Proper 6 (Pentecost 2) Series A 2017

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Second Sunday after Pentecost  (Proper 6) June 18

The Sundays after Pentecost bring us to some of the basics of the Christian faith. We start here on Proper 6 with the will of God, one of those hidden parts of our God which is revealed in tantalizing glimpses in scripture but which remains maddeningly obscure. We want to know his will, but are we really able to bear all of it?

Most of the time our thoughts turn to the will of God when some great disaster strikes. Then it is so easy to slip into the strange comfort that fatalism affords us. “I don’t know why your friend died in a car crash, must be God’s will.” I am not sure how that helps such a situation, but I hear it enough that it must be deemed wise or good by at least some of the population. But these are not the times that we best seek the will of God, or at least they really ought not be the only times we talk about the will of God.

This Sunday affords us a chance to talk about the part of God’s will that has been revealed. When some tragedy strikes, and we find ourselves asking those difficult “why?” sorts of questions, God’s will is often hidden from us. Perhaps, after much prayer and time, we might get an idea of it in hindsight, but in the middle of such events, we just cannot see it.

But God’s will is not entirely obscure, in fact he has said some rather plain things about it. He wants all people to come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved (I Timothy.) This seems pretty clear to me. I don’t know exactly how he will do it, but at least I know what he wants. God does indeed reveal his salvific will, at least in part to us. Jesus did not come to condemn the world but to save the world (John 3:16-17). Out of God’s love, God is clear about what he wants. He wants your blessing, your good, your health, your happiness. He wants you to live forever.

Now because the revealed will of God is an expression of his love and not his sovereign power, there is another piece here. Love, by its very definition can be disappointed. God does not always get what he wants. That may seem odd to say about a being who is almighty, but there are some things that power cannot do. Power cannot woo someone to love me. I cannot bully someone into being my real friend. I cannot intimidate affection. God is not after our obedience, but he is after our hearts. He wants to save us, he wants us to be in a relationship in which he is loved and loves us. Power will not get that, but love will.

This means that in this world God often works with a “plan B” or “C” or “D” or even a plan “Z” and beyond. Take, for instance the story recorded in I Samuel 8 in which the people chose a king for themselves. God clearly does not want this. He says so in so many words, but he acquiesces to the request of the people, and when the first king does not work out, he raises up for them David. Plan B can be a pretty good arrangement too! God’s first will was that we not fall into sin but spend an eternity growing and loving God. Sin ruined that plan of God, but God’s gracious will is not so easily thwarted and his love is resourceful beyond all measure. Yes, he would have apparently preferred to keep raising up judges for the people, but when they
reject that, he moves onto another way, even though he knows the problems that kings will bring, he still blesses David and gives us the many psalms that he wrote.

We call this “plan B” sort of will, God’s secondary will. The secondary will of God means that we need to be a little circumspect when we would speak of the will of God in any earthly affair. Yes, it may be God’s will, but it is not God’s primary will. That primary will of God is effected only in the salvation of people, the marvelous relationship God establishes with them which we call faith.

There is another point to be made here about the will of God. Often I found people fixated on determining “God’s will” for their life. Usually this was when they faced some critical decision in their life, like moving, or taking a job, or deciding on a career. Lots of pious evangelical sorts of students in my classes talk this way as they approach their senior year. But is this really what God means in Jeremiah when he says, “I know the plans I have for you.”? I think God means to say there that he wants to do good things for us, to save us, back to the paragraphs above. I am not sure that he has plotted out who I should marry or what job I will take or which house to buy. He may know ahead, but that is totally different than planning it.

I usually tell such people that God has not revealed every detail of his will, but he has told us that he really wants to bless us. I believe he can bless me in this place or in that place. He can bless me if I am married to this person or if I choose to remain single, etc. it is not that one way is the only way that God has in mind. I think he values our free will much more than we do sometimes.

**Collect of the Day**

Almighty, eternal Word, in the Word of Your apostles and prophets You have proclaimed to us your saving will. Grant us faith to believe Your promises that we may receive eternal salvation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This prayer is addressed to Jesus and not to the Father, making it a little unusual. Jesus is almighty and eternal. Not only does he have all the power, but he has eternity as well. We do well to remember that time is also the creation of God, not his master. We experience time as a fourth dimension of sorts. It happens, we see the minutes and the days speed past, unable to speed or slow their pace. Not so with God. To say that God is eternal, is really to say that he is omnipresent. There is no moment that is not present to him, that is not soon to him.

God has proclaimed, via apostles (NT) and prophets (OT) his saving will. But he continues to proclaim that saving will through us too. That will is to save. God’s will is not to send hurricanes or earthquakes or to wreak destruction and havoc on our lives. God’s will is to save.

Grant us faith to believe your promises so we may receive eternal salvation. Again, I think this prayer might have been strengthened if we had noticed that God still wants to save people, including lost folks today. He has not sent an angel to tell that good news, he has sent us. We have a chance, through the witness to God’s love, to be right in line with God’s will. I have no
idea if much of my life is in line with God’s will all the time, but I know that when I am part of
his saving work, I am right in step with him. He loves to save people and when I am part of that
good work, I am close to God.

Luther said that if we dig too deeply into the will of God, especially in the context of human
suffering and tragedy, we run a terrible risk. If we say that the death of some child is God’s will,
we portray God to look the same as Satan. He regularly chided the reformers of his day who
came out of the Humanist tradition for this. He thought they were digging into the “hiddenness
of God” and would not like what they found. He thought that we should only look for what God
has revealed about his nature: the love for this world in Christ and the cross. The will of God is
too terrible for us to bear in our sinful state.

God hides his power, his will, his glory, his majesty, and the rest of it so we will focus on his
love. He knows us well enough that if he were to show us his power, we would gravitate toward
that and ignore the love which is the real thing that brings us to relationship with him and
ultimately to heavenly bliss.

Readings

Exodus 19:2-8

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day
they came into the wilderness of Sinai. 2 They set out from Rephidim and came into the
wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the
mountain, 3 while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying,
“Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: 4 ‘You yourselves have
seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.
5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my
treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6 and you shall be to me a
kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of
Israel.”

7 So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the
LORD had commanded him. 8 All the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has
spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. 9 And the LORD
said to Moses, “Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I
speak with you, and may also believe you forever.”

I am immediately drawn to the end of this text and the almost laughable aspect of these folks
asserting that they will do all the God has spoken through Moses. The next several books are
really the account of how they did not do that. Indeed, the omitted verse 9 seems to suggest that
God is already doubting the integrity of that promise. The people have said they would do it, but
God comes in the thick cloud so they will believe.
But I think that this is all a red herring sort of interpretation which serves only to distract from the real message. The real story, the real Gospel story, is to be found in verses 5-6, even though they at first sound like terrible law. God says that “if” they obey... Any time we get one of those “if...then” statements, it is a condition placed upon us, and we almost never measure up. The only time we might is when Jesus almost says that if you are dead, then I came to save you. Death is the one thing we are all good at. Living up to God’s expectations is not something we are good at.

But while this is terrible law on the face of it, I don’t think that prima facie reading is the only way to go. At least there is an equally good Gospel buried in here. The fact is that God knew that they people would not pull this off, at least not perfectly. In fact, if you look at the sheer volume of the Torah, the Law of which he speaks here, much of it is dedicated to reassuring fundamentally flawed people that God still loves them and has appointed a means for the relationship to be restored through sacrifice and faith. The real Gospel is to be found in the fact that this whining, complaining, and often childish group of people is to be God’s treasure. It will not be too long before they would be found cavorting around a golden calf and Moses had to grind it up and make them drink it. God knew that about them, but he makes this covenant anyway. They will turn back from the Promised Land, God knew that, and says that they are his treasure anyway. Korah will rebel, the people will grumble, God will send snakes, but they will always be his treasure, the priests and holy nation that he has created. Even when he sends them into exile, he will do so because purified in the crucible they will return faithfully as his people.

Listen to the words God uses to describe them. They will be the treasure in God’s hand. He will look at them and love what he sees. This is the language of a lover to his beloved. They are not slaves of God, but his treasured possession, his sweetie. He loves them. They will be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation among all the other nations. Of course I Peter 1, just recently read in our parishes, runs with that imagery. If you take that seriously, the children of Israel are to be the priestly nation for all the nations of the earth. It is the blessing given to Abraham repackaged. Abraham had been given a promise that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him, especially the family God created with him and Sarah. Now, all the nations of the earth are blessed through this nation, a nation which God is forging in the fire of slavery and now the rigors of wandering in the wilderness, where they must count on God for water and food and protection from their enemies. God has in mind that through them he will speak and through them the prayers of the whole world will ascend to him.

A priest stands between the people and God. The priest speaks God’s word to the people and their prayers to God. The prayers of the people are gathered and offered through the priest. Their sins are brought to God, their problems, their hopes, their fears, etc. Then, the priest turns around and in turn God speaks to the people through the priest. He conveys the blessings of God to the people. That is how God sees this rag-tag bunch of runaway slaves whom he has gathered around the base of Mt. Sinai.
How do we, as the new Israel (Galatians and Romans) continue to act in that way? Do our prayers reflect the needs of the unbeliever or the non-member down the street? Do we pray for them, regularly? Do we bring the message of God to them? How are we in the Church like the priests and holy nation that God has called us to be?

Psalm 100

1 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!
2 Serve the LORD with gladness!
   Come into his presence with singing!

3 Know that the LORD, he is God!
   It is he who made us, and we are his;
   we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
   and his courts with praise!
   Give thanks to him; bless his name!

5 For the LORD is good;
   his steadfast love endures forever,
   and his faithfulness to all generations.

This marvelous little psalm gives voice to the person of God who delights in the place that God has made for them.

When I was six or seven years old, my father assigned this psalm to the first grade class at Trinity Lutheran School in rural Ft Dodge Iowa. Now, you should probably know that the first grade class of Trinity that year consisted of two students: Christy Clark and me. We took turns reading a verse in front of the congregation. It was a great day to be in first grade and to know how to read. I only tell you this because it has continued to be a cherished memory. Do you have some children in your congregation who are good readers? Let them read this little psalm or another on a coming Sunday. They will remember it perhaps for the rest of their lives. I know that today I cannot run across this psalm in my devotions or preaching without remember that day we stood in front of church and read, probably too fast, perhaps not all that well, but we read for all to hear.

Romans 5:6-15 (I have included the whole chapter for us today – this is just too good to take out of context.)

1 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.
6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. 11 More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— 13 for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. 14 Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

15 But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. 16 And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. 17 For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

18 Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. 19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. 20 Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, 21 so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The preacher who has committed to the Epistle readings this year has a challenge here. Because Easter is a little late, we don't get the first propers. The season contracted to allow for Easter to be late, just as the Sundays after Epiphany had to expand to fill in the spot before Ash Wednesday. Unfortunately that means we are picking up Paul's amazing letter to the Romans in the middle. The first chapters were in propers 1-5.

Romans presents to us the longest sustained argument in the whole NT. The structure of that argument is important for reading this passage.

1:1-15 Introduction
1:16-17 Thesis
1:18-3:20 Antithesis
3:21-31 Recapitulation/expansion of Thesis
4:1-25 Example of Abraham from Torah
5:1-21 Argument for the Thesis
8:1-39 Implications of Thesis/doxology
9:1-11:36 – Thesis applied to the question of Paul’s fellow Jews
12:1-15:7 Thesis applied to the lives of the Romans
15:8-33 Paul’s ministry and plans
16 Paul’s Greetings.

You can see that this passage is critical to Paul’s epistolary project: this is the heart of his argument. His thesis said that we live by faith for faith – that a righteousness apart from works of the law has been revealed, not in works, but through the faith in/of Jesus.

In vss. 6-8 Paul makes the classic argument for the passiveness of faith. God is not rewarding us for our works, not even for a disposition. God has saved us while we were hostile, opposed, indeed, the very enemies of God. Jesus did not die as some heroic act of brotherly love for his noble friend, jumping on the grenade for his platoon mate. Jesus died for the very brutal men who slaughtered him. God’s love is that sort of amazing. It is not based on the lovability of the object. As Samuel Crossman said in “My Song is Love Unknown” he did this that the unlovely might lovely be.

In vss. 9-11 Paul explains what he means by this righteousness bestowed. Christ death for us means that God is wholly committed to us. Jesus’ death has reconciled us to God, sweeping away the objection raised by our sinfulness. Now, reconciled, we will surely be saved from death and devil because Jesus lives. His life bestowed on us in Baptism (6:1-6) means the life of Christ is our life. (Galatians 2:20 – Christ lives in me!) This live allows us now to rejoice in the very God who was our terrible enemy before. We hated him when we were in sin. We realized that he was holy and we must die in his presence. But simply having holiness restored does not mean we love him and delight in him. Our delight in our holiness is not some obligation of gratitude we are supposed to pay. It is a genuine delight in God. We were enemies who begrudged him his authority and rightful place. Now, redeemed by Christ, raised and restored to relationship with God, we love God.

This text has a nice resonance with the Old Testament text. God does not wait for us to be good or even to try hard before he acts. His will is to save. I don’t wait to see if the drowning man really wants to be saved before I call for help, throw him a life-preserver, or jump in the water to save him. I just act. God sees our predicament and he acts according to his will, his saving will.

What is more, that salvation is not done. We have been fully reconciled to God. The death of Jesus on the cross has born sin’s deadly weight. Now, raised from the grave, Jesus is a living
promise of even more. Not only are the sins paid for, but we are given a whole new life. In this life we may rejoice, serve, live, play, and much more in his gracious gift.

The final section of the passage before notes a fun and memorable pattern. There is a strange symmetry. The sin came into the world through one man, Adam. The righteousness also come back to this world through one man, Jesus. These two singular individuals have done something that affected the whole of the human race. Adam because he was the progenitor of all. Jesus because he took humanity itself into the godhead. In both cases, the effect is universal. All humans have been redeemed in Christ. The pattern was established in Adam but now runs backwards. Just as death came through one man, now life also comes through one man.

If you are preaching this text, you may want to preach a sermon on the mystery of God’s great love for us. God’s great love does not hang on our goodness, not even the goodness of our intent, not even the goodness of our will. God’s love is not a response to anything in us, but is wholly God’s to give.

Matthew 9:35-10:20

35 And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; 38 therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

1 And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. 2 The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; 3 Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; 4 Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

5 These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, 6 but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 And proclaim as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ 8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay. 9 Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, 10 no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff, for the laborer deserves his food. 11 And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart. 12 As you enter the house, greet it. 13 And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. 14 And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. 15 Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.

16 “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. 17 Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their
synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. 19 When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. 20 For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

I think that this is the text that will draw us. I am not as focused, myself, on the actual instructions which Jesus gave to the first century disciples. He will amend these when he makes the mission universal later in the book. What really attracts me to this text is the motivation for the mission in the first place and then the description of the disciples as they go out.

It says that Jesus has compassion on the crowds. That is far too weak of a word for what the NT uses here, but English does not really have a good way to say this. “Splangchnizo” is not only difficult to say for the English tongue but it is difficult to understand. Literally the word means that his innards, his bowels were moved. I suppose gut wrenching would be an English equivalent, but even that is not enough. The emotional freight of this word is such that Jesus was made physically sick by what he saw, not revolted, but the pain and suffering of the people almost overwhelmed him.

He looks the same way at 21st century America. Do we really believe that or do we think that we are much better off with our cell phones, modern pharmaceuticals, life saving surgeries, and retirement accounts? Do we hubristically envision ourselves in this picture more in the shoes of Jesus than do we remember that this is the way that Jesus sees us?

If we do, that is a serious problem. It means that we lose out both on the comfort for us and the ability to be unified in the will of God for the salvation of others. Jesus has not come to pat anyone on the head and say “good job.” The world has been so messed up by sin that the things we think are good and normal are all unfit for heaven. The nature which we think is so “natural” and pure is but a stinking cesspool compared to the world which God made and gave us in Eden. The love which the best of couples and the happiest of families shares is but a pale shadow, a distant echo of the rich and beautiful love which God put into the hearts of Adam and Eve and which we will experience in heaven. The amazing feats of athletes at the Olympic Games will look like a kindergarten field day compared to what we can do when these bodies are unleashed from their sinful bounds on the last day. And when it comes to our minds, earthly Einstein will look like a dummy in heaven.

Jesus looks at the way we are right now and he weeps for us, because he was there at the beginning and he knows what we were supposed to be. He knows our potential, a potential we cannot realize no matter how hard we try.

Until we realize just how messed up we are, we cannot really appreciate what He has done for us. Even then, we probably don’t appreciate it very well. We just are closer to it. The truth is, there is a great gulf between what I am supposed to be and what I am. That gulf is much greater than the gulf that exists between me in my comfort and the starving delta citizens of Burma or the
weeping parents who pull the crushed body of their only child out of the wreckage of natural disaster. I am much more like them than I am like the person God made humanity to be.

When I am aware of that fact, when I realize that Jesus has come to restore that which was lost in the fall of mankind into sin, then I am ready to see the rest of this world in a totally different light. Now, my brother sleeping under a bridge or addicted to meth is just another manifestation of me. Jesus loves him the same way he loves me. The man whose deeds I find so offensive or so painful is not really all that different from me either. The woman whose life is in shambles because of the choices she made will be just as dead as me in a few years. What is the real difference between us? The grave swallows us both.

But Jesus has had mercy on me. His great compassion has moved him to act, and not only for me, but for all the other miserable wretches in the world too. His greatest desire is to save us, all of us. He has not turned his face away from my suffering because he could not bear it. Rather he has faced my suffering, taken my suffering to himself and in a great mystery, he has born it and given me his joy.

Pray to the Lord of the harvest that he may sent out workers into this field. God has heard that prayer and you are it! Every Christian has been enlisted in that great army of witnesses to the good deeds of Christ. This is not “professional church worker” day, but it is priesthood of all believers day. The workers are not just those who wear funny collars or who get paid money to do it, but it is everyone whose forehead bears the seal of him who died, the cross with which all of us have been marked.

Like sheep among wolves, wise as serpents and innocent as doves, he sends us out. Sheep to be slaughtered, persecution happens when we witness to this great deed of Christ. Our enemy cannot bear the news we bring. It undoes all his evil plans. For two thousand years God’s people have endured his enmity. Do you know why chef’s wear those funny, tall white hats? It is because when the Moslems came and persecuted the Christians of what is modern day Egypt and modern Turkey, they often sought out the wealthiest members of the community to get them to convert to Islam. They fled, often to the monasteries. The monks took them in, and hid them. But what to do with these wealthy people who were not really monks? They put them to work in the kitchen, since they did know a few things about good food. But to complete the ruse, they gave them the same hats as the monks wore, and in the east they are tall black hats. But since they were not really monks they made them white. The next time you go out to eat and get a glimpse into the kitchen and see a man standing over the stove with a tall white hat, think about why he wears that. It is a legacy of what Jesus is talking about right here.

We are to be wise as serpents. That word choice cannot be an accident. There is only one way to be as wise as that serpent and that is to be in his clutches, living on this side of the fall. The devil tempted Adam and Eve with wisdom and knowledge and we got it. Now we know sin from the inside out. Just think of a heroin addict. He knows the drug in a way I do not, thank God. An angel cannot understand what we know, at least not and still be an angel. God has sent sinners to be the instrument to reach sinners. He has sent broken people to bear good news to broken
people. Our brokenness, our sinful nature, our deepest problems are not disqualifiers from being a witness to Christ, far from it, they are our best qualification! I can speak with integrity of God’s love for stinkers because I know it firsthand. I can speak of God’s great mercy for sinners because he has had mercy on me and I am a great sinner.

And we are to be innocent as doves. Too often we think moral purity is what this means. And indeed I do believe that Christians need to live better than he or she was, it is simply the witness of the affair. But this is not what this really means. We need to be on the receiving end of God’s gracious act. That is how we get real innocence. God gives it to sinners. We are not better than the sinner, but we are forgiven, really forgiven. Our sins are really taken away. We can with honesty say that we are perfect because Jesus has made us perfect.

Jesus speaks these words to his disciples and sends them out to the lost sheep of Israel. In Matthew 28 he expands that to all nations, not Israel and all nations, but all nations. They are all beloved of God in the same way. Everyone who has been baptized is now part of that great act of his will. He wants to save the world, the whole thing.

Jesus gives them the message to proclaim: The kingdom of God is at hand! Our culture and too often the Christians as well, think that God must be far away. We go to heaven. But Jesus exhorts his disciples and us to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. We don’t see it – Paul’s words that we live by faith and not by sight need to be remembered. At the same time we can say that God’s kingdom has come, is here right now. (Look at Paul’s description in Romans 12).

The kingdom’s presence is seen through faith in a number of ways. God’s love for me means I love too. I don’t live anymore in a kingdom in which I am the center, but I live in a kingdom in which god gives and I am therefore a generous person. I don’t live in a scale-balancing kingdom in which I settle scores but I live in a real kingdom in which I forgive sins and sinners. The kingdom of heaven’s presence means I see the problems like Jesus sees them in the beginning of the lesson today, a harvest which is ready for the harvesting and which needs God to send people. When I am lying in the hospital bed and I am facing some terrible surgery, I am in the hands of God. I may die, I may survive, but both of them are beautiful outcomes. I am in the kingdom God right now. If I suffer in some terrorist event, I won’t need to be afraid, God has never left me. I am in the kingdom. I may still suffer, but I will suffer differently because my Jesus suffered too and through that he saved me.

Law

1. The world is profoundly messed up. Even when we think we got it right, the “right” we see is profoundly wrong. Compared to Eden’s perfection, this whole world is profoundly trashed. The lions were not supposed to eat the gazelles on the Serengeti. In fact, the Serengeti is a massive collapsed volcanic crater. I am not sure that was supposed to have happened either.

2. We often think that we are only partially messed up, or at least we have something going for us. Morally, I may be a wreck, but at least I have some good intentions. But like the
children of Israel long ago, I can mouth any words, I may even believe them, but it is so much gas.

3. Many of the world’s evils are utterly random and we are inclined to attribute them to God. No less a theologian than Sharon Stone recently said that the earthquake in China was the result of China’s bad Karma for their maltreatment of the Tibetans.

4. But while God surely is still the master of this world, I cannot discern what he is doing with the earthquake in China, floods in Burma, hurricanes in New Orleans or any other disaster. This is hidden from me, and I don’t like stuff that is hidden from me. I want to know.

5. But if I know, can I really bear that? My perverse human nature seeks to know the power and the will of God. It hungers for these things. But what I really need is God’s loving and gracious will. I don’t look for that. “Boring” I am apt to say. Give me power and then we can do something. But power will solve very few of the world problems, at least really solve them.

Gospel

1. God made this world, and despite is profound problems, he still loves his creation. He has every right to destroy it and start over, but he does not. He saves, he restores, he would redeem it.

2. His will to save me in no way depends on my ability to get even one thing right. Salvation belongs to God alone, in no way to me.

3. God loves me enough that he does not tell me everything. Even though we are deep into his secondary will for this world, he will not be dissuaded from his primary will. He never loses sight of the fact that he made this world, he loves this world, and he wants to save it. Yes, sometimes he must discipline, sometimes terrible things happen as a result of sin, but he never makes that the end of the story.

4. God has revealed all that I need to know. he has told me that he loves me and he loves everyone else too. In fact, he invites me to be part of his great and beautiful salvation. He promises that my words can be his words, and his words have real ability to save.

5. God hears my vows and knows that I am weak. He hears my assertions of love and knows that I am clueless about what I am saying most of the time, but he still receives them and delights in them. Even my best of days are not up to his standards, but he still holds me in his hand and delights in me because I have been redeemed by his only and truly beloved Son, Jesus. I have real value therein, all of it a gift.

Sermon Themes:
1. Jesus wants you (That the Holy Spirit would quicken in the hearer the vocation of the Christian to/for this broken world.)

Do you remember the old Uncle Sam posters from WWII when the finger always pointed at the person looking at the picture? Jesus has a great mission. His revealed will is beautiful to behold. He wants nothing less than to save the world. Oddly enough, he has sent us. Though we are broken and flawed human beings, he has saved a central role for us. As people who know firsthand his gracious will, we are especially equipped to be his messengers of that gracious love.

Moses first recorded this strange plan. He said that the people of Israel would be a holy nation of priests, the treasured tool in the hand of God. Jesus fulfilled that vision when he sent out the disciples, but he is not done sending. He continues to send. His Holy Spirit, whose outpouring we noted a couple weeks ago, continues to empower and send disciples into the field.

Jesus looks on this broken world with deep compassion. See the notes I wrote above regarding Christ’s compassion in the Gospel reading – I won’t repeat them here. The preacher will want to locate this inside God’s amazing love that sent Jesus to the Cross (Epistle reading) and reconciled a hostile world to himself.

Now, having been reconciled in our own baptisms, have been invited into the very heart of God’s kingdom. He hasn’t invited us into the kingdom to work in some obscure corner tending a lonely orchard or arbor. He has called us into the very heart and core of God’s kingdom. God has given us the most important job of all, wonder at that! He is saving the world through us. Remember, he is saving the world. We are not. It is easy to take on that job. Really makes for problems. Don’t do that.

But do remember that the salvation of the world is at stake. God is saving, he is just doing it through you.

2. Sheep, Snakes, and Doves – the Menagerie of Christianity: Jesus sends us out into the world to be witnesses to his love. What does he see in us? It might surprise, dismay and shock you.

He sees sheep who are defenseless against the persecutors who would devour us. But like the blades of grass which my lawn mower chops down every week, they will still be green and growing when my lawn mower is rusting away in some dump. God’s people may be mowed down by persecution, but the kingdom, the will, the people of God keep right on growing and going.

He sees snakes – crafty and corrupt. We are people who are targeted by the evil one. Our sinful lives bear testimony to it. And if that were the end of the story, we would be in a sorry plight indeed. But it is not the end of the story. God has redeemed us, and now as
sinners redeemed, we are uniquely qualified to be the witnesses to God’s great redeeming love. In baptism we have received a new mark, a new identity.

He sees innocent doves. Jesus’ great redeeming work lets us walk out these doors with absolute confidence. He will give us the words we need on the day of persecution or our need. He has given his life for us, how can he hold back anything else? His great love has washed us clean of our guilt, he has made us perfectly pure and innocent. I can serve him now without fear and I can be his witness confident that even when I do screw up, he will find a way to wash that too and it also will be used for his kingdom.

3. The Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand (That the Holy Spirit empower the hearer to live his/her life in the Kingdom of God today.)

We tend to live life and believe as if the kingdom of God were far away. But Jesus tells his disciples and us to proclaim that the kingdom is at hand. This requires us to adjust some of our thinking and our doing and our believing. Prayer is no longer a long distance call.

The world is messed up. Paul says we live by faith, not by sight. We live in a now and not yet reality. But the kingdom shows up in the people of God and how we deal with that broken world differently. Just look at Jesus today. He sees all the broken and harassed people. The world looks at them and sees problems and wants to write them off as lost causes. We will put them in a ghetto and forget about them. They are a basket of deplorables. But Jesus sees a harvest white and ready for the harvesters and prays God will send out some works. And then he turns right around and does it, sending out the 12.

The kingdom of God will show up in the fact that God’s great love shown to the people of Israel in the first reading is working in us. He bore them and us on eagle’s wings and now we are likewise generous people. We are no longer the scale balancing, vengeance seekers the world would expect us to be. We are the forgivers and the reconcilers whom the world desperately needs.

Jesus may not have sent us out to heal the sick, raise the dead, or cast out the demons, at least not in the miraculous, literal sense we might first imagine. But we are healing the sick relationships, raising the dead sinners, casting out the demons from people’s lives by the power of his Spirit working in us.

4. The Will of God (Collect - That the Holy Spirit would comfort the anxious and fretful Christians with the good news of his gracious will.)

The law development here will be that we are proud and hubristic. We want to be in control and think that we can understand the total will of God. But this is a foolish task. God has not revealed his will to us that way. This is really sort of a Calvinist sort of approach to life which often trusts our reason too much and as a result downplays our trust and God’s gracious action.
We need to ask what is the will of God. Paul exhorts us to do that in several places. There are indeed some things that clearly are contrary to God’s will. Embarking on a career in heroin production cannot be accommodated to God’s will. But God has not planned out every decision we make nor has he charted the “right” course for our lives. We face many decisions which are not between something right and wrong. Most of the decisions we make are simply between to possible good things. When we may God’s will about those things we have this reversed and we have assumed the role of God. The will he has revealed to us and which we need to discern is a deep, loving desire to save and bless us and all people. We see it in the first reading and the second reading but especially in the compassion Christ has for the crowds. He doesn’t go out and start telling them to shape up, get with the divine program, he sees their hurt and wants to help them, heal them, and raise them.

We often imagine that we need to discern God’s will when he has revealed it to us clearly. Should I take this job? Should I marry this person? Should I do this or that? But God has not said there is some will for this we need to discern. He has said he wants to bless us. He will find a way to bless me in all sorts of situations, I can remove that from my plate. If I take this job he will bless, if I stay at my current job, he will bless. His will is to bless me.