

“God Will/God Won’t,” July 19, 2009

Last week Stan talked about how each of us has a personal relationship with God, and our own image or understanding of who God is. We all experience God in a whole variety of different ways, too. What I believe we also need to be aware of is that our understanding, whatever it is, is also quite limited and finite, and probably falls far short of capturing who God is and what God is like.

In his book *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, theologian Len Sweet cites Augustine, who once walked the seashore. He picked up a seashell, and observed that our brains can no more contain the full knowledge of God than a seashell can contain the sea. And indeed, he was absolutely right.

Not only can our minds not conceive of all that God is, but I fear that there are times we create God in our image rather than seeing that we are created in God’s image. That means that, at least in my view, our images of God are too confined, too finite, too limited, and possibly pretty far off the mark when it comes to trying to understand God.

Years ago, there was a book entitled *Your God is Too Small*, and it had that very premise—that we confine God to our understanding. We put God in a box as, for instance, a police officer, or Santa Claus, or a magician. In fact, in my earlier years, I often heard it said that God in what we call the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Scriptures, is a God of wrath, while in the New Testament, God is a God of love. However, when I engaged in an intensive study of the Hebrew Scriptures, I discovered a very consistent and loving God. It was the humans who wrote the Bible who attributed the wrath categorization to God. Because they had such a limited understanding, they felt they had no recourse but to describe God in some pretty harsh terms.

That’s true, as well, when it comes to determining what God’s will for all of us is. I know I shared this story at The Garden some years ago, and I’m aware I’ve shared it with some of you individually, but it’s one that really resonated with me so much that I want to share it again. It’s about a pastor friend and his wife who went hiking in one of our state parks. They stopped to rest atop a huge boulder, and when they got up to move on, it turns out that his wife’s foot had fallen asleep, and before he could grab onto her, she fell some 30 feet to the trail below.

He ran through the park until he found someone to call the paramedics, but by the time they got to her, she had died. The paramedic, learning that my friend was a pastor, and trying to be helpful and consoling, said to my friend, “Well, you of all people, should know that this was God’s will.” My friend said that he uttered some words that the paramedic probably didn’t think he knew, or should know, and then he said to the guy, “No, this is

not God’s will. God did not want this to happen. God’s tears were the first to fall when she fell.”

I agreed with my friend then, and I still do. I do not believe, I cannot believe that God is so hateful and mean as to cause a young woman entering the prime of her life to fall to her death, nor do I believe that God snatches children from their loving parents, or that God is responsible for sending cars careening into one another and snuffing out innocent lives. Those accusations create an image of a God who is basically cruel, uncaring and insensitive, and that doesn’t fit with my experience of who God is.

Why do terrible things like that happen? I don’t know. All I do know is that bad things happen; there is pain in our world; injustice reigns far more than justice; people suffer from incurable illnesses; there is incredible heartache everywhere, some as a result of our own doing, and such that just happens.

Does God cause such things? I don’t think so, and let me tell you why. I believe that each of us is created with free will—that’s a gift of God’s love for us, but that means that we are free to choose our actions. We can be loving, or we can withhold love. We can inflict harm on others, or we can choose not to. Furthermore, God has brought about a kind of order into the world, and even when we can’t see it, there are natural laws that govern the universe and make the world a bit less unruly. That means that if we slip, we’re likely to fall, because there’s such a thing as gravity on this planet.

So more specifically, what is God’s will for us? What does God want for us? The retired senior pastor of St. Luke’s, Carver McGriff, once shared a story about a great preacher of an earlier day by the name of Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick told of a conversation he had with one of his church members who had gone on and on about all the misfortune in his life. The member then asked the preacher, “Why is God doing this to me? I can’t worship a God like that!” The old preacher replied, “You can’t and neither can I. That isn’t of God, because the God I know and worship would never inflict harm on us!”

He was saying that God isn’t one to deliberately cause pain or harm to any part of creation. There are other scholars who have tried to discern God’s will, and Leslie Weatherhead was one of them, writing a classic book entitled aptly enough *The Will of God*. In that book that’s now several decades old, Weatherhead made a rather profound statement. He said “**Surely we cannot identify as the will of God something for which someone would be locked up in jail.**”

Our Bible passage and the one Stan used last week, give us pretty strong clues as to the nature and will of God. The passage for today is from the writings of the prophet Jeremiah, who’s trying to share God’s words to the people of Israel. Our passage says this: “**I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for.**” I’m not sure it could be written any more plainly. God’s plan for us is to bring us prosperity and not disaster, and to bring about the future we hope

for. The long and short of it is that God's will for us is for good, and only for good.

There's something we need to note about this passage, however, and that's that the people of Israel whom Jeremiah is addressing are living in exile when they hear these words from God. They are not living the life they had envisioned and the one they yearned for, nor the one we assume God wanted for them. They had been captured and removed from the land upon which they had lived. If we read further in this passage, we'll see that God does not promise to free them from their captivity, but instead promises to be with them in their hardship, to give them the strength and courage they need to withstand their circumstances, and God encourages them to be hopeful, while they make the best they can of their situation.

Leslie Weatherhead, in his book, *The Will of God*, gave us a much more studied, scholarly approach to God's will. Weatherhead divided God's will into three categories: God's intentional will, God's circumstantial will, and God's ultimate will. Let me try to explain briefly what he meant by those terms.

God's intentional will, he says, **is God's ideal plan and intention for us.** That plan is always for goodness. What that means is that we have to come to terms with the idea that God's will for us can sometimes seem to be defeated by human beings. It means that even though God's desire is that our lives be filled with goodness, and only goodness, that just simply does not always happen. That's the very nature of what it means to be human; we humans tend to be imperfect creatures, and we inflict pain and hurt on one another.

Secondly, Weatherhead names **God's circumstantial will**, which he understands as **God's plan for us within certain circumstances that are set up because of our humanity.** Even though God wants goodness for us, there is the awareness that good does not always happen. When that occurs, God's will is that we be able to find some good even in the midst of difficulty and heartache. What is the positive, the good that could come from an event that we consider to be not so good? It's looking for the good in even the worst of circumstances, and trusting God to bring about some sort of good.

The third 'category' for God's will, according to Weatherhead is **the ultimate will of God.** By that, he's talking about the **final realization of God's purposes.** Another way to put it is to say that, when the end of life, or even the end of the world comes, God and God's love will prevail. That means that we will all ultimately be united with God, and nothing will ever be able to ultimately defeat God.

So what does all this mean? I think it says to us that there are some basic premises that we can count on. For one thing, we can know for sure that God is good, and that God's will for us is good and just. From the passage Stan used last week, and from many others as well, we know that God is love. That means that God's desire for us is to live lives that are full and healthy, lives that are rich and satisfying, lives that are filled with meaning, purpose, and love.

I believe deeply that God wants relationship with us; God wants to connect with us and be an active part of our lives. Because of the nature of life itself, I have to say that I don't see God as an all-powerful God as much as an all-loving God. That means to me that God doesn't orchestrate every movement and moment of our lives, but rather, as with the exiled people of Israel, God promises to be with us always, to keep us hope-filled and to encourage us to be faithful and loving, even in the worst of times.

All I can say is that my belief in the goodness and love of God is at the very heart of my faith, but that's not the important thing. The most important thing is for each of us to be able to answer what is at the heart of our own faith. So I ask you, "What is at the heart of your faith?"

CLOSING:

In *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, Len Sweet writes about a question that was asked of Mother Theresa prior to her death. She was asked why she had spent her life caring for the dying, and she responded, "Because I like doing my own thing." Sweet commented: "In this one response, Mother Teresa had captured the meaning of Augustine's famous dictum, 'Love God and do what you will.' When we share God's heart of love, our wills will be God's will. Doing our own things will be doing the divine thing."

That's my hope and prayer as we leave here this morning: that we will share God's heart of love, and that our will be God's will, and that we do the divine thing." May it be so.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.

