

“Thy Will Be Done”
Matthew 6:5-15
Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.
Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
March 5, 2023

I hope we all learn this morning that to ask for God’s will to be done in our lives is in fact a very FEARFUL prayer. The desire for God’s will to take precedence in our lives and the world around us even as it is in heaven is one request that should NEVER be taken lightly. It is an appeal that our wills might become more conformed to GOD'S own will and that we might actively practice what we TOO easily may confess with our lips. As W. Phillip Keller says in his book on the Lord's Prayer, millions repeat it without any understanding of what God's will is, and EVEN MORE have prayed it without any intention of obeying it.

The FIRST thing that must be said about the will of God is that it is the MOST IMPORTANT KNOWLEDGE we can ever have, and the HIGHEST AND NOBLEST ACTIVITY we can ever perform. There is nothing in this world more essential than KNOWING what God expects of us and then laying aside our OWN wants, our PERSONAL priorities and predilections, in order to do what GOD would have us to do. George Truett, that great Baptist preacher of the early twentieth century, always professed that "to KNOW the will of God is the greatest knowledge, to FIND the will of God is the greatest discovery, and to DO the will of God is the greatest achievement." The Englishman G. Campbell Morgan, another great preacher of that era, kept in his study this motto: "The will of God- nothing more, nothing less." As Jesus could say, "For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will but the will of him who sent me," so OUR profession as Christians has to continually be, "I am come, not to do mine own will, but the will of him who sent me."

As we discovered last week, if trying to get our arms around a theme as daunting and ambitious as the “kingdom of God” is darn near impossible, then you can imagine how much harder is it to address a subject as wide as “God’s will,” ESPECIALLY in a 20-minute sermon. So many books have already been written and thousands of sermons preached on it and STILL there is no consensus, no common agreement as to what it is and how it works. Pastors and theologians have come up with DIFFERENT MODELS to try to explain it such as when they break it down into different compartments- all of them insufficient. They will explain that there is the “INTENTIONAL” will of God and that has to do with God’s “intention” or “ideal purpose” for creation. It is to recognize that God desires nothing less than peace and joy and hope in each of our lives. Then they say there is a “CIRCUMSTANTIAL” will of God, that because God has given us some degree of free will, God therefore allows for mistakes and even catastrophic events to take place in our lives. If God were to rescue us from every little or even big tragedy that occurred in our lives, it would deny our free will and turn us into little more than robots. And then they assert that there is God’s “ULTIMATE” will and that is the belief that in the end, God will eventually win out, that all things work together for good in spite of all the evil and tragedy and suffering in the world.

Such compartmentalizing can be useful but it can also be a lot more CONFUSING, even to pastors such as myself. I prefer to approach this subject the same way Jesus did regarding “the kingdom of God.” Just as he refused to come straight out and define it for his disciples, preferring instead to offer hints about it in his teachings and parables, so might we approach the idea of the will of God in the same way. And what kind of hints does Jesus make about God’s will. He says, for instance, that the WILL of his Father is that everyone who sees the Son and

believes in him should have eternal life. Thus we know that God wants the very best for ALL his children. Jesus further states that not everyone who says “Lord, Lord” shall enter heaven but only those who DO the WILL of his Father. He also says that whoever does the WILL of his Father in heaven is his brother and sister and mother. But his DEFINITIVE statement on the matter is when he comes right out and declares, “If you have seen me, you have also seen the Father,” and “I and the Father are one.” Hence, if you REALLLY want to understand the will of God; if you long to see God’s purposes accomplished here on earth--in our lives, our congregation, and in the Pittsburgh area and beyond--then understand that God's will is ULTIMATELY revealed in and through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus came to do the Father's will, and as we make him the beginning and goal of OUR lives, then the FATHER'S WILL shall become central to our OWN as well. As St. Paul tells us in his epistle to the Philippians, he had every reason to claim equality with God but assumed instead the form of a servant whereby the Creator became one with the creature. Furthermore, he was humble to the point of submitting himself into the hands of his enemies who then nailed him to a cross- ALL BECAUSE IT WAS HIS FATHER'S WILL. He sought no glory for himself, but came to speak the words and perform the will of his Father in heaven. Where the will of God as revealed in the Son is to deny oneself in the interests of his kingdom, the will of you and me and EVERYONE ELSE tends to be just the OPPOSITE, to serve OURSELVES and our OWN interests over and against the interests of that kingdom. Ultimately, it is our pride, our selfishness, and our egotism that declares, "NOT THY will but MY will be done."

If "thy will be done" is the shortest and simplest clause of the whole prayer, it is also the HARDEST to pray. You see, if the will is where the HEART resides- with the heart

representing the seat of our intentions and desires, if it is the innermost part of our being out of which our thoughts and decisions are acted out, then the selfishness and egotism that so dominates each of our hearts is invariably going to conflict with the pure and righteous motives of God. It's hard to deny that we all feel we know what is best for us and how we should conduct our lives. We don't especially like someone else telling us when we are wrong or need help in what we're doing, and yet that is what God is graciously saying. When God's will becomes apparent to us, it inevitably competes with our OWN will- challenging our pride, forcing us to make some kind of decision as to whether we will obey God and disregard our own rights and plans, OR obey our OWN wants and desires and disregard the call of God. And unless our will, infected as it is with the cancer of arrogance and self-love, is made subordinate to GOD'S will; unless our prayers truly become "THY will be done" and not "MY will be done," then "all human plans and projects come to naught" as the poet Robert Browning once said.

I submit that a knowledge of God's will is not all that difficult to discern. Rather, it is our willingness to DO that will that we find so darn difficult. We're afraid that the will of God is hard- and indeed it IS hard. To follow Christ means to revolutionize our thoughts, our attitudes, our way of living so that it is brought into conformity with HIS will- and of course we find that to be both painful and risky as the rich young ruler discovered when Jesus asked him to get rid of all the trappings of success and power that got in the way of him becoming a disciple.

If we would desire to know and do God's will, then we must SENSITIZE ourselves to it in several ways. We must study the Bible daily and diligently, making it the rule for our lives. Those things we DON'T understand- we must be patient, pray, and their meaning will soon come. We must make prayer a major focus in our lives and to increasingly attune our hearts to

the heart of Christ. And, not LEAST, we must make Jesus our personal example. We should focus in particular upon his personality and character; we must observe his gentleness, his love for little children, his patience with his disciples, his compassion for persons in need, his indignation at abuses and injustice. Above all, we must note how in the hour of his greatest crisis, he did not seek to take his life into his OWN hands, but prayed in the confines of Gethsemane, "Father, THY will be done." Christ's wisdom will then become OUR wisdom; his judgments, OUR judgments; his love, OUR love. In this way, we will not only KNOW the will of God in our mind and heart; more importantly, we will LIVE the will of God out in our life.

Now to be honest, I have probably spent more time trying to make sense of what "the will of God" means for Christians and for myself than any other biblical theme. After so many years trying to understand it, with even GREATER difficulty in trying to LIVE it, this morning's sermon is my best attempt at summing up for you what I feel about the subject. To begin with, there was a time when I ardently believed there was exactly ONE WILL, just ONE PURPOSE for our lives and this was established by God, slowly revealed to us by his Holy Spirit, which we gradually discover in our walk with Christ, and then fulfill through our daily life in the world. I argued that insofar as we remained close to Christ, only then could we discover his masterplan for us, and to the degree we remain faithful to that plan, we thus demonstrate our faithfulness to HIM. Throughout our lives, we find ourselves confronted with a multitude of choices and decisions and to the extent we better understand God's mind and heart on them through the various spiritual disciplines, we then stand a better chance of hearing God's voice on the matter and realizing God's will for us- at least, that's how I interpreted it.

There are many in the church who construe God's will in much the same way. They're

convinced that God has a single perfect plan for each person's life and if we just learn to grasp it and stick to that blueprint, we'll end up achieving our God-given potential and eventually reach HIS goal--that is, GOD'S goal--for our lives. Oh we're it really that easy! The problem of such thinking is that if you deviate from that plan or fall off from it (as we ALL ultimately WILL), then you feel like you missed your chance and for the rest of your life, you will have to suffer for it. I had a member in a former church of mine who experienced deep guilt for what he felt was abandoning God's plan for his life many years earlier. When he was younger, he was sure God had wanted him to enter the ministry but he chose another route instead- he got married and began a family. However, in order to support them, he went to work for a major oil company which was the largest employer in the area. He remained on the job with them for many years where he made a good living and from which he eventually retired with a handsome pension. One day, with tears in his eyes, he confessed to me of the guilt he has had to live with for that decision. For believing he had disobeyed God and chosen a secular occupation over that of a holy vocation, he was convinced that he had been out of his will ever since. Well after some discussion about it, especially over the meaning of God's will and the difference between what some might call a secular versus a holy vocation, he managed to resolve the conflict in his heart. Can you see how such a view of God's will can be painful and eventually self-defeating, often leading to little joy or even spiritual maturity for the Christian who holds to such a view.

Speaking for myself, I was single in the ministry for many years until I met and wed Rose almost 17 years ago. During my many years of bachelorhood, I had to listen to a number of well-meaning friends say, "David, just be patient. God has that one special person chosen just for YOU and your name has been written on her heart. Your time will come." Well the truth

was that I have a number of women friends and had even dated some of them over the years, and for various reasons--not the least of which that I was busy pastoring churches and working on a full-time doctoral degree at the same time--not one of them led to marriage nor were they all intended to. That fact is that I've come to believe there are perhaps hundreds of persons we all could have the option of marrying- not just that one person some think is out there with our name inscribed upon that other individual's heart. However, after finding someone who I DID want to spend the rest of my life with, God's will became that I love that person with all my heart and all my soul and all my strength, and that I demonstrate in my relationship to her the same kind of devotion and honor and respect I try to maintain in my relationship to CHRIST- THAT then is what I believe "God's will" is.

In other words, each of us is continuously faced with a plethora of choices- some healthy and many others NOT so. But there's NO ONE PLAN for us to follow which if we deviate from it, threatens us with spiritual disaster and life-long ruin. God has given us intelligence and common sense for a reason and that is to assess and make the wisest and most responsible choices we can, and if they are made with the right intentions in mind, then I believe that's good enough for GOD. After all, the psalmist does say, "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Psalm 37:4) However, when we do find ourselves having to make a major or potential life-altering decision whether it concerns a job or where we will move to or who it is we will eventually marry, then once we DO make that decision, he then requires that we commit ourselves to it and remain as faithful and responsible as we can to those very persons affected by that decision. AGAIN, that becomes GOD'S WILL for our lives.

Throughout my years as a Christian and in the service of my vocation as a minister of the

Gospel, I have learned that the more time I spend with God, enjoying his presence and developing a greater sense of intimacy with him, then I rarely have to worry about whether I'm in the "perfect" will of God for my life or not. You see, I think God will honor WHATEVER choices I make in life so long as I conduct myself as a faithful and responsible child of God, which means striving to live as humbly and honorably and devotedly as I can. In this way, I find that instead of the Christian life becoming a form of bondage as it has for many of them, it has become the most freeing kind of existence I can possibly imagine. The key, however, is in remembering that as we continue to walk with Christ, drawing ever closer to him and recalling his promise of how nothing in life will ever separate us from either his presence or his love, God's will then becomes a natural part of that walk and not some specific plan or roadmap we have to keep consulting in order to remain faithful to him. The secret lies in remembering how everything else proceeds from that relationship and nothing more. As St. Paul wrote to his young disciple Timothy, *"For God did NOT give us a spirit of timidity or cowardice or fear, but [He has given us a spirit] of power and of love and of sound judgment and personal discipline [abilities that result in a calm, well-balanced mind and self-control]."* (2 Timothy 1:7)

I end my sermon with a quote I discovered some years ago and which I keep printed on a 3x5 card in the middle of my favorite Bible. I do so in order to remind myself what's most important about my walk with Christ and how his will works its way out in my life. Maybe you'll find it to be just as instructive as I have. It reads:

"The real issue in life is NOT the search for GOD'S WILL, it is the search for GOD. The issue in faith is not knowing what God is doing, rather it is knowing that God knows what He is doing. The issue of faith is seeking GOD'S PRESENCE, not God's plan for my life, because there is no

plan outside of my knowing Him. We don't need to know the will of God, we only need to know GOD...which IS, strangely enough, HIS WILL." -Mike Yaconelli

In other words, to know the will of God is to make God the highest objective of our life—to know him and to draw closer to him--and not feel we need to discover and make sense out of some masterplan God has devised just for each one of us. To me, St. Paul expressed it best when he described the greatest objective of HIS life as: “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.”(Phil. 3:10-12) Make God HIMSELF the object of your pursuit and he will take care of the rest. You can be confident you will then reach your goal and become all he wants you to become in the process. To quote Yaconelli once again, “We don't need to know the will of God, we only need to know GOD...which IS, strangely enough, HIS WILL”- that seems to say it ALL for me, and may the same be said for YOU! Let us pray...

Gracious God, Our Heavenly Father, because you are so gracious and merciful, we remain confident that your actions are always oriented toward our benefit. Yet, because this world is so troubled, it can be difficult to understand your intentions for us. What seems to us to be good, is sometimes not and what often is not, sometimes is. Help illuminate the darkness around us by understanding that your will is, above all, that we may desire to know you better, and by knowing you better, draw closer to you each and every day. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.