

Your Will Be Done
Matthew 26:36-39
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First Central Congregational Church
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This fall we are exploring the Lord's Prayer, each week considering a different phrase. Today we arrive at "Your will be done." For our Gospel lesson, I have selected another passage in scripture, where Jesus prays for God's will to be done—it is the moment in the Garden of Gethsemane where he is awaiting his arrest. Of this prayer, theologian Timothy Bradshaw writes, "Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane reveals an honest human turning to God for help in desperate danger." Hear, now the prayer of Jesus, from the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew 26:36-39

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

Harold Bloom, America's best-selling literary critic, died this week. The obituary in The Guardian proclaimed that "Bloom magisterially reaffirmed the centrality of the great works of literature in western culture." In doing so, he wrote best-selling books and generated controversy in academic and critical circles.

I pulled Bloom's books off my shelf and perused them again this week. A few of what I have are poetry anthologies he edited, including one of my favorites *The Best Poems of the English Language from Chaucer through Robert Frost*. The book is not just an anthology, Bloom introduces each poet with insightful essays. That book sits on a shelf within easy reach of my desk, as I pull it down often when I am writing a worship service, looking for just the right poem to read, or even seeking a good turn of phrase. It is no exaggeration to say that that one book of Bloom's has been deeply influential in shaping not only my own understanding of poetry, but also our worship as a congregation.

In the introduction to that anthology he wrote, “The work of great poetry is to aid *us* to become free artists of ourselves.” Let’s return to that idea in a moment when we get to talking about the human and divine wills.

Bloom was also a fascinating biblical critic. He was Jewish, but with rather unconventional religious beliefs that were deeply influenced by Gnosticism. In his best-selling *Book of J*, which is on my shelf but I haven’t yet read, he argued that one of the key writers of the Torah must have been a woman. Bloom delighted in the character of Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. In an essay he wrote on the Book of Exodus which I admire, he wrote that “Yahweh is an uncanny personality, and not at all a concept.” He was critical of the monotheistic faiths for the ways in which they tried to tame God. He wrote, “To see the God of Israel is to see as though the world had been turned upside down.” He suggests a stance toward God that is “appreciative, wryly apprehensive, intensely interested, and above all attentive and alert.” Also “perhaps a touch wary” and “prepared to be surprised.”

On Facebook this week, I posted a few of my favorite quotes from his book *How to Read and Why*.

"Why read? Because you will be haunted by great visions."

"Reread what is most worthy of rereading, and you will remember what strengthens your spirit."

"We read to find ourselves, more fully and more strange than otherwise we could hope to find."

That’s one reason he enjoyed reading the Bible—because it is uncanny and strange and compels us to find ourselves such.

Of course, he was a great proponent of reading Shakespeare, arguing that Shakespeare invented our modern sense of the human self. The most important text for that is *Hamlet*. About the character Hamlet, Bloom wrote, “Hamlet primarily is brooding upon the will . . . Does one have a will to act, or does one only sicken unto action, and what are the limits of the will?”

Hamlet is such a compelling story precisely because the Danish prince can’t decide what to do. He is struggling over what is the correct course of action and what his duties are. And in that way he is not dissimilar to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane also struggling in a desperate situation about what he should do. Timothy Bradshaw writes, “His Gethsemane prayer was the point of agonizing conflict between human well-being, freedom from pain and evil, and trust in the divine will.”

We modern humans are shaped by an understanding of the self in which we create ourselves through acts of our own wills. By the choices and decisions we make and the actions we take. We are autonomous and self-created. Which means that we often struggle with exactly what we are supposed to do and be. We wrestle with our choices in decisions both small and great. Should I take the job? Should I buy those boots? Am I really in love with this person?

Sometimes the mere act of choosing makes us anxious and afraid. Sometimes we wish the choices were made for us. Sometimes we feel like a character in a Jean-Paul Sartre novel, burdened by our very freedom.

And, so, what does it mean for us to pray to God, “Your will be done.” How does God’s will and our wills interact?

Growing up a Southern Baptist in the late eighties and early nineties, “What is God’s will for your life?” was a common question. It seemed that we needed to really work at figuring out what God’s will is and in particular what God wanted for each of us.

And so a popular devotional study of the time was *Experiencing God* by the Canadian Baptist Henry Blackaby. The subtitle to that was “How to live the full adventure of knowing and doing the will of God.” Blackaby and his partner Claude V. King turned the study guide into a published book. My high school Sunday school teacher gave me a copy as a gift when I graduated college (Ironically at a point when I had become rather more liberal). This week when I pulled that book off the shelf to re-examine it, I found this written by her in the front:

Congratulations on your recent graduation. God is working in your life, remember, [And then she quoted the book of Jeremiah] “‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not calamity to give you a future and a hope.’”

The note suggests that God has a plan for my life, and it is my job to discern what that is and then obey it.

Henry Blackaby was more sophisticated than that in his take. For instance, he wrote, “‘What is God’s will for my life?’ is not the best question to ask. I think the right question is simply, ‘What is God’s will?’ Once I know God’s will, then I can adjust my life to Him and His purposes. . . . Once I know what God is doing, then I know what I need to do.”

Also for Blackaby, God’s plan for our lives is about a personal, spiritual relationship. He wrote, “[God] wants you to experience an intimate love relationship with Him that is real and personal.” He elaborated on this:

Knowing God does not come through a program, a study, or a method. Knowing God comes through a relationship with a Person. This is an intimate love relationship with God. Through this relationship, God reveals Himself, His purposes, and His ways; God accomplished through you something only He can do. Then you come to *know God* in a more intimate way by *experiencing God* at work through you.

I like the emphases on relationship, experience, and joining up with the work God is already about. But even as a young man I grew uncomfortable with the idea that God has some firmly determined plan that I either fit in or not through my obedience. That troubled me for a host of reasons. One reason was that I observed some people who took these ideas to the extreme, praying for God’s will about what clothes to buy or what to eat for dinner. And seeing God’s plan at work every time they got a good parking space. There is a fatalism to such views that eliminate our human freedom and autonomy and makes the life of faith mechanical rather

than creative. Theologian Timothy Bradshaw writes that for people who feel the need to discern God's will "from moment to moment can lead to a dehumanizing of the creaturely person." He even says that doing so risks a kind of insanity.

In college I began to feel that surely we don't have to discern God's will in each and every moment for every little thing, but instead our lives are shaped by our faith in such a way that God trusts us to make the right decisions on our own. Bradshaw articulates this as well, "We know the will of God sufficiently to conduct our lives with confidence—we tend to know when we are against the grain of divine intention."

We shouldn't have to spend a lot of time trying to know the will of God, because God has already made that abundantly clear in scripture and the life of Jesus. The passage from Isaiah read earlier today is one example. Or think of Micah 6: "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." We can absorb the teachings of Jesus and the scripture and let these guide us in the broad direction of our life.

In an undergraduate philosophy course on Evil and Suffering, we read an essay by Lewis Ford on God's persuasive power. Ford was a Process Theologian, meaning his views were shaped by the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead that placed process not substance as the primary element in reality. You may know that I wrote my dissertation on Whitehead. Reading Ford's essay was one of the lures that drew me into process philosophy. Ford died earlier this year, and for his funeral they requested comments from those who had been influenced by his work. In the short response I submitted, I included this statement, "I am grateful to his scholarship which freed me."

Ford argued that God's power is never coercive. God does not control or compel. God only persuades. He wrote,

Divine persuasive power maximizes creaturely freedom, respecting the integrity of each creature in the very act of guiding that creature's development toward greater freedom. The image of God as the craftsman, the cosmic watchmaker, must be abandoned. God is the husbandman in the vineyard of the world, fostering and nurturing its continuous evolutionary growth throughout all ages; he is the companion and friend who inspires us to achieve the very best that is within us. God creates by persuading the world to create itself.

I once heard John Cobb, another Process theologian, put it succinctly, "God is not a jerk."

As my professor, Dr. Bob Clarke, explained it, yes God has a will for your life, which God presents as a lure that entices you to follow. But, you are free to contribute to your life plan with your choices, then God's persuasive lure and your choices work together. So, it isn't about obedience to one particular plan that you either follow or you are completely in the wrong.

As a young college student, figuring out my own beliefs, I found these ideas completely liberating. And they've remained core aspects of my theology ever since.

So, let's return to the Lord's Prayer and what we mean when we pray "Your will be done." Timothy Bradshaw, whose book *Praying as Believing*, is my guide for this entire sermon

series, is not a Process theologian, but on this particular point he is deeply influenced by that way of thinking. He argues that God's work is a "joint enterprise" with us: "God implements [God's] will only through the will and activity of [God's] faithful people."

He continues:

In praying 'Your will be done,' we share the very vision of God's creative and re-creative purpose: the heavenly [Parent] has entrusted creation . . . to us: we acknowledge that and responsively offer ourselves for [the] kingdom.

Bradshaw supports the idea that "the self is created by act[s] of will" and that we human beings are "creative centre[s] of activity and decision." It is just that our "human will is most fulfilled when we [identify] with the divine." We are, therefore, also praying for an "inner transformation of the heart."

That doesn't mean blind obedience to some fatalistic plan, but an act of solidarity and trust built upon a personal, loving relationship. To pray "Your will be done," is to freely commit ourselves to the goals of the creation—communion, peace, joy—and to therefore shape our own wills by those goals.

Bradshaw writes, "When we pray for the will of God to be done, this takes our life forward into the future of God, something we cannot chart safely but must launch out into with the venture of faith." John Cobb names this the "call forward." We have been lured and persuaded and now we too desire the same ends as God, and therefore we move forward into a new future filled with possibilities, trusting the goodness of God to do its work on us and on the world.

And so we conform our will to God's will as an active of creative freedom, of adventure, of hope. What of those times when we are deciding what to do? There is no one path forward that is your destiny that you must discern. There are endless possibilities that are open to you and remain within the persuasive lure of God. What we choose and who we become is a joint project, fully of playfulness and novelty.

I began with Harold Bloom who wrote that "The work of great poetry is to aid us to become free artists of ourselves." That is also the work of prayer. Particularly this prayer. The Lord's Prayer, and its petition "Your will be done."

Let us, then, pray as Jesus taught us to pray.