

This morning, let's continue our discussion of Adam Hamilton's book *Why, Making Sense of God's Will*. Last Sunday we discussed why the innocent suffer. I hope the discussion was helpful to you and that you have gained some additional insight into this subject. This morning let's turn to the subject of God's will; how do we discern God's will for our life? The Apostle Paul addresses this issue in the twelfth chapter of Romans, the first two verses.

Read Romans 12:1-2

It seems that we are always looking for ways to predict the future. In the same way, we are always trying to discern God's will for our lives. For example, a farmer was plowing in his fields one day and praying: "Lord, what is your will for my life?" He looked up and saw two large clouds forming what appeared to be letters. He continued to watch them drift overhead and finally was able to make out the letters "PC." He thought about it for a while and realized that God must be sending him a message to "Preach Christ!" So, he went into the house and informed his wife that he was entering the ministry. But unfortunately, he was not cut out for the ministry; his sermons were boring and he moved from church to church with little success. A year later, he returned to his farm. His friends came and asked him: "What happened? We thought God called you to be a preacher." To which he replied: "I finally realized the PC didn't mean "Preach Christ;" it meant "Plant Corn."

As this farmer found out, discerning God's will is not always easy. When we seriously start thinking about God's will for our lives some intriguing questions come to mind. Such as: is God's will a set of principles and precepts that we live by or does God have a specific will for each decision we make, every action that we take, and every word that we speak in every situation in life? This leads to another question: is God's will irresistible? In other words, is everything that happens predetermined by God's will and bound to take place? Or does God give us freedom to resist His will and plans? Now this is some serious stuff!

Let's dig a little deeper into this. Is the story of your life already written, or is it a work in progress? Did God have a perfect and complete plan for your life before you were born? Is everything that will happen to us already written down? Are we just players on the stage of life going through a predetermined script? Some people believe this based on certain scripture passages such as Psalm 139:16 which states: "Like an open book ... all the stages of my life were spread out before you. The days of my life are all prepared before I had even lived one day."

However, there are some problems with this point of view. For example, if everything happens according to God's predetermined plan, then we can blame God for all the suffering and evil in our lives and in the world. And thus, what we discussed last Sunday has no meaning. Then there's the question: what is the point of life if we are merely acting in a play that God has

already written? If every event and every line were predetermined by God, then our daily life would have no purpose except for the entertainment of God. And after several generations, it would be like watching old TV reruns of *Friends* or *The Big Bang Theory*. Another problem with this concept is that if we are doing what God has already determined, why should we be punished for doing wrong; we are just doing what God has forced us to do.

However, as we discussed last week, God has given us this precious gift of free will. God has given us the freedom to choose whether we will pursue His will or reject it. Following this approach, God doesn't hand us the script for our lives; we are left to discover it for ourselves. Under this approach which some call "permissive will," God has a plan for our life, but seldom makes it so clear that we can't miss it like the farmer did. However, there are also problems with this approach. If God has a script and allows you to stray from it, then you only need to stray from it once to throw the whole plan off. For example, I heard the call to ministry when I was a teenager, but rejected it and became an engineer instead. Yes, I finally answered the call, but it took me over 30 years.

In his book, Adam Hamilton offers another option to comparing God's will to a manuscript completed before our birth. What if God, in giving us life, invites us to collaborate with Him in writing the story of our lives? Think about this possibility – God has an outline for the story of our lives but gives us the choice of writing our own story either without Him or in collaboration with Him. Under this concept, God's plan for our lives is not so much a manuscript, but an idea and outline for a story that God hopes that we will choose to follow, filling in the blanks with guidance from God each day.

Let's carry this thought a little bit farther. What if God's plan for our lives, instead of being a predetermined set of specific actions was more like that of a Heavenly Parent? Most parents do not plan out every detail of their children's lives, such as their career or who they will marry; however, I have met a few who tried. I had a guy who worked for me in Santa Fe who chose every one of his daughter's classes at UNM; even going through registration with her. Now when Judy and I took our sons to college, within five minutes they told us good-bye, get out of here, we are finally on our own; go home!

Judy and I have given our sons an education, the ability to make their own decisions and values that hopefully have shaped their lives. Over the years, they have made many good decisions, and a few that disappointed me. For example, I would have loved to have had my sons follow me in engineering, but both of them said that it was too boring. I also would have liked for one of them to have gone to Clemson University where my brothers and I went to school. But when our youngest son Ben was asked if he was going to Clemson, he said: "Only if the good schools turn me down!" Part of the joy of being a parent is watching your children grow up and make wise decisions.

What if God takes more joy in watching us make decisions rather than in making the decisions for us? And what if God takes delight in being consulted for advice and wisdom when we, God's children, are trying to make these decisions. If this is true, then God's will is more about how we make decisions than about the actual decisions we make. This concept is referred to as God's "prescriptive will." Take a doctor's prescription for example. It is an instruction from the doctor on the necessary medicine we need to take to improve our health. God's prescriptive will is the instruction God has given us that will lead to greater spiritual and relational health. We find this in the Ten Commandments and in the teachings of Jesus Christ which Jesus summed all up in two commands: "Love God and love your neighbor."

The Apostle Paul addresses God's will in Colossians 1:9-10 where he writes: "We haven't stopped praying for you and asking for you to be filled with the knowledge of God's will, ... so that you can live lives that are worthy of the Lord and pleasing to Him in every way: by producing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God." Thus, the purpose of knowing God's will according to Paul is so that we might "live lives that are worthy of the Lord" and that we might grow in the "knowledge of God."

We must also remember that God is not just co-authoring our own personal story; we are part of the much larger story of God's love and care for the entire world. God is working in the lives of all the people we meet every day. When we collaborate with God, we invite Him to lead us, guide us, and use us. Daily we have the opportunity to be used by God to influence the lives of others for Him. This too is part of God's will. The key is that we must pay attention and be aware of these opportunities when they present themselves so that our story can be interwoven with God's story of salvation and redemption for the world.

You never know when God is going to use you. For example, one day I walked into my barber shop for my haircut and Donna said: "I was hoping you would come in today." She had some health issues that she needed to discuss with her pastor. When I moved to Albuquerque in 2009, I started going to Donna because she gave quick but good haircuts. At that time, she was not going to church, but over time she started going to St. Stephen's where I was a pastor. Like me, you may have had similar experiences in your life.

These are called "God moments," not coincidences. As Jethro Gibbs says on the TV show NCIS there are no coincidences in life. When we invite the Holy Spirit to lead us, and when we seek to do God's will, we will find ourselves in the midst of God's bigger story and playing a part in God's work in other peoples' lives. Part of knowing God's will is simply paying attention and noticing what's going on around you. Part of it is offering yourself as an instrument of God's love and grace to others. When we are responding to another person or situation, we should ask ourselves: "What is the most loving thing that I can do? What would Jesus do in this situation?"

Just like we try to give our children the basic tools, education, and values to make decisions in life, so God has given us tools to help us discern His will. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 states: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do every good work." And in John 14:26, Jesus promised: "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." In addition to the Bible and the Spirit, we also have the advice and counsel of other Christians. As we try to determine God's will, each of these is available to us in addition to our own experiences, intelligence, and common sense.

A certain harbor in Italy can be reached only by sailing up a narrow channel between dangerous rocks. To guide ships safely into the port, three lights have been mounted on three huge poles in the harbor. When the three lights are perfectly lined up and seen as one, the ship can safely proceed up the narrow channel. If the pilot sees two of these lights, he knows that he is off course and in danger. In the same way, God has provided three beacons to guide us through life: His Word, the Spirit and knowledge of the situation we are in.

Now here's a key point about God's will. Many of us have the idea that following the will of God will result in our happiness, as though God's will is that we will always be happy. Now I hate to burst your bubble, but the will of God is not about our happiness, but about our faithfulness. Because of this we often deny God's will. We know what He wants us to do, but we don't want to do it. So we play word games. We pray for additional guidance and direction when actually we just want a different answer. We believe that if we keep asking and stalling, God might change His mind.

We humans also have the tendency of taking the easy way out, the path of least resistance. But in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus said that there are two paths in life; one is wide and broad like the Interstate Highway that leads to destruction, while the other is narrow that leads to abundant life, and is less traveled. I like the way that the *Message* paraphrases these verses: "Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life – to God – is vigorous and requires total attention." Doing God's will may actually lead to hardship and difficulty. While this may result in some suffering and some sacrifice on our part, this path is more scenic and enjoyable in the long run. Rest assured that the will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you.

Our life is a story. Like any story it includes times of joy and happiness, but it also has its share of conflict, challenges, struggles, and pain. Because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are reminded that the difficult chapters of our lives are never the final chapters.

When we are going through rough times, we cannot see God or imagine how things will work out at that moment. But when in hindsight we look back over our lives, we see how God moved the plot forward despite some of our poor decisions. Remember the famous poem "Footprints:" when the person looked back on the difficult times of their life and only saw one set of footprints in the sand. It was then that God carried them. With God as our co-author, the dark times are never the end of the story. Your story is not complete; the remaining chapters have yet to be written.

There's an old poem that goes like this: "You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day, by the deeds that you do, and by the words that you say. Men read what you write, whether faithless or true, say, what's the gospel according to you?" In closing, here's a key point; God's plan for your life is not set in stone; you have a chance each day to shape the story. Make it a good one; one worthy of the Lord! Amen