

“I’ve got to make a decision y’all, and I don’t know what to do.” It was Tuesday morning, the day of our weekly rounds at the state psychiatric hospital where I served 11 years ago. Graduation from divinity school was a month and a half away, and I had a choice to make. I didn’t know what to do though so I brought my uncertainty up to my chaplain colleagues. In late February I tentatively accepted an invitation to complete a year-long chaplain residency at the nearby university hospital. Two months later I received an offer to enter a graduate program at the College of William & Mary studying religion in American history. As one colleague said to me, “It’s a win-win situation. Either way you’ll be doing something you’ll love, right? People would kill for that.” I knew he was right, but that did not make the decision any easier. I wanted to be doing the “right” thing. Isn’t that what we all want? We want to know that we won’t be left destitute or alone. We want clearly defined expectations and guidelines for what will work and won’t. We want signs that we’re on the right path.

Another colleague suggested that I map out the pros and cons of each option, which I already been doing in my head for the past 72 hours to no avail. With their help though, I made a list on the chalkboard. The pros for taking the chaplaincy position were much more logical: I wouldn’t have to move. I’d have a steady income and health insurance. I’d be close to friends. I’d get more experience doing something I knew I loved, and I could continue to ordination process uninterrupted. Clearly, this was the logical choice and the safest one.

Even still, I wasn’t settled. I finally looked over at Marian, who had more than 25 years of chaplaincy under her belt and asked her: “How can I *really* know for sure that I am doing the right thing? How do I know this is God’s will for me?”

“Well,” she said, “I don’t think it makes a difference which one chose. God will be present in both places, right? God can work through both situations then. I think the better question to ask is where you think you can flourish the most? What would bring you joy?”

It was such a perfect answer that I couldn’t stand it. Feelings are as fickle as the wind. I wanted as close to a guarantee as possible that all my hard work and time were going to amount to something meaningful and promising. I wanted assurance that there would be as little hardship and as most comfort as possible. Society’s quest for “fairness” have

convinced us that if we cross our t's and dot our i's, everything will be just fine. Even when we know that we can't control things we sure try to anyway, which can cause us to fall into this hidden yet voracious trap of believing that if we do our part then God will then God's part as though we have a contractual relationship based on what we can offer one another. But the apostle Paul makes it clear that's not how discipleship and faithfulness work. We can't work our way to a secure and easy future. What we can do though is trust that God is present whichever way we go and working in us, because of us, and in spite of us when need be. When Paul writes that all things work together for the good of those who love God, it's not good as we might want to think: certainty about the future, material wealth, a conflict-free relationship, an easy life. It's also not about suffering so that God can teach us a lesson. God is not precarious that way. God's dream is that we will become more like Christ no matter where we are. God's will is for us to know we are made in God's image and to live that way—with all the freedom and responsibility that brings. Christianity is not a fool-proof plan for success, it's a call to faithfulness and trust. Just as I could not find anything about deciding between chaplaincy or the unknown, you will not find in the Bible specific instructions about whether to have another child, take a certain job, retire at a certain time or whether to have that surgery or undergo that treatment. Does that mean Scripture is useless? No, Scripture and prayer are not simply to get what we want. They are invitations step back and see how God has worked throughout time. Through them we learn how to invite God in to our lives so that God can shape us into the person God knows we are and can be. In other words, they are invitations to confession, mercy, and grace. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that "God's will for [the people in the Bible] did not come to them in a printed manual, with specific answers to be found on page 536, paragraph 5, line 14. God's will for them, which was [God's] love for them, are in the form of a living relationship that they were free to embrace or flee...[and] God comes to us in the same way."¹

The truth of the matter is I wanted to flee from the unknown of God into what seemed like the certainty of good things. But no matter where we go God is there. Nothing can keep us from the love of God—a love that went so far as to become human and die so that anything that threatens to define and destroy us simply can't. Today, will you wrestle with the question of what it might mean for you to live a life of holy surrender and trust rather than one that relies so much on maintaining a certain lifestyle? Such questions don't lend themselves to easy answers, but they shift the focus from maintenance to transformation and re-creation.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings* (Boston: Cowley, 1998), 108-9.

In the end, I said “no” to the hospital and “yes” to more study. It was nothing like I had planned or imagined. There were hardships and regrets, but there were blessings I could not have imagined: godchildren, travel, and a world of discovery that still calls to me. It is calling out to you, too. There is no mere right or wrong, “there’s only sacred ground,” as writer Anne Lamott says. “The only holy place is [the place] we are” now, for that is where God is.² Nothing can keep you from the love that steadies and upholds you. So, if you stand in a whirlpool of questions and doubt today, don’t despair that you have no answer. *God loves you. Is with you. Will be with you.*

If darkness and fear overwhelm you and you don’t know what to say, you need not say anything. *The Spirit knows. Is with you. Will be with you.*

Death. Illness. Foreclosure. Broken Relationship. Despair. Addiction. Guilt. It does not matter—you are still an heir to the promises of God. Nothing you have done or will do will cause God to abandon or leave you. *Nothing* is beyond God’s saving grace.

Nothing can keep you from the love of God.

Nothing can keep God from having the final say.

Nothing.

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

So, what then shall we say to these things?

Nothing. Nothing at all.

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² Anne Lamott, *Imperfect Birds* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010).