

First Congregational United Church of Christ  
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany- January 29, 2023

Scripture lessons: Genesis 45:4-8 & Luke 22:39-46

THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS, OUR CHRIST- “Thy Will Be Done on Earth as it is in Heaven”

The stories of Joseph and his brothers are among the best-known in the Bible. Today’s first Scripture from the book of Genesis tells of one of the most climactic moments in their whole saga. To understand what’s going on in it and to see how it helps us with the third petition of the Lord’s Prayer, we need to go back to their beginnings.

First, we recall that Joseph starts out as a spoiled brat. His father, Jacob, has eleven other sons, but doesn’t hide from them the fact that Joseph is his favorite. And what a surprise- the brothers don’t like that. They like it even less when Joseph starts telling them his dreams.

Imagine your heavily favored and pampered younger brother or sister saying to you and the rest of your siblings, “Hey, everybody, listen up. I had a dream last night. We were all out in the fields binding sheaves of wheat. My sheaf stood upright and all of yours gathered around to bow down to it. Isn’t that great?!

“Yeah, and then I had another one. In it, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars all bowed down to me. How great is that?!

Not even his fawning father, Jacob, could stand that one. He said to Joseph, “Son, do you mean to tell me that you really think that someday I, your mother, and all eleven of your brothers will bow down to you?”

For their part, the brothers decide that it’s time to pursue *their* dream for Joseph. They plot to kill him, but eventually *only* sell him into slavery in Egypt. To cover up what they’ve done, they smear Joseph’s coat with goat’s blood. They take it to their father, and insinuate that daddy’s boy must have been killed by a wild beast. Jacob is crushed by this, but the brothers have finally gotten rid of their nemesis- or so they think.

But it turns out instead that through various twists and turns, Joseph is freed from slavery. His Egyptian overlords recognize special talents in him, talents so valuable that in time the Pharaoh actually gives Joseph chief administrative authority over all of Egypt.

Then a severe famine hits. But Joseph has predicted it through his unique gifts of dream interpretation, and his foresight has enabled him to gather surplus that will hold Egypt in good stead throughout the lean years. The drought has hit Canaan, too, so that Joseph’s brothers go to Egypt to try and get food from the only place that they know might have it. Jacob has heard that the Egyptians somehow have managed to set aside plentiful reserves, so he sends his sons on a do-or-die mission. Get food from Egypt or we’ll starve.

Ironically, the brothers *do* end up bowing down to Joseph. They bow down in order to plead their need. Joseph recognizes them, but they don’t recognize him. When he finally reveals himself, the brothers tremble over what they had done to him all of those years ago.

BUT. . . Joseph reassures them. His words from way back then help us now to better understand and pray the third petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father . . . Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. How is that? What’s the connection?

Well, Genesis 45 reads, "Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life

. . . God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God.'"

In other words, Joseph insists that despite the evil that was done by the brothers, God's will has still been accomplished. God's will as revealed to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is that through them and their descendants God will establish and sustain a people that will bless the whole world.

So, Joseph says to his brothers, "Look, even though we've all messed up big-time and in different ways, God's will still has been done. I freely admit that when we were younger, I was a big-mouthed brat. I admit too that our father, Jacob, was so wrong to have favored me so much. For your part, your resentment grew so great that you tried to kill me and finally sold me into slavery. All that is undeniably and terribly true, but thanks to God, it's not the whole story.

"Beyond us and all of our flaws, even through us and our wrongdoing, God has still been at work to carry out the promise that God made to our ancestors. As crazy as it seems, I am now in Egypt and I do have all of this power and authority, so I will make sure that you get the food you need. Our father, Jacob, and the rest of our people will indeed survive. God will bless the whole world through us, for God's will- it will be done."

This conviction of Joseph's is at the heart of Biblical faith. Again and again, the Scriptures say that in spite of our frequent blindness, indifference and downright resistance to it, God's gracious will ultimately does and will prevail. The Bible offers this repeated assurance of the triumph of God's providential love. The big question for us always is- do we count on it?

Consider the alternatives. There are two main ones, as far as I can see. If we reject faith in divine providence, it seems that we can see our lives primarily in terms of either chance or choice. My life is either basically a big crapshoot that's largely determined by luck OR it's the result mainly of what I alone decide and do with it. But either of these can easily lead me into an aching sense of helplessness or hopelessness or both.

For how can I decisively shape my life if in fact it's largely a matter of luck, a result mostly of whatever random hand I happen to be dealt? Or I can have any stable and well-founded sense of hope if what my life turns out to be is mostly up to me and you? If the outcome of my future and of yours depends primarily on what you and I do, then it seems that a clear recognition of how many things are utterly beyond our knowing and out of our control, plus a healthy dose of honest introspection about our own personal flaws and weaknesses, plus a stiff refresher course in the long history of human indifference, malice, and wickedness will soon enough leave all of us hanging our heads in despair- the despair of helplessness, of hopelessness, or of both.

But Joseph and the Scriptures say, "*Do not* despair. What we in our limitations cannot know or control and what we in our weakness and sin intend and do for wrong and even for evil, God ultimately can and will make work for good." In spite of our repeated indifference, resistance, and outright opposition to it, God's will for us and for the whole creation at last will be done.

Now how God will do this, how God can continue to honor our freedom, allow even its severe misuse, and still achieve God's purposes in the end, we simply do not know. How God is able, as Martin Luther so colorfully put it, "To carve the rotten wood, ride the lame horse, and shoot

straight with the crooked bow” is something that Joseph, the Bible, and we can never even pretend to say. But that the will of God finally will triumph is the assurance that’s given to us from the heart of the Biblical message.

This is what we need to remember whenever we pray with Jesus, “Our Father . . . Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” For the good news of God’s gracious providence, rightly understood and received, awakens and strengthens our desire to have *our* wills fully transformed. With trust in and thanks for God’s providential love, our yearning to have our wills finally united with God’s is renewed and invigorated. This is the gospel foundation that enables us to say yes and yes again to the truth that what God wills is in fact what we want whenever we’re at our best. It is what we want the most when we are most truly ourselves.

As Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph had seen, God willed to establish and sustain through them and their descendants a people that would bless the whole world. We rejoice with them in that gift, but we always need to go farther. We need to ask as well, “Blessed with what?”

The New Testament, in I Timothy 2, verse 4 says it like this- “God desires everyone to be *saved* and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” *Salvation* is the Bible’s big word for the blessing that God desires for everyone and everything. In the Scriptures, salvation means rescue, safety, release, and reconciliation. It means healing, wholeness, harmony, and peace. All of THAT is what God wills to be “on earth as it is in heaven”.

And what is heaven? Heaven is wherever God’s will for healing, wholeness, harmony, and peace is, as theologian Al Winn has put it, “embraced and realized promptly, and without delay, perfectly and without exception, willingly and without resistance”. We might occasionally have heavenly moments like that now, but more often we still live as those who are “on earth”. Mostly, we still live as those who frequently ignore and resist God’s will or who embrace and realize it only partially, sporadically, and with half a heart.

Nevertheless, in the fellowship of the church, we keep praying with Jesus for *more*. With him we keep praying for God’s kingdom to come completely, for all of earth to become heaven, for God’s peace to reign *everywhere, in everyone, and in everything*.

As we pray this prayer, we always apply it first and foremost to ourselves. We rightly pray it in the spirit of one of my dear, departed mother’s all-time favorite hymns- “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” Let *me* embrace and realize God’s will with my whole heart and life. Let *me* not resist in any way God’s saving will for everyone and everything.

Let me bring this closer to my bone and you do the same for yours. I’m a man, a husband, a father, a son, a brother, and an uncle. I’m a friend, a minister, and a member of the United Church of Christ. I’m an American citizen. I’m a consumer and a big sports fan.

In other words, my life, like yours, is made up of many relationships that involve multiple roles, responsibilities, and interests. What is God’s saving will for all of them, for each of these many dimensions of my real life- and yours?

Reconciliation, healing, wholeness, harmony, and peace is God’s desire for everyone and everything. How can I best serve those divine purposes in the way that I relate to myself and my family, to my church, to my friends and enemies, to the local, national, and international communities of which I’m a part, to the natural environment in which I live, to the work that I do and the money I receive, to the leisure I enjoy and the entertainment that I seek?

Those questions always come straight to the fore when we pray with Jesus- “Our Father . . . Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” God’s will is relevant to the whole of our lives, not

just to parts of them, and especially not just to the so-called “religious” or “spiritual” parts. In fact, it’s when we try to preserve any aspect of our lives only for ourselves and for our wills that injury, fragmentation, disharmony, and conflict arise both within and among us.

But when we pray with Jesus “Our Father . . . Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”, it means that we’re beginning to see that the full union of our wills with God’s truly is the only way to peace. It means that we’re beginning to realize that faithfulness to God’s will truly is the only way to the harmony, fulfillment, and satisfaction that we want the most and that God yearns to give.

In closing, let’s remember where the nitty-gritty of Jesus’ prayer for God’s will really pops out. Today’s second Scripture reading from St. Luke reminded us that in Gethsemane Jesus sweat drops of blood when he prayed for God’s will to be done. Getting up from that prayer, he then went and shed his blood, nailed to a wooden cross.

In light of that fact, what might earnestly praying for God’s will to be done demand of us? What drops of blood may we need to sweat and to shed in order to serve the Kingdom of a God who wants everyone who’s hungry to be fed, who’s naked to be clothed, who’s sick or imprisoned to be visited, who’s a stranger to be welcomed and in which all who enter- the first, the last, and everyone in between- are meant to come together as one family, joyfully united to faithfully reflect the beauty of the love that God is?

It’s a plain fact and a hard one that uniting our wills with God’s can often be costly for us. But that’s what we are called to do as followers of Jesus, and that’s what we truly want to do, whenever we pray with him “Our Father . . . Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Amen.