

Lent V, 9 March 2008
St. Margaret's Church
RCL Year A
To the Honor and Glory of God
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God's will?: John 11.1-45

Have you ever asked the question, "God, what is your will for my life?" There are lots of different ways of asking the same question: what do you want me to do; should I choose this or that; is this going to bring about the right result?

I am going to assume for the sake of this sermon that we have all asked this question in one way or another, or we will ask it someday. We want to know what God's will is for our lives and what things God wants us to do. Our motivation might be fear – fear that we will be punished if we stray from God's will. Or maybe, love motivates us to seek God's will. Maybe we think that God's will is the key to our happiness.

Sometimes we ask the big question in times of transition and opportunity. Some of us agonize over it continuously.

Let's look at John, chapter 11 with this in mind: what is God's will?

John 11 is one of those long stories in John's gospel. Over the past few weeks we have heard John tell stories about Jesus talking with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well. Last week there was that lengthy, rich story about the blind man whom Jesus healed. In this one Jesus has an extended encounter with his close friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

Let's look at the story from the various viewpoints of its participants.

First, the disciples hear Jesus say he wants to go to Judea (v. 7). They were currently in the Jordan valley, east of Jerusalem in a safe spot. They remind Jesus that they were recently in Jerusalem (Judea) and things did not go so well. People tried to stone him the last time they were there (v.8). Why would he possibly want to go back? He tells them that he is going to Lazarus, who lived in a suburb of Jerusalem, just a short walk to the east.

Thomas offers this great line in verse 16, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Die with him? Die with Lazarus? Die with Jesus? We don't know. Clearly, Thomas and the others think this is a bad idea. They might not know what God's will is exactly, but they are pretty sure going to Judea is a bad idea.

Martha and Mary are two other characters in this story who have some perspective on what God's will is. First, they alert Jesus that their brother is ill. They know that somehow Jesus is going to be part of this story, whether by healing Lazarus or just being there.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany four days after Lazarus' death, he has a conversation with each of the sisters. Independently of each other, they both say to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died (vv. 21 and 32)." Their comment reveals an alternative version of God's will running through their minds. It could have been different, they have been saying to themselves, if you had been here. You could have done something and changed the outcome.

The standers-by in verse 37 show that they clearly know what God's will is. They have special insight. They watch Jesus arrive on the scene and weep and some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of a blind man have kept this man from dying?"

They shove it right in Jesus' face. If you do such a big thing as giving sight, can't you do such a little thing of healing an illness? If you were really God, you would have done something here. If you were really as powerful as all that, then you would have done something. The assumption behind this accusation is that God would have, and should have, prevented this man from dying. They knew God's will – and Jesus did not do it.

And then there is Lazarus. Anything we know about Lazarus is only speculation. He is dead at the beginning of the story and alive at the end of it. What did he think of this?

We come to this story knowing the end. It is impossible to read a book or watch a movie a second time with the same eyes you did the first time. We know that Lazarus lives again. Most of us are quite happy for him. This is a great story about the power of resurrection. We assume that it was God's will that Lazarus live again. We assume that because it happened. If it happens, it must be God's will.

But is it? Shift perspectives only a little bit and we see that Lazarus may have gotten a raw deal. As far as I know, Lazarus is not alive today. That tells me that he died – again. He had to go through this a second time. It is bad enough that he had to do it once, but twice? God's will?

Not only that, but between the first time he died and whenever the second time was, he was a marked man. People tried to kill him. In the next chapter, chapter 12, we read that large numbers of people went out from Jerusalem to Bethany to see Lazarus, the resurrected one.

In verse 10 we read "So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus." God's will? God's will that one man be hunted that others might believe."

Can we really know what God's will is for us? Can we finite, limited creatures really know? This story complicates it for us. Everyone in the story assumes they know what God's will is, but they all miss it.

Maybe it is time for us to free ourselves from the burden of this question. Maybe we need to stop asking this question and agonizing about the answers. Maybe we need to just live and love the best we can and leave that matter of God's will up to God.

It is always amazing how many of us think we know what God's will is for us. If we just wait awhile, our perspective on it changes. What we think is God's will today is not necessarily what we will think tomorrow. It is even more amazing when we think we know what God's will is for the people around us. We cannot see the big picture. We cannot know all ends. We do not know the spiritual realities that are at play in the universe. How do we know when Jesus is going to walk up to some tomb and shout, "Live."

There is a powerful trend in pop-spirituality that says that if it happened, it is God's will. That is one of the most destructive spiritual axioms that I have ever heard. Yet, it is pervasive. It is in the church, here in this room, and in the various circles I come in contact with. We attribute all sorts of things to God's will that are really tragedies: car accidents, health problems, broken relationships, war, and death. Was it God's will that Lazarus died twice? Was it God's will or humankind's will that Jesus be executed? We need to be very careful what we assign to God's will.

If you are like me, you agonize when you have to make a choice among positive things. This job or that job? This candidate or that candidate? This ministry or that ministry? Am I doing God's will for my children? Am I doing God's will in my family, in the world, in my work?

Those questions rarely get us anywhere. Perhaps the best we can do is desire God's will, rather than figure out the specifics of it. That is what the Lord's Prayer says, "thy will be done." Not: show me your will so I can do it. You do your will. A desire to be a part of it may be all we need.

If we can disentangle ourselves from the question of God's will, we might just be free enough to live. Just live and love. If we do that, God's will will take care of itself.

I close with a prayer I adapted from Thomas Merton, that famous Cistercian monk of the twentieth century. May this prayer become the prayer of our spiritual liberation:

LORD GOD, we have no idea where we are going. We do not see the road ahead of us. We cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do we really know ourselves, and the fact that we think we are following your will does not mean that we are actually doing so. But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And we hope we have that desire in all that we are doing. We hope that we will never do anything apart from that desire. And we know that if we do this you will lead us by the right road, though we may know nothing about it. Therefore we will trust you always though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to face our perils alone. (*Thoughts in Solitude*, Part Two, Chapter II)