

## "WHAT ABOUT GOD'S WILL?"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California  
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Romans 8:18-30

I accepted the appointment to this church as minister because I believed it was God's will for my life. We moved here on faith, trusting God to work out the details. Our housing needs in Palo Alto were met miraculously when you formed a corporation to purchase the half we couldn't afford of a house. Our house in Modesto did not sell quickly, according to plan; but we moved our belongings in November when a renter was found. As the house still hasn't sold, even with a renter, we find ourselves with a negative of \$600 per month. What about God's will? Why this wrinkle - or, in Bob Medearis' terminology, a hiccup? Why isn't the plan smooth, without blemish, wrinkle or hiccup?

A young mother is discovered to have terminal cancer and leaves two young children. Is this God's will? A man loses his business; he spent his life, energy, devotion, expertise, but times are hard, and he loses it all. Is this God's will? Are famines, earthquakes, airplane crashes, children's deaths, God's will? Is everything that happens to you God's will, part of a master plan? How do you deal with tragedy, disappointment, setbacks, illness, the death of loved ones? What about God's will? What is God doing? How do you make sense? What is the relationship between what happens to you and God's will?

Historically, there are two answers: one at each end of the spectrum. On the one hand, are those who believe that God is omnipotent, all powerful and in control of the universe. As such then, everything that happens is God's will. God is therefore cruel, heartless, far from good. Or, these believers say, we don't see the broader picture. At the other end of the spectrum are those who believe that God is impotent, weak and powerless. This is essentially the answer Rabbi Kushner gives in his very popular book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People. He concludes that God is essentially powerless and that we should "forgive the world for not being perfect, forgive God for not making a better world...and go on living despite it all".

The Bible gives a more satisfactory alternative. No, all the questions are not answered, but the biblical authors were more interested in being practical, than theoretical or philosophical. The Epistle lesson for this morning is especially pertinent - Romans 8:18-30.

Immediately we are confronted with the fact that many of us living today in relatively comfortable America and the Peninsula have a false view of life. Our expectations are unrealistic and unrelated to what really is. What do I mean? Many of us expect life to be easy. We expect to be comfortable, serene, healthy, and when we're not, we wonder why God is punishing us. We somehow think that if we are good, life will be good. We are then baffled and confused when tragedy strikes; blaming God or acquiescing and saying, "It must be God's will." Where did we get such ideas?

Look at verse 18. "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." Paul recognizes that this present age is accompanied with suffering. You can expect to suffer. Life is not a rose garden. Hardship, illness, suffering are part of the fabric of life. Why?

Verse 20. "For the creation was subjected to futility." "Lose its purpose" is the Good News translation. And, Paul says in verse 19, "this was the will of God who subjected it to hope."

Now we are in deep water. Why was it God's will that the created order lose its way, its purpose? Paul does not explain; for, again, the Bible is more interested in describing the situation and offering salvation - the way out - than it is in answering "why" questions. Looking at it from the perspective of salvation, the freedom to choose was given to humankind in creation. God of his own free will voluntarily limits himself so that humans will be more than puppets and will freely choose relationship with God, rather than evil. So, we see that the human experience, the human situation, is God's will. Namely, God created the kind of world where people have the opportunity, the possibility, to oppose God and to destroy his very creation.

What happened and is happening? Paul describes the kind of world in which we live with vivid language. Verse 21, "bondage to decay". It is decaying, deteriorating, reverting back to chaos. Genesis tells us that God is creating order out of chaos, and notice how constant a battle, and how quickly chaos and decay take over. What happens when you neglect your yard a few months or years? It reverts to chaos - weeds - and it spreads like a cancer. What happens to a building, a house, when it is neglected, when maintenance and repairs are ignored? What happens to your marriage, what happens to your school work, when you let it go, get behind, ignore it? What happens to your body when you fail to feed it properly, rest it, exercise it? Decay, disease, runs rampant. Paul calls this situation "decay, bondage to decay, or chaos".

We in our simple expectation that life is rosy also choose to ignore evil: call it the force of evil, or the devil, or satan. It has not been popular to discuss the devil lately. When was the last time you heard a sermon on the devil? The devil is not a man or person, but is an evil force that seeks to destroy you, your home, your body, your faith with the decay that destroys, that causes cancer, accidents, failures. That is the kind of world in which we live and "groan with pain" as Paul writes. But, the pain is not futile.

Paul uses a fascinating image in this passage to describe the stance you and I must make. How do you live in the midst of decay? How do you stand against the devil? How do you make sense of it? In verse 22, Paul writes, "we know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail." The Good News version translates "groaning in travail" as "the pain of childbirth". Isn't that a powerful image? The whole world is in the process of childbirth. No man really understands the image here; but, I had the privilege of being with Ellie when Craig was born. I watched her in great pain. She struggled, she fought, she pushed. She didn't give up, acquiesce, resign herself to the will of God. No, she fought with all her might in order to fulfill the will of God, to culminate, to realize the will of God.

When we have this understanding of life, then the Beatitudes make sense. Last week we looked at the Beatitudes and Jesus' observation of how completely happy and fulfilled in God are those who are poor in spirit, mourn, hunger and thirst for righteousness, disciplined, etc. Because of the nature of this world - attacked by the devil, beset by decay and deterioration, threatened by chaos - to do God's will, to live in Christ, to endure persecution, is to experience joy at a deep level. For the struggle is the will of God. We are struggling against the forces of evil. We are in labor struggling to bring the kingdom of God, God's will to birth. That is our hope.

The pain of childbirth is endured because of the hope that soon the pain will be over, and a baby, a precious new life, will be born. That is why there is joy in living the Beatitudes, because of the hope of victory. Verse 18, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed." Verse 23, "We groan inwardly as we wait for adoption." Verse 24, "In this hope we are saved." "Hiccups" in one's smooth plan, the struggle with cancer, sorrow over a loved one's death, randomness of accidents, are all endured by struggling, fighting, pushing with all your might, in the light of the hope that God's will be done!

This is not the end, however, of the passage. We do not finish here with the struggle and pain for you to bear all alone. What is God doing? God too is suffering. Keep the cross in mind. God is not sitting majestically on some throne above it all "willing" this and "willing" that. No, God is not removed from life. God is suffering also, as Jesus did on the cross, agonizing, weeping, struggling, to bring salvation, to bring healing, to bring order. Bishop Edward Galvin has written, "you will never put your foot down on any part of the road of suffering but you will find God's footprints there before you."

In the midst of the decay, deterioration, evil and chaos of life, God is "working for good". Verse 28, "We know that in everything God works for good." The King James Version read, "All things work together for good." That is not always true. But, in everything that happens, God is in there working for good with those who love him, who cooperate with him through prayer. Verse 26 has a beautifully moving description of prayer, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." God even helps you pray. God helps you open yourself to the power of God to help you.

What about God's will? Rather than blame God for what happens because we live in a world of anti-God forces; rather than blindly accepting everything as the will of God; cooperate with God in the fight, the struggle, the suffering, to bring order in your life and in the world. Live in the hope that an incomparable new age, new time is coming, and for it we labor as in childbirth, confident that "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Live in hope. Live with confidence. Live in praise. Rejoice. Life is good. Victory is assured. Praise God. Amen and amen!

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