

THY WILL BE DONE

Romans 12:2, 9-21

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There is a dangerous, insidious temptation among people in faith communities. It is a particular form of arrogance in which people claim to speak for God, to know exactly what God's opinion is in specific situations.

The most egregious examples are the religious extremists who say that they are killing in the name of God – whether those extremists are members of ISIS, or Christian fundamentalists bombing abortion clinics, or those who claimed that Hurricane Katrina was an act of God punishing America for this nation's sins.

You see, once people believe that they know exactly what God's will is, that belief can justify any behavior.

There are other examples, just as insidious if less deadly. A year from now, we will be in the midst of another presidential campaign. (Aren't you excited? Can't you hardly wait!) If you listen closely, you will hear God's name invoked on behalf of various candidates. I doubt that any candidate will come out and say, directly, "God wants you to vote for me", but listen for subtle messages from the mouths of candidates, their supporters, and imbedded in their advertising. People become convinced that their candidate is the right one, the right choice, the Christian choice. That kind of rhetoric became so popular in the 2004 election cycle that Sojourners magazine produced a bumper sticker that said, "God is not a Republican, or a Democrat." I preached a sermon that year in which I quoted Lincoln. He was asked, during the Civil War, "Do you believe God is on our side?"

And he so wisely replied, “Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God’s side, for God is always right.” (Can I get an AMEN?)

Of course it’s natural to want to know what God wants for us, as individuals, and for the world. It’s not only natural, but right, isn’t it? It’s why we read the Bible – to find out how our lives can align with God’s will.

There are two traps we want to avoid: one is becoming too certain, and one is becoming too specific. Let me give you an example. After you study the Bible, you will conclude that God’s will is for the world to be peaceful and just, and for people to be treated with dignity. You can make that claim and back it up with hundreds of scripture passages. But if you take it one step further and then say, “Therefore, God would vote for this particular bill in the Senate”, or “God would want the United Nations to take this particular action,” you’ve overstepped.

When we open the Bible, we want to have two things by our side: humility and questions. Humility, because God says, through the prophet Isaiah: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Humility, because God told Moses to take off his shoes in the presence of holiness.

Claiming to know the mind of God completely is arrogance; it is hubris. But coming to the Bible with questions? That’s a different thing entirely. When we bring our questions, we are saying, “There’s so much I don’t know; I am full of curiosity and a desire to know God better.” We come with questions and we

receive, not always firm and definite answers, but a direction, a way of life, a path to follow. Knowing the will of God is not clutching in our hand a set of absolute answers; it is knowing which direction God wants our lives to go.

When we pray, “Thy will be done,” we are giving up some of our power. It’s not a small thing to say, not for people who cling fiercely to our independence, who don’t like other people telling us what to do. Do we really know what we’re saying? “God, never mind about what I want. Let’s have things go the way you want them to.” It’s a huge prayer, if we think about it. Do we? Do we ever think about what we’re really praying? What we’re asking?

What kind of changes would we encounter in our lives if God’s will became reality on earth? If the last would become first, well, where does that leave us? Do we really want a more just world if it means us sharing more of our wealth?

In the Episcopal church, the priest introduces the Lord’s Prayer with these words: “Now, as our savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say,” and then the congregation says the Lord’s Prayer. If we’re thinking about what we’re saying it requires boldness. Courage. “God, I’m willing to submit to your will.”

“Thy will, God, be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” We send this prayer up to heaven, but it comes back down to us, with God saying to us, “On earth is where it starts.” It starts in the pew where we sit, in the shop where we work, in the relationships where we struggle to be responsible, in the places where we try to serve. It is God’s heavenly will that is to be done, but it is on earth that it is to be accomplished. Built into the language of the Lord’s Prayer is the connection between God’s work and ours. *

What does God's will look like? How do you know when you're doing it? Our passage for today gives us all the clues we need. If it's genuine love, if it's hope that rejoices, if it's patience in suffering, then you're tapped into the will of God. If you're rejoicing with those who rejoice, and weeping with those who weep – if you're empathizing, if you're caring about others more than yourself, then you're being motivated by the will of God.

On our own, of our own volition, we probably wouldn't choose to associate with the lowly. We'd choose to hang out with celebrities, hoping their shine would rub off on us. We'd choose to spend time with those who could do something for us. So if we're sharing our lives with the hungry and the homeless, with those other people reject, we can feel confident that we're making the choices that God values.

If I were to make a list of my top 25 scripture verses, I believe that Romans 12:2 would make the cut. It's one of those verses which stands out. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." There is a distinction between this world, its ways and its values, and the reign of God and its ways and values. We can muck around here, listening to worldly voices, being swayed by whatever is momentarily popular, or we can navigate our lives according to God's compass. It's not that God doesn't love this world; nothing could be more false. It's that God is calling us to join in the work of transforming this world. What I love about this verse is that it calls us to look critically at our lives and our world, from a different vantage point, from God's

perspective. It's as if we're in one of those glider planes that you can charter to see your community from above. Things look different from that view. And when we've seen things, more the way God sees them, we'll be less tempted by things that are temporary and fleeting. God's perspective is so much broader, too, and more creative, that it helps us imagine new possibilities for our lives, more solutions to this world's problems. "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God..."

As I've mentioned before, I am currently involved in a contentious struggle in my role on the Board of Directors of the Ohio Conference - the United Church of Christ at the state level. We own two camping sites and run an outdoor ministries program. The program has been operating at a deficit for a number of years, and both sites are in need of some repair. Some people, especially those who don't personally have experiences at the camps, don't see a need for such a costly program to continue. Others of us are trying desperately to save the program. My own spiritual life was nurtured by church camp. Both of my children had transformative experiences at Templed Hills and Pilgrim Hills, and many, many members of Avon Lake UCC have had their lives changed and faith strengthened there. Those places and programs have had a significant impact on this congregation.

I was in a conversation last week with one of the other board members who is very concerned about the numbers and the finances. As we talked, he kept going back to his spreadsheets. I was talking about the ministry and its impact,

and he was talking dollars and cents. We were speaking different languages. Finally, I said, "But there's another way to look at this." He said, "Well, I'd like to know what it is." And I began brainstorming. What if we sell one camp and invest the money in the other? What if we let everyone in the state who's been impacted by camp know what's going on? Perhaps some of them would donate money. Dollars are important but they don't need to dictate our decision. Businesses have to make decisions based on finances sometimes, but surely we can look at things from a different perspective; surely we can do better than just saying, "The dollars tell us to give up." I did not want us to be conformed to this world and its perspective. I want us to remember those mountain top moments - well, hill top moments since this is Ohio, when campers stand on holy ground and feel the presence of God, moments they take home with them, friendships they form which are different than all their other friendships because of sacred times they have shared. Do not be conformed, and think that all of life has to be mundane or superficial; seek out those transforming experiences which give our life depth and also cause our spirits to soar. In those moments and places we begin to see what God's will may be for our own lives.

When we pray, "Thy will be done," if we really mean what we say, we are asking God to change us and our world. We are relinquishing control and letting God take the driver's seat. Are we ready for that kind of a ride?

*This paragraph includes quotes from Thomas G. Long's Matthew commentary.