

Half Truths: Beyond Cliché Theology
Part 3: God Will Never Give You More Than You Can Handle
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Countryside Community Church
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I. Is This A Test?

Music Video: Carrie Newcomer “I Heard an Owl”

Scripture: I Corinthians 10:13

This is the third week in our Half-Truths series. We have already discussed the half-truths “Everything happens for a reason,” and “God helps those who help themselves.” During our discussions we have asked all of you to come up with more half-truth phrases that you have heard, or even said yourself, and pin them to our bulletin board in the foyer. Here are a couple of the half-truths from our board:

- It’s God’s will
- Everything happens for the best
- The “good” people will be healthy and prosper
- “She wasn’t really yours, anyway...”
- The more you give the more you get
- Insinuating that prayer leads to recovery, so losing someone means that they were not properly prayed for...
- They are in a better place
- God needed another angel
- Its all part of God’s plan

Many of these phrases are used at times when people are at a loss of words to comfort when someone they care about is suffering. But often times these phrases cause even more suffering, rather than the comfort they intended. And, as we have been discussing these last couple of weeks, these kinds of phrases send a message about God that might not be intended either. Does God really cause bad things to happen in the world in order to teach someone a lesson? Is there really a master plan out there with a pre-determined end-time that God manipulates us all toward? Would God really cause someone’s death just so there could be another angel in heaven? How many angels does heaven really need? Are these the ideas we really believe about God? And what about our experience with humanity? Is it true that only “good” people prosper?

Our half-truth for today is “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” Now here is one that we’ve probably all heard and even said ourselves many times. There is some truth in this phrase, right? We’re all still here. We have come through 100% of our struggles thus far, right? Or have we? Is merely surviving, the point? Is being alive and sitting in church a sure sign that we are “handling” things? What do we call this room we are sitting in together? A “sanctuary,” right? What does “sanctuary” mean? It is a place of refuge, a place where we are safe or sheltered from pursuit, danger, or trouble. The very idea of sanctuary is that we all have a place we can go to precisely when we are feeling overwhelmed and can’t seem to handle things!

The Bible is full of stories of people not being able to handle things. If simply being alive is the definition of handling things, then all of the people in the Bible have failed! Even Jesus died. Surely Able was not handling things with Cain. And Stephen was not really handling things when his peers were stoning him to death. What about John the Baptist when Herod’s wife called for his beheading? Or the guy dying on the side of the road before the Samaritan came along? And what about our own experiences? Surely the folks in Orlando, San Bernadino, and Sandy Hook were given more than they could handle, and the continual struggles in the Middle East show us a situation that no one seems to be able to handle. And, the millions of refugees? All of the people living in abusive relationships or the children who roam the streets homeless? Our lives are full of

people who are suffering with more than they can handle. How would anyone feel if our response to suffering is simply to say, “Hang in there, God doesn’t give us more than we can handle?”

So where did this phrase originate? Adam Hamilton, the author of our half-truth series, suggests that it might have started from a misinterpretation of our text from I Corinthians: ¹³*No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.* (I Corinthians 10:13) The word “tested” in Greek is *πειρασμός* (*peirasmos*) meaning to test or tempt. The idea in I Corinthians then is not that God gives us tests for our strength, but rather that temptation is something that happens to all of us. God is not the one doing this to us, rather we, ourselves, are tempted by things outside of God’s desire for us. God is the one actually sitting beside us helping us find a way out of the temptation, not the one causing it. If we were left alone to handle things, we would, more often than not, end up following that which tempts us rather than living in the abundance already provided for us. We are the ones creating havoc. God is the one helping us find a way out when there doesn’t seem to be one.

I think the biblical translation that helps us understand this passage a little better is from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson. This translation reads: *“No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he’ll never let you be pushed past your limit; he’ll always be there to help you come through it.”* (*The Message*) God helps us in our time of need and suffering so that the darkness does not overcome us. When we have more than we can handle, because clearly we often do, we are not alone. God is there with us, and we are loved.

II. Repent: Change Your Whole Way Of Thinking

Video: Adam Hamilton

Here is the shift in thinking in order for us to turn this half-truth around and understand the full truth of it: Its not that God won’t give us more than we can handle, but rather God comes along beside us to help us handle all that life gives us. This shift helps us reorder our thinking, doesn’t it? Here, God is not seen as some kind of superior judge who stands over us, experimenting with our lives, just to see how much we can stand before we break, but rather, God is a loving, compassionate companion in our struggles, helping us find a way through them.

God helps us in our struggles by sending us the Spirit through the love and compassion each of us have for one another. In our earlier half-truth discussions, we talked about how we say these things as a way to excuse ourselves from having to be engaged in each other’s lives. I think this is the real danger of these half-truths and why we need to expose them. If we are using these clichés in order to shirk our responsibilities to one another, then surely we are not following God’s desire for us. God’s creation includes us to be there for one another, nurturing and strengthening one another, cultivating the earth, not destroying it. If we tell one another just to “hang in there” without helping each other figure out how we might do that, then we are ignoring our call from God in creation.

Adam Hamilton tells a story of a woman who had just lost her husband and her son in a car accident. Clearly there is no way to “handle” this type of tragedy in life. He tells us about a group of friends and family that surrounded this woman and supported her within her suffering. They came to her home and helped her get through the everyday ordinary things in life. They fixed her breakfast and made sure she was eating. They provided food for visitors who came to the house. They did her laundry, kept her house clean, and took care of the other children for her. They didn’t show up and say, “hang in there, you can handle this!” They came alongside her and helped her handle things. They helped her get through each and every day, until she was better able to get up in the morning on her own. This is how the Spirit works through us. This is how God is present with us.

We know we all need help from each other in times of struggle, right? So I wonder, why are we so reluctant to offer it to one another? And why are we even more reluctant to ask for help from one another? Remember that story from our Gospel writers about Peter and the disciples being terrified when Jesus comes to them, walking on the water? Peter plucks up his courage and tries this himself, only to sink when the fear of what he is attempting registers in his brain. Peter does not just allow himself to be swallowed by the waves thinking that God won't give him more than he can handle. Peter reaches up his hand, crying out for help. And Jesus grasps his hand pulling him into the safety of the boat.

How we handle things we are given in life is by realizing that we are not in this life alone. We are in this life together. We offer help, and we receive it from others. That's how love works. We don't keep score of who gives more, or who needs more. We just come alongside one another and pitch in where we can, knowing that others will pitch in for us when we need it. I Corinthians says "*No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone.*" We all struggle, and we are all in it together.

During our musical meditation I'd like us to think about those times in life when we have struggled. Have you ever felt trapped in a situation, overwhelmed and seeing no way out? How was it resolved?

III. A Very Present Help In Trouble

Scripture: Psalm 46:1-2 "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

²*Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;*"

A couple of years ago we did a sermon series called "A Way Out of No Way" where we explored the biblical stories of people with their backs up against a wall with no way out of their situation. They cried out to God for help, and God was there with them, renewing creation through the cleansing waters of the flood with Noah; renewing the covenant with Abraham and Sarah in their call to make a great nation; Being present with the Israelites as they fled from Pharaoh only to be trapped between Pharaoh's army and the Red Sea. The covenant established by God in creation sustained and empowered humanity in these stories to live as a blessing in creation. God continues this covenant with us. What we learn from these stories, and what we know from our own experiences, is that God's covenant with us is never static or complete. Rather, it is an ongoing relationship, constantly renewed by God, because we always seem to be tempted to take matters into our own hands, only to find our backs against a wall, crying out yet again for God to make a way where there is no way.

We have, as a global community, come through the terrible struggles of our history. We found an alternative way to live with one another when faced with the horrific actions of the Christians toward the Muslims in the Crusades and against the Jews in the Holocaust. God did not cause these crimes against humanity, we did. God was there with us in our suffering, working toward reconciliation. Coming through such experiences does not justify the pain in anyway. Humanity will forever be scarred from these experiences, just as Cain carried his scars with him throughout his life. There is no excuse for our actions toward one another, but there is always an alternative choice to live in a world where we engage with each other in our suffering, rather than being the cause of our struggles with one another. God promises to be with us to help us find a way to do this.

Within our current global situation, we have a choice to be part of the solution rather than to ignore our responsibility toward one another. We have been given the resources to reach out and welcome in the refugees who have been forced to flee from their homes. Through the Tri Faith Initiative we have been given the opportunity to reach out to our Muslim and Jewish neighbors in love, building relationships and breaking down assumptions and stereotypes, rather than living in fear of one another. And we have been given the capacity to change our carbon footprint on this earth so that we leave behind a planet fit for our children to live abundantly. The question remains, will we choose to live into these opportunities? Will we use the

resources we have been given to be a part of the answers to our prayers, or will we continue to excuse our lack of responsibility for creation, by blaming God and everyone else for our situation?

How can each of us be *Emmanuel*, God with us, for one another in this world? We can start by examining the things we say to one another. We can consciously face each another and participate in each others lives, helping one another, instead of hurting each other. We can choose to step up and encourage one another instead of tearing each other down. We can be the ones who provide opportunities for love, rather than hate.

It is true, in a way, that God never gives us more than we can handle, but only because God gives us each other and helps us handle whatever we've been given. Amen.

IV. Communion