

SERMON: 7 EASTER C

John 10:22-30

Preached Sunday, May 20, 2007 at St. Philip's, Brevard
(Second in Series on the Problem of Evil & Suffering)

When something terrible happens, we still want life to make sense. We want to know that God is still in heaven and that all will be right with the world. Which explains why, in the face of tragedy, pain, suffering, loss and evil, we often hear ourselves and others say,

"Someday, with God's help, we might understand why this had to happen."

"I guess it's just something we have to accept as God's will — and we have to let God's will be done."

But what if pain, suffering and evil were not the will of God? What if God also wept whenever we faced devastating losses and tragedies? What if many Christians have had a fundamental misunderstanding about the mystery we call "the will of God"?

This is the contention of a book recommended to me many years ago. The man who recommended it is The Rev. J.R. McDowell. In case you don't know him, J.R. is a retired Episcopal priest in Brevard who's lived here for many years. You may have seen his column on the Church Page in The Transylvania Times. In one of my first visits with J.R., he mentioned the author Leslie Weatherhead and asked if I knew his book called The Will of God.^{*} When I said No, he replies with great enthusiasm, "Oh, you *must* read it. It will change your ministry." I found a copy of the book, read it, and realized right away what J.R. meant. The book helped me befriend the mystery of God's will. In this life, I will never be able to fully accept and understand pain, evil and tragedies. But they are no longer a stumbling block to my faith.

Leslie Weatherhead's great contribution to Christianity lies in his distinction between three different aspects of God's will. These are: the intentional will of God, the circumstantial will of God, and the ultimate will of God. Here's a brief explanation of each:

Intentional will is what God originally intends for us and for all creation. We believe that God desires abundant life for all, and that all people would be drawn to God and each other in love. We might think of this as the Dream of God. As we know all too well, God's dream for us and for the world is often not realized in this life. This leads us to part 2:

Circumstantial will. This is the will of God when the original intention is frustrated by the limitations of this mortal life. The Dream of God is often thwarted by human frailty, brokenness and the sinfulness which effects everything around us — including Creation. We might call circumstantial will the divine “Plan B.” When the original intention cannot be realized for the time being, we see God’s creative Spirit working to bring about God’s will in another way. This leads us to part 3:

God’s ultimate will. We believe in faith that the love of God will prevail, even when it suffers a temporary setback. We believe that, eventually, God will establish the divine will throughout the universe. Weatherhead calls this “the final realization of God’s purposes.” For us personally, we believe that the next life will be a state of existence in which there are no barriers to the ultimate will of God. In this life, meanwhile, we pray that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Consider some real-life illustrations. When Hurricane Katrina struck, I felt instinctively that this was not the intentional will of God, which is abundant life and peace for all. I confess that I do not fully understand why natural disasters like Katrina happen. It’s high on the list of questions I intend to ask when I get to heaven. In discussing the mystery of suffering, St. Paul says that all of creation “waits with eager longing” for its full revelation. He goes on to say that, one day, “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay.” But, in the interim, we are encouraged to wait in hope and patience (Romans 8:18-25).

Since Katrina was contrary to the first aspect of God’s will, we now move to the second, the circumstantial will of God. During and after Katrina, we saw the creative Spirit of God at work when human beings helped each other in the face of disaster and staggering loss. We saw it when neighboring cities and states welcomed refugees into their homes and communities. We saw it in the outpouring of tangible acts of love by thousands of people. And we saw it in the resolve of the residents to rebuild their lives and communities. Faith was working to counteract the effects of evil and sin. Yes, there were many failures and problems, so the circumstantial will of God was mixed together with the weakness of humanity.

Thankfully, these failures are no match for the ultimate will of God, which is the eventual realization of the kingdom of God. New Orleans and other devastated areas are re-building. There are opportunities for them to become stronger and more socially equitable communities. The churches, synagogues and mosques have become beacons of hope in ways that they were not prior to Katrina. The love and faith we see at work in response to this disaster can move this part of Creation closer to the Kingdom that is God’s ultimate will.

We can apply the same thinking to human illness and disease. God's original intention for human beings is abundant life, to be whole and well. But we know that sickness, disease and death are part of what it means to be mortal. Whether you think of it as a consequence of original sin or just the way life is, the fact is that none of us is immune. In the face of illness, we look for God's circumstantial will. We don't accept cancer as something from God — especially in young people — so we fight it with all of our spiritual, medical and emotional resources. We support and encourage each other to not lose faith, hope or love. Sometimes, God's intentional will prevails; sometimes, it doesn't. But, given the fact that cancer is part of life in this world, this is God's "Plan B." The ultimate will of God is never in doubt: that we will be gathered to the Communion of Saints, and that our souls will dwell in union with God for eternity.

Here's another illustration. The Vestry of St. Philip's took part yesterday in an anti-racism training workshop. This is part of a movement in our denomination and our Diocese to become an intentionally anti-racist church. Genesis tells us that all people are created in God's image. Jesus tells us in today's Gospel reading that he wants all his followers to be one as he and the Creator are one. So we know that the sin of racism is not part of God's dream for us. In the face of this evil, we look to God's circumstantial will. People of faith are called to dismantle racist systems, attitudes and structures as part of our baptismal ministry. As long as sin and evil temporarily prevail, this work is Plan B. God's ultimate will is the unity of all people in and with God. The readings we've had recently from the Book of Revelation portray heaven as a place where people from "all tribes and peoples and languages" are gathered together in worship (7:9). In that day, the intentional will and the ultimate will of God will be one and the same.

Throughout his book, Leslie Weatherhead illustrates his concept by reflecting upon the Cross. In the final chapter, he summarizes his thesis:

The intentional will of God is deflected by mankind's misuse of free will — by the folly and ignorance in the world, and by that family relationship through which all humanity is so closely bound together that your sins affect me and my sins hurt you. Yet, even so, there is *a* will of God within the circumstances which evil has caused. I believe ... that the Cross was not the intention of God for Jesus. God's intention was that Jesus should be followed, not crucified. But when evil men thrust the Cross upon him, he accepted God's will in those circumstances. [In this way, ...] he made his Cross an instrument by which the ultimate will of God could be done.... He achieved God's purposes not only in spite of the Cross, but through it (pp. 74-75).

My sisters and brothers, we need never fear the will of God. It is all blessing and peace for us at all times. But we are still working and praying for God's ultimate will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Until then, we have sin, evil and suffering to contend with. There are battles to be fought and ministry to be done in the name of Christ.

In closing, I offer this prayer for all of us who do the work of the kingdom:

I asked God for strength, and God granted me difficulties.

I asked for wisdom, and God granted me problems to solve.

I asked for prosperity, and God granted me brain and brawn with which to work.

I asked for courage, and God granted me danger to overcome.

I asked for love, and God granted me troubled people to help.

I asked for favors, and God granted me opportunities.

I received nothing I wanted — but I received everything I needed.**

AMEN.

*By Leslie D. Weatherhead (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1944/1972).

**Islamic prayer, re-printed in Smithsonian magazine (date unknown).