

AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD: A GEOGRAPHY OF FAITH
The Practice of Living with Purpose: Vocation

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

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Mark 12:28-31

Growing up Southern Baptist I was taught to seek God's will for my life at every turn. Answering questions, as mundane as "What classes should I take next semester?" to as weighty as, "What do I want to do when I grow up?" were all a part of figuring out God's plan and purpose for my life. Of course there was only ONE perfect divine purpose for me and my job was to figure it out among all the competing voices that wanted to rob me of it. Some of these competing

voices were fairly benign, as in settling for the good rather than the best, but some of them were downright evil, a more sinister ploy led by the devil himself.

As you can only imagine, such decision making was ominous and fraught with danger. To not choose God's will was a sure way to send your life on a terrible trajectory. To not choose to do God's will was to rob your life of joy and fulfillment. To not choose to do God's will, well, hate your luck! So you had be very, very careful. You had to pray very, very intently. Every decision seemed like a gamble.

There was also great fear in actually discovering this will of God. here was this fear that God's will might mean that you would have to do something that you didn't want to do. A fear that God's will might mean you would have to give up your desire to be a lawyer so that you could go to Africa to be a missionary; a fear that God's will might mean you would have to forgo riches for poverty; a fear that God's will might mean living in a perpetual state of Lent, where you would be forced to give beer, or sex, or whatever.

Of course this whole notion of "God's will" came in very handy when it came to dating. You could say, "I think it is God's will that I kiss you!" That sounded so hot and so spiritual all at the same time. But "God's will" was not always so sexy. There was a dark side too. If you needed to break up with someone you simply said, "I've been praying and I think it is God's will that we break up." That line was used all the time at the Baptist University I attended. God got the blame for the breakup and you slithered out of unsatisfying entanglement.

Now don't get me wrong, doing God's will was...is...serious business. We memorized verses like "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matthew 6:33) What this meant, we were told, was to seek God's perfect will for our lives and our lives would be rewarding and fulfilling. And of course the converse was also true. If we didn't follow God's perfect will for our lives, then we would be in deep, deep trouble...there would be hell to pay. God had a perfect will for our lives and our job was to figure it out like some complicated jigsaw puzzle. Every decision of our lives, from the mundane to the major, was a part of making God's will come to pass in our lives, along with its blessings and joys, but if we got it wrong, woe unto you! You can only imagine the kind of handwringing and anxiety this sort of environment created.

But I have come to the place in my life and life's journey where I don't think God's will is some big mystery to be solved in each of the particular decisions of our particular lives. I think God's will is knowable. If you really want to discern what God's will is our own faith tradition, as well as that of all the enduring religions, is rich in wisdom and insight. In fact, I don't think discovering God's will is much of a mystery at all. Some of the greatest wisdom from our Hebrew heritage and from Jesus, our Christ, puts God's will in the most simple, striking and succinct ways.

In what is often called the most sublime definition of true religion, the prophet Micah asked:
"[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

I just don't think this whole question of God's will and purpose can be framed any better than that. And recently, I came across a great reflection on this gold nugget of scripture from the Jewish Talmud:

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.

And Jesus, who was thoroughly Jewish, was well rooted in the Hebrew tradition. So when one of the religious leaders of his day came to him and asked him:

“Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

The first part of Jesus’ answer is part of Jewish great *Shema*, that great confession of faith offered by Jews everywhere.

Jesus’ answer certainly impressed this Jewish leader, who said

“You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘[God] is one, and besides [God] there is no other’; and ‘to love [God] with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

And the religious leader’s answer so impressed Jesus, that Jesus complimented him right back and told him: *“You are not far from the kingdom of God.”*

And after this little exchange we are told that no one had any more questions. But that has certainly not stopped many of us from asking our questions about just what is God’s perfect will and purpose for our lives.

Our lectionary gospel reading today adds to this theme of God’s will by saying

“but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

So what I am hearing is fairly clear: Love God. Love your neighbor...as yourself. Do justice now. Do love now. Walk humbly with God now. And do it all as a servant to each other. This is pretty much the gist of God’s will as far as I can tell. I think what we have here is as close to God’s will as we will ever get. Not a “God’s will” that is concerned about the *what* of your life... about every minute decision of your life so that you fulfill God’s one and only perfect will for your life. But, a “God’s will” that is concerned about *how* you go about your living your life to the full... an expansive God’s will that simply gives shape and meaning to the passions and joys of your life.

Barbara Brown Taylor talks of the great angst she had upon graduating from seminary. She said she had no clue what she was going to do with her life after she finished her degree. She was graduating from divinity school but she didn’t even belong to a church. So she began asking God to tell her what she was supposed to do. What was her purpose in life? How was she going to find the perfect vocation that had her name on it? So she started praying at the top of a fire escape on the deserted Victorian mansion next door the seminary. She writes:

Up on that fire escape, I learned to pray the way a wolf howls. I learned to pray the way that Ella Fitzgerald sang scat.

Then one night when my whole heart was open to hearing from God what I was supposed to do with my life, God said, “Anything that pleases you.”

“What?” I said, resorting to words again. “What kind of an answer is that?”

“Do anything that pleases you,” the voice in my head said again, “and belong to me.”

At one level, that answer was no help at all. The ball was back in my court again, where God had left me all kinds of room to lob it wherever I wanted. I could be a priest or a circus worker. God really did not care. At another level, I was so relieved that I sledded

down that stairs that night. Whatever I decided to do for a living, it was not *what* I did but *how* I did it that mattered. God had suggested an overall purpose, but was not going to supply the particulars for me. If I wanted a life of meaning, then I was going to have to apply the purpose for myself. (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 110.)

I find her words so liberating and so refreshing...and spot on.

As people of God, we know what God's will is. And as followers of Jesus, we can figure out what God's purpose is for our lives because we can hear it and see it...in fact we've heard it and seen it and experienced it... lived out in the of Jesus, our Christ. Our calling and vocation in life is to live it out God's purpose in the unique and only YOU. It doesn't matter if you are factory worker or a C.E.O. It doesn't matter if you are a student or retiree. It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor, gay or straight. It doesn't matter if you're a full time minister or not. Just be you. Just be your creative, unique self. Follow your dreams and passions. Let your best prayers lead you. Go where life and joy abound. Whatever you do, just do it with great purpose. Do it with God. Do it with love and justice. Do it loving God and neighbor and self. Do it as a servant.

Friends, I think God's will is knowable. It is as knowable as 2 plus 2 equals 4. What concerns me is that too many people don't know what God's will is. Or, they think God's will is a threat and a killjoy to their lives, so why bother. Or worse yet, people know God's will and could care less because they think life is all about them!

Victor Frankl observed "Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for." Our faith tradition offers us a ready purpose to live by. It helps us imagine what God's will is and discover that it is neither magical or mystical. It presents us with a meaning to live for.

Frederick Buechner summarized it beautifully. He said, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*) I like that. He affirms our deep gladness, our joys, our loves, our passions, our desires, whatever those may be. But God's purpose doesn't stop there it also encompasses the world's deep hunger. And that place...where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet...is the place we practice and learn God's purpose for our lives.

Irenaeus of Lyon, an early church father, suggested that God's will is this: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." Can you imagine that God's will might make you *more* human? That God's will leads to you being fully alive?

Henry David Thoreau wrote:

Do not be too moral. You may cheat yourself out of too much life. Aim above morality.
Be not simply good; be good for something.

For too many years, I was, as they say, too "heavenly minded" to be any earthly good. I was too worried about God's will at every turn and I ended up self-focused, anxious and afraid. I was trying to be good when I should have been aiming higher! I should have been aiming at being good for something. I should have been practicing the art of living with a purpose all along the way.

Whatever you do with your life, whatever choices you make, learn what it means to become more fully human; learn what it means to practice love and justice and servanthood wherever you find yourself in life and in whatever you are doing for living, learn what it means to live with purpose; learn what it means to do it with God, who promises to be with you through it all!