

Trinity United Methodist Church

May 10, 2020

“Recalculating”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Welcome and Prayer

It's a joy to welcome you to worship today. We're glad that you have chosen to worship with us.

As we turn to God in prayer this morning, I want to address in prayer an event that has happened in Georgia back in February that has recently come to light, which you have probably seen on the news and in our social media feeds. A young man by the name of Ahmaud Arbery was jogging and was gunned down by two white individuals who at least should have called the police on him if they truly believed that he was suspicious, but certainly and indeed had no right to take this young man's life. This is yet another episode in our country's continued issues around race. And before you start jumping on me, let me just say that the bottom line is that we do not know what it is like, truly, to walk in another's shoes, at least until we have experienced some of what it's like to walk in their shoes through common experiences. And bottom line is, we who are not persons of color don't begin to know what it's like to have someone judge you based simply on your appearance, much less the color of your skin. And so I invite you to help this be an opportunity to at least develop more understanding around these long-systemic issues that we have around race in our country, and even possibly to get more involved in finding solutions and ways in which we can better understand one another, walk a mile in one another's shoes, at least to develop more empathy for each other, and to work toward more understanding and to work toward that day when these issues are no more. So it's in that vein that I invite you to join me in prayer.

God, we pray for Ahmaud and his family. We pray that you would comfort them in their grief and in their incredibly tragic loss. We pray for all families of color, all parents of children of color who have thought that “that could be my boy...that could be my girl.” All parents who are having to address this matter with their children in a way of, “Hey, you've got to even be careful when you're out exercising now.” Forgive us for our knee-jerk reactions, especially when they are reactions of indifference. Lord, help us to develop more empathy for one another. Help us to seek not to be understood, but help us seek to understand. Indeed, in that spirit, make us all instruments of your peace. Forgive us for all the many ways in which we judge one another, in which we divide

ourselves one against the other. Take away all of the “-isms” that seek to separate us from one another in this country and in our world. Work your spirit of love and of grace in each of us such that our first inclination toward one another is complete and total love and not fear. And until that day when your kingdom is fully realized and all of these things for which we pray are fully realized, make us instruments of your peace indeed, the agents of your grace and your love in all of our interactions with each other. And help us each to do what we can do to be bearers of Christ, your image here in our world, and to be bearers of your kingdom.

For all these things and more, we pray in the name of the Prince of Peace, who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Scripture: James 4:13-16 (NLT)

13 Look here, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.” 14 How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it’s here a little while, then it’s gone. 15 What you ought to say is, “If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.” 16 Otherwise you are boasting about your own pretentious plans, and all such boasting is evil.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

I remember when I got my first GPS device. I believe it was a Garmin device. This was before GPS got integrated with our cell phones, so it sat up on the dash and it was just a GPS device. But as you do with GPS these days, you put in your destination, you hit “Go,” and it gives you directions of how to get there. But you remember particularly those early GPS devices, that when you would veer from the course to which it was telling you to go, it would say, “*Recalculating.*” And I don’t know about you, but I remember the woman’s voice—it was particularly the woman’s voice I remember on the

Garmin—the first couple of times it would say “recalculating,” but the more that you veered off course and it had to continue recalculating, and it would tell you each time, “recalculating,” “recalculating”...Didn’t it seem like the more times she said that, after a few times it seemed that she was getting really annoyed at that? “Recalculating.” “*Recalculating.*” It was the same each time, of course, but it just sounded a little like the device was a little more annoyed each and every time.

Recalculating is the name of our new sermon series that I’ll be sharing with you over the next few weeks. And if there was ever a time in which we need to calculate, it is indeed now. We had to do a whole bunch of recalculating as our society ground to a halt very quickly, almost literally overnight, as things began to change literally overnight there for that week back in mid-March. I will always remember that week in my life and in our lives together. And it seems like now, just as maybe we’re getting used to this stay-at-home stuff, our state governments and so forth are talking about ways in which we might begin to reopen and in which we might begin to return to somewhat of life as we once knew it.

We need to recalculate on many levels, however, both in terms of how we begin to interact with people beyond our own households; how we might begin to come back and worship in person in church—might. Plans are in the works, and continue to pray about that. Just *everything* is this opportunity to recalculate, and not just in negative ways of, “Oh, we can’t do it like we used to,” but hey, we get this opportunity to really rethink some things and do some things in some new and different and maybe even improved ways than we did things before the stay-at-home orders.

It’s a whole new world that is before us. I’ve read many reports online here lately of how this is going to be like a post-9/11 world, if you remember. I remember as a kid when my uncle would fly out to different trainings. My aunt and I used to be able to go right up to the window right by the gate where he boarded the plane, and we used to watch the plane taxi off and then I’d run to a different spot in the airport to be able to watch the plane take off. After 9/11, you definitely couldn’t do that type of thing any more.

So we’re in this completely new world in which we find ourselves. I’ve been saying to friends and to myself, this COVID-19 situation is paradigm-shifting. Things are going to look very different from here on out, and it’s up to us to figure out how those things will look moving forward. We need to recalculate. Because forget just driving off the path; the path that we were on beforehand really isn’t there anymore. So we need to recalculate the route to wherever it is that we’re going. The question is, where do we begin?

And I think that's a very important question for us as followers of Jesus. As people of Christian faith. Because you see, what James highlights for us today is that as people of faith, we don't get to just chart our own course and go however we want all willy-nilly. For sure, there have been ages and ages of people of Christian faith who will come to church on Sunday morning but then live their lives Monday through Saturday however they doggone well please. That's not really what following Jesus means.

So as we seek to really live out our discipleship each and every day, each and every moment, we have this built-in guidance system, don't we? We have this built-in GPS, and it's called God. It's the Holy Spirit that guides our decisions, that can guide our steps. Proverbs talks about how we can make our own plans, but it's the Lord who determines our steps.

God's sovereignty is a theme in the book of James, and if you read through the Book of James, it can read a bit like a downer. He's very, "Hey, don't be doing this. Do *this* instead." And there is great hope in what he says to do. But there is so much, "Don't be doing this," and "don't be doing that," and so forth. And especially when we're already feeling a bit beat up and down because of whatever current situations we're in, that can drive us down a bit further, so I want us to get the bigger picture of what James is talking about here. God is sovereign. God is large and in charge. God has a plan. And His plan is clearly laid out in scripture to make us as His own people, to live in fellowship with us. When sin entered that picture and changed that plan slightly, God's plan since then has been how to bring us back into perfect fellowship with Him, first through the law, then through the prophets, then through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, ultimately. And even then, ultimately, for the purpose of the new heavens and the new earth in which we will all once again live in perfect fellowship with God and with all the saints in glory. If we stop short of that and we get just to living with Jesus and going to heaven when we die, we sell ourselves short. The ultimate plan is to get us all back together with God as He intended in the very beginning. And in that, to renew all of creation with us.

And so that is God's ultimate plan for everybody, for indeed the whole entire world. But as subplots to that larger plan, He's got a plan for each of us, as well. He created us with a purpose. And rawly speaking, that is for us who are made in His image, in which we were created, to reflect His grace and His goodness, His mercy, His love, His forgiveness, into all the world around us. That part of the world which we encounter day by day.

And then there are subplots of that plan. For some of us, that plan was evidently to become a pastor and a preacher. For some of you, that plan might have been to become an educator. For some of you, that plan might have been to raise a family and stay at home and do so. For others, it might have been to excel in a particular career

path. There are all kinds of these subplot plans that ultimately feed into God's overarching plan--the redemption of the world.

So James highlights this: That God is ultimately in charge. That God is sovereign. So any time that we get too big for our britches, so to say, and we say, like those in verse 13, "Today or tomorrow, we're going to a certain town and we will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit." Now again, as I pointed out last week in the end of our sermon series on anxiety, having a plan is important. Planning for the future is important. And there's nothing inherently wrong with making a plan in and of itself. The problem is when we put our plan before God's plan. When we boast in our plan above God's plan. When we get more caught up in "Ha! Look at me and what I'm going to do!" versus "Wow, look at God and what I pray God will do through me." You see the difference there? You hear the difference there?

And so James points out that we are flat out arrogant to think that we can just make up our own plans, especially when they have nothing in common with God's plan. Now, at the same time, let me offer another caveat for you: As we seek to discern God's plan, it's helpful to have other Christian people around us, brothers and sisters that we trust, to help us to discern that plan. I'm going to try to circle back to that in a minute.

But you see, you look at all the successful people in the world around us, and they've got a plan that they seem to execute. You might say, "What's wrong with having our plan, and we execute it, and maybe we've been to business school and we've got a rock-solid, airtight business plan, and we're going to be as rich as Jeff Bezos," the CEO of Amazon. Or "We're going to be as rich as Bill Gates." And what's wrong with that? It worked for them. But remember: It worked for them, but they don't espouse to be people of deep Christian faith. We do. I *hope* we do.

So James is pointing out here that we're to be different. That as we make our plans, as we recalculate and we make our plans moving forward from here, we have to remember: God's got a plan, and we've got to tune in to that plan. How do we do that?

Now, again, I'm going to sound like a broken record, because I've been saying this over and over and over and over again. So let me rephrase it as a question: How's your prayer life? How are you doing at reading scripture? What's the last thing you heard God say to you through scripture? If there's one thing that this COVID situation has shown us—it's kind of like the Maury Povich memes on Facebook. It says, "You said the stay-at-home orders would be such a wonderful opportunity to love on your children more and enjoy their presence with you. Quarantine determined that was a lie." Right? Have you seen those memes? Maybe I should make one that says, "You said this quarantine situation would give you more time to pray and to read your scripture. This time determined that's a lie." Is that the case? I hope not.

We've got to tune in to God's plan. I was reminded again of an illustration; I've used it before. Nowadays, when it comes to tuning in to a TV station, we just use our remote. We go to the guide and we flip down to choose whatever we want to watch, we press "Select," and boom, it's there. Right? Easy as that. Or we go to our favorite streaming service—Netflix, Hulu, Disney Plus, whatever the case might be. We find whatever it is we want to watch—that episode of *The Office* that we've watched ten zillion times before, maybe that episode of *Tiger King* to see if Carole Baskin really did kill her husband—and we just hit "Select." And boom, we're watching some sort of craziness like that. When we get in the car and we want to tune in to a radio station, we just hit the preset. Number 1 might be 105.3; number 2 might be 106.9; number 3 might be 97.3—can you tell what I listen to on the radio? Or we pull up our favorite music app on our phone that's connected to the car and we scroll through Spotify and we find a playlist that we want or we find a song that we want and we just hit it, and easy as that.

Oh, if tuning in to God's voice was as easy as pushing a button! It's not, though, is it? We've got to dial it in like in the old days, when you had to carefully turn the tuning knob on the dash or on the stereo or whatever the case might be and get it to where you heard just a tad bit of static or no static to really adjust it. And then you might turn the corner and—pfft—there's some static again, and you have to readjust it a little bit. Or to get the TV station to come in clear, you actually had to get up and walk across the room—I remember this at my grandfather's house—and adjust the rabbit ears on the top of the TV and then go back and get a clear picture and then go back and sit down. And depending on how close somebody was sitting to the TV, if they got up and moved, it might distort the picture all over again, and you had to constantly, it seemed, readjust it to get the clear picture and clear sound.

It takes at least that much work to really tune in to the voice of God. To really tune in to God's plan. And that's partially why James says, "What you ought to say is, 'If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.'" I learned that growing up as, "Lord willing and the creek don't rise." Right? "I'll see you next time, 'Lord willing and the creek don't rise.'"

But James also gives a very stern warning. He says, "Otherwise you are boasting about your own pretentious plans, and all such boasting is evil." And so I've had people ask: "What if I'm more wrapped up in my plans and not in God's plan?" And, "How can I make sure that I'm in God's will?"

Well, friends, let me echo probably what every single pastor would say: That we *wish* more people would have that level of concern to discern God's will. Because if you're concerned about it, don't worry, friends. You're on the right path. Keep seeking His will, is the bottom line of what we have to do.

When I was a senior at Virginia Tech, the football team was sent to the Diamond Walnut Bowl in San Francisco, California. I believe it was the *only* Diamond Walnut Bowl played in San Francisco. But anyway, being I'm an only child, one of the benefits is that my family has been able to have opportunities that larger families haven't, so I called Mom and Dad. I was in the Marching Virginians, the marching band, and we found out that they were only going to take 100 people out of the 330-strong member band, being that it was a cross-country trip. So I called Mom and Dad and said, "Hey, for Christmas this year—it's my senior year—let's the three of us go to San Francisco for the Bowl trip together. And I'll give my spot in the band to somebody else and let somebody else go." So that's what we ended up doing. The great part was that, while all my friends were stuck in practice during the day, I got to go tour San Francisco and Napa Wine Country and all that with my parents, and then we stayed in the same hotel that the band stayed in, so at night Mom and Dad went to bed and I got to go out with my friends. But I digress a little bit.

Mom and Dad and I were touring around San Francisco. We had gotten one of the self-guided tour maps. Again, this was before the days of GPS. So Mom was driving our rental car. I was navigating in the passenger seat. Dad was in the back seat (maybe that's why he had heart issues after that—I don't know). Anyway...We were going along, we had been out all over town during the day. We were tired, getting ready to go back to the hotel for a nap before dinner. So I'm using this map, navigating us back to the hotel, when all of a sudden we're at a stoplight and to the left is one of those San Francisco streets that just goes nearly straight up at a very steep incline. And Mom goes, "Oh! That looks fun!" And vroom, we go up that hill. Dad and I both holler out, "What in the (blank) are you doing? And in exasperation, being that she was *not* following my directions, I just completely threw the map and it landed in the back seat somewhere beside Dad as I threw it in exasperation.

Friends, when we decide to go off the course that God has for us, thank God that He doesn't throw the map in exasperation and give up on us. God doesn't get sassy with us when He has to recalculate to bring us back to the path that He has for us. Instead, God is ever patient with us, to lead us, to guide us in the way He would have us to go.

So as we begin to recalculate yet again where we go from here, let us be ever mindful as people of Christian faith of the constant recalculating we need to do internally as well. And as we make our plans for the future, whatever that future holds, whatever that future looks like, let's make sure we pray about it, search God's Word for guidance, and continue to recalculate internally as well. And let us always give thanks for the opportunity that God gives us to do so.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Questions for Discipleship

1. What is one thing that stood out to you from this week's message?
2. Sum up God's will for your life in as few as words as possible. Now give your rationale.
3. Share a time when you were convinced of being in God's will only to learn differently. What did you learn from that experience?
4. What is the thing you find most difficult thing to trust God with? Why?