



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Lydia Talbot: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lydia Talbot.

Lillian Daniel: And I’m Lillian Daniel. Our guest today is William Willimon, Bishop of the United Methodist Church for North Alabama. He’s going to talk to us about heaven, which is the place, he says, where God finally gets what God wants.

Lydia Talbot: We also welcome back Joy Rogers, the Provost of St. James Cathedral, as we continue our series on the “Fruits of the Spirit.” She’ll be reflecting on “faithfulness.”

Lillian Daniel: And we begin with the story of a young woman whose heart is drawn to the people of Africa. She’s not sure where it will lead, but she knows it’s a call from God. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Tracye Campbell: I’m Tracye Campbell. I am a television producer with WTTW Channel 11. I am an elder at the Light Church of All Nations. And I am an aspiring missionary. They asked me what do you think you’ll be doing in five years and just out of no where—well, it wasn’t really out of no where, but I know where it came from—I said I want to be a missionary in Africa. I was praying and praying: Lord, where am I going? And I discovered through a DNA test that I had DNA heritage in Africa, the Tikar-Fullani house of people of Cameroon. I told my sister and she introduced me to an organization called the Cameroon American Aids Alliance. And I said, I want to go!

I had never been to Cameroon before. People kept saying to me you’re a producer, you should take a camera with you, you should record this whole event. I spent three weeks there. I think I had just as much fun as the people I worked with. I ended up doing some of the things I said I wanted to do, which was pray for people and just listen to people. And then I did some things I didn’t want to do, which was carrying that camera around, but I’m glad I did. We were at an invocation ceremony and it was on a Sunday. We were there for five hours. These beautiful girls were singing. They sat patiently through this ceremony and at the end of the ceremony they serenaded us with song. We attended two clinics about a five hour drive from Douala, which is the main port city. Dirt roads, big pot holes. It was a huge hospital or they called it a rehabilitation center. They has a clinic. They had something I had never seen before, I thought I would never see in my life, which was a leper village.

I've never been treated so well in my life by people who don't have nearly as much as I have. The food I enjoyed so much. And after you hear so many things about don't eat this, don't eat that, at a certain point you don't care any more because the hospitality is so overwhelming. How can you say no? And even the children. I asked them, what do you do after you go home from school? "Well, I read my books and I sweep the floor and I wash dishes and I help my mom wash clothes." And they didn't say it grudgingly, they said it with joy. The love is there. God's love is with you and you can have it and you have access to it. That's what I felt when I was in Cameroon.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Lydia Talbot: Our thanks to Tracye Campbell for sharing her story. Now, let me tell you about today's speaker.

For twenty years, William Willimon was Dean of the Chapel and Professor of Christian Ministry at Duke University, where he established his reputation as one of America's great preachers and writers. In 1996, in a survey conducted by Baylor University, he was named one of the "Twelve Most Effective Preachers" in the English-speaking world. And in a study by the Pulpit and Pew Center, it was reported that Will is the second most widely read author by mainline Protestant pastors. In 2004, Will Willimon was elected Bishop for the United Methodist Church in North Alabama, a region with 157,000 Methodists and 792 pastors. We're happy that, with all that responsibility, he is able to be with us today. Welcome, Will.

MESSAGE

Will Willimon: Thank you. It's good to be back!

A reading from Revelation:

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" [Revelation 5:11-13]

Where are we headed? Where does all of this end?

A man in my church was in the American army in World War II, Pacific theater. He once recounted the misery of that experience, the seemingly endless days of mud and sickness, of death and destruction.

"How did you survive?" I asked. "How did you make it to the end?"

"I lay on my sleeping bag every night and thought of home. I fantasized about the end of the war. I pictured being met at the train station by my girlfriend and my parents. It was the only thing that kept me going, my faith. Though I didn't know when the war would end, I could

imagine the end.”

Well, our scripture is from the Book of Revelation. A vision of the end. In the end, when all is said and done, says the Book of Revelation, we shall be with God. What we have only glimpsed dimly, in bits and pieces, “through a mirror dimly,” we will see face to face. Completely. Heaven is that time, that place where God gets what God wants. We spend so much of our lives on Earth striving earnestly to get what *we* want. Heaven is where God gets what God wants.

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wandered around the streets of his native Copenhagen asking people if they believed in a heaven. Nearly everybody answered that they did. Then Kierkegaard asked them what difference their belief in heaven made in their daily lives. He concluded that their belief in heaven had not the slightest impact on the way they lived here. That’s one reason why one doesn’t hear many sermons, in mainline Protestant Christianity, on the subject of heaven. We say that we would rather focus upon the here and now. Jesus urged us not to speculate on the day and the hour and the time of the ending of this world.

Perhaps we are reluctant to focus much on heaven for other reasons. People on top, people in power, people whose children are well fixed, well housed, well futured, tend to focus on the here and now because—well, let’s face it—the here and now has been rather good to us. We say that we don’t want to talk about heaven, dismissing talk about heavenly visions as “pie in the sky, by and by.”

But what about the woman who has buried three of her four children before they reached age five due to hunger and malnutrition in Honduras? What about that woman in my town, who was recently beaten to death by her jealous boyfriend? There’s not all that much justice here. Is there any hope for ultimate justice?

It’s easy enough for me to say that the world, as it is, is enough for me, because this world, as it is, has been very good to me. But heaven is not simply a place where we get what we want. Heaven is a name for that place, that time, that set of arrangements when God gets what God wants. Today’s scripture from Revelation says that God wants a world where there is no weeping, no grief, and no injustice anymore.

It’s clear that God doesn’t have that world, not now, not here. After Hurricane Katrina, a reporter called me and asked, “How do you reconcile a belief in a just and loving God with a terrible natural disaster like this?”

I thought it an odd question. Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster. And yet, as I talked to the reporter, I realized that he assumed that, being a Christian, I had some sort of belief that everything that happens in the world happens because God planned it that way. God is behind everything that occurs.

A belief in heaven suggests that this world as it is is *not* the world that God intended when God began creating in the first book of the Bible, Genesis. The story told there says that we live in a botched creation, a creation that does not live up to divine expectations, mainly due

to human sin and rebellion. Visions in the book of Revelation are visions of a world set right, a creation finished and fulfilled, the world that God intended, now arrived in fullness.

Any church that stops leaning toward that “new heaven and new earth,” a church that no longer keeps taut the tension between the world as it is, and the world as God intends it to be, is a sadly compromised and accommodated church. We’ve somehow got to keep before us the gap between the status quo and the world that God intends. There is some distance between God’s will for the world, and the world in which we now live. There is stress between what is and what ought to be.

We’ve got the world as we have made it. Well, heaven is the world as God has created it. Heaven is not the result of earnest human striving, but rather the result of God’s creation and restoration. Heaven is that time, that place where the Lamb sits on the throne, where all power, all glory, all blessing and honor is given to Lamb, the crucified and resurrected Lamb.

A couple of weeks ago I went to a funeral of one of the true saints of the church. In the sermon, her pastor praised her for all the good that she had done over the years in her church and in her community. He enumerated all of the lives that she had touched, the people who had loved her because she had loved them. He praised her as an exemplar of Christian virtues.

A week later I went to another funeral. This was a very different funeral. There, the man who had died was a person who had made many mistakes in his life. Throughout adulthood he had struggled with an addiction to alcohol. He had never been able to hold a job. His addiction and his personality had made his children’s lives and his wife’s life rather miserable. He ended it all by taking his own life when he was in a drunken stupor.

At this funeral, the pastor began by saying, “Jerry was always a troubled person, from the first day I made his acquaintance. We found this week that he was even more troubled than any of us thought. Jerry made a mess of things. He disappointed people he loved, and he kept messing up. But this is the church, and we have not come to focus upon Jerry’s mistakes, but rather we have come to focus upon the work of the God who loved Jerry. The same God who created Jerry, saw him every day of his life. Our savior has a particular place in his heart for the people who mess up. He promised us that he never stops seeking sinners, never stops looking for the lost. He continues to reach out to Jerry today, and as Jerry has died, he is now being embraced by the God who loved him, and who would do anything for him. Jerry is, at last, after a lot of wandering, safe, at home.”

Note that the pastor was forced, by the circumstances of this man’s life, to focus at the end, not upon this man’s messed up life, but on the nature and the work of God in Jesus Christ. In the end, that is our hope in life, in death, in any life beyond death – God will get what God wants. And the Scriptures keep telling us, God wants *us*.

In so much of mainline Christianity we splash in a shallow pool. We offer admonition, advice, and encouragement, but many times it’s not much different than people could hear anywhere else. For the most part we are dealing with people who are not too troubled, not too messed up, not too great failures at life. But what do you say when people come to a dead end, a brick

wall, when there is no hope for human work or human progress?

That's when we talk like the Revelation to John, chapter five. We talk about heaven. We talk about a God who triumphs, a God who isn't stumped by our sin and our rebellion. We talk about who's on the throne. We talk about that time, and that place, where God at last gets what God wants.

"Are you settling in?" That was one of the most frequently asked questions to me, during my first couple of years of my new job. It's an interesting question. Are you settling in? Are you adapting to the status quo? Are you adjusting to what already is?

Christians are people who, because we know something about the end, the final purposes of God, heaven, we don't "settle in." We keep up a holy restiveness. We keep moving, keep standing on tiptoes, expectant, because we have been offered a vision of a new heaven and a new earth where God at last gets what God wants. This Earth is not our home. This Earth, as good as it is, is not God's final act. One day, the show will end. God will get what God wants. And we call that heaven.

CONVERSATION

Lillian Daniel: If you'd like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from William Willimon, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or read the text anytime. Now, let's talk with Will Willimon.

Will, I really appreciated your critique of mainline Christians who don't want to talk about heaven because they're lives are going pretty well. But it seems like another reason that people don't want to talk about heaven is that they don't want to talk about death.

Will Willimon: I think that's a great point. It is. I think, ideally, heaven enables us to talk about the reality of death and heaven is in no way a denial of the pain and the horror of death, which Paul calls the "final enemy." But I think we do live in a kind of death denying culture.

Lydia Talbot: On the other hand, there are people who profess to be Christians who have an unusual preoccupation with getting to heaven!

Will Willimon: Yeah, there is that truth, too. I think for a lot of people, they think Christianity is where you get your ticket to eternity. I'm a Wesleyan Christian, a Methodist. John Wesley advised early Methodists: don't worry too much about eternity, worry about here and now, living with Jesus so you'll be ready to live with him for eternity. And I think that is good advice. I'm thinking about the woman who when asked why she had adopted nine foster children in a row, here response was: "Well, I just saw a new world coming and I want to be part of it!" That's where a belief in heaven sort of feeds back to right now. Christians believe that one day we will be with God for eternity, so what better time than now to start getting closer to God!

Lydia Talbot: She was leaning, as you say, into a new heaven and new Earth.

Will Willimon: She was leaning in. Yes.

Lillian Daniel: So when we do get stuck in a sort of small view of heaven that's essentially all about what we want—we'll get to see the people we want to see and be with the people we already love—what's missing in that?

Will Willimon: I think probably our view. One thing that impresses me in the book of Revelation, which I preached from, is it's expansive, it's huge. But I love that view before the throne. John says: I didn't see just the righteous people, I saw every creature under heaven, the goldfinches and the whales and every creature was singing before the throne. Heaven is that restoration of the world that is bigger than just me and my aches and pains. I remember—I'm an Alabaman—at one of our churches someone said, when our churches became racially integrated back in the 60s, "Well, you better get ready to live with some of these people in heaven. Get started right now! Get along with them right here in the church!" I thought that was a good indication that a belief in heaven really does have implications for now.

Lydia Talbot: Well, now, but not yet. Didn't Martin Buber, the Jewish theologian say, "Heaven is now, but not yet." Does that fit?

Will Willimon: Yeah. And as I mentioned, we get glimpses and pieces of it. A friend of mine and I wandered into a dingy little diner in South Carolina. We walked in and at every table there were people sitting there with baseball caps, working people, and at every table there was a white person and an African American person. They were sitting there and everybody was jovially talking. My friend muttered as we went in, "We just walked into the kingdom of God!"

Lillian Daniel: And it's a diner! Who knew?

Will Willimon: And it's a diner!

Lillian Daniel: It's a heavenly banquet.

Will Willimon: I think we get those glimpses and we believe that one day, which we just glimpse in bits and pieces now, that will be God's great final act and forever.

Lydia Talbot: You say that the kingdom of God is a place where God gets what God wants. And there are people who reject your notion, the Christian notion of heaven. What do you say to those folks and how can you be so emphatic?

Will Willimon: Well, my emphatic quality, I guess, is that we're talking about hope. Christians generally don't go very far when we're asked to specify how exactly does this look and all. Most of the talk in the New Testament is very metaphoric and has these striking images. Jesus didn't talk about this subject very much at all. And yet I think it's a hope based on what we've been promised. Here's Jesus dying on the cross and to the only person there with him: "Today you'll be with me in paradise." To a thief who didn't even really understand, or presumably never heard Jesus talking! That kind of expansive, shocking love we think will one day will be complete. But it's a hope.

Lillian Daniel: If heaven is the place where God gets what God wants, presumably it might be a place where we do not get what we want.

Will Willimon: That's great! If you've had a problem with God over the years!

Lillian Daniel: So if you reflect on this what would be hard for you in heaven? What would be hard for you in heaven that God would want that maybe you wouldn't?

Will Willimon: Well, it can't be comfortable being with people that I steadfastly avoid all the time now and can't stand being around! I remember an English theologian who said, "I wonder if heaven is like a mirror in which for the first time we truthfully look at ourselves." Are we talking about heaven here or hell? And, in fact, in a lot of great literature the difference between what we call heaven and what we call hell is often just about: what do you really want in life now? God is giving you what God gives you. Another thing I've often thought, on any given Sunday only half of the Methodist church members, much less than half, are actually in church. Now, we're the people who say we just can't wait to be with God forever when we can't even work out 10 or 12 Sundays a year to be with God now! So, there is that wonderful tension.

Lillian Daniel: It is a tension! Well, thank you for bringing us this word on heaven.

REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: We turn now to another in our series of closing reflections on the "Fruits of the Spirit." Today, Joy Rogers, Provost of St. James Episcopal Cathedral in Chicago, reflects on "faithfulness."

REFLECTION

Joy Rogers: To stay faithful in the face of the hurt of the world, the brokenness in myself—beset by doubt, by loneliness, by fear—in those times of testing when I cannot find God, or feel God, I can only retreat to a shadowy place deep inside of me and wait for more. Then, like Jacob, alone and guilty, wrestling with an angel, I too must grapple fiercely with the mystery and refuse to let go, staying with the struggle, demanding something, anything, to lift the darkness and open my soul. Until at last, the blessing comes and, once again, like Jacob, I limp into a future as yet unknown, but named anew for promise and purpose and for God until the next time.

CLOSING

Lillian Daniel: Thank you, Joy, and our thanks again to William Willimon, Tracye Campbell and you for being with us today on "30 Good Minutes." I'm Lillian Daniel.

Lydia Talbot: And I'm Lydia Talbot. As we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today's program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at "30 Good Minutes," may peace be with you in the week ahead.