**June 17, 2018**

**Luke 11:2-4**

*Thy Will Be Done*

John Calvin wrote that we think of God in such a way that God fits our own interests and desires. If we like ice cream, then we think God likes ice cream. If we love dogs, then we think that God also loves dogs, so all dogs go to heaven when they die. If we had a good relationship with our father, we may think of God as the benevolent Almighty Father with a great big bushy beard, leaning down from the clouds. We inevitably turn the *imago dei* around so that (in our minds) God begins to be formed by our image, as opposed to our being formed in God’s image. We use our knowledge and language and relationships and experiences to define ourselves and the world around us (God being part of that world). The Holy Spirit and scripture are the two things outside of ourselves which temper our understanding of God. Both the Holy Spirit and scripture are beyond our understanding and control. They will always be shrouded in mystery. So we turn to them to keep ourselves in check, knowing that God is bigger than we are. God is holier than we are. And to have any chance of knowing God better, we must delve into the mystery.

That being said, the clearer our understanding of who God is, the better our prayers. For prayer is about aligning our will with God’s will. Tim Keller wrote that “prayer is profoundly altered by the amount and accuracy of the knowledge of God… If God is *not* the starting point, then our own emotional needs become the drivers and sole focus of our prayer.”

Albert Mohler, a prominent Southern Baptist, agreed with Keller on this note. “Prayer is not an act of therapy… Prayer is *not* first and foremost about us, but about the glory of God… We are not simply trying to find the right formula or a secret code to force God to answer our prayer as we want it to be answered… Prayer does not inform God of what he does not know, nor does it get him to do what he is reluctant to do. Prayer does not change God; it changes us.”

Our prayer then should not be dependent on our own wish list or needs, but on God’s wish list and needs. What is God’s prayer for today? When would God have us pray? How would God have us pray?

Secondly, if our knowledge of God directly impacts our prayer, the value of Christian Education increases significantly. It becomes more important to spend time reading the Bible each day. It becomes critical to engage in spiritual and theological dialogue with other believers, young and old, wise and inexperienced. Every conversation we have, every verse we read, every question we ask leads us closer to the mystery and deeper into our relationship with God. Just as a good marriage is enriched by date nights and pillow talk and spending time with one another, so is our relationship with God. How could we know God, worship God, or serve God if we do not spend time with God? How could we know God’s will without first knowing God?

This phrase may be the most difficult line in all of scripture. “Thy will be done – on earth as in heaven.” When we say these words, we are praying for God’s kingdom… not ours. Not America, not Europe, not white-male-privilege power. When we say these words, we are praying for God’s will… not ours. We are relinquishing control over our own lives. We are admitting that we may not know the best or right things for ourselves or this world. We are even admitting that whatever comes after this prayer may be wrong.

To pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done” is to “become a beggar,” according to Pope Francis. We humble our own endeavors and structures. We place ourselves solely in God’s hands, dependent upon whatever God wills and gives. Praying “thy kingdom come” turns us away from any loyalty we had to ourselves or our family or our alma mater or whatever is our native/natural/comfortable way of thinking and being, and instead turns us to God’s way of thinking, being, and doing.

I believe that praying “thy will be done” moves us so far away from our own desires and understanding that this prayer actually takes us outside of time and space, into another dimension. When we pray “thy will be done,” we first profess belief that God has been in the world, active and already doing God’s will in the past. We are claiming that God’s will has been done. Even when we may not see it, even when we may not understand it, even when it seems like something evil may have won the day, we believe that ultimately God’s will has been done on earth as in heaven. I don’t mean that God caused the cancers that killed over 600,000 people last year. Or that it was God’s will for someone to lose their job which ultimately spiraled the family into poverty and eventually divorce. Evil has been active in the world, too. Other powers and principalities were fast at work interfering with God’s love and life and grace. But by praying “God’s will be done,” we profess that God’s will was done *despite* the evil and other powers in the world.

Through Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, God’s will was complete on earth. This is why we confess our sins in worship, and also give thanks for the forgiveness already granted. God’s will was done on earth. God’s life and love and grace are already known, and yet, we continue to need more of God’s grace. We continue to be dependent on God’s will being made known.

So when we pray “thy will be done” we also call God’s will into our present day. We lift up particular people and situations which still need God’s care and attention. We pray for God’s will to be done with world leaders in nuclear summits. We pray for God’s will to be done at Sweet Hollow, to guide us as we carefully steward the resources given us. We pray for God’s will to be done within our families, for God’s will to be accomplished in the promise of new life and new babies, and for God’s will in every minutia of our personal and communal and global lives.

We need God here and now. We need God today. So we pray “thy will be done” for whatever is happening at this very moment.

But the moment we engage our present prayers, we also look into the future of what will be. We pray for healing in hopes that someone will be well. We pray for peace in hopes that war will come to an end. When we pray “thy will be done” we seek God’s will in whatever will come to be. We admit the frailty of our own nature, and celebrate the eternal Wisdom that is God. We place our trust in God’s will which is continually moving the world closer to redemption and a restoration of its original goodness.

Of course, the difficulties arise when God’s vision and will are different from our own. When we pray “thy will be done,” we subjugate our own desires below the Lord’s. We concede that God may have another plan. So as we work for a vibrant and creative future at Sweet Hollow, and we pray “God’s will be done,” we also accept that God’s will might be done outside of the ways we want or dream. When we wish for healing and pray “thy will be done,” we accept that God’s healing may come outside of our own lifetime and understanding.

As I have prepared for this sermon series, this phrase “thy will be done” has convicted me. I began to reflect on my personal prayer life, and the ways that I pray with others. I confess that my prayer life has often been selfish and narrowly focused. I have prayed in ways that prioritized my own needs over God’s. I have prayed in ways that sought to soothe my own ego or emotions, as opposed to seeking God’s. I have prayed for particular outcomes, and struggled mightily when those things were delayed or did not come to pass. Albert Mohler’s words which I read a few moments ago were what finally caught my attention. “Prayer does not inform God of what he does not know, nor does it get him to do what he is reluctant to do. Prayer does not change God; it changes us.” I’ve been convicted of trying to inform and wheel-and-deal and change God. So I’m trying a new approach with prayer. I am not arguing the fine points with God. In recent days, I find myself holding each pray like I would hold a baby bird. I gently take each prayer into my heart. I marvel over its details, but I cannot hold too tightly. I simply lift it up before God’s presence. Essentially I am naming God, then naming the person or situation for whom I’d like to pray, then resting in silence. Although this may not be the best or *right* way to pray, it is right for me for now.

But everyone does it differently…

So what does it mean when you tell someone that you will pray for them? It means that you will not pray for what they want, but you will seek God’s will, which is ultimately in their best interest. You will not squish their prayer into your own understanding of time or life, but lift it into the glory that is God’s life and love and grace.

In the moments of reflection to come, let me invite you to consider the specific prayers you bring today. Be honest in admitting the intentions you have for these people and places. Can you turn them over to God – completely? Without designing the process or the outcome? Can you trust God enough to pray “thy will be done?”

May our eyes and ears and hearts be open to God’s will today and every day. Amen.