to comprehend the total mystery of it all, but I think we can know enough. We can discern enough to act. So how do we go about discerning? We have several tools in toolbox.

There is first of all the Bible. Reading the Bible gives us pretty clear direction about what God wills for us to do. Love your neighbor. Feed the hungry. Forgive your brother. The Bible gives us commands, and stories, and poetry that point in a certain direction. It's not always easy, but it's pretty clear. Mark Twain famously remarked, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." So Bible reading is perhaps our best tool.

Prayer is another tool. Open yourself up to God by praying for discernment. The story of

Jesus in the Garden the night of his arrest certainly illustrates this. Jesus knelt down and begged God for direction—three separate times according to the gospels. He presented his struggles to God, including what he hoped for. “Let this cup pass; exempt me from this ordeal.... Yet, not what I want, but what you want.” He got an answer to his prayer though not the answer he hoped for. This does highlight the fact that while it is not God’s intentional or ultimate will for us to suffer, perhaps suffering may be what is necessary. God may be calling us to take the narrow road, to endure persecution, to do the more difficult thing. Prayer, that direct communion with God, is one of the ways we listen for God’s voice telling us what to do.

And a third tool for us in discovering God’s will is right in this room. It is the community of faith. By talking and listening to one another, we learn what God wants us to do. One of the important tasks for us during our interim between sr. pastors will be to undertake a congregational self-study. It will be a forum for asking ourselves, What is God calling us to be and do as a church at this time in our history? What are our world’s, our community’s biggest needs and how can we make a difference? Should we focus on issues around race, inter-faith dialogue, poverty, education, health, refugees, justice, or peace? Should we concentrate on the growing numbers who are unchurched and have no experience of the God we know or the rich tradition and moral framework of our Judeo Christian heritage? There will be many voices. (As Hilary said, where there are two Presbyterians there are at least three opinions.) We trust that by listening and sifting them all, we will through community sense God’s direction.

So the Bible, prayer, and Christian community are tools for figuring out God’s will. We may not understand God’s will perfectly, but we can know enough to move forward. Moving forward takes guts because invariably it means being willing to surrender our wants should they not be the same as God’s. In doing so we have to trust that God is a lot better at being God than we are. And that, friends, is really a relief. Just ask any two-year old who doesn’t get their way. If they could tell you they would say that deep down they are glad that they are not in charge of the universe but that Mom or Dad, somebody a lot bigger and smarter than they, holds the power.

Thy will be done. It’s a very good prayer to pray.

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i. Romans 8:28

ii. Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, (Cambridge: Crowley Publications, 1993), p. 23.