

***Rethinking Clichés: God Only Takes the Best***  
***Matthew 18:10-14; Mark 5:35-43***  
***June 7, 2009***

This past week we were saddened by the loss of the Air France plane over the Atlantic Ocean and the tragic loss of many lives. Our own community has been grieving the death of a 16 year old attending a party of teenagers. In the face of such devastating loss, we often grope for an explanation, for some way to make sense of the situation.

Upon the death of a high school cheerleader, someone remarked, "God must have needed a cheerleader in heaven." Funeral homes often have a collection of schmaltzy poems to put in memorial folders. One of those poems says, "God broke our hearts to prove to us that He only takes the Best." Another common phrase of folk theology is, "It must be the will of God." These things are said with the best of intentions by the kindest people trying to offer some comfort or explanation in the midst of agonizing grief. However, when we analyze these comments, we realize that they imply a less than kindly, even brutal, character to God. They give the impression that God is a Cosmic Sadist who delights in inflicting pain and cruelty. These saying attribute all unnatural deaths to acts of God. They imply that God plays favorites. I invite you to rethink these sayings with me and to find something fresh that more accurately depicts our belief about God.

Leslie Weatherhead was one of the most prominent Methodist preachers in England in the first half of the twentieth century. One of his most helpful books is called *The Will of God*,<sup>i</sup> written in an attempt to address the pain and loss of World War II. It is a series of sermons in which he seeks to correct confusion about the will of God. He breaks the will of God into three kinds: intentional, circumstantial, and ultimate.

God's intentional will is for goodness. The word "will" also means desire. Just as a parent desires all that contributes to a child's health, growth, and well-being, so God desires all that makes our lives healthy, good, and wholesome. It is important to dissociate from the phrase "the will of God" all that is evil, unpleasant, and unhappy. What kind of God would intentionally pour out undeserved misery, disappointment and frustration, grief, calamity, and ill health upon those whom God loves? In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus boldly declares, "It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost." The intentional will of God is for the goodness of creation. God desires goodness and harmony for all of God's creatures. God does not play favorites; God shows no partiality. All are included in God's desire for health and wholeness.

Sometimes, however, circumstances disrupt God's intentions: accidents, detours, losses. When God's original design is thwarted, God continues to will goodness in the midst of changed circumstances. God responds positively and creatively to challenging situations to wrest good out of evil. Weatherhead calls this the circumstantial will of God.

We see the circumstantial will of God illustrated in the healing stories of Jesus' ministry. Today we hear how Jairus' daughter has fallen ill and even died from disease. But this is not the intentional will of God. Given the circumstances of her illness, God works through the ministry of Jesus to grant her healing and life. Sadly we know that not every instance of illness is met with miraculous divine intervention such that a cure is found. However, God never abandons us when God's intentional will is thwarted. Even in the most dreadful situations, God is by our side. God stands with us to fight the fight, to challenge the odds, to endure the struggle. God's circumstantial will is that we respond to evil positively and creatively in order to glean something from it that will contribute to the goodness of the world.

We've visited the intentional will of God for goodness and the circumstantial will of God in the midst of events that interfere with God's intended desire for goodness. The third part in Weatherhead's description is the ultimate will of God. In spite of all evil forces and even using evil for good, God's will ultimately triumphs. Nothing can happen which can finally defeat God. Though we humans or natural law may hinder the purposes of God, God works within the changing, evolving circumstances of our lives to bring about goodness. In the end God is victorious. As Paul says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Ultimately the will of God and God's desire for goodness triumphs.

In rethinking clichés such as "God only takes the best" and "It must be the will of God" we can affirm some different truths. The will of God is always directed toward goodness and what is best given existing circumstances. God desires the health and wholeness of all of God's creatures, wanting none of them to be unnaturally hurt. God is not the source of evil and tragedy. Sometimes God's will is thwarted by other circumstances, but God continues to work in the midst of changed environments to bring goodness. Eventually the ultimate will of God will prevail.

William Sloane Coffin's son, Alex, was killed in a tragic car accident at the age of 21. In preaching shortly after his son's death, Coffin said, "The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is 'It is the will of God.' Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was *not* the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."<sup>ii</sup>

What then can be said in the face of death and loss, if not “It is the will of God.” We might say, “God’s heart is broken along with yours.” “God weeps with you.” “God shares your sorrow.” If something must be said, it is most helpful simply to reflect feelings. “This is a painful loss.” “You must feel like your heart has been broken.” “I feel angry that this happened.” Rather than the words we speak, more important is offering a supportive presence. Merely having a hand to hold, someone to be with us in our sorrow is a blessing. A silent, supportive witness to life, to love, to faith speaks volumes in a more compassionate way than even well-intended words can ever convey.

Howard Thurman offers a beautiful summary of the ministry of presence. He wrote:

*I share with you the agony of your grief,  
The anguish of your heart finds echo in my own.  
I know I cannot enter all you feel  
Nor bear with you the burden of your pain;  
I can but offer what my love does give:  
the strength of caring,  
the warmth of one who seeks to understand  
the silent storm-swept barrenness of so great a loss.  
This I do in quiet ways,  
That on your lonely path  
you may not walk alone.*

When loss or tragedy strikes us, as it probably will at some time or another, it is important that we have our theology straight. If we attribute everything that happens to the will of God, we might find ourselves alienated from such a cruel being who would decree the death of a loved one. But if we have a solid grounding in the God revealed by Jesus Christ, a God of compassion and caring, who has numbered every hair upon our head, a God who knows us intimately and who desires what is best for us, we will find in God a source of strength for the prevailing storms of life.

---

<sup>i</sup> Leslie D. Weatherhead, *The Will of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1944).

<sup>ii</sup> William Sloane Coffin, “Alex’s Death.”