

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Thy Will be Done: We Can Do Hard Things
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Exodus 2:1-4; Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

Our basic beliefs make a huge difference in the way we operate day-to-day. For example, we will treat people very differently depending on if we believe people are at their core, good, or if we have a belief that humans have a natural flaw, an origin of sin. If we believe humans are essentially bad by nature we will expect evil from others and put up all kinds of protections to keep ourselves from anticipated harm. On the other hand, if we think humans were created and God declared them “very good” then things like trust and respect come much quicker to relationships. These kinds of basic beliefs can significantly impact our choices in life sometimes without us even noticing.

Another belief that can greatly affect the way we live is if we believe God will only give us what we can handle. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it never says anything close to that in scripture. If anything, scripture hints heavily that a life of faith is hard, even more, it tells us we should expect hardships, and doing hard things are signs we are living by faith.

Now I get why “God will only give you what you can handle” thrives even though scripture says otherwise. “God will only give you what you can handle” is a much prettier package to sell to others and looks much nicer on the mantle to motivate us in our daily faith walk.

I think one reason this brand of sweetened theology thrives is that as we read scripture, we already know all the spoilers. We know what Mary will find at the tomb on Easter Sunday, we know the first time God asks Noah to build an ark it’s a good idea, we know when Moses’ mother puts her baby boy into a basket in the river that a princess will find him and will live happily ever after...ish. We know things turn out okay, so “God will only give you what you can handle” seems like it fits all these stories.

Unfortunately, for the people in the story when it was first being lived they would not have felt like they could “handle” these things. If we wash away all our knowledge of the next few pages we can see that the truth is “things will be hard.” Let’s try to shed all our knowledge of Moses and meet his mother for the first time.

We pick up in Exodus with a law harmfully impacting the lives of the Israelites. The law says that the firstborn son of every family must be killed. This is a daily reality for the people and many are facing the hardships this law mandates. Then we focus on one mother who is facing the unimaginable. She has given birth to a baby. It’s a boy - her first boy.

This should be a cause for celebration, but the minute he is born panic sets into the family. His father is nowhere to be found, probably trying to distance himself as much as possible so he does not bond with the doomed child. His young sister is vaguely aware of the threat. The most she can grasp is that her parents are afraid and people are not stopping by with good wishes. The mother, through all her anxiety, hangs on to hope, foolish hope, but hope nonetheless.

This mother has no idea how to save her son. She has watched all her friends fail to save their sons. They tried escaping, they tried disguises, they tried lying, but every time the boys met the same end.

Then one day, a wild idea comes to her, out of her foolish hope, she considers the option to weave a basket, cover it in pitch and tar, put her 3-month-old child into the basket, and let the basket float in the river while she goes about her day.

This is the part where we let spoilers gloss over her reality. She does not know what will happen to the baby. She knows the waters are fairly steady, that things get trapped and hidden in the reeds all the time, the baby may be safe. But she also knows the animals that eat from that water, and the hazards of the rapids should the basket get rocked loose. Knowing all this, and that the powerful authority wants to kill her child she does the hardest things she has ever had to do. She leaves her child in a makeshift floaty tucked away on the unpredictable waters with only the foolish hope that maybe he will still be there when she gets back and she can kiss his face one more time.

I pity anyone who tells that woman walking away from her baby that “God will only give you what you can handle.” This is not something she can handle. The mothers I know barely let their newborns out of their sight let alone handle what this mother has done.

This story clearly tells us things will be hard; even for righteous people, even for people God loves and has chosen to birth great leaders; even for those who pray enough and give enough and attend worship enough and volunteer enough. Even for us, things will be hard.

God does not regulate how much we can handle and turn the faucet of hardship just to that amount. I wish it was so, but God does not step in and keep this mother from doing the hardest of things. NO. What God does is honors her work of doing something hard by providing a rescue in that river. That river the mother steps into which represents her terror becomes the thing that saves the baby. Because she was willing to do the hard thing she got more than she could ever imagine. God honors those who are willing to do hard things.

As I was reflecting on hard things in life my mind kept drifting to moments we have to examine our own inner selves, our beliefs and truths, our biases and assumptions. There is something about admitting we don't know it all that is exceptionally hard for humans. God forbid we have to admit we were straight-up wrong about something! Making these kinds of admissions is very much like taking our pride and placing it into a basket and leaving ourselves vulnerable to whatever might come down that river.

Humans do not like to admit when we are wrong. We do not like to acknowledge something we said or a belief we held was not the truth. We avoid it at every cost. Businesses are making millions off of this reality. Google feeds you the articles it thinks you want based on the majority demographic around you. Search the same question in different demographic parts of the country and you will get different results. TikTok wants you to stay on the app as long as possible, so it only sends you videos it already thinks you will like. These juggernauts don't want to challenge you, they know humans run away from challenging information. Google and TikTok are never going to ask you to do hard things. They will reinforce what you already think you know.

One reason my mind went to moments where we have to reexamine an inner reality is that I am obsessed with people who leave cults. I have watched every documentary at least twice on every organization that has been accused of being a cult. It is especially incredible to me how children raised inside a cult can suddenly realize their reality is off.

I am in awe of the stories of those who leave cults because they have done one of the hardest things. They allowed new information to challenge their reality and found a way to ignore the raging beast that says, " I AM RIGHT" and changed something essential about themselves so they could be better. Listening to their stories, it is apparent how hard it is to change but also how little it takes to crack the facade.

Many of their stories shift in one great moment of realization. They may have been gathering information for a while but the moment they choose to acknowledge that they maybe aren't right, their whole world shifts.

They build their baskets with articles and conversations with outsiders weaving together information that is contrary to the cults' narrative. Their curiosity becomes doubt and questions coat their old reality. One person described it as a dark space where they didn't know which way was up or down, just floating in a void. The easy thing to do at that moment is to abandon the process.

To grab our pride back out of the baskets and double down on old beliefs and go back to the comfortable way of before. Those who choose to do the harder way eventually get to that final piece of the puzzle, the rescue, that removes the cover from their eyes, and the light of truth shines in on them.

To continue moving in the darkness of life, letting new information challenge our reality, is the hardest thing a human can do. The writer of Ecclesiastes knows this too. "Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well."

These verses beg us to keep moving forward even in the hard times because something will succeed. God does not promise to give us an easy path but every story in scripture reminds us that God provides a rescue. God honors those who do the hard things and often it takes someone risking, taking the hard path for God's people to move forward.

We Presbyterians have a phrase we like to use when hard decisions are being made. We say, "If the way be made clear," this phrase, however, relies on a belief that God will only give us what we are ready to handle. The votes on every hard decision will only go the way God's people are willing to go. But what if we are being asked to step onto a hard path? Will enough of us vote to do the harder thing?

The way was not clear to Noah when he started building an ark. The way was not clear to Mary when she headed out to the tomb. The way was not clear when Moses' mother placed him in the water. Sometimes the way is hard. And that is exactly the way God's will is directing us. We need to do hard things.

Our congregation has decided to do a hard thing. We have chosen to be a Matthew 25 church and examine our understanding of racism and poverty in our community. We will have to put our pride into that makeshift basket and set it afloat if we hope to achieve God's will in this. This past week we launched ourselves into learning about what systemic racism is, and over the next few months the Matthew 25 workgroup has invited incredible speakers to challenge our understanding of the systems we participate in.

This is a hard thing for our community, but we can do hard things. God will be with us as we learn, as we listen, and as we lean into new stories and new understandings. I expect to feel punched in the gut a few times, but those hard realizations will help me love more and understand God more. Please, no matter what your first reaction is to being asked to understand systemic racism, we need to do THIS hard thing. In a lot of ways this river that we are placing our baskets into represents our greatest fears, but what if the rescue for us, you and me, for this church, for this community is in this direction? Then we need to be the people who trust enough in God to do this hard thing. I hope you will join us for more of these Matthew 25 discussions so we can do this hard thing together knowing God's rescue is waiting to scoop us up on the other side of the reeds.