

Matthew 26:36-46  
Jeremiah 18:1-12

## HAVE IT YOUR OWN WAY

So many scenarios come to mind in the wake of that phrase, “Have it your own way.”

Picture the closing scene of a bitter argument between two friends. One finally gives up, says “Have it your own way!” and stalks off. That phrase comes down hard, like there is nothing more to be said.

In a former parish, I knew a man whose son was a reckless driver. Several times the boy’s license was revoked. The father heckled and threatened his son, but he never quite worked himself up to take the car away. Nothing could induce the boy to lessen his speed, until one day he couldn’t make the turn. How many tombstones might properly bear the inscription: Have it your own way.

Yet the same phrase stands behind many of our heroes. The inventions, the breakthroughs, the battles won, and the disasters averted rest quite often on men and women whose purpose was stubborn and unyielding – people who insisted, in some manner or another, on having it their own way. We conclude, looking back, that their way was noble and good.

Some of us have saved our lives or escaped from great trouble or calamity by listening to someone who did not want us to have our own way.

Sometimes we have shamed ourselves and forsaken our rightful responsibility or our proper purpose by letting pressure or disapproval or unpleasantness talk us out of following our own way.

That phrase surrounds us wherever we go, like the Mona Lisa smile. Sometimes it is bitter and mocking, and sometimes it is admiring or caressing. But there is no escape from it. Look at the people around you. Do you know that every single one of them wants his or her own way? Each one has a different way – a different style – of going at that. Yet it is nonetheless true of each and every one of us. It always has been.

We humans are famous for wanting to have things our own way. It is a fortunate thing in many ways – a wonderful quality. We would

not wish to be creatures who had no will of our own – who dreamed no dreams, held no hopes, felt no inspiration, had no vision of how things might be. It is good that we want our own way when our way is good. The problems arise when what we want is not very farsighted or conscious enough of the repercussions that will fall on others. Sometimes we want our own way when the thing we want is not even good for *us*.

Nevertheless, we want what we want. We want our own way, and the sooner the better. And all the people around us want their own way too. What a marvelous, exhilarating, heavenly thing when all of our ways seem to fit together for a while. It doesn't seem to happen very often or last for very long, but it is pure grace and joy when it happens. That is the ideal goal of every government, the hope of every marriage, the sought-after condition of every business and organization. If only all our endeavors could fit together in harmony and peace! If only we could each have our own way without destroying or upsetting someone else's way. If only we could each have our own way without having to feel guilty when we get it!

Such harmony times are rare, we all know. We live in a world rife with alienation and different ways – the biblical word is “sin.” For that reason, even when our ways are in harmony we frequently do not know it or trust it. That is part of the condition of life here, and it is part of the conditioning we get here. Within this context, I would like to suggest that we each end up fitting into one of four categories. I realize that when we categorize, we also caricature, but categorizing can be helpful (and the name or title used here for each category is arbitrary).

### I.) THE SILENT

In this category, I am thinking of those of us – and all of us at times – who quit trying: the suspended, the shut-off, the cop-outs, the walking dead. There are those who give up on ever getting their own way. Life seems to have dealt them blow after blow in such a way that they conclude it will always be so – until finally, unwilling to settle for less and unable to imagine that they will ever succeed in having anything their own way, they go silent. They quit trying. I call them THE SILENT. I do not mean they never talk; they just do not say anything. Why bother when we already know it will not do any good or change anything?

So think of THE SILENT not in terms of a noise factor but in terms of a silence toward life itself. THE SILENT may make a lot of noise or they may be terribly shy. But the thing that counts is that their hope – the dreams and goals and purposes – has gone silent. THE SILENT do little or nothing for anyone else, and nobody is able to do much for them. They request little, receive little, give little. (You know what Jesus says about those three!) Underneath the surface, at least, they go through life in a pout – having wanted the moon; having concluded that they were powerless to acquire it or even approach it; having realized that nobody would ever give it to them. They simply survive, leaving dreams and destiny and purpose to others. Most often THE SILENT are very angry with God. God should have made it different. Or God should do something about it now – fix it so they can have it their own way. But THE SILENT do not voice this anger very often or very easily. If we get angry, we start to want to do something about it. If we already know we cannot do anything about it, we shut the anger down along with everything else. Of course, it comes out in arthritis and cancer and heart attacks, but that is not as bad as facing the primary loss of hope.

### II.) THE SENTRY

The second category I think of as sentries – the watchdogs. Those who are THE SENTRY have also concluded that they cannot have it their own way, yet they cannot accept this conclusion. It seems to them that other people get their way, and so it seems unjust that they should not also have things as they want them. So THE SENTRY decide, “If I cannot have it my way, by god nobody else is going to have it their way either!”

So THE SENTRY go through life working very hard and spending lots of time and energy making sure that nobody is having it too easy; making sure that nobody is getting what they want or feeling pleased about it; making sure that “justice” prevails – at least the justice that says everybody should have a hard time. So THE SENTRY stand guard, watching, pacing up and down, ready at any moment to challenge good fortune, privilege, or anything going well. THE SENTRY no longer have goals of their own. Their only remaining purpose is to make sure that nobody else’s goals are accomplished.

At first glance THE SENTRY appear in a darker light than they deserve. THE SENTRY have a good motive. They are trying to cure injustice. Deep inside they believe that if they mess things up for other

people long enough, eventually everybody will get together and fix the injustice. At least they will give in and let them have their way too.

### III. THE SERVANT

The third category can be characterized as servants, sellouts, subservient. Like the other categories, they are people who do not get their own way and have stopped trying for that, but their reaction is different. They say, “If I can’t have it my own way, maybe I can help somebody else achieve their goal. At least that will be some satisfaction, some accomplishment, some chance for celebration and vicarious pleasure.”

Some of those who are THE SERVANT are bitter and some are joyful, depending upon how much they believe in the purpose of the person or the group they decide to serve. In either case, those who are THE SERVANT spend life no longer trying to have their own way but seeking, rather, to strengthen the hand of someone else. (Into this category fall a few statesmen, some mothers, an ever-decreasing number of wives, an increasing number of husbands, and all Christians. You may cheer or boo as you like. I am only trying to be descriptive.)

### IV.) THE STUBBORN

Not a good enough choice of words, but THE STUBBORN are the holdouts – the folk who continue to think that they are special and that somehow they can manage to have things their own way. So they are self-centered, stubborn, domineering, aggressive. They give the impression that they think themselves superior to others.

THE STUBBORN do not see themselves as too weak or helpless to get their own way. Generally they spend their lives going after what they want, getting their own way at least often enough to keep them striving, and going into battle with whatever or whoever stands in the way. They organize, browbeat, manipulate, overpower, and even destroy in order to get their own way. If somebody gets hurt, THE STUBBORN do not seem to grieve much. After all, those folk should have been helping anyway. At least they should not have stood in the way.

THE STUBBORN are not as evil as they look on the surface either. Their inner conviction is that “If I had my way in this wicked world, I would straighten things out and everybody would be better off.”

Playing with these four categories can be fun. It is amusing, for instance, to chuckle over how richly THE SENTRY and THE STUBBORN may deserve each other. It is less amusing to contemplate what happens when THE SERVANT tries to serve THE SILENT. We certainly hope our children will not end up in such marriages. It ceases to be amusing at all when we try to figure out what kind of marriage would be good. There is not any other ground to stand on. We all end up somewhere in the four categories. And none of the four are terribly appealing. We all wish we could have it our own way. And the whole drama of life can be seen in that longing and our reactions and responses to it.

This strange battleground – this endless conflict of wills and interests – can get disheartening, if not downright depressing. We have the choice of being cop-outs, complainers, Milquetoasts, or little Napoleons? Have it your own way, indeed! So it is fascinating to contemplate what does in fact happen to each of these four categories when God enters the picture – when the Holy Spirit becomes a conscious reality for a person caught in one of these categories.

### Ia.) THE SILENT

The cop-out leaps to a new dimension. THE SILENT wait patiently for the Lord. *“The remnant shall remain!” “Keep the lamps trimmed and full, for you do not know at what hour your Master shall appear.”* No longer the walking dead, THE SILENT watch and wait for a great HOPE. They become the mystics – the saints whose lives are so little in this world that all who come in contact with them are reminded of the world to come.

The personality is not unrecognizable. The response and the attitude toward the world are not greatly changed. The category is still there, yet look what a change has come over the person! With what subtle strokes God changes darkness into light. There is no massacre of flesh and blood, or of will or spirit. Nothing has changed, yet all is different – new. A person reborn with a mission and purpose: to watch and to wait; to contemplate and get close to the wisdom and source of all things. The person has done no massive overhaul of their life or personality. He is the same old cop-out, only with faith in God. Now we can all learn and benefit from him. His life speaks truth and his cop-out is for the Kingdom. We think God is impossibly demanding, yet how little God actually requires to change minus into plus. We call it “faith.”

IIa.) THE SENTRY

What happens to THE SENTRY? Is it their inevitable fate to wander the earth with boundless energy, hacking at people who have it too good? The Holy Spirit comes and what do we see but prophets and reformers. Every age has its Jeremiahs and Ezekiels and Amoses. Each one is THE SENTRY whom God has touched.

Again, the personality is not hard to recognize. The response and the attitude toward the world are about the same. The category is still there. To be sure, the whining complaint sounds more like a clear call to repent. The bitching sounds more like great-hearted compassion, and the perspective seems to have broadened considerably. But still, there is no overhaul of personality like we keep thinking God will require. No gifts are required which were not already there. Conversion is so subtle. Rebirth just quietly blows the dross away. It is the same old SENTRY, only with faith in God.

IVa.) THE STUBBORN

Can you imagine what would happen to THE STUBBORN, the domineering – the people who go on insisting on having it their own way? You think that's too much for God? That if *you* are that way, you will have to be mesmerized and remade from scratch? Did Moses stop dominating? Did Paul stop organizing and issuing orders after the Damascus Road? Did Luther suggest taking a vote on where he should stand?

THE STUBBORN bother and scare us most because sometimes they are Hitler and sometimes they are Gandhi; sometimes they organize the Inquisition and sometimes they organize the Red Cross. But they are all the same category. They all want their own way no matter what the odds or who likes it.

Many people think the world would be better off if we did not have THE STUBBORN. I think the world would be long past all freedom or hope if it were not for these hard-nosed “drivers” of God.

IIIa.) THE SERVANT

You noticed, I suppose, that I skipped this third category. That is because when God touches us, in some way or another we all end up as THE SERVANT in some way, on some new level. We can still underline “sellout” and “subservient,” but the subtle change is there again.

## HAVE IT YOUR OWN WAY

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It is a miserable, soul-shriveling thing to serve, to sell out, to be subservient to other people. It is a joyous, exciting, fulfilling thing to serve the Living God. Sometimes, on the surface, that even appears to mean serving the same people in the same way. But it feels very different.

Can you remember what it was like for a human being to have nothing and no one to serve? Think about it! Meditation for a Sunday afternoon: “Nothing and no one to serve.” That is Hell at its worst, as anybody who has tried it can testify. In this context, we can affirm that the secret of LIFE is learning how and when and whom to serve – and to whom to say “Have it your own way.”

That’s what this sermon is about: the difference between God having God’s way and us having ours. For years we think it will be horrible and debilitating if we have to report-in to anybody, take orders from anybody, serve anybody. But across the world and down through the ages, it has always turned out to be the most beautiful, freeing, and soul-lifting experience in life when we finally say to God: “Have it your own way.”

I do not know the WAY; I cannot see that well or that far. The only way to truly have my way is for God to have God’s way. So one day we return unto the Lord saying, “Please, I know I fought it before – rebelled, threatened, pouted, and swore I would never want YOU guiding my life. But please, Lord. Have it your own way.”