



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

Program #5316

First broadcast January 24, 2010

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.

Daniel Pawlus: And I’m Daniel Pawlus. Our guest today, whom you’ll meet in a moment, is Will Willimon, Bishop of the United Methodist Church for North Alabama. He’ll be talking about the love of God.

Lydia Talbot: We also welcome back Michael Siegel, Senior Rabbi of Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago. He has a few thoughts about heaven on earth.

Daniel Pawlus: We begin with a profile of Susan Baller-Shepard, a Presbyterian minister whose adoption of a baby from China gave her new insight into the roles hope and mystery play in the spiritual life. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Susan Baller-Shepard: I think that the spiritual path and the adoption path are not that far apart. What you do in both is that you hope for the face at the end of the game. I think Christ is in disguises all over the place and I think I got to see Christ as an infant in my daughter.

I am a person who likes to get my ducks in a row. I like to know what the lay of the land is. And with adoption you have so much mystery and there is so much that you cannot control and so much that is out of your hands. It’s constantly out of your hands and you constantly have to surrender. It’s a hard journey.

My husband and I have two sons: Alex who is fourteen and Drake who is twelve. And we had talked about adoption. What was interesting is once we started the adoption path they told us, because of a number of things including Y2K, that China was slowing down, did we want to switch to Cambodia. I was really prayerful about it. I really wanted it to be China. It just felt in my heart of hearts that China was the way to go. So we stayed on the path to China even though we were watching other people going with different countries and coming home sooner with children. So there were times when I really felt like I don’t know if I have the gumption to do this. And I have talked to parents now because now the wait for China is about three years. And I keep trying to encourage them saying you’ll get there, you’ll get a name and a face and it will all worth it.

When I first saw Lizzie, they would bring the babies in one at a time so I kept waiting, like, “Is this her? Is this her?” And then by the third I knew that this was going to be our daughter. I was leaping out of my chair, like lunging at the adoption workers there to get Lizzie in my arms and just to look at her. It was thrilling. Thrilling isn’t even the word. Her Chinese name is Yang Yu. Yang from the city she’s from and Yu means rain. So her name is Elizabeth Amelie Yong Yu Baller-Shepherd. When my daughter comes to me and says, “So what did my birth mother look like?” When I tell her I don’t know, I’ll say, “You know, I believe you were knit together in your mother’s womb.” But I don’t have answers for her. Lizzie responded one time after we were talking about how God knows what’s going on, she said, “Well that’s good. Somebody better know what’s going on!” And I believe that. I really try to help her see, if I possible can, that we are together because we’re meant to be together and that God would have it be so.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Lydia Talbot: Our thanks to Susan Baller-Shepard for sharing her touching story.

Now, let me tell you about today’s speaker. Dr. William Willimon is a Bishop of the United Methodist Church serving the people of North Alabama. For twenty years, prior to his election as Bishop, Will was Dean of the Chapel and Professor of Christian Ministry at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. A prolific writer, he’s the author of 60 books and one of the most widely read writers by mainline Protestant pastors. In 1996, an international survey conducted by Baylor University named him on the 12 “most effective preachers” in the English-speaking world. We’re delighted to welcome Will Willimon back to “30 Good Minutes.” Welcome, Will.

MESSAGE

William Willimon: Thank you, Lydia.

“Well, I’m searching for something in my life.” That’s how the young man explained his presence at our church. He was searching for something. A recent book calls us North Americans a “nation of seekers.” In fact, some of the churches I know have a seekers service in which they open the church up for people who are looking for something. We’re all looking for a more meaningful life. We’re all searching for more purpose filled lives.

They asked Jesus, “What’s is God like?” And as he so often did, Jesus responded by telling a series of stories.

“Which one of you,” Jesus asked, “which one of you shepherds, say, has a lost sheep? Would you not leave the ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness and go beat the bushes for that one lost sheep? And when you find that lost sheep, which one of you would not put that sheep on your shoulders and take the sheep back to your friends and say, ‘Come party with me. I found my lost sheep!’”

Which one of you women, if you lose a coin, would you not rip all the carpet up off the floor of your home and move all the heavy appliances out in the yard, move all the furniture out on the porch? And when you have found that lost coin, which one of you would not run out into the street and say to your neighbors, “Come party with me. I found my lost quarter!” Now, which one of you would not do that?

Which one of you fathers, say you have a younger rebellious son. The son says, ‘Dad, drop dead! Put the will into effect. Give me the money that will come to me in my inheritance and I’m out of here!’ Which one of you would not do just that? Give everything you had to your rebellious son, he leaves, he goes, he squanders all of the money, he comes back home in rags. Which one of you would not say to him, “Harold, you wanted a party, I’ll show you a party!” Now, which one of you would not do that?

Well, of course the answer is: none of us would do that! That’s crazy! And then Jesus, the teller of these stories says, “Excuse me, these are not stories about the way you behave. These are stories about the way God behaves. Get it?” God is the seeking shepherd, the searching woman, the waiting, inviting father.

Whew! How that definition of God collides with our contemporary understandings of God. What is God like? Oh, God is large, distant, very, very distant, up there, out there somewhere. God is the one that got the world started and set up certain natural laws. The world is functioning just fine, thank you, and then God retired. Well, Jesus speaks of a God who seeks and searches and finds.

I remind you of the context of these stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost boy. They said to Jesus, “Why do you always hang out with sinners? You’re always eating and getting drunk with sinners. What kind of religious person are you? After all, what’s the point of religion except to separate out people: the sinful from the righteous? What are you doing with these sinners?”

In response, Jesus says, “I came to seek and to save the lost.” Now, that’s a very different view of God and a very different view of ourselves. When most of us our thinking about ourselves we’ll say things like, “Well, you see, I’m searching for something,” or “I’m here because I’m looking for God.” Well, fine. But that’s not the way the Bible tells it usually.

In the Bible we’re usually looking for any way to get away from God and it’s God who is looking for a way to get to us. Jesus Christ, Christians believe, is God’s supreme act of coming close to us, of seeking and searching us out until God finds us.

Annie Dillard, the great American writer, in her book about her life growing up in Pittsburgh. She was a smart young woman. By the age of 15 she’d read through all the books in the Carnegie Branch of the Pittsburgh Library near her home. And reading those books she decided that all this religion stuff is bunk and God doesn’t really exist. So she took it upon herself at age 15 to show up at Shadyside Presbyterian Church and she said to her aging pastor, “I want my name off the roll. I don’t believe in God anymore.” The pastor said, “Okay.” Annie Dillard said, “You’re not going to try to argue me out of it?” And he said, “No, no, no. You’re too smart for me. There’s no way I could argue you back in.” So she said, “I want my name off the roll.” He said, “It’s off the roll.” She said, “Okay.” She walked out of the minister’s office and on her way down the hall she heard him mutter to himself out loud, “She’ll be back!” She wheeled around, went back into the office and she said, “What did I hear you say?” He said, “Oh, I said I

presumed that you'll probably be back." And she said, "Look, this is my life. I live my life like I want to live my life. I'm not coming back!"

Well, Annie Dillard wrote in her life story, "As I write this I'm 48 years old and I'm back."

You see, when we're telling the story of us and God we've got to talk about the God that came to us in Jesus Christ, the one that doesn't leave it all up to us. It's not over between us and God until God says it's over. God is not the one who sets up the rules and puts out the standards and says, "Now here's the bar. Chin up to it if you can." No, God is the one that seeks and searches and finds. And Jesus says there in Luke 15 that if just one of these sinners gets caught in the great dragnet of God's grace, heaven just goes crazy. Thank God our relationship to God is not all up to us. Thank God that we not only have a God that loves us as we are, but seeks us out where we are.

A couple of Sundays ago I came out of church. I was talking to this woman and she said, "Actually I've only been a member of this church for six months." I said, "Oh, really? Well, that's interesting. Why did you decide to come back to church after being away from church so much of your life?" And she said, "Well, I really didn't decide to come back to church, I really got dragged back in here." I said, "Who did that?" She said, "Well, I spend so much of my life trying to get away from God, but then I went through this nasty divorce and God cornered me and grabbed me and, well, here I am!"

Now, what this says to me based on Luke 15 and the stories of the seeking shepherd and the searching woman and the waiting father, maybe you're trying to get away from God, well, all I've got to say about that is as you go through your life, keep looking over shoulder. Okay?

CONVERSATION

Daniel Pawlus: 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 William Willimon. Will, thank you for joining us again today.

William Willimon: It's great to be back!

Daniel Pawlus: It's a very provocative message you just delivered for us I think. I wonder if we can talk about the idea of seekers some more.

William Willimon: Well, the ideas were Jesus', not original with me, but, all right go ahead!

Daniel Pawlus: Well, I've give you that! I love this idea that we're not the ones that are seeking, that God is more of the seeker. What has been your experience with those folks that are coming into church, or back to church, for the first time, thinking that they're supposed to do all the work and maybe coming finally to a place where they realize it's more about God accepting them?

William Willimon: I guess I treasure those people. I wish my churches had more of them because I think the stories that many of them have to tell are really a kind of validation of a living, active God. I fear that much of us in the North American church are kind of in the grip of a deism. That was the faith of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and all, that God is a great clockmaker that set up this wonderful world and then left and doesn't intrude very often. One of the things I loved about being a college chaplain at Duke was to get to hear these stories by these students who are just minding their own business, walking innocently long, and then—bam!—they felt they heard their name called, they were summoned to something that was not their idea. And I think that's much closer to the image of God that Jesus delivers.

Lydia Talbot: Will, how many times in your long career, in your own pilgrimage have you looked over your own shoulder and felt God's hand pulling at your shirt?

William Willimon: Well, many times. I'll say enough to keep me at ministry for forty years! I've had these wonderful moments in ministry when I just want to throw in the towel and was depressed and disgusted and this is all crazy and what are we doing trying to have a church in this neighborhood anyway. And it seemed to me just right then something came my way. Often an act of fidelity by a layperson that was so undeniable and real that it was almost like God was just saying to me, "Now look at that! Are you going to tell me that's not miraculous, that's not spectacular? Look at that. Let me hear you say it." So I'm thankful. Again it's a great comfort in the Christian faith to realize that, in a sense, my relationship to God is God's self-assignment, God's problem and not mine, earnest efforts and all. I love those moments where God just kind of cuts through and gets to us.

Lydia Talbot: But aren't you also saying that we're called to follow that example, that we should also be seekers, we should also search out others who need help who are lost?

William Willimon: That's great. I sometimes wonder if so many of the churches that I serve have people who, if they've been found, were found a long time ago and they're content and as happy as they can be being Methodists. I say the test of a church is how many people are there that are lost and being found. I was in a very unorthodox Methodist church a couple of weeks ago. It meets in a former grocery store. It's called Genesis. It's a church for people that feel uncomfortable at church. Well, during the service my wife and I are sitting there and the pastor, a talented woman, was talking about when Al-Anon met and when AA met during the week. So the minister said, "How many of you are addicted to drugs or alcohol? Let's see the hands." And Betsy said, "Are we allowed to ask that? I've never heard that during church announcements." All these hands went up. And the pastor said, "I know some of you have trouble believing in the Christian faith. You read about some strange things in the Bible, people walking on water and everything. Well, if you need some help, every hand being held up here is a miracle that God created. And just look at these people. They are your proof, your evidence. Now, put down your hands." Well, I just thought, now that's a church that kind of gives resonance with the Gospel in a beautiful way.

Daniel Pawlus: Will, I know you're a prolific writer and a voracious reader, as well. I'm curious what you're noticing happening in the Christian culture right now. There's lots of shifts going on. What's speaking to you in a really interesting way in the things that you look at and read?

William Willimon: I guess today I'm interested in what I can understand of the emerging church, the emergent church, the church of the 20- and 30-somethings, those that my church has real trouble reaching and attracting and seeking and keeping.

Daniel Pawlus: What do you mean by that?

William Willimon: The emergent church I think of as a kind of new movement in very diverse forms of people who are not happy with the theological options we've given them of evangelicalism over here or spent liberalism over there. I know I have a church where they sing contemporary Christian music. It has a kind of rock sound. But then they have communion, the Eucharist, every Sunday. They sit around in easy chairs and sofas. For the sermon, the preacher starts them out, tells them what he thinks, and he throws it open and everybody else joins into it and that's the sermon. Wow. Some of that kind of frightens me but I'm over it!

Lydia Talbot: Why does that frighten you? I mean I know churches where you're overdressed in jeans and sandals. Why does that frighten you?

William Willimon: Yeah. I've got churches like that. Well, notice I'm not in jeans and sandals! When I complained about the sermon at one of these churches one of the lay leaders, who is 26 years old, said to me, "You clergy really get scared when we get into active Biblical interpretation, don't you? You think you own that, don't you?" And I said, "Thank you, kid. Thank you." So I think it's a generational difference. I'm so interested because I love to see these congregations that take very seriously the challenge of reaching a new generation.

Lydia Talbot: I can picture your new generation. I can picture your two-year-old grandson, Will, named for you, who just recently asked you what you did. Tell us the story.

William Willimon: He was asking me what I did. He said he wanted to be an astronaut. I said I don't do that, I'm a Methodist preacher. And he said, "You are a Methodist preacher?" And I said, "Yeah! And I have a degree, too. I've got a certificate certifying me as one. Why do you ask?" He said, "I just didn't know that. I've never been able to tell." Boy, out of the mouth of babes!

Lydia Talbot: How do you talk about God to Will? What is the language that you use with your grandchildren these days?

William Willimon: I hope I will practice the faith and his parents will practice the faith in such a way that he will grow up wanting to embrace that. I think that's kind of the way most people become Christian. I think I also, apropos with my message, have faith that God wants him and that God will find a way to get to him. Again, as a college chaplain for twenty years, I love these stories about people who expended a lot intellectual energy avoiding God only to have God show up in their lives at the most inopportune time and the weirdest place. I love to hear these strange stories. So I think I have faith that Jesus Christ really does want to reach the whole world and he died for the sins of the whole world and that this is part of his move into the world and on the world.

Daniel Pawlus: Will, it's always a great pleasure to have you with us.

Will Willimon: I'm glad to be here.

Daniel Pawlus: Thanks for joining us today.

REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

Daniel Pawlus: We turn now to Michael Siegel, Senior Rabbi of Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago, with this final thought.

REFLECTION

Michael Siegel: The story is told of a man who asked to see heaven and hell. First he was taken to hell, where there were long tables filled with the most sumptuous foods and delicacies. When the man looked at the people's faces there was only sadness. He then noticed that their bodies were gaunt. Next he was brought to heaven, where the man was shown the exact same scene. There too the tables were heaped with food. Except in heaven, the people appeared to be well fed, and the expression on their faces was joyful.

When the man asked the guide to show him the difference between the people's experience in heaven and hell he pointed to their arms. There the man saw that in both places the people's elbows were held in a straight position, so that even though they held forks in their hands they were unable to reach their own mouths. In this way, the people in hell starved amidst the bounty. While in heaven, the people understood that if they fed each other, and shared that which was before them that they could all be satisfied.

Friends, this is a story for our day. There are many in our country who are feeling economic hardship: whose very existence has become precarious. All this in the wealthiest country in the world! America's bounty is before us; the difference between a heaven or hell of our own making is in the acceptance of responsibility to sustain one another.

CLOSING

Daniel Pawlus: Thank you, Michael. And our thanks again to William Willimon, Susan Baller-Shepard and you for being with us today on "30 Good Minutes." I'm Daniel Pawlus.

Lydia Talbot: And I'm Lydia Talbot. Before we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org, where you'll find an extensive collection of reflections and stories, on video and in print, to enhance your spiritual life. Now, from all of us at "30 Good Minutes," may peace be with you in the week ahead.