



THE 'P' IN T.U.L.I.P.

April 17, 2016, The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Psalm 23; John 10:22-30

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Theme: God never, ever lets us go.

Give us ears to hear Scripture read, O God. Give us ears to hear it deep, not just on the surface. Tune our ears to the tones of truth underneath the words. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

I teach the new members' class on Presbyterianism four times a year. At the end of my ramble about all the different denominations of Christians and where our Presbyterian-Reformed way fits in, I leave some time for Q and A. Somebody often asks about predestination. Predestination is popularly associated with the Presbyterian tradition. It's the idea that God chooses us more than we choose God, and did so before even we could make up our minds about God. Most modern people dislike the idea. It rubs against our notions about individual autonomy. Actually, predestination was not that central to John Calvin, and in fact lots of *non*-Presbyterians believed in some form of it in the 16th Century. Today, most Christians, Presbyterians included, have either nuanced the idea dramatically or more-or-less rejected predestination as raw speculation.

About a century ago, a quirky acronym, "T-U-L-I-P," "tulip," became popular with conservative Calvinists as a way to sum up what they said were the five essential theological points of *true* Reformed or Presbyterian theology. You might guess that whoever made "tulip" up was a *Dutch* Calvinist. But as a summary of Reformed theology, its five points are highly problematic. The T-U-L-I-P business is not much used today. And you can be thankful I'm not going to get into all five letters in this sermon..., only one, *just the "P."*



Only the “P,” and it *doesn't* stand for “predestination.” It stands for an idea that may be even more counter-intuitive, an idea perhaps even more radical than predestination. I believe in *this* “P,” believe in it with all my heart. The “P” at the end of T-U-L-I-P stands for a daring affirmation called the “Perseverance of the Saints.” Perseverance of the Saints is the promise that God never lets go of us, no matter what. Even if we let go of God, God does not let go of us. Even if we deny God, God never denies us. God’s love is ferociously insistent, unrelenting, perfectly stubborn. God’s love for us cannot be foiled by anything, not even our rejection of God.

In that story from the Gospel of John that Gracey just read, Jesus is being tested by some Jerusalem critics who first challenge him to come out and declare himself to be the Messiah... or not. His reply is neither yes nor no. All that day, Jesus had been speaking about the nature of His relationship with those who follow in his way. He loves them; he loves their shared community. He speaks about this relationship in an earthy metaphor of the time, one that everybody in that world could understand, that of a shepherd and his sheep. The sheep and shepherd image was real, poignant, even intimate. Ancient shepherds related to the vulnerable creatures in their care in a way that was intimate, loving, and fiercely protective. That, Jesus says, this is exactly how he relates to His community, to us. Jesus says that they “*hear my voice. I know them...*” And the finally, He says this, says it twice, “*No one will snatch them from my hand..., no one can snatch them from the Father’s hand.*”

That’s sheep-and-shepherd language for the “P” in T-U-L-I-P. It’s a metaphorical affirmation of the radical promise, which old Calvinism called “The Perseverance of the Saints.” That is to say, God never lets us go, no matter what. Even if we let go of God, God does not let go of us. God’s love is ferociously insistent, unrelenting, and perfectly stubborn. God’s love for us cannot be foiled by anything, not even our rejection of God.

Let me share a personal memory... The little church I served out on Long Island had a great many older folks, I mean *older*, older folks. So we had a weekly seniors group called “The Pioneers.” Each Wednesday’s meeting began with a



program of some sort, maybe a speaker or a craft or a field trip. The day ended with lunch together. In between the program and lunch there was a chapel service. Now, the chapel in the Northport Presbyterian Church was minuscule. It seated maybe two dozen very friendly people. It was equipped with an awful little electronic organ. Our organist was the church's retired organist, an ancient Methodist spinster who called pieces of music that she liked "cunning numbers."

The highlight of the Pioneers' chapel service was the hymn sing. I presided, and believe it or not, took requests. Pioneers would call out a hymn by name or number, and I'd turn to our organist to see if she knew it. She almost always did. She'd then launch into it on that squeaky little Hammond organ; we'd sing a few verses, and go to the next hymn.

One of our Pioneers was a very sweet and very diminutive lady in her 80's named Helen K. Yost. Helen was long a widow. She and her husband had had no children. She'd grown up here in the City. In fact, she'd been a member of the Jan Hus Presbyterian Church over in Yorkville back when it was an enclave of Czech immigrants. Helen later lived in a pleasant little retirement community in Greenlawn. She became a dear friend to our family. Before she died, Helen told us she wanted us to have her old department store bedroom set. Our daughter Grace would sleep in Helen's bed till she went off to college.

Helen K. Yost was a consummate worrier. She worried about everything; she worried about little things like her geraniums and she worried about big things like her relationship with God. Her face belied worry. Her voice betrayed worry. Oh, she had a firm Christian faith, but still, she worried.

At the weekly Pioneers hymn sing, Helen always sat in the same pew in the little chapel and she always requested the same hymn. Week after week, year after year, the same hymn. We came to know it by heart. It's number 384 in our *Hymnal*. Frankly, it's rather sentimental, and it's hard to sing because of the range. It's called "*O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go.*" Every Wednesday we sang it, for years and years.



I came to understand that Helen needed to hear it, she needed to hear it over and over. *“O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go.”* I told her that she didn’t need to worry; I told her that nobody, not anything, not her doubts, not her failings, not her bouts with depression, *nothing but nothing* could ever snatch her from the arms of her Shepherd. She knew it. She just need to hear it sung again.

I kind of wish I could have told Helen a story I heard years after she died. It’s told by Will Willimon, the former dean of the chapel at Duke. It’s about a parishioner with whom he was once talking. They were having coffee and he asked her,

“How have you been. How’s your fall been going?”

“Well not so good,” she said. ‘Our son’s been putting us through hell.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Willimon. ‘How old is your son?’

‘He’s eighteen, and uh, we have not known where he was for the last six months. We basically changed the locks on the door. I pray for him every night, but we didn’t know where he was, and last week, during dinner, suddenly somebody is pounding on the door. We open the door and there he is! And he starts this string of profanity. I said, we’re eating, come on in, sit down and eat with us and he refuses to sit down at the table and he storms back into his room, he slams the door shut, and I can hear the door lock.’

‘And my husband sat there and he got up, poured himself a drink, went out, turned on the TV. That’s kind of how he handles it. And I put my napkin down and got up and went down the hall. I went out to the garage, and I looked at my husband’s tools and I got this big hammer, this large hammer. I walked back from the garage back in the hall, stood in front of my son’s door. I asked him, ‘Open the door.’ And this string of profanity pours out.’

*‘So I took that hammer and I leaned back and hit with one good hit. I knocked the whole doorknob, the lock, everything right off the door. Just split the door in two. And barged through the door. And my son looked terrified. And I caught him right up under his chin like this and I slammed him up against the headboard of the bed and I said, ‘I went into labor because of you. And by God, **I will never, ever, ever, give up on you!**’”*



Amplify that mother's *cri de coeur* a thousand-fold and you might have something approaching the relentless love of God, a love that, in the antique words of Helen K. Yost's favorite hymn, "*wilt not let you go.*" Never, not ever, ever.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.