

McCabe United Methodist Church

March 4, 2018

Half-Truths Series: “God Won’t Give You More Than You Can Handle”

Sermon on Psalm 23 & 1 Corinthians 10:12-13

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

About four years ago, I was listening to an episode of a public radio show I love. In this particular episode, a comedian named Tig Notaro was featured and, during the course of the episode, they played a clip from a stand-up comedy routine she had performed in August of 2012.

As part of her routine back in August of 2012, Tig Notaro told the audience about how, in the span of 4 months she had been hospitalized for a nearly deadly bout of the intestinal infection C-Diff, she had broke-up with a long-time romantic love, her mother died, *and* she was diagnosed with bilateral breast cancer.

All in the span of four months. Can you imagine?

So, she told her audience about all of these devastating life circumstances that hit her in this extremely short period of time, and then she said this – and I quote:

“But you know what’s nice about all of this is that you can always rest assured that God never gives you more than you can handle.” The audience chuckled...and she continued: “Never. Never. When you’ve had it, God goes, ‘all right, that’s it.’” The audience chuckled some more.

Then she said, “I just keep picturing God going, ‘you know what? I think she can take a little more.’ And then the angels are standing back going, ‘God, what are you doing? You are out of your mind.’ And God was like, ‘no, no, no. I really think she can handle [all of] this.’”¹ And the audience roared with laughter.

The other day in the Thursday afternoon Bible study I’ve been helping to lead the last many months, we talked a little bit about the phrase “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” We talked about it because we’re studying the “Half-Truths” we’re exploring in this sermon series.

We had just wrapped-up our discussion on the half-truth Pastor Mark explored in his sermon last weekend – the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” – and we very briefly chatted about today’s phrase: “God won’t give you more than you can handle.”

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2013/12/27/257628016/comedian-tig-notaro-plays-not-my-job>

One of the women in the study group very honestly said, “You know, I find that to be a comforting thought – that God won't give me more than I can handle.” And, to many people of faith, it *is* comforting to think that God won't give us more than we can handle.

If you are someone who finds comfort in this phrase, it's not my intent to steal that comfort from you! Just know that, for many, this phrase has been said to them at a moment when they felt God *had*, in fact, given them more than they could handle...and, instead of being a comforting thought, it felt more like a slap in the face, or insult added to injury.

In his book *Half Truths*, Rev. Adam Hamilton tells the story of a woman he knew who, for much of her life, found comfort in believing that God wouldn't give her more than she could handle – this, despite the fact that she regularly met with a therapist to help her through the problems of her life...and, despite the fact that her own mother committed suicide when she felt she could no longer “handle” the circumstances of her life.

One day, in a therapy session, the woman told her therapist that she believed God wouldn't give her more than she could handle. The therapist then bluntly replied, “I can tell you plenty of stories of people who had more than they could handle. In fact, I wouldn't have a job if everyone could *handle* everything life threw at them!”²

Two weeks ago, we looked at the first “half-truth” explored in Rev. Hamilton's book – the half-truth “Everything happens for a reason.” Last week, we looked at the half-truth “God helps those who help themselves.” Like the two half-truths we already considered, this weekend's phrase is another one many folks assume is in the Bible. But, it's not. Not exactly, anyway. There is, however, a verse in First Corinthians – a verse we just heard read – that may sometimes get *confused* for the phrase “God won't give you more than you can handle.”

Again, in First Corinthians chapter 10, verse 13, St. Paul wrote, “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.”

With these words, Paul reminds the early Christians in Corinth that testing – or, perhaps better understood as *temptation* – is common to all humans. Temptation is common – *what tempts us* is different from person to person. That's the bad news.

The *good* news is that, as Paul writes, “God is faithful.” And, when we find ourselves tempted, a way out is always provided. The problem, of course, is that we frequently

² Hamilton, Adam. *Half Truths*. 89 (with paraphrase from video statement on this chapter's subject).

fail to search all that carefully for the way out when we're tempted with something harmful.

Just think about the chocolate we promised not to eat during Lent, but that looks too good to pass up. Or the harsh word we can't help but let slip from our mouth...or from our fingers as we type it in a Facebook comment. Or the alcoholic drink we suspect might put us over the edge as we think about the drive home. Or the photos and videos online that seduce us, while also leading us down a path of unhealthy obsession.

“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.”

Sometimes the way out God provides is simple willpower. Other times it's the friend or sponsor who is always just a phone call away. This verse from First Corinthians chapter 10 is a crucially important verse for us to keep in mind when we're tempted... but it's important for us to realize that what St. Paul is saying, here, in First Corinthians 10 is *not the same* as “God won't give you more than you can handle.”

St. Paul's words from First Corinthians chapter 10 relate specifically to *temptation*... whereas the phrase “God won't give you more than you can handle” gets applied to all manner of life circumstances: romantic break-ups, illnesses, the death of loved ones, accidents, even addictions.

In fact, the other day, Chris Chase, our McCabe member who is leading our Celebrate Recovery ministry, popped-into church and we had a brief conversation about this weekend's half-truth.

When I told him we'd be exploring the phrase “God won't give you more than you can handle”, Chris's eyes got big and he said, “Oh, wow. Yeah, that's a phrase that gets used a lot with people who are struggling with addictions – and it doesn't get used in a good way!” We talked about how the reality of addictions points to the fact that many, many of us *do* experience more than we can handle in this life.

So, we turn to drugs, alcohol, food, the internet...*whatever*, as a way to “handle” the things of life we *cannot* handle on our own.

While the phrase “God won't give you more than you can handle” may ring true for some people, it certainly does not ring true for others. Perhaps better, we could tweak this phrase slightly and open up the *half-truth* to become more of a *full* truth.

What if, instead of “God won't give you more than you can handle, we shifted it to “God helps you handle all that life gives you”? Do you see the difference? Life

presents us with all manner of challenges...and we believe in a God who not only provides us a way out when we are tempted, but who also provides us resources and *people* to help us handle every challenge that comes our way.

About five weeks ago, my husband, Derrick, got laid-off as part of a massive, company-wide restructure. Thousands of others who held the management position my husband held also lost their jobs. Even though he was simply collateral damage in a corporate restructure, as you would imagine, it was a significant blow for my husband, professionally.

Of course, on top of that, I had just gone 3/4-time here at the church, which meant I had just gone onto *his* company health insurance... insurance we are using rather heavily right now as I have regular appointments and check-ups with my obstetrician as we prepare to welcome a new baby in June. The thought of suddenly being without health insurance, at this particular time, was a bit nerve-wracking.

Thankfully, we have been fortunate to have had solid incomes and, over the years, both of us have developed strong financial practices. So, with that in mind, we haven't worried too much about our immediate finances.

Mostly, we have worried over the loss of health care benefits – though, we are grateful for options like COBRA that allow for continuance of benefits...at a price, of course. But it certainly complicates the joy and anticipation of preparing for a baby when, all of a sudden, you're also on a job search – grieving a job you loved while looking for something new.

About a week after my husband got laid-off, I emailed our McCabe Leadership Team members to let them know about all this – and, of course, to ask for their prayers in the midst of it. Our Leadership Team members were incredibly thoughtful and supportive in response.

In fact, one of our folks responded by inviting me to look at something from Adam Hamilton's *Half Truths* book. This was a couple of weeks before we started our *Half Truths* series, so, as it happened, I had not yet read the section to which she directed me. (Obviously, *she* had already read the entire book!)

And the section she invited me to read happened to be from this weekend's chapter on the half-truth “God won't give you more than you can handle.”

At the end of this weekend's chapter, Adam Hamilton tells the story of Annie Johnson Flint. Annie was born in 1866; her biological mother died when Annie was three and, in the midst of an illness, her father gave her and her siblings up for adoption. Annie was adopted into a wonderful family, but, before she was 18, both of her adoptive parents also died.

In her early adulthood, Annie became a teacher. Unfortunately, not long after she began teaching she developed a degenerative disease that left her unable to care for herself. She had to quit teaching and she spent the rest of her life living in a hospital.

Somehow, through all this loss, heartbreak, and pain, Annie chose to respond with passion and creativity, rather than with bitterness. She began to write poetry. One of her famous poems is called “What God Hath Promised” and it reads as follows:

“God hath not promised skies always blue. / Flower strewn pathways all our lives through; / God hath not promised sun without rain, / Joy without sorrow, peace without pain. / But God hath promised strength for the day, / Rest for the labor, light for the way, / Grace for the trials, help from above, / Unfailing sympathy, undying love.”³

I don’t know about you, but, to me, that sounds a whole lot like the twenty-third Psalm:

“The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.”

These words of Scripture, often read at funerals, are words of comfort and strength *for daily life*. Words of comfort and strength for those times when it feels like life has given you more than you can handle. Words reminding us that, while life will be filled with dark valleys and enemies, the Lord remains our shepherd through it all: guiding us and caring for us when we most need that guidance and care.

In the last couple of weeks, new job offers started rolling in for my husband, and that is definitely a good thing. But the whole situation has still been painful. He has found a lot of comfort, strength, and guidance through the Wesleyan Covenant prayer – with which some of you may be familiar. We have prayed it together in worship on occasion here at McCabe.

In this prayer, the one praying prays the following prayer to God...as I read it, feel free to quietly join in saying the words with me:

³ As told and quoted by Adam Hamilton in *Half Truths*. 99-101.

“I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”

Like that poem by Annie Johnson Flint, and like the famous words of Psalm 23, the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer acknowledges that life will bring with it hardship: times of unemployment, times of being brought low, times of emptiness. But what matters most is that we seek God's presence and guidance no matter what.

If, upon hearing about my husband's job loss, someone had said to us, “Well, you know, God won't give you more than you can handle,” we would have known they were trying to be kind and comforting...even though we may not believe the sentiment to be *full*, biblical truth.

No one has said that to us. Instead, people have said exactly what we needed to hear: “Oh, I'm so sorry. That is awful and scary and the timing is terrible.” And they have prayed for us and asked how we're doing, how they could help.

Surely you all can think of people in your life who have also done just those kinds of things when life had delivered a blow you were struggling to handle.

Perhaps you have striven to be such a person for others who are struggling to handle life's blows. If so, you have allowed God to work through you to help others handle what life has given them. And thanks be to God for that.

Let us pray...