

“KNOWING GOD’S WILL”

Scripture lesson: Romans 12:1-8

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Romans 12:1-8: I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God,” Paul writes in Romans. I hear that phrase “the will of God” often. Sometimes I hear it from young people who are seeking a direction for their lives – a job, a spouse: “I am just trying to figure out what God’s will for me is?” Sometimes I hear it as an attempt at comfort when something tragic has happened – an unexpected death, a natural disaster: “We don’t understand, but it is God’s will and we have to accept it.” It’s a question I ask myself when I am faced with a critical decision, or am trying to decide where I stand on an issue: “What is God’s will?” It lies behind the prayer that Jesus prayed in the Garden, “Not my will but your will be done.” The will of God is an important biblical concept. But what is it? How do we discern it? How do we know what the will of God is?

There is the story told of an old farmer who always wondered in the back of his mind whether God really wanted him to be a great evangelist. One day, working in the fields, he took a break and lay down under a tree. Looking up in the sky he saw the clouds form what seemed to be the letters P and C. So, he hopped up, sold his farm, and went out to P-reach C-hrist, knowing now that this was God's will for his life.

The only trouble was this guy was a terrible preacher. One night at one of his crusades, after a horrible, horrible sermon, a compassionate friend of his who knew the story of how the farmer got his "calling" went forward and whispered in his ear, "Could it be that God was just asking you to P-lant C-orn?"

That’s the issue. It’s one thing to talk about God’s will, another thing to be sure that we know what it is. People do all kinds of things claiming it is God’s will.

Three years ago, Kevin Schatz and his wife Elizabeth of Paradise, California, did something so noble a local television station featured them. The pair decided to adopt three children from Liberia to add to their six other children. In June of this year, they were sentenced to life in prison for beating to death one of those children with a quarter inch plastic tube... because she mispronounced a word. For several hours the 7-year-old was held down by Elizabeth and beaten dozens of times by Kevin on the back of her body which caused massive tissue damage. Another 11-year-old adopted child was also critically beaten for "being a liar and a bad influence on the 7-year-old."

Apparently, they got the idea from a fundamentalist Christian group which promotes this as a way of training children to be obedient. Spare the rod, spoil the child. This couple thought they were doing God's will.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect,” Paul writes. So how do we discern what is the will of God?

Different people mean different things by God's will. For some, God's will is more like a master plan, and for others it is more like a blue print. A master plan gives you the big view; the general lay out of things. With a master plan you can clearly see what something is to look like – what goes where. But it doesn't give you all the details. A master plan for a house doesn't show you where all the plugs and light switches go. It doesn't detail the plumbing fixtures. Those decisions have yet to be made.

A blueprint, of course, gives much more detail. It gives you the specifics of where the plugs and switches go. What color the walls are to be painted, even. You just follow the plan, the decisions are all made for you. This is how some people think about God's will.

There is an ad on TV for a Christian dating service which says, “let us help you find the person God has picked out for you.” God's will is there waiting to be found. God has already decided the specifics for us. There is a divine blueprint for our lives – what our job will be, who we will marry, where we are to live, how many children we are to have. They are all there in the blueprint waiting for us to find and follow.

Sometimes this is called God's directive will – God will show you specifically who to marry, what is on your agenda for the day, what is supposed to happen. God wants to direct the details of our lives.

There is some comfort as well as some anxiety about this. The comfort comes in relieving us of the responsibility of making those tough choices. It is a way to guarantee that we won't make any mistakes. There is one way, the right way, God's way. The anxiety comes in knowing how we are to find God's will. How do you know this is the right plan? What if I miss it?

But there is also a danger here. William Sloan Coffin was for many years the pastor at the Riverside Church in NYC. His son drove his car into Boston Harbor one night after having had too much to drink. In a sermon not long after, Coffin tells how a day or so after Alex's death, he was sitting in his sister's living room when a woman came to the house with some food she had made and as she walked past Coffin on her way to the kitchen she muttered, “I just don't understand God's will.”

Coffin said, “Instantly he was up and in hot pursuit, swarming all over her. ‘I'll say you don't, lady! Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he probably was driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had had a couple of frosties too many? Do you think it is God's will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of road, and no guard rail separating the road and Boston Harbor?’”

Coffin went on to say that he took great comfort in knowing that it was not God's will that his son plunged to his death in that harbor; it was not a part of some divine plan. God did not plan it or cause it.

In the creation story, human beings are created in the image of God and given a wide ranging permission and authority to care for God's creation. They are given the ability to make real choices. “You may eat of every tree in the garden except one,” God tells them. We are not God's

puppets according to the Bible, we are God's partners. Paul says in I Corinthians that we are God's servants, working together with him. The Bible seems to indicate that our lives are not like blueprints – pre-determined, set in place. God invites us into an active partnership.

Within that partnership, we have been given the master plan of God's will. The prophet Micah tells us that God has told us what he requires of us and that is "to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God." In broad outline, that is the will of God – that we do justice, that we walk in humility and kindness with him. Just a few words but they take a lifetime of living and learning to do.

Jesus summarizes the requirement of the law by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." That's the master plan. That is God's will for all of us.

Martina McBride writes of her discovery of God's will:

I met God's Will on a Halloween night
 He was dressed as a bag of leaves
 It hid the braces on his legs at first.

His smile was as bright as the August sun
 When he looked at me
 As he struggled down the driveway, it almost
 Made me hurt.

Will don't walk too good.
 Will don't talk too good.
 He won't do the things that the other kids do
 In our neighborhood.

Before they moved to California,
 His mother said, they didn't think he'd live
 And she said each day that I have him,
 Well it's just another gift.

And I never got to tell her, that the boy
 Showed me the truth
 In crayon red, on notebook paper, he'd written,
 Me and God love you.

I've been searchin', prayin', wounded, jaded
 I guess I would be still
 Yeah that was until...
 I met God's Will on a Halloween night
 He was dressed as a bag of leaves

We meet God's will in Jesus. When he heals the sick, forgives the sinner, restores the lost, gives dignity to the least, feeds the hungry, chastises the proud. All of these are embodiments of love; all are ways God's will is enacted in specific situations. Living by the law of love is living in the will of God.

This broad sweep, this master plan, doesn't tell us what to do in every circumstance. We must still make specific decisions about how we live God's will in our own unique situations. That is why Paul says we must discern the will of God. Discernment is that process by which we take

God's intentions and apply them in specific ways. Paul offers us some guidance about how we go about this process of discernment.

First, he says that we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. The word "body" here means not just our physical, it means all that makes us who we are – body, mind, spirit, our very selves. We are to present ourselves as a living sacrifice – we are to submit ourselves to God. We are to seek his will beyond our own.

You may have heard me tell the story of the man who was on a diet to lose weight. He asked his coworkers to help hold him accountable. He was doing well when one day he showed up at work with a big chocolate cake with a piece or two already gone. "What's going on?" one of his fellow workers asked. "You said you were giving all that up. What's with the cake?"

"I did," the man said, "but this is a very special cake. You see, God wanted me to have this cake."

"How do you know that?" his friend asked

"Well, as I was driving to work I saw this cake in the window of the bakery. I told God if he wanted me to have that cake there would be a parking place right in front of the bakery, and sure enough, when I drove around the block for the fifth time, there was an empty spot, so I knew it was God telling me he wanted me to have this cake."

Often, when we talk about God's will, our will gets in the way. There is always a human tendency towards making ourselves the final arbitrator in any situation – of disguising our will as God's will.

Jesus teaches us to pray, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done." In the anguish of the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, "Father, take this cup from me...yet not as I will, but as you will." Your will not mine is the perfect prayer. Submitting ourselves to God is the first step in discerning God's will in our specific situations.

Secondly, discernment requires careful listening – listening to what is being asked, what the possibilities are before us, but especially listening to scripture.

There is another old story told about a man who wanted to know what to do in a certain situation, so he decided to let the Bible fall open wherever it would and then point to a verse with his finger. That would be his guidance. When he did it, his finger landed on the verse that said, "Judas went out and hanged himself." The man thought, well surely that can't be right, so he did it again. He let the Bible fall open and then pointed with his finger. This time the verse read, "Go thou and do likewise."

That's not the kind of listening to scripture I'm talking about. Proof texting – taking one verse out of context – doesn't reveal much about God's will. Rather it is immersing ourselves in the story, learning those repetitive themes of God's acts, so that we begin to adopt a worldview that is shaped by God's view of the world.

Paul also invites us to listen to our own lives. We have gifts that differ, he writes. Each of us is unique and to discern God's will takes account of our uniqueness. Given my abilities, the situation I am faced with, what is the good I can accomplish? How can I honor God in this situation? How do I enact justice and love? What strength, what insight, what good do I have to add to this situation?

It is quite possible, that in any situation, God's will can be expressed in a number of ways, not just one.

But finally, we must use humility when it comes to God's will. "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but think with sober judgment," Paul writes. Much harm has been caused in the world by people who claim to be doing God's will. There is a certain arrogance that comes with that sense of being right which causes us often to disregard the rights of others. We must be reminded that at best, now we see in a mirror dimly, as Paul puts it. Our knowledge of God will always be blurred by our own blind spots. To think that we have the corner on God's truth, or understand his will completely, is the first sign that we don't.

Martin Luther said that our acts will always be tainted by sin, but that is not to stop us. "We are to sin boldly," he said. We will never have all the facts to make a perfect judgment, but with the aid of basic experience, we must leap bravely into the future, knowing that finally the future belongs to God whose will is that we come to live abundantly in his grace.

A quote from Soren Kierkegaard expresses this completely: "Lord, I have to make a choice, and I am afraid that I may make the wrong one. But I have to make it anyway, and I can't put this off. So I will make it, and trust you to forgive me if I do wrong. And, Lord, I will trust you, too, to help make things right afterwards."