

## **Stand In His Strength Alone**

A sermon for the season of Pentecost

Matthew 18:15-20

In the Gospel text for today is this verse, Matthew 18:19: "Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven." That's really great. If two or three agree on earth about anything, it will be done by God in heaven. It's true that the next verse says where two or three are gathered in my name." You might say: "Well, it has to be in his name. there am I in the midst of them." That's not too difficult. We often pray, as we should, in Jesus' name. What does this mean? It's really something enormous.

We look always at how it all works with our feet on the ground. The biggest difficulty in 2000 years of church history is that the church becomes identified with the culture. (There are also those who are counter culture because of that famous verse in Matthew 16:25: ". . . whoever who loses his life for my sake shall find it." But that is another extremism.)

What do we have here? Another kind of crazy saying? How does it work really? When we start asking about spiritual exercises for Christians, there are some Jesus freaks who want to say: "I want to know God's will, especially in a crisis. How do I know whom to marry? How do I know what career I should take up? In the years I have, what do I do?"

What is the right thing, the Christian thing, to do? That leads us into a whole series of difficulties, at least three major kinds. The first one is to say: "It's something I can tell by my feelings." When we have a great deal of struggle with a decision, then afterwards we might say: "I had peace in my heart. I had a sense of joy in the Lord. Or I had a sense that this is God's will; it just felt that way." We hear these sorts of statements: It's not a matter of the mind but of the heart. After hearing that split of things, what is that which carries us? We might go for a walk in the early morning and be awed by the beauty of creation. Or we might hear some great piece of music and it lifts us up. That which overpowers us is what it's all about. That's the Holy Spirit acting.

The second way is that it is a matter of experience. But most of us have been baptized as babies and we don't remember it. We didn't make any decision. We didn't know anything. Nevertheless we were made a child of God. But then it is said,

that's not enough. It has to become real for us by experience, that which transforms us. It's like the story of the farmer out in his field in the springtime and he looked up and saw the clouds in the sky form the letters "PC." He thought it was a sign from God that he should sell his farm and become a missionary to "Preach Christ." But he wasn't effective in the role and someone said the PC in the sky really meant "plant corn." We tend to think that there are special experiences of enlightenment that will determine what we should do. What's real is my experience, it's real for me and it changes things.

Third, we say: We have to make a decision God's way. There's the famous book, *Let God Be God*. Our problem is how can we follow God's way instead of our own way, and decide his way and let that transform us, change us in a way that is not our will but Thy will. That is a kind of extreme Christian spirituality that is among us.

When we look at it in each of these three, it's my feelings, my experience, my decision. It's all about me. It is a way of trying to manipulate God. Ultimately it is upside down. That's not the way God works.

In the Lord's Prayer there is the petition, "Thy kingdom come." Luther's explanation of this states: "God's kingdom comes indeed without our prayer." His kingdom even if we don't have the feeling of it, the experience of it, it comes in spite of us. "Thy will be done," God's will is done whether we do it or not. God's will is done because he is the one who establishes his good and gracious will. That comes down to that basic reality of baptism. When you and I are baptized, we are truly given the Holy Spirit. We are truly given eternal life, not just a kickstart in that direction. We are truly given the gift of faith, not a kickstart, but it's truly done. God's kingdom has come, God's will has been done for you there.

The same is true when we come to the Lord's Supper. You might have slept through the sermon, and you might be enormously bored. You might say you don't feel very spiritual. What is it that we are doing anyway? I don't understand it. (Neither do I, of course.) But it's his doing, his will, not ours, and it doesn't depend on our experience but on what he has done.

A seminary professor told his students that in his life he had had all sorts of feelings, all sorts of experiences, had made all kinds of decisions, but he couldn't say that any one of those was explicitly and only Christian. After all, we can't judge. But we are tempted all the time to think we shouldn't judge others but we can

judge ourselves. But we're not even to judge ourselves; the Lord himself is the one who judges (1 Cor 4:3-5).

How does the Christian life work? Paul writes about the Christian life in Romans 13:1-10. In Romans 13:8 Paul writes: "What then is the law?" He starts with the Ten Commandments: Honor your parents, not commit adultery, not steal, not covet, and adds "any other commandment." He says all these laws are summed up in this sentence: "'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; there therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

How does it all work in the life we live? We all have feelings. We all have experiences. We all make decisions. But that is to be seen under the larger umbrella that the Lord has done it all, and my task now is to care for my neighbor and the way I care for my neighbor is by asking: What does harm? What is the greater harm? The lesser harm? That means we use our common reason and common sense. It doesn't mean that an overpowering feeling I have, an overpowering experience I have, or an overpowering decision is decisive but rather it means we live by common reason and common sense, considering the consequences. And that is a real struggle. It's not to go with the culture but it's not automatically to go against the culture. It is to ask: What is best for my neighbor?

Of course we will make mistakes. "The heart is infinitely corrupt" (Jeremiah 17:9). "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags" (Isa 64:6). Even our best works are sinful.

We live by the cross. We live by the fact that in anything and everything we are forgiven because it is God's good and gracious will that we are forgiven because he is creating for us that life forever with him.

Now as we live, we can be caught in looking at ourselves and not looking at him and his big plan, his kingdom, his will.

In a few moments we will sing: "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus." It helps us focus on him, particularly the third verse:

"Stand up, stand up for Jesus, Stand in his strength alone;  
The arm of flesh will fail you, You dare not trust your own.  
Put on the Gospel armor; Each piece put on with prayer.  
Where duty calls or danger, Be never wanting there."

We keep ourselves focused on him, not on us, on his work and his plan which is forever, even as we live now in him as well. That is his good and gracious will. That is the freedom we have in him.

Amen