

**A SERMON GIVEN BY REV. PAUL J. KOTTKE
UNIVERSITY PARK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

Sunday, July 25, 2010

Title: Is God in Control? [Last in a series based on Dr. Timothy Johnson's book *Finding God in the Questions*]

Scripture: Isaiah 46:8-10 and Ephesians 1:3-14

Theme: In order for us to live meaningful lives in the midst of every day uncertainty, it is very important to believe that there is a strategic presence of control. Is this control something that we create in our own lives or is there a deeper, universal presence of control which comes from God?

Over the last five weeks, we have been engaged asking a variety of theological questions based on this book by Dr. Timothy Johnson, *Finding God in the Questions*. This sermon series is built upon the idea that indeed our personal and corporate faith is strengthened by asking questions. This seems to be such a simple statement to make and yet, in many ways, it flies in the face of traditional religion. This is certainly true for mainline Christianity, which has a history of attempting to provide concrete, indisputable answers to any questions. In truth, I am not sure where this discomfort with questions came from with the Christian Church. The New Testament is filled with questions: Jesus' use of parables, His teachings such as the Beatitudes, the events of Holy Week and of Easter Sunday. There is significant variance among the gospel accounts. My guess is that once Christianity became an Empire religion under Constantine, enforced with Roman armies, the faith moved from one comfortable with questions to one that sought institutional control with an insistence on having "correct" answers.

Now I recognize that for many, having clear, specific answers seems to serve them well. But for others, such answers seem to get in the way of a more authentic, credible relationship with God.

For us, taking the risk to ask deep, strategic questions, does not by necessity mean that our

faith will change. We may simply end up re-affirming the basic premises of our established faith. But the difference will be that our faith will be stronger and more able to stand in the "winds of challenges." We do well to also acknowledge that by risking the questions, we may indeed make some major changes in our faith. Some of the premises that we have been holding onto since our young adult or childhood years may indeed give way to doubt. But then if we hold true to the journey, doubt invites the exploration of a new understanding.

So whether one's faith changes or remains basically the same, I am convinced that either way we win. Because in the end, our faith is stronger and more able to be a profound resource for deep, meaningful living.

Dr. Johnson writes, "In my experience, finding God in the questions does not mean finding complete answers. In fact, you may discover that along the path of faith, you pick up more questions than you started with. But you might also discover that you need fewer answers, and those you do find are enough to live on." [p.183]

Clearly, there are an innumerable number of other questions that could be addressed. In fact, I would suggest that such is the journey of our faith as we move throughout our lives. The ultimate purpose of this series is but to wet our

appetite and, if necessary, give permission. We do not need to settle for answers simply because someone in authority has told us that they are the correct answers.

The last question of this series is one that Dr. Johnson addresses toward the end of his book. It is a good one for us to end on because in some ways this question resides at the very core of our faith – Is God in Control?

As I suggested in my Friday email, have you ever wanted to cry out to God, “Who is in control here anyway!?” In those moments when our life is going well, we tend not to worry so much about God’s control because we have a sense that we are capable of controlling our own destiny. But in those times when the “storms of the seas” are at their peak and we are being battered completely, we have a tendency to wonder where God is.

The words of scripture read this morning reflect the understanding that everything is within some aspect God’s master plans. Indeed, it would be almost inconceivable to declare that God was not in control. It is the scriptures that tell us that from chaos came creation [order, seasons, and cycles of life, and finally meaning and purpose] as the movement of God’s spirit and desire.

From Isaiah: “Remember...I am God, and there is no other...declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying ‘My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention.’” [Chapter 46:8-10] A declaration that God’s purpose for the world and for humanity has stood consistently from the beginning of time.

The reading from Ephesians is part of an early creedal statement for Christians: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.” This reading affirms a specifically Christian understanding that we are

participating in a faith for which we have been chosen since before the foundation of the world.

It is also scriptures that remind us that we cannot fully understand the order and meaning of God. At some level, we are asked to simply trust that God is indeed in control. “Now we see in a mirror dimly. Then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” [I Cor 13:12]

Dr. Johnson raises two aspects of this question of God’s control. The first is the aspect of “providence” – the thought that God has arranged the intimate details of each individual’s life, reflecting the words of Ephesians. He writes:

In retrospect, it’s often startling to see how events in our lives that at the time appeared to be totally disconnected seem to have stunning – even spooky – connections. [p. 171]

He goes on to say that perhaps it is not so much that God arranges the details of our lives but that rather when we live by the principles of God over time sacred convergences occur.

Put another way, the many individual choices we make along the way start to build up in a collective direction that can ultimately make a dramatic difference, depending on those individual choices...Even though there may be no immediate consequence of each individual choice we make, there will be an ultimate and cumulative effect from the many choices we make in our lives. We may be rich and famous but unhappy and unfulfilled precisely because we have ended up with what we have been choosing. Similarly when we make choices according to the “will of God”...we are more likely to end up with fewer material rewards but considerably more personal satisfaction and contentment. Because I believe these consequences are built into the way God created this world, I call them

“providential” – intended by God but resulting from our free choices. [p.172-4]

The second aspect of the control of God is evil – Why wouldn’t God prevent meaningless, cruel, and evil events from taking place? As I stated in the Friday email, in the end, we come to realize that if God were firmly in control then there would be no room for us to be in an authentic relationship with God. Because of the relational nature of God, God created a world that has some component of randomness, of risk, of uncertainty precisely so that we would have free will. Simply put, God has given us permission to walk away from God – like the Prodigal Son – in the belief that we will choose relationship over isolation, that we will choose love over hate, that we will choose life abundant rather than the darkness of death. But it is precisely at this point evil can begin to form and take shape for those who would choose the path away from God.

So I find myself torn between the natural desire for a world without suffering, where we would feast forever on a cosmic silver platter, and the present one, where there is at least the possibility of striving to overcome pain and suffering with honest love and real choice. [p.177]

Imagine then a world without risk. Would there not be complete loss of meaning for being alive?

Imagine a world in which God exercises all control over every one of the smallest details. Would there not be the loss of any semblance of the dignity of humanity – that we are called into an authentic relationship with each other, with creation itself, and ultimately with God.

In order for us to live meaningful lives in the midst of everyday uncertainty, it is very important to believe that there is a strategic presence of control. Is this control something that we create in our own lives or is there a

deeper, universal presence of control which comes from God? Perhaps, it is both.

This morning, I was looking at the rose garden by the portico of the church. There is a plaque dedicated to James Parden. Jim died about 15 years ago from cancer. He was in his mid-life, was very successful financier, and developed cancer. After treatment, the cancer went into remission. Jim felt that God had cured him. After a few years, the cancer resurfaced but Jim never let go of the notion that God had healed him. Even in his final week of life, when he knew that he would die, he stated almost with his last breath that God was good, and that God had healed him. On the plaque in Jim’s memory are these words, “God is Faithful.” And is that not perhaps more the awareness for us – not to seek out the ways that God is in control – but to become more aware of the ways that God is faithful? That we are able to live trusting in God’s faithfulness? That when we stumble, God is there to pick us up? When we have success, God is there to celebrate with us. And when our time comes to move beyond this life, God is there to declare “Well, done, good and faithful servant.”

I close this sermon series with a quote attributed to the 19th century poet and spiritual writer Rainer Maria Rilke. This quote was given to me by Joanne Johnson [As an aside, I always value when parishioners pass onto me some of their favorite material. In this way, these sermons become truly community property.]

I beg...to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer...