

“Surrender Personal Will to Divine Will”

Psalm 23

We are continuing our Lenten journey today, encountering our fifth sacred Truth.... Surrender Personal Will to Divine Will. Have you noticed that as we continue to make our way up the Tree of Life, the more difficult these Truths seem to be? We started out talking about how we are all one, a concept most people of faith can wrap our minds around pretty easily. That’s our bread and butter. All are one. All are Welcome. All are created in the image of God. All are part of the Body of Christ. As I said, a concept which for most people of faith, we can get our minds around.

But this week, we are talking about surrender, a concept which goes against every fiber of our independent, I can do it on my own, I don’t need anyone being. Surrender is just not in our vocabulary. In our wider culture, and yes, even in our own religious institutions to a certain degree, surrender is seen as failure. Surrender is seen as giving up. Surrender is seen as abandoning hope. For so many of us, surrender is not an option....or so we have been told by the larger narrative of this world.

Except in reality, the very basis of our faith story as Christians is all about surrender, giving up our egos, giving up our wants to become one with the

presence of God in our midst. In the Gospels, Jesus tells his disciples that whoever wishes to follow him must first take up his own cross. She must reject father, mother, family, even reject our own self to become Jesus' follower. In our sacred text, we are also told how Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, asking for God's will to be done. We also know that Jesus died on the cross, an utter failure in the eyes of the world, only to be transformed into new life by our God. And think about...each and every Sunday, we pray the Lord's Prayer and at the very heart of this prayer is: let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Surrender is very much a part of our faith narrative. And when we start thinking of surrender in such terms, it becomes a way for us as the people of God to be empowered, a way for us to experience the fullness of God in our midst. In faith, where we are constantly reminded that where the world sees foolishness, we see grace and love, through faith, God transforms our understanding of surrender. It becomes a way for us to disentangle ourselves from our worried thoughts and egos. It becomes a way to for us as the people of God to change the world's narrative from power and might to healing and wholeness.

I think it is only fair to share that this sermon comes with a disclaimer. I am preaching this sermon as much for me as I am bringing a word for the congregation, maybe even more so. I'm sure it will come as no surprise to anyone who knows me that I like to think I am in control, that if I plan out every detail,

then I will be prepared for anything and everything with no surprises. Needless to say, having kids, working in the church, and going back to school at age 40 has blown that theory out of the water.

But still I try. I really like my illusion of control. It is my safety net. It is my preferred mode of operation. It is what allows me to stay in my comfort zone so much so that I often find myself bargaining with God. I'll say, "Okay God, you want me to go into ministry, you want me to go back to school, you want me to do something that is so out of my realm, something which terrifies me completely, okay I'll do it but here are the terms of the deal. I want it done my way. I want it done on my own time. And I want it to cause as little disruption to my life as possible." Again, no surprise that in moments like these, moments when I think I am control, moments when I think I have finally bargained my way with God, I hear laughter filling the universe.

I know I am not alone in this way of bargaining my way into surrender. We have all been there. And it is not just us sitting in these pews. It is human nature. Researcher and storyteller, Brene' Brown shares that after collecting thousands of stories for her research, she always hears the same thing...that people from all walks of life, regards of class, regardless of gender, regardless of ethnicity, all people grapple with illusions of perfection and control, trying to make ourselves bulletproof before we go into any arena. Yet, here's what she has discovered,

“When we spend our lives waiting until we’re perfect and in control, when we spend our lives trying to become bulletproof before we walk into the arena, we ultimately sacrifice relationships and opportunities that may not be recoverable, we squander our precious time, and we turn our backs on our gifts, those unique contributions that only we can make. Perfection, control, and being bulletproof are seductive, but they don’t exist in the human experience.”

Let me say that again: Perfection, control, and being bulletproof are seductive but they don’t exist in the human experience.

So if that’s the case, how do we put aside our illusions of control, our illusions of perfection, our illusions of being independent, how do we put aside our illusions and surrender our personal will to Divine Will? For me, as I have lived with this Sacred Truth, the answer to that question is reflected through Psalm 23 but not in a way most of us would assume.

And here’s why I say that: Usually when we think of Psalm 23, we latch on to the images of a Gentle shepherd and his little white lambs, all clean and well behaved, staring lovingly at the shepherd. But that’s not the way sheep really behave. Sheep are stubborn. They have a tendency to wander. Sheep have a tendency to do things their own way.

Over the years, we have tamed Psalm 23, making it only about a gentle shepherd and his perfect sheep, and in doing so, we have missed its radical message. Psalm 23 is probably the most counter cultural psalm within our sacred text. Because you see, the psalmist isn't saying all these comforting words after the fact, after he has made it through safely, after he has got it all figured out, after everything ends happily ever after.

No, Psalm 23 is a Trust Psalm. It is a trust psalm because the Psalmist is saying all this stuff while he is going through the crisis, while he is experiencing all the despair. Psalm 23 is powerful and meaningful because it is about a person claiming the promises given to him by his God, and reminding God of those promises as well. It is about a person who trust God completely. It is about a person who understands that by surrendering our will to Divine Will we lose nothing. Rather instead, by surrendering, we gain the whole world. We gain peace. We gain awareness. We experience the gift of grace which constantly transforms us into the people God created and calls us to be.

The very images of Psalm 23 show us that surrendering to God means having the courage and the strength to eat before our enemies, to walk through the darkest valley, to fear no evil, not because of what we've done but because of what God has done, because who God is, because of what God has promised us as God's children, named and claimed and loved more than we will ever know. For us as

people of faith, surrendering our personal will to Divine Will always comes back to who God is for us as people of faith...our God who is faithful, our God who is loving, our God who is steadfast from generation to generation. Surrendering our personal will to Divine Will always come back to the very character of God, a God in which we trust completely and whole-heartedly because our God has promised us that Love will always have the last word. Surrendering our will to Divine Will always comes back to the promise given to us by God, a promise which transforms what the world sees as failure into opportunities into new life for us as Beloved Children of God because our God has never failed us yet and God is not about to start now.

I'll admit that this again would be a great time for a sermon illustration but as I shared earlier, this is a lesson I am still learning. So what I thought I would do is instead offering an illustration, I would invite us to practice....This week, I am inviting us all to practice surrendering our will to Divine Will. Don't worry, I'm not just going to throw you out there on your own. I'm going to pass along something that I want us to practice this week.

Dr. Jeff Brantely teaches mindfulness -- a practice of moment-to-moment, non-judging awareness that all people can cultivate to more fully participate in their lives, improve health and reduce stress. In this work, he has found that people can sometimes become so stressed out -- too distracted, too agitated, too hurried

and worried -- that even the consolation and refuge of their spiritual life becomes difficult to access.

So he always invites people to step back and realize that our lives only happen in the present moment. He always asks them this one question: What, in this moment, is blocking us from realizing the sacred? Then he invites people to spend time in prayer with this question.

He states: Learn to trust your immediate, mindful awareness of inner feelings of aversion, and the call of the ego to fight a particular situation. And then, in that moment, choose to escape the distortions of ego talk. Choose to practice surrender. Surrender to this moment. Surrender in this moment.

By “surrender” I do not mean you must become passive when there is something to do to improve a situation. Instead, I am pointing to the many times when there is literally nothing else to be done, yet the inner voices and judges are screaming in protest and demanding more action. I am pointing to the moments when it is best to sit with an unpleasant situation, to sit with sadness or pain or anger.

Offer a prayer of surrender. Turn to the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Sit comfortably. Close your eyes. Breathe in and out, relaxing and receiving the breath sensations. Repeat the prayer, surrender to it. “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Allow yourself and this moment to just be, and let our mind, body and spirit receive and experience the fullness of God’s presence and grace.

So here's the invitation, I would like us all to spend time in prayer this week, asking ourselves What, in this moment, is blocking us from realizing the sacred? And of course, praying the prayer Jesus taught us to pray by saying...

"Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

I don't have all the answers but I do have the promise...the promise which tells us there is enough, a promise which tells us we are loved more than we could ever image.... I do have the promise that one day...God's Kingdom will come and it will be on earth as it is in heaven. So what better time to start praying this prayer? We already know how is going to turn out. Amen.