

Sermon: Like Clockwork
Scripture: Psalm 139 and Ephesians 2
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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You know how TV shows in a series often begin with the phrase “Previously on...” and then they give a 30 second encapsulation of the scenes that lead up to the current episode... Well, here’s a one sentence “previously on” for our Reformation fall worship series at First Congregational: Martin Luther thumbed his nose at the authority Popes and called all believers priests, encouraging the people with the help of the printing press to read the scripture themselves and proclaimed that God’s grace is the only thing that can save us and God’s grace lone, while a few decades later John Calvin came on the scene calling all men asses and God sovereign and the reformers excused themselves from the Church’s altar and served holy communion from the table with people in their pews...which bring us up to the theme for this morning...predestination.

It’s a theme that Calvin and other reformers felt compelled to articulate - since God is absolutely Sovereign nothing happens without God’s knowledge and power and fore-ordained intention. If God is all-powerful then how could anything happen without it being God’s will and purpose. And if the scriptures, which have total authority here, remember, suggest that God knows us from the beginning and through to the end – like the Psalm that Kyle and Elizabeth just read – and that Gentiles were predestined to be received into the covenant with Israel, as Paul’s letter to the Ephesians suggests, and if the scriptures also suggests that at the end of it all some people are saved and others damned, then by golly God must pre-ordain some to be saved. And if God ordains some to be saved then God

determines that others will be damned and that is basically the theory of predestination.

I can't say I love the impression of God that such a theology leaves which is one reason I align myself with progressive Christian churches and denominations, like our own UCC. We tend not to lay out strict theological claims for our membership but regarding eschatology – meaning what we believe about the ultimate destiny of humankind we progressive Christians at the very least leave that final judgment to God and Her graciousness or we would outright proclaim a theology of universal salvation, that no one in fact, in the end, will be able to resist the forgiveness, love, and salvation of God. That theology though has its own harrowing ramifications, though, as that would mean Hitler and Stephen Paddock, for instance, would in the end enjoy eternal bliss.

And such a theology, we have to understand, is a departure from much of traditional reformed Christian theology which held to the absolute authority of scripture and the Bible does have reference to salvation and damnation – I'd say it's not as central as our conservative Christian brothers and sisters seem to hold that it is but it's in there. And The Reformers placed our eternal destiny front and center to their theology and understanding of human relationship with the divine. Remember the selling of indulgences was the church's practice of manipulating people into giving money to the church by suggesting that they could buy loved one's passage through purgatory to heaven. The 16th century reformers were not challenging the notion of heaven and hell, only the notion that the church had any business administering who was in and out and in between.

This is why Calvin felt so compelled to establish this principle of predestination because, think about it, if everything is pre-ordained by God then the church has no power and no business suggesting that they can

mediate or mitigate ultimate things. If it's all pre-ordained, pre-determined, predestined, then the church is forced out of the business they were getting rich off of.

So Calvin said yes, God gave us free will within the temporal realm but ultimately God knows and directs where our lives are going in the end, we have nothing to do with that. But what does that mean for our own free will and determination of our lives? How much do we actually determine in our lives and how much are we a product of our nature and our nurture? We tend to assume, especially in our freedom loving country, that we are totally free to do and be what we want but is that true? I found it interesting that our daughter, Augusta Claire, has been reading in her English class during this Las Vegas tragedy, the 1960's novel *A Clockwork Orange* where the protagonist, Alex, is this extremely violent character who thrives on the violence he does to others and who, during his incarceration, is the subject of a government experiment to rehabilitate him by showing him violent images and making him physically sick with a drug. Once he's out, the thoughts and desire for violence still come but they are accompanied by nausea, which curbs his behavior... at least for a time. So is he free or is he determined. Is his predilection for violence built into him or learned and can he help that this brings him satisfaction? Are we determined like wound up clockwork or are we free to truly choose our own course?

And then there's this to complicate matters: A few years ago I heard a fascinating interview that Terri Gross did with a criminologist named Adrian Raine who has been studying the brains of murderers, criminals and psychopaths. He has a particular interest in the nature, physiological side of the nature-nurture debate to understand more fully why people do what they do. And what Raine has found in his studies is that the brains of many of those locked away for life or awaiting the death penalty for awful crimes

simply do not function as well as the majority of ours do. The studies show that the frontal lobe of their brains, the part that is mostly responsible for arresting our impulsive behavior, is simply underactive. In the case of psychopaths, their amygdala, that part of the brain responsible for emotions and empathy, is smaller and in some cases dramatically shriveled. It's very possible that Stephen Paddock, who committed the atrocities in Las Vegas this week, has a shriveled amygdala, that part of the healthy brain that for many of us simply wouldn't allow us to stomach such an act. Raine does not deny that nurture and free will plays a part in what people do, but only that many of the hardened criminals in our prison systems, those really "wretched" sinners who must be damned to hell for what they do, some might say, actually have brain deficits as well as in many cases the kind of upbringings that seriously stack the cards against them being something, anything, different.

Think about that for a moment. Some of those people that we can easily write off as "bad" people; those criminals who have done horrible things, ruined others' lives, and reaped the consequences, their brains don't function as well as ours do. Those who make us feel a whole lot better about ourselves because "at least we are not like them", who knows what divine judgment makes of what they were given and how they responded... and for that matter, who knows about us in that equation too. Are we more like clockwork than we think or are we truly free to set our course in light of the way our brains work and the condition of our souls? Do we sit here with successful jobs and families enjoying the benefits of this society because we earned it all and deserve it all or do our relatively healthy brains play a part and the fact that we grew up in well-to-do families and had basically loving parents? And does that other person who sits in a 6 by 8 foot prison cell year after year because of a violent crime deserve where he

or she has landed, does that truly represent their worth or is his brain unhealthy, or did her abusive impoverished upbringing not give her much of a chance in the first place? Is Stephen Paddock pure evil because of what he did last week and what about the goodness he's done in his life up to that point which his brother swore was there? And if we've basically lived as good people, isn't it possible that we have done things that unbeknownst to us have had evil consequences and don't we participate and accept a social system that can be terribly unjust and so might we have blood on our hands as well?

In the face of such questions, the mystery of our human lives seems too deep to unravel. John Calvin and many of the reformers unraveled it by handing it all over to God and said it has all been predestined anyway. Is that too simplistic and a cop out or is there something there in handing it all over to God and acknowledging how severely limited our own capacity to know – and judge - truly is. Cause if we can't know then how can we possibly judge another as unworthy or this person as worthy. This must be something of why Jesus taught forgiveness and compassion, because in his knowing, in his fully human, fully divine consciousness, he was well aware that things were rarely as they seemed, which is why in the Gospels he seems to even favor the despicable ones around him and confront and provoke the good and upstanding citizens of his day.

In the face of the mystery and confusion of it all by far it seems the best policy is compassion and compassion in spades. Knowing how little we know, we must err on the side of forgiveness. Knowing how much we benefit in our lives from those who give us the benefit of the doubt, we must offer the same to others. With Jesus as our Lord and God holding our destiny, we must -in gratitude- walk through this world with compassion.