

2018 06 24 – Your Will be Done on Earth

Psalm 9

“Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”

As you know I am doing a sermon series this summer based on The Lord's Prayer. When you do a sermon series one of the decisions you have to make is whether or not you will try to use the bible passages that have been specified in the lectionary for each week. When I checked the scripture readings for this Sunday I wasn't sure what to do. None of them even mentioned “the will of God.” But then I dove a little further and realized that the writer of the ninth psalm had quite a bit to say about God and what God wanted for the world.

The scripture passage that we just read, begins with the psalmist thanking God with his whole heart for God's wonderful deeds and then he lists them saying:

‘For my enemies are driven back, they stumble and perish before you.’

“You have rebuked the nations, you have destroyed the wicked;
you have blotted out their name for ever”

“Enemies have perished; you have made their cities a desolation;
the very memory of them has vanished.”

From these lines, we could certainly get the idea that God chooses sides in a fight and then uses military might to destroy complete nations. The psalmist may have believed this, but does it make sense to you? Do you believe in a God who gets involved in humanity's squabbles? Certainly many wars, especially Christian wars, have been fought in the name of God, But is violence and war God's will for us and for all of creation?

It's amazing what some people believe or at least want us to believe about God's will. How often, at a funeral, have we heard the phrase, "it was the will of God," as if God decided that this person should be killed in an accident or get sick, suffer and die. I do not believe that adults or children die because God "needs another angel in heaven." God suffers when we suffer and God cries when we cry. One of the most dangerous things we can do is attribute suffering and death to God's will.

How many of you remember the stock market crash of 2008? That's a painful memory, isn't it? Early the next year, it was revealed that even after the crash, executives in financial firms still received bonuses in the millions of dollars. They were running institutions that had to be bailed out by the government, organizations that ignored all the warning signals and allowed millions of people to lose their savings and even their homes and yet they took no responsibility and, instead, were rewarded for their failure. Lloyd Blankfein, the chief executive officer of Goldman Sachs responded to questions about these bonuses by saying he was just a banker "doing God's work."

<https://dealbook.nytimes.com/2009/11/09/goldman-chief-says-he-is-just-doing-gods-work/>

Similarly just a week ago, Jeff Sessions, the Attorney General of the United States, defended his department's immigration policy by suggesting that God supported the government in separating immigrant parents from their children. His exact words were, "I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained the government for his purposes." It's interesting to note that this

same passage was used about 170 years earlier to defend slavery.

Unspeakable crimes against humanity can happen when we take one scripture passage in isolation and use it to determine God's will.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/06/14/jeff-sessions-points-to-the-bible-in-defense-of-separating-immigrant-families/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.2ab32231b7a9

So what do we do? How do we understand the will of God? I think it is important to do as Ron Lavin, a Lutheran pastor, suggested when he wrote, "Before we call something the will of God, we should check to make sure that it is consistent with what Jesus taught us about God" (*Abba*, page 44). We just happen to be in the middle of a sermon series on The Lord's Prayer, the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. So let's look at the previous line in the prayer. Who can tell me what that is? (*wait for answers - Thy/Your kingdom come*) Exactly, one of Jesus' favourite topics was the kingdom or the reign of God. And what do we know about God's reign? (*reign of justice and peace, based on love and forgiveness*)

So let's go back to our scripture for today. I cherry-picked a few of the lines in the psalm to make an earlier point, but let's see what else it has to say. What about these lines:

"You have upheld the justice of my cause;
seated on your throne, you have given righteous judgement."

"You will judge the world with righteousness,
and deliver true justice to the peoples."

"The needy shall not always be forgotten,
the hope of the poor shall not forever be vain."

There we go... some words that connect with God's vision for the world: justice, righteousness, hope for the poor.

It's interesting to note that the Hebrew word that we translate as "righteousness or justice" is tzedakah. For the Hebrew people tzedakah was an ethical obligation. It was an obligation to care for others. For centuries, Jewish scholars have written about this word and its meaning. In the middle ages, Moses ben Maimon, a Jewish philosopher, wrote a list that he called the "Eight Levels of Giving" and right at the top of the list was "Giving an interest-free loan to a person in need, forming a partnership with a person in need, giving a grant to a person in need, finding a job for a person in need, so long as that loan, grant, partnership or job results in the person no longer living by relying upon others" <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maimonides> Giving in order to empower the other. What an amazing example of righteousness or justice in action. One of the reasons that I choose to give most of my charitable gifts to the Mission and Service Fund is because I know that the United Church of Canada works hard to create mutual partnerships with those that we are attempting to help. Justice for the marginalized or the oppressed is the key to God's reign on earth.

So what is God's will? Yes, it has a lot to do with the reign of God. But I think the most important thing that we need to know about God's will is that God wills us freedom, the freedom to make up our own minds. We are all God's beloved children and like all loving parents, God wants us to live our own lives. Yes, there are other factors at play, but what happens in our lives has more to do with the decisions that we make than anything else. I believe that God's will for us is

that we make decisions and take actions that move us and all of God's creation further along the path to God's vision of peace and justice for all.