

# “Can We Know the Will of God?”

Sermon Preached At Foundry United Methodist Church

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I Thessalonians 5:14-22

Matthew 18:10-14

It was fifteen years ago now that I got a call from a social worker at a hospital near the church where I was serving. A young woman had been in a car accident. She was unconscious, and her family had traveled from another state to be with her. They were Methodist. They wanted a Methodist minister. The social worker wondered if I would come and pray with them.

Of course I would.

So for the next seven days I began and ended my work day by visiting with this family, until the doctors came to the conclusion that her brain had died and they turned off the respirator.

I prayed with the family during the course of this difficult week. I tried to help family members talk to one another. And I tried to spend some time with each family member one on one. The youngest son in the family did everything he could to avoid me. His parents were very concerned about him. He had a lot of trouble in school, trouble with drugs, trouble with life in general. He finally managed to get himself straightened out. He was on what felt like a positive track to his parents. Now, they were worried about what his sister's accident might do to him. He hardly said more than a few words to anyone in the family all week, and they felt like he was ready to explode.

Finally, one day I cornered him and asked him if he would take a walk with me. He thought about it for a moment and then shook his head yes. We walked together and found a quiet place to talk, a landing on a set of stairs in the hospital that hardly anyone ever used. We were standing there, and I was trying to figure out how I might start a conversation when he suddenly turned to me in an angry voice said, “Why did you do this? If you had to take somebody why didn't you take me? Why did you do this to my sister? Why? Why? Why?”

He had confused me with God (which is something that anybody who knew me at all would never do). For just an instant I experienced what it must feel like to be God and have humanity ask the question Why? Why? Why?

Well, what do we say to this young man? What do we say about this? Was his sister's accident the will of God? Did God intend this? Did God permit it? Did God stand by and allow it to happen? Was this woman's tragic accident God's will? Everything inside of us wants to say, “No! No! No! No!”

Such a thing could not be the will of any God that we know. This can't be God's will!

But as soon as we say this we raise another question; one that I find even harder to answer. If this was not God's will, then is there no purpose or meaning in it? If this was just an accident, if this was just the

luck of the draw of life, then isn't it senseless, meaningless? Isn't this possibility even harder to face?

Isn't it better to believe that this, even this, is part of some secret plan being worked out in history that ultimately has some sort of meaning that we will understand by and by, that we will know all about further along?

What do we do with this tragedy? This is the question of the book of Job. If we give thanks to God for the good things in life, doesn't God have to take any responsibility for the things that are awful? If God gets credit for the blessings that we experience, doesn't God have to take some of the rap for the awful and miserable things that happen to us and, even worse, happen to the ones we love?

Can we know the will of God?

This is the first of several Sundays that I want to wrestle with you about the question of how we can understand the will of God. In some ways it is harder question for we who are people of faith. Everyone has to wrestle with the losses and the tragedies of life, but we who are people of faith have to wrestle with it within the context of our understanding of God.

What do our losses mean in relationship to our understanding of who God is? What does our grief mean in relationship to our understanding of who God is? What does our pain mean in relationship to who we say God is?

I don't want to rush through these questions easily or quickly. I have no answers to pull out of a hat like a magicians rabbit. I think there are no easy answers to these kinds of questions.

I want us to sit with the questions for a while, to wrestle with them, to experience the difficulty of trying to understand God in relationship to the things that happen to us. There is something about sitting with the questions that is healing.

This morning I just want to set some parameters, some suggested parameters, for our thoughts and our discussions over the several Sundays of the next couple of months when I will be addressing this topic. I want to suggest these parameters by lifting up two verses of the New Testament.

The first verse is from Matthew 18, and it says this: "It is not the will of God that anyone of these little ones should perish." It is *not* the will of God that anyone of these little ones should be lost.

Not everything that happens in life is the will of God.

Not everything that happens in the world is the will of a God. Whatever we do with our theological thinking, there has to be room in our world for things to happen that God neither wills nor intends. It is not God's will that anyone of these little one should be lost.

A group of us have just finished studying Miguel De La Torre's book *Reading the Bible from the Margins*. De La Torre, a Cuban-American theologian, tries to understand how it is that the Bible has been used so often throughout history to oppress people. The Bible has been used to justify and support every war that's ever been fought. It's been used to defend and legitimize slavery. It's been used to support racism. It's been used to oppress women. It's been used to justify heterosexism and homophobia. The Bible has been used to oppress people throughout its entire existence.

On the other hand, the Bible is at the same time a source of inspiration and encouragement for almost every liberation movement that has existed within western society. Listen to the spirituals that came out of the struggle of people to survive slavery: "Go down Moses and tell old Pharaoh to let my people free." "Didn't the Lord deliver Daniel?" The Bible has sustained, encouraged and driven almost every liberation movement in western society.

So how do we understand this? The Bible as a tool of oppression, the Bible as a tool of liberation, and how does all this hang together?

This is what De La Torre suggests. He says that for Christians the Bible has never been our final revelation. The Bible has never been our full revelation. Our understanding of final and full revelation has always been Jesus Christ. And the Bible is, as Martin Luther once said, the straw of the manger in which Christ is laid. So if we as Christians read the Bible we need to read it through the lens of Jesus Christ who, as De La Torre emphasizes, said in John 10:10: "I have come to bring life and to bring it abundantly."

So the way you read the Bible is this: Anything in Scripture which enhances life and make people's existence more abundant is the word of God. Anything in life that enhances life and makes our existence more abundant is the will of God. Not everything that happens in life is God's will. That which brings life and life abundant is the will of God. It isn't God's will that any of these little ones should perish.

That's one parameter: Not everything that happens is God's will.

The second parameter is found in the book of I Thessalonias. It's a verse in the fifth chapter that says this: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. If not everything that happens is God's will we can also know this: That in Christ Jesus the will of God is striving to be present in every circumstance of life in which we find ourselves. There is no circumstance in life in which we should stop praying and hoping, because God's will is striving in that circumstance with us. There is no situation in life in which we should give way to final despair because there's no situation in life in which God's will is not wrestling with us.

Ted Bowman, who we met through Sue Zabel, was one of our workshop leaders during our healing convocation this weekend. He led some very powerful workshops about loss and grief. As I sat through his workshops I was amazed to be reminded of the amount of pain that we carry within ourselves.

So much of life is loss. So much of life is saying good bye to people we love. Saying good bye to our own health, youth, vitality, our own dreams. We carry within ourselves so much pain from what life does to us.

At the same time, in Ted's workshops I was reminded of how much resilience God has placed within us. If we can live through the pain and if, like Paul says in Thessalonians, we can be in community and share the pain with others, if someone would just give us permission to hurt, if someone would just hold our hand in the midst of the pain and give us permission to feel it, there's a possibility of moving through the pain into fullness of life. There is no circumstance of life in which the will of God is absent. The will of God is working in every situation in which we find ourselves to bring out of it good and love.

These are the two sides of it: Things happen to us that are not the will of God. But the will of God never abandons us in the midst of it.

I can't take any credit for what happened on the landing of the stairs in the hospital, the stairs that hardly anybody ever used. I was scared half to death. After the youngest son in that family whose daughter was lying unconscious in the hospital bed near my church, after he had stopped using drugs, he'd taken up weightlifting. He was bigger than I was, and he was stronger than I was, and he was furious with God, and he had confused me with God. All I wanted to do was to run in the other direction, but it occurred to me that he was probably faster than I was too.

So as calmly as I could manage, I said to him, "Son, I'm not God. I'm not God, and I don't know why this happened. But son, I know this, that God loves your sister as much as you do. God loves your sister as much as you do."

And for the first time that week he shed a tear. Just a tear. And his heart began to open just a crack to being healed, to God's healing love.

If you want to ask the question of where the will of God was in this, the will of God was here in the crack that opened in his heart.