

## Easter 6A 2023

Why do we seek to follow the will of God?

People have different reasons.

Some do so out of fear of what will happen otherwise.

Eternal damnation might follow, or some imagine that disobedience will lead to suffering in this world.

(If it is true that disobedience leads to suffering, then the writer of Job was benighted and Jesus must have been extremely disobedient.)

Some religious leaders certainly try to frighten us into following *someone*, though I think they are more interested in our following *them*.

“Do what I say or go to hell.”

I suppose that it is also true that not empathy or responsibility, but fear is the only thing that will motivate some people into compliance.

It is what prevents some people from committing crime.

Though fear indeed can be effective at reducing certain behaviors, it is not useful in cultivating meaningful relationships built on trust and compassion.

A person who relates to us out of fear is not a true friend and ultimately cannot be trusted.

As soon as he thinks he can get away with something, he will.

A person who relates to *God* out of fear, I suspect, has similar limitations.

That is, she will convince herself that she can fool even God.

The rationalization often takes the form of, “If no one else knows, then God also will not know. If everyone else thinks I am good, then so will God,” but God is not so naive.

If fear is not the reason that we follow the will of God, then do we instead seek to prove something about ourselves so that God will love us?

Some certainly do it for this reason, but this is conditional love.

“I will love you if . . .”

But again, God requires that we prove nothing.

I have nevertheless even heard of people using God to make themselves feel superior.

Remember the pharisee who prayed, “God, thank you for not making me a sinner like this tax collector”?

This need to feel superior that so many of us share leads to blindness.

When I was at my previous call, there was a nurse in NYC who regularly walked home from his shift.

On the way home, a guy on the stoop he regularly passed would always say hi and the nurse would reply.

One day, that guy on the stoop beat the nurse within an inch of his life.

When asked why, he said he thought the nurse was gay.

The guy on the stoop, it was revealed, had tattooed on his arm the passage from

Leviticus used against gay people.

He had not noticed that a mere 22 verses prior, there is a passage that forbids tattoos.

When our goal is to feel superior, we find what support we want and ignore the rest.

We tend, in other words, to lose sight of God in the details.

We cannot see the forest for the trees.

The need to feel superior may not only result in violence, but can also produce false relationships.

I told you before that I have known people who were interested in being my “friend” because they thought it afforded them cultural capital.

(Can you believe that in some circles I was the cool guy?)

Some people like to be able to say to others, “This is my gay friend; this is my black friend; this is my Jewish friend,” but they are not our friends.

This, too, is not an attitude that produces a meaningful relationship.

God certainly does not need adherents who are interested in proclaiming, “My god is better than your god.”

These are dramatic examples, and we are all justified in thinking, “Well, I would never do anything like *that*,” but there are so many more subtle ways of making ourselves feel superior.

As depicted in the film, “A Man Called Otto,” it can be about Ford vs. Chevrolet.

It can take the form of judging the kind of cat litter we use, the type of chocolate we eat (we talked about that one), political affiliation, or, as I said, the god that we worship.

Judging and feeling superior is just much easier than understanding, yet moving from judging others to understanding others is essential to our spiritual development.

In the workshop on prayer last Thursday, we practiced differentiating between analyzing a person and understanding that person.

Analyzing tends toward judgment as we show others what is wrong with them; understanding, on the other hand, is at least a step towards relationship with that person, which is the point of Christianity.

The God that Jesus teaches requires nothing less than sincerity and humility, understanding and compassion.

Jesus tells us simply and clearly why we would follow such a God—not fear or arrogance or personal gain.

He says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

True cooperation comes out of love.

We love God and believe that God loves us.

This is a bold statement.

Christianity was, to my knowledge, the first religion to claim that God loved us.

We go even farther, of course, and assert not that God is *loving*, but that God *is* love.

A God who is *loving* might have a bad day.

A God who *is* love cannot stop loving without ceasing to exist.

Observation reveals that the nature of the world perpetuates disagreement, so that we  
can never be rid of conflict.

We are all intentionally different.

We each have weaknesses, some to addiction, some to mental illness.

Some people have an extreme amount of empathy.

Others are born with none.

This is a formula for conflict, and out of that conflict comes growth.

This is not the Garden of Eden.

We are *supposed* to struggle, to experience strife, which teaches us to work together and  
to grow in relation to God.

We have different gifts and weaknesses so that we *must* rely on one another.

Our brains are wired differently so that some of us are able to see one side of an issue; others are able to see a different side.

As I told you before, brain scans can reveal with a high degree of accuracy what political party we belong to.

It is useful, therefore, to listen to others because, otherwise, when we process everything solely through our own prism, we will miss things.

Even when we listen successfully, however, complete agreement on most issues is impossible.

We are not supposed to agree on everything.

The point is to deepen one another's understanding of a complex world.

Outside of Eden, where we live, we are supposed to find ways to work together.

Let that sink in.

We are not creating Eden, a perfect world; we are building relationships of understanding.

We do it out of love, out of love for others, out of love for Jesus, or we can refuse.

We can hatefully divide and point fingers, cast aspersions on those who choose the wrong cat litter, sometimes even hiding behind Jesus while we do it.

That is up to each one of us.

What we do out of love occasions growth.

What we do out of a lack of love causes us to be spiritually stunted and spreads harm.

When we are acting out of arrogance or a desire for power over others, we end up with alienation, separation, loneliness, anxiety, depression.

The result, in other words, is a lack of meaningful relationships with God and others.

When we are working together, building not Eden, but understanding relationships out of love and humility, God works with us to bring about meaningful results.

Out of love, we seek the will of God.