



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker  
May 26, 2019 Sermon

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## God's Providential Care: An Ongoing Conversation

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 136 (selected verses), Romans 8:18-28

"What we need in the hour of trial, and what we should seek by earnest prayer, is confidence in Him who sees the end from the beginning and doeth all things well."—Phineas Gurley (Pastor First Presbyterian Church, Dayton Ohio, 1850-1854), funeral sermon for Willie Lincoln, February 24, 1862.

"The will of God prevails."—Abraham Lincoln, *Meditation on the Divine Will*, September 2, 1862.

"Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration which it has already attained. . . . Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. . . . The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes."—Abraham Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1864.

"But more sublime than any or all of these [reasons we admired and loved Lincoln], more holy and influential, more beautiful, and strong, and sustaining, *was his abiding confidence in God and in the final triumph of truth and righteousness through Him and for His sake*. This was his noblest virtue, his grandest principle, the secret alike of his strength, his patience, and his success."

Phineas Gurley, funeral sermon for Abraham Lincoln, April 19, 1865.

"Through strife and misunderstanding it was the evident purpose of God to expand his work."  
Rev. Edgar Work, Pastor, Third Street Presbyterian Church, Dayton, Ohio, speaking of the Centennial Celebration of First Presbyterian Church, Dayton, Ohio, March 2, 1899

**Preface to the First Scripture Lesson:** Our first Scripture Lesson—Psalm 136—teaches us to have confidence in the Providence of God. That is, to have confidence that God not only has a plan for us and the universe, but also is with us as we live into that plan, both individually and as a people.

Such confidence takes time and practice to develop. It requires "conversation," that is, a back-and-forth process of discernment within ourselves, with one another, and especially, always, with God. So the Psalm is set up to be read conversationally, responsively, back and forth: I say a line, and then you say a line.

Don't worry: your part is easy; your line is always the same: "For his steadfast love endures forever." And I'll cue you each time. Listen now for God's Word to us . . .

**Preface to the Second Scripture Lesson:** Our Second Scripture Lesson—Paul's letter to the church at Rome, chapter 8, verses 18-28—also encourages us to trust in God's providence, even—no, especially—in difficulty, in our hours of trial.

Often, especially in our trials, we do not—we cannot—see God's providential hand at work. But it's still there; and God is still with us, in the person of the Holy Spirit, praying for us, interceding on our behalf, knowing us, guiding us, and loving us. We can't always see that, Paul says, but we have to trust and hope in that. Listen now for God's Word to us . . .

**Sermon:** It's called "The Butterfly Effect," formulated by a great scientist, Edward Lorenz, and it holds that one small, distant event, such as the flap of a butterfly's wing in Brazil, can have profound, far-reaching effects, such as a tornado in Texas.

It's called "The Pickled Pigs' Feet Effect," formulated by a tired father, and it holds that one small, distant event, such as the delivery of pickled pigs' feet in Philadelphia, can have profound, far-reaching effects, such as three kids driving their father crazy in South Carolina.

It was a hot, summer, Sunday afternoon. There being nothing else to do, I loaded the kids into car, and drove out into the country, where we passed a roadside stand, in front of which was a large, hand-painted sign, "Pickled Pigs Feet 4 Sale."

"EEEEWWWWWWWW GROSS!" came the chorus from the backseat. I looked in the rear view mirror, and said: "If it weren't for pickled pigs' feet, you kids wouldn't be here today."

"WHAAAA—?!"

So I told them the story.

"Your grandfather was sent by *his* mother to deliver a jar of pickled pigs' feet to the home of *your* grandmother because *her* father loved pickled pigs' feet. But way back then, Mama Baker and Papa Baker weren't your Mama and Papa Baker yet, they weren't even married yet. Papa Baker was living at home, in his first year at law school, and Mama Baker was working in Philadelphia, taking night classes at Temple University. But that Sunday afternoon, when Papa Baker knocked on the door to deliver the pickled pigs' feet, and Mama Baker answered it (her mother told her to), and they looked at each other . . . well, here *you* three are in the back seat, driving *me* crazy."

"Really?!" came the giggles from the backseat.

"Really." I replied, adjusting the rear view mirror.

The Butterfly Effect is part of what's called "Chaos Theory," which holds that there is a pattern—a determinative causal nexus—for all events, but sometimes we can't see it, at least in the short term, because things are just too complicated. Yes, events will run their course, but, according to Chaos Theory, the particular course is "highly sensitive to initial conditions," such as the flap of a butterfly's wing.

The Pickled Pigs' Feet Effect is part of what I call "Design Theory," which holds that there is a design—an overarching purpose and plan—for the entire universe, but sometimes we can't see it, at least in the short term, because we're too caught up in the events of the moment. In this case, the design was that of my two grandmothers, who had been plotting this delivery for some time, but which my parents were too caught up in the events of the moment to see. Yes, true love will have its course, but, according to my grandmothers, the particular course is "highly sensitive to initial conditions," such as pickled pigs' feet.

For the next few Sundays, culminating on Pentecost Sunday on June 9th, we're celebrating the 100th anniversary of Westminster Presbyterian Church which is itself a consolidation of two churches: (1) First Presbyterian Church which dates to 1799, the first church founded in Dayton, and (2) Third Street Presbyterian Church which dates to 1838 when it broke away from First as part of the New School vs. Old School dispute, which fractured American Presbyterianism in the first half of the nineteenth century. The two were re-united in 1919 (hence our celebration), chose Westminster for a new name, and started building this building, which was finished in 1926.

Maybe it's Chaos Theory; maybe, Design Theory; maybe, both; but here's my point: if it weren't for *this* church, *we* wouldn't be here today. And by "we," I mean The United States of America. So here's the story:

From 1849-1854, Dr. Phineas Densmore Gurley was the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Dayton. He, like the church itself, was Old School: he emphasized traditional Presbyterian doctrine. In particular, Dr. Gurley emphasized the doctrine of Divine Providence, the teaching that God rules the universe, that there is a design—an overarching plan and purpose—for the entire universe.

Now by all accounts, Dr. Gurley was both a fine preacher and pastor. And by 1853, word of that must have travelled, because, late in that year, F Street Presbyterian Church, of Washington DC, wrote Gurley asking him if he would be their pastor.

Dr. Gurley's letter of resignation from First Church Dayton, along with the church's resolution accepting it, are, together, a beautiful testament to the love a pastor and congregation can have for one other. They can be found online if you want to read them in their entirety, but for now, excerpts:

After "long and anxious deliberation," Dr. Gurley at first *tums down* the Washington Church; he loves First Dayton and its people. But as he tries to write his letter of refusal, he becomes unhappy; his conscience gnaws at him. "I felt that perhaps I had refused to hear the voice and follow the leading of Providence," he writes.

And then, as he continues to struggle, Dr. Gurley “receives communications from Washington so remarkable in their character, so strong in their argument and appeals, and so significant as indications of the will of God, that I felt it my duty to reconsider the whole question, to look at it anew and very carefully that I might know what the Great Head of the Church would have me do.”

And so he does, with “earnest, prayerful reflection,” finally reaching the conclusion “that God has called me to go and labor for his cause and glory in Washington City—the evidence to my own mind is clear and irresistible.” But that clarity comes at a price: it breaks his heart to leave them. Near the end of his letter of resignation, Dr. Gurley writes: “I have loved you all and loved you well; and you have given me love and kindness in return. . . . But the great and good shepherd will be with you to the end. Trust in him . . .”

To say that the people of First Presbyterian accepted Dr. Gurley’s resignation with reluctance would be a gross understatement: “we are strongly opposed to our pastor’s decision . . . our own feelings rise up against it . . . we do truly feel that he is mistaken, strangely mistaken . . .” And yet for all that, they continue:

*[O]ur thanks are due to our Heavenly Father for the directing influence of his Spirit, [that] led us to seek the ministerial labor of our beloved pastor, friend, and Christian brother, the Reverend Phineas D. Gurley; and so now because, in the providence of God . . . our beloved pastor is very clear in his convictions of duty that God has called him to Washington City, be it **resolved** that only the kindest feelings of duty towards our beloved pastor, and of Christian submission to God’s providence, lead to us to acquiesce in his application for the dissolution of his pastoral relations with us.*

And so with love and gratitude—and hearts breaking all around—both pastor and congregation submit to God’s providence, and say good-bye: Early in 1854, Dr. Gurley leaves Dayton for Washington.

Seven years later, early in 1861, Abraham Lincoln arrives in Washington. By that time, under Dr. Gurley’s guidance, F Street Presbyterian Church has merged with Second Presbyterian Church to form and build a new church, New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, with Dr. Gurley as pastor, located just four blocks from the White House.

Upon their arrival, Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln rent a pew (the customary way of supporting a church in those days) for \$50 per year, and attend services regularly. Lincoln admires Gurley’s preaching.

Dr. Gurley becomes the Lincoln’s family pastor; he and the president develop a friendship. The families socialize together; Lincoln seeks Gurley’s advice, especially on the appointment of army chaplains; and Gurley often helps people—especially those who seek a sentence commuted or a pardon granted—gain an audience with Lincoln.

Early in 1862, Willie, the Lincoln’s 11-year-old son, contracts typhoid fever. Dr. Gurley is frequently at his bedside throughout the illness. On February 20, 1862, when Willie dies, both Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln are devastated. Two days after Willie’s death, Gurley preaches at his funeral, saying:

*The eye of the Nation is moistened with tears, as it turns to-day to the Presidential Mansion; the prayer of the Nation ascends to Heaven on [their] behalf, that God’s grace may be sufficient for them, in this hour of sore bereavement and trial.*

And he continues, saying:

*It is well for us, and very comforting, on such an occasion as this, to get a clear and a scriptural view of the providence of God. His kingdom ruleth over all. All those events which in anywise affect our condition and happiness are in his hands, and at his disposal. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without His direction; much less any one of the human family, for we are of more value than many sparrows. A mysterious dealing [we] may consider it, but still it is **His** dealing; What we need in the hour of trial, and what we should seek by earnest prayer, is confidence in Him who sees the end from the beginning and doeth all things well. For his steadfast love endures forever.*

After the funeral, Lincoln asks Gurley for a copy of the sermon. And from this point forward, God’s providence becomes a more and more prominent theme in Lincoln’s writing. “The will of God prevails,” he writes in September 1862, some six months after Willie’s death. “In great contests, each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be, wrong . . . in the present civil war it is quite possible that God’s purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities working just as they do, are the best adaptation to effect His purpose.”

Or, as Dr. Gurley put it: “A mysterious dealing [we] may consider it, but still it is *His* dealing”

The prominence of this theme culminates in Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address delivered in early March 1865, about a month before his assassination:

*The Almighty has His own purposes. . . . If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, has to come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?*

*Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."*

*The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.* Or as Dr. Gurley put it: "What we need in the hour of trial, and what we should seek by earnest prayer, is confidence in *Him* who sees the end from the beginning and doeth all things well."

It was Lincoln's belief and trust in Divine Providence that gave him the strength to see the war through to its end, to free the slaves, and to preserve the union. Or at least so thought Phineas D. Gurley.

When Lincoln was assassinated, Gurley, as his friend and pastor, delivered his funeral sermon. After noting all of Lincoln's outstanding virtues—"He was simple and sincere, plain and honest, truthful and just, benevolent and kind. His perceptions were quick and clear, his judgments were calm and accurate, and his purposes were good and pure beyond a question. Always and everywhere he aimed and endeavored to *be* right and to *do* right. His integrity was thorough, all-pervading, all-controlling, and incorruptible"—after all *that*, Gurney says *this*:

But more sublime than any or all of these, more holy and influential, more beautiful, and strong, and sustaining, was *his abiding confidence in the overruling providence of God and in the final triumph of truth and righteousness through the power and blessing of God.* This was his noblest virtue, his grandest principle, the secret alike of his strength, his patience, and his success.

The secret to Lincoln's success—his abiding confidence in the Providence of God—was developed through his friendship and conversation with Phineas Gurney, who, in turn, developed *his* abiding confidence in the providence of God through his friendship and conversation with First Presbyterian Church of Dayton Ohio, which 54 years later, in another act of God's Providence, joined with Third Street Presbyterian to become Westminster Presbyterian Church. And so: If it weren't for *this* church, we wouldn't be here today. And by "we," I mean The United States of America.

One small, distant event can have profound, far-reaching effects.

God's Providence: Maybe it's chaos theory: there's a pattern—a determinative causal nexus—for all events, but sometimes we can't see it, at least in the short term, because things are just too complicated. Or maybe it's Design Theory: there's a design—an overarching purpose and plan—for the entire universe, but sometimes we can't see it, at least in the short term, because we're too caught up in the events of the moment. Or maybe it's both, and it just depends on how you look at it. "A mysterious dealing [we] may consider it, but still it is *His* dealing."

No matter: what we need in *our* hour of trial—because the forces of disunity, division, violence, and hatred are still very much with us today (witness the events of yesterday just four blocks from here)—what we need in *our* hour of trial and what we should seek by *our* earnest prayer, is confidence in *Him* who sees the end from the beginning and doeth all things well.

And how does that confidence enable us to live?

*With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.*

This is what the Great Head of the Church, that great and good shepherd, would have us do—trust in him.

Amen.