**A Pilgrimage of Hope: The Will of God**

**Matthew 26:36-42**

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By now you know that we are doing Lent a little differently. We are taking the whole six weeks of Lent (the 40 days before Easter, not including Sundays) and focusing, basically on the last day of Jesus’ life. We are looking at what is known as the Stations of the Cross. The Stations of the Cross are probably not unknown to any of you. However, the discipline of using the Stations of the Cross for prayer and meditation isn’t usually the tradition of Protestantism.

Debbie Houghton, our Director of Adult Spiritual Formation, found how some churches have used the Stations of the Cross. The churches have some of the artistically interested and/or talented people in the church interpret the stations with drawings, paintings, or photographs. We are doing the same thing this year with our own interested and talented people. You can catch a preview of some of the artwork at our Wednesday evening Lenten Vespers at Green Wood. During Holy Week, they will be displayed in the Social Hall where you may use them for your own prayer and meditation.

The Stations of the Cross historically recounted the Scripture that depicted Jesus before Pilate, condemning him to die, until he was laid in the tomb. In Jerusalem, you can walk what is known as the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Suffering, or the Way of Sorrow. It is a walk of 2,000 feet through the Old City of Jerusalem. It is traditionally thought to be the route that Jesus walked with the cross after his sentence at the Antonia Fortress by the Temple Mount. The path ends at what is now the Church of the Sepulcher or the place where it is traditionally thought that Jesus was crucified.

An interesting side note is that the major denominations that manage the Church of the Sepulcher, the Armenians, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholic, in a rare show of unity, closed the church this last week because of what they call the systematic campaign of abuse against churches and Christians by the Israeli government. Evidently, there is a push to unfairly tax, specifically, properties of the Christian community in the Holy Land.

So along this 2,000 foot walk, there are fourteen places (or stations) identified that coincide with scripture or tradition relating to things that happened to Jesus along the way. These are the Stations of the Cross.

The stations have changed throughout history. As we have said, historically it begins with Pilate’s condemnation of Jesus and ends with Jesus being laid in the tomb. However, in 1991 Pope John Paul II switched them up so that each station would actually be a station that has scriptural reference. As recently as 2007 Pope Benedict XVI changed them to start with Jesus Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, which is what we read today.

This first station, or the first stop, isn’t part of the traditional Via Dolorosa. It is actually across the Kidron Valley from the Temple Mount to the east. It’s in an olive garden where Jesus and his disciples decided to camp after they celebrated the Passover together. Gethsemane literally means “oil press.” They camped out in the garden of the oil press.

We read that Jesus was “grieved, even to death.” That is, he was so sad he felt like dying. We don’t read it with that interpretation very often, do we? We usually read this passage with a very measured tone, Jesus in control. Jesus Christ Superstar has helped me with this passage. It is the first time that I heard it dealt with emotionally, like someone who really is grieving. He is sad, angry, he accuses, he bargains with God. He comes back to Peter, James and John after praying and finds them sleeping and questions their loyalty and commitment. Jesus asks God for things to be different, but then ends up submitting. “If that is not possible, then let your will be done.”

Parts of the Christian Church have built a theology around this notion that God had planned all along that Jesus would have to die a terrible death as if this were the requirement that God needed for us to be back in the good graces of God – atoned for our sin. To be honest, I don’t find that to be very hopeful, nor is it particularly Scriptural. There are actually a half a dozen main atonement theories that the Church articulates. We are not going to get into those today. Suffice it to say that the way God moves in our lives is a mystery. We struggle to take the truth we know and flesh it out to try to create a deeper understanding. But we also have to confess that our words and thoughts cannot contain the totality of God and will always fall short of perfectly describing God and God’s ways. Too often we just end up saying, “That’s God’s will,” as if everything that happens is by God’s design. I don’t believe that. Nor do I believe that is what Jesus meant in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Leslie Weatherhead has greatly influenced my thinking on this. Weatherhead was a notable English Methodist minister and theologian in the mid 20th century. He wrote a book called The Will of God, which is actually a collection of sermons he wrote on the subject.

In the book, he tells the story of trying to console a friend in India who had just lost his son to the cholera epidemic. His friend finally replied that it was God’s will his son die of Cholera. That’s all there is to it. It is the will of God.

Weatherhead said that he was a close enough friend to challenge him a bit and so he said, “Suppose someone crept up the steps onto the veranda where your little girl is sleeping and deliberately placed a wad of cotton soaked in cholera culture over your little girls mouth. What would you think about that?”

His friend got a bit angry that Weatherhead would even suggest such an evil thing, but admitted that if someone attempted that and he caught him, he would kill him if he could. Weatherhead replied, “Isn’t that what you have accused God of doing when you said that your boy’s death from cholera was God’s will? Call your little boy’s death the result of mass ignorance, or mass sin if you like. Call it bad drains or communal carelessness, but don’t call it the will of God.” He concludes that we cannot identify as the will of God something for which a person would be locked up in jail for.

Weatherhead’s point is that we have gotten a bit careless assigning everything to the will of God, and more specifically to the “intentional” will of God. To be honest, if everything that happens is the intentional will of God, I don’t find my solace or hope in that. I don’t think the family and friends of those killed in Parkland, Florida would be comforted if you tried to convince them that it was God’s will that a young man walk into the school with a rapid fire assault weapon to kill seventeen people. What sane person would want to worship a God like that?

I do understand why we want to assign something like that to the will of God, because in a world that seems so capricious and out of control, we yearn for someone or something to be in control, even if we have to assign to it the evil things that happen.

As Weatherhead struggled with this he came to the conclusion we must understand the will of God in three parts: 1) The intentional will of God, 2) The circumstantial will of God, and 3) the ultimate will of God. He says that the trouble arises because we use the phrase “will of God” to cover all three, without making any distinction between them. It is sort of like the word “love.” The Greek language has three words to describe love in all of its facets. In English, we try to describe love with only one word. It gets confusing. Weatherhead says that we have to be more careful and say exactly what we mean.

So was it the intentional will of God that Jesus must suffer and die? Weatherhead says “no,” and I agree with him. I think if you read carefully what Jesus was saying at the beginning of his ministry, he didn’t think so either. Rather, he came with the “intention” that people would follow him, not kill him. So the discipleship of people, not the death of Jesus, was the intentional will of God.

“But,” as Weatherhead puts it, “when the circumstances wrought by [humanity’s] evil set up such a dilemma that Christ was compelled either to die or to run away, then in those circumstances the cross was the will of God” (pg. 12). That, I believe, is the struggle with which Jesus agonized over in the garden that night. When Jesus finally submitted, he said, “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.”

That’s the difference between God’s intentional will – that Jesus should be followed – and God’s circumstantial will – that in the face of humanity’s evil Jesus should accept death, but accept it in such a positive and creative way as to lead to what Weatherhead calls the “ultimate will of God.”

God’s ultimate will is the redemption of humanity – winning back the hearts and minds of you and me. He also wants all other human beings so that the grace-filled, peaceful, loving community known as the realm of God might come to fruition. God’s ultimate will is a bit like water flowing to the ocean. We can dam it, divert it, use it, store it, but eventually nothing can stop it.

That is the hope I find as we take this Lenten journey. It was not God’s intentional will that Jesus die on the cross. But ultimately even that will not stop God from God’s ultimate will, and, circumstantially, is even used for God’s ultimate purpose of atonement – atonement of all God’s creation.

I pray that same hope will carry you and me through all our circumstances, that we may freely proclaim with Jesus, “Not my will, but yours be done.” Amen.