

RETURN OF THE ETHICAL WILL

Sermon by Reverend Brad Greeley
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Do you have a *will*? We know we should – our culture and experience tell us that. As an affluent and acquisitive lot, we want and have *lots* of “things.” And experience has shown us how important it is to have some order in *transferring* these things. When death necessitates the transfer, feelings can get in the way of *orderly* distribution. So we create a will that defines the disposal of our things when we die. This is the kind of will deemed most important by most people. But *is* it?

In recent years, we have discovered the need for a second kind of will, a “living” will. We need, in the high tech era, to direct our own dying in a sensible way. Thus, many of us (I hope all of you) have Living Wills that direct a designated person to help us die in simple dignity *if* we cannot make those decisions ourselves. Isn't that as important as distributing your “*things*”?

There is yet another kind of will. I believe it to be more crucial to the next generations than the others, by far. I remember when my wife Catherine and I had our first chance to travel abroad. It was after our children were old enough to be left at home with their grandparents (and the grandparents still young enough to want to come and care for them for a week). We had a great time making all the plans. But we kept putting off the hardest issue of all: If the *unthinkable* should happen, who did we want to *raise* our children? We did a lot of soul searching about that and finally named a couple IN OUR WILLS whom we believed would be most likely to raise our children with the values we held most important. Wills have expressed such concerns and sometimes in some detail. A will written by a rabbi at the beginning of this century is typical:

*The small savings which I leave will come to you only after the death of [your] mother...
The heritage which is already yours is a good name and as good an education as I could
afford to give.*

Remain strictly honest, truthful, industrious and frugal.

Throw your whole energy into the pursuance of the calling you have chosen.

*Serve the Lord and keep Him always before you, toward [people] be amiable,
accommodating and modest, and you will fare well even without riches.*

My last word to you is: Honor your mother.

Help her bear her dreary widowhood.

Leave her undisturbed in the use of the small estate, and assist if there should be want.

Farewell, wife and children.

The *unusual* part of this will, the part I want to commend to you this morning, is the middle section, the *nonphysical* things of value which the rabbi is leaving his loved ones. That is called an “ethical will.” Today, I want to remind you of an “ethical will,” a means to bring *balance* to our thinking and “willing” about our possessions *and* our *lives*. The idea of an ethical will comes to us from ancient Judaism. The wills I quote are from the book this morning’s reading came from (*So That Your Values Live On – Ethical Wills and how to prepare them* edited by Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer) and from another book entitled *About Mourning* by Sabine Weizman and Phyllis Kamm.

Weizman and Kamm define an ethical will as “a letter left behind for loved ones which shares *wisdom* and *feelings*, makes requests, and gives advice.” Such letters, they say, “often crystallize the meaning of the life of the writer and transmit the hope that the writer’s values will be preserved and continued through the heirs. It is a *summary* of what the writer has *learned* from life and what the writer *wants* most for his/her loved ones.” In this affluent, materialistic society, the ethical will gets right to the issue and offers some redress for those who hold their *values* to be at least as important as their “things.”

The Old Testament includes a number of examples of these wills. David’s advice to his son Solomon is one of the best. One of the first examples of an actual dated will of this type was made in Spain in 1090 CE. It reminds us of the extraordinary importance of *books* in those days:

Make thy books, thy companions, let thy cases and shelves by thy pleasure grounds and gardens.

Bask in their paradise, gather their fruit, pluck their roses, take their spices and their myrrh.

If thy soul be satiate and weary, change from garden to garden, from furrow to furrow, from prospect to prospect.

Then will thy soul be filled with delight!

Never refuse to lend books to anyone who has not the means to purchase books for himself (sic), but only act thus to those who can be trusted to return the volumes.

Behold a small cloud rising from the sea of science and learning, carried by the breeze of wisdom and understanding.

Some *practical* advice (I wish I’d learn only to lend to those who returned books), some *shared* wisdom, and some *mystical* direction. How much more significant a legacy than the part of his will which said who got which book. One of the best wills I’ve read in this contemporary one written by American humorist and humanist Sam Levenson:

I leave you my unpaid debts. They are my greatest assets. Everything I own, I owe.

1. To America I owe a debt for the opportunity it gave me to be free and to be me.

2. To my parents I owe America. They gave it to me and I leave it with you. Take good care of it.

3. *To the biblical tradition I owe the belief that [one] does not live by bread alone, nor do [we] live alone at all. This is also the democratic tradition. Preserve it.*

4. *To the six million of my people and to the 30 million other humans who died because of man's inhumanity to man, I owe a vow that it must never happen again.*

5. *I leave you not everything I never had, but everything I had in my lifetime: good family, respect for learning, compassion for my fellow [human beings] and some four-letter words for all occasions: words like help, give, care, feel and love.*

Love, my dear grandchildren, is easier to recommend than to define.

I can tell you only that like those who came before you, you will surely know when love ain't; you will also know when mercy ain't and brotherhood ain't.

The millennium will come when all the "ain'ts" shall have become "ises" and all the "ises" shall be for all, even for those you don't like.

Finally, I leave you the years I should like to have lived so that I might possibly see whether your generation will bring more love and peace to the world than ours did.

I not only hope you will, I pray that you will.

That is a wonderful, moving bequest. It is a statement of value and faith given in the face of death. It is a profoundly religious affirmation of hope and solace. Few of us, I suspect, have been recipients of such a document. I know I have not. But what a glorious gift to receive – and to give.

My responsibility to lead memorial services calls me to do something *like* this. I write eulogies. With the help of the family, I try to recall things people have said, incidents in their lives, habits, deeds so they can “tell me” what it was in their lives that was important, wise, valuable, exemplary (as in, an example to others).

That is something *each* of us can do as we *remember* our loved ones. In fact we can imagine that as *they* are dictating to us their ethical will, they are answering the questions:

- What did they live for?
- What values directed their lives?
- What lessons were most important?
- What purpose did they find in life?

In our imagined conversation, filter out the criticisms, the nagging, and the negatives that come with intimate relations. Listen rather to what their *lives* said, especially if their *words* were biting or inaccurate.

For some of us such an exercise may involve a loved one from whom an *ethical* will seems a contradiction. There are those among us who have known family members who were incredibly

temperamental, or alcoholic, or violent, or negligent. We cannot ignore or deny such pain-filled memories, but there is probably *more* to be remembered than just those horrible *perversions* of familial love. Awareness of the mistakes and failings and weaknesses of our families does have an ethical message for us and does challenge us to develop compassion and understanding and, hardest of all, perhaps, forgiveness.

Creating an ethical will for those who have gone before is a way each of us can be in touch with the legacy of value and love we have to draw on as individuals. And, it is a way of being reminded of those values that you do *not* want to imitate or celebrate. There is always something to be learned from a careful clarification of the values of those who raised and cared for us.

Nor is there any reason to wait until they are *gone* before the subject of an ethical will is explored. I came across a story of a couple who wrote an ethical will for their children, then *gathered* them together, and *read* it to them. In the discussion that followed it was clear to all how important and wonderful an opportunity it was to do it in *person* before death changed everything. There were *some* values that the grown children had not yet “understood,” much to the surprise of parents and children.

Elaine Shuman Kittredge did it the other way around. She wrote about the “intangibles” she had received from her parents while they were still alive. She wrote:

My father’s legacy to me:

He gave me the openness to be generous to strangers and friends and not use money as a tool to control people.

He gave me the knowledge that to be proud of my achievements is not vanity but a part of human joy.

He gave me the knowledge that to give all of my love does not deplete my resources.

That to give everything I know and believe is worthwhile to others, is the meaning of life.

My mother’s legacy to me:

She taught me how to laugh loudly and to cry without shame.

She taught me that I am responsible for myself no matter what age I am.

She taught me to be proud and strong as a woman in an unliberated day and age.

Doing it now, while your loved ones are still alive, can help avoid the sad lament of “Paula.” Paula had been raised in a middle class, suburban, intellectual family and had moved thoroughly away from it all – to a farm in a remote village. Her life appeared to be a total *rejection* of her parents’ values. After her mother died Paula sobbed:

I hope she knew I do hold her values, the most important ones she worked so hard to make real for me.

She taught me to be empathetic, compassionate, sensitive, honest, how to be well

organized, competent, dependable and authentic – to always be the best kind of person I could possibly be – and to have no regrets...I do hope she knew.

Indeed, we can write a “thank you” love letter *now* to those still living from whom we have already received the legacy of an ethical life.

Finally, the task of writing our ethical will is our own. On this day of remembrance we are vividly reminded of the reality of our own *mortality*. We, too, must plan seriously for our own deaths. We must make a will for our possessions. We should make a living will to assure our dignified dying. And we should confront our own lives, clarify our personal values, review the significance of our days, and evaluate the important relationships over the years. That will prepare us to make an ethical will. That, *and* the willingness to challenge ambiguity or relativity about our values in the real world: to be clear, specific, and focused about what *we* think is morally right.

If we have any desire that those who come after us know what we believed in and what we lived for, we obviously must be *clear* ourselves about what we believe and value – NOW. Creating *that* part of the ethical will would be the easier part, however. I could quite quickly come up with a list of values that I think are important and would wish for my children: truth, reason, beauty, compassion, warmth, humor, integrity, justice...

But making that list and then putting those values into the context of a will forces me to recognize that I can only bequeath those values which have, in fact, been truly *acted* on in my life. My legacy can only be those values I have lived! I can't leave my kids a Picasso or a Manet if I don't have one. I can't leave them honesty and empathy if I don't “have” them.

Think for a moment about what trait of yours you would most value for others. What value do you see really *present* in your life, that you would most like to pass on? That's the place to begin your ethical will. I haven't written an ethical will yet, although I have enjoined you to do so. But I have *thought* about it. I would begin mine this way:

*”Dear Andrea and Nathan (my children):
I urge you to meet each person in life with the belief that there is good in them.
Believing that, you will find that to be true.
Acting on that, you will help them to grow that good – for the benefit of themselves and others.”*

What is the legacy of beliefs and values YOU wish to leave behind? WRITE IT DOWN! It could help to change a world that sorely *needs* changing.