Sermon for November 8, 2026
"The Will of God in a Nutshell”

Matthew 22:34-40

What is the meaning of life? You have to answer the question. Not out loud, but in your heart. If you don't answer the question, it will be answered for you. The answer to this question determines how you live your life or even if you live it. If you think life is something you endure until you die, then that is how you will live. You will endure your existence until you die. If you think life is a search for light and hope, then you will live and find light and hope. Your answer to the meaning of life is your reason for getting out of bed in the morning. If you got out of bed this morning, then you have an answer whether you have put it into words or not. If you get out of bed just to avoid the pain and trouble of losing your job or displeasing your family, then that will define your existence. You will live for that purpose alone, but if you get out of bed each day to make a difference in the world, then that is the purpose you will serve no matter what the tasks of that day are.

What is the meaning of life? The world has a lot of answers if you don't already have one. It could be to keep up with the Joneses. Bumper stickers proclaim: "The one who dies with the most toys wins!" or "Go for the Gusto."

When we Christians define the meaning of life, we necessarily talk about the will of God. God is the one who created us and ordered the universe. So, God is the one capable of defining and determining our purpose for living. As a result, we ask "What is God's will for my life," and our answer determines how we live our lives.

We must be careful about the answers we accept to that question. Those who murdered Muslims during the crusades and those who tortured Jews during the inquisitions thought they were doing God's will. Many others gave their lives for justice and peace and bread for the poor. The difference between these groups was their definition of God's will and hence their reason for living. One group lived to kill and destroy; the other to love and heal.

Back in Jesus' day there were two answers to this question of God's will supplied by the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Sadducees took the conservative approach. They said that if it isn't in the Laws of Moses it doesn't matter. The result was that they preserved the message that came down to them, but they were too rigid and couldn't adapt to change. They didn't even consider the words of prophets like Amos and Isaiah to be binding. Even that approach left them with 613 laws to remember and follow every day to do God's will. If you asked one of them what the will of God was, they would say, “Here are 613 laws: memorize them.”

The other group, the Pharisees, took a different approach. So that they would not become too rigid like the Sadducees, they were constantly interpreting the law. To adapt to new situations, they were constantly adding new laws to the laws of Moses. These new laws were meant to fill in the gaps left by those 613 laws. The result was that their understanding of the will of God was even more complex than the Sadducees. If you had asked one of them what the will of God was, they would have said, "Here memorize these 613 laws and this library of commentaries on those laws.”

Where did this leave the common people? A scribe had time to do all that studying. What about a fisherman or a homemaker or a farmer? How were they supposed to do God's will and take care of their families? They didn't have the time or the resources to learn all those laws.

I know Jesus saw the problem with all this. He grew up in a carpenter's home after all. He had probably seen Mary and Joseph, faithful servants of God, wrestle with this very problem, and so from the beginning of his ministry he was on a collision course with the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

At the beginning of our lesson for today, Jesus has already silenced the Sadducees, the conservatives. I imagine that the Pharisees, the liberals, felt threatened, or maybe they thought they could get Jesus on their side. Jesus had shown himself better than their opponents the Sadducees. The Pharisees may have been afraid he would do the same to them if they couldn't get him in their camp. So, they decided to try to catch him off balance. They got someone who knew the laws of Moses better than anyone else and they asked this cleaver guy to devise a question to trip Jesus up. This lawyer came up with a real doozie too. It was, "Of all the laws, which is the greatest?" You see everybody had their favorite law and if Jesus didn't pick it, they would be offended. They could also get him for excluding all the others and say he was against all the laws save the one he picked. This put Jesus in an awkward place: He could have struck out at the Pharisees in anger, but instead he turned it to his advantage.

Jesus answered and said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. The second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments rests all the law and the prophets."

This was radical stuff. It revolutionized the whole "Will of God" industry! You know how miniaturization has revolutionized the electronics industry. What used to take a room full of vacuum tubes can now be put on a computer chip. The ability to perform complex mathematic calculations now fits in the palm of your hand or in your shirt pocket.

That is what Jesus did to the will of God. He took volumes and volumes of law and commentary and put it in a few simple words. He put the will of the Almighty God of the universe in a nutshell that you can carry around and look at any time. This teaching could put the Pharisees and Sadducees out of business. Any farmer or homemaker could learn that and know how to do the will of God. They wouldn't need to go to the Sadducees and Pharisees anymore to get them to explain what God's will was.

It was ingenious because it didn't exclude all the other laws that God had given to the people. Instead, it summed them up. This double commandment was the law and the prophets in a nutshell. "The Law" referred to the books of Moses and "The prophets" to the rest of the Old Testament. The whole kit and caboodle in condensed form.

What is the meaning of life? What is your reason for living? Is it to love God and love your neighbor? Or is it merely to avoid trouble and pain? Why did you get out of bed and come to church this morning? Was it out of a sense of duty - to get someone or something off your back? Or was it to worship and enjoy the presence of God?

The meaning of life is quite simple: love God and your neighbor. You can try to serve another purpose if you want, but your meaning of life will not give your life any meaning. The only way to find true meaning and abundant life is to make God's definition of the meaning to existence your own.

You have to decide that you will live to glorify God and love your neighbor. It is a conscious commitment that all you do will be in service to God and others. Why do you get up in the morning? - To love God and my neighbors. Why do you go to work or go about your daily tasks? - To love God and my neighbor. If loving God and your neighbor is your reason for living, then your life will have meaning. God's love will define your actions, and his light and hope will fill your life.

If you don't have an answer to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" you had better find one and fast. Because you will wake up tomorrow and one will be forced on you whether you like it or not. I offer you God's answer: "Love God and your neighbor." This is the only meaning of life that will really give your life meaning.