

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church
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Epiphany V B (Mark 1:29-39)

We Christians have a lot to answer for.

“It’s God’s will,” for one.

We hear this phrase bandied about far too often for far too many events that, to me, are clearly *not* the will of God.

The election of a president. No matter which side you’re on, in my humble opinion it is *not* God’s will that one person receives more votes than another. The election of a president has to do with individual citizens voting, and it has to do with money and with power. Money and power have *nothing* to do with the will of God.

The death of a child. No. Emphatically no. It was not God’s will that Hannah Scalese contracted a rare cancer and died. It was not God’s will that Carolynn Cosin died in a car wreck, nor Michael and Katie nor Bruce. It is not God’s will that there are children in hospital who will die today. No. God does not create pain, God does not create illness, God does not create terminal disease. No. It is not God’s will.

Colonization. Nope, definitely not God’s will. Colonization had to do with greed – the desire for diamonds, or oil, or land – and it had to do with the wretched notion that some people and some cultures are intrinsically better than others and should impose their religion and their government upon those people. God has *nothing* to do with the abuse of power.

Slavery. *Seriously?* In the nineteenth century Holy Scripture was actually used to support the wicked sin of slavery – the ownership of a human being who had too little power to escape bondage. Then again, Holy Scripture has been used to support many evil things: misogyny, capital punishment, conversion therapy, the subjugation of women, and the really amusing notion from a twisted reading of the Book of Revelation that the United States of America is going to become the new Kingdom of God. Really. I heard it on the radio last week.

But honestly... today’s Gospel story is a healing story, and it causes me to think about healing and curing and what the heck is God’s will.

Every time I hear a “success” story of a miraculous healing, deep down I think about the other situation when healing did not take place. Every time I reflect on my own sobriety, I am reminded that I’m one of the few who have made it.

So does God like me more than another suffering alcoholic or drug addict?

If we thank God for healing, should we curse God when there is no cure?

I don’t know the precise answers.

I don’t know...

But there are a few things I do know.

First, God does not cause suffering. Listen to me again: *God does not cause suffering*. The God of love whom we worship did *not* send hurricanes upon Puerto Rico to punish their wicked and tawdry ways; God did not send Ebola fever to punish the people of Africa nor AIDS to punish the men of San Francisco. *How could a God of love punish the innocent – children, the sick and dying, the elderly, and just plain folks – along with the wicked?* I don't think God is like that. This is not God's will. This is simply not the God I worship, and it is not the God of the Bible – *that* God is the God of love and mercy.

And by the way, to the megachurch's pastor's celebrity wife who says Jesus is the only flu shot we need, I say "horse pucky." Sorry, I couldn't help myself.

Second, God has given us free will. We have choices to make – and that is a gift from God. We can choose good, we can choose evil. We can choose to do the right thing... or the wrong thing. We can choose to fight injustice... or to participate in it. We can choose to battle racism... or to support inequality. We can choose to feed the poor... or to support the rich. We can choose to end poverty.... or not.

The Eucharistic prayer we use on Wednesdays recounts the ways we've messed up our world this way: "We failed to honor your image in one another and in ourselves; we would not see your goodness in the world around us; and so we violated your creation, abused one another, and rejected your love."

And then comes this *amazing* reassurance: "Yet *you never ceased to care for us*, and prepared the way of salvation for all people."

This is God's will.

God's will is that we love mercy and work for justice.

God's will is that we speak for those who have no power.

God's will is that we do what we can to heal a broken world and to heal our broken selves.

And when we're faced with human suffering, when we're faced with a choice to make, we can pray. Now you probably won't (although it's not impossible) hear a heavenly voice booming down like thunder, you probably won't see a blinding flash of light or words written in the stars, but if we are open enough, if we can just step aside and let God be God, we will truly find direction.

And we must be very, very thoughtful before we claim God's will.

Prayer is a powerful thing, and it heals. It may not cure, but it *heals*. It opens our hearts and souls and minds and bodies to God's goodness, and that, in itself, is healing.

Think of healing as a way of approaching God, a way to re-establish or refresh our relationship with God, a way to come ever closer to the God who loves us and who wants the best for us, no matter how badly we mess up.

For me, that way is Jesus Christ. The ultimate gift from God.

No matter how we suffer, or what suffering we see. No matter what evil enslaves us, no matter what evil is done on our behalf. No matter how we reject God or blame God or mistrust God, God is patient and forever.

I still don't know why one person is miraculously cured and another isn't, and I don't think it is God's will, but that's one of those things I'm going to have to leave up to God.

And we'll have a conversation about it in the great beyond.

Amen.