

Wait, What?...

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
II Hezekiah 4:11-18
Pastor Bill Chadwick March 26, 2017

The recommended lectionary reading for today is the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which I just preached on a few months ago, shortly before we started following the Narrative Lectionary. So I thought I would instead address an issue that has been percolating for a long time for me. It's a sermon designed for a Healing Service Sunday.

First a story. A congregation was holding their periodic healing service just like we are doing today. When the pastor announced that now it was time for the prayers for healing an older man in the front pew said, "What?" The pastor repeated, "It's time now for the healing service, Ronald. Would you like us to pray for you for anything?"

"Uhh...Okay. I guess I could use prayers for my hearing?"

"Excellent. Come right on up here, Ronald." Then the pastor laid his hands on both of Ronald's ears and prayed loudly for God to heal Ronald's hearing. When finished, he asked, "So how is your hearing now, Ronald?"

"Um. I don't know. It's not until Thursday."

I would like us to think together about some phrases that are a regular part of American life and consider together whether they in fact represent biblical truth. As someone who uses words for a living, I am acutely aware of the need for precise language. As Mark Twain so beautifully put it: "The **difference between the almost right word and the right word** is really a large matter—it's the **difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.**"

Let's look at a few common phrases.

"God helps those who help themselves." (sermon slide #1)

Let's turn to where we find that in the Bible. Grab your pew Bibles and turn to II Hezekiah 4:13. Raise your hand when you've got it.

Okay. Stop. I don't mean to embarrass anyone. There isn't a book of the Bible named Second Hezekiah...or First Hezekiah, for that matter. And that phrase, "God helps those who help themselves," isn't in the Bible, either.

Anyone know where the phrase is from? Yes, Benjamin Franklin, precisely from Poor Richard's Almanac. The phrase "God helps those who help themselves" is a rallying cry for American self-reliance; it's not biblical theology.

How might we re-phrase it to better fit the God we read about in the Bible?

“God helps those who can’t help themselves” (sermon slide #2) Or “God helps those who help others.” (sermon slide #3)

Next phrase: “There, but for the grace of God go I”? (sermon slide #4)

How many of you have said that? I have. I’ve used that phrase until quite recently, when one day I *thought* about it. What am I saying by that phrase? I’m saying, “That person described by the ‘There’ in the phrase is obviously on God’s (expletive deleted) list. This poor person with the physical challenge or who was born in abject poverty or whatever, obviously didn’t receive God’s grace. But *I* did! Really?

Theologically much better to say, “There, but for utterly random luck...and absolutely no other reason, go I.”

Third. One day early last week Kris and I walked on the boardwalk in the Turkey Creek Sanctuary in southeast Florida, hoping to see manatees and alligators. It’s sort of like a boardwalk through the jungle. Many of the planks in the nearly two-mile long boardwalk had inscriptions carved into them, usually just names. (Sermon SLIDE #5 of boardwalk) This inscription took several planks. It is difficult to read, so I will read it for you. It is a memorial in honor of someone who died young and it has the person’s name and then the quote, “God took him to prove that God only takes the very best.” (sermon slide #6: “God only takes the very best.”)

Seriously? Do you want to worship that God? And what does it say about those of us who haven’t yet been “taken”? “Thank heavens I’m not the best!”

A pastor friend of mine told me about attending the funeral of a 23 year-old woman. The officiating pastor said, “Evidently God needed her as a flower in his garden in heaven.” My friend said, “I was so horrified by that that I was dumbstruck and couldn’t move. But I have regretted ever since that I didn’t stand up right there in the funeral and take issue with that blasphemy!”

Assertions like these—“God helps those who help themselves,” “There but for the grace of God go I” and “God takes the very best...”—are violations of one of the Commandments. Which one? *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.* (sermon slide #7) Unlike what most of us were taught in confirmation class, I don’t believe that that commandment is primarily about swearing, using the name of God in a profane way. Rather, I believe that its core meaning is that we are not to attribute to God things that clearly do not belong to God, like God “taking” our loved ones at an early age.

Or here’s one of my favorite examples of taking the Lord’s name in vain: saying that “AIDS is God’s judgment on gays.” Have you heard that? Let’s think about that. If that were the case, that AIDS is God’s judgment, it would mean that while God might hate gay men, God really loves gay women, who have a lower incidence of STDS than gay men or

straight people. To say “AIDS is God’s judgment on gays” is a statement that makes no sense, logically or theologically.

Moving on. Another phrase: “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” (sermon slide #8) A mother whose three year-old daughter contracted an illness and died, was told this a number of times by well-meaning friends trying to comfort her. “You’ll be okay. God won’t give you more than you can handle.”

Her logical response was to think, “If only I weren’t so strong my daughter would still be alive.” (Harold Kushner in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*)

Actually, I believe that God doesn’t give us more than we can handle. That’s true; *God* doesn’t! But LIFE sometimes does! It just does ... sometimes give us more than we can handle. Yet often we keep trying to muster up the strength to handle it on our own. While all along we have this wonderful community, the Oak Grove family, eager to help us bear our troubles. And we have the promise of Jesus in Matthew 11:28: “Come to me, all you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

Another: “Everything happens for a reason.” (sermon slide #9) Really? That may be of comfort when your car breaks down or you don’t get that anticipated promotion at work, but does it work when an earthquake wipes out a village or when any child dies? That phrase “Everything happens for a reason” is not in the Bible. Sometimes there just are no easy answers. And I trust that God grieves alongside of us, in our pain. (blank sermon slide #10)

Bottom line for me is that I simply refuse to believe that God gives us horrible tragedies, to make us better people or for any other reason.

I could go on and on. My initial rough draft had four more examples.

Let me finish with a story I’ve shared before, but not for a while, so many of you have not heard it.

This happened maybe 35 years ago. I was living and working in Stillwater...not the prison, but the Presbyterian Church. My dad, in his 70s, had his second hip replaced. The first one had been a breeze and he was up and around within hours. This second one not so much; it was more the Murphy’s Law version of hip replacement. Things did not go well during surgery and went downhill from there. Several days later he was still in Methodist Hospital. My siblings all lived on the west side of town near the hospital so I let them do the majority of the visiting. But then my older brother Cal called one afternoon and said, “If you have the time I think Dad could use a visit from you.”

“Okay,” I said. “Should I come right away?”

“No, no. Whenever it’s convenient, tonight or tomorrow is fine.”

“Okay, I’ll go over tonight,” and I went back to whatever I was working on.

But I couldn’t concentrate and I had this strong feeling, “I think I need to go now.” So I hopped in my car and drove across the Twin Cities to St. Louis Park. By that time I had been a pastor for a few years and had done a lot of hospital calling, so I knew what people looked like when they were on the road to recovery and I knew what people looked like when they were on the other road, and as I turned the corner into my dad’s hospital room and looked at him in agony there in his bed I immediately saw that he was on the wrong road. I was dumbfounded at how different he looked from two days earlier. Clearly, this was the look of a dying man. My mom didn’t look so good, either.

It was just the three of us in the room and after a few minutes of chitchat, with my heart just broken and aching with sadness and fear and dread, I said, “How about we pray together?” So my mom stood on the other side of the bed and I stood on this side and the three of us held hands in a circle and shut our eyes. I prayed something like this, “Dear Jesus...” (Now, in seminary we were taught to pray to God, not to Jesus, but when I’m in trouble I pray to Jesus.) “Dear Jesus, you gave sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf and made the lame to walk. Please, please heal Dad.”

And into that hospital room, and into our hearts, came an incredible sense of peace, of holiness and love. A palpable sense of the presence of Jesus. When I opened my eyes I was literally surprised not to be able to see Jesus. For it felt like there were four of us holding hands.

An amazing experience. Nothing like I had known before or since.

And from that moment, Dad started to get better.

But that’s not the point. A few years later he died from something else. The point is this: it didn’t matter any longer if Dad got better or not. All that mattered was that Jesus was there.

In life and in death, we belong to God.

Amen? Amen.