

January 6, 2019

God Won't Give You More Than You Can Handle

Danielle Jones

1 Corinthians 10:13 and 2 Corinthians 1:8-11

So, this morning is the first in a four part sermon series that we, as your ministers, are collaborating on. The title of it is "That's Not in the Bible: White Lies and Half Truths." So, as we begin, let's admit that sometimes we all say things that we don't really believe, but we say them anyway because we hope they will help someone we care about. We tell little white lies maybe to erase the truth that we know might lead to some pain. "Does this dress look good on me?" Don't answer that, but if you do, I know you'll say "yes" because, even if the answer is "no," sometimes the little white lies we tell keep our relationships intact, and that is why we tell them. We've learned through life experience that we don't have to share every little thought or feeling that we have about someone or something, particularly when we know it will hurt them for no good reason. Other times we say things that we haven't fully thought through that turn out really to only be half true at best.

Instead of sitting in the discomfort of tragic news that we hear from a friend, we may try to short-circuit the discomfort by saying something like, "Well, everything happens for a reason." Instead of honoring the grief that accompanies certain seasons of our lives, we may hear someone say to us, "Hang in there. This too shall pass." Rather than doing the hard theological work of really digging into scripture to figure out what it says about a difficult topic, we may lean back on the old phrase, "Well, hate the sin; love the sinner." These phrases can seem helpful on the surface, but as we dig into them, they contain some theology that is, at best, incorrect, and, at worst, damaging to us and others. So, for the next four weeks, John, Rustin, Lindy and I are going to take a look at these all-too-familiar phrases, phrases that we admit we've even used at times, phrases that roll off our tongues pretty easily but that don't do much in bringing hope to one another in how we really navigate difficult seasons with God.

So, our scripture passage this morning is really two scripture passages, both written by the Apostle Paul. If you're looking to find someone who's been through every challenge and has still come out with his faith intact, Paul is your guy. Shipwrecked, thrown in prison, plagued by what he calls a thorn in the flesh throughout his life, Paul's words are actually the words that have been twisted to help us land on the phrase we have for this morning: God won't give you more than you can handle. So, our first task is that passage that people have twisted into what we're talking about today, a piece of scripture that will shed light on that, and, then, the second piece of scripture is a piece that will definitely show you that that's not true. You will come up against more than you can handle just as Paul himself did. So, let's listen now as Lindy reads our two scripture passages for today.

(Lindy reads 1 Corinthians 10:13 and 2 Corinthians 1:8-11.)

Please pray with me. God, we do thank you for your word that is a light unto our path and a lamp unto our feet, and we pray this morning that you would illuminate the path before us as we all consider the suffering that we face, and as we seek to find you in the midst of it all. In Jesus name. Amen.

So, God won't give you more than you can handle. I have to be honest. I selected this half-truth because I kind of like it. I would say over the years when I've faced my own trials and challenges, at times I've found myself reciting this in my head for encouragement, only to find that in time it breaks down somewhere because we start to see we have much more than we can handle, or, if we don't have more that we can handle, someone else we know does. I remember a Christmas break in college when I came back to school, gathered up with all my friends, and we share what was happening over Christmas break. This was before social media and email, even. So, we had to actually talk to each other and share these stories, and as we're doing that, we're talking about gifts received and trips taken and time off and jobs that people had on break, and one of our friends didn't pipe up at all until finally someone said, 'Well, how was your break?' And, she said, 'Well, our house actually burned down over Christmas.' We were absolutely dumbfounded, and we knew without a doubt that she had more than she could handle because she was the daughter of a single mother, and she had been doing her best to stay in school at all, and now they had lost everything.

Two falls ago, something like this happened again as I had gathered the moms of the daughters of the Girl Scout Troop that I had helped lead to go through what we were doing for the year, and everybody was exchanging stories of summer camp and summer trips and lots of fun and lots of gratitude that the kids were back in school, and our friend Keri had said nothing, and somebody finally said, 'Keri, what's going on. How was your summer?' And she said, 'Well, we found out my husband has cancer, and they don't really know where it started,' and she went through this litany of appointments they had been through and treatments he was undergoing and in the focus of these moments, and I'm sure you can call to mind a multitude of moments that you've had, I was sure that my friends had more they could handle. So, was God the one who had given them more than they could handle? I know I didn't believe that. Did they deserve what was coming to them? Absolutely not. So, how do we navigate these tough, challenging situations when they come, these moments when someone we love are completely overcome and grasping for some kind of hope? What do we say to them? How do we encourage them? There has to be more than just saying, 'God won't give you more than you can handle.' Well, Paul's letters to the Corinthians tackle some of these kinds of questions.

To set the stage for Paul's writings, I think it's helpful to remind ourselves that in the Old Testament - we did this over December, reminded ourselves of these prophecies, these prophetic words spoken in Isaiah about the Messiah who was to come. Those prophecies are held in tension with other predictions in the Old Testament, predictions we more often talk about during Lent and Easter, about one who would come and suffer on behalf of God's people. What we know is that this Messiah and this suffering servant, he's called, come together in the person of Jesus Christ, both of these prophecies manifesting themselves in the one person of Jesus. And, so, Paul, with this truth as his backdrop, writes to the Corinthians to encourage them in how to pursue their life with Christ. So, the first passage that Lindy read this morning is the passage that our phrase actually finds its roots in. 'God won't give you more than you can handle' comes from this passage. 'No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with temptation, he will provide a way to escape so that you can endure it.'

Now, in the case of 1 Corinthians Chapter 10, verse 13, Paul was writing to the Corinthians to remind them that they would face temptation. Earlier in Chapter 10, Paul goes through the Israelite's journey

with God and highlights the temptations that the Israelites face as they follow God. He lists that they were tempted by idolatry, sexual immorality. They tested God, and they complained about God, what God was doing and what God was failing to do in their eyes. Paul then says to the Corinthians, in the verse before the one that Lindy read, "You think you're standing on firm ground, but be careful that you don't also fall." Paul was trying to highlight that temptations are part of the journey with God. They are not unique to just the Israelites, but these are the temptations that all of us face when following God. I think we could testify to that in this room today. We play a part in idolatry when we put things in front of God. We have a choice to pursue healthy expressions of our sexuality or to pursue unhealthy expressions of our sexuality. We can test God or trust God. We can believe that God is working for good on our behalf, or we can complain about how God is acting on our behalf. So, the context shows us that when we face temptations, God will provide resources for us. In the same way that the Israelites found themselves at these crossroads through a fork in the road, we find ourselves in the same places in the midst of temptation.

What the passage does not talk about are the trials and suffering that we experience in our lives. That word temptation is needed to understand that passage fully, and it doesn't talk about what happens in suffering, which brings us to the second passage that Lindy read. It's a first-hand account of just a slice of the suffering that Paul experienced in his life with God. Paul is brutally honest with the Corinthians and with us that God has not made his life magically easier. He tells not just the half-truth but the full truth, that he has undergone enormous challenges in his life, and he wants the Corinthians to know that their prayers helped see him through, that God helped see him through and that these things will be true of their story as well. They will have suffering, and they need one another in God to find their way through. Now, the Corinthians were hearing from other teachers, who were claiming to be following God, that God would actually make their lives easier. So, Paul is saying, "Actually that is not true. Your life does not automatically get easier, but you will find God in the midst of what you are experiencing."

Paul tells them this by sharing these snippets of his stories. Now, throughout the letters of Paul, we see our natural expectations of the way that life works turned upside down. We see God take what is low and despised and even weak to accomplish his purposes. God uses a baby to reveal himself instead of coming in power and in might. God uses the brokenness of humans - women who are sinful, men who have children who are dying. He uses all of these extraordinary stories to make the truth known. Paul also tells us that, when we face these suffering, comfort comes through affliction. Paul uses the phrase sufficiency comes through God when we are insufficient. Life, we see in Christ, comes through death. Blessing through suffering. Salvation through grief. Abundance through poverty. Paul even goes so far as to say, "boasting in my own suffering so that the work of God can be on display." This is the hope that Paul longs to give us in the midst of our suffering. Paul reminds us that we actually will inevitably face what we can't handle, but Paul also shows us that, when we do face more than we can handle, there are ways that we can find God in the midst of those challenges.

So, what do we make of all this? First, it's important to always remember that suffering is part of our human experience. The brokenness of this world means that we all will suffer. Jesus, as the Son of God, that Messiah that we're longing for, even Jesus who is coming to heal the world suffers because suffering is a part of being human, and, in fact, it's Jesus' suffering that shows us that he really was human. Second, it's important to remember that God is not the one who brings suffering upon us. The

phrase, “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” makes it sound like God’s the one who’s handing you the suffering, and, when we have that in our hearts and minds, we end up questioning God. We’re left questioning God’s character, and we become angry with God when we are facing more than we can handle. We feel that God has done something to us instead of looking for God’s presence with us in our suffering, and finally, when we talk about God giving us more than we can handle – that last part “we can handle” – makes us feel like we have to do the work of figuring this out, and if we can’t, we’re somehow failing. We begin to feel ashamed that we can’t handle it, and then we start to look to our own resources, and we don’t have enough to overcome the trial that leads to more shame that can keep us from finding God in the midst of that suffering. Focusing on ourselves and our own resources doesn’t give us very much comfort in the midst of suffering, but focusing on God and God’s resources can bring us much comfort and hope when we realize that we don’t have to go it alone, that God has the ability to bring us peace that passes all understanding and endurance beyond what we could ever muster on our own.

When Paul was wrestling with that thorn in his flesh, he pleaded with God three different times to take it away, he tells us, and God finally says to him, “My Grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness,” and Paul’s response to that is this, “Therefore, I will boast even more of my weakness so that the power of Christ can rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, I’m content with being weak, with insults, hardships, persecutions and even calamities.” And here’s the beautiful phrase we’ve heard before, “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” It is precisely in the moment that we are faced with more than we can handle that we have no choice but to reach out to God and to community, and what we find when we do reach out to God in those moments is that we follow a God who understands our suffering because he has suffered, too, and we find, through the stories of Jesus’ life and the early followers that we have recorded in scripture, that suffering is not actually the end of the story. It is, instead, a new beginning, a new opportunity to experience God’s grace and power in ways that we just can’t experience when we are strong.

So, I think if Paul were here right now, he’d say, “Bring on the suffering.” I’m not quite ready to say that, but I am ready to admit that again and again we are all going to experience more than we can handle, and I’m ready to claim that truth that it is not God that gives it to us, but it is God that meets us in the center of our suffering, releasing us from having to handle it ourselves and giving us the grace to navigate the journey step by step. In the midst of every challenge that each one of us will face, individually and as a community, we have another opportunity for God’s love and grace to be on display in our lives because, when we are weak, God is strong, and, as Paul said, we have a chance for God’s strength to shine in our weakness, for God’s sufficiency to be made known through our insufficiency, for life to be revealed even when something in us and around us dies and for blessing to amazingly come even when we are in pain.

So, we will face more than we can handle, but we will also be met by a God who understands what we are going through and is committed to shepherding us through along the way.

Let us pray. God, it’s too overwhelming to think about praying for more suffering to come, and I don’t think that’s even what you want for us to pray, but when the suffering does come, we pray that we will have the courage to reach out to you, O God, and to find you right in the center of it all, carrying us

through. We are reminded this morning that we don't have to go it alone, and we don't even have to handle it. We have been given the community of faith to walk alongside us. So, be gentle with us, we pray, and give us courage, we pray, and thank you, God, for examples like Paul to show us the way. In Jesus' name. Amen.