

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

On Palm Sunday we began our three-part, Holy Week sermon series on the “will of God,” mining the teachings of Leslie Weatherhead, Minister at London’s City Temple during World War II. Weatherhead divides God’s will into three categories:

the *intentional* will of God: God’s first design for the creation;
the *circumstantial* will of God: God’s purpose within the boundaries of a mortal moment; and
the *ultimate* will of God: God’s final desire for the creation’s fulfillment.

Sermon Series II: God’s Circumstantial Will

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Focusing on God’s intentional will, we resolved the theodicy dilemma – that defense of God’s goodness in the face of suffering – by *denying* “God is all-powerful:”

God is all-loving; yet
God’s people suffer; because
God is not all-powerful.

With this theological turn, we affirm God’s intentional will as life and Love, and we confirm that God *never* causes suffering – not for Jesus, not for anyone. Rather, God grants humankind a gift of freedom so full, so complete, that God self-limits the Divine power-to-control to share it. In turn, then, we receive the responsibility to choose our behavior, earning the consequences for good or for ill – not at God’s hand, but by our own. Through this understanding, we see that God did not hang Jesus at Golgotha, *we did* – a testimony to Jesus’ faithfulness and, sadly, our capacity for wickedness.

This evening we explore Jesus’ fidelity in those

circumstances that were not the will of God, but the “will of evil men,”² as Weatherhead describes Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, and death. A presiding principle of this exploration:

because we recognize **God as the source and completion of all that exists;** and
because **God is always loving and good;**
therefore
God cannot create evil, and evil cannot create good.

Sharpening this postulate with tonight’s Gospel: Did God engineer Jesus’ crucifixion in order to convene the treasured Last Supper events? *Of*

course not. Rather, a terrible, entirely human conspiracy worked against God’s hopes for Jesus and his community: some who Jesus sought to love, chose to destroy him, and, according to the Creator’s gift of

freedom, God would not intervene, not even in that cruelty.

Weatherhead subdivides God’s “circumstantial will” into two parts, “one in the natural realm and the other in the spiritual.” He explains of the first: “The laws of the universe, which are themselves an expression of God’s will, were not set aside for Jesus, the beloved son. The laws which govern the hammering in of nails held on the day of Crucifixion in just the same way as they do when you [or I] nail up a wooden box. If bombs are dropped from an airplane over the closely built dwellings in a city, they pierce the roofs of the godly and of the ungodly [alike] ... The forces of nature carry out their functions and are not deflected when they are used by the forces of evil.”³

For Weatherhead, the “laws of the universe” – like a good Modern: physics, chemistry, biology, among others – express God’s intention. Therefore, Jesus’ horrible death on the cross *is* God’s will, inasmuch as the mechanics of hammers and nails, sun and

sword do not bend even for the Christ of God.⁴ This “natural-realm” component of God’s circumstantial will strongly affirms the ideas of God’s self-limiting and the fullness of humankind’s freedom.

Turning to this evening’s Gospel, Jesus’ recognition of the malevolence against him frames his washing of the disciples’ feet. At the outset of our reading from John, “The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray [Jesus]. And during supper, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands ... got up from the table ...”⁵

See, as evening approaches, Jesus already “knows his hour has come to depart from this world” – not because God has granted him a second sight to see into the future, but because he can sense the danger on the surface of his skin, feel it in the pit of his stomach when he realizes that one of his intimates has turned on him so grievously.⁶ Despite this heartbreak, Jesus finds strength in his faith: he recalls that he “had come from God and was going to God.”⁷ He does not take up arms against his aggressor. He does not run from what is coming. Instead, he “take[s] off his outer robe, [ties] a towel around himself[, pours] water into a basin, and [begins] to wash the disciples’ feet and wipe them [with the towel] tied around him ...”⁸

Again, did Judas Iscariot’s betrayal conceive Jesus’ tenderness and compassion for his friends? *Of course not.* These circumstances revealed the goodness already long at work in Jesus. Weatherhead agrees, writing of the horror in his day: “The war did not [invent] courage. [The war] *revealed* the courage that was there all the time ... Evil is never creative of good, though the circumstances of evil have [been occasions] for the expression of good[ness].”

Following the footwashing, our Lectionary leaps forward ten verses, past Jesus’ identification of Judas as his traitor. In the omitted section, the Evangelist recounts, “Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, ‘Very truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.’”⁹ With their feet still drying, the disciples look across the table at one another, incredulous that a member of their fellowship could turn on their community after the moving experience they have just shared.¹⁰

At the urging of Peter, John¹¹ asks, “‘Lord, who is it?’ Jesus answers, ‘It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’ So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. [And after Judas] received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him,” the text reads.¹²

In the half-century that has passed since Matthew’s community authored the version of events we heard last weekend, the Johannine sect fits Judas’ betrayal within its own inherited cosmology – its conception of the universe’s origin, meaning, and trajectory¹³ – that imagines the earth as set between the warring realms of God and the angels, and Satan and his demons. According to this vision, God remains powerful, yet also under attack from a formidable foe, a constitutive evil crackling with corruption, disease, and destruction. God actively fights against this opposing force, violence for violence.

John’s narrative casts Judas as possessed, as trapped in Satan’s plot. Yet, Jesus says to Judas, “Do quickly what you are going to do,”¹⁴ and after Judas receives the bread – an unholy Communion – he “immediately went out.”¹⁵ The Evangelist concludes the awful affair, “And it was night.”¹⁶

Once more: was it God’s will that Jesus become an accomplice in the very conspiracy leading to his crucifixion? *Of course not.* Yet, in the narrowed confines of this terrible situation, Jesus’ acceptance becomes God’s *circumstantial* will, the highest road of life and Love still leading to the fulfillment of God’s *ultimate* will.

Weatherhead describes the character of Jesus’ consent as the “spiritual” component¹⁷ within the circumstantial will of God. He suggests, “Christ did not just submit to this dread event of the Crucifixion with what we miscall ‘resignation.’ He took hold of the situation. Given those circumstances which evil had produced, it was also God’s will that Jesus should not just die like a trapped animal, but that he should so react to evil, positively and creatively, as to wrest good out of evil circumstances.”¹⁸

Given that evil cannot create good, Jesus must respond “positively and creatively.”¹⁹ That is, God’s goodness must remain the source and the aim of Jesus’ action. “Taking hold of this situation,” Jesus

transforms the world's violence into God's grace by kneeling before those he loves, bathing their feet, and sharing their supper table. "In other words, [the] circumstantial will of God [can open] the way to God's ultimate triumph," and, as Weatherhead names of Jesus' singular fidelity, "that is why the Cross is not just a symbol of capital punishment [like] the hangman's rope, but is a symbol of [evil's redemption] in the cause of [God's] holy purposes."

Once Judas leaves, Jesus narrates his actions and their impacts, and he instructs the disciples: "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him ... [Dear ones,] I am with you only a little longer ... I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."²⁰

Within the extant cosmology, the battle between good and evil expected Jesus – if, in fact, God on earth – to meet violence with violence, demonstrating dominion and bridling the devil with the power-to-control. However, Jesus acts unwaveringly in accord with God's Loving nature and in alignment with God's final ambition, *no matter the circumstances*. With this constancy, Jesus not only disarms the threat to creation's fulfillment, he disembodies evil and inaugurates a new metaphysics. That is, in this new conception, evil no longer operates as God's tool for an inscrutable purpose, and evil no longer stands on its own as a formidable, opposing force. Likewise, God no longer expresses messiahship with the power-to-control, but with the power of Love! By this Love, God "conquers evil," and, by the same means, will soon "put death to flight."²¹ God does not change during the Crucifixion, rather, how we understand God shifts as we recognize evil as ephemeral, and God as eternal – as forever and always *good*.

Finally, while we receive this triumph of Love as the ultimate Good News, the events of Holy Week make clear that our righteousness does not promise earthly reward. As explanation, Weatherhead observes: "because of human folly and sin[;] because [humankind]'s free will creates circumstances of evil that cut across God's plans[; and] because of our oneness with the great human family;" others' evils

can create circumstances that "disturb" God's good purposes for us.²²

I suggest we reconceive "original sin" as *these disturbances*, rather than some curse of Adam and Eve into which all of us have been born. That is, let us understand "original sin" as our subjection to ills that we have not chosen for ourselves, as burdens imposed upon us by other *individual's* sins and the world's *collective* resistance to God's intentional will.²³ Only by this idea can I endorse the atonement claim that Jesus "died for our sins," for Jesus was not crucified as payment of a cosmic debt, but as the consequence of evil that was not his own.

Weatherhead summarizes: while God's intentional will includes a good purpose for every person, human shortcoming create the necessity for God's "circumstantial will." Yet, in the faithful honoring of its calling, the Christian soul can find peace in the promise that God's ultimate ambitions can still be accomplished through us – that how we live and who we are *matters*.²⁴ Tonight, we enter these Loving mysteries, washing one another's feet as Jesus did for those he loved, and loving one another through the new dawn soon to rise.

In singleness of heart, *Amen*.

Endnotes

- ¹ From Psalm 31.
- ² Weatherhead, Leslie. *The Will Of God*. Nashville, Abingdon, 1974, p. 28.
- ³ Weatherhead, p. 31.
- ⁴ Because God certainly did not establish “the laws which govern the hammering in of nails” for the express purpose of Christ’s Cross, I associate this “design” element more with the creative act and God’s intentional will. That is, the intentional will of these natural laws was for good, but humankind – not God – used them for evil.
- ⁵ John 13:2-3a, 4a.
- ⁶ John 13:1.
- ⁷ John 13:3b.
- ⁸ John 13:4b-5.
- ⁹ John 13:21.
- ¹⁰ John 13:22-23.
- ¹¹ The traditional identity of “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”
- ¹² John 13:24-27a.
- ¹³ In the theological context.
- ¹⁴ Despite this direction, the disciples do not sense what Jesus senses: “No one at the table knew why [Jesus] said this to [Judas]” (John 13:28). Therefore, “[s]ome thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, ‘Buy what we need for the festival;’ [or ‘G]ive something to the poor”” (John 29-30).
- ¹⁵ John 13:30a.
- ¹⁶ John 13:30b.
- ¹⁷ The companion to the “natural” element noted earlier.
- ¹⁸ Weatherhead, p. 32.
- ¹⁹ In the company of the Holy Spirit, some experiences meant to tear us down (what we can name as “suffering”) can be remade into crucibles that build us up (what we can mark as “struggle”). As in (the considerably lower stakes of) an athlete’s workouts or a performer’s rehearsals, an academic’s studies or a professional’s practices, by redirecting our experience toward a higher purpose – achievement, beauty, service, in addition to God’s ambition – we can reclaim our circumstances as constructive.
- ²⁰ John 13:31, 33-35.
- ²¹ From the prayer “On Sunday,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), p. 835.
- ²² Weatherhead, p. 30.
- ²³ Importantly, a collective in which we may share complicity, whether by our conscious choice or not.
- ²⁴ Ibid.



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