

Jesus' Prayer: Divine Desire

Matthew 26:36-46 (Common English Bible)

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. He said to the disciples, "Stay here while I go and pray over there." When he took Peter and Zebedee's two sons, he began to feel sad and anxious. Then he said to them, "I'm very sad. It's as if I'm dying. Stay here and keep alert with me." Then he went a short distance farther and fell on his face and prayed, "My Father, if it's possible, take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want."

He came back to the disciples and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, "Couldn't you stay alert one hour with me? Stay alert and pray so that you won't give in to temptation. The spirit is eager, but the flesh is weak." A second time he went away and prayed, "My Father, if it's not possible that this cup be taken away unless I drink it, then let it be what you want."

Again he came and found them sleeping. Their eyes were heavy with sleep. But he left them and again went and prayed the same words for the third time. Then he came to his disciples and said to them, "Will you sleep and rest all night? Look, the time has come for the Human One to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up. Let's go. Look, here comes my betrayer."

Before I became your pastor, I served as the campus minister at the University of Memphis. Every year about this time, sophomores and juniors would ask me about God's will. They'd say, "David, I'm having a hard time declaring a major. I want to choose the right one. What do you think God wants me to do? What's God's will for my life?"

When I started in the ministry 37 years ago, I was flattered when anyone asked my opinion. And I was too hasty in offering my advice. I quickly learned if someone asked me about God's will, she or he would return later demanding to know why God and I got it wrong. I decided a long time ago to give up my role as religious psychic.

Don't get me wrong. I'm glad when anyone seriously seeks God's will. It's a sign of spiritual maturity. But unfortunately, many of us do it for selfish or fearful reasons. All too often some self-serving situation leads us to discern God's will.

We wonder, what does God want *me* to do? What is God's perfect path for *me*? How can *I* assure *my* happiness or success? Our concern revolves around the unholy trinity of me, myself, and I. We're not concerned with God's will about other people, the world around us, or even God's kingdom.

Others of us approach the will of God with fear. We act as if God's hands are hidden behind God's back and we have to determine which hand holds blessing and which holds curse. We assume God's will is like a divine obstacle course with a narrow, hidden path surrounded by pitfalls and traps. One false move and we plunge to disaster. One mistake and God's anger awaits. It's no wonder we're nervous about making the wrong choice.

When I talked with the college students, I wouldn't tell them what to do or what I believed was God's will for them. Instead, we talked about who they were, and who they were becoming. We talked about God not waiting them to fail or be punished. We talked about God wanting them to become the person they were created to be and that being a spiritually mature person meant learning to make difficult choices.

Seeking God's will has always been a challenge. Trying to discern what the Creator wants is never easy. So how can we honestly pray, "thy will be done"?

The Greek word translated as will, doesn't have anything to do with willpower (trying harder) or willfulness (unrestrained force). In Aramaic the word carries the meaning of "desire". It's about the heart's desire. It's about that overwhelming or ultimate want or longing that guides and directs our lives.

The great Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote about God's longing for mystical union with creation - how holy desire would be fulfilled. He said Hasidic Jews don't pray "Thy will be done" like Christians in an agony of abasement. Instead, they pray "Thy longing be satisfied". The Rabbi said God's desire pursues us and that's what make everything run smoothly to the extent it does. Thy will be done is a petition that prays us beyond our heart's own limits.

We're conditioned to think of prayer as asking God for what we want. Dear God, please give me this or give me that. But praying "thy will be done" means we're asking what God wants. We're not asking for our hearts' desires, but to be enthralled by what God is doing on earth as in heaven. We're asking for our lives to be caught up in something bigger and better, the gracious adventure of what God is doing in the world.

God desires for you and me to live into love filled and grace-based relationship with one another and the whole wide world. God desires that we live not for ourselves, but for divine purposes. God desires that we be kingdom agents working for justice, hope and peace. God desires that we trust in God's providence and care. God desires that our wills become united.

Prayer is an act of uniting our will with God's will. It is not an attempt to get God to do what we want. It's desiring to do what delights God. It's discovering that what pleases God will ultimately bring us joy. It's following in God's footsteps even when we're afraid.

One of the more powerful stories in the Bible is Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. It takes place during the last week of his life. He's aware his days are numbered and one of his own disciples has betrayed him. He's aware the forces in Jerusalem opposed to him are preparing to arrest him and won't be satisfied until he's dead. Jesus is uncertain, fearful, anxious. So, he finds a quiet place and prays.

Jesus' words are so human. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Abba (Daddy), everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me" (Mark 14:36). I know that prayer. I prayed it when my father was dying of cancer. I prayed it when I developed a brain tumor twice. Many of us have been praying it during this pandemic. We've all had cups we've asked God to take from us.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He doesn't end his prayer with his own desire. He ends with these words of faith, "Yet not what I will, but what you will." He prays the very prayer he taught his disciples. "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The deepest desire of Jesus' heart is for the will of God to be his will. This petition is stained with his sweat and blood.

How do you and I begin to pray like Jesus? How do we begin to pray for God's will be done in us and through us? Someone asked the evangelist Billy Graham how to begin to pray for a revival. "That's easy," said Graham. "Just draw a circle on the ground. Step inside it. Then say, 'Lord, send a revival in this circle.'" Praying for God's will to be done on earth gets down to the struggle, the contest, the conflict between our wills and God's.

In a mystery deeper than we shall fully fathom, Jesus himself learned obedience through suffering. He attended the school of fervent, passionate prayer. What he wanted that night in Gethsemane was understandable. He wanted rescue, deliverance, safety, wholeness, peace, life—all things that are part of God's will. He wanted to be spared the unconscionable suffering and the disgrace of condemnation as a criminal - the lash, the nails, the thirst, the bleeding, the dying. "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." Silence. "Then, Father, thy will be done."

When he rose from his knees, Jesus was the calmest person in the garden. In the next hours he was in control, not his captors. He was the judge, not Pilate. He moved resolutely to his cross in the confidence of a person perfectly within the will of God.

It is through such victories that God's will gets done on earth as it is in heaven. And we need more of them. Are you open to that kind of struggle and victory in your own life? Before you answer, know that it probably will cost you drops of bloody sweat to pray this petition and mean it.

But beyond your Gethsemane and mine lies a quiet confidence that's priceless. Beyond your Gethsemane and mine lies a power in prayer greater than our imaginations. Beyond your Gethsemane and mine lies the healing and salvation of the world.

Come brothers and sisters, like Jesus let us pray, let us really pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

February 28, 2021 (Lord's Prayer 4)

David Whiteley, Pastor

Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church