

Christ Church + Washington Parish

The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli

1 Corinthians 10:13 - God never gives you more than you can handle

January 25, 2018

Good morning. Today we have the last in our series Faith beyond Clichés. God never gives you more than you can handle. Those phrases that may come easily to our minds and our lips when we're confronted with a crisis or trying to make meaning out of something, but whose theological legs are flimsy. Like all the cliches that we have done, it is not in the Bible, though theology that has influenced its development is. Like all the cliches, there is some truth in it and some comfort in it - if not, it wouldn't have stuck around so long. Yet its limitations far outweigh the comfort it may give.

Two weeks ago I preached on another cliché: Everything happens for a reason. These two cliches share a major theological problem - the belief that God dishes out life events at all. Placing God responsible for the things that happen in the world or in our own lives disregards the personal agency God granted each one of us and the realities of the natural world. God doesn't make things happen - God leaves that up to us - but God does come alongside us, guiding us in truth and embracing us in love, which does affect what happens in the world. God doesn't give us more than we can handle puts this poor theology on overdrive suggesting that God actually gives us challenges all the while promising not to push us over the brink.

Now, like many of our cliches, the notion behind this comes from Paul. Turning to 1st Letter to the Corinthians chapter 10 verse 13: “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.” Paul’s words promise that God will not let life test you beyond your strength; God will always provide a way to endure. Now Paul isn’t saying you won’t die or that you won’t experience terrible loss, but that God provides a way to endure.

In his reflections on this cliché, Adam Hamilton, a prominent American pastor, shared this story from one of his congregants. This woman had lost her mother to suicide when she was 16, and she had been in and out of therapy throughout her adult life. And through this time she believed in this cliché - God will not give me more than I can handle. That belief brought her great comfort - it gave her confidence that she could make it through whatever challenges laid in her way. Then one day in her therapist’s office, she said it aloud - God will not give me more than I can handle. Her therapist stopped her. “Are you kidding? Do you really believe that?” “Yeah, I do,” she responded. The therapist said, “Look, I’m in business, because people have more than they can handle. Your mom took her life because she had more than she could handle. You are here because you have more than you can handle, and you made the wise choice to seek help.” The therapist’s words disturbed her, and she was upset to have this phrase challenged that had brought her such comfort in difficult times taken from her. But the more she thought about it, the more she realized, the truth in her therapist’s words. Sometimes people do have more than they could handle. Sometimes she had more than she could handle.¹

¹ From Adam Hamilton’s teaching video, “Half-truths”

One of the big problems with “God never gives you more than you can handle” is that suggests that it’s not okay to be overwhelmed . . . it’s not faithful to be overwhelmed. That somehow you are not trusting God if you feel like you just can’t handle the crap you are carrying. Yet being overwhelmed has nothing to do with the strength of your faith. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asks God that he might be spared the sacrifice of his life, because he found the prospect overwhelming. Moses got overwhelmed by the people in the desert. And my favorite, the great prophet Elijah. Some king wanted to kill him, and he runs away and begs God to take his life; he was giving up; he was too overwhelmed by the prospect of running in fear for the rest of his life. God sent him an angel who fed him and gave him drink, and he goes off to a cave and hangs out for 40 days, and then God is like what are you still doing here Elijah? And Elijah is like, I’ve been a good servant to you, and someone’s trying to kill me, and I have no one. I mind as well lay down and die. Then God comes to him again, this time in a still small voice, and asks - What are you still doing here Elijah? And Elijah says, I’ve been a good servant to you, and someone’s trying to kill me, and I have no one. I mind as well lay down and die. Elijah is seriously overwhelmed, not in a moment, but for weeks at this point. He can’t see his way out of it. That’s when God tells him, go back to this land, and find this person, and this person, and this person, and they will help you.

See in none of these cases did God hand the people their reason for being overwhelmed, nor does he relieve them of those burdens, but God does respond. God responds in the form of people. Jesus’ mother and friends stand with him at the cross. Moses gathers 70 other leaders to help him with the work of leading the people. And Elijah, Elijah gets a whole bunch of people that he can lean on to make it through. In the letter to the Galatians chapter 6 vs. 2 “Bear one another’s

burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” God gives us hope in one another. God works through people who come alongside us. That’s the way life can be handled.

If you have drawn strength in the past from this phrase, replace it with this: **God will help you handle all that life gives you.** Trust that God is going to help you climb out of the pit that you are in. And look for the people who will come alongside you while you are overwhelmed, and offer a hand, one that might just ease the burden a little. One day at a time. God will help you handle all that life hands you. No one can make you believe this when you are in the pit. But if you keep saying it, keep saying it, and look for the people who are alongside you, you will see God there - you will believe God is there. If you see someone you care about in despair themselves, you can’t make them believe it either even if you say it a hundred times. Don’t say it a hundred times - it’s annoying. But you can come alongside them, and help to carry the burden, and in doing so live into the way that God helps us handle all that life hands us.

When you are living this - God helping you handle the struggles and even tragedies of life, it can come with a heavy-hearted joy. Joy and gratitude feeling God is with you and yet still burdened by the anxiety, the grief, the fear that tends to come with these times. I’ve found that particular hymn in words and melody embody this heavy-hearted joy, which makes sense when understanding its origins. The hymn’s author, Horatio Spafford was a prominent lawyer and devout Christian living in Chicago, had everything he had ever wanted - a wonderful family (a wife and four daughters), a successful business (he also owned a lot of real estate in northern Chicago), and a deep rootedness in God. When the great Chicago fire hit in 1871, all of his properties in northern Chicago were destroyed. Yet he and his wife devoted themselves to caring

for those who had lost even more, spending two years working with refugees from the fire. In 1873, they needed a break. So they planned a European vacation. Needing to work a few weeks longer, Horatio sent his wife and their four daughters ahead of him on a ship to England. Tragedy struck mid-ocean, when the steamship they were on collided with another ship. Only Anna, his wife, survived clinging to debris along with two dozen others in the ocean water. When she reached England, she sent a telegram to Horatio - "Saved alone. What shall I do?" He immediately boarded a ship and went to his wife, Anna, in England to bring her home. No doubt Horatio had more than he could handle at that point. He made the same journey across the same waters that his daughters died in. On that trip across the Atlantic, sailing across the watery grave of his four daughters, he wrote a poem that later became the popular Christian hymn "It is well with my soul."

The first verse goes:

"When peace like a river attendeth my way

When sorrows like sea billows roll,

Whatever my lot,

thou hast taught me to say:

*It is well, it is well, with my soul"*²

These words . . . these words, Horatio felt the deep loss of all four of his children - the sorrow billowing over him - and he also felt God with him - the feeling settled his soul. If you doubt the words **God will help you handle all that life gives you**, sing it, sing "it is well with my

² The story of Horatio Spafford comes from multiple sources, but here is one: <http://www.spaffordcenter.org/history>

soul.” Music can make a different part of ourselves believe the truths that take many words to explain. Or if you like the wordy route, go back to Corinthians chapter 10 verse 13: “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.”