

"CHANGING GOD'S MIND"

Preached by Douglas Norris in the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto, CA
October 16, 1983

Genesis 32:24-30
Luke 18:1-8

I appreciate the music of our church. The choirs are outstanding. Have you heard of the advice given to an enthusiastic choir director: "Never try to teach a pig to sing. You won't succeed, and it annoys the pig." What can be changed? Can you change human nature? Can you change situations? Can you change God? Can you change God's mind, or what we assume to be God's will?

Jesus told a story - read in the Gospel lesson today - of a widow who hounded, pestered a judge. He was probably a judge appointed by the Romans or King Herod. He was probably an official of the occupation forces. If he was typical of his times, he was also subject to bribery. It was a common occurrence for the rich to get what they wanted - "justice" so to speak - because they could bribe the judge. But, a poor widow had no means to influence the judge in her behalf. We are not told the nature of her complaint, but she felt she had been wronged.

In order to get the judge's attention, and action, she utilized the effective method of "hounding" or "wearing down". Most children understand this method and use it most effectively to get what they want: "Can I, Mom, huh, can I? Oh, why not, Mother?" The poor mother often wearily and in exasperation gives in and sighs, "All right, all ready?" And then she adds some inane comment to justify the defeat, like, "Just this once, but don't ask again." Both the child and the mother know that she is just mouthing words to keep the tongue in shape or the mouth muscles operative! This method - called "wearing down" or "wear your opponent out" - is not only effective, but Jesus legitimized it and praised the widow for her persistence.

Jesus even says that God, like the judge, responds to the persistent prayers of his people. You can change God's mind. You can change what is; the situation is not immovable, or unchangeable. You can make changes.

In our Old Testament lesson today, Jacob wrestled with God. Jacob had tricked Esau, his brother. Jacob's conscience was guilty and now the certainty of meeting Esau after years of separation, plus the reality that Esau had 500 men with him, drove Jacob to his knees. He prayed by himself, all night, wrestling with God. Jacob was struggling with his past. Jacob needed assurance and forgiveness. He was wrestling God and his future. In the morning the one with whom he was wrestling said to Jacob, "Let me go, daylight is coming." But Jacob hung on, persisted, and demanded, "I won't let you go until you bless me." He was crying, "Give me strength, give me power, help me." And Jacob won. He changed God's mind. God capitulated and blessed Jacob.

Prayer essentially is the attempt to change God's mind; petition and intercession prayers, that is. Prayers of praise, thanksgiving, and confession are not attempts to change God's mind, but prayers of petition on your own behalf, or intercessions on someone else's behalf, are attempts to change God's mind. At least, that is one way of expressing or defining prayer. We pray to change the situation, what is, the attitude or heart, the condition. Prayer is the struggle with God's will.

On the one hand, prayer is the learning of God's will - "Oh, God, reveal to me your will in this situation." But, on the other hand, prayer is struggle with God's will and the attempt to change it. At least, what people assume is God's will. In Jesus' story of the widow, she was unhappy with her situation. She was struggling with the judge to get his attention and to effect some changes in her situation, what some, no doubt, were telling her is God's will.

Notice how often it is the comfortable, the powerful, the observer or outsider who so glibly define God's will.

It was the slave owner who told the slave, "Slavery is God's will, and it is your duty to submit and obey. To object to your slavery is to defy the will of God." And the slave owner found verses in the Bible to define the will of God, which must have been comforting to the slave!

It is the males (comfortable and powerful in their position) who announce to women, "It is God's will for you to be man's helpmate. You are not to enter into man's world or compete with a man. It is your duty to submit and obey. To object is to defy the will of God." And men for centuries have found verses in the Bible to define the will of God - So comforting to women!

It is the heterosexual, comfortable and powerful in the position, who announce to the homosexual, "You are an abomination to the will of God and therefore do not deserve equal rights. Your duty is to stay in the closet, deny your sexuality, live in celibacy, and stay away from my children." And the heterosexual finds verses in the Bible to define the will of God, which is comforting to the homosexual!

It is the militarist and industrialist, comfortable and rich in their position, who announce to the peacemakers and freeze-niks, "War has always been with us and it is God's will that America be strong, that we pursue a policy of deterrence by scaring the enemy with our superior nuclear weapons. Besides that, we know that the Soviets are not to be trusted." And the militarist and industrialists and politicians find verses in the Bible to define the will of God, which will be so comforting when they blow up the world!

It is the full and the fat who say to the hungry, "It is God's will for some to be poor. After all, the poor ye have with you always." And they find a verse in the Bible to define the will of God, which must be very comforting to the starving.

It is the comfortable who don't want their precious dream world disturbed who announce glibly to the parent whose child was killed by a drunk driver, "It is God's will. And the drunk, after all, didn't know what he was doing." Or the healthy tell the sick, "It is God's will", which is comforting to the sick!

It is the defeated and discouraged who sigh, "It is God's will. Human nature can't be changed. The choices made as a child determine who and what you are as an adult, and cannot be changed." The will of God, they say.

The will of God, so glibly defined, becomes solidified and stagnated in systems. When a way of life becomes a tradition, it becomes solidified into systems and they develop inertia, with no movement and no change.

But in our day, one thing in the future is certain and that is: there will be change. Our way of life will change. Our society will change. Our church will change. You will change. The rapid changes are producing three types of people: 1) Those in the system who resist, who try to hold back the future. 2) Those who are overwhelmed, who wring their hands, and try to accommodate themselves, to acquiesce to the will of God saying, "Yassuh, Massa, whatever you say, Massa," the conformist, the defeated. Or, 3) Those who attempt to influence, to invent the future, refusing to be victims, but with intentionality decide what that future should be, and go about it making it happen.

That is faith, said Jesus. The nature of the system is to beat people into submission, to turn people into acquiescing, complacent victims. But, Jesus says, "Pound on the door. Hound the judge. Be persistent. Hang in there. Demand." Quite revolutionary, of course, but the Gospel is revolutionary. The Gospel says quite forcefully: you can change your life. You can change your lifestyle. You can change those decisions made in childhood. You can change this world.

One more application. We have a church to build. We have a vision of what we could be: a thriving, growing church, growing in the Holy Spirit, the power of God, growing in love and mutual concern, growing in outreach to children, youth and adults, growing in outreach to minister to the needs of people, a vision of glorious worship of God, people being educated, challenged.

That's the vision. The system tell us, "There's not enough money, people won't give any more than they are now giving." The system says "Go slow, go easy." The system says, "Hang on to the past. Conserve, preserve what we have. Cut back. Don't risk. Don't reach out."

Jesus says, there was a widow who was victimized and cheated. No doubt, people told her, "Don't fight the system. The poor just don't have a chance; especially when you are a woman." The judge probably said, "Don't bother me. After all, I'm busy. I've got all kinds of important things to do." The religious probably told her, "It's God's will. Accept it. You can't change God's mind." The woman probably had self-doubts, "Is there any hope? Do I have the persistence?"

But, she was a woman of faith. And she changed things. The judge finally listened, heard her case and acted in her behalf. The widow succeeded. Jesus praised the woman for her persistence, for her dogged, determined faith. She made things happen. She invented her future. She set the pace. She prayed. She wrestled. She pounded. She hounded.

Faith pounds on the door, and cries, "We have a vision! Let's get going. We can do it."

The Gospel lesson ends by Jesus, perhaps sorrowfully, asking, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith?"

"C H A N G I N G G O D ' S M I N D"

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LUKE 18:1-8

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