

A Sermon Series on the Lord's Prayer

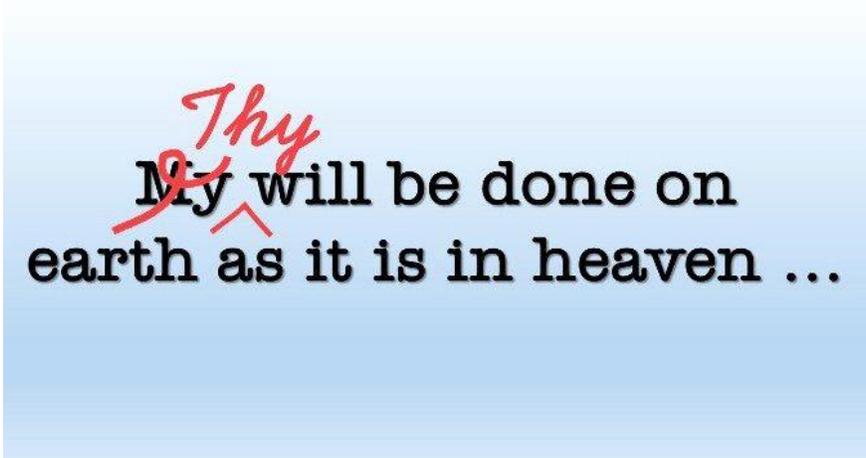
Part Six: *"Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."*

Based on Matthew 6:10b; Galatians 4:6-7; Romans 8:14-17, 26-28;
and Mark 14:32,35-36

By Rev. Dr. Ruth Ragovin

August 8, 2021

The Fourth Petition: *"Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven /
Nehwey tzevyanach aykanna d'bwashmaya aph b'arha"*



~~My~~ Thy will be done on
earth as it is in heaven ...

Matthew 6:10 (NRSV) ~ *Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

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Frederick Buechner has written in his book *Listening to Your Life* that:

In the Episcopal Order of Worship, the priest sometimes introduces the Lord's Prayer with the words, "Now, as our Savior Christ hath taught us, we are bold to say, ..." The word bold is worth thinking about. We do well not to pray the prayer lightly. It takes guts to pray it at all. We can pray it in the unthinking and perfunctory way we usually do only by disregarding what we are saying.

"Thy will be done" is what we are saying. This is the climax of the first half of the prayer. We are asking God to be God. We are asking God to do not what we want but what God wants. We are asking God to make manifest the holiness that is now mostly hidden, to set free in all its terrible splendor the devastating power that is now mostly under restraint. "Thy kingdom come ... on earth" is what we are saying. And if that were suddenly to happen, what then? What would stand and what would fall? Who would be welcomed in and who would be thrown the Hell out? Which if any of our most precious visions of what God is and of what human beings are would prove to be more or less on the mark and which would turn out to be as phony as three-dollar bills? Boldness indeed. To speak those words is to invite the tiger out of the cage, to unleash a power that makes atomic power look like a warm breeze.¹

Today we will continue with our sermon series on the Lord's Prayer by focusing on the petition **"your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."** With this phrase we move from longing for God's Kingdom or realm of love, justice, and righteousness to be established in our world, to audaciously and boldly asking to co-partner with God by becoming midwives of the new world order God wills. Here we pray for heaven to meet earth in acts of justice and compassion. This is indeed a bold call to action!

Are we up to the task of bringing heaven to earth? Can we help bring about God's will for our world? That feels pretty overwhelming, doesn't it? That is partly because the laden word 'will' is embedded in this petition from the Lord's Prayer. "Your Kingdom Come, Your Will be Done, on earth as it is in heaven." It is unfortunate here that the Greek, Latin, and English translators did not take more seriously the original Aramaic word, *tzevyanach*, which should be translated with the English word "desire." It has a different, more manageable feel, doesn't it, to pray "your desire be done" than "your will be done." But we will have to live with this word "will," which can take on negative

¹ Cited William H. Willimon & Stanley Hauerwas with Scott C. Saye, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer & the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), epigraph.

connotations for many of us. We think of the derogative term “willful,” which has been defined as “having or showing a stubborn and determined intention to do as one wants, regardless of the consequences or effects.” We talk about people with iron-wills. Parents fret about the “willful child.” How about “willful misconduct,” which includes the deliberate violation of rules. Or “willful ignorance.” We bring these unpleasant inferences into our understanding of the will of God as something that is harshly imposed upon us. Some may have images of God arbitrarily smiting or punishing people and even whole communities. Bad weather events are called ‘acts of God,’ as though God somehow willed them, even though we know that is not the case.

Then there’s the added baggage not just of our images of God’s will but the fact that to do God’s will we somehow have to get our own wills under control. Even though the Bible suggests that we have been given ‘free will,’ I think most of us would honestly admit that we have difficulty willing freely or even desiring freely what we know is good for us and our world. The great Reformation theologian Martin Luther said that our wills are not free. There is a self-contradiction within them. We are internally conflicted. We are unable to do the things we know are right. To make this point obvious let me ask if any of you have had difficulty losing weight, or quitting smoking, controlling your temper, staying off the internet, or curbing your spending habits? Even the great St. Paul admitted that his will was not free. Can any of you identify with his anguished lament written in his letter to the Romans when we confessed: ¹⁵ ***I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*** (Romans 7:15, 18-19)?

So back to my original question: How can we even pray with boldness “thy will be done” when we can’t even control our own wills? To answer that question, I want to look at today’s passage from Matthew 6:10 “***your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven***” in connection with some older phrases and passages that may have influenced it. We are going to do some Biblical exegesis together today, the kind that you might do if you were in a New Testament class in seminary, and I hope you will enjoy it! We will draw on the the incredible scholarship and insights of John Dominic Crossan, who is widely regarded as the foremost historical Jesus scholar of our time. He wrote a book called *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of The Lord’s Prayer*.

Here he points out that, in addition to the renderings of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4², there are three other places in the New Testament where the Lord's Prayer is found in a nutshell: Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:15; and, Mark 14:36. At least thirty years before we had the fuller liturgical versions that we are familiar with, the Lord's Prayer was concentrated in the exclamation "***Abba ho Patēr!***" This bilingual address to God in Aramaic (***Abba***) and Greek (***ho Patēr***) is most accurately translated as "***Abba! The Father!***" (Here you see the actual transition from Jesus' original teaching of the Lord's Prayer to his disciples in Aramaic to its entry into the Greek speaking world.) Crossan believes that these references to "Abba! Father!," known as the "***Abba Prayer***," are early versions of the Lord's Prayer that are much closer to the time Jesus taught his disciples to pray. He believes that we should take this cry of "Abba! Father!" in these passages very, very seriously as a way to more fully understand the Lord's Prayer.³

All three of these passages were written much earlier than what we find in Matthew or Luke, which were composed between 85-90 CE. The first two of the *Abba Prayers* are found in the Apostle Paul's writings from the mid-50s. In Paul's Letter to the Galatians 4:6-7, he wrote: "***And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'***"⁷ ***So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.***" Later, in his letter to the Romans 8:15-16, Paul wrote something similar: "***For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!'***"¹⁶ ***it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.***" About fifteen years later, in late 60s or early 70s, the Gospel of Mark was written. Mark tells us that when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane facing his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, he "***fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 'Abba, Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me.'***" (Mark 14: 35-36).

It is at this point that our study of these passages dovetails with our scripture passage today from Matthew 6:10: ***your will be done, on earth as it in heaven.*** For not only do we find the titular address of ***Abba! Father!***, but there is one additional important word

² In addition to these, the Lord's Prayer was also included in the important first-century manual of church practice known as *The Teaching* [*Didachē* 8.2 in Greek].

³³ John Dominic Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of The Lord's Prayer* (NY: HarperOne, 2010), p. 22.

that appears both in the Lord's Prayer of Matthew and in the passages in Romans and the Gospel of Mark. That common term is the "will of God."⁴

Note how Paul concludes his great commentary on the Abba Prayer in Romans: *When we cry, "Abba! Father!"*¹⁶ *it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God ...*²⁷ *the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God* (Romans 8:15-16, 27). In the Lord's Prayer in Matthew, we pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In his letter to the Romans, Paul likewise connects our prayer "Abba! Father!" with the will of God. We might understand God's will to be God's vision for us and our world. Yet sometimes what God wills is not what we would like to will. This is painfully obvious when we read this passage from the Gospel of Mark that also includes both the titular title "Abba, Father" along with the "will" of God. It reads:³² *They went to a place called Gethsemane ... and [Jesus] began to be deeply distressed and troubled. ...*³⁵ *Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him.*³⁶ *"Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."* (Mark 14:32-36)

To pray "Your will be done" is to recognize that prayer is about furthering God's will to be done on earth, not our will. Jesus' prayer to be delivered from arrest and death was not answered. Paul repeatedly prayed to be delivered from the 'thorn in the flesh,' some sort of infirmity, but he did not experience this in his lifetime (2 Cor 12:7). How often do we pray for things that do not come to pass: the healing of a loved one, a pay raise, reconciliation with a friend or family member, our organist to be successfully weaned off a ventilator? In spite of this, we are called to pray the same way that Jesus prayed in Gethsemane: Yet not what I will, but what you will God.

This still leaves us with the dilemma of not knowing how we can surrender our wants, egos, desires, and wills to pray as God would have us to pray: ***your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*** Is it even humanly possible to do this? To answer this, Crossan asks us to look next at the larger passage within which the "***Abba! Father!***" is embedded in Romans. Here the Apostle Paul makes this curious statement: "***for we do not know how to pray as we ought***" (Rom 8:26). First notice the little but important word "we." Remember how we begin the Lord's Prayer not with the words "my Father" but "our Father." This is not about individual prayer but our universal prayer for the world. Next, focus on the word "how": "***for we do not know how to pray as we ought.***"

⁴ Crossan, p. 101.

It isn't that we don't know what to pray for, Paul says. We obviously have long lists of things we pray for, don't we? It rather is that we don't know how to pray.

Paul addresses the 'hows' of prayer in short form in Galatians 4:6-7, followed by a longer version in Romans 8:14-17. Let's look again at Galatians 4:6: ***“And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”*** What does this passage tell us about how we are to pray, especially when it's a pretty big order like our partnering with God to manifest God's realm of love, justice, compassion, and righteousness on earth? Paul's answer is so encouraging. Paul says that God empowers us to pray. God actually sent God's own Spirit into our hearts and it is this Spirit within us that cries out ***“Abba! Father!”***

Paul's heartfelt belief, stemming from his own personal experience of Christ praying through him, is spelled out in even more detail in his letter to the Romans. Here he writes that: ***When we cry, “Abba! Father!”¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ ...²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*** (Romans 8:15-17, 26-27)

This is one of the most beautiful, profound, and hope-filled passages of scripture in the New Testament. Even though we may feel overwhelmed by the bold order in the Lord's Prayer to pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven by bringing more and more of God's ideas into concrete manifestations upon this plane (Emmett Fox, 24), we can also absolutely be reassured that God's Spirit will intercede and help us in our weakness, praying “Abba! Father!” through us. Crossan says that ***“Paul's claim is clear, and quite stunning. We cannot pray the Abba Prayer to God the Father by ourselves or from ourselves. We can only pray it by, with, and through the Holy Spirit. Better: only the Holy Spirit can pray it in us, for us, and through us. Better still: it is a collaborative prayer between—in this order—God's divine Spirit and our human spirit.”***⁵ By praying the “Our Father” it is almost like we are given a heart transplant or a brand-new operating system that allows our minds, hearts, and wills to align themselves with God. Wow! We are not doing this on our own! God prays through us for God's own will to be done in spite of the fact that our wills are conflicted and we are unable to do this on

⁵ Crossan, 24-25.

our own. The incredible news is that we can actually help usher in God's realm of love on earth as it is in heaven!

And now I have the distinct pleasure of bringing in the teachings of my own biological father, the Rev. Dr. Herbert Richardson, who recently wrote a little book called *How Christ Frees Us From Satan: The Three Gifts of Faith*. It is kind of an autobiographical work in which he shares his own unsuccessful battle of willing freely what God would have us will for ourselves and the world. It was actually in praying the *Abba* Prayer, or the "Our Father," that he had a dramatic personal experience of God's Spirit praying through him and transforming his own willing into willing what God desires for the world. Listen to what he shares about this:

"The redemptive work of Jesus Christ is to enable us to conform our wills to the will of God ... by teaching us how to pray and then praying with us. The prayer that Jesus Christ teaches us is the prayer that He Himself prays to God: The "Our Father." This is the same prayer that Jesus used to resist Satan's temptation to will something for himself (to become autonomous) rather than to will what God willed him to do. Jesus promises that every time we start to pray His prayer to will what God wills, then Jesus will come to us and help us to pray it. Then, as we pray the prayer of Jesus, we have the very consciousness and will of Jesus within us.

The prayer that Jesus prays with us, begins with the words "Our Father ..."

"Our Father ..." are the words that we must constantly think and say in order to keep our mind within the mind of God.

Praying "Our Father ..." is how we have the very voice and person of Jesus Christ constantly dwelling in our mind.

Praying "Our Father ..." is how we receive from God the gift of His Son: Jesus Christ.⁶

This is also how, as the Apostle Paul writes in both Galatians and Romans, we are empowered to be not just the beloved children of God but actually even **"an heir, through God"** (Gal. 4:7) or **"heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ"** (Rom 8:17). And as heirs of God we are called to assume our responsibility of taking care of all of creation by working toward God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven, knowing that God offers God's Spirit freely to all who ask!

⁶ Herbert W. Richardson, *How Christ Frees Us From Satan: The Three Gifts of Faith* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2021), pp. 32-33.

Of course, when we boldly pray “Abba! Father! Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” we know that God’s will might not coincide with our own personal wishes for ourselves and the world. We have seen that Jesus himself experienced this. There will be many times we will be sadly disappointed. Our challenge continually will be to turn our disappointment into gratitude for, as Willimon and Hauerwas remind us, there are important spiritual lessons we can receive because: *“in praying that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven, we are attempting to school ourselves to want what God wants. We receive, not what our hearts desire, but rather we become so enthralled with a vision of what God is doing on earth and in heaven, that we forget the story that the world has told us—that we have nothing better to do than satisfy our desires. ... To pray, ‘Your will be done,’ is to beg, not for what we want, but rather to beg to have our lives caught up in some project greater than our lives ... namely the adventure of what God is doing in the world.”*⁷

What is that project that is greater than our own lives that we pray to be part of with the words **“your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”**? We will find it outlined in the remaining petitions of the Lord’s Prayer with the mention of “bread,” “forgiveness of sins,” and “resisting temptation.” And, as Frederick Buechner warns us, when we pray for these: *“You need to be bold in another way to speak the second half [of the Lord’s Prayer]. Give us. Forgive us. Don’t test us. Deliver us. If it takes guts to face the omnipotence that is God’s, it takes perhaps no less to face the impotence that is ours. We can do nothing without God. Without God we are nothing. It is only the words “Our Father” that make the prayer bearable. If God is indeed something like a father, then as something like children maybe we can risk approaching him anyway.”*⁸ Yet when we risk approaching God, as we do every Sunday when we pray the Lord’s Prayer together, let us be encouraged by the great promise at the end of the Romans that: **When we cry, “Abba! Father!”¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ ...²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.** (Romans 8:16-17,28).

Closing Prayer: God, as your Son and our Savior Christ has taught us, let us continue to be bold to pray Abba! Father! May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and may we do our part in making it so. Amen.

⁷ Willimon & Hauerwas, p. 67.

⁸ Cited in the epigraph in Willimon & Hauerwas.