

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

ON GRACE & FREE WILL

A sermon preached 4th September 2016 at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr. Based on Deuteronomy 30: 15 – 20, Philemon, and Luke 14: 25 – 33.

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life that you and your descendants may live.”

Most people in the ancient world had a strong sense of destiny. Even at the height of Hellenistic classicism the Greeks thought *moira* or fate was superior to the will of the gods much less men and women. But Jews and Christians had a different outlook on life. They believed God gave us the power to make real choices. It was Moses' successor Joshua who said, “If you be unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve. Whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the river or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Commandments assume free will implicitly. You don't really, except by analogy, give a command to a computer. No computer has ever said what some of you have heard your middle schooler say to you, “No!” That's because the fastest computer isn't as smart as your sixth-grader.

Mary chooses to sit with Jesus and listen to his teaching whereas Martha chooses to worry about setting the table. Jesus says this about their choice. “Mary has chosen the better portion which shall not be taken from her.” The sisters choose different things. Jesus doesn't say, “Fate chose it for them.” They each chose a good. Mary chose a higher good.

The Apostle Paul writing to Philemon, tries to persuade him voluntarily to free the slave Onesimus. “I preferred to do nothing without your consent,” he writes, “in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.”

From the outset of Church history, Christians have opted to favor one of two sides in an ongoing argument, one that I'll state herewith as a question: Are we involved with the God of Israel because we choose to be or because God has chosen us to be?

Now if all the data we had to consider were our will and our preferences — if life is always and only about the decisions *we* make — then the Methodists or Arminians would be right and the Presbyterians or Calvinists would be wrong. The Jesuits would be right and the Dominicans would be wrong.

But what about divine grace or providence? What if God has preferences and is busy in our lives? The same Paul who wrote Philemon wrote this in Romans, “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.” In the next chapter the emphasis on grace is so strong it seems to clear the field of free will. Paul writes, “When Rebekah had conceived Esau and Jacob by Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue not because of works but because of him who calls—Rebekah was told, ‘the elder will serve the younger.’”

Grace, like free will, is part of the scriptural data. So how do we approach our question? Because if there is no free will then we're not really responsible for anything we do. And if there's no grace or divine foreknowledge, if God has to read *The San Francisco Chronicle* or *The Times of London* before God knows what's going on, then he can't be God; all God can do is create the first big bang and sit back and wonder what'll happen next. And if God's only a spectator, a bystander, he can't help you any more than Teri and Byron could help their Southern Cal Trojans last night.

The consequences of rejecting either free will or grace are you either lose your humanity if you reject free will or you lose God's divinity if you reject grace. How then can we hold these truths together?

We can read Aquinas's *Metaphysics*. He says God as the first cause is responsible for everything that happens. But God is not a tyrant. God does not *exclude* or rival second causes but rather *establishes* them. The house built in Taos this summer? That was really Chris and Nicky Peters who helped build that. That wasn't the Holy Spirit pouring concrete, it was Sutter Portner. So we're real human beings and we really have free will precisely *because* God is omnipotent. The first cause created us second causes to make real choices with real consequences.

That's the philosophical way to think through this. But I prefer to tell you the same thing by 'telling it slant' to use a phrase of Emily Dickinson; by telling you a story. When I met my friend Father David Stokes, he was the Rector of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Providence, Rhode Island, an Anglo-Catholic Oxford Movement parish around which Brown University arranges itself. The God who rescued Israel from bondage in Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead, the Anglican divines John Donne and George Herbert, Karl Barth, Jane Austen, Walker Percy, Jaroslav Pelikan, Brevard Childs — I would go to Saturday morning Low Mass at Smokey Steve's and afterward over coffee Father Stokes and I would cosset ourselves in these things. With encouragement from him and from the Bishop of Rhode Island, I sought holy orders in the Episcopal Church.

It was the spring of 1993. I was at the Diocesan House in Providence waiting for my initial interview with the Commission on Ministry. Father Stokes was already meeting with the Commission. I was sitting in another room waiting for a signal to join them.

I am a neurotic about keeping a book on me. So when I opened my bag and the novel I was reading wasn't there, I scanned the bookshelves in the room. They were empty but for two derelict loose-leaf binders. I pushed them aside. And there it was, the only book at hand: The 1990 Journal of the Diocese of Rhode Island.

No Episcopalian would ever confuse a Diocesan Journal with *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the novel which wasn't in my bag. But I was desperate. It was a codex with sentences. So I opened it and the first words to shine upon my retinae were these, "We affirm the election of the Rev. William W. Wiedrich as Suffragan Bishop of the Diocese of Chicago." I stopped there. Why?

I wasn't raised going to church. I started going to church, without my parents at first, in Sault Ste Marie, Michigan when I was a sophomore in high school. The first Episcopal priest I knew was Father Wiedrich. I didn't go to his parish, St James', but his son Tom was a classmate and friend at Sault High. We played varsity basketball together. Tom was a beautiful jump shooter. Father Wiedrich attended our practices in his clericals. With my parents, he and his wife cheered us Blue Devils on. When he preached at our high school Baccalaureate, he referred to what he had given us as we filed into the

room, a round pin-on button with TUIT on it. Some people said they didn't go to church because they didn't get around to it. We were now, he said, without excuse.

The chances that I would be caught without a book are small. The chances that the only book in that room would be that 1990 Diocesan Journal are smaller. The chances that that book would fall open to that page and the first words to shine on my eyes would be about the first Episcopal priest I knew. Tally it all up with the odds that this would happen as I'm waiting to meet the people who would decide whether I'd go on in the process toward being priested. It seemed to me then as it seems to me now that the odds against what happened have to be astronomical. After the 8 o'clock Eucharist this morning, DB Murray said this was a 'Black Swan' event.

You don't have to invoke the supernatural to account for any of it. Each of those things could have been a coincidence as could all of them added up together. A reasonable person could shrug it off as a fluke. But it's also possible that it wasn't a fluke, that it was grace, that the Most High was taking me by the elbow, letting let me peek around the corner into the frontier between the seen and the unseen. I have no idea what you make of it but I am the world's leading authority on what I made of it. God was whispering from the wings. And what I heard the Most High saying was this. *I know exactly where you are. You have been expected. You are on schedule. You are taking the right turn at the right time.*

The meeting went well. Before I left the Diocesan house, I asked for the phone number of the Diocese of Chicago. It didn't take long to get around to it. I called and spoke with Bishop Wiedrich.

Seven years ago, the Chicago Bears' All-Pro linebacker Brian Urlacher suffered a completely dislocated wrist at Lambeau Field the first Sunday of that season. My Green Bay Packers beat the Bears that night, 21 – 15. The Bears rushed Urlacher back to Chicago and the team's hand and wrist surgeon who performed a complicated all-night operation. I didn't need the *Chicago Tribune* to know this. The surgeon, Tom Wiedrich, told me about it.

So the answer to the question, Do you believe in grace or free will? is — what? Go ahead, say it with me. *Yes!* In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

St Stephen's welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA, Sunday mornings at 10 o'clock. For more information about our life and mission please email us at office@ststephenschurch.org, call us at 415-435-4501, or visit us at www.ststephenschurch.org.