The Battle of Wills

Matthew 26:31-46
Key Verse: Matthew 26:39
“Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

In today’s passage, we find the word “will” mentioned a dozen times. With it popping up so much it made me think about what “will” is. Will is an interesting word, in one aspect will is our ability to make a conscious choice. When God created man, he gave us free will to make our own choices. Plants don’t have a will; animals have some but people have the most because we were made in the image of God and we think and can make informed choices. But another aspect of will related to determination or desire. When we say that something can be done “at will” that usually means we can do it without hindrance anytime we want. However, if we encounter hindrances, that means we need a stronger will. If you don’t want something very much, then the will to succeed is probably going to be weak. On the other hand, if you have a strong will, then there is a better chance for success hence the saying “Where there’s a will, there’s a way”. In the story, today, I believe that we encounter both of these aspects of will and Jesus reveal another aspect of will.

If you remember from last week, after Jesus and the disciples finished their Passover meal, they sung a hymn and went up to the Mount of Olives and that’s where our passage this morning. And we should remember what the atmosphere was like during their meal. This was a very intimate time between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus told them of his upcoming suffering and death and how his body would be broken and his blood would be poured out for them. They didn’t understand what he was about to go through. Then he said that one of them would betray him. It was a highly emotional evening and it was about to get even more intense. Take a look at verses 31-32. “Then Jesus told them, “This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: “‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ **32** But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”” Imagine their surprise when he said that all of them would fall away from him. None of them wanted to believe it. Finally, Peter couldn’t take it any longer and said, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.” (v33) Here we see Peter's will revealed, however it was based upon his feelings. And his feelings were a mix of his emotion, love and loyalty for Jesus. And one way to understand it is to compare it to marriage. A newly married couple have strong feelings of love and they think that they will always be faithful, strong and able to ride the wave of emotion through any storm. There is even a saying for this, “they’re in their honeymoon period” and it means that they can do nothing wrong to each other. But those who've been married longer realize that feelings only last so long and without a daily decision to love our spouse, a marriage could quickly fall apart. Feelings are important, but they can’t be they only foundation of a relationship. Feelings are like the plant on shallow soil that withers in the time of scorching because it has no root. (Lk 8:13) This is quite different than faith. At the center of your emotions is you, but at the center of faith is God. Peter's words were noble, they were admirable and most of us probably would have said the same thing. But several things should have given him

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pause.

The first is that Jesus' words were based on the Bible. The prophet Zechariah, who Jesus quoted, said, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." (Zech 13:7) The disciples falling away had been prophesied about 500 years before it happened. And second, is that, Jesus didn't seem to be bothered about it. It was as if, Jesus was saying, "But after your epic fail I will rise from the dead meet you in Galilee." But all the disciples miss this quick statement because of Peter's outburst. Thirdly, it was Jesus who was saying it. He even said it a second time. Look at verse 34, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows you will disown me three times."

However, Peter's reaction became even more stubborn and visceral, it was like he was wearing ear plugs. "Peter declared, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.'" And of course, the other disciples followed suit. Part of the gospel message is that we cannot save ourselves, we are weak sinners, we live only by the grace of God. But we don't like to hear that so we think "If I just try harder," "If I just do more," "If I can be more holy, then I will be ok". However, these are not Biblical mindsets and they only set us up for failure. At the heart of these is "I", "me", "my", and not Jesus. Reliance on yourself is the opposite of faith in God. What is worst here, is that following Jesus by their feelings and self-reliance actually led them to deny the truth and reject Jesus' message. We want to admire Peter's loyalty, it looks brave, but in reality, his emotion actually cut him off from the truth of God, which was a dangerous place to be. Especially at this vulnerable time.

Take a look at verse 36 it says, "Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."" Gethsemane was one of Jesus' favorite places to visit. It was an olive grove on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives and the name means "oil press," a place for squeezing the oil from olives. And I believe that name has some spiritual significance for it was about to get intense and the pressure is going to be like an oil press. Take a look at verse 37. "He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled." It's here we begin to see Jesus' humanity as he becomes sorrowful and troubled. When have you ever known Jesus to be troubled? Even when he was outnumbered and surrounded he was never troubled. He was the picture of strength, like the White cliffs of Dover in England, where the waves smash against it and it's unmoved, eternal, perfect. In Jesus, we usually see his divinity. Most of the time great leaders try to hide their weaknesses to appear strong for the sake of others. However, here Jesus begins to pull back the veil before the three disciples. He didn't hide this brought them there so that they may witness it and participate. Take a look at verse 38. It says, "Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."" Jesus was beginning to weight of what he was about to go through. We can only imagine the terrible sensations he began to feel as God put on him the sin of the world and the condemnation it required. Yet, Jesus understood, as he had said from Zechariah, that it was God who was striking the shepherd and God's hand that was against him. He knew it, and he knew it was right, but what a weight to bear. Jesus didn't die

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serenely as many martyrs have. He was no mere martyr; he was the Lamb of God bearing the penalty of the sins of the entire human race. The wrath of God was turned loose upon him. The pressure must have been as intense as an olive press that squeezes every last drop of oil out of the olives that are put into it. In this moment, Jesus was becoming every murderer, adulterer, thief that sinned against God. It must have broken God's heart to do it and been beyond anything Jesus could have imagined as the weight of generations of the wrath of God all fell on Jesus separating him from his father. Those who have experienced the pain of abandonment, divorce, death, can begin to understand the depth of anguish that Jesus felt, it is the worst pain in the world. Far worse than the physical pain of the cross, is the anguish of soul that our Lord bore for us.

Take a look at verse 39. “Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”” Jesus couldn't go any farther, even as he tried he collapsed under the weight that was upon him until he was flat, face down before Almighty God. Out of all Jesus’ prayers, this one stands unique. It wasn’t a prayer for direction like his others were. Jesus knew exactly what he had to do. It was a prayer to bring HIS will under the complete control of God, to make HIS desire to be what God desires. This is why I titled the message today, “The Battle of Wills” because it was an intense struggle to submit his desire to live to God’s will for his sacrifice. Luke describes the scene as only a physician could, he says, “And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.” (Lk 22:44) This was the peak of his life of prayer. This is where Jesus and Peter are different, Peter ran with his emotions, where Jesus controlled his.

Jesus revealed his raw and honest request, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me." Notice here the love and trust, that there is no sense of trying to sound strong or say the right words, just real honest prayer from his heart. Though Jesus was fully God, he was also fully man and here those two natures came to a head. As a man Jesus, could not carry out God's will but it had to be done. There wasn’t a plan B for God entrusted world salvation to Jesus. It was his purpose for coming into the world. The whole history of the world led to the cross, it was the focal point, and it rested squarely on Jesus’ shoulders Jesus. As a man, Jesus didn’t want to die, he didn’t want to suffer, or to be betrayed, humiliated, degraded and dehumanized. As a man Jesus wanted life, honor and blessing, but here we see the divine nature of Jesus. He did not submit to his natural feelings. Instead he said, "Yet not as I will, but as you will." Here Jesus was not hopelessly admitting that he was a victim of the will of God. Sometimes we hear God's will used fatalistically in prayer: "God please heal this person ...if it is your will." or "God please move this impossible mountain in my life ...but your will be done." If we say "your will be done" fatalistically, we are saying we are the victim of God's will which will inevitably happen, which I can do nothing to change. When Jesus said "your will be done", the will of God is what he truly wanted more than his will. Jesus confessed that God's will was better than his will but it was such a struggle to accept. Though it went against every fiber of his humanity, he completely submitted himself to the perfect will of God.

This really goes against our humanity, our natural will. Many people live by Frank Sinatra’s theme:

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“And now, the end is near; And so I face the final curtain. My friend, I’ll say it clear, I’ll state my case, of which I’m certain. I’ve lived a life that’s full. I’ve traveled each and every highway; But more, much more than this, I did it my way.” Burger King became popular when it came out with the campaign, “Have it your way.” Most people want everything in life their way. We want to be the captain of our ship, the master of our destiny, the king of our castle. Have you seen the “Jesus is my co-pilot” bumper stickers? People think they are spiritual but It’s basically saying, “Thanks for the offer God, but let me do the driving.” In so doing, we proclaim that we know best and our way is better than God's. It's not until we fall on our face that we realize we were wrong and even then, it takes a great deal of humility to change our ways. It truly is amazing that Jesus could go through this struggle and submit his will and accept God's. It’s because Jesus submitted to the will of God that we are saved from the condemnation. Thank you, Jesus, I am forever in your debt.

When Jesus returned to his disciples, he found them sleeping. Here their weakness was beginning to show. They said "we will die with you!!...but don't ask us to stay awake and pray with you." How often our flesh cannot keep up with our big words, right? Jesus asked Peter, “Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the body is weak.” (v41) Spiritual maturity is being able to pray WHEN it’s time to pray instead of avoiding the struggle. Even though the disciple’s spirit was willing, they couldn’t deal with temptation and accept God's will on their own.

God, who is faithful, heard Jesus as he cried out in prayer. God removed the dread and fear of the cup and poured out his strength into Jesus to stand up under it. God gave Jesus a clear understanding of his will and Jesus’ second prayer was spoken by a new man, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”” If you notice, “Yet not as I will,” is gone. Jesus only says, “may your will be done” Removed from this prayer is any sense of struggle. There is no more conflict, no more sorrow. In its place, we find resolve, acceptance, submission and calmness beyond our human measure. Through his prayer, Jesus laid all his burdens at the foot of the throne of God and he didn’t pick it up again. Jesus took the cup, but he took it from his Father's hand. He didn’t take the cup from his enemies’ hands or from Satan. Because he had perfectly resolved to follow God's will, it is from God's hand alone that Jesus took the cup. It was not forced upon him and he was not a victim, he victoriously did what no man could do. (John 10:17-18)

The picture of Jesus after his second prayer was very different however it was still the same for his disciple. When he came back to them, again he found them sleeping. So, he prayed for a third time to finish the process. To a lesser extent, the disciples were also experiencing overwhelming sorrow like Jesus but instead of praying they chose to sleep. Sleep is an escape. It ALWAYS feels more comforting to run away to some escape, like sleep, or food, alcohol, drugs, Facebook, video games, surfing the web, or even friends instead of dealing with difficult situations. But the reality is, when we finally stop running and are done self-medicating ourselves, the problem is STILL there. And what was the result?

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Take a look at verses 45-46. “Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. **46** Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”” When Jesus came back to his disciples once again he found them asleep, but Jesus is back to his old self and is the picture of strength. He is full of the Holy Spirit and ready to take action. Seeing his betrayer in the distance Jesus says, " Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" Three prayers earlier, Jesus was broken and barely able to stand, hardly able to bear the weight of what he must do. But here we see Jesus stronger than he's ever been. From here on out Jesus was in full control of every situation he was in. During the time of Jesus prayed his situation didn’t change. His enemies didn’t get lost on the way, God didn’t find another way, the disciples didn’t mount a resistance. And yet through three prayers everything changed, because Jesus was changed. God couldn’t take away the cup but wow did God hear his prayer! This incredible power, peace and resolve could have been given to the disciples as well but they failed to listen to Jesus.

And when the time came, Jesus didn’t wait for Judas and the crowd to capture him, instead he went out to them. Peter thought he was on fire for Jesus as he grabbed a sword but in his self-reliance and emotion, he had no idea what God actually wanted him to do, however in contrast, Jesus was in complete control. Through this passage we see that God has given each of us our own free will to choose as we wish. And we have to use that freedom to choose what’s best for us. And God’s purpose for us is always what is best for us, but many times we don’t want to follow it. Sometimes we don’t even know what God’s will is for us. The way we find that out is through prayer and Bible study. We have to first find out what it is before we can follow it. But some people aren’t even willing to do that. They only want to do it their way, like Judas & Peter. But once we know God’s will, then we have to submit to it. There is where the battle of wills begins for us. The battle of following God’s will or our own. When we encounter this, we can remember Jesus and how he struggled and won the victory through prayer. May God bless you as you struggle to follow God’s will for your life.

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