### “God’s Will Be Done” Steve Finlan for The First Church, July 16, 2023

**Isaiah 55:8–12**

8For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

12 For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

**Matthew 12:24–25, 33–37**

24 When the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons.” 25He knew what they were thinking and said to them . . . 33 “Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. 34You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. 36I tell you, on the day of judgement you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; 37for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Welcome to all, and thank you for coming to First Church today. Every Sunday we gather here to hear about God, and to pray to and *experience* God in this hour. So is it just learning about God or is it about *us* and our spiritual experience? It’s both. There’s always an ongoing interface between God and humans. Today we’re going to see the dichotomy and the interaction in these readings. The Isaiah reading is about God, the gospel reading is mostly about humans, and whether their lives have been changed by God or not. You may already know the answer to that in your own life, but let’s see how this unfolds. When we learn about God we should be ready to be surprised!

We know that we pray that God’s will may be done. We also believe that God’s will *will* be done. We believe; we have faith that God’s intentions will come to fruition in time, in *God’s* time. The Isaiah quote is a sublime reflection on the certainty that God’s “word [will] go out” and “accomplish [its] purpose” (55:11). God’s will *will* be fulfilled. It is just as certain as rain and snow coming down to water the earth. This image communicates something of the beauty of God’s way, a taste of the essence of God’s plan.

Now, the gospel passage has a different focus. It speaks about humans and the words we speak, but I think the implication is that God will have the final word, and that *our* words will be judged and measured against God’s word and way. We can choose to be part of God’s plan, to participate, to allow our mortal actions to become interwoven into the divine and infinite will.

This gospel passage is one of those instances where Jesus shows a deep knowledge both of spiritual truth and psychological reality. So simple, yet so true! Good things come from a good heart, actually a “good treasure,” and evil things from an “evil treasure” (Matt 12:35). “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (12:34). A healthy tree bears healthy fruit; a sick tree bears sickly fruit. The abundance of thoughts and attitudes in the mind is what produces a person’s words and deeds. “The tree is known by its fruit” (12:33). Further, our habits of behavior determine what our *next* behaviors will be.

Have you given time to consider the thoughts that form *your* foundations? Do you seek to reach out to the God within? Do you value your relationships? Do you offer your *full* God-based thoughts and deeds to be of service to others? How does this change your relationships?

I think one of the values being communicated in this passage is *responsibility*. We are indeed each responsible for the thoughts and attitudes that we nurture, that we *treasure* in our minds. We have choices. We are not as helpless as we sometimes pretend to be. Having to give an account of our words is an example of how we are held responsible.

So what appeal is Jesus making? I think he is encouraging us to raise up our minds to the spiritual heights, to aspire to truth and goodness, to seek God’s will. He wants us to “make the tree good, and its fruit good” (Matt 12:33). Easier said than done.

And we can’t do it all by ourselves. We need God’s help. Jesus is asking us to be remade, restructured, born again. He’s asking us to select from the best a new treasure, to put our highest value on truth, beauty, goodness, love, and unity. Abraham Lincoln trusted and hoped that people’s memories would swell the Union’s cause “when touched . . . by the better angels of our nature.” He was hoping people’s better aspirations would make it possible to avoid war. We know, unfortunately, it turned out to be impossible at that time because human motivations were not synchronized and focused on values that make for goodness and unity. What if there had been a few more God-centered people? Some who were brave enough to stand up, to seek a higher purpose?

What about now? Are *our* values sufficient to prevent another huge rupture in our country? Because it is primarily our values, and only secondarily our political opinions, that can preserve the Union. Do we actually value civility and fairness in word and deed?. . . Do we seek to understand the viewpoints of those who think differently from ourselves? Or do we quickly vilify them? Do we listen to voices on the television that tell us to mock or hate certain kinds of people? Some mockery is almost unavoidable, but have we selected a group of people that we will shut out and despise? I hope not. It is the lazier, easier path to dismiss others, rather than to choose the hard work of building bridges over divides of opinion. It takes courage to choose that latter path.

God is so much higher than our human interpretations. God sees the big picture. When we come to understand God more deeply, we become more tolerant of people, because we understand that each one has to develop his or her own understanding of God. We come to realize that even Christians often will have different social instincts and will develop differing philosophies of living. Some will emphasize the individual and will hold each one sacred. Others will emphasize the group, and will exalt that which symbolizes the group, like the flag. We need both types of people. We cannot force our interpretation of the divine onto others. Each person’s experience of the divine has validity and truth in their life. When we *share* these experiences we might perceive more of God and learn to accept others and *their* experience.

Actually it is somewhat gratifying to be able to understand people of differing viewpoints. It doesn’t mean they will understand each other, but they might understand you, and you can be an unconscious mediator, to some extent. At the very least, you can become a great listener. It’s better than being stuck at a certain stage of partisanship, where you are likely to start feeling guilty about your one-sidedness and your contempt for the other side. Don’t cripple yourself, spiritually. Strive to understand others. Open your heart. Ask God for patience and understanding.

Trust in the grand plan of God, who *wants* there to be a diversity of people. Trust that God’s word will not “return empty, but it shall accomplish” God’s purpose (Isa 55:11). Trust that God will educate us all, and that we—at least everyone who seeks to know the will of God—will gain the knowledge, the truth, and the goodness that we need to receive in order to make spiritual progress. It is possible that most of that will happen in the afterlife, when we will have more time than we have in this very short earth life. But great gains in human understanding can be achieved today. We have to accept that real effort is required and there is no easy, one-step method. It is unlikely that either we or the people who perplex us will be straightened out and perfected in this lifetime. But the challenge stands before us. Are we ready to accept it, with God’s help? For surely when humankind and God unite, there are no limits to what can happen.