

## THE GIFT OF FREE WILL

Last fall the church held a family retreat up at Pilgrim Pines. One of the activities on Saturday afternoon was a challenge course of various high-altitude endeavors. You could rock climb a two-story tower, or walk a tightrope across a moderate span. But the BIG attraction was a 60-foot telephone pole. The objective of this challenge was to scale this 60-foot telephone pole on little pegs. At the top of the pole was a tiny little platform, about the size of a dinner plate. You were to climb the little pegs, pull yourself up onto the dinner-plate platform, turn around and free-jump to a trapeze several feet away.

Well, I'm afraid of heights. Always have been. As far back as I can remember.

- Didn't pass my YMCA swimming test because I wouldn't jump off the diving board.
- The Parasailing Disaster of 2010.
- On the observation deck of the Empire State Building, I'm the one glued to the inner wall.

But, I have enthusiasm and I like to join in. So I trekked along with the other adventurers out to the challenge course. And let me tell you, everyone was into it. They were trying each course in succession. My own girls scaled the telephone pole multiple times.

And I was being strongly encouraged to do it. Coaxed even. Guilt-tripped a little. The name "chicken" might have been mentioned.

So I gave in.

There were two instructors on the course. The head guy – named Joseph – and a new guy (who shall remain nameless), who was there for the day helping out as Joseph's understudy.

When it came time to get my harness on, New Guy was helping me out. He laid it out on the ground and I stepped into it. I was already shaking and crying. Not just a little – A LOT. I was kind of trying to cover my crying with some hysterical version of laughter, but really, I was torn up inside.

So New Guy got me all strapped in, with a dozen latches and buckles, and I told him, "I'm a single mom. I have two girls that rely on me. That Need Me. My Life Has Value!" And he was laughing; there was

probably a case study of campers like me in the training manual. And so I was finally in the harness, shaking and crying and laughing for a growing audience.

Only to learn that New Guy had put the harness on wrong. The Primary Hook thing, to which all the other buckles and safety stops attach, was on the INSIDE. So he had to UNDO each buckle and fastener and have me step out of the harness, turn it around and redo it all.

Now, here was my chance to RUN! I was free of this treachery and this ridiculous endeavor that I let myself get talked into (by my own will too, by the way). I could have RUN straight back to the cabin and had a nice relaxing afternoon. Maybe taken a nap. But NO.

I'm determined. I have a will of steel. Forget this aversion. I'm doing this. So harnessed up, I start my ascent. About five feet off the ground, I'm frozen. And each time I freeze, Joseph coaxes me: Can you take one more step? Thirty minutes later he has coaxed me to the top. I am sweating, crying, shaking like the Santa Ana winds.

Somehow – almost unconsciously through pure will – I have made it to the dinner-plate platform, but now I'm stuck. I'm holding on for dear life to that pole. I have to turn around, let go and jump. It's the only way. The crowd below is getting a little bored and starting to thin out. My heart rate is through the roof and I'm in considerable discomfort, having been in this harness for an eternity. And finally I turn around, push off and leap for the trapeze. I catch it – victoriously – and then let go as Joseph lowers me to the ground.

And this is where the teaching moment comes. Joseph, all Godly and prayerful, asks how this experience – this fear and trepidation – relates to my life on the ground: Are you scared and afraid to take risks?

My answer: NO! I'm actually pretty fearless. When I was nineteen, I drove myself across the country; I put myself through college; I became an entrepreneur at age twenty-eight. I'm comfortable with a fair amount of risk; making decisions comes easily to me. No! I just have an innate, inherent, born-this-way aversion to heights! No amount of further coaxing is going to change that. Climbing that pole didn't do a darn thing for me except cause my blood pressure to rise, and cause me anxiety and distress that probably took five years off my life! And pretty much rendered me a noodle for the rest of the weekend.

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And then it hit me. The lesson of that pole was not to conquer my fear of heights. NO – I was born that way! The lesson was to finally SEE and ACCEPT that this is how God made ME.

And it got me thinking: How often we push ourselves into extremely uncomfortable situations – situations that are not aligned with who God made us to be. If we spent a little more time getting to know the ME God created, we might not be so easily tempted to do things that are not God's Will for us.

Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness led by the Holy Spirit and tempted by Satan, but he was so clear about his calling and the use of his gifts that he could not be pulled into service of evil.

And how tempting: Feed your people! Heal your people!

And yes, Jesus fed and healed, but he was not tricked into making that the central part of his ministry. He came to reconcile us to GOD, to our FATHER. To show us that a personal, one-on-one relationship with the ONE who created us is not just possible BUT ATTAINABLE. If only we slow down, listen, and try to discern God's Will for us – get to know the person God created us to be.

Not knowing myself and accepting WHO I am leaves a mighty big door open to temptation.

God gave us this beautiful thing called Life and this little gift called Free Will and then set us on our way – with talents to discover, each of us unique and made specifically for a purpose. And off we go, but not to take time away to pray and get clear on our gifts and our vocatio so that we can use them for our best purpose. No, we charge off into the “real world” instead.

It is estimated that Jesus was about thirty years old when he was baptized and then went into the wilderness to pray and discern God's Will for him. Yet we all enter adulthood and don't give much thought to it at all.

It is SO easy to think and believe that the things we do on a daily basis – hour to hour, task to task – are separate from the Kingdom of God. We keep God in a tiny little box while we are busy leading our BIG lives. When we finally carve out five minutes to pray or an hour on Sunday morning – or maybe, if we're lucky, ninety minutes during the week for a Disciple Band or Bible study – we think that THOSE are sacred, holy times, when we get aligned and allow our thoughts to be

organized by God. And maybe we listen and hear something that then gives us an inspiration to carry a little of that out into our Real Life – out there.

Yes, we enjoy those little moments of respite that those spiritual distractions provide, but then off we go to the “real world” and the “really important” things on our to-do lists and agendas.

And we suffer. We are burned out, overextended, overscheduled. Antidepressants and antianxiety meds are as prevalent as mints!

This we know. What is less apparent is *why*?

I believe it's because we don't take the time to learn God's Will for us. We take our Free Will and run.

**Because doing God's Will seems SCARY.**

We've heard that our only fear should be of the Lord, and boy, when it comes to trusting God's Will for us, that sure rings true.

What if I finally decide to do God's Will? What if I get really honest with God and show him all of my heart and express my deepest desires, my greatest loves? What if I reveal to God how much I love my family, my children? Well, surely it's locusts and destruction. The plague maybe. Something BAD is surely going to happen. Perhaps I'll be made to SUFFER in some way to prove my faith or TESTED in some way to prove my conviction. God may finally end this whole universe JUST to make me cower in a prostate position.

Trusting God = FEAR to many of us. LOSS of something we hold dear.

If I really listen and AGREE to be obedient and follow God's Will, then surely before I know it I will have to give up all my worldly possessions, travel to some faraway land and live among spiders and bugs really high up in some precipice – you know, because I'm afraid of heights.

Wow. No wonder we have fear and trepidation. If I do God's Will, it might RUIN my life!

Funny how these phrases become so ingrained in our vernacular that we don't even hear them anymore.

MY Life. *Whose* life? We get so lost in these tragic tales that we forget we were CREATED by God, our Father. My Life is a gift from my Creator.

But it's easier to just ignore that fact and get back to the Real World – my daily demands. If I think too much about God's Will for me, it's really uncomfortable.

But I've come to know firsthand the folly of that perspective. C.S. Lewis said that "Satan's greatest trick was in convincing man that he does not exist."

No, WE cower from what we believe to be a scary God, and run right back to our daily Hell. Where we shake off that crazy notion we had about being vulnerable and open and trusting and obedient. Back to our familiar, if not comfortable, grind. Where weariness takes hold. Joy is sapped. Strength diminishes. Dissatisfaction and discontent rule. Sound familiar?

Paul never spoke of Hell. He talked about the bondage we are living in – here today, in this worldly world. And how Jesus came to free us from that bondage – from our present-day Hell.

I understand the apprehension to fully rely on God. Lucky for me, I got taken to my knees and had no other choice but to turn my will over to God. I took my Free Will so far, until I couldn't run, push, drive any harder. Until I hit my knees, and Grace Rushed In.

No one comes skipping to the cross. I've heard that before. No, we come battered and bruised and heartbroken, hopeless and in despair, run ragged with our own Free Will – doing life OUR way. And sadly for most of us, it's a long, hard, bitter road until we finally surrender.

**But I'm here today to ask you: Why wait?**

God loves you. God wants to be in relationship with you. He waits PATIENTLY for each of us to learn the hard lessons, skin enough knees and elbows, and wrestle with alligators and snakes and bears. Until we say HERE. Here it is God – take it! Take my Free Will. Your Will, not mine, be done.

*And then the Peace flows in. The Peace That Exceeds All Understanding.*

It took a lot for me to accept and realize and SEE that my greatest hopes and dreams were actually placed in my heart by God. By my Creator. For my benefit! Joy, beauty, love, light, pleasure are all from God for ME.

God doesn't want us to suffer or strive or claw our way through life. No.

God created in YOU the most special, unique individual with your very own talents and traits to bless this world. In God's service.

There is no chain on the door to the Kingdom. We can come and go as we please. That's the thing with Free Will. It's FREE in every way.

**Are you in enough pain yet, to receive the gift that comes when you finally turn your will and your life over to the care of God?**

When I'm following God's Will, doors open, coincidences happen, intentions align. I am suddenly in the flow of life. The Great Spirit begins working through me. I start doing some REAL Good (not the people-pleasing kind). And beauty and joy flow in.

When I finally turned my will over to the care of God, my life changed. And now I see that even in the hardest lessons, there was a gentle guiding hand. "Are you going to see this time, Kimberly? Learn this time? I'm right here – turn to me." I can see that even as my heart was shattering with hopelessness and despair, God was there. Waiting.

**But God did not bring hurt or harm into my life. I DID.**

With my Free Will, I volunteered for my biggest lessons. I ignored the signs and opened the door to my own heartbreaks.

**I was no victim of my circumstances. I was a volunteer.**

All those times when I pushed against all resistance, all odds – when I overworked, overpleased, and overdelivered, enabling and disabling as I went along – I was not doing God's Will! I was doing mine. To get what I wanted, according to MY PLAN – all signs, signals, symptoms be damned.

What a temptation it was, I see now! In service of the Dark Side, was I. Tempted to do good in the wrong directions. To be good or look good in our DOING. It's soooooo easy to miss this point. It's just so subtle, we don't even see it at first. And today I know that when I'm in pain, it's because I am in self-will.

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The Holy Spirit is always with us to keep us on the right path. God never leaves our side in the storm. The question is: Do we seek the security of the shelter God is providing, or do we continue to go it on our own?

Do you really want to go on living in your own personal Hell? Reading books on happiness, striving for some unattainable better place or state of mind? The continual drive for more, better?

It's funny: When we don't take the time to learn about and accept ourselves and God's Will for us, it's awfully easy to find fault in others. To be very judgy about how someone else needs to change. To focus on how much their actions or behavior BOTHER us. If only they would follow my lead or do the things I suggest, then everything would be GREAT.

I have found that the more accepting I get of myself – the more I learn about the ME God created – the more accepting I am of others.

I have come to awareness of many of my innate traits – not just the fear of heights. For example, God made me highly intuitive and empathic, which makes me really effective at my job in public relations. BUT, I also need a fair amount of solitude and quiet time, away from anything public or extroverted – just time alone to myself, where I recharge and come back to center.

These are not mutually exclusive traits in me. Both are present in equal measure. When I deny that, I drain myself, and then I'm not in service to *anyone*. Being exhausted, depleted and spent distracts us and diminishes God's Kingdom!

Saying no to overextending myself – the pull of the Dark Side – means I can say yes to what God calls me to, and it allows me to more easily see the temptation that wants to pull me off course – to do “good” in the wrong direction.

Today when I have a busy day, the one thing I don't skip is prayer. Today I schedule my Disciple Band meeting as if it is with my “most important” client. Because, well, it is.

Today I am no longer interested in what my will wants. I only want to do God's Will for me. Because that feels right. It fits like a glove. His yolk is EASY.

**When you make the conscious decision to turn your will and your life over to the care of God, it's the LAST decision you ever have to make.**

Today I know that if I offer myself and my problems to prayer, the answers come. And to my joy and delight, they often come in ways I could never have thought of.

If we build a relationship with God, GOOD ORDERLY DIRECTION flows into our lives. When we turn it over, order is restored. The more I keep my hands off, the better my life becomes. And what a RELIEF! It was exhausting running the show. I had to be so vigilant, to ensure that everyone did what they needed to do – that things were planned for and organized and CONTROLLED.

Of course, that approach never felt right. But I didn't stop to DISCERN why. I just pushed harder.

God wants what's best for each of us. He wants us to be happy, joyous and free. Jesus came to release us from the bondage of THIS world, if only we would follow his way.

**The greatest gift is our Free Will – when we stop and turn and give it back to God.**

And then Grace rushes in. God knows what's in our hearts. And suddenly we find all the love and joy and opportunity we were striving for.

Discernment is the key – the signpost to God's Will for us. Through quiet time, prayer and meditation, I have come to know what God's Will is for me. I feel a certain peace within me, and I know.

To Thine Own Self Be True! How many times have we heard that? This is the weather indicator – the thermometer given to us to help discern God's Will for us. If it's really right for me, it cannot possibly be wrong for someone else. To Thine Own Self Be True. Because you have value. Your heart's desire IS God's Will for you.

And that means taking care of ourselves. No relying, expecting or demanding someone else to do it for us.

When I am filled up, I overflow – to service and to God's Will.

To Thine Own Self Be True – to the gifts God gave me.

My spiritual awakening to God's Will for me is not the exception. It is the rule. The joy, the beauty, the love, serenity and success that have flowed into my life are there for the taking. My experience is not a fluke. It's a promise – to anyone willing to finally turn over their will and receive this gift.

**My experience and relationship with a loving God is the Good News Jesus spoke of.**

God knows you by name. He created you in his image. I know that the love and direction I receive on a daily basis are real, attainable and available to you TOO!

Fear Not.

My experience has been that trusting God brings peace. Relying on my self-will brings pain.

You can trust God. He loves you. He knows you. He made you with a purpose and wants you to be happy, joyous and free.

This, my friends, is Good News.