

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

God Doesn't Give You More Than You Can Handle

Gospel Lesson

John 5:2-15 (NRSV)

² Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. ³ In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵ One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” ⁷ The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” ⁸ Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” ⁹ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath. ¹⁰ So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, “It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.” ¹¹ But he answered them, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your mat and walk.’” ¹² They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take it up and walk’?” ¹³ Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. ¹⁴ Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.” ¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

Bible/Sermon Focus

This week's sermon was the last in our sermon series titled, “*It Ain't In There.*” Over the past four weeks we have looked at four statements that are often believed to be in the Bible, but actually aren't. They included:

“I Accepted Jesus as My Personal Lord and Savior.”
 “Love the Sinner; Hate the Sin.”
 “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves.”
 “God Doesn't Give You More Than You Can Handle.”

Before we move into this last phrase, it is interesting to note that all the weight thrown behind these concepts are relatively new, rooted in a similar brand of Evangelical, Fundamental, Western (mostly American) Christian identity that claims to be authoritative and “Bible-based.” These clichés are passed around our culture as if they have been a part of Christian identity from the beginning of the Jesus movement, but most are from our more recent history as a nation. They are newer than even our very young denomination.

“God doesn't give you more than you can handle,” is a phrase that is luckily being deeply questioned by the Evangelical Fundamental church these days. Do an online search and you may be surprised at the number of articles you find about how this phrase is, at best, not helpful. When a person is hurting, this phrase makes God sound like a sadist. At the very least

it leaves us with a God who is unable to meet us in our pain, who expects us to remember that we are tough enough to get through it and we should pull ourselves up by our boot straps.

How we talk about suffering and evil matters. Saying, "God doesn't give you more than you can handle," belittles a person's suffering and offers no comfort or community. It is a way to separate ourselves from having to be burdened by another person's pain. Because if God won't give them more than they can handle then they certainly don't need me.

But the truth is, people need people. We need each other. We are called to be part of the body of Christ together. The entire message of the gospel is that we can't just depend on ourselves. There is no rugged individualism in Christianity. There is nowhere that we can go without God. Where two or three of us are gathered, we will find Christ. Christ's message and ministry is rooted in relationship. So much so that in this story, Jesus commands the man who had been sick for 38 years to do something illegal ("stand up and take your mat") by working on the Sabbath. Relationships matter more than rules when it comes to the Law of God.

The healing stories of Jesus are about more than just curing ailments, they are about living new lives. Every day we are given the opportunity to be more Christ like to one another. Every day, every moment we have a choice. We can live in the new life of compassion and healing and love that Jesus offers. We can sit with those who suffer and be present in their suffering.

Discussion Questions

1. When was the first time you heard, "God doesn't give you more than you can handle?"
2. Reflect on his quote from Pastor Andy, "*The healing stories of Jesus are about more than just curing ailments, they are about living new lives.*"
3. Reflect on this quote from hospice chaplain Colin Mattoon: "*This message that 'God won't give you more than you can handle' can also breed a self-focused and self-reliant way of thinking. The sufferers may feel they aren't trying hard enough, or aren't reading their Bibles thoroughly enough or aren't praying fervently enough. They can experience guilt, shame, and doubt based on a misunderstanding of God's Word. This unintended consequence of 'God won't give you more than you can handle' is antithetical to the gospel.*"
4. What should we say instead?

Prayer

God of community. Teach us to show up for each other. Help us learn to sit with others who are suffering. Help us to love those who feel unlovable. Make us more like you each day. Remind us that you knew suffering, and that you are with us when the burden is unbearable. Amen.

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