

# McCabe United Methodist Church

February 18, 2018

*Half-Truths Series: "Everything Happens for a Reason"*

Sermon on Genesis 1:26-28 & Romans 8:26-28

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Over the last couple of months, I was involved in two driving incidents that could have been much worse than they were.

One morning, as I neared an intersection where I had the right of way and drivers on the *other* road had a stop sign, I noticed a car approaching the stop sign at a rather high speed: I was quite sure they were not going to be pausing, let alone *stopping*, for the stop sign.

I slammed on my brakes just ahead of the intersection...and just as this other car sailed right through the stop sign and through the intersection. If I hadn't noticed they weren't likely going to stop, they would have squarely t-boned my vehicle on the passenger side.

Then, a few weeks later, I was the front car stopped at a red light at the Centennial and I-94 intersection when, all of a sudden, I got rear-ended by the car that had been stopped behind me...and *she* had rear-ended *me* because another driver – in a Ford F-150 – hadn't been paying attention, had *not* seen the red light ahead of him, and crashed into *her* going some 40 miles an hour.

Thank goodness none of us were hurt...but both the truck and the car behind me were totaled. I had some relatively minor damage to the back of my vehicle, but nothing worse than that.

As we formally kick-off this *Half-Truths* sermon series, we begin with an exploration of the phrase "everything happens for a reason." Well, as far as the two vehicle incidents in my recent past are concerned, sure, they absolutely happened for a reason: and, in both cases, the *reason* was drivers who were at least momentarily careless and inattentive. But we'll get back to today's particular "half-truth" in a bit...

The church season of Lent is a time of reflection and preparation ahead of the joyful Easter holiday. Lent is a 6-week, 40-day journey toward the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday.

It was on the cross of Good Friday that Jesus offered himself in love for the forgiveness and salvation of the world. Because Lent is a journey toward that cross, it is often a time of more *somber* reflection on our sin and on our own mortality. This Lenten season, through this *Half-Truths* sermon series, we are all being invited

to reflect upon – and perhaps to confess and repent for – the ways in which we have sometimes said or believed things that are not *full truths* of Christian faith...things that, though they retain a kernel of truth, are, really, only *half truths*.

In the church, we always use the Bible as our primary guide for life and belief. This Lenten season, during our weekend worship services, we are also using Rev. Adam Hamilton's book *Half-Truths* to explore a list of 5 phrases that represent beliefs many of us Christians often cling to...and, though these phrases *sound* fully true, they do not fully reflect the truths we learn from the Bible.

The 5 half-truths we will be exploring this Lent are as follows...and, know I'm confident most – if not *all* – of us, including myself, have used some form of these “half-truths” at one time or another. Here they are:

*Everything happens for a reason.*

*God helps those who help themselves.*

*God won't give you more than you can handle.*

*God said it, I believe it, that settles it.*

And, finally, *love the sinner, hate the sin.*

It's possible that, as you consider these 5 phrases – these 5 *half-truths* – you might be thinking they all seem just fine as they are! Perhaps one or more of these phrases marks a deeply held belief of yours. If so, perhaps it makes you a little nervous to think about exploring such phrases as being only *half* true, rather than being fully true. Again, this series is about reflection and critical thinking.

That in mind, Adam Hamilton wrote these words in the introduction to this book: “It's okay to say: I think the author gets it wrong in this chapter. Maybe I did. Go on to the next chapter and see what you think. Hopefully I got it right in at least one of the chapters.” Then he says, “I'm not suggesting that these statements are entirely untrue, merely that they are half true.”

What he says next is so critical...please listen carefully: “Here's why it's important to examine these particular half truths: “I think they can sometimes hurt people. I think they can lead people to conclusions about God that not only are untrue but that may push some people away from God.”<sup>1</sup> ... I'm going to say that again.

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Hamilton. *Half-Truths*. All related quotes here from pp. 9-10.

“Here's why it's important to examine these particular half truths: I think they can sometimes hurt people. I think they can lead people to conclusions about God that not only are untrue but that may *push some people away* from God.”

As we closed our previous sermon series last weekend – our *Puzzling Relationships* series – Pastor Mark preached a powerful message reminding us of all the people who are *not* here as we worship: people who were once here but have since strayed away...and people who, for whatever reasons, have never darkened the doors of any church.

Friends, these 5 “half-truths” represent some of the common reasons people stray away or *stay away* from the church. Some people grew-up learning these half-truths from other Christians... and then *life happened* and they realized these half-truths had taught them about a God they no longer wanted to worship.

And today's phrase is a biggie where that is concerned. “Everything happens for a reason,” you say? That probably doesn't work for many people who've suffered tragedies and on-going hardships in life.

Years ago, when I was a new pastor serving in my first parish, I was at a high school sporting event, sitting next to a church member. As we watched the game and chit-chatted, the conversation turned serious and reflective.

My church member told me about her beloved sister-in-law who, in her late 30's had gotten – and beaten – cancer...only to later be killed by a drunk driver in a fatal car crash. She left behind her husband and young children. My church member shared this tragic information about her dear family member and then she asked me the question pastors sometimes dread getting asked:

“Pastor Jenny, why did God let this happen?” Another version of this question is, “If our God is loving and powerful, why do such terrible things happen in our world – and so often to 'innocent' people?”

Or, she could have asked it with today's half-truth in mind: “If everything happens for a reason, what was God's *reason* for the tragic death of my sister-in-law?”

I certainly couldn't offer much of an answer regarding why she had gotten cancer...but the reason for her death by a drunk driver was clear: someone had made the terrifying choice to drive while intoxicated...and my church member's sister-in-law *got in the way*.

Early in the Bible – in the very first chapters of Genesis – we learn that God gave us humans free will. And, for all its gifts and curses, God has never taken free will away

from us. As we heard read a bit ago, in Genesis chapter 1, God gave humans “dominion” over the earth.

To have *dominion* means to have sovereignty, to have *control* over something. We humans were created in God's own image and then given “dominion” over the earth. Implied in this is that humans should have dominion the way *God* has dominion...and our God is a God defined by love, *not* by authoritarian control.

In the chapters that follow Genesis 1, we encounter the story of Adam, Eve, the serpent, and the famous tree in the garden of Eden. God gave the humans all the plants and fruit-bearing trees of the garden for food, but God also gave them one rule: they were *not* to eat the fruit from that famous tree.

However, after a while, the famous tree became rather enticing and the humans got curious about what would happen if they tasted its fruit. So they did. God had given them the gift of choice...but God had also provided some boundaries...and we humans violated the boundaries.

The gift of free will is perhaps the most challenging gift God ever gave us: the gift of *choice*...the gift to choose love or hate, the gift to choose wisely or foolishly, the gift to make choices that bring *life* to ourselves and others or to make choices that bring *death*. In a video he made based on each of these half-truths, Adam Hamilton said this about the dominion and choice we humans have been given:

He said, “God chooses to *risk* by giving dominion to human beings.”<sup>2</sup> “*God chooses to risk by giving dominion [and choice] to human beings.*”

I can't help but think about this as I consider my own household: my 19-year-old stepson is living with us while he goes to Bismarck State College...and my husband and I have a baby on the way. At the same time we're working on “launching” a young adult human into the world, we're also preparing to parent someone who is brand-new.

It's all risky, isn't it? Being a parent, being a teacher...being a human who chooses to engage in life with other people in it: it's all *risky*. When other people are part of your life, you quickly learn that your life is not, nor will it ever be, your own. The choices you make – your words and actions – have an effect on others, good or bad...and the same holds true for the others in your life: *their* choices – their words and actions – have an effect on you.

God gave us the gift of choice and it is a beautiful gift: it allows us to sincerely choose love and compassion and wisdom and strength...but it is also risky, and a

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<sup>2</sup> Adam Hamilton in *Everything Happens for a Reason. Half-Truths* DVD.

phenomenal responsibility.

This past Wednesday, in the midst of our own final preparations for our evening Ash Wednesday worship service, news broke of our nation's most recent mass shooting: 17 people killed at Parkland, Florida's, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

As the first day of the season of Lent, Ash Wednesday in particular is a day of somber reflection on our mortality and on our need for forgiveness.

The ashes of Ash Wednesday recall the dust of the earth from which we came...and *to which* we will return in death. That we put the ashes on our foreheads in the sign of the cross is a reminder that, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our sin is forgiven and we are given victory over death through the gift of eternal life.

As I was making final preparations for our Ash Wednesday worship service, and in the midst of reports from the site of the shooting in Florida, I saw this photo...a photo that was then on the front page of our own Bismarck Tribune Thursday morning:

I do not know these women's stories. I don't know if they are moms of shooting victims or if they are community women who simply needed to gather near the school Wednesday afternoon to cry out in desperation.

What I *do* know is that one of these women had already been to church that day. The cross in ash on her forehead is a sign that, earlier that day, she had already been reminded of humanity's sin. She had already been reminded of our mortality. And she had already been reminded of our deep and complete need for God's grace and wisdom.

She had already been reminded of all these things...and then, just hours later, an extremely angry, violent young man grabbed an extremely dangerous weapon and opened-fire at her community's high school.<sup>3</sup>

One of the verses we heard read a few minutes ago was Romans chapter 8, verse 28, which, again, states:

“All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose.” This verse is often cited as biblical justification for today's half-truth...but “all things work together for good” is *not the same* as “everything happens for a reason”.

To say that everything happens for a reason means that God plans every detail, every happening – good or bad – in this life. “Everything happens for a reason”

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<sup>3</sup> <http://time.com/5162936/florida-high-school-shooting-timeline/>

means it was God's will for Nikolaus Kruz to open fire on his former high school...*and* it means it was God's will for the Philadelphia Eagles to have won the Super Bowl this year.

Granted, if you happen to be a fan of any winning sports teams, you might be okay with the idea that it was God's will for them to have won. But, what then of all the years your teams don't win? And, no matter what, if it's God's will, it's not about skill and determination – not even a little. Besides, isn't it rather absurd to put the outcome of sporting events in the same category as school shootings, cancer, and tragic accidents?

Yet, if we say everything happens for a reason, that's exactly what we're doing: no matter how small or large the scale, it was God's will to happen however it happened. Not only is there a measure of absurdity to that, but it also means God did not *really* give us free will.

And free will is such an over-arching concept throughout the Bible, that I, for one, am not willing to sacrifice that full-truth for a *half-truth* like “everything happens for a reason”.

So what about this: what about, instead of “everything happens for a reason”, we opt for what St. Paul is *actually* saying in Romans 8:28 – that it's not that everything happens for a reason, but, rather, that God is always working for good *no matter what*.

When the mass shooting happened at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in December of 2012, a friend posted on Facebook this powerful quote by Fred Rogers – the famed children's TV show star. Mr. Rogers was also an ordained Presbyterian minister and, in this quote, Romans 8:28 is everywhere...he said:

“When I was boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of 'disaster', I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in the world.”

At Stoneman Douglas, the helpers were the football coach who sacrificed himself to save students...and the teachers who brought students to safety...the helpers were the officers who apprehended the killer...and the medical teams who tended to the wounded.

*“All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”*

School shootings are not God's will for humanity. Death by drunk driving is not God's will for humanity. Cancer is not God's will for humanity. Massive natural disasters are not God's will for humanity. No.

But it *is* God's will and plan to always work for good in the midst of such devastation. And part of what it means that God gave us humans “dominion” is that we are given the amazing responsibility and opportunity to *partner with God* in working for good in all things.