

**“WRESTLING WITH THE WILL OF GOD”**

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister  
First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

“How was it that you were called to ministry?” That’s the question people are most curious about as they learn of my calling. The confirmands two years ago had me tell the story three times. On the heels of that, the next comment follows. “You likely knew you’d become a pastor ever since you were a boy, didn’t you?”

In my case, as a boy, I thought I would play center for the Detroit Red Wings or become an attorney like Perry Mason. As a late teen, I thought I might become a professor or work for Chrysler Corporation, as they were courting me. It wasn’t until I was 22 that I recognized God intended me to be a parish minister. Then I for one could hardly believe it. When I returned for my 20th high school reunion, I wasn’t exactly voted the *least* likely to be ordained. But I wasn’t so far off either.

When people hear that story, they frown. They frown because they like to believe that unlike them, some people—as in we clergy—are experts at God’s will; that for us it comes early and easily, effortlessly and obviously. That, unlike them, we quickly have razor sharp surety about what God wills. As I preach today on God’s will, I won’t puncture all of those balloons. Yes, I have learned the difference between projecting our own desires and seeking God’s. But it is never easy. It is never without effort. It always requires testing. It will always make me tremble.

*God’s will.* The sound of the two words ring out like a chisel and sledgehammer carving letters into tablets of stone, don’t they? *God’s will.* It has an intimidating ring of authority for most of us. So maybe the first thing I want to do is to soften that impression a bit. When we look at God’s will unfold through the Bible, for example, God is no haughty, commanding Oz bellowing from smoke and flames. God is more of a poem, a story or an encounter. God’s love is intensely personal, perhaps breaking our hearts, but then thrilling them yet before everything shakes out. God’s love brings us to our knees, yes, but it’s not distant or remote. His love is steady, personal, strong, brave, sorrowful, hopeful, joyful, and ever enduring.

As we ponder our daily rhythm, God’s will seems shrouded in mystery, even elusive. Isaiah said God’s ways are not our ways said in a loud voice. But when we read closely the story of God with Israel and then at work in the early church, this self-revealing God seeks to be more accessible to us than we wanted or sought.

We heard this in our Epistle lesson. “God has made known to us the mystery of his will.” (Eph. 1.9) Elsewhere, Paul wrote, “Ever since the creation of the world (God’s) invisible nature...has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.” (Romans 1.20) If we want to know what God wills, maybe we start with considering what God has already willed, the habits at the heart of God’s desires. Would you like a glimpse into God’s motives from the very beginning? Here I like the African-American poet James Weldon Johnson and his rendering of creation.

And God stepped out on space,  
 And he looked around and said:  
     I'm lonely—  
     I'll make me a world.  
 And as far as the eye of God could see  
     Darkness covered everything,  
     Blacker than a hundred midnights  
     Down in a cypress swamp.

    Then God smiled.  
     And light broke,  
 And the darkness rolled up on one side  
 And the light stood shining on the other,  
 And God said, That's good!

Then God reached out and took the light in his hands,  
 And God rolled the light around in his hands  
     Until he made the sun;  
 And he set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.  
 And the light that was left from making the sun  
     God gathered it up in a shining ball  
     And flung it against the darkness,  
 Spangling the night with moon and stars.  
     Then down between  
     The darkness and the light  
     He hurled the world;  
 And God said: That's good.

Johnson helps us realize there was a time when God asked, "What kind of God am I going to be?" God has wishes. God makes choices. God delights. God grieves. God is pleased and displeased. God makes promises and keeps them. And God's first primeval urge to create something was the beginning of his will. But here's the essential part so far as you and I go: *God seeks to be in personal relationship with us.* And loving us as God does—more than we love ourselves--our being separated from God pains God deeply apart from how much it hurts us.

We all know that as we love another, we have desires for the good of that other. You desire the best for the one you love. You desire love from the one you love. You long for excellence in the other. Friends, the origin of God's will is like this.

It pierces my heart how often I lose track of God's motives and purposes in the hurley-burley of everyday living. Details and pressures intrude on us and distort things, don't they? Before we know it, we begin asking: is God really in control? Frankly, this is not a great question. It is too mechanistic for the mystery of God. Humankind has only asked if "God is in control" since the Industrial Revolution, when we built trains and trolleys, and projected on God a role over creation like a

giant stationmaster. My faithful grandparents on their farm—with drought over their tender seedlings and heavy storms at harvest time—never asked “is God in control?” But because we ask it so much, I will grapple with the question anyway.

I wasn't crazy about the movie *Forrest Gump*, but there was one scene that spoke to me. Forrest wonders aloud over the grave of his young wife and muses, “Jenny, I don't know if momma was right, or if it's Lieutenant Dan. I don't know if we each have a destiny, or if we're all just floatin' around accidental-like on a breeze, but I think it's maybe both. Maybe both is happening at the same time.”

You know, love can do many things. But when love becomes too controlling, it ceases to be love. Paul wrote that love does not insist on its own way. Is God in control? Ultimately, I believe in the big picture, yes. God is finally in control when it comes to our destiny. Ultimately, God will receive and comfort us. God is strong like this. But is God in control of nitty-gritty details day in and day out? Was God in control last night when I rose at 3:47 am, trudged to the bathroom, buried my little toe into the bedpost and almost broke it? No. Or at least I certainly hope not.

We cannot say whatever happens equals God's will. At times I do God's will, at times I don't, and the same for you. *God chooses not to determine everything.* This is called freedom, and it allows us to receive God's gifts without coercion. Otherwise, we'd all become criminally insane every time a child dies. But God is far from uninvolved. Our God cares how things will turn out more than we do.

God gazes upon us like the smitten parent watching his daughter at her ballet recital as she sashays among the two-dozen ballerinas encircling after an *echappe*. Of course, there are lots of little girls on that stage, but the parent sees just one—*my* daughter, the love of *my* life, my precious, *my* beloved. Except God is able to pull this off for almost seven billion people simultaneously, not to mention the spider on the windowsill and that pesky dog barking away in the distance. His eye is on the sparrow, as the stellar old hymn has it, and I know he watches me.

We usually begin to ask about the will of God around one of two questions. One, what does God want me to do with my life? Two, why do bad things happen? Jesus is the answer to both of the questions. The Jesus who didn't explain evil, but triumphed over it in a hidden way. The Jesus who didn't crush and eradicate evil, but who bore our sin on himself. The Jesus who freely offered his life despite our ingratitude and worse. The Jesus who said not-my-will-be-done-but-thine-be-done. Notice I say “he *is* the answer”, not “he developed and gave the answer.” When it comes to Jesus, it's less about his teaching, more about who he truly is.

St. Francis of Assisi, seeking to discover God's claim upon his life, would visit a small, dilapidated church called San Damiano. He went daily for many months and knelt before a crucifix, praying to Jesus. He prayed over and over the same prayer, waiting and listening as he spoke. How instructive for our generation of instant gratification! Francis prayed, kept praying, kept reading and kept listening.

Most high,  
glorious God  
enlighten the darkness of my heart.  
and give me, Lord  
correct faith,  
certain hope,  
perfect charity,  
wisdom and perception,  
that I may do  
what is truly your most holy will.  
Amen.