

**Discerning the Will of God
Matthew 6: 7-15; Romans 12: 1-2**

**Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
August 26, 2018**

Let me briefly review our pulpit journey over three Sundays on the subject of the Will of God.

That journey has been guided by the insights of Leslie D. Weatherhead, the British preacher of the last century, in his book entitled "The Will of God", published following World War II.

Weatherhead would have us understand that a conversation about the Will of God must clarify the different aspects of it. This is important, because we have all suffered loss, we have all experienced disappointment, we all have plans and expectations and hopes, we all have wondered about God's influence in our lives, we all pray for God's attention, even intervention.

First, there is God's Intentional Will, which may be described as God's ideal purposes. We should not accept the idea that every disaster or death or disappointment is intended by God, for that would be inconsistent with the benevolent God who created us, and who wishes only good for us and for creation. My daughter is visiting a friends in Hawaii as I speak, but it is not God's intention that they be threatened by a hurricane this week.

Second, there is God's Circumstantial Will: That is, how accidents of nature, or unfortunate human mistakes, or evil actions of human beings with free will, may momentarily interrupt God's ideal purposes. A boys soccer team are all now novice monks, after rescue from a cave in Indonesia. Those circumstances may have temporarily interrupted God's will for them.

Third, there is God's Ultimate Will: That is, how God's ideal purposes may finally be realized, although temporarily disturbed by a natural event, or human error, or evil force. God's ultimate

will for a Naval Academy graduate named John McCain was finally realized, despite his capture in a lake in Hanoi and torture in a POW prison, a lake and prison at which my son and I paused in 1993. Years after the war, John McCain was among the voices advocating for normalization of US/Vietnam relations, enabling Lee and I to visit the land of Lee's birth. A great American patriot, and fiesty six-term Senator, fulfilled God's ultimate will before succumbing to the same brain disease that took the life of my father.

We can be sure that God did not intend that injury and death would occur at a gathering of citizens with their congresswoman Gabby Gifford in Tucson. We can be sure that God did not intend that injury and death would visit the weekly Bible Study at Mother Emmanuel A.M.E. church in Charleston. It is the free will of human beings to manufacture guns, to sell guns, to buy guns, and to sometimes use guns for evil purposes.

We can be sure that God did not intend that teenagers would die in auto accidents in the last week of summer. We can be sure that God did not intend that a college student would die while on a morning jog in Iowa. We can be sure that God did not intend that thousands of innocent children would die of violence in Syria. The risks and miscalculations accompanying human free will, may lead to tragic results.

In some of these examples, it is not yet so obvious how the Ultimate Will of God may emerge from the Circumstances that have, for the moment, disturbed God's Intentional Will. But in some of these instances, one can begin to understand a larger purpose:

Gun control movements have, collectively, surpassed the level of financial support enjoyed for so long by the unrivaled National Rifle Association. God's Ultimate Will emerges.

The organs and tissues of shattered bodies may in the end benefit hundreds of other human beings, bringing renewed life to ill, infirmed desperate patients and their families. God's Ultimate Will emerges.

The early impact of the racist rampages in Charleston, and later in Charlottesville and elsewhere, may have altered attitudes on Capitol Hill and in state houses across the nation. God's Ultimate Will emerges.

Then there is, for faithful Christians, the Ultimate example of God's Ultimate Will, as Leslie Weatherhead points out: While it was God's original purpose that Jesus command a following, his death at the hands of evil but temporarily countered that intention. The crucifixion served to increase and advance the following, as evidenced by our gathering today as disciples in his name! You and I are testimony to the fact that God's Ultimate Will for Jesus has indeed prevailed. That may reveal why Jesus, in agony from the Cross, was able to utter "If it be your Will": The cry not of reluctant resignation; but rather, the affirmation of ready compliance.

But this is hindsight to some extent, isn't it, perceiving God's Will in what would appear to be benevolent consequences of past events? What we want to know is whether or not there are methods or capacities in the present for determining God's Will, as we navigate into the future. How might we discern God's Will, so that we might perform in concert with it, rather than in resistance or opposition to it?

Weatherhead suggests five "signposts" that might possibly be utilized:

First, there is the matter of our “conscience”—that “lonely voice within our hearts”...the voice that says “This is right; that is wrong”... and the path of God’s Will is the former. There is a kind of accumulated, compounded wisdom—from collective history, from living in community, from personal experience—that guides us away from the looming precipice: our conscience.

Second, related to conscience, there is “common sense”. God has placed in our minds a gift: the capacity to make judgments. Why would we not use it? Insight based upon the thoughtful assessment of a situation, is a more reliable tool than impulsive reaction—and thus more likely to be in close touch with God’s Will.

Third, there is the advice of a trusted friend. Sharing my inner most struggle or yearning with a confidant can help me see the dilemma from a different perspective, in part because the confidant is separated from it emotionally. Just as God can use my conscience or common sense, God can use my trusted friend as an instrument to help me discern God’s Will.

One wonders if the voice of conscience, or common sense, or a trusted friend might overcome fear in a darkened cave, or the downward plunge into alcoholism, or the pressure of riding in a car driven by a peer under the influence, or the negligence of leaving a gun cabinet unlocked, might have circumvented the frustration of God’s ultimate will.

Fourth, there is the voice of the Church, which one might expect Weatherhead, as a preacher, to take very seriously. He contends that no church functions as it ought to, unless there is thoughtful, loving support available to the member who is struggling to know God’s place and purpose in his or her life at any given time. This was Weatherhead’s experience at London’s City Temple. What is our experience at Hyattstown Christian Church?

Fifth, there is the possibility that through a process of quiet contemplation and private prayer, God's Will may be revealed. In the Quaker tradition, this is known as "Inner Light": the experience of God speaking directly to the human soul, and thus making known God's wishes in a certain matter. When complemented by conscience, or common sense, or trusted advice, or the embrace of the Church, the "inner light" of individual soul-searching may provide direction.

There are these five "signposts" for discerning the Will of God, but Weatherhead insists there is another even more trustworthy, and that is what he calls a "deep friendship with God". He says: "Those who know God are the quickest and surest at discerning God's Will". That, of course, is a friendship that must be cultivated with devotion over time. Weatherhead insists, not surprisingly, that it is such "friendship" with God that allowed Jesus to fulfill God's Will for him. So I would ask myself: In what shape or condition is my friendship with God?

Would I propose that three sermons complete our search to understand the Will of God? Would I suggest that all of our questions have been satisfactorily answered? By now you know me better than that! At most, I might allow that embarking on this journey at all, has been nothing more nor less than God's Will for us together just now.

And if I may, I might also suggest that, if we want to know the Will of God, it might help to nurture and enjoy a true friendship with God.