

Oregon City United Methodist Church
18955 S. South End Road
Oregon City, OR 97045

Rev. Michael Benischek
503-522-9807
September 11, 2016

Series: Stop Saying These Things!

Sermon: God Won't Give You More Than You Can Handle

I Corinthians 10:13 (NIV)

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

Psalm 46:1-3 (NIV)

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.

Sermon

We're in this sermon series on things Jesus didn't say, Christian clichés, phrases that have become so frequent and habitual in our spiritual lives that we've stopped really examining what they mean or where they come from and, while we intend them to be helpful, they rarely are. These are things we should stop saying. We started this series with, "Everything happens for a reason," agreeing that there are reasons for most things that happen but God's plan is not usually the reason. Last week, I heard about a former youth group member of mine from a church a while back, who was killed in a car accident over the weekend. I looked up obituary on the funeral home website, where you can also post comments. And I saw a comment that said, "Dear Jill, I'm sorry about Kaitlyn, but everything happens for a reason". Another one said, "I don't know why God would take your child, but I'm sure there's a purpose." I wanted to post a link to last week's sermon that says that stuff happens. Not God's fault, not the devil's fault, but life and death happens. We can find the good, but not for one instant should you believe that this was God's will. That's why I'm doing this sermon series - to get us away from these high platitudes that have no real basis, this sinking sand foundation that these phrases have. And so it is this morning, as we tackle the phrase, God won't give you more than you can handle.

Like "everything happens for a reason," this phrase usually comes out in times of great distress: a situation at work has become almost untenable, a relationship with a child has gotten worse and worse, a loved one is under the power of addiction, the cancer's back again, you've lost another friend, you're in the grip of depression, you aren't sure how to go on: and a friend, thinking they're being encouraging, offers the phrase, "God won't give you more than you can handle." What they mean, and what I wish they would say, is, "No matter how hard things are, you're going to make it through." And that's probably true: no matter how hard things are right now, you are going to make it through, especially if you have the support of a friend in a faith community. But the phrase, "God won't give you more than you can handle," is not from Scripture, and in fact doesn't make sense in light of what we see in Scripture. It's problematic and, as one of my friends said this week, it's even cruel.

Imagine that you were on the Titanic. And you happen to be one of the ones that made the icy water, after the boat went down. Most folk died of hypothermia, not by drowning. And you're floating with your neighbor, mere minutes of life left. And your neighbor says, "God won't give you more than you can handle." Bullocks! You're in the middle of the bloody Atlantic, chances are you're not going to make it, no matter who you are! St. Mother Theresa couldn't make this! This week also marks the anniversary of the Battle of Antietam, Civil War, still the bloodiest one day for America. Over 50,000 gone in one day. And imagine that you're charging through the corn field or down bloody lane and you see the whole population of Oregon City plus thousands more strewn across the battle field. And your Sergeant says, "God won't give you more than you can handle."

Charge!” Most kids didn’t make it out. Bullets and cannonfire don’t discriminate between believers and non-believers. Imagine that you’re in one of the twin towers 15 years ago today. And one of the planes crashes into a floor below you - and you really have no way out. And the words of your pastor comes into your ears as you realize your fate - God won’t give you more than you can handle. It doesn’t make sense, does it. What the phrase could imply is that if we don’t make it through whatever hardship we have, we must have wee little faith.

So let’s explore some of the reasons why we should wipe this phrase out of our vocabulary and replace it with something better: The first issue with this phrase is in the first four words: “God won’t give you...”. Saying this implies that all the bad stuff you’re going through right now is from God, that God is actively making all of the bad you’re going through happen. And then it says, “But God won’t give you too much, so you won’t totally lose it. This won’t actually kill you, even though it feels like it. God will let up giving you these horrible circumstances before you collapse.”

When we say this, we imply that God knows that each of us has a certain tolerance for really horrible things, and gives us a heaping helping of those things right up to the edge of what would kill us, and then God stops. And we say this to people meaning, “You’re so strong; you can handle this.” But 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. Because while God will give you this extraordinary level of grief or anguish that you are going through right now – God won’t give you more. Just this. And you should be able to handle it.” What’s wrong with you! You should be able to handle this! What’s wrong with your faith! And we talked about this a good bit last week, for those who believe that God is micromanaging the world and that every single detail that happens in your life is because of God’s plan, that God made it all happen. But I challenged you then to really consider whether that’s true, because the dominant message of Scripture isn’t that God gives us these bad things. The dominant message of Scripture isn’t that God tests our strength by seeing how much we can handle. And God doesn’t sit back and watch bad things happen, only jumping in to stop them when they reach some invisible limit that would put us over what we can handle. Instead, the message of Scripture what I read - is that life can be really hard, and you can’t handle it yourself. That’s why you need God. That’s why God created us to be in community.

That’s why, when you join this church, you promise both to care for others and to let them care for you. Because God didn’t make you to “handle” all the horrible things that happen in life. But God did promise to be with you, to work through others, to put gifts in your path that might make those challenges a tiny bit easier. I think this phrase, this misinterpretation, comes from First Corinthians, the passage we heard just a few minutes ago. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to people. And God is faithful; God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, God will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” And I think this is where we get the idea that God won’t give us more than we can handle. But Paul isn’t writing about life in general when he writes, “God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.” Paul isn’t saying, “God will never put more hardship in your life than you can handle.” Paul is talking specifically about temptation.

Paul is writing to the young church at Corinth, this crazy city that was the Las Vegas of the middle east of those days, where all kinds of debauchery took place. And he’s writing to these new Christians who have converted to faith but are still acting like pagans: they’re still attending parties and festivities in the pagan temples, engaging pagan practices. And they’re still really struggling with living their old life. Their old practices that they know to be counter to God.

We all face temptation - sometimes temptation of a really serious nature, and sometimes just the little things in our every day walk – and being spiritual people doesn’t protect us from that, but God always provides a way out for us: often just putting that voice in our hearts that tells us the right thing to do. The point Paul was trying

to make, that even if we have knowledge of what is good, we are still tempted to make bad choices. I know cookies are bad, but they're so delicious! And in every temptation, God is faithful to provide a way out. If we will pay attention, there is always an alternative, so giving in to temptation is never inevitable: we can never say, "the devil made me do it." So that's what Paul was trying to convey to the Corinthians: he didn't say, and Jesus certainly never said, "God will never give you more than you can handle." Instead, Jesus said, "Come to me, and I will give you rest."

Psalm 55 says, "Cast your cares on the Lord, and he will sustain you." God doesn't give us the bad things that happen in our lives. God doesn't give us cancer. God doesn't make hurricanes and earthquakes happen. God doesn't make people die far too young. God doesn't abandon people who end their own lives. God doesn't lead us into financial ruin. God doesn't cause terrible car accidents. We do stupid things that have consequences. Other people do stupid things that have consequences. Sometimes we hurt other people; sometimes they hurt us. God doesn't give us bad things, and God certainly isn't trying to test how strong we are by the level of grief we can handle. Instead, 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, in even the hardest of times, instead of saying to ourselves or 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 to trust that help will be there. So I want you to erase from your vocabulary the phrase, "God won't give you more than you can handle." And I challenge you to replace it with the words of Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble. That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart, when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea, when its waters roar and rage, when the mountains shake because of its surging waves...The Lord of heavenly forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our place of safety."

We can say with confidence that God will help us handle everything we encounter in life; that God has not promised all blue skies and rainbows, but that God has promised to be with us through it all. And that is something that I can handle.