

“Making Sense of God’s Will: Why Love Triumphs”

Romans 8:28, 35, 37-39

October 14, 2012

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We have been learning from a new sermon series, “Why: Making Sense of God’s Will.” If you have experienced that God has answered your prayers, then you have a perfect God for your life. But most of us, including myself, experience God with questions because God isn’t perfect for us. We still have unanswered prayers and sufferings. Sometimes it seems God is not perfect. We have questions about God not because we do not trust in God, but because we have wrong expectations about God. This means that either we believe whatever happens must be the will of God or we attempt to advise God to do things for us. Again, God is not a divine vending machine! Then who and what is God? This morning, I hope that we will learn more about God and understand why God’s love prevails despite life’s problems.

1John 4:7-9 reminds us, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent only one and his Son into the world that we might live through him.” The essence of Christian faith is love, which enables us to feel God’s presence and his active work through us. Love may not solve all our problems, but it will sustain us and strengthen us to face our difficulties. Forces of evil, sufferings and agonies in our lives threaten us. The love of God will protect us, will give us peace which surpasses our understanding. God’s love triumphs over any life’s problems and power of evil.

Let us think about God’s presence with us first. Our third year Tongan Luau was a fun and dynamic program this year. My baby, Jacob, really enjoyed dancing with our dancers and helped to pick up dollars for the cashiers. I found something interesting about him during the Luau. Asipele Langi’s warrior dance was a special experience for us. It started with a big sound of thunder. While Jacob was dancing, he was scared and stopped. Then he was looking for his parents. I called him to come back to me and I held him in my arms with a big hug. Parent’s or guardian’s primary job for their babies is not to eliminate all the potential dangers, but to provide protection and a safe environment. The metaphor of parenthood helps us to picture God’s love. In the same way, God may not stop the thunder or eliminate the frightening things in our lives, but knowing that God is with us gives us peace in the midst of life storms. I want to

share another story about peace that God wants us to have in our life.

There are two artists who were commissioned to paint a picture of their conception of peace. The one who best captured peace on canvas would be given a prize. They each went to their studios and painted for the allotted period of time, and then the moment came for the judges to look at their renderings. They pulled the veil off the first canvas, and there was a marvelous canvas. It was a Grandma Moses peaceable kingdom sort of scene. A farmer's wife was preparing the evening meal. The farmer was bringing the cattle in at the end of a day from the pasture. The children were playing on the porch, and smoke was coming out of the chimney. The colors were beautiful. The judges said, "This is it. Peace! We'll look at the other one." So they pulled the veil off the second rendering and instead of beautiful colors and a peaceful scene, there was a raging waterfall. When you looked at it, you felt terribly upset. It got down into your soul and disturbed you. But at the side of the waterfall was a little tree. That tree had been growing in the mist coming from the waterfall, and on the end of the branch jutting out over the water was a bird's nest, and standing on the edge of the bird's nest was a mother bird singing her heart out. They said, "That's peace!" By the love of God, we feel peace inside our hearts even though the storms may rage on the outside of our lives.

Secondly, let's think about how God's love works through us. I will share a story from Pastor Hamilton at the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City. A couple of years ago, on one Christmas service, his church had a special offering for those who are currently unemployed in the congregation. After service, he sat down at his desk and began calling the list of persons. The first call was to a woman named "Carrie." When she answered he said, "Carrie, this is Pastor Hamilton from the church, and I was wondering if I could stop by to drop off a Christmas gift basket from the church. It is a small reminder that God has not forgotten you, and that God loves you. Would it be okay if I stopped by this afternoon to drop the basket off for you?" There was silence on the other end of the phone, and then he heard Carrie begin to cry. An hour later, the Pastor stopped by her apartment. He presented her the basket, gave her a hug, and told her once again that his visit was a small reminder of God's continued love for her. She said, "Pastor, can I tell you why I was crying when you called earlier?" She had a piece of paper in her hand. She said, "I was so discouraged this morning I could not even bring myself to go to church." Her prayer was:

"Where and why? These are my questions. I look around and see the ugly aftereffects of what God has given us. I am not blaming God, I am asking, where are you? I need you! I need help! And no matter how hard I try, I am not getting better. I say your will be done, but it is so hard. I'm not Jesus. I am so

weak. I need you Lord. Please, wrap your arms around me and give me your peace. Give me your strength, give me your hope. Let me want to believe and not fear.”

She continued, “I had just finished writing this prayer asking for God to show me he still loved me and to wrap his arms around me when the phone rang. I was astounded when I heard your voice on the other end of the line! And the first words out of your mouth were ‘I’m calling to bring a gift from the church—a sign that God loves you and has not forgotten you.’ I was speechless. I have never had a prayer answered so quickly before.” This story inspires us that God did not instantly solve all of Carrie’s problems; that’s not usually how God works. But **God uses people, either a pastor or you, as a messenger of God.** Carrie found strength and encouragement.

Let us think of Paul’s confession in our Scripture. As we know, he had been a persecutor of Jesus, but became a follower when he heard Jesus’ words while he was traveling to Damascus. This occurred after Jesus’ death. Our Scripture reading, Romans 8:35 describes Paul’s situation. He is faced with hardship, distress, hunger, peril, and persecution because of Jesus Christ whom he trusted. As verse 36 says, his situation is like “being killed all day long”. What makes him endure all kinds of hardship, distress, hunger, peril and persecution? What makes him have courage, boldness to resist all anguish and pain in front of the crisis of death? Here is one more question. What made his stubborn heart open up and devote the rest of life to Jesus Christ? Here is my interpretation. What dramatically transformed his stance towards Jesus was that he personally experienced the love of God through Jesus’ voice to him. As he said, Romans 8:39 is giving us a clear answer on his devotion and faith. It wasn’t because a magical lamp freed him from suffering or fear of death nor the power to control his surroundings. But he says, “Nothing separates us from the love of God. Paul deeply realized God’s love in him. Now he has confidence that he is connected to that love of God which will never be broken and also gave him courage to deal with all the sufferings. What we pursue on the journey of our Christian faith is not bliss of life, but more deeply to experience the love of God, not only for ourselves but also for one another. It is a call to witness God’s love. Our hope is not that we want to succeed in our businesses or to be rich, but our hope is that God is with us all the time, even in both good and difficult times. We hope and pray that God’s love is present in us. And it works through us to love others and through others to love us. Finally, God’s love prevails and triumphs over any power to threaten us. May the Spirit of God sustain you and keep you bold in your journey. Amen.

Thanks to Adam Hamilton's book "Why?" for framing this sermon series.