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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## RAISING THE WHITE FLAG

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SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ MARCH 5, 2017

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### COMMUNION MEDITATION

**T**hey went to the olive grove called Gethsemane, and Jesus said, "Sit here while I go and pray." <sup>33</sup>He took Peter, James, and John with him, and he became deeply troubled and distressed. <sup>34</sup>He told them, "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

<sup>35</sup>He went on a little farther and fell to the ground. He prayed that, if it were possible, the awful hour awaiting him might pass him by. <sup>36</sup>"Abba, Father," he cried out, "everything is possible for you. Please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine."

Mark 14:32-36 (NLT)

### August 1945

Large swatches of the nation lay in ruins. Industrial districts, ports, military bases and airfields had been bombed out of commission. Acres of downtown Tokyo were still smoldering ruins (with only the massive leafy grounds of the Imperial Palace in the center of the city purposely spared from destruction). Now two mid-size cities in the space of three days had been wiped off the map by single weapons of a power never before seen in human conflict. The American President had sent a direct and unmistakable message to the Emperor that more destruction would come if the Japanese did not immediately lay down their arms in surrender.

A secret war council debated long into the night in their underground bunker. The proud Emperor resisted the pleas of most of his advisors to end their futile resistance. For this little man named Hirohito

who had been told all his life he was divine and invincible, the act of surrender would require him to admit the truth he had been resolutely denying. It would tell the world that his nation was not all-powerful, and that its lust for world domination was a disastrous fantasy, and that its cruelty and barbarity would ultimately face justice. Finally, after he had resisted reality as long as he could, reason broke through denial and madness. The Emperor relented. The war was over, and the world rejoiced with relief. The American occupation began.

Surrender is the most bitter medicine of all to the proud. And yet, it is the only cure. Had the Emperor not surrendered, probably millions more of his people would have died (along with hundreds of thousands of Americans). His nation's recovery would have been delayed by years or decades. Thus the seemingly-disastrous surrender actually was the best thing for Japan. Today it is prosperous, democratic, free, and a respected member of the world community. It was only unconditional surrender that could have brought them to this place.

### **Going Against Instinct**

I will speak briefly to you today about the essential spiritual act of surrender, of figuratively "waving the white flag" and ending our resistance to the God who desires to be the unquestioned Lord of our lives. For many modern, successful, accomplished people this is the hardest step of all in coming to Christ, the last and highest hurdle to clear.

After all the intellectual doubts to faith have been removed, after we have seen the impact of the Lord in the lives of our contemporaries, after we have felt the enticing lure of unconditional love and the assurance of eternal life, the final fortress that remains is the will. To surrender to God seems to go against our instincts for self-reliance, hard work, and willpower. Those qualities are undeniably good in certain ways. What athlete ever won a championship, what entrepreneur ever built a successful business, what general ever won a battle, what opera diva ever brought down the house in applause without self-confidence and discipline and determination?

But trusting in ourselves can subtly become dangerous. We can become our own gods. The "inconvenient truth" we all need to learn is that, although we may do our best with the talents and opportunities God gives us, ultimately we are not in control. Our bodies will not last

forever, nor be able to resist the effects of age and decline. We can't ultimately control other people. We can't take with us beyond the grave the wealth we accumulate. And we can't control our eternal destinies by our own efforts alone. There are limits we cannot overcome. In the end, what matters most is whether or not we have surrendered.

### **All the Difference**

And even further, what makes all the difference is the One **to whom** we surrender. Had the Japanese surrendered to the Soviet Union (who hastily jumped into the Pacific War at the very end, hoping for some spoils), their future would have been very different indeed. They would have become a vassal state, like Eastern Europe—or, even worse, another North Korea. They would have become an oppressive and isolated land of poverty, cruelty and Communist dictatorship, with no economic or personal freedom.

But instead, to their inestimable relief and gratitude, Japan surrendered to America: a country committed to democracy, liberty, and rights; a people who had ample reason to want to punish and yet chose forgiveness, justice and compassion; a nation founded not by an ethnic group for its own power and benefit, but founded on an ideal derived from a Judeo-Christian world view. It made all the difference to Japan to whom it surrendered.

When a man or woman faces the truth about themselves and makes that fateful choice to surrender, if you surrender to Jesus Christ there is nothing to fear. He is the One who loves us, sacrificed Himself totally for us, and desires to impose on us not slavery and punishment but forgiveness and freedom. If you're struggling with this choice (like the Emperor in his bunker), go ahead and wave the white flag. In the end, it is your only hope.

### **In Harmony with God**

The spirit of surrender is so beautifully and unforgettably modeled for us by our Lord. In our text for today, that dramatic moment of agony and dread in the midnight garden, we see the humanity of Jesus recoiling in dread at the pain and suffering that lay before Him. And yet His will determined to be in absolute harmony with the will of His Heavenly Father—who had sent Him to earth for precisely this mission.

And so He surrendered with these immortal words: “Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.”

Developing in ourselves a spirit of yielding or surrendering to the will of God is not only the necessary and indispensable step to becoming a true Christian. It is also essential for our daily Christian lives. Supplanting our will (our desires, our preferences, our impulses, our habits) with His will as revealed in His Word and brought to our mind and conscience by His Spirit within us, is the best way to live day-by-day. Let’s review in our minds “The Lord’s Prayer,” which we say together regularly when we gather to worship and which many of us whisper daily. Think about the second sentence of that prayer: Is it not a prayer of surrender? “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done.”

This concept of surrender—that learning to surrender to God is the essence of a successful life of faith, and also the most difficult but most critical choice we can make—is one I have been pondering for awhile. I did not expect to find it embedded in a book I was reading recently on American history, but there it was. And I will close by telling you how a profound decision of surrendering to God lay at the very center of the most critical and dangerous moment in American history.

## **No Fear**

Today we have journeyed in our minds from 2017 back to 1945, and now we will go even further back: to 1863. It was Sunday afternoon, July 4. The pivotal battle of Gettysburg had ended the day before. President Lincoln and his son Tad went to an Army hospital in Washington to visit a wounded Union general named Daniel Sickles who had just been shipped in from the battlefield in Pennsylvania. The general’s aide recorded word-for-word the conversation, which has been reprinted in numerous Lincoln biographies. The general asked if the President had been anxious about the battle.

Lincoln said, “When everyone seemed panic-stricken, I went into my room and locked the door and got down on my knees before Almighty God and prayed to Him. I told Him that this was His war. ... And after that, I don’t know how it was and I can’t explain it, but soon a sweet comfort crept into my soul that things would go all right at Gettysburg, and this is why I had no fear.”

I quote this verbatim because it is convincing proof that our greatest President, by this moment, had become a believer in Christ. Some secular historians try to argue that Lincoln was not a man of faith; I believe what I just read is convincing proof they are wrong. Though earlier in his life he had indeed been a skeptic and doubter, and though he had tried mightily, once in the White House, to win the war in his own strength and resources and resolve, Lincoln had finally turned to One far greater than himself. And at his and the nation's darkest hour, he had prayed a prayer of surrender: in effect, our President said to his Lord, "Thy will be done." And having done so, he rose from his knees with a sense of peace. That peace is what awaits us all, if we will surrender to God.

Perhaps, during our time of communion today, someone here will decide to pray the great surrender prayer. Perhaps someone here will decide to stop pursuing their own will in some matter, and instead say as Jesus did in the lonely garden, "I want your will to be done, not mine." ■



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