

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson at First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, March 20, 2011, dedicated to Franklin Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Ky., and the Rev. Katie Ann Strednak, for their shared commitment to seek the will of God instead of listening to the voice of fear; and for their tenacity in participating in building up the body of Christ as they learn, teach and bless Franklin and beyond.

“Thy will be Done on Earth as it is in Heaven”

Matthew 6:10b

**(Part III of VIII in the sermon series
“The Lord’s Prayer”)**

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Let us pray. God with us always, we call for you and discover you are already here patiently waiting. We come seeking your guidance for this hour and this day; awaiting your vision for our lives and for humanity. May your will be accomplished this day, even through us, even through me; and may the words of my mouth and the mediation of all our hearts be acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

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Here we are – week three and we’re off to a rolling good start on The Lord’s Prayer. If you’ve been away, your best bet is to stop by the church office or go on-line and pick up all of Reverend Tim’s sermons. In the meantime, since we are now midway, I’ll share some highly abbreviated notes:

The Lord’s Prayer – has other names including: the Jesus prayer and the Our Father prayer. Emmet Fox called it the Great Prayer, telling his audiences it is a “compact formula for the development of the soul.”ⁱ In this 2,000-year-old model, Jesus teaches us how to pray together as one body. Up on the Mount,

just before teaching it he cautions us not to pray for show, as if we were on stage over at Capital Theatre. I raise this up to us in part because we have added a couple of elements to our worship for Lent – the Lord’s Prayer in different versions, varied musical interpretations, and during worship, it is signed as the whole or in parts through an interpreter. Our hope is to facilitate a depth of soul, not depth of show.

The opening of the prayer is unmistakable: **“Our Father, who art in heaven.”** Not just my father or yours alone, but remarkably and radically, the father of Jesus is proclaimed in this prayer as our father, too. Some of those sitting cross-legged on the hillside would have heard it as blasphemy – way too personal, offensive and even dangerous. Others might have thought they heard him wrong; maybe his words were distorted in the wind. I’m not alone when I wonder if it was a mix of what happened. Perhaps some were startled, while others had to let it sink in the way Lincoln’s address at Gettysburg had to settle in years after it was delivered before it gained its reputation?ⁱⁱ Either way it has far surpassed the test of time. It has shaped worship of God around the world. In essence we are praying, “Come listen to us, Daddy.”

And yet, we know the gap between us and God is not always bridged by this parental image. It can also be a place of stumbling if your parents were not able to express love in healthy ways. Even so, it is offered as a way to know “God on high” or is also “God near by,” with us, approachable, ready and desiring for us to communicate. Immediately at Jesus’ invitation, we are all in this prayer together.

“. . . Hallowed be Thy name” – We don’t use the word hallowed very often, do we? My grandmother in her earlier days might well have gone after, or at least threatened, to go after the likes of Bart Simpson with a bar of soap. She would not have approved of using God’s name in unholy, unhallowed ways. What young Bart has missed is that it’s not just a name of our creator that is lost in his recklessness; it is also his own unique place in the greater scheme of life. God is God and thankfully, we are not. Furthermore, once we proclaim God is holy, is hallowed, we assume a different posture in our life, even physically. We kneel, we stand in line, we reach up, we watch, we wait; we look out across the vista

and know we are but tiny bits of particle in the vast universe. And yet, God calls us to talk, listen and be loved. God calls us to work together in redeeming the world. On the days we have any sense we are humbled and amazed. Which brings us to the core of the prayer for this morning:

“. . . Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Last week in our Sunday morning class, we talked about where we might catch glimpses of the kingdom of heaven, or the reign of God on earth – we referred to them as “spot kingdoms.” Examples included Faith Mission and Good Samaritan [and the Italian Children’s Home] and *everywhere people are fed and are cared for in personal ways*. The kingdom is also *where uprisings are replaced by peace and where fear is replaced by safety*. It is the *Great Reversal*. It does not look like earthly politics where power is over another person or domination over the weak. Only God is in first place. Furthermore, God’s kingdom or reign is not only for some later time, it is both now and coming. It is worth our seeking.

I used to live straight across the river from Cape Canaveral and the Kennedy Space Center. I would stand in our front yard and watch liftoff of rockets and shuttles. (When they launch at night it is amazing – the whole sky turns red for an instant!) Because of this, one particular “spot kingdom” mentioned in class really caught my attention. It reminded me that the kingdom or reign of God does not only happen in a three-tiered universe and come down to us, the way we sing of highest heaven in some of our beloved hymns. It can begin on earth and sent skyward. God’s reign may be seen when nations unite, plan and participate in the science and technology of satellites, telescopes, and most particularly this month, the International Space Station. God is not limited by time or space.

In spite of many signs, there may be moments in life when we have trouble seeing or experiencing the reign of God. For such moments, theologian Jurgen Moltmann challenges us to notice: “The church [is] the source of continual new impulses toward the realization of righteousness, freedom here, and in the light of the

promised future that is to come.”ⁱⁱⁱ It may be when we do not see or do not yet know of the kingdom that we, the church, have slowed down or stopped generating new impulses toward the reign of God now and coming. Or, it may be we quit looking for it. At other times it may be we choose not to participate. And sometimes it may be hidden for while behind circumstance or even fear.

“. . . Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth . . .”

We pray for God’s will to be done, but to some, that can sound terrifying, especially if you think the will of God includes atrocities. So often we hear the phrase, “It was the will of God,” as a way to describe all kinds of things that don’t fit together with the character of our loving God.

For instance, when someone becomes terribly ill, or a terrorist strikes, or one car crashes into another; or an earthquake tosses the planet several degrees off its axis and then a tsunami washes up with jet speed. Are these really the will of God? It is not uncommon for people to give God all the credit for such horrible things, as if it somehow reduces the pain or explains the events. John Spong reminds us, “We blame God for so much!”^{iv} Placing the blame on God may grant us an open window to help us catch our breath in the moment (and that can be really helpful) but then thankfully down the road God can help us to consider other options. When things happen that do not match the character of God, we may want to move beyond attributing everything to God.

I learned this in part through one of my saints. He was a middle-aged man by the name of Bill. He lived in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I selfishly saved him for the last visit of every hospital visitation day. I was blessed as our friendship grew. Both he and his wife were upbeat and gentle of spirit – Bill in particular had a deep and abiding sense of joy. At the same time, he knew illness was terminal. He had known that long before we met. He was direct and honest with feelings as they came and went, but there was one he struggled with for a long time - it was connected to the death of his daughter. She had suffered a violent death, murdered the year before, and early on he angrily wanted to know, “How does that fit into the will of God?” As his pastor, all I could do at first was be with him in the outrage, sadness and despair. Later, with some help

from Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, we learned a little more together about a broader understanding of the will of God – that there is a difference between God’s ultimate will and the immense variety of things that get in the way of it.

We were reminded that Jesus went so far as to tell us that some things are unmistakably not God’s will.^v Through the gospel of Matthew we hear him tell us, “*So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost*” (Mt 18:14) and in Second Peter we are assured that God “*is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.*” (2 Peter 3:9) It requires us to take on the curiosity and courage of Nicodemus and the obedience of Abram to notice God’s will and the life of Jesus to know more. In him, we see a continuum of God’s will.

It was God’s hope and desire, God’s intention, that everyone would make the best choice and follow Jesus. This hope continues today for all of us as well. It is God’s desire for us to choose God and follow the way of the Christ. At the same time we participate in the gift of free will, sometimes referred to as the permissive will of God. God did not desire the people to turn against Jesus; however we are given our own freedom. We are not just chess pieces moving around on a giant chess board at the hand of God, and yet the choice of the people does not get the final word in the death of Jesus.

In spite of their sin, God still pursued the ultimate hope and will. Even though the crowd and the leaders chose this horrible option for the Christ, death would not win. It was overturned. Not only that - in the process of facing such horrific experiences of betrayal and torture a new level of forgiveness and loving ones enemy was made visible. Jesus raised the bar on forgiveness. Jesus raised the bar on loving one’s enemy. Jesus loved and loves, more completely than any other.

God’s will, God’s hope, is the redemption of all humanity. “*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*” (Romans 8:28) We can trust in the divine character and hope of God.

God wants the best for us; wills the best for us. God calls us to life. In fact, *God calls us to abundant life!* But God's will does not always happen fast – it takes all of history. It is not completed instantly – God embraces and corrects us one step at a time. And our own free will gets in the way as we resist over and over again.

We will make mistakes; some of them will be huge. And when we fall, you and I can trust that “Thy will be done” means God will provide; God will show us the way and help us through it. God knows us far better than we know ourselves and loves us . . . and when need be, God loves us still, in spite of our choices.

The good news of this day is that God can, and will, redeem and transform us in the process. Even though horrible things beyond our own control also may occur, they are not the end. Every single day we are invited and encouraged in the name of God to participate in the saving actions that can happen when there is need of healing, justice, freedom, restoration and transformation of the people of God and all of creation.

Above everything else, this petition in the Lord's Prayer is one of great hope, because we can trust that God's kingdom *will* come, it is already on the way; it is already in you.

To God be all glory now and forever, amen.

ⁱ Emmet Fox, *The Sermon on the Mount* (New York; Harper and Brothers, 1934), p.161.

ⁱⁱ William J. Carl III, *The Lord's Prayer for Today* (Louisville; Westminster John Know Press, 2006) p.5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Grounds and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p.22.

^{iv} John Shelby Spong, *Honest Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 61.

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