

“The Mystery of God’s Will”

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Friends, the bulk of my sermon this morning is actually a letter I wrote over a quarter of a century ago to the cousin of a dear friend of mine. This friend’s name was Chris and her cousin’s name was Gail who at the time was struggling to understand how God was working in her life. You see, she was a long-time Christian and was even serving as Clerk of Session at her own Presbyterian Church. Like Job in the Old Testament, she merely assumed that if you loved Jesus and did good in the world, God would bless you in this life, while if you did the OPPOSITE, you could expect punishments of some kind. And so she THOUGHT she understood something about how God works in the world, that was, until her husband suddenly passed away after a short illness and then it was discovered that she herself had developed cancer. This chain of events had caused her to question, not just GOD’S WILL but even the EXISTENCE of God himself. Well Chris, this friend of mine, in conversation with her cousin, shared that she had a friend who was a Presbyterian minister who might possibly shed some light on the subject for her. Gail had already spoken with her OWN pastor about her growing doubts but his response didn’t seem to be of much help. Gail told Chris that she’d welcome anything I had to share on the subject that might help her better come to terms with her illness and her relationship with God.

After hearing about Gail’s plight and the deep and serious questions it had produced for her, I sat down one evening and devoted whatever thoughts I had on the subject to paper, a topic I MYSELF had spent years questioning. I think I wanted as much to clarify my OWN thoughts about God’s will as much as trying to offer some clarity for her regarding it. So many books have already been written and thousands of sermons preached on it and STILL there is no consensus, no common agreement as to what it is and how the mind of God operates. Pastors and theologians have come up with DIFFERENT MODELS to try to explain it such as when they break it down into different compartments- all of them insufficient. They will explain that there is the “INTENTIONAL” will of God and that has to do with God’s “intention” or “ideal purpose” for creation. It is to recognize that God desires nothing less than peace and joy and hope in each of our lives. Then they say there is a “CIRCUMSTANTIAL” will of God, that because God has given us some degree of free will, God therefore allows for mistakes and even catastrophic events to take place in our lives. If God were to rescue us from every little or even big tragedy that occurred in our lives, it would deny our free will and turn us into little more than robots. And then they assert that there is God’s “ULTIMATE” will and that is the belief that in the end, God will eventually win out, that all things work together for good in spite of all the evil and tragedy and suffering in the world.

Such compartmentalizing can be useful but it can also be a lot more CONFUSING, even to pastors such as MYSELF. I prefer to approach this subject the same way Jesus did regarding “the kingdom of God.” Just as he refused to come straight out and define it for his disciples, preferring instead to offer hints about it in his teachings and parables, so might we approach the

idea of the will of God in the same way. And what kind of hints does Jesus make about God's will. He says, for instance, that the WILL of his Father is that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life. Thus we know that God wants the very best for ALL his children. Jesus further states that not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" shall enter heaven but only those who DO the WILL of his Father. He also says that whoever does the WILL of his Father in heaven is his brother and sister and mother. But his DEFINITIVE statement on the matter is when he comes right out and declares, "If you have seen me, you have also seen the Father," and "I and the Father are one." Hence, if you REALLLY want to understand the will of God; if you long to see God's purposes accomplished here on earth--in our lives, our congregation, and in world at large--then understand that God's will is ULTIMATELY revealed in and through his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus came to do the Father's will, and as we make him the beginning and goal of OUR lives, then the FATHER'S WILL shall become central to our OWN as well. Well, after an evening of trying to consolidate my thoughts on the matter, this was the letter I ended up composing:

January 11, 1998

Dear Gail,

Chris shared with me the close relationship the two of you have and even let me read the message you delivered about your faith journey and how you arrived at the church you currently attend. I have to say that I found it to be very inspiring. I explained to Chris that to serve as a Clerk of Session is a high honor and tremendous responsibility, and anyone who assumes that the position is merely a secretarial one understands neither our polity or theology. So, it's not only nice to engage a fellow Christian but a sister Presbyterian as well.

She told me about the talk the two of you had over the intractable question of divine providence and free will. Certainly, anyone who claims to have any inside knowledge of this mystery is only fooling him or herself. Both historically and theologically, the problem of trying to reconcile the two- what God's intention for our lives may be and the freedom we have to either accept or reject it, has bedeviled philosophers and theologians since time immemorial. I prefer to think of it as an "antinomy." An antinomy is when two seemingly contradictory ideas can't be resolved but must exist in constant, creative tension with each other without any real harmonization; both are true and necessary. I've spent the past 25 years struggling with this issue and how I've resolved it in my OWN mind is about the best I can offer.

We inhabit a world in which we are free to exercise some latitude of freedom in terms of the choices we make while paradoxically, we ALSO sit under the providential or predestined will of God, meaning it seems that there are some choices made for us which we often don't quite understand. Actually, most choices we make are never made in a vacuum- for the most part, they are the result of a certain conditioning, forces, and influences which are operative in our lives, conscious and subconscious. Much of my nature has been shaped and formed under the sway of personal experiences or certain beliefs and traditions that I've either inherited from my parents, my church, my larger social environment, or arrived at through my own personal studies. This is why the Church becomes so important in one's life- it is intended to serve as a

powerful force in the molding of one's character and life.

I agree with our Lord that our understanding of how free will--to the extent we truly ARE free--operates in mysterious conjunction with God's will for us can best be illustrated through examples rather than some long theological explanation. Though I grew up in the Presbyterian Church, when I turned 15, I convinced myself that I was an atheist and that the concept of God was actually too preposterous for any clear-thinking person to accept; that it was merely a projection of people's deepest fears, aspirations, and beliefs. That lasted until I turned 20 and found myself in a church in upstate N.Y. I attended an evening service with my aunt only as a favor to her, not because I wanted to be there. But at the end of that service, something seemed to speak to my heart and, getting on my knees, I simply prayed, "God, if there IS a God, help me." Before I even got up from off my knees, I had a feeling that someone, something had claimed me and was saying in effect, "David, you're mine and we're about to begin a marvelous adventure together." I had the strange impression that not only was there a God, but that God would also be there to help me through some perilous waters I was then treading. In fact, it was a feeling that only grew and intensified such that by the end of the week, I knew I wasn't going back to Rutgers University for my junior year of studies but would be pursuing the MINISTRY instead. For the past quarter of a century, I have been active in various kinds of ministry, trying to learn a little bit more about who it was that claimed me that evening, learn more about this crazy world we live in, and what God's will for my life must be.

When I look back to my "conversion" experience, I realize now that it was not my introduction to God for the first time, for God had actually been present to me throughout the twenty years that led up to that night. Rather, it signified my recognition that God had been there the WHOLE TIME- sustaining me, leading me, and correcting me, even though I stubbornly refused to acknowledge him. I liken it to the planting of a seed in the ground. When you look at a seed, it appears at first as nothing more than a dry, shriveled up husk, something akin to a small pebble. You find it hard to believe that it could possibly contain anything resembling life in it. But plant it, water it, add nutrients and sunlight, and in time it cracks the casing and begins its slow and inexorable journey upwards. Then one day, it breaks through the surface of the soil and in amazement you say to yourself, "Aha! There was life in that shriveled up old seed the whole time- only I didn't know it."

Well I've come to believe that faith operates in much the same way- one reason why Jesus compared faith to a seed. We often grow oblivious to the fact that God is real and operating in our lives as we can't see, hear, smell, touch or taste him. But then one day, that which was germinating just below the surface breaks through the topsoil of our lives and we discover that not only there IS a God, but that God's been down there--in our heart and soul--taking root and germinating the whole time, waiting to break through the surface and make his appearance known to us. My conversion experience was thus my "Aha!"- the realization that God was working in and through me, even when I forgot, cursed, ran from, or dismissed him. I now see how God works very personally and uniquely with each one of us, and when we DO discover his presence and learn of his unwillingness to give up on us, we can only recognize it and celebrate it and ultimately respond to it with gratitude and love.

Another example from my life involves courtship and matrimony. As a single man (I was then a bachelor), I often hear people tell me, "David, just be patient. There's that one special woman out there with your name written on her heart and God will one day lead you to her." Well, to tell the truth, I have NEVER believed that. I know that there's hundreds, perhaps THOUSANDS of women out there who would be just as suitable a mate for me as that "one special woman" people seem to think exists specifically for me. I run across them every day and had I been so inclined, one of them would have been my wife already. However, I believe that when you DO meet someone you care for and want to become serious with, if it ever gets to the point of marriage, then THAT WOMAN, the one you have committed your heart and soul to, BECOMES God's partner for your life. It then BECOMES God's will that I endeavor to love that person as I love myself, to help make that relationship as solid as it can possibly be. Thus, God's will, insofar as I see it, is not the particular man or woman God "sends" your way but the COMMITMENT one makes once the two persons exchange their vows and become husband and wife.

But one final example I have involves death. A number of years ago, my clerk of session in my first pastorate lost her grandson in a terrible motorcycle accident. He was killed in the twilight of the day, riding on land that was marked as "no trespassing." At the end of the road was a wire stretched across it to keep cars and trucks from entering the property. He did not see the wire and rode right into it, nearly decapitating himself. At the funeral, his grandparents made the comment to me that the only way they could accept this terrible tragedy was to believe that it was surely God's will. I didn't say anything about it then but waited a month. Then I went over to their house and had a long talk to them about it.

I said, "I refuse to believe that such accidents and tragedies are 'God's will.' I no more believe that God wanted your grandson to die any more than God wants children to be born with spina bifida or develop cancers or for wars to break out." Accidents, tragedies, illness, setbacks, etc. occur because we live in a world that is broken and dangerous. In fact, that's what "under sin" means- to inhabit a world that is broken, a domain which doesn't function the way God had originally intended it to. All around us and even within us, there is natural, moral, emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual chaos at work. Their grandson died because he was careless- he was riding on land he should not have been on and a terrible accident occurred. If someone develops lung cancer after smoking three packs a day for forty years, that's not God's will that he contracted the disease- it was his OWN fault. Again, that was not GOD'S doing but their grandson's. HOWEVER, I DO believe that if we give God an opportunity to enter into our tragedies and sufferings, he can then take what seems like an entirely meaningless and tragic event and transform it into something redemptive- so that we not only LEARN from our sufferings and tragedies but can even GROW from them. Through such events, our hearts and sympathies are softened and expanded so we can identify and empathize with those who sorrow around us more. Gail, the most beautiful people I have ever met are those who have suffered the most in their lives; you've probably experienced that YOURSELF. And when we die--for whatever reason that might be--it is never because God "takes" us, but rather God is there to "receive" us. There's a huge gulf between the notion of God "taking" us and God "receiving" us when we leave this life- we must never believe that God intentionally takes our life, that "our

time was up” so to speak.

As you can see, according to the gospel of Dave Wood, there are no easy answers, especially where the question of divine will and free will are involved. I know my own feelings on the subject still remain unformed and incomplete and will CONTINUE to evolve as my life goes on. Perhaps, I've left you a little more confused- which I never believe is a bad thing. However, let me leave you with a passage I read recently from the writings of H. Richard Niebuhr- one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century:

"Sometimes everyone who has taught through spoken and written words needs to look back on his activity with the question, 'What has been the intention of my work?' Not, 'What did I intend?' I always intended something very specific--to gain clarity or give some clarity about this point or that--to satisfy my curiosity about some puzzle--to understand some relationship. I have had and have intentions but what does all the work taken together intend? This is Kierkegaard's question in *Point of View for my Work as an Author*...What was the intention behind all my intentions, the fundamental intention which I represented rather than willed, the thing to which I was committed rather than committed myself? In UNBELIEF I call that intention fate--what was I fated to do--in CONFIDENCE I call it divine governance."

In other words, behind all our willing and acting, there is a mysterious will or intention that guides and give shape to even our OWN willing and acting- and that is God's providential will. I hope this helps you some. Feel free to share any other questions that come your way and I'll do my best to confuse you some more.

Sincerely,
Dave

Well friends, I want to end my sermon with a quote I discovered some years ago and which I keep printed on a 3x5 card in the middle of my favorite Bible. I do so in order to remind myself what's most important about my walk with Christ and how I'm convinced his will works its way out in MY life; maybe you'll find it to be just as instructive as I have. It reads like this:

"The real issue in life is NOT the search for GOD'S WILL, it is the search for GOD. The issue in faith is not knowing what God is doing, rather it is knowing that God knows what HE is doing. The issue of faith is seeking GOD'S PRESENCE, not God's plan for my life, because there is no plan outside of my knowing Him. We don't need to know the will of God, we only need to know GOD...which IS, strangely enough, HIS WILL." –Mike Yaconelli

My friends, that single statement is one of the most insightful yet simple explanations I have ever come across. In other words, to KNOW the will of God is to make God THE HIGHEST OBJECTIVE OF OUR LIFE. It is to KNOW HIM and in the process, DRAW CLOSER to him and not feel we need to discover and make sense out of some design or masterplan God has devised just for each one of us. To me, St. Paul expressed it best when he described the greatest objective of HIS life as: "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death; in order that I may attain

to the resurrection from the dead.” (Phil. 3:10-12) Make God HIMSELF the object of your pursuit and he will take care of the rest. You can be confident you will then reach your goal and become all he wants you to become in the process. To quote Yaconelli once again, “We don’t need to know the will of God, we only need to know GOD...which IS, strangely enough, HIS WILL”- that seems to say it ALL for me, and may the same be said for YOU! Let us pray...

Gracious God, Our Heavenly Father, because you are so gracious and merciful, we remain confident that your actions are always oriented toward our benefit. Yet, because this world is so troubled, it can be difficult to understand your intentions for us. What seems to us to be good, is sometimes not and what often is not, sometimes is. Help illuminate the darkness around us by understanding that your will is, above all, that we may desire to know you better, and by knowing you better, draw closer to you each and every day. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.