

God's will for you and me

Matthew 18:15-20

A sermon for the Fifteen Sunday after Pentecost

There are amazing promises in the Matthew text for today. It says: "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" (Matthew 18:19).

What do we have here? A crazy saying? To be sure, the next verse says: "where two or three are gathered in my name" (Matthew 18:20).

You might say: "Well, it has to be 'in his name.'" That's not too difficult. We often pray, as we should, in Jesus' name. That means something enormous. It means by his authority, his power, to which we can appeal because we are adopted children of God, fellow heirs with Christ (Romans 8:16).

But how does it work really? Practically speaking. How it all works with our feet on the ground?

How do I know God's will, especially in a crisis? How do I know whom to marry? What career should I take up? In the years I have left, what do I do? What is the right thing?

As we wrestle with questions, we can get confused about how it works because the culture around us has ideas and expectations about Christians, and it helps if we can sort out such expectations from what it's really about.

Let's look at three. The first expectation is that Christians have or ought to have a special spiritual perceptiveness, like a sixth sense.

Charles Murray, the noted social policy analyst, has made the news recently for moving away from the atheism of his earlier years and moving toward Christianity. He now refers to himself as a lapsed atheist.

He reports that he thinks Christians have a special spiritual perceptiveness. He compares this perceptiveness to the way a professional musician hears music differently than others do.

He hopes to feel that spiritual perceptiveness. He says: "You ought to feel a certain degree of reverence for Jesus." And adds: "One night I did feel it. I hadn't concocted it. It was a little bit of a burst."

He would like to have faith like his wife has. He says: "Catherine compares her evolving faith to a light on a rheostat that has gradually gotten brighter over the years. Nothing like that has ever happened to me. I have yet to experience the joys of faith. When I'm around Catherine and others who have, I sometimes feel like a little boy whose nose is pressed against the window, watching a party he can't attend."

Nobody likes to be on the outside looking in. But part of the problem is the expectation that I should feel a certain way, or have a certain peace in my heart, a sense of joy in the Lord, and if I don't, then something's wrong with me. God must not be acting in me as in others.

The problem, of course, is that being a Christian is not about feelings, or even a spiritual perceptiveness, a sixth sense.

Most of us were baptized as babies, and we don't remember it. We didn't feel anything. We didn't know anything. Nevertheless, there and then we were adopted as fellow heirs with Christ of his kingdom to come.

The second way we can be misled by the expectations of the cultural for what it is to be Christian is by looking for evidence in unusual experiences and dreams.

A young farmer out in his field looked up and saw a cloud formation shaped like letters "PC." Was it a sign from heaven? What did it mean? PC. He decided it meant: "Preach Christ." So, he left his tractor, went to seminary, and became a pastor. But, in fact, he didn't have the right skills for ministry, and over the years he ruined several congregations. His older brother shook his head and said that "PC" in the sky really meant "Plant Corn." His younger brother had been a smart and good farmer. He should have stuck with that.

Luther himself had a dramatic religious experience. He even wrote about it. One night at prayer he saw a vision of Christ himself. At first he was overwhelmed, and then he remembered that, "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). So, he told that vision to go away and it did. Visions and dreams are ambiguous. Could be from God, or could be Satan in disguise.

Luther adds: Where does God meet us? In the everyday world of church, in his word and sacraments.

The third way cultural expectations of what it means to be Christian can confuse us up is by thinking we have to make a decision for Christ. To be sure, there are even

Christians, particularly Baptists and evangelicals, who say this. For example, Franklin Graham, the son of Billy Graham, has a TV commercial in which he invites listeners to make a decision for Christ, to recognize that Jesus is God's Son and to "invite" Him "into your heart," and "trust Him as your Savior."

His message is 90% Christ-centered and 10% you-centered because it's finally up to you to do it, to "invite" him "into your heart." But when you try to do that, how do you know if you've been sincere enough? Done it rightly? What if you don't feel as earnest today as you did yesterday?

When we look at each of these three expectations of Christians that come from the culture of our day, what's the same in all three is that it's my feelings, my experience, my decision. It's up to me to feel it right, do it right, respond rightly. It's both a burden and a way of maintaining control, of putting ourselves in the driver's seat. But that's upside down. That's not the way God works.

In the Lord's Prayer there is the petition, "Thy kingdom come." Luther's explanation states: "God's kingdom comes indeed without our prayer."

His kingdom comes 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. There at the font we are adopted, given the Holy Spirit, eternal life (not just a kick start), and faith. There at the font God's kingdom has come, God's will for you has been done.

The same is true when we come to the Lord's Supper. Perhaps you don't feel the way you think you should when you come forward for communion. Or you might say you don't really understand what is it that we are doing anyway. Well, I don't understand it either, of course. But it's his doing, his will, not ours, and it doesn't depend on our experience, our feelings, our decisions, but on what he has done.

How does the Christian life work with our feet on the ground? It's not about spiritual powers and experiences, but about the Golden Rule. In our Romans text for today Paul writes: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another for that is fulfilling the law" (Romans 13:8). He then mentions a few commandments: "don't commit adultery, don't kill, steal, or covet, and adds "any other commandment." He says these laws are summed up in: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love

does no wrong to a neighbor; there therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." Like the Golden Rule.

How does it all work in the life we live? We all have feelings, high and low, and profound experiences, good and bad.

But all 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, keeping evil at bay so that life may be protected and flourish.

This means using horse sense, as Dolly Parton would say, that is, practical common sense in everyday situations. Of course, even then we are going to make mistakes.

We live by the fact that we daily stand at the foot of the cross; we are forgiven. It is God's good and gracious will that we are forgiven because he is creating for us that life forever with him.

To be sure, we catch ourselves looking at ourselves in pride and despair and not looking at him and his big plan, his kingdom, his will.

We keep ourselves focused on him, 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 also the freedom we have in him.

Amen