

“Discerning the will of God”

August 21, 2011

Text: Isaiah 51:1-6, Romans 12:1-8

I.

Everywhere we turn these days, there’s concern about the economy—and not just here in the United States, but the global economy as well. These are anxious and uncertain times, times we may not have seen since the GREAT DEPRESSION back in the thirties.

Understandably, people are eager for answers; we’re eager for solutions. We Americans are used to *fixing* the problems that confront us. We have a history of coming together during times of duress, pooling our resources and doing whatever it takes to get the job done.

However, the KEY in all of this is our mind set and our spirit. Part of what we’re going through in our country and around the world is massive change—change in the way the world works and in the way the world responds.

- What’s really changed is that, with technology—everyday—the world is a smaller place.
- Which is to say, increasingly, we are more interdependent. In other words, we can’t just do our own thing. What we do affects the rest of the planet. That’s one of the consequences of globalization.
- When our economy takes a set back, it affects the global economy, particularly Europe, as we’re finding out.

All of this leaves us in a more vulnerable state than what we’re accustomed to. And of course, the recent lowering of our national credit ranking by Standard and Poors, didn’t help things. We’ve never had anything less than a AAA rating.

Still, our real challenge—in terms of our spirit—is how we respond to this in light of the BIG PICTURE of our situation? What kind of leadership are we going to display—for ourselves and for the rest of the world?

I continue to believe that the answers and solutions that we are looking for in all of this are rooted in our relationships.

- In the way we look at and understand one another.
- In the respect we have for individual freedom and individual differences
- and for the increasing diversity that marks our world.

Why? Because we have to do this together—as ONE people, ONE planet.

II.

In our scripture reading from **Romans 12** this morning, Paul has some suggestions for us. To begin with, a sense of *sacrificial spirit* runs through the reading.

Present yourselves to God—your bodies—as a living sacrifice, says Paul. Right away, that sets the tone.

He then says, ***Do not be conformed to this world ... but be transformed by the renewing of your minds ... so you may discern what is the will of God—what is good, acceptable and perfect.***

Right away, Paul implies there is a problem when our spirit conforms too much to this world ... in other words, to the values of the world. What are the values of the world? In our own time, they are (1) *greed* and (2) *looking out for #one* with little regard for anyone else.

And let's tell the truth, friends, greed is the omnipresent SIN of our time. It's the reason we're in the economic mess we're in. People too eager for short-term profits ...

- too eager to get a loan they couldn't afford ...
- too eager to sell a loan they knew the client couldn't afford ...
- too eager to leverage whatever capital to long-term debt.

III.

Easily, we get ***conformed to this world***. We see those profit signs and forget who we are. It happens all the time. We Americans have been born in to such a good deal in life that we keep thinking:

- (a) it's going to be like that forever and,
- (b) there are a lot more good deals out there with our name on them.

There's nothing wrong with looking for and expecting good news. Why not? But when we get too caught up in (1) *short-term profits*; (2) *upward mobility*; (3) and *looking out for #one*—when these concerns become the dominant concerns of our lives, we've ***conformed too much to the tug of the world***.

Do not be conformed to this world, says Paul ... ***but be transformed by the renewing of your minds ... so you may discern what is the will of God.***

IV.

What's interesting and instructive for us are the points Paul makes *after* the emphasis on ***discerning the will of God***.

1. The first thing Paul talks about is the need to be humble ... *not to think of yourself more highly than you ought* ...

Having a humble spirit is always good ... where *humble* means that the world doesn't revolve around us. In any effort to *discern* the will of God, we must always be on our knees before God.

God's will is a fearsome thing. Imagine, having a sense of God's will for our lives and for the world. But how can we ever KNOW, in some conclusive way, if we're doing God's will or not? That's the dilemma, for—clearly—we cannot know. All we can do is seek God's will in the humble hope that whatever our actions and words ... that somehow they approach God's purposes.

Thy will be done, our Lord taught us to pray. And, indeed, may it be so—both in us and through us, **on earth as it is in heaven**.

2. The second thing Paul stresses is that *we are all ONE, one body in Christ*, he says ... and individually we are members one of another.

So, *discerning the will of God* has to do with having a humble spirit and with the awareness that *individually, we are members one of another*.

Clearly, this suggests that we need each other ... that we're not an island unto ourselves. Paul goes on, saying ...

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us ... and then he identifies some of the gifts: gifts of *prophecy* ... *ministering* ... *teaching* ... *generosity* ... *exhortation* ... *leadership* ... *compassion* ...

What this means, of course, is that we all have gifts ... and we are all members one of another and, therefore, we need each other.

And so the KEY is that we work together and that we cooperate and that we compromise where we need to compromise to produce the greater good. Romans suggests that this is God's will for our lives.

It seems so simple ... and yet, it's not because we forget the *humility* part; or we forget how we're all members one of another. We forget ... and we go our own way ... off into our different groups that divide and separate and look out only for ourselves.

This process of *discerning God's will* is no easy process. Easily, it can take us to places we don't want to go. Cooperation and compromise ask something of us. It's not just *same ole', same ole'*.

If we take the Bible as our guide, God's will advocates for the poor ... for the little guy ... for the powerless, the vulnerable ... for those beaten down by the forces of the world.

V.

With this in mind, consider the will of God for Israel in exile. What must they have thought? *Is this it? Is this all there is? Endless life in Babylon.* We can hear their voices as we commiserate with them in their plight:

We're Jews, we're Israelites. We don't belong here. This isn't who we are. Can this possibly be God's will for our lives?

We must harbor similar thoughts and feelings sometimes ourselves: *Is this God's will for my life? No job ... no retirement ... no health care ... every day, fewer opportunities for education ... fewer possibilities to improve our situation in life.*

- It's in this context that the prophet Second Isaiah was a tremendous voice of hope for Israel in exile.
- Isaiah painted a powerful picture of the possibilities of tomorrow ... and that tomorrow—distinctly—was NOT in Babylon, but back in Judah, their homeland ... back in Jerusalem, the holy city.

Isaiah was painting a picture of a new day, a new day of unmistakable hope.

Listen to me, he says, again and again.

***Listen to me, my people and give heed to me, my nation ...
for a teaching will go out from me ...
and my justice will be a light to the people.***

Lift up your eyes to the heavens ... for my salvation will be forever ...

Wow, what powerful words of hope.

VI.

These words of hope are for us, too, friends. God's will seeks justice and well being for all people. And to get there—to justice and well-being, God wills that we work together, each doing his or her own part.

That's the key, too, for our nation and our world to climb out of these depressed economic times. What God wills is that we each do our part. Together we have more than sufficient skills and gifts to find our way through this.

We need to check our ego at the door and each do our part.

- Politicians, economists, educators ...
- experts in information technology, engineering, urban development ...

- business persons of all kinds, fire fighters, police officers ...
- doctors, psychologists, sociologists, ministers ... all of us.
- We're in this together.

Indeed, with Paul, let us ...

1. NOT be conformed to this world ... but be
2. transformed by the renewing of our minds, so we can
3. *Discern what is the will of God ... what is good, acceptable and excellent ...*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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