

**Half Truths: Beyond Cliché Theology**  
**Part I: Everything Happens For A Reason**  
**Countryside Community Church**  
**June 12, 2016**

***I. The Whole Truth***

**Video: Half Truths with Adam Hamilton**

1. Everything Happens for a Reason
2. God Helps Those Who Help Themselves
3. God Will Never Give You More Than You Can Handle
4. God Said It. I Believe It. That Settles It.
5. Love the Sinner. Hate the Sin.

How many of you have actually said a couple of these phrases before to someone? It's ok to raise your hand and admit it. Like Adam mentioned, we have all probably said them at one time or another. I know I have. These phrases have become a regular part of our vernacular with one another. Often times we find ourselves in situations where we just don't know what to say to someone who is hurting, or grieving, so some of these phrases just come out. We want to feel like we are responding in some way, trying to be a caring and concerned person or neighbor. And in the moment, just being present with that other person is more important than what we really say anyway, right? Well, sometimes.

Certainly a ministry of presence with another person is extremely important, but what we say during those times can make a difference too. More often than not, it's better not to say anything at all when there are no words to address the suffering. Many times a hug, or a held hand, is more soothing or comforting than saying something that ends up making the other person even more confused or somehow more angry or guilty than they did before we came to "help" them. Intentionally exploring these phrases that we all use, and looking closely at some of their unintended effects, is helpful for us so we don't end up hurting the very people we are trying to help. When we actually examine what it is we are saying in these half truths then we can see how we might better phrase the comfort we are truly trying to express.

Adam Hamilton, the author of the book we will be discussing for these next five weeks, is the Senior Minister of The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection near Kansas City. This congregation is experiencing many of the same expansion issues we are this summer, as they too are raising funds and designing a new building space of their own. Their project is slightly larger than ours, as their congregational membership is almost 19,000 and their new building will run nearly \$90 million!

Adam mentions in his book that there were several more phrases or "half-truths" out there in our culture, and that he had a really hard time narrowing all of them down to just the five that he discusses in his book. I'm sure all of us have heard more than these five, or even said them ourselves. One of the activities we'd like to add to our experience during this series is to start collecting more of these statements. We are asking you to write down those phrases that you have either used yourself, and then thought better of later, or those that others have said to you in a time of sadness or personal struggle that actually made you feel worse than you did before. We have a bulletin board just outside the sanctuary (to your right as you are exiting) that we would like to use for the collection of these sayings. We will list the ones we collect each week so that we can all see them and pay attention to why they aren't very helpful. Once we examine them a bit closer, we can then make the effort to re-phrase them in a truly comforting way. We all want to help, and this is one way we can examine our methods for helping others and get better and better at saying what we really mean to say. There are index cards and pens attached to the board where you can share, in the next five weeks, other "half-truths" by tacking them up on the board.

Why are these types of phrases called “half-truths?” Adam explains in his video that these phrases actually capture some element of truth within them, but then veer off course and end up missing the point entirely. In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, *“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31-32)*. Jesus is calling us to seek the whole truth, and to live lives of wholeheartedness. When we don’t intentionally consider what we actually say to one another, we are not living wholeheartedly. We are instead, merely getting by. How do we follow Jesus in seeking this whole truth? How do we begin living more wholeheartedly? We pay attention to one another. We practice talking to one another - intentionally listening to the need of the other, while intentionally seeking to address that need.

All of us have been on the receiving side of these kinds of phrases when we were struggling in some way. It was clear that these types of phrases were not really comforting to us, but we probably just shrugged them off knowing that the people who said them meant well, though they missed the mark a bit. I remember a time when I was facing surgery on my optic nerve. I spent a lot of time wondering if I would be able, after the surgery, to see the faces of my small children as they grew up. Many of the people in our church tried to comfort me with phrases like “Everything Happens for a Reason.” I can tell you, if I had truly believed that at the time, I would not be standing here discussing it with you this morning. If this phrase is true, God’s reason and will seem far distant from my own, and I’m not sure I want to know a God who would intentionally take my eyesight from me just to either teach me a lesson, or so I could be part of some other, larger plan.

Isn’t this what’s really being said in this phrase, that God is in control and has some kind of master plan all worked out? If this is true, then everything that happens, somehow, fits into this plan without us ever fully understanding it or having any say in it all. At least that’s what I heard, when someone said it to me back then. And far from comforting me, I can tell you, it terrified me. Heading into brain surgery thinking that God caused the tumor behind my eye for some kind of “reason” did not help. Thankfully I had a tremendously supportive husband around me who also had some thoughts about who God is and how we relate to one another, so I got a little different version of the idea. One which said God was with me in my fear, not the cause of it.

And this is the real point we are trying to convey, right? Not that God causes bad things to happen, but rather, God is with us when bad things do happen. To me, it’s all about who we think God is, and how we are related. Thich Nhat Hanh has written a book that speaks to the relatedness of creation to its source. Let’s listen:

### THIS IS, BECAUSE THAT IS

Let us visualize the ocean with a multitude of waves. Imagine that we are a wave on the ocean, and surrounding us are many, many waves. If the wave looks deeply within herself, she will realize that her being there depends on the presence of all the other waves. Her coming up, her going down, and her being big or small depend entirely on how the other waves are. Looking into yourself, you touch the whole, you touch everything— you are conditioned by what is there around you.

In the teaching of the Buddha, we learn that “this is, because that is.” “This is like this because that is like that.” It’s a very simple teaching but very deep. Because the other waves are, this wave is. Because the other waves are like that, this wave is like this. Touching yourself, you touch the whole. When you are capable of touching yourself deeply, and touching others deeply, you touch the other dimension, the dimension of the ultimate reality.

A wave is made of other waves. You can discover the relationship between that wave and all the other waves with the principle of cause and effect. But there is another level of relationship, and that is the relationship between the wave and the water. The wave is aware that she is made of the other waves, and at the same time she realizes that she is made of water too. It is very important for her to touch the water, the foundation of her being. She realizes that all the other waves are also made of water. In Buddhism we speak of the world of phenomena (dharmalakshana). You, me, the trees, the birds, squirrels, the creek, the air, the stars are all phenomena. There is a relationship between one

phenomenon and another. If we observe things deeply, we will discover that one thing contains all the other things. If you look deeply into a tree, you will discover that a tree is not only a tree. It is also a person. It is a cloud. It is the sunshine. It is the Earth. It is the animals and the minerals. The practice of looking deeply reveals to us that one thing is made up of all other things. One thing contains the whole cosmos.

When we hold a piece of bread to eat, if mindfulness is there, if the Holy Spirit is there, we can eat the bread in a way that will allow us to touch the whole cosmos deeply. A piece of bread contains the sunshine. That is not something difficult to see. Without sunshine, the piece of bread cannot be. A piece of bread contains a cloud. Without a cloud, the wheat cannot grow. So when you eat the piece of bread, you eat the cloud, you eat the sunshine, you eat the minerals, time, space, everything. One thing contains everything. With the energy of mindfulness, we can see deeply. With the Holy Spirit, we can see deeply. Mindfulness is the energy of the Buddha. The Holy Spirit is the energy of God. They both have the capacity to make us present, fully alive, deeply understanding, and loving. That is why in our daily life, we should live mindfully, we should live with the Holy Spirit so we can live every moment of our daily life deeply. If we do not live each moment deeply, there is no way we can touch the ultimate dimension, the dimension of the noumena.

It seems as though the wave and the water are two different things, but in fact they are one. Without water, there would be no wave, and if we remove the wave, there is no water. There are two levels and two kinds of relationships. When we speak of cause and effect, we have to be aware on what level we are speaking. Is it on the level of phenomena or on the level of noumena? It is very important not to mix up the two.

*(Hanh, Thich Nhat (2000-10-01). Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers (pp. 3-6). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.)*

## **II. God's Desire**

We live in a cause and effect world, right? So it makes sense that if God is in control, then God causes things to happen. But I believe, considering what we have just heard, and from what we know of the life and ministry of Jesus, that God created us together with all that is, and therefore we are all a part of the same source. What affects one part, affects all parts. God does not *cause* pain and suffering, but rather is *with us in* our pain and suffering. In creation God sets up a natural order to things, and sets boundaries, in order to distinguish one thing from another. Remember Eric's sermon last week on separating the waters of chaos to form the sky and the oceans? Setting creation within time and in history does not mean, however, that all creation is then continually controlled and determined by God. God has hopes and desires for creation. God creates laws or boundaries for creation, and hopes that we follow them. When we don't, there are consequences that inevitably follow. This doesn't mean that God is not in control, or that God is not present with us, but rather that God is not determining any specific outcome.

God includes us in this creation as well, right? Humanity was actually asked by God to help in creation. Remember in Genesis when we were asked to name the animals, and given "dominion" over creation? Dominion literally means to have the responsibility for something else. This is not "power over" but rather "responsibility for." In Genesis God gives humanity the responsibility of caring for the animals and all creation. We are to be stewards, or caretakers, of the earth. So when we talk about the sovereignty of God and whether God is in continual control of all things, we have to take this point into consideration. God actually trusts us to care for one another, and for the earth, and all creation. So how do you think we are doing with that?

There are consequences to bad choices and not following our call to steward the earth and creation. Bad things do happen. There are natural disasters, there are cancers that cannot be treated, there are defenseless children being abused in the world, there are people being brutally forced from their homes and having to risk the lives of their children to flee into foreign countries where they have no idea how they will live. God does not *cause* these things. God comforts us in the midst of them. It is for us to choose life, a whole-hearted life, for things to be different. Deuteronomy says *"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set*

*before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20a).*

When life seems to come at us with unexplainable phenomena, let us not respond with phrases like “Everything Happens for a Reason.” By saying this, we are ignoring our responsibility in creation, and we are denying our call to truly care for the person who is standing right in front of us. We may not understand exactly why bad things happen, but let us not blame God for things we don’t understand. Instead, let us admit that things might seem random on the surface, but that oftentimes, randomness isn’t really random. Let us instead seek the order often found within the randomness. Let us explore ways we might better “steward” the earth and creation. Let us find better ways to care for one another, so we might minimize as much of our pain and suffering as we possibly can. God is there with us too. God is with us in the exploring, the seeking, the comforting, and the empathy we share. God is in us, and we are in God.

As we listen to our musical offering, let us consider what all of this means in our living whole-heartedly. Ask yourself, *“They say everything happens for a reason. How do you understand the will of God when bad things happen?”*

### **III. Working Together**

#### **Scripture: Romans 8:26-30**

*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

How then do we go about “choosing life” as Deuteronomy calls us? We trust in creation and the Creator. We participate in the activity we see God doing in the world around us. In the Romans text we just heard, Paul reminds us that even when we don’t know what to say, or how to care for one another as we ought to, the Spirit is there with us, interceding with sighs too deep for words. For though God does not control or determine creation, God is continually active in it, working together with all that is, for the good of all that is.

We are co-creators with God in our living. God is present with us, and working all things together for good, but this does not dismiss our responsibility for participating with God in creation. We are called to be about caring for one another and seeking the order that lies in the midst of the randomness. We are called to be the “Reason” in our half truth “Everything Happens for a Reason.” You see, it really is partially true. Everything does happen for a reason, if that “reason” is *US*. If we are using this phrase to dismiss our responsibilities for one another and for all creation, then it is only half true. If instead we see it as a call to act within creation, participating with God for the good of creation, then we are living whole-heartedly.

There are a couple of “Memes” (or quotes) floating around on Facebook that come to mind when I hear this phrase, “Everything Happens for a Reason.” The first one Adam Hamilton uses in his study of this half-truth. It reads “Everything Happens for a Reason... But sometimes the reason is you’re stupid and make bad decisions!” This really turns this half-truth around! Instead of blaming God for everything, it addresses our own responsibility for what is happening in the world around us. Through this understanding, we claim our role as co-creator and can more readily hear the call of God to work together in moving all things toward good.

Much of this participation starts with listening for our call to act in the world. We intentionally listen for this call through prayer. A second meme is the one from Pope Francis that reads “You pray for the hungry. Then

you feed them. That's how prayer works." If when we pray, we pray only for God to provide food to those who are hungry, without then being part of how God accomplishes this, then we are only living and praying half-heartedly. If however we pray for God to provide food for the hungry and then ask God how we might be part of the solution to hunger in our community, then we are beginning to see the whole truth of having dominion in creation. Once we pray to be a part of the answer to our own prayer, we need then to truly be listening for that answer, and act on whatever calling we hear.

We have changed our traditional Pastoral Prayer a bit for this series so that we might be more intentional in our prayers for one another. Each week we will be praying for a specific group of God's creation, and then we will be asking you to spend some time considering how you might be part of the answer to our prayers. In the bulletin each week, we are providing possible avenues for acting on your prayers. If you are already participating in some way with God, then fabulous! Keep doing it! If not, consider reaching out and offering your help in some way toward the issues facing all of us in creation. Let us all work together to make this half-truth, the whole truth, as we live together in the love God creates within each of us. Amen.

**9:00 Musical Offering:** *Mendelssohn's "Songs Without Words" played by Alex Ritter*

**11:00 Communion:** *"Let's Work Together" sung by Julia Olynyk*

## **RESPONSIVE PRAYER**

*"Prayer changes things" is a statement that could be a half truth when we fail to realize that what most needs changing lies within. Starting this Sunday during our responsive prayers, we will pause to listen to our still-speaking God, expecting to hear how we might be part of the answers to our prayers.*

*This week our prayers were made for those experiencing war; those who have had to flee their homes seeking refuge elsewhere in the world; those experiencing grief, and for an awareness of how we might better care for the environment.*

*Organizations to Contact at Countryside:*

*Faith and the Environment – Environment Issues*

*Center for Faith Studies – Refugee Welcome and Care*

*Stephen Ministry – Grief*

*Organizations to Contact in Omaha:*

*Lutheran Family Services: Grief Counseling and Refugee Services*

*Grief Share – support groups for grief*

**OUR WORSHIP HAS CONCLUDED. NOW OUR SERVICE BEGINS.**