

**Sermon: On Being Willing**  
**Scripture: Luke 1:26-38**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: December 7, 2009**

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**“Oh Mary, faithful daughter, holy mother, you have been called  
By the Creator, to bear our savior, O highly favored, we honor you.”**

Apparently, as the scripture is written, Mary could have said “no”. The Angel Gabriel doesn’t exactly pose it as a question to her though. He says this is what is going to happen: “you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and call him Jesus.” And she says “how will this be?” and the angel explains. But then the angel awaits her response and it is only after Mary says “behold I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

And ever since Mary has been the quintessential example of the human spirit submitting to God’s, the aligning of our will to God’s will; an attitude that we can assume she taught to her son when in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prays – “But Father, not my will but your will be done.”

It’s not really an American cultural value this willingness to forsake our will in submission to another’s. In fact the opposite is what we celebrate: the power of our own will. And this is understandable because this country was founded upon the oppressed coming out from under the will of others for religious freedom, like the puritan you met last week, busting in here from the past, so I heard. As a result we tend to celebrate all the amazing things that can be accomplished by our willfulness. And this is important and this is problematic. Even now, the American myth of “the land of opportunity” is still alive and well despite the fact that opportunity is fading for people of lower and middle classes more than ever. Today, it’s the millionaires and billionaires and the corporations who have been granted personhood who are celebrating what can be accomplished through willfulness in this land of opportunity and really not many others.

And so it’s worth considering, I think, how much really do we willfully determine the shape and condition of our lives and how much is determined for us. I’d suggest that the evidence is far weighted on the side of our being determined. It was Woody Allen

who once said “80 percent of life is just showing up.” And the writer and theologian Eugene Peterson says further:

“Nothing we do by the exercise of our wills will ever come close to approximating what is done to us by other wills. By far the largest part of our life is experienced in the mode of passivity. Life is undergone. We receive. We enter into what is already there. Our genetic system, the atmosphere, the food chain, our parents, our bodies, the weather, much of our government, the landscape, our education... they are there in place before we [ever] exercise our will.” (Peterson’s *The Contemplative Pastor*, p. 106)

And this is true, but then of course what makes us distinctly human is our free will, that capacity within us to choose and decide, to determine and create, to protest and re-create. It’s that small but critical percentage of our lives that we can determine that makes us human. And then our spiritual tradition goes and teaches us that even with that small percentage that we do determine, our spiritual work is to turn even that little bit over to the higher will of God, to let go and let God. It seems a truly strange claim until we test it and realize that our joy and our peace in ourselves and in our relationships with others is in fact often found there, in submitting our will to what is Good and Right and True because that is the way we and the world are made.

Consider your own experience in the relationships in your life. Wouldn’t you agree that the worst relationships, the failed relationships are those where our willfulness clashed with the willfulness of the other. And isn’t it true that the most beautiful of relationships, the ones that really work are more characterized by a willingness on each side to forgo our own willfulness for the sake of the other. Of course it’s a dance, one with the other. We are created with freedom of will, for sure, but LOVE grows in relationship less from willfulness and more from being willing.

Eugene Peterson goes so far as to say this: “every act of intimacy, whether in work or language or marriage or prayer suppresses willfulness and cultivates willingness.” (*Contemplative Pastor*, p.109) Every act of intimacy suppresses willfulness and cultivates willingness. Think about times of creativity in your life – painting or writing or composing or building – isn’t it true that while our willfulness is a component of our creativity with training and practice and all, the intimate act of creating itself is more often about letting go than it is about grabbing hold. Creativity is more often about suppressing willfulness and cultivating a willingness to let happen what needs

to happen... and What Needs to Happen is another name for God and another name for our lives fulfilled. This is what the beginning of the Christmas story is about and what Mary beautifully exemplifies for us - the cultivation and practice of willingness.

But right willingness, let me be clear. If we are relating to a tyrant, a spousal tyrant or a national tyrant, then the practice of willingness in that relationship is not what we need! But we are not talking about a tyrant here in the Christmas story. Instead we are hearing this invitation come to Mary with the full knowledge of the revelation that comes at the end of the story. We hear Mary's willingness to receive the seed of God in light of the revelation that this God who Mary is submitting to is a Presence so full of love that He is willing to be crucified on a cross BEFORE exerting His own will over the will of his beloved creatures! That is the type of presence that we can fully trust ourselves into. That is our God.

Sure, there are times we need to practice willfulness in relation to the limited sinful people and systems around us, but there is also the critical and right submission of our will to Love's will and this is what Mary so beautifully accomplishes. Paradoxically, it must be true that in order for Mary to be so capable of relinquishing her own willfulness to God's will that Mary must have been a woman powerfully clear about not overly submitting herself to the men of her life, which is how I read that Mary was a "virgin", that she was fully willing when it came to God though she was not penetrated and controlled by the willfulness of others.

That's why she is the holy virgin Mother, that's why her practice of willingness was a holy act, not because she was mild and meek and willing to be steam-rolled but because she submitted her will to the will of Love Alone. And that's why she can be such an example for us. And then in following her example and in cultivating our willingness with God we will most likely find an increase in our capacity to cultivate and practice right willfulness in relationship with others. May Mary, God's faithful daughter and Christ's holy mother, mother us in this effort.

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