

Thy Will: A Message on Silence, Suffering, and Searching

Pastor Nicholas W. Gliha preached June 30th 2019 at the United Methodist Church of Chagrin Falls.

Scripture: Job 40: 6-9; Esther 1:1

You might gather from the title of the message that today's message is going to be a happy one full of enthusiasm and clapping and cheering and hooping and hollering and you know, the best parts of Nick he preaches. Ha, no friends, today is not necessarily one of those days. Today I want to invite you into my mind as I share with you some of the processing I've been doing in a journal and through a clergy accountability group.

I share these thoughts not as a "boohoo" story, but rather I believe that for some of you they might help you in navigating what your faith means to you, perhaps help you see more of the United Methodist church and vocally let you know that I am someone who is in solidarity with you when your faith seems stagnant or you're searching for a God that appears to be silent. I trust there are many of you feeling this way as attendance records are down more than previous years have shown, giving is substantially down, and to be frank, worship just doesn't have that same spark of enthusiasm that it did when I first got here. All of this, seemingly happened after GC2019. I know, I know, you're probably sick of me mentioning GC2019 every time that I preach, but I'm not sure everyone is completely over it yet, especially when the denomination constantly re-opens the wound trying to find ways to fight it. This particular fight and its consequences and lingering effects is part of the inspiration for the message today.

First, some background on the scripture. We'll do Job first, the book of Job chapter 40 verses 6-9. Job gets a bad rap in the Bible as being a whiny dude. He has a hard life. He's a well off guy, upper middle class, happy marriage, healthy body, positive relation with his kids. Just your poster child of the American dream. But then God meets with the angelic counsel and one of the angels named Satan (Pronounced: Sah-tahn) whom is not the same as Satan, the archangel. Satan tells God that Job only likes God because God has been good to him and that God should ruin Job's life to see if he remains faithful. God says "Perfects, let's do it" and Job's life is miserable for the next 40 chapters. His body breaks out from illness and his wife so infamously says to him "Curse God and die!" Job spends the next 40 chapters in dense prose that is basically an ethics seminar with his friends trying to make sense of Job's suffering coming up with the usual "you must have done something to deserve this" argument.

They assume a very basic human system of cause and effect. This ethics seminar is larger than just Job though, as Job falls into the category of the wisdom literature. The two preceding books, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes also represent

wisdom literature and also talk about the ethics of God, the nature of God, the justice of God and all of that. Much of what we assume about God comes from these works. Each of these books builds upon the question of God from the previous book in line leading up to that beautiful moment in Job 40 when God responds and talks about justice and suffering.

So, yes, Job is sad on its own, but Job represents a larger beauty when read in proper order. It's dense so I invite you to go on your own time and watch the Bible Project on Youtube. They do lovely animations that help Christians understand the Bible as one cohesive story and their overview of not just Job and Esther are amazing, but also the wisdom literature as a whole.

So, with all of that said to catch you up in Job, these verses I have selected are God's own words to Job explaining that God knows every movement of every creature and every blade of grass, and that what Job and other humans are able to perceive is only what humans can perceive. But although we are made in the image of God, we are not made identical to God, and as such our minds cannot think of the world in terms of a perspective that only God alone can see. God then point blank challenges Job saying "Since you think I'm doing such a poor job at running the world how about you do it?" Job, smartly at this point, shuts up and admits he was wrong.

Esther on the other hand is a fascinating book full of twists and turns, morally gray political moves, murder and manipulation, intrigue, etc. It's basically ancient day House of Cards for anyone that is a fan of that show and Esther is Frank Underwood. Esther is also a really interesting book in that it is the only book in the Bible to not include any reference to God whatsoever. Esther also makes it clear from the very first sentence that it is a story not about God, but rather the political world in which they live in. This is what happened during the time and reign of Ahasuerus. Not God's reign, but Ahasuerus' reign. In Esther, God appears to be silent, dismissive, uninterested. But in Esther we see the evidence of God through the actions of the characters.

My goal for this message is to have us answer the question "My will or God's will?" If we were to fill in the blank "This is what happened during the reign of _____ in the United Methodist Church would we fill that blank with God or something else entirely? I want us to wrestle with the inward holiness and social holiness of following God's will and at the same time acting on God's will for the transformation of the world. This tension is a beautiful thing but if the scales ever tip one way too far it can be a very dangerous thing where we can elevate ourselves, our wills, our interpretations, our end games to God's end games. We become gods ourselves and kill the one God who already died for us once before. But first, story time.

I find myself in a place of confusion, a wilderness experience when it comes to my faith, not unlike the time Jesus felt temptation to turn from God as well. I admit that GC2019 has really rocked me. Not necessarily because my "side" didn't "win" but rather

the questions thereafter about the nature of God that have come up. Further, the increased hatred between clergy and lay to those on the other side of the aisle, and mostly, the political movements within the church body that have rocked my faith is how much of this book is the Word of God for the people of God or the word of the people for the people of the people. Allow me a moment to verbally process this, to make sense further of what I am saying. Annual conference was weird this year, and if you will recall Mary shared about the election process for delegates to go to general conference to help sway the direction of the voting process. All good and fine. But the way it was done was...icky. Caucus groups representing the farther leaning progressive and moderate minded groups campaigned through text, social media, and printed flyers under the guise of "East Ohio Forward" at each of the doors entering Hoover as did the far right leaning caucus group, the Wesleyan Covenant Association.

The bishop would lead us in prayer before each vote, every single vote, all like 98,000 of them asking that God's will would be done, not our will, but God's will. God, elect the people that should go. The moment amen was said, a buzz from my pocket with the precise voting numbers of who to vote for. God's will...or vote the slate? In the end, the clergy swept with a progressive minded slate whereas the lay was primarily conservative. As we clapped and cheered for our delegates on their elections, I wonder, did any of God's will get done? Was this similar to Esther with morally gray politics? Or was it similar to Esther's opening verse where it says "in the days of not the lord, but the people's king."

This led me into a deeper spiral of unbelief about all of scripture, the thing I have turned to for years with eagerness and a good dosage of skepticism. Are any of these words God's words? Or is it, just like any other history book, written from the side of those that won? I mean think about it, it's primarily a male driven book with the Israelites always being the winners. There aren't many cases where women speak or are even given a name. There are over 400,000 redactions done in the Bible of stories added or dismissed as time has gone on and changed. How can this ever be a timeless book of God's word and will when it has changed over history? Those changes done only by those with the education to write and read and the authority to even do such a thing. Whose voice wasn't included? Who are the "losers" in this case and which side would Jesus fall on?

I think this is one reason I have struggled with the phrase "The Bible says" since I began doing Biblical Scholarship in undergrad, because surely the Bible contains powerful verses of scripture about the nature of God and even hard facts about what God supports and does not support but I can't help get past the question "what voices weren't given a chance to say something through scripture?" We often toss it up to "oh well times were different back then" just as we casually dismiss our own country's racist history and suppression of African Americans not all that long ago.

So if we can't change the "different times" of the past, how can we ensure that all voices have a space in the gospel of chagrin falls being written today? Is carrying on the fight against the traditional plan doing God's will? Or has God's will been done with it's passing. I don't know. I know I prayed for that to happen at GC2019. In my mind, it didn't, but then again, my mind isn't God's mind.

Which leads me to Job. My poor sad sap of a boy, Job. Job loved God with all his heart and mind. Then Satan (Sa-Tahn) told God that Job only loves God because God has been good to Job, that God has lived up the expectations and interpretations of God by Job. Then when God appears to change, and when God hurts Job, Job lashes out at God calling God unjust and a liar. Am I, and people like me like Job? Angry that our understanding of who God is now in opposition to what God perceives to be based on the "will" of the church? I'm not sure. Like Job, I, and perhaps some of you, can admit that it's difficult to trust, follow, dedicate my life and time to a God that has an asterisk attached to God's love. Where love is surrounded by oppression, classism, racism, suffering, encampment of children, etc. etc. etc. That's not love. That's manipulation and power plays. I surely wouldn't be in a relationship with McKinsie if she had contingencies on her love, why would I with God?

Contingencies is something this country as a whole is wrestling with right now. Right? It's a country built on immigrants but illegal immigrants are a tricky situation. We follow a savior who was a fleeing refugee, but we admit in praxis and with tax dollars its tricky to accept just anyone. Not to mention national security. But lets hopefully agree on one thing here together....what is happening at the border with the separation of the children and the living conditions of the children is unacceptable, it is inhumane, it is disgusting. If GC2019 and annual conference is an example of God's silence for me and the personal suffering we as the united methodist church are going through, what is happening in our nation is suffering and silence as well.

I mean you know what's going but as a quick recap 50 attorneys and doctors were given a rare glimpse inside one of the detention facilities and claimed it to be inhumane and lacking in basic hygiene and food and that the children had been staying there far longer than the legal 72 hours by matters of weeks. interviews with the children also confirmed that nearly all of these children were not unaccompanied migrants at the border, but rather were forcibly separated from their parents. And in all fairness those that run the facility have gone on record saying there are just too many people to accommodate and they could never plan for something like this so I don't place blame on them either.

I want to take a moment to speak from the position of the United Methodist Church here so you understand the following words I say regarding this particular issue is not me abusing the pulpit to push my agenda but rather inform you of where the United Methodist Church stands. First, Resolution 3281 passed in 2008 says "The

United Methodist Church directs its local churches, congregations, and members to: “call the United States government to immediately cease all arrests, detainment, and deportations of undocumented immigrants, including children, solely based upon their immigration status until a fair and comprehensive immigration reform is passed.” (Book of Resolutions, 3281) further, our very own Book of Discipline states in its section on “Rights of Immigrant Families” “We oppose immigration policies that separate family members from each other or that include detention of families with children, and we call on local churches to be in ministry with immigrant families.” In response to the aforementioned conditions along the borders the UM General Board of Church and Society has called upon local churches to make this “Suffering Children Sunday” can we take a moment of silence just to consider that we are living in a time in one of the most prosperous nations on the planet where we need a day such as “Suffering children Sunday.”

If you want to feel good about the UMC right now look no further than UMCOR which has delivered 46,128 hygiene kits to six church-run transitional shelters along the U.S.-Mexico border and given grants valued at \$294,345 to fill gaps in capacity at these shelters in the last three months, Amick said. Global Ministries encourages churches to give in support of the [global migration Advance #3022144](#). Lastly, if you would like to build and send one of those hygiene kits see me after church and I will give you the PDF of what goes in, how it assemble and we as a church can send them out to support the effort.

But perhaps, I, like Job in my time of lamenting against God for both the church and border conditions am forgetting that my mind is not God’s and as such cannot see the greater perspective of what God is doing. Is the world painful and full of suffering? Yes. But in the last 500 years has the world’s conditions also improved? Yes. We are living longer, infant mortality is down, wars and overall deaths by conflicts across the globe are down and more. God is orchestrating the world, friends, it just isn’t happening on our timeline, our schedules or our wills. God says to Job in the chapter before the one read this morning that God knows the movements of every animal and every blade of grass with a laundry list of other things. But even in that prose, God admits that there is chaos, that the world is good, but that does not mean perfect. That perfection would not come for another 600 years when a child would be born in a stable in Bethlehem. It would come from a rabbi from Nazareth, and it is a promise of a savior who would come once again to end chaos once and for all.

Friends, this is the hope we must long for or else we can lose it all. Trust me, I’m nearly there. And it’s so, so hard to accept in conditions of a salvation that might not come in our lifetime, our children’s lifetime, their children’s lifetime or for another 1500 years. But we must believe in it. Because that hope is the very same hope that cast out the darkness. It is a defiant hope to say to all forms of injustice that this is not the day of

Trump, not the day of Obama, not the day of ICE raids, not the day of radicalized shooters, not the day of racism, not the day of classism, not the day of corrupt governments, not the day of any of the other Ahasuerus' that have come, are here, or will come in the future but it is now, then and forevermore the day of the Lord! It is a defiant hope even when it's hard to say with confidence that today is the day of the Lord God who comes in the name of unconditional love, mercy, justice, and peace and that nothing, no power in heaven or hell can stop that. That's the inward holiness

---Due to Time the following section was skipped over in the worship setting---

Esther, the outward social holiness is a powerful witness about how people see the evidence of God. They don't see it in miracles always, they don't see it in prosperity, they don't even always see it from churches or preachers. They see it in it the everyday nurturing of everyday people. Nurturing comes in the smallest of signs as well, like when Isabel Andras made me this little yellow bracelet and explained to me that it is a friendship bracelet and it invites me into the friendship circle with her, Sara Hartle and Chris Bryant. Then if my heart wasn't melted enough already, she later messages me and says "I wanted to make one for McKinsie but I wasn't sure of her favorite color. Do you think she would want one?" That's church. That's the evidence of God.

I see the evidence of God in the many decorating volunteers getting ready for VBS this year spending countless hours each week to make this church the most magical place in the world for a group of children for a week. That's church. I see it in our music ministry, our membership care teams and the stories I heard through team leader Sarah Alexander about some of the special moments. I see in fellowship hour as each week people bring a unique twist to the offering because you simply love to nurture one another.

I see in the way you smile and hug everyone that walks through the door and when you pass the peace. Friends, when God has felt silent to me these past few months, and when God feels unjust this week along the borders, I see the evidence of the sovereignty and goodness of God in you. The people of the church. When I have wanted to be a slave to my own fears about God, you have called me if even silently to continue pushing on. I am still searching through the silence and the suffering for what is God's will, but i'm grateful to be on that journey with you, and hope you are with me. May it be so, amen.

A Prayer for Suffering Children

God of All Children Everywhere,

Our hearts are bruised when we see children suffering alone.

Our hearts are torn when we are unable to help.

Our hearts are broken when we have some complicity in the matter.

For all the times we were too busy and shooed a curious child away,
forgive us, oh God.

For all the times we failed to get down on their level and look eye to eye with a child,
forgive us, oh God.

For all the times we did not share when we saw a hungry child somewhere in the world,
forgive us, oh God.

For all the times we thought about calling elected officials to demand change, but did
not, forgive us, oh God.

For all the times we thought that caring for the children of this world was someone
else's responsibility, forgive us, oh God.

With Your grace, heal our hearts.

With Your grace, unite us in action.

With Your grace, repair our government.

With Your grace, help us to find a way to welcome all children everywhere,

That they may know that Jesus loves them,

Not just because "the Bible tells them so,"

But because they have known Your love in real and tangible ways,

And they know that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate them from Your love.

Amen.