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Date: April 15, 2012
Sermon Title: What Do You Mean, "Not MY Will"?
Scripture: Mathew 26:36-44
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Matthew 26:36-44

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' Again he went away for the second time and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.' Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words.

We've been studying "prayer" at our church. I mean really studying for eight weeks, and I saved the best (or the hardest) for last: getting what we want versus NOT getting what we want.

There are all kinds of prayer. Happy prayer. Praise prayer. Thanksgiving prayer. Just-staying-in-touch prayer. But I bet if you and I kept tabs on our prayers, just for one month, including our Sunday morning "pastoral prayer," I bet 75 percent of what we pray for is telling God what we want. It may be what we want for others or for ourselves or for our nation or the world, for our soldiers, for the sick. That's the bulk of our prayers. Telling God what we want.

Now, I can quote Jesus or the Rolling Stones. And they'd both be right. The Rolling Stones sang

*No, you can't always get what you want,
But if you try sometime, you just might find
You get what you need.*

"You can't always get what you want ... but ... you get what you need."

We've studied prayer from every imaginable angle, and I can tell you, the Rolling Stones have a pretty good theology of prayer. Sooner or later, God gets you what you need, but it may be different from what you want. The Rolling Stones say so. And so does Jesus.

Our morning Scripture is one of the most difficult Scriptures in all the Bible. It took place on Maundy Thursday, right after what we call "The Last Supper." After Jesus and his disciples finished that "Last Supper," they walked a little way outside of Jerusalem to the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-44), where Jesus was "sorrowful and troubled." (verse 37) He even said out loud to his friends, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." (verse 38) Jesus could not have been more clear, more blunt. "I'm hurting, I need you," he is saying, "please, please ... keep watch with me, stay alert, pay attention, share this with me, be my friends, be here for me." Then he went off just a "little farther and fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'Father, if it's possible, take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will but thy will be done.'" (verse 39)

Three times, Jesus prayed that prayer, three times! And three times he checked back with his friends ... and they were asleep. They couldn't hang in there. I think their own fear took over, their own nerves, even depression. Jesus explained their behavior with the classic line, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." They loved Jesus. They believed in him, they wanted to follow him. But they were broken — emotionally, physically broken. So Jesus faced his agony alone. And his agony was the all-too-human struggle between what we want and what God wants. What Jesus wanted was to be released from God's plan that had him headed straight to the Cross.

All the Biblical scholarship, from the most fundamentalist to ultraliberal, agrees that when Jesus said, "If possible, take this cup from me," he was talking about the cup of suffering, the cup of his death on the Cross. Jesus wanted out, he wanted plan B. Jesus wanted God to listen to him and to grant him what he wanted: more living, more life, more of everything that life has to offer — friendship and fellowship and fun and love. And yes, work, all the work Jesus was so good at — teaching, healing, inspiring, leading.

"Just let me do more of that," Jesus was begging, "I'm good at this, people are listening, people are changing. It's working — just give me a little more time."

We can all sympathize with that. We can empathize, we can understand, we can agree. We would want that for Jesus as much as we would want that for ourselves or our loved ones. A little more time. Another opportunity. A chance.

One of my best resources for these eight weeks on prayer is surprisingly *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Prayer*. I was one idiot who got a lot out of it. In the section on "Not My Will," they tell a story of a pastor whose mom was dying. She was only 62. So the pastor began to pray for his mom. Very specifically. He prayed that she would live 18 more years, long enough to get to 80. Long enough to see her just-born granddaughter graduate from high school. He prayed that specific prayer 50 times, basing his prayer plan on an Old Testament story in which a man besieged God with prayer. But, *The Idiot's Guide to Prayer* reports, the pastor's mom didn't get 18 more years or 18 more months or 18 more weeks. Within 18 hours she had passed away.

For those of us who believe in Christ, who believe in prayer, that's the conundrum it, isn't it? That's where the rubber meets the road. That's our reality check, our gut check. That story, that's not some half-hearted believer, tossing out some "Hail Mary" prayer as a last-ditch effort to get what he wants. That's a man of faith, praying on behalf of a woman of faith, making a reasonable request, based on a Biblical principle. And he doesn't get what he wants.

I've prayed just such a prayer a thousand times. No, I bet it's 10,000 times. A simple, direct prayer, begging God repeatedly, urgently, to do something specific for someone else. Did I say 10,000 times? Make that tens of thousands of times. I, banging on heaven's door with my list of demands, of wants, of needs. My petition, my wish list. And truth is, I get what I want a lot. Not just from time to time, but a lot, often enough to keep me going back.

There is a man who used to come to me for help, for money, all the time. And I was nice to him some of the time and rude to him some of the time; I was helpful some of the time and dismissive some of the time. One afternoon, when I was being particularly rude and dismissive, I said to him, "Why do you keep coming back here?" "Because," he said, "you're nice often enough." My prayer life is like that. My prayer life is nice enough often enough. So I keep going back.

But seriously, what is really happening? Is my "nice enough often enough" prayer success blind luck? The law of averages at work? Coincidence? Or is it the result of my persistent banging on God's door until the God of the Universe moves the forces of heaven to overrule natural law and give me what I want? Blind luck? Or God's will? My will? Or God's will?

In this eight-week study of prayer — in fact in my lifelong study of prayer — I've got these three conclusions, three takeaways:

Number one: prayer is conversation — you and God in conversation. It's that simple.

Number two: prayer is a mystery. Anybody who could explain it like a mathematical model, well God bless him.

Number three: prayer is learning to meld my will with God's will. Maybe it's better to say, "bend" my will to God's will, or "weld" my will to God's will. But I choose "meld." Sort of like "melt" and "blend." Ultimately, I want my will to reflect God's will. And I hope my will is part of God's will.

The Bible pushes us in that direction all the time:

Psalm 40:8, "I desire to do your will, O, my God."

Psalm 143:10, "Teach me to do your will, for you are my God."

Matthew 12:50, "Jesus said, 'Whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother, my sister, my mother.'"

It's not easy to let go of "my will" and my idea of the best short-term outcome.

In your bulletin I've re-printed my poem based on today's Scripture. It is my very self-centered reaction to trying to figure out where my will and God's will intersect. Remember, this poem is about ME ... which is precisely the point.

Insert poem "not my will."

I'm sure you caught the stubborn selfishness of my prayer life! Believe me, I am not suggesting myself as a model for prayer, anything but! I'm a wreck. I listen to other clergy out there, I read them, I see them on TV, and I'm glad they're so perfect. Their spiritual life is perfect, their personal life is perfect, their prayer life is perfect. Unfortunately, you're stuck with me, a man of vast imperfections on every level. Even my prayer life is imperfect.

Through the years, our church has hosted a number of "prayer vigils" on behalf of someone who was sick or dying. Once, as we were putting together a prayer vigil, someone was reported to have said, "What good is that? Everyone Greenfield Hill Church prays for dies." And I thought about that, and I agree. Our church has been here since 1725. With the exception of those members alive this morning, 100 percent of everybody else who ever join Greenfield Hill Church has died. Very true. A dismal record, indeed.

Yet, still we pray. The reason is simple: we choose to see beyond the immediate outcome. The immediate outcome often is dismal, disappointing, disagreeable. We don't get the job we'd been counting on. Or we don't get better. We don't make the team. We don't win. We don't get reconciled or forgiven or healed. Maybe not for us, maybe not for those we prayed for. Petition denied. Prayer request rejected. Hoped-for result not happening. God's will trumps yours. You lose.

It certainly feels that way. Unless there really is a "God's will." Unless Jesus really was on to something when he willingly surrendered HIS will to God's will. Unless there really is a "big picture," a "grand scheme of things" greater than we can imagine, something so "out there" that it stretches our faith to the max. Something like "heaven."

Thursday night, Alida gathered over 80 people, scores and scores of teenagers, to remember the life of Bradley Helt, the young Fairfield Prep student who ended his life this week. With Bradley's mom there and his brother, kids who knew him and kids who didn't, gathered to pray, gathered FOR prayer. Why? Why? To those inclined to be practical or cynical or logical, it would seem too little too late. And yet there they were. Hurting. Heartbroken. Tear-stained. Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, they were in agony ... AND like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, they were willing to seek God's will in the midst of their own sorrow.

For her devotion Thursday night, Alida read the article in the *Fairfield Minuteman* written by a recent Fairfield Prep grad. The article ended with these three lines:

"At the end of the day, I believe in my faith.
Rest in peace, Brad.
I'll see you again some day."

That's actually pretty deep stuff. "I believe in my faith," he says. All that Easter stuff, all that resurrection/eternal life stuff, all that "God's love" stuff, from a college freshman willing to go on record, "I believe in my faith." Then he says, "RIP, Brad — rest in peace ... in peace." Not hell, not torment, not

judgment or failure or sin. In peace. In the quiet confidence of God's all-forgiving grace. Just as Jesus, with his own quiet confidence, declared from the Cross, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit," this college freshman places his Fairfield Prep friend in the peace of God's embrace. And he concludes, "I'll see you again some day."

That's a college freshman's version of the Bible's greatest promises. "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye ... we shall all be changed. The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible" "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven and the dead in Christ shall arise. And we shall be caught up together with them ... and so shall we ever be with the Lord." (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18) "... and the Lord will wipe away every tear from our eyes." (Revelation 7:17)

That's faith. That's Easter. That's the real Easter of last week put to the test this week. St. Paul, who knew a thing or two about life's ups and downs, wrote, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." (1 Corinthians 8:28) Various translations twist the verse this way and that, but the heart of it remains the same: God's interest is in the final good. The end result. The finished product. And sometimes that's our way in our time frame. And sometimes that's God's way in God's time frame.

But the nature of faith is we choose to see good each way, each time.