

Matthew 6: 7-15

Thy will Be Done: 2nd in a Series – How Do I Pray?

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This month our worship theme is How Do I Pray? I grew up hearing prayers from the time I was little. When I was a little girl my parents would often entertain visiting ministers, or missionaries. When it was time for the grace before the meal, my mother would often ask our guest to offer thanks. These were no ordinary prayers. With practiced turns of phrase and poetry these men and a few women dignitaries would call on the Lord in a way often sucked the air out of the room. As I listened to them rising to heights of impressive eloquence I would marvel at the way that they could pray, and then I would worry about when we would finally get to eat.

It was memories of those dinner that made me nervous about my own ability to pray. As I grew up I came to see that many of those prayers were as much for show as for an act of thanksgiving. The truth is- when you are scared you don't want poetic turns of phrase, you just want to know you can close your eyes and feel God's presence. When you need strength you don't want to impress people, you just want to know you are not alone. Most of us don't ever expect to enter a prayer competition, or a national pray-off. We just need to know how to pray.

The disciples felt the same way. After living with Jesus and watching him closely, they recognized that his prayer-life was a key part of who he was, and what made him special. His daily conversations with God were never recorded anywhere; but they was a key to his strength, and equanimity. Once the disciples realized this they asked Jesus how to pray. He said- pray like this, and then he gave them the words we say each week- the Lord's Prayer. This month all of our sermons will be based on the Lord's Prayer.

This is the one prayer which has been translated into most every language. It is the prayer that unites us as followers of Jesus, because it is so universally used. Everyone from evangelicals to progressives, from Baptists to Roman Catholics says a version of the words. Every wedding in this church we all say the Lord's Prayer after the vows- so that these words are the first prayer the married couple says together. Every graveside service ends with the Lord's Prayer. This prayer has become the wind beneath the sails of generations of Christians.

Last week, we talked about thy kingdom come. Today we will discuss Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. What does this line mean and how does it help us understand how to pray?

In the first place, the prayer says- Life has purpose. God has a vision for the world. You remind yourself that this is God's world, and you are part of something much bigger than yourself. What is God's vision? There are clues everywhere that point to an amazing plan for life. When you look around at creation- you see so much variety. God's vision was for great variety, but each one a gift.

Confirmands – think about your friends each one a little different. It is the difference that make them so special and unique. Different ways of being creative – some into art, others music, others mechanical, some scientific, some great at math but all interesting. God made to many types of personalities, learning styles, and various combinations of abilities.

Each of us is a love song from God. God does not expect that all people will be the same, but god envisions a world where we all have the same opportunities to discover and use our gifts.

In the ancient laws of Israel we see respect for God's creation. When people harvested in the fields they were required to leave the gleanings for the poor. They could not take it all but were meant to provide for those who had no land or means of producing food. Every 7 years was declared a Sabbatical for the land. People who own vineyards are not to pick the fruit but leave it for those who have no thing.

Beggars and the landless poor can gather all the fruit which the trees produce. This is still observed today in Israel.

Leviticus declares that every 50th year – there will be a Jubilee, and anyone who has lost his land and forced to work on someone else's shall have his debt forgiven. Everyone who has been forced into monetary servitude shall be allowed to return home to his family and restored to his own tribe's land.

Jesus says- love God and love your neighbor as yourself. That is part of God's vision. Every time you harvest your crop you are forced to see the poor standing at the edge of the field retrieving what you have left for them. God envisions a world where no family is forced to live in economic servitude for generations. You are free to make your own mistakes, but money lenders have strict rules, and no one can keep the poor under their heel forever.

When we pray Thy will be done, we say- I know that this world does not revolve around me. My life belongs to God.

In the second place, when we say- thy will be done we admit that we don't always understand.

When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane he was trying to understand, so he prayed. He could see that the city of Jerusalem was dangerous for him now. He could see that people were out to get him. He could see that his prophetic critique of Rome had worn Pilot's patience thin. He knew that even the Temple officials were mad at him for turning over the tables of the money changers. He knew what happened to people who took on the Romans and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem during the Passover. He knew what the punishment for insurrection would be. He knew all of this when he entered the garden of Gethsemane. But he did not understand why he would have to pay such a price for following his conscience.

SO he sank onto the ground next to a rock to pray. He asked God to make this cup pass. But then he prayed thy will be done. That was Jesus' way of saying, I don't know how this will end, but I don't like what I see. However I understand that you – O God can see much more than I. you have a vision for the world. I won't run from your vision, or get in the way. I don't like where this is going, but I won't try to fix this mess. I will get out of the way, and that your will might be done.

Before Martin Luther King died he told his people that he did not expect to see justice for his people in his lifetime, but he believed that God had a plan for justice. That plan was clear to him. The more King prayed the more he caught a glimpse of a vision for this country- a vision of a time when Black and white children who had been segregated would attend the same schools, and play together. King had faith that God's vision would be come real in history, and history arcs toward justice.

Thy will be done is a hard prayer to pray. But this prayer takes you out of the driver's seat and puts God squarely behind the wheel. When you do all your research for school, and decide on a college that you want it is hard to pray- Thy will be done, instead of my will be done. When you pray- Thy will be done you say – I have done my best, but I cannot see or know what you know; so ultimately I put my life in your hands. When you apply for a good job, and get an interview- it is hard to pray – thy will be done. You want to say- My will be done. But the prayer thy will be done says – you know much more about the market, the economy, the future of this firm than I do; I have done all my due diligence now I put myself in your hands.

Finally, when we pray Thy will be done, we put our trust in God. This series is entitled "How do I Pray? If you want to learn to pray you have to first learn to trust the one you are talking to. You cannot really pray to God until you learn to trust God. You cannot trust anyone until you get to know them. To pray you need to build your trust in God.

I want to tell you a story about my own prayer journey. Growing up listening to the eloquent prayers of my father and his friends intimidated me. So when I graduated from Harvard Divinity School and went to my first call as an assistant in a large church I was scared that someone might ask me to pray in public. I worked hard to anticipate when someone might need a prayer, and tried to write things out on index cards. All my church prayers were carefully crafted and then the final draft was copied or typed onto index cards. One morning before worship I took my cards, and went to the car. I put Liz in the car seat and drove to the church. When I arrived I discovered to my horror that my prayers were gone. Panicked and lost, I did not know what to do. Finally, I went into the service, late without the cards, and then I started to really pray. I prayed to remember what I had written. I prayed for strength. I prayed I would not humiliate myself. Something strange happened. In that moment when I faced my worst fear, I also began to learn to pray. As I faced one of my worst fears, I realized I was not alone. The relationship which is the heart of prayer- began to deepen that day.

When Jesus went off to pray we don't know what he said, because his specific words don't matter. He just told God about his day, asked for help, sought advice and wisdom. He did all the things you do when you love someone and want to talk to them. You don't pray- thy will be done to a stranger, and mean it. You cannot mean it until you have told God what you want, what you fear, what you think. And then as trust grows between you, you leave some space for God to influence you. You step back into the silence, and allow God to be God. Thy will be done.