

“Your Story - Already Written or a Collaboration?”¹

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Colossians 1:9-10

... since the day we heard about you, we haven't stopped praying for you and asking for you to be filled with the knowledge of God's will, with all wisdom and spiritual understanding. We're praying this so that you can live lives that are worthy of the Lord and pleasing to him in every way: by producing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God...

Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

There's a story about a farmer plowing his field, praying about what he should do with the rest of his life. "Lord, please send me a sign."

He looks up and sees the clouds forming what looks like letters. As they drift they seem to form the letters, "P.C." "Hmm! P.C. ... Preach Christ. I'll do that!"

He returns the tractor to the shed and goes off to live into God's call for him preaching wherever they'll have him. But his sermons are terrible. His ministry goes nowhere. After a while, he cries out, "Lord, I've been trying so hard. It's just not working."

Fast forward, back on the farm his friends ask what happened. "I thought 'P.C.' meant 'Preach Christ.'" Turns out it meant, "Plant Corn!"

Today is our third in a series of sermons on "Why?" questions. Today we ask, "Why can't I see God's will for my life?" As we begin, we'll also be asking, "Is God's will a set of guidelines or does God have a specific plan for every decision? And, "Is God's intention irresistible or can we go another way?" We talked about this two weeks ago, so we won't take much time on this one.

Some people believe God has a concrete plan for each life all laid out. Some texts might seem to support this. We read in Psalm 139, "On your scroll every day was written that was being formed for me, before any one of them had yet happened." But does God really have a complete plan for our lives all laid out? Is everything we do, all that will ever happen to us, predetermined?

Many people think so. But if everything happens according to God's plan then, as we talked about two weeks ago, that means God is responsible for everything we do wrong ... children kept in cages... That can't be.

Another problem: If everything is already laid out then we really are just actors on God's stage. What's the point of life then?

Do you have a DVR? I don't but if you recorded the big game and then before you could watch it, you heard about the big plays and the score, would you still want to watch it? Or would you find you have better things to do with your time?

¹ This sermon is adapted from chapter three of Adam Hamilton's book, *Why? Making Sense of God's Will*, 2011.

Other people suggest that God has a perfect plan for our lives but gives us the freedom to decide whether or not to follow this path. If this is so, why wouldn't God give us a script? Why leave us to figure it out for ourselves?

Another thing. If God has a perfect plan for the big decisions but allows us to stray, isn't it true that we'd only have to stray once to completely mess up God's perfect will? I didn't date that boy from psych class at college. We didn't marry and have three kids, all of which God might have planned. Instead I moved to New Mexico, married a guy from Wisconsin, had kids and moved here. If God plans the big stuff, how many lives would have been changed by that one decision? That boy in West Chester, the one he might have married, the one I did marry, the one he didn't, all of our kids and their progeny. The students I would have taught if I'd stayed in Pennsylvania... The list goes on.

Here's a thought.

What if God invites us to collaborate in the writing of our stories? My daughter Kellyn once collaborated with a school friend to write a novella. They came up with the basic plot, then wrote alternating chapters. If they'd continued working together, they might have gotten good at it. They'd have learned to smooth the transitions between chapters and to write in similar styles. They'd have chosen one to be editor, to make sure the flow was seamless and the writing uniform.

Maybe this is how our lives are when we live in God. We bring our humanity to the story – conflict, individuality, fear, beginnings and ends. God brings reconciliation and peace, forgiveness, hope, and love. When we include God in our story, it gains beauty and inspiration that we would have otherwise missed.

Maybe God has an outline. God hopes we will join in a collaboration, yet we have the option. Will we write our story with God's help – or without. Any of us who have been parents, mentors, or otherwise helped in raising up younger people know the hope that these people in our care will make wise decisions. We want them to trust God and to know joy. We try to guide them when we can and support them when we can't. And we love them. Could God's role in creation be like a heavenly parent?

Jesus prayed, "Abba." "Daddy." What if God's will is less about pushing us this way or that, and more about guiding and supporting and loving us just like we do with the youngsters in our care.

I believe God's intention is that we know and practice love – through compassion and justice. When we allow it, God helps us write our life's chapters to include these things instructing us along the way so that we can live more fully and joyfully.

We find God's instruction in the bible, in life experiences, and in the words of the people around us – including at church. This instruction requires openness on our part. We need others to help us interpret what this scripture means or that life lesson.

In our Colossians text, the writer explains that God's will is for us to live lives worthy of God and that we might grow in knowledge of God. When we understand God's hope as less of a specific plan and more as God's intention for how we make decisions, we start to understand God's part in our lives.

Dr. Chauncey Crandall, a nationally known cardiologist, used his influence as a platform to advance God's kin-dom. In his medical office, he'd pray for his patients and shares God's love

with them. His skills allowed him a unique sphere of influence where a preachers would never have had credibility.

Sometimes God's will is large; sometimes it's like Brian Stahl buying a fast food meal for the homeless man in the parking lot. We each have a sphere of influence where we can make a difference. The farmer through his business connections reached people who might never visit a church. Same with Dr. Crandall or Brian or you.

I've heard people say all their friends already go to church. My sphere of influence includes all of you and a very few outside church circles. Yet we each have neighbors. Working people have colleagues and work friends. We all have daily opportunities to be used by God. To share the good news – through our words and how we behave – with people who might never meet a pastor.

When we collaborate with God, we allow God to guide us. God as Spirit helps us to notice what we might otherwise miss and to say “yes” in moments when we can be part of God's meta-story.

Most mornings – as I do my back stretches in bed – I ask God to guide me in the coming day. When I'm driving and miss a turn, I may see something that changes the day right then or helps me to serve God the following month. I don't know and that's okay. I just practice being open to God as Spirit, do what I know to do and try to be open to direction. I trust God to use me as part of God's bigger story.

We started by asking about God's will for our lives, this is how we do it – by paying attention and by willingly offering ourselves to be a part of God's story. Probably the best question we can ask ourselves is, “What's the most loving thing I can do?” Speaking from experience, on the rare days I actually practice it over the course of the day, this is a wonderful help. And it leaves me feeling great at the end of the day.

We have tools to help us know God's will – scripture and other writings, our own and others' experience, the stories of the Church. We also have our own common sense. Still, when we open ourselves to God's hope for our lives, we have to set aside our own notions. How often do we say we don't know God's will when in truth we just don't like what we're picking up? Sometimes God's path isn't the easy one. God's plan is for the good of all creation which sometimes is different from what gives us happiness. But in the end, it's good news.

The chapters in our lives vary. Some are terrible; others wonderful. Scripture reminds us that whatever happens, that's not the end of the story. God works through all things to create good, maybe not even for us, but good nonetheless. God is always at work transforming the suffering and pain that are part of this life into joys, into wholeness and life. Even when we don't see it, we can trust in it.

Fern was only one of the older people I've met who said, “I'm done, I don't need to do anything.” I always respond that as long as we're breathing, God still has work for us. We all have at least one chapter left in our lives, some many. Work with God to shape that story so that you may lead lives worthy of God and pleasing in every way as you bear fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God.

Amen.