



Sermons from
First Presbyterian Church

“The Hardest Prayer to Pray”

The Rev. Evans L McGowan
June 24, 2012 8am Service
Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Psalm 119:33-40
Matthew 6:7-13

This morning we continue our in-depth look at the Lord’s Prayer, today focusing on “Your Will Be Done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.” Jesus warns us not to heap up empty phrases, yet for many of us the Lord’s Prayer has become just that: a recitation of words said in unison. Let us pray together that we might hear God’s graces anew this morning.

Gracious God, we long to know your will. Yet even more so we long for your touch. Touch our hearts, that we might be molded ever more into your image. And may the words of my mouth, and the mediation of all our hearts, be acceptable and affirming in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer.

It all started when the landing gear got stuck. You know the feeling - confusion leading to uncertainty in one’s mind, as the fear begins to sink into your heart leading to all-out panic.

I was on a redeye flight leaving Oakland, California, on my way to New Orleans. My girlfriend was also flying into New Orleans, but from Michigan. The plan was to meet at the Atlanta airport before continuing onto the Big Easy. There we would be hosted by my uncles – it was Uncle Lee’s birthday and we had never been to New Orleans. As the lights twinkled in the Bay Area hills, I thought of the exciting time we were going to have. And that’s when I noticed the crew peering out the window, trying to see something. The stewardess came on to tell us the landing gear was stuck – thankfully in the down position, so we could still land, but they couldn’t make a cross-country trip with the wheels down. As we began our

long bank and descent back into Oakland, my heart sank with the falling altitude. My best laid plans – you know, those ones made by mice and men – were falling apart before my eyes.

You see, we weren't going to crash, and there were other planes in the morning to take me to New Orleans, but that was just the beginning of my master plan. Unbeknownst to anyone else, I had already checked into another flight that would pick up in Atlanta to take me to Detroit, the first leg of an elaborate scheme to sneak on Emily's return flight to Michigan without her noticing, surprise her at the gate, take her out to dinner and then propose to her in a gazebo of roses and candlelight. I wasn't going to make that connecting flight, and my fragile plan now lay shattered before me. Even with all the kings horses and all the kings men, how would it ever fit back together again?

I began to ask those familiar questions to anyone who has been in a similar situation – What was I thinking? How could I be so foolish? And then my thoughts turned to Emily - Am I making the right decision? What if I'm wrong? And finally, perhaps because I was in my first year of seminary: Why is God allowing this to happen? Is this against God's will?

The best of times quickly became the worst of times. And in bad times, we often wonder: Is this part of God's plan? What is God's Will? Do we want God's will to be done, HERE, on EARTH, as it is in heaven?

One paradox we read in the Bible: God's will is good, even when bad things happen.

When we look at the beginning of the bible, when everything is chaos – *tohu wabohu* in the Hebrew– we read in Genesis that God spoke and created the heavens and the earth, and said that it was good. We see here that God's will and intention is good and for good. Fast-forward to Christ in the garden of

Gesthemene, and we hear him ask God to take this bitter cup away from him, before saying:

“Not **my** will but *your* will be done.”

The hardest thing to pray, especially when things get bad, is to ask NOT for our own wants, wishes, or needs, but to pray that God’s will be done. As the psalmist says,

³⁶ Turn my heart toward your statutes
and not toward selfish gain.

If we believe God’s will is good, then why wouldn’t we want it? I think it’s because it doesn’t have the qualifier we often hear in advertising – “for us.” Listen to these slogans:

“This Bud’s for *you*.” [Budweiser]

“Where do *you* want to go today?” [Microsoft]

“What’s in *your* wallet?” [VISA]

“Have it *your* way.” [Burger King]

God’s will is good, period. Not just for you. Not just for me. But for something greater.

There is an interesting scene in the TV Show LOST that helps to capture this tension. It’s in the Season 5 Finale, when all seems, well, lost. We have two characters facing each other after a long, tortuous relationship. Their names are Benjamin and Jacob, and if you only know the biblical story then you can understand their relationship. Jacob is the patriarch, the one who has guided his people through good times and bad, and who has a favorite son, Joseph, who is Benjamin’s older brother. Benjamin and Joseph share the same mother, Rachel, who dies giving birth to Benjamin. You have to wonder if Benjamin doesn’t feel a little left out, not being the favorite son but in fact the last born, and the one

known to have “killed” his mother, even though it wasn’t his fault. So in this heart-wrenching scene when Benjamin is demanding of Jacob, his father-figure, why he didn’t favor him, why he overlooked Benjamin even though he was obedient to him until the end, Ben cries out to Jacob, “What about *me*?” [pause] Jacob responds to Ben with a question of his own, “What *about* you?”

When times are bad, do we not cry out “What about me?” or “Why is God doing this to me?” We are shocked at Jacob’s harsh retort, his callous response, making us all the more resonate with Benjamin’s pain. And yet there is some truth to Jacob’s point. What *about* you? Do you think all of this is about you? What makes your wants or needs greater than others’? Are you all that matters in this world?

Surely our God is more compassionate than the Jacob we find in LOST or in the Bible. And yet we must understand that God’s good will might not be to our immediate benefit. God may be working some greater purpose that we cannot yet see. Amidst this tension between the visible troubles of the world and our loving yet often invisible God, the psalmist sings:

³³ Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees,
that I may follow it to the end.^[b]

³⁴ Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law
and obey it with all my heart.

The psalmist does not seek out his own will but the will of God, that he might follow and obey God, and not his own wants and desires. This truly is the hardest prayer to pray, as it shapes and molds our hearts into the very heart of God, that we might beat to the drum of love not just for you or for me, but for all God’s children and all of creation. It is a prayer that does not demand answers, but simply asks to know God. Indeed, it is only after we center ourselves on God does Jesus then instruct us to ask for things, such as our daily bread and forgiveness.

We center ourselves in the heart of God that we might surrender to the will of God, trusting God's will is good – not just for us, but for all.

So there I was, back at the airport, on the phone with Delta, pleading for them to understand. My voice may have been a little shrill and my heartbeat a little loud, but between the wings banking us around and the wheels touching the runway, I had centered myself in the heart of God, falling to my knees in surrender and supplication: Thy will be done, God. Thy will be done.

I got on the same plane the very next morning and the same thing happened, except this time I got a nice aerial tour of the bay area. They finally put us on a new plane, and agreed to change my ticket so that my plan would still be intact. We had a wonderful time in New Orleans before I surprised her in Detroit, taking her to dinner and then going for “a walk.” There, in a gazebo surrounded by candlelight and roses that her uncle had secretly set up, we committed ourselves to a whole new adventure...

How might we today learn to trust God's will more fully? Here's one suggestion: Remember and imagine God's will in your life. Remember what God has already done. Imagine what God might do. And remember not to add “for you” or “for me,” as God intends good for all of us and all of creation. The Rev. Peter Gomes speaks of the priority of the Kingdom view: “for only in taking a long view can we avoid the tyranny of the moment and the terror of the immediate.”

There is a hymn I loved to sing at camp. It's Hymn #384, and while it has a different tune the words still ring true:

“O love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee.
I give thee back the life I owe,

That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

George Matheson is the author. He, too, was engaged once, but his fiancé called off the engagement after he became blind. His sister took care of him until she, too, got married. On the eve of her wedding, he wrote this song.

Can you trust in the love that will not let you go? Can you trust in the ocean depths of God's love to bring about a richer, fuller resolution? Does love really underpin the universe? Is God's kingdom really breaking in?

Faith has never been easy, even in the Big Easy. The path is long and the way far from clear. There is real loss in this world. Not all things go according to God's will. Still we are called to center ourselves on this unfathomable love, surrendering ourselves to the one who will see it through... not just for us, not just for me, but for all of us, in all of creation, in all times and places.

And thus we pray: Thy Will Be Done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Amen.

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