

“THE BIBLE DOESN’T SAY THAT: I – ‘GOD WON’T GIVE YOU MORE THAN YOU CAN HANDLE”

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I Corinthians 10:12-13

Matthew 11:28-30

I begin today with a special treat for parents who have growing children at home, and well, for anyone who has ever been a parent bringing up children. It’s the story of a woman in her thirties who hadn’t grown up in church, but found herself, one Sunday, when her husband was out of town on business, sneaking into the back row of the local church (after getting her children settled into the nursery) because well, she felt like something was missing in her life. She felt like a fish out of water, and did everything she could not to be noticed and not to make any stupid mistakes, like reading the wrong thing or standing up at the wrong time.

Lo and behold, it was just what she needed, and from then on, that church was home to her. She discovered what had been missing in her life – a relationship with the Lord – and joined in any number of things – Sunday School, worship, and, one thing very special, a weekday morning study group consisting of young mothers.

She loved that group, and they loved her. They supported one another, shared their hopes and dreams, shared their “kid” stories, and worked together on growing in their faith. Everything was going swimmingly, until . . .

One day, they were talking about “quiet time” – you know, the time you spend each day in quiet with the Lord, in prayer and meditation and reading. Clearly, finding quiet time was a challenge for all of them, as you can tell by these words that that mother wrote:

“Mothers of young children are famous for trying to fit in quiet time during nap time, which also happens to be laundry time, dishes time, shower time, and stare-off-into-space-in-stunned-silence time. From a teething baby, to a buzzing dryer to falling asleep at the table with her eyes open, more often than not, quiet time is a total bust for Mama Bear. So (she writes) it was no surprise when everyone in the group sadly agreed that a daily quiet time seemed like an impossible luxury.

Thus, they decided to study a book that was going to tell them how to do it.

And this is what the book said, and by the way, what made this young mother go ballistic! The book told them to “get up earlier! All you have to do is get

up and have your quiet time in the dark before anyone else is awake, because you can sleep when you're dead."

It actually said that! And that was the last straw for this exhausted young mother. She went off on a tirade and ended up by deciding that for young parents "quiet time" with the Lord ought to be called "loud time" instead. And she finished by saying this: "I will not be getting up earlier. Nope, I'm gonna honor God intentionally in my sleep, because I'm pretty sure God wants me to be the very best mother I can possibly be to my boys. I will listen for God's voice in the wilderness, and at the water park, and under McDonald's indoor play structure, because that is my daily loud time and God is faithful to meet me in the chaos. If that makes me a bad Christian, then I guess I'm a bad Christian. But tomorrow I'll be sleeping in. And I'm not even gonna worry about it, because I'm pretty sure I'll have plenty of quiet time with God when I'm dead!" (Jamie Wright, "My Life as a Bad Christian," *The Christian Century*, 4/11/18, pgs. 28-29)

I loved her story, but let me tell you why I told it to you this morning. Because I'm starting a brief, three-week sermon series this morning about things people say that, while well-intentioned, are often harmful. Like telling an exhausted, trying-as-best-she-can young mother, that she should get up early to have quiet time and not to worry, because she can sleep when she's dead. Oy vey!

Anyway, this series is loosely based on a book some of you may have read by Adam Hamilton entitled *Half Truths*, in which he addresses a number of sayings we recite without really knowing their origin, and clearly, without really knowing the impact they have on those to whom we speak them.

So today, we'll start with a saying that you, no doubt, have heard, and perhaps have even said – and it is this: "God won't give you more than you can handle." It's said when someone is going through a tough time, and you want to help them get through it, you want to reassure them that it's going to be okay.

You may have even thought you were quoting the Bible, but in fact, it isn't in the Bible. The closest thing to it was in this morning's Epistle lesson, but Paul didn't say "God won't give you more than you can handle," instead Paul said, "God will not let you be tested beyond your strength." Not that God sends the test, but that God is with you when tests come, to carry you through.

But here's the thing, when we tell someone that "God won't give you more than you can handle," here's how, as one person put it, they might take it: "What people are likely to hear is 'Hey, you should be able to handle this, because God wouldn't give you too much to handle. In fact, if you think you can't handle it, it's your own fault because you should be stronger.'" (On-line, The Rev. Elizabeth

Schindler, “God Won’t Give You More Than You Can Handle,” Faith UMC, Issaquah WA)

So instead of being comforted by your words, they end up feeling guilty for not being able to handle things – which, of course, is not what you intended at all.

The bottom line is that telling them that God gives them trouble is wrong. God doesn’t give trouble, but troubles are part of the human condition for many reasons. The Bible is filled with stories of people who encounter troubles, big troubles in their lives – but is God the source of them? No.

Rather, God is the one who walks with us through them.

I remember a long time ago reading about a famous pastor named William Sloane Coffin after the death of his son in a tragic accident. At the funeral, another clergyman, in an attempt to be comforting said this – that the boy’s death was God’s will, at which point Rev. Coffin leapt to his feet and shouted, “The heck it was! It wasn’t God’s will at all. When my son died, God was the first one who cried!”

That was very much what the famous Martin Luther said upon the death of his son when his wife confronted him in anger, “Where was God when our son died?” Luther’s reply? “The same place he was when his son died. He was there watching and weeping.” (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 137)

God doesn’t give us trouble, but God is there for us when trouble comes.

One young woman said that whenever people tell her that God won’t give her more than she can handle, she replies that even when life is hard, it’s never more than **he** can handle.

I think she’s got it absolutely right. Life is hard sometimes, people we love suffer some terrible things, so instead of saying “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” we would do better to say that “God is going to help you make your way through this.”

There’s a young pastor named Nate Pyle whose family went through a horrific three week period at one point – the death of a loved one, severe illness of another, terrible financial problems, and the straw that broke the camel’s back – after trying for a long time to conceive, he and his wife found out she was pregnant, but it was an ectopic pregnancy and she would miscarry. Every day seemed to carry more bad news for them, and he doesn’t say whether anyone said the “God won’t give you more than you can handle” line.

But he did say this: “In the midst of the pain, I am actively expecting God to do something. I don’t know what. I don’t know when. But I am expecting the God of resurrection to heal us. I am expecting God to restore us. I am expecting him to

redeem the situation. I am expecting him to do this and so I will be actively looking and waiting for him to do something. I believe expectant waiting can only happen when we exchange our feeble platitudes for an authentic faith that engages God with the full brunt of our emotion and pain. Only then can salvation be seen.” (Online, Nate Pyle, “Confronting the Lie: God Won’t Give You More Than You Can Handle”)

That young man knows the truth of suffering – and the truth is that all of us suffer hardships at one time or another, and many times there is no answer to the question “why?” We can drive ourselves crazy trying to answer it, or suffer unbearably if others convince us that God sent it to us, or, we can accept the fact that bad things happen, but when they happen, God is there – always – to help us make our way through it.

And one of the ways God works is through other people. So Adam Hamilton suggests that the next time you’re trying to comfort a friend who is hurting, instead of saying “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” say “How can I help you?” It’s as simple as that. “I’m sorry things are so bad, what can I do to help?” And when you do, yours is the face of Christ for that person.

You never know how God will use you. Maybe just the fact that you asked a hurting person how you could help made them realize they weren’t all alone. Or the fact that you helped by doing something seemingly small and insignificant like babysitting their kids for a few hours, or buying a few bags of groceries, or sitting with them in a hospital waiting room, or taking their hand to pray with them – all of these little things are God’s way of saying “I’m with you during these tough times.”

Oh friends, in this world in which we live today a lot of people are saying things they purport to be the Gospel truth, and while some of it is hard-hearted and hard-headed, a lot of it isn’t. Yet, as children of God, we would do better when trying to help someone who is struggling, to, instead of trying to fix it, simply offer to walk with them through it. “How can I help?”

Is there someone you know who is struggling right now? Why don’t you call them up or visit them and ask how you can help? Don’t try to fix things, don’t try to explain their suffering, just ask how you can help, and then, do whatever you can to do just that.

I know a lot of you do that already, because I hear stories about uplifting phone calls and notes and letters, or a bouquet of flowers arriving at just the right time, or a check appearing just when things seem their worst, or someone from the church showing up in a hospital waiting room. And I see it in bigger ways when we tell those whose lives have been crushed by natural disasters that some call “acts of

God” that we’ve got their back when we give money or show up in person to help them recover.

“How can we help?” When things are bad, it’s the best line we can utter to help someone who is hurting.

I want to close with some words of wisdom from a pastor in Washington State that go like this:

“We have the promise that God walks with us, that God’s grace will sustain us, that even the very worst thing is never the last thing, because God’s love wins in the end, and even death is overcome by life. We have the promise that nothing in life or in death or even in life beyond death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. We have the promise that God will never leave us or forsake us.

So, in hard times, even in the hardest of times, instead of saying to ourselves and others that God won’t give us more than we can handle, our response as followers of Jesus is to say to God and others, ‘I need help,’ (and I would add, ‘How can I help?’) and trust that God will be there.”

And then she finishes with this wonderful thought:

“Erase from your vocabulary the phrase ‘God won’t give you more than you can handle,’ and replace it with the words of Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble.”  
(Schindler, *ibid*)

Or, as we’re about to do – think on the words we’re about to sing – “Do not be afraid, I am with you.”

My friends, trouble comes in life, it just does, and people suffer. When they do, may we not make it worse but instead be signs of God’s ever-present love and care, as we simply say, “How can we help?”

May it be so.

Amen.