

“Thy Will Be Done”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 20, 2019

First Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:5-13

Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁷“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread. ¹²And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 18:1-8

¹Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” ⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”



Sermon: *“Thy Will Be Done”*

This parable is one of those stories that can be confusing because it sounds like it’s saying something that it’s really not. A widow, someone who in the time of Jesus would have had very few rights and even less power, is standing before a judge arguing her case. We are told the judge is corrupt. He doesn’t care for anyone or anything. Presumably he is only here for the power and the paycheck. But the widow does not accept his inaction and his apathy. She continues to shout for justice. She waits outside his office for him to come out. She follows him to his car in the court parking lot. She taps on his window and accosts him as he leaves home to go walk his dog. All the while crying out for justice to be done. Maybe she even disguises herself as a delivery man just so she can talk to him when he answers the door. The widow is tireless in crying out for this feckless judge, to do the right thing. She hounds him until he finally gives in. He rules in her favor giving her the justice she’s been demanding.

Some people read that as “the squeaky wheel gets the grease.” If you just keep asking long enough, you will eventually wear God down, and God will just grant your request. It’s the basic child’s approach: keep screaming until you get what you want. Or, ask mom and if she says no, ask dad. And if he says no, ask the grandparents. But that’s not what Jesus is saying here. Jesus tells the disciples what the parable is about in the very first line: This parable is about “their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” What Jesus seems to want us to see here is not that the widow badgers the judge until he gives in, rather that the widow never loses hope that justice will prevail.

We see that in our own government a lot these days. There is corruption, the disproportionate influence of industry lobbyists and corporate money, and party often seems to take precedence over country. But there is still reason to have faith in our democratic system of checks and balances and separation of powers. There is reason to trust that ultimately, right will win out; justice will be done. We just might have to wait a while for it. But we also know that we might have to advocate for our rights and call on our elected officials and cast our votes for a long time before we see real change. Democracy is not a “vote-once-and-you’re-done” event. It’s a lifelong vocation. It involves reading the news, writing your representatives, participating in the system. Likewise, praying and being connected to God is not something we do once in a while, it’s a daily discipline. But like democracy, we don’t always see positive results in the short term.

Jesus is encouraging the disciples to trust that God’s will is being done in the world, even if they have to wait to see the results of it. The closing line underscores this: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Will the followers of Jesus trust? Can their faith withstand the perils and tribulations of this world? Faith doesn’t mean easy answers. It means trusting that no matter what happens, for better or for worse, in the end, God’s will be done.

In the Exodus story, Moses leads the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and towards the new homeland that God has promised them; a journey that winds up lasting 40 years. We remember that story for the miracles that occur along that way: The Red Sea is parted to allow the Israelites to cross and escape the army of Pharaoh, the Israelites are led by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night, and they are fed with Manna from heaven throughout the full 40 years.

But those aren't even the most interesting parts of the story. What's really impressive is that when the Red Sea parted, the people actually took those first steps away from the relative safety of the shore and out onto the wet seabed, walking between those twin walls of roaring water. What is truly amazing is that when the manna fell, the people ate it. But what is most astounding of all, is that after 40 years, when Moses arrived at the Jordan river, the rest of the Israelites were still following behind him! Don't you think at least some of those people would have thought "Forget this, this guy doesn't know where he's going, and he won't stop to ask directions! I'm going back!" Through all the hardships, the Israelites never lost their faith. Even though their destination was beyond their line of sight, they never lost hope that they would one day arrive.

This parable of the widow and the unjust judge looks like it's about getting what we want by being persistent in our prayers. But it's not. We can't use our prayers to beat God into submission. This parable is really about continuing to rely on God and faithfully going to God in prayer, even when the situation seems hopeless. It is too easy to simply give in because things are not going the way we think they should, or that we are not getting the answers that we want in the timeframe in which we want them. Jesus assures the disciples that God will always do what is right, but we need to remain faithful.

It has been said that the arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice. And that is also true of God's will. God works within the structures of human time and space. Yes, God is sovereign and omnipotent. God can do what God can do, and God does. But we don't always see. And we don't always understand.

That's what Jesus is telling the disciples here. Continue to pray. You may not get exactly what you ask for today or tomorrow or maybe even ever, but keep praying, knowing that the Kingdom is coming; God's will be done. A prayer not answered in the way you had hoped, does not mean God is apathetic or disinterested. If you prayed for the other team's kicker to miss, but he made it; that doesn't mean God isn't listening. And if you prayed for the tumor to go away but it didn't; that doesn't mean that God doesn't care. And if you prayed for there to be peace and justice in the world and things still seem to be going sideways; that doesn't mean God isn't working God's purposes out.

I think sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking that if we have faith in God, if we pray hard enough or believe hard enough, God will save us from all the difficulties and pain and suffering of this life. But we forget that difficulty and pain and suffering are actually a part of life. Loving God and knowing God loves us does not exempt us from those realities. God never promises us a life free from challenges, but God does promise that we will not face those challenges alone. And so we pray, asking for God's help; seeking God's power; and we trust that God hears our prayers and that God answers. And we do so knowing that the answers may not be the ones we would choose and they may not be in a form we can recognize.

When I think about how God works, I always think of Jim, one of my students at Clemson. He had a younger brother named John who was born with a mental disability. He wasn't able to do many of the things that his peers could do, and he will never be able to live on his own. Every day Jim prayed for his brother, to be healthy, to be more able, to get stronger. One day John's doctor told the family that the defect in John's brain was in the left hemisphere, which meant the dominant side of his brain was the right side. This was actually a good thing because John, you see, was left-handed, which puts him in the minority among human beings. But it also meant that his gross motor control was located in the side of his brain that was unaffected. So he was able to actually perform simple tasks to care for himself, to eat, to write, to get dressed; had he been right-handed, or had the defect been located in the opposite hemisphere, he would have been incapable of any of this.

I remember Jim saying to me, "I wish John hadn't been born with his disability, but I thank God every day he was born left-handed. Who would have ever thought to pray for that?" Faithfully going to God in prayer means understanding that God is wiser than we are. And it means trusting that God is working God's purposes out.

Unfortunately, it also means that we won't always get the answer we were hoping for and in those moments, we have to trust that God's way will be best, even when we are unsure. Our best example of this is Jesus himself. On the night of his arrest, Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. He knows the cross awaits and he doesn't want to face it. So, he prays to God saying, "If it is possible, let this cup pass from me; *yet not what I want but what you want.*"¹ Jesus knows

what *he* wants. But he is willing to accept God's will because he knows that God's will is going to work out better in the long run than his own.

So we pray; not just because of what we want, although we do take our needs and our cares and our wants to God (God invites and encourages us to do so). We pray because we need to rely on God. Prayer helps us be aware of God active in our lives and in the world around us. Prayer helps us to be quiet so that we can listen for God and look for God's responses. Prayer makes us contemplate God's will and not just what *we* want, but what *God* wants for us and how we can be a part of it. Prayer helps us see our place in the world and to better be a part of God's work.

And like Jesus' prayer in the garden and the prayer he taught his disciples to pray, we always make our hearts known to God, but we also put our trust in God to do what is best: Thy will be done.

"Thy will be done" is a prayer of request and it is a statement of faith. "Thy will be done" is written not with an ellipsis, but with an exclamation point! And when we pray the words "Thy will be done" we do so not with a sigh of resignation, but with a shout of confidence.

Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come., Amen.

End Note

¹ Matthew 26:39, NRSV