

Thy Will Be Done

Matthew 6:9-10

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 7, 2021

Aledo UMC

Pastor Dave Schultz

Sermon Text, Matthew 6:9-10

⁹ (Jesus said unto them,) "After this manner therefore pray ye: 'Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'"

Sermon, "Thy Will Be Done on Earth as It Is in Heaven"

This is the fourth of ten sermons on the Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

I want to focus on the first four words in the next phrase of The Lord's Prayer: *Thy will be done*. For some folks, this may be the most frightening phrase in the Lord's Prayer. That's because for most of us, we view the will of God as a great unknown, and as human beings we are generally afraid of the unknown. How often have you prayed, "Thy will be done" when a loved one is on her or his death bed?

Far too often we harbor an unhealthy and inaccurate fear of God. We're not fully convinced that God wants to bless us rather than curse us. We're convinced that Johnny Cash was right when he sang that "God's gonna cut us down."

God's gonna cut you down! And now God's just waiting for the right time and the right place to whoop our hindquarters. And then we pray, "Thy will be done." And we offer that prayer with a sigh of resignation: (sigh) "Thy will be done. I have no say in the matter.

Nobody likes me,
Even God hates me,
Guess I'll eat some worms.
Thy will be done.

And so we surrender our will to the will of God. And worms. But shouldn't our posture before God always be one of surrender anyway?

Thy will be done. Is that really such a frightening petition? Look where it comes in the prayer: it comes after we've professed that God is our Father; it comes after we've declared that God our Father has a heavenly perspective over our lives; it comes after we've declared that our Father is worthy of praise; and it comes after we've signed on to participate in God's kingdom. Then, in confidence and in a holy relationship with God we pray, "Thy will be done."

So what is God's will?

First, it is God's will to bless us. James wrote—

¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created (James 1:17-18).

Likewise in Jeremiah 29:11 the prophet promises—

¹¹ "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. And I will be found of you," declares the Lord (Jeremiah 29:11-13a).

I think one of the most fascinating stories in the Bible is the story of Jonah; I especially love the way in which the story of Jonah interfaces with this mystery which we call the will of God. The will of God is revealed in the opening verses of Jonah 1—

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

In other words, "God's gonna cut you down, Nineveh." Clearly, the will of God is to destroy Nineveh. But if that's the will of God, then why bother sending Jonah to preach against it? Hasn't God already made up his mind? What's the point of preaching against the people of that city?

Of course, you know the story: Jonah runs away to Joppa which is in the opposite direction from Nineveh. In Joppa, Jonah catches a ride aboard a ship and sets sail for Tarshish. Tarshish, by the way, is on the coast of Spain; Tarshish was at the western end of the then-known world; it was over 2,600 miles away from Nineveh.

But why would Jonah run away in the first place? Jonah, faithful Jew that he was, regarded the people of Nineveh as a hated enemy of the Jews; Jonah despised the Ninevites. You'd think this news would make him the happiest prophet in Israel: he has the God-given task of proclaiming to Israel's arch-enemies, "God's gonna cut you down!"

But Jonah wants no part of delivering that bad news to Nineveh. Instead, he comes up with a rather fishy excuse and declines the invitation to go preach there.

Jonah ends up taking a three-day sea cruise—which sounds nice to you and me, but Jonah thought it kind of stunk and he was glad to be back on land when the cruise was over. The story picks up again in chapter 3 verse 1—

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

God, why would you commission Jonah to go to Nineveh if it was your will to destroy the city anyway?

Apparently, when it comes to the will of God, God isn't quite as set on punishment and destruction the way we might assume God is set on punishment and destruction. But isn't that what John 3:16-17 is all about?

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

It seems as though Jonah suspected as much and that's why he didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place. However, after his three-day fish excursion, Jonah decided to obey the Lord so went to Nineveh and preached God's message to them.

Jonah preached that God's will was about to come crashing down on them. But something happened: the people of Nineveh believed God and repented of their evil ways. They proclaimed a fast and, in a sign of humble submission to God, they put on sackcloth. Even the king of Nineveh got in on the act, issuing a decree calling for the citizens to participate in the public rituals of repentance. The king even commanded the livestock, the pets and the other animals of Nineveh to repent. "Who knows," he said. God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish" (Jonah 3:9).

What's up with the king of Nineveh? Doesn't he know that it was God's will to destroy his kingdom?

That was certainly Jonah's expectation; he finished his preaching tour, then went outside the city and sat down on at a place east of the city where he made himself a little shelter and then earnestly prayed, "Thy will be done! Thy will be done!" And then he waited for God to rain fire and brimstone on the despised city; it would be another Sodom and Gomorrah!

Haven't you done something like that in your life? "God, rain down destruction on my enemy: that bully on the schoolyard or that neighbor who's threatened to sue you.

Maybe it's someone you've never met before: that politician that annoys the snot out of you or that gunman or those terrorists. Just a little hot judgment from God and justice would be served.

"C'mon, God, 'Thy will be done,'" Jonah prayed. "How about another Sodom and Gomorrah? Then Israel will be done with this enemy!"

It didn't happen. The people of Nineveh repented and God changed his mind; or, to put it more succinctly: God altered his will. And instead of being a mirror image of Sodom and Gomorrah, Nineveh became the exact opposite of Sodom and Gomorrah and yet, the back story is quite similar.

Before the judgment of God was poured out on Sodom and Gomorrah, the Son of God accompanied by two angels came to visit Abraham to tell him about the immanent destruction of those two towns. The Son of God and Abraham both knew that Abraham's beloved nephew Lot and his family lived in Sodom. The divine visit wasn't just happenstance; it was really an invitation from Jesus Christ to Abraham to intercede on behalf of the two cities. And Abraham does in Genesis 18:

²³ "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" Abraham prayed. ²⁴ "What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty?" ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

²⁶ The Lord said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

And Abraham keeps praying and interceding—bargaining with God—until he whittles the number down to ten. Unfortunately, ten righteous persons could not be found in Sodom and Gomorrah. Only Lot and his two daughters were spared.

In both cases, God's will seems to bent for judgment but in both cases, God invites someone to turn the tide toward mercy. Unfortunately, in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, mercy was only extended to a few. On the other hand, in the case of Nineveh, "mercy there was great and grace was free" and the city was spared.

So what is God's will? And what are we praying when we pray, "Thy will be done"? We're really saying to God, "What is your will and how can I participate in it?"

Now consider the words of Peter in his second epistle: "(God is) not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 2:9b, NKJV). "Thy will be done" suggests that everybody God's way of salvation is open to all persons: from the chosen Jews to the hated Ninevites. But in order for God's will to be done, God invites us to partner with him and love the our neighbors into the kingdom of God.

Jonah began as an unwilling partner with God, but a great fish convinced him to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh. Abraham partnered with God by interceding for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. And God invites us to partner with him that God's will might be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We don't need to fear the will of God. God's will is not bent on harm or destruction; God wants to pour out mercy on the people of this planet. And he wants plain old folks like you and me to join him in that adventure of grace. That's why we pray, "Thy will be done;" to yield ourselves to the loving, embracing mystery of God's gracious good will. And not only are we invited to partner with God in doing his will; but God also equips us for the task.

With that in mind, I'd like to close with a benediction found at the end of Hebrews 13:

²⁰ Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21)