

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Thy Will be Done: Discover our Gifts
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Exodus 4:1-9; 2 Timothy 1:3-7

A few weeks ago I talked with you about how important it is for us to examine our Theology and notice what kind of effects it has on our daily practical lives. My example that time was how believing that somebody is a sinner versus believing that they are made very good can affect the way we interact with and see the people around us. As I was studying the scriptures for today I realized this time I was going to have to be a little bit more vulnerable and talk about a way that a seemingly inconsequential belief caused serious damage in my life.

Because this week we are talking about gifts from God, and for the majority of my life my understanding of God's gifts caused me to feel unworthy. Now I want to be clear that the toxic theology that I had taken to heart was not something that was purposely given to me to be hurtful. In fact, on the surface, everything that was taught to me was very well intended and looked to be an uplifting theology. The only way I have learned that what I believed was wrong is by the fruits it has produced in my life. When it became apparent that the fruits this belief was producing were rotten, I had no other choice but to re-examine how I understood God's gifts.

God's gifts were always presented as good things. If something was good in my life it was a gift from God, which sounds truthful enough. However when this idea pairs with another common Christian teaching it turns toxic. I did not just believe God's gifts were good, I also believed I was unworthy of them. And so the equation that developed in my mind was good equals God, bad equals me, or what I deserved.

This is not what was taught to me but this is what found its root inside me. I was supposed to be striving to be perfect like Jesus, and that was a task I could never hope to achieve because I was a miserable sinner. We can begin to see how these theologies play off each other and start rotting us from the inside.

So I tried to be good. I did what the assignment was. I was the good student, I was the good child, I was the good friend, but when I found myself in a relationship with someone else and I started valuing being the good girlfriend over everything else, it suddenly became apparent that this was not a healthy way to live. Because I believed good things came from God but that I deserved bad things, and so when my partner dealt me bad things that fit with my view of myself, it's what I deserved. My job was to be the good girlfriend despite it all. The occasions when good things happened it was a blessed relief from God. When bad things happened it was par for the course. What more could I expect to have happen to me?

My theology justified the abuse. So for four years I tried to make the pieces fit together. Until one day, the Spirit took hold of me and I refused to meet up with that person again. I told him to forget my number and forget I existed. I wanted nothing more to do with him.

That is exactly how I described my break free moment. The Spirit took hold and saved me, but can you hear it even in that? My toxic theology was present even in the moment I broke free. I could not give myself any credit for the good thing that I had done, that I had finally stood up for myself. It was all God! This is how strong our beliefs can dictate our lives. They literally write our story for us and in my story I never said I did the good things. It was always God. While it is true that God gives us good things we also need to see that God does not do anything alone. We have to save some credit for ourselves.

When I was reading this story about Moses, I heard the same toxic theology come up as I was reading. Oh here is poor miserable Moses, who is the runaway murderer, who is a stutterer, who can't get anything right. God is stepping in and saving him, giving him the good things he needs to be the leader God is asking him to be. Moses does not deserve the position or attention he is getting from God, but yet God takes Mercy and gives him good gifts.

That is how I always read the story until last week when I finally made the connection that the toxic theology that nearly destroyed my life was trying to inform me about what was happening to Moses. I had to stop and reread this with a new lens and stop seeing Moses as the unworthy and God as the ultimate good, but try to understand why Moses is chosen, why are these signs given to him?

When we stop assuming Moses is a worthless loser we begin to see how this partnership actually comes together. The first sign, when Moses gets worried, God says what do you have there in your hand? And Moses looks and says, well this is my staff, this is what I used to guide my flocks when there is a dangerous edge of a cliff. I can stand and direct my flock away from it, if there's a fight within the flock I can break it up. From far away, if there is a predator on the outskirts of the flock, I can raise my staff high and make myself look bigger and scare away the danger. This is just a staff.

God knows this is a good start. God also knows there's other dangers among the flock. Moses also knows how to pick up a snake by its tail and throw it far away. God knows these are really good skills when you're standing with the people and they don't believe who you are or who sent you. Take your staff, throw it on the ground and it will turn into a snake. when you grab that snake by the tail, it will turn back into your staff. God uses the skills that Moses already has to create the sign that Moses needs to convince people. God doesn't say, I'll be with you. I'll put some lightning in the sky. There will be a miraculous sign they will have to understand. God doesn't take any of the credit. God uses what Moses is already good at to create the sign needed.

And if that's not enough God gives another sign. God does not just know what Moses is good at on the outside, God knows who Moses is on the inside. God saw Moses put his body in between the slave and the Egyptian guard, and when the slave was being beaten Moses put his body in between them and said stop. Moses was so passionate about this because he murdered the abuser. God knows that Moses is a leader willing to put his flesh on the line for the things he believes are right. So knowing that, knowing that Moses is already willing to do that, God says here's another sign. Put your hand inside your cloak. When you remove it it will be filled with disease, then when you put it back in your cloak and pull it out again it will be healed. This sign shows the people who Moses is as a leader, someone willing to put his body on the line for them.

And then we have the last sign. This last sign is a bit different because God is asking Moses to go and get something that he doesn't already have on his person. But this, I think, was God's move to try and win over some of the skeptics that will be among the crowd. Modern-day illusionists do this too. If you don't believe that my card trick worked, or you believe this cup might have a hole in the bottom of it, or if you don't believe the tricks that I showed you with the things that I brought, then I'll ask you to give me a \$20 out of your pocket, something you know very well. If I can do something magical with that then you may be more willing to believe my skills.

The Israelites knew the water. The water around them was their life. It gave them nourishment, it washed them. They let their kids play in this water. They knew it inside and out, and in all of those years of interacting with this water it had never turned to blood. So for Moses to say to someone, go and get a pitcher of water from the Nile,

and for that water they know so well to be brought to him, to be dumped out and for blood to hit the ground, the skeptics would realize this is real. We know this water. How could it have done this in the hands of this person? It has become something we have never seen before.

This final sign connects all that Moses is as a leader to the people. He uses the thing they value the most, their greatest asset, to show that in his hands he can make something different happen for their lives.

These signs are God's gift to Moses. They are meant to help him as he takes on the role that God has chosen him for. It is true that they are good gifts but the whole truth is it they are also Moses's gifts to God. Moses has learned how to use that staff. He has learned how to handle a snake, so in that moment God has something to work with, to make a sign out of the skills that Moses already possesses. Moses is already a person who before God chose him to do anything was willing to put his body in the line of danger to protect the people. When God needs another sign to give to Moses, he makes one Moses will be comfortable with because it is connected to who he is at the core.

The third sign is probably the one Moses feels least comfortable with. He has never turned water into blood. But because God first asks the things that Moses is comfortable with and they have some success producing these signs, together Moses easily steps into the third sign of accepting the water and throwing it on the ground.

It would be absolutely correct for Moses to claim all these signs are God's because they are. But they are also deeply rooted in who Moses is, what he is skilled at, who he is inside at his core nature. These are good gifts from God, and Moses is a very active and willing partner in the process of making this great good, which is releasing God's people from Egypt. It is a great, good work of God and it is a great, good work of Moses.

Our second testament reading encourages us to fan the flames of our gifts. This imagery shows it so beautifully because our gifts are just minor sparks. But when we take the time to fan them, to take them out and put them on a torch and show the world our gifts, we become active participants in the good that God is doing through us.

When I gave God all the credit for rescuing me from a bad relationship it left me with deep distrust in myself. I had chosen the bad person. I was not able to get out. I might choose wrong again and need God to rescue me again. It wasn't until I accepted my role in making that final call that I began to trust myself again. That it was the strength I had built inside me that allowed me to break free. Was God there cheering me on, reminding me of my strength? Absolutely, but that strength was mine. It was my voice that spoke up. The power that took control that day is mine.

And so I want you to take some time this week and give yourself the credit. You have gotten this far, yes, with God's help, yes, with God's good gifts, and you have had to act on those gifts that God has given you. You have had to actually do something about that problem in your life and stand up for what you know to be true. You are not unworthy, you are the very tool that God needs to make this world into what it is becoming. Give yourself credit for being a willing and active partner with God for the betterment of this world. You deserve credit for the good things you have done. You are worthy, you are worth it.