

Discerning the Will of God  
Acts 15:22-29

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June 28, 2020

*For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . . .* Acts 15:28

The sermon I have for you this morning is less an exposition of a scripture passage than it is theological reflection on a question. The question is one that was asked by one of you this spring during the course of an online adult Sunday school class. The questioner wanted to know how we can tell if something is the will of God. Though this question was raised by one it is asked by many.

It is a question that troubled Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War. Lincoln apparently did much of his thinking with a pen or pencil in hand, scribbling notes on scraps of paper, letting his ideas grow. One such scrap of paper was discovered after his death. It is called Lincoln's "Meditation on the Divine Will," and you can find it online in Lincoln's own hand. The note is Lincoln's mind at work. He did not come to any definitive conclusion, but he was trying to puzzle out if and to what extent the War was God's will.

You have your own meditations on the divine will. At least one of you – I think representative of many – wonders how to go about discerning whether something is God's will. I will do some thinking out loud on the question from the pulpit this morning, and you can take it from there to add thoughts of your own and see where you land on the matter.

*The nature of God*

Before we can think of the will God has we have to think a bit about the God who has the will we are trying to discover. Because it is God's will we are after we have to begin with the God who is doing the willing.

The God who wills is not aloof. There is a song that begins singing about God's handiwork high above in the stars and about how God rules over land and sea. But that first bit of the song keeps God distant, far removed in the universe. The next bit of it acknowledges the truth of biblical history, but it keeps God in the distant past. The third bit of the song marks a kind of conversion experience in which the lyrics celebrate that God does not live way out there or way back there but rather is one who is here, walking beside us day by day.<sup>1</sup> That song is wholly consistent with scripture. Throughout the Bible God is an interested God, involved, and never far removed from events public or personal. The God who wills is not aloof.

The God who wills is not a micromanager. This is something I learned personally. When, back in high school, I first felt the call to ordained ministry, I wasn't sure if it was a call to life in the parish as a pastor or to life in a college or seminary as a professor. To be honest, I was still

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Carmichael, "He's Everything to Me," *Living Praise Hymnal*, compiled by John W. Peterson (Grand Rapids: Singspiration, 1974), #189.

struggling with the question as many as 15 years after I was ordained. When I first started wondering whether I should be a pastor or a professor my mother told me to go into my room and pray; God, she said, would show me. All through college, all through seminary, all through my first church, all through my first several years here, I kept asking to know God's will on the matter: "Lord, do you want me to be a pastor or a professor?" At long last I got the clearest answer that ever came. I prayed my prayer and a picture flashed into my mind. I hadn't seen this picture since I first saw it many years prior in a philosophy textbook I had in college. You can find it on the Internet and see it for yourself. It's the optical illusion called "Rubin's Vase." It is a simply drawing that shows either a white vase in the center against a black background or on the sides the profiles of two people looking at each other against a white background. Here, then, was the conversation. Me: "Lord, do you want me to be a pastor or a professor?" God: "I don't care. It could go either way. You pick." It turns out I have always been both; I never had to decide. My point now is that the God who wills does not micromanage.

The God who wills has a mind that is unknowable. We will never know the will of God perfectly because we will never know the mind of God perfectly. You may remember what Isaiah heard God say:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Is. 55:8-9)

So our reflection on how to discern the will of God begins with these three ideas about the nature of God: God is not aloof, God does not micromanage, and the fullness of God's mind is beyond our comprehension.

#### *The message of scripture*

From the nature of God I turn to the nature of the message of scripture. As we work our way through the Bible we can discern a shift happening in terms of how people discerned the will of God. That is to say, methods changed to the point that old means for discerning God's will were later abandoned and never recommended. Here is a look at that history.

The Book of Judges, long ago in time as far as biblical history is concerned, tells of Gideon's fleece (6:36-40). Gideon, you may recall, was a young man who was attempting to learn God's mind on a certain matter. He proposed using as fleece as the sign of God's answer. He put a bit of wool on the threshing floor one night. If God's answer was yes God was to arrange it so that, in the morning, there would be dew on the fleece but not on the threshing floor. He repeated the experiment the next night, though switched the signals around, just to be sure. The method worked both times.

The Book of Jonah, some long years after Judges, tells of people aboard a ship that was struggling through a storm at sea. They assumed someone on board had a god angry with them. They cast lots – a kind of drawing of straws, I suppose – to learn who it was. The method worked.

Early in the Book of Acts that old method from the Book of Jonah is how the surviving disciples learned from God who was to replace Judas to fill out the Twelve once again. They form a nominating committee, come up with two names, and then cast lots to discern God's will on the matter.

Later in the Book of Acts, in the portion read for us earlier, there is a major decision to be made in accordance with the will God. There is not fleece on the ground this time around. No straws are drawn. No lots are cast. There is only a report that the decision arrived at seemed good to the church leaders and to the Holy Spirit. "Seemed good" is a far cry from clarity.

The Apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, in direct response to a question from the Corinthians, says there is some stuff around which he has no clarity from God (1 Cor. 7:25). In his second letter to the same church he says "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7).

So scripture moves from clear sign as to the will God to the opaqueness of walking necessarily by faith rather than sight. Nevertheless, this same Paul who says we are compelled to walk by faith also indicates that we are led by the Spirit (Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:18).

#### *Some helpful signposts*

This brings me to identify some helpful signposts that suggest the direction the Spirit is leading.

Something that is the will of God will always be Christlike, for God is like Jesus. The disciple Philip one day asked Jesus if he could see God. Jesus, without skipping a beat, replied, "If you've seen me you've seen God." (Jn. 14:8-9). One of the letters in the New Testament calls Jesus "the image of the invisible God." (Col. 1:15) God is like Jesus. So if you want to know the will of God, then get to know Jesus Christ. That will rule out all manner of things.

For example, is this virus the will of God? No. Where on any page of the New Testament does Jesus send out pestilence to make a point? Jesus sends out people. Jesus sends out his word. He cures disease; he doesn't cause it to make a point.

What about what's going on in your life? Are you sick because it's the will of God? Lonely? Depressed? Miserable? No! Where in scripture do you find Jesus heaping that kind of hurt on people? You don't.

Or take it up with regard to any kind of malicious act and rule it out immediately. A man in Florida recently killed his neighbor because he believed God told him to do it. Nonsense! A man in Phoenix killed his wife and two daughters because he believed God wanted him to. Utter nonsense! Would Jesus ever command such a thing? Of course not.

God is like Jesus. If you want to know the will of God, get to know Jesus. The will of God will always be Christlike.

Another signpost to go by is that the will of God is a suggestion that recurs. God has a way of keeping after you. God gets what God wants and does not take no for an answer. If there is a thought that just will not let you go, it may be a prompt from the Holy Spirit.

The will of God is something demanding. Something that stands out in scripture is that God does not ask people to do only that which is easy. God asks what seems close to the realm of a person's ability but is just beyond what a person thinks he or she is capable of. God's will, generally, is something that challenges a person.

The will of God is an open door. If God is choosing you to do a certain thing the door of opportunity will present itself. It may be like Harry Potter's Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  or the gate leaving the parking garage at the Madison airport. That is to say, it may not look like it is going to open at first, though it does open when you walk up to it. It may not be open from a distance. But if you go up to it and it opens, the thing may be of God.

The will of God will be confirmed by others. By that I mean that other people whom you trust concur with the idea you've been thinking is right for you. "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit *and to us.*" It wasn't just one person's cockamamie idea.

Pull all this together – Christlikeness, an idea that won't leave you alone, an idea others think makes sense for you, is challenging, and which you have occasion to act on – pull all that together and you *may* have an insight into the will of God. Even so, you'll have to walk by faith.