

As St. Peter tells us in our Epistle reading, the Bible is no ordinary book, but rather it was written by men “as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” The words in the Word of God are never frivolous, unnecessary, or meaningless. Rather, the Holy Spirit guided them all, such that even in little, often unnoticed words and phrases, great meaning can be drawn out.

One of those little things is the use of a similar phrase found both in our Gospel reading from this morning and in the Gospel reading from last week. Two different people say to Jesus, “If you will,” or “If you desire,” or “If you choose,” – all the same meaning.

They’re asking Jesus what it is that He wants. And so by looking at Jesus’ response to these two individuals, we can learn about what it is that God wills, what He wants.

Last week, who was it that spoke these words? We heard from Matthew 8, “When [Jesus] came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before Him, saying, ‘Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.’”

It is a leper who speaks the words, “if you will.” Here’s a man whose disease has rendered him unclean, unable to be around other people, unable to worship with others in the temple, unable to live a normal life. His position is one of misery, loneliness, and suffering.

He’s at a very low point, which the Holy Spirit illustrates in a literary device as He meets Jesus when Jesus is coming down from the mountain. Jesus has been up on the mountain, preaching the majestic Sermon on the Mount, and now is coming down, back down into the sinful, broken world. In that low spot of the world, this leper, afflicted by the effects of sin, comes to Him and pitifully says, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”

In contrast, this week’s Gospel has the words come from the mouth of Peter, up on the Mountain of Transfiguration. Jesus has led Peter, James, and John up onto a mountain and there reveals to them a portion of His heavenly glory.

He shines so brightly that looking at His face is like staring at the sun. His clothing becomes so radiant with holiness that it’s as white as light itself. And the very veil between heaven and earth is pulled back and none other than Moses and Elijah appear there. These two were both spoken of in the Scriptures as prophets prefiguring the Messiah who was to come, and now they are there, these great saints of old, conversing with that Messiah.

On this mountain, the three disciples are given a glimpse into heaven itself. It’s in this context that Peter speaks and says, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

In this glorious moment, Peter says to Jesus that if He wishes – if He wills, same word, just translated differently – Peter will strive to keep this moment going. He’ll work so that, if Jesus wants it, they don’t have to go back down the mountain, but can just stay there, basking in this heavenly splendor.

So, to summarize the contrast, on the one hand we have a man who's at the lowest of the low, at the bottom of the mountain, suffering horribly, and he calls out to Jesus that if Jesus wills it, He can heal him.

On the other hand, we have a man in heavenly glory, at the top of the mountain, gazing upon majesty that is normally reserved only for those who have died and gone into paradise. He tells Jesus that if Jesus wills it, he'll make it so that they can remain in glory.

Both men say to Jesus, "If you will," and yet the words that follow are just as different as their positions from which they address Jesus. With the leper, the question is a confession of both Jesus' power and Jesus' love. He says that, if Jesus desires, He has the power to cure an incurable disease. And the fact that he asks in the first place says that he believes that Jesus would actually have compassion and do something, that Jesus will not just leave him in his misery. The leper's words put the act all on Jesus: "If you will, you (Jesus) can make me clean." The only thing the leper does is ask in faith.

With Peter, the focus is on glory and experiencing it. He's wanting to prolong the moment, stay in the glory. He's not thinking of those still below, just on that moment on the mountain. And Peter's words put the act on himself: "If you wish, I (Peter) will make three tents." Not what Jesus would do out of power and love, but what Peter would do through his own efforts.

The responses received by these requests show us what exactly it is that God wills. Peter isn't even allowed to finish his proposal. While he is still speaking, the whole place is enveloped in a bright cloud and the Father speaks from heaven: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him." God makes it very clear that He did not send His Son to the earth to be exalted in visible glory by all, and neither did He send His Son to simply lord over people on earth and impress them with displays of power.

That this cannot be is not only seen in how the Father cuts off Peter's words, but also in Peter's – and the other disciples' – reaction to the Father's actions. They are basking in the glory, and then the Father increases it, enveloping them in this shining cloud and speaking directly from heaven. How do they respond? Not with increased admiration or joy, but with fear. They are all terrified and fall on their faces, scared to even look at the glory of God.

The point is made, very clearly, that sinful men cannot handle the glory of God. Our corruption causes us to want to flee from God's presence, to hide from His glory. This is seen in our Old Testament text, where the people are afraid to approach Moses when he comes down from speaking with the Lord because his face is shining with a reflection of the glory of the Lord. Even a reflection of the Lord's glory is more than we can handle, much less the fullness of it. Our sin drives us from God's presence, and that is not what our God wills.

Rather, His will is to restore us to Himself, to allow us to be in His presence once more. That is seen in His response to the leper. The leper tells Jesus, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean," and how does Jesus respond? "And Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, 'I will; be clean.'"

It is the Lord's will that this man no longer be separated from others by this uncleanness, but that he be restored to his family, his community, to the worship of God. And the Lord Jesus is willing to touch the man, which would have made Himself unclean, in order to restore him. Jesus desires to cleanse from sin, and is willing to take sin and its effects upon Himself to do so.

In this occasion with the leper, we get a small picture of what Jesus will do on the cross. There, He will take not merely the ceremonial uncleanness of leprosy onto Himself, but the sin of the entire world. Every awful thing that anyone has ever done, every time that you have broken His Law, ignored His Commandments, exalted your will over His will – these all He bore in His body on the tree.

He came down, not just from the Mount of Transfiguration, but from the glorious halls of heaven, down to this world full of people thoroughly infected with the incurable leprosy of sin, and He did so because He wills that you and I and all people be made clean. He humbles Himself and conceals His blinding glory, even allowing Himself to be afflicted with all manner of bodily and spiritual torments, so that we might not fear His presence but rather be brought into it and rejoice in it.

He comes down, so that He might bring us back up with Him. That is what He desires, what He wills.

His will, like His power and His love, is unchanging, and so it guides how He cares for us His people still today. When we confess our sins at the beginning of every Divine Service, we are just like that leper, approaching our God and saying to Him, "If you will, you can make me clean." And because the love He has for you is the love He had for that leper, He responds in the absolution and says, "I will; be clean."

When we bring our children to the font, and when the Holy Spirit works through the Word to bring older children and adults to the font, there again we are saying, "If you will, you can make me clean," and again, He responds according to His unchanging love and unbreakable promises and says, "I will; be clean."

When He comes down from heaven and manifests Himself, His true body and true blood on our altar in His Supper, He doesn't blaze with glory, lest we go blind or be paralyzed with fear. Rather, He humbles Himself that we might approach and even hold Him in our hands and have Him say to us, "I will; be clean."

We dare not mandate our own inventions nor take away His commands, thinking that we could make some silly tents of human reason or emotional appeal to keep Him in. Rather, we trust that His will is to cleanse us from our sins and let us rejoice in His presence. He gathers us onto His mountain on Sundays and gives us His glorious, heavenly gifts, concealed in humble means.

As His people, His Church, we then follow Him down from the mountain. We leave His presence here and go back down, out into the sinful world. As His people, this is a hard thing for us to do, at least to do rightly.

We'd love it if the world were full of glory for us. We want everyone out there to love us like God loves us, to be willing to help us and care for us as He does, to recognize us as God's servants like Moses and Elijah and treat us accordingly.

Or, barring that, we'd like to retreat to a mountaintop somewhere and just let the whole sinful world fall apart, deal with the consequences of their actions, while we in glory could proclaim, "We told you so." Our thoughts are like Peter's, wanting to remain on the mountaintop, not having to deal with sin and death.

But as Christians, Christ's people, that is not His will for us. Rather, His will is that we follow Him. We go to those lost in sin, as Christ goes to those lost in sin. We speak His words to His lost sheep, calling sinners to repentance even though they don't want to hear it, offering hope not grounded in earthly success but in eternal peace with God. We reach out to those afflicted with sin and its effects, seeking to help them both physically and even more so with the cure for sin: the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We must be willing to suffer, just as He was willing to suffer, for after all, it wasn't too long after Jesus had come down from the Mountain of Transfiguration that He was again lifted up, but this time on a cross.

But in all this, we are never alone. Our Lord comes down with us, goes before us, leads us as our Good Shepherd. We simply follow, for we know that just as He was raised and glorified and now sits at the right hand of the Father, we too will be raised and brought back up onto His holy mountain.

The day is coming when we will dwell in His glory, shining as we reflect His light. We will not be struck with terror at His voice but rather will rejoice in it, singing His praises with Moses and Elijah and all who have gone before us. Our God's will, His desire, what He wants, is to have all His children gathered into His glorious presence forever.

In the name of Jesus, amen.