

“The Lord’s Prayer Part 2: Thy Will Be Done”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

2-28-21

Based upon Mark 14:32-42; Rom. 7:14-25

Have you heard the story about the Navy ship that got into trouble off the coast of Canada? As it tried to avoid a collision in the dense fog off of Newfoundland, the communications officer recorded the following conversation, which began when the ship suddenly saw lights breaking through the fog just off its bow, and realized that a collision was imminent:

“Please divert your course 15 degrees to avert a collision,” the Navy ship transmitted.

“Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees,” came the reply.

“This is the captain of a U.S. Navy ship. I say again: Divert your course,” the ship transmitted.

“No, I say again: Divert YOUR course,” came the reply.

“Look. This is an aircraft carrier of the United States Navy. We are a large warship. Divert your course at once!”

“And this is a lighthouse. But it’s your call.”¹

Now since this is a Navy town, let me just say that this story, according to Snopes.com, is apocryphal, not true.² It’s been floating around, (pun intended), for almost a hundred years. So, I do not mean to slander in anyway the skills of the talented men and women who serve in our Naval forces. I’m sharing this story because I think that even if it’s not true about the Navy, it is a true story about human nature, and speaks to the challenges we face when we try to pray the phrase of the Lord’s Prayer that is the focus for this week: “thy will be done.” We don’t always recognize what is God’s will in the fog of our daily lives, and even when we do, prefer almost always to plow ahead according to our own wills, convinced that we know better even when clearly, we do not.

Last week, you may remember, I began this Lenten preaching series on the Lord’s Prayer by examining the phrase “hallowed be thy name,” which calls upon us as well as God to revere and reveal God’s holiness. Since God’s ways are not our own, and we are called to try to live them, I said that we cannot really begin to fulfill our part of that petition unless or until we pray the next phrase, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” I am not going to unpack the idea of God’s kingdom this morning, since I just preached on that in January. Instead, I want us to focus on what follows, because however we understand the concept of God’s kingdom, it is clear that it can’t come unless or until God’s will is done. This is true not only because God is ultimately in charge of God’s Kingdom, not us, but also because we human beings have huge issues when it comes to what we will. We are quite good at saying that we want something, but then living in a way that shows we don’t really want it enough to change. The Kingdom is one of those things.

¹ *Animating Illustrations*, cf. “stubbornness,” Homileticsonline.com, https://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=stubbornness&imageField2=

² See <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/the-obstinate-lighthouse/>

Our struggle with willfulness and obedience is not a new problem. Paul conceded his own struggle with will in his wonderfully wandering confession in *Romans* today. “I do not understand my own actions,” he wrote. “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” I think we all know what he’s talking about at least on a small scale, if not on the scale of true evil. “I’m not going to eat that donut,” we say when we see the box in the fridge. Then a half an hour later we eat the donut. “I’m not going to lose my patience with my child, parent, or spouse;” then we lose our patience. We are great at making promises and pledges and do so every year in January. But by now, the end of February, how many of us are exercising as much as we promised, or watching less T.V., or calling friends more often, or whatever? Very few. And these were actions that we genuinely willed for ourselves, or at least some part of us did. The problem is that not all of us did. The parts of ourselves that like sugar, or binge watching, or feeling righteous in our anger had other plans. It’s these parts, which are unwilling to change, and in some cases, unwilling even to surrender to the need for change, that trip us up.

In his book, Will and Spirit, Gerald May summarized the problem this way. He said “The problem of personal mastery versus self-surrender exists in every moment of choice. It appears in the most mundane of daily decisions, and it glows fiercely in the way we view the very meaning of our existence. It presents us with a dilemma; a dilemma that can confuse us and may— if taken far enough— even destroy us. Fundamentally, this dilemma has to do with whether we engage the deepest levels of our lives in willing or in willful ways.”³

Mercifully, this particular dilemma is one that Jesus understands personally, as we heard in today’s Gospel lesson. Even though he was God incarnate, Jesus was also human, which means he had a will of his own. He knew his arrest and death were looming, knew his time on earth was coming to an end. So, he took some disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane and began to pray fervently that God would come up with a different plan. It was one of his most human moments. Jesus knew what pain was, and how much was coming; he also knew what it was to love life and people and the world. He did not want to lose all of that, or to suffer. Again and again, he prayed, while again and again his disciples demonstrated that they did not even have enough control over their wills to stay awake. But after Jesus had prayed so hard that according to *Luke*, he was sweating blood, something in him shifted. Instead of running away or refusing, instead of continuing to pray “Please God could you change course?” Jesus ultimately shifted from willfulness to willingness. He yielded to the lighthouse, and prayed, “not my will, by yours be done.”

I don’t know how many of us could have done that in his place. It is rare for people to be that trusting and self-sacrificial. But I do think we can learn from that moment, nonetheless. Jesus did not want to suffer or die, but he was also deeply invested in something that he knew was going to be much larger than his life. Jesus wanted the new creation God had planned through his resurrection to begin. He wanted God’s love and forgiveness to transform the world. He wanted the kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. So, he took the leap and prayed for God’s will to be done.

³ May, Gerald G., Will and Spirit (New York: Harper Collins Pub. 1982), 5.

There's no quick and easy way for us to get to that level of willingness and surrender because we don't know all that Jesus knew then. But I do believe that we can move from stubborn willfulness into faithful willingness more often if we, like Jesus, remember that God's will is more loving and good than we can understand, and what God wills for us is a future with hope. Like Jesus, we are part of God's plan to make that future a reality. We are part of something bigger than ourselves. Every time we pray, "Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven," and mean it, we are praying for God's dream of the future to be realized. Do you remember how that dream is described in *The Book of Revelation*? (See Rev. 21). The Spirit inspired John with a vision of a world where suffering and tears are no more, where everyone dwells in abundance, where justice was available to all, love and grace characterized all relationships, and even the trees had healing in their leaves. Still need more inspiration? Turn to *Isaiah*. (See Isaiah 11). In his Spirit-inspired visions of God's peaceable kingdom, it isn't just the human beings who are at peace, it is the whole of Creation, lion and lamb, infant and asp all lying peacefully together. Wouldn't you like to live in such a place? I know I would. Just thinking about it makes it easier for me to pray "thy will be done," and I am a very willful person. If you try it, I suspect you will find the same to be true for you.

But once we pray this prayer, we then need to open ourselves to God working in our lives to make it come true. That requires letting go of another level of resistance. For the past few weeks, in honor of Black History month, the award-winning movie *Driving Miss Daisy* has been showing on T.V.⁴ If you remember that classic film, it's about an elderly woman living in the deep South in the 1940s, whose son hires a chauffeur for her because he feels she's too old to be driving herself anymore. The chauffeur, named Hoke, played by Morgan Freeman, is African American. Daisy, played by Jessica Tandy, doesn't want a chauffeur. So, for a long time she just ignores him in the house. But eventually she needs to go to the store. Still stubbornly refusing to accept Hoke's help in getting there, Daisy sets out to walk to the store herself. Hoke gets the car and begins to drive next to her as she walks down the sidewalk. "Go away," she snarls trying to wave him off like a bug. "What are you doing?" "I am trying to take you to the store," Hoke replies. "Get in the car, Miss Daisy." Eventually she reluctantly concedes, but then won't let him drive quickly. Then after months of that, she lets him drive normally, but won't let him use the air conditioner. At every step of the way she is resistant, and in so doing, makes it harder on herself. Over time, however, she loses her resistance as she recognizes the blessing that Hoke is in her life. By the end of the movie, when she is in her last days, it is him she wants to see even more than her son. He is her best friend.

We are like Daisy. "I don't need you," we say. "I like things the way I like them and will do them myself." Then when it becomes clear that we do need God, we start to cherry pick, saying, "OK I'll take your help with this problem, but only my terms. I'll take your saving grace, but I'm not going to change how I manage my time or my relationships, or my finances in this life," or on the national level, "OK we will say we are a Christian nation, but we aren't going to embrace the Kingdom values of taking care of the poor, welcoming immigrants, condemning greed and materialism, or giving up weapons and war." Our behavior must look as ridiculous to

⁴ Uhry, Alfred, Richard D. Zanuck, Lili Fini Zanuck, Bruce Beresford, Morgan Freeman, Jessica Tandy, Dan Aykroyd, Patti LuPone, Esther Rolle, and Alfred Uhry. *Driving Miss Daisy*. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2003.

God as Daisy's did to Hoke. "I've got a faster way to get there," God says patiently as we march stubbornly down the sidewalk claiming to be headed to the Kingdom. "You'd feel more comfortable if I allow my Spirit to cool your temper," God explains, when we refuse the AC and drip in angry sweat. If we want God's glorious dream to come true faster, we have to trust, surrender, and obey.

Author John Purdy wrote that whenever we pray, "Thy will be done," we are actually praying three things: "1) that God's purpose will be accomplished on earth as in heaven; 2) that God's will will be accomplished through us; and 3) that God's will will be accomplished in spite of us."⁵ The first petition is entirely in God's hands, as well as the last one, thanks be to God. We cannot stop God's plan from being fulfilled even if we try. The crucifixion taught us that. But when you think about your life, think about how much is spent in willingness and how much in willfulness that God has to work around with grace and patience. Are you making it hard for God to lead you into a life of abundance or easy? Are you open to change in your life or in the way the world works? What if the changes would mean less suffering for humanity, but the loss of a few perks for you? How much do you trust God, and how much do you trust your ability to discern God's will? We can't surrender to everything, nor should we. But if we make our lives about going it alone, shouldering our own destinies, then we not only find that we can't usually achieve all that we want, in our desperate struggle to do everything ourselves, we almost inevitably cut ourselves off from all kinds of blessings that we could discover with God's help.

I'd like to close today with another story. It's not about a ship or a car, but a bicycle. In hindsight I guess I should have called this sermon "Letting God Take the Wheel." Here is author Tim Hansel's take on the challenge of finding the balance between willingness and willfulness and journeying into God's future with hope:

At first, I saw God as my observer, my judge, keeping track of the things I did wrong, so as to know whether I merited heaven or hell when I die. He was out there sort of like a president.

But later on when I met Christ, it seemed as though life were rather like a bike ride, but it was a tandem bike, and I noticed that Christ was in the back helping me pedal.

I don't know just when it was that He suggested we change places, but life has not been the same since. When I had control, I knew the way. It was rather boring, but predictable... It was the shortest distance between two points.

But when He took the lead, He knew delightful long cuts, up mountains, and through rocky places at breakneck speeds, it was all I could do to hang on! Even though it looked like madness, He said, "Pedal!"

I worried and was anxious and asked, "Where are you taking me?" He laughed and didn't answer, and I started to learn to trust.

I forgot my boring life and entered into the adventure. And when I'd say, "I'm scared," He'd lean back and touch my hand.

He took me to people with gifts that I needed, gifts of healing, acceptance, and joy. They gave me gifts to take on my journey, my Lord's and mine.

And we were off again. He said, "Give the gifts away; they're extra baggage, too much weight." So I did, to the people we met, and I found that in giving I received, and still our burden

⁵ Purdy, John, C., *Lord, Teach Us to Pray: Six Studies on Spirituality and The Lord's Prayer* (Pittsburgh: The Kerygma Program, 1992), 25-26.

was light.

I did not trust Him, at first, in control of my life. I thought He'd wreck it, but He knows bike secrets, knows how to make it bend to take sharp corners, knows how to jump to clear high rocks, knows how to fly to shorten scary passages.

And I am learning to shut up and pedal in the strangest places, and I'm beginning to enjoy the view and the cool breeze on my face with my delightful constant companion, Jesus Christ.

And when I'm sure I just can't do any more, He just smiles and says, "Pedal."⁶

May we allow God to direct our course, carry us forward, and accomplish God's will this day and every day through us, not in spite of us, so that God's Kingdom will soon be as fully realized on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

⁶ Swindoll, Charles R., cf. "Trust," Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 586-587.