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First Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 121
Matthew 25:31-46

“God Helps Those Who Help Themselves”

Today I’m beginning a new sermon series called “Half Truths”. During this series we’ll contemplate things we often say to one another or often believe that bear scrutiny. There’s a part of each statement that is true, but there’s a part of each statement that isn’t true, and it’s the part that isn’t true that can trip us up. So I’d like for us over the next 4 weeks to think carefully about these phrases and how we use them so that we can find the whole truth.

Today’s Half-Truth is “God helps those who help themselves.” How many of you have heard that phrase said?

Back when Jay Leno hosted the Tonight Show, in one of his infamous *Jaywalking* segments, a number of people he interviewed thought “God helps those who help themselves” was one of the Ten Commandments. The Barna group, a Christian polling firm, found that 8 in 10 Americans think “God helps those who help themselves” is in the Bible. In fact, more than half were strongly convinced that “God helps those who help themselves” is a major theme of scripture.

But . . . spoiler alert – it’s not. Friends, nowhere in the Bible will you find the phrase “God helps those who help themselves.”

Rather, it’s one of those “phantom verses” – verses people think are in the Bible but aren’t, like:

"Spare the rod, spoil the child". That’s not in there. Or --

"This, too, shall pass." Neither is:

"God works in mysterious ways." Or,

"Cleanliness is next to Godliness."

You won’t find any of those in the Bible, either.

Which doesn't mean there isn't some truth to the saying "God helps those who help themselves" . . . there is. But generally not in the way we think there is truth in the saying.

The phrase "God helps those who help themselves" probably originated in Greek mythology in the 5th century BCE. It was then echoed by various philosophers throughout the centuries but was popularized in 1736 by Benjamin Franklin. That, of course, gave it a particular place in American thinking.

And it is, when you think about it, a very American thing to say. The saying "God helps those who help themselves" reflects some of our most cherished values, like personal freedom and self-reliance. We are a "pull yourselves up by your bootstraps" sort of nation, so it comes as no surprise, really, that so many Americans would attribute this saying to the Bible. After all, all of us infect the Bible with our morals and values. Heck, every time I write a sermon I'm putting my values and morals into my interpretation of scripture! But I hope that before I do that, I'm asking what the Bible's morals and values are and placing my interpretation against that. And it's pretty clear to me when reading the Bible, that God helps those who help themselves, is not one of the Bible's primary morals and values.

It's really a secondary or probably even tertiary value . . . a half-truth, if you will.

For example, when we sit down for dinner, we say grace before we eat. But I don't expect food to magically appear on my plate. I've worked for my supper by earning a paycheck, shopping for groceries, and preparing the meal. I've done my part to make sure there is food on the table, even though I'm also thanking God for helping me to put food on my table.

Another example --

Years ago, when my husband Terry and I were selling our home in Wisconsin, I bought a statue of St. Joseph, the patron saint of real estate. After struggling to sell our first home, I wasn't taking any chances the second time around. I didn't want to own a home in WI and a home in St. Louis, which is where we were moving! Terry couldn't believe it when I buried St. Joseph in the front yard, head toward the house. It's unclear whether he should be buried head toward the

house or head down. But anyways, I buried him, said a prayer and waited for the magic to happen. Bring on the buyers!

Well, a buyer did quickly come along. Ha! I said to Terry. It worked!

Until, that is, the deal fell through at inspection time, and we moved to St. Louis – the glum owners of two homes. And when the WI house did eventually sell, it likely wasn't St. Joseph who did it. It was a better sales price, and a willingness on our part to do some necessary repairs.

The moral of the story, is we can pray and pray, but we also have to do some work in the process.

But . . . this is only half the truth . . .

The whole truth comes to us in today's reading from Matthew 25. Today's reading from Matthew is the 3rd of 3 stories Jesus tells his disciples in the last week of his life, and he tells these stories with greater and greater urgency. What do they all have in common? They're all about judgement day and what happens to us on it.

And what will happen is really quite simple: we'll be judged by how well we've cared for others, especially "the least of these"; i.e. the people who can't help themselves. You will be judged, we will be judged, by God for what we do and do not do. We will be held accountable to God for how we've lived our lives. Period. It's that simple. We're called to serve, not ignore or overlook or make assumptions about someone's need, but to look into each person's face and see Christ and help them.

"What you do for and to the least of these-the sick, hungry, homeless, oppressed, and imprisoned, you do to me," Jesus said.

What you do to them, you do to me. Not just the poor we deem worthy of our assistance, not just those who try to help themselves, but all the poor.

A couple of years ago the Journal-Gazette had an Op-Ed written by the program director of the Allen County Salvation Army. It stuck with me, because she wrote about a disturbing trend she'd been witnessing: a growing number of people who put criteria on whom they would help. Some people insisted that before they help

a family or child, they know their political affiliation. They also were seeing a demand for “non-ethnic” names of children on their Angel Tree. Some people, she wrote, only want “traditional names” or names they can pronounce.

But friends, it’s not up to us to play judge and jury as to who is worthy of our assistance and who is not. What WE ARE CALLED TO DO is to remember what Jesus said: “When you did it to one of the least of these, my family, you did it to me.” No where in Jesus’ parable does a sheep doesn’t step over a homeless person and tell him to get a job. A sheep doesn’t insist that the person in jail should live in cruel and inhumane conditions because of her crime. A sheep doesn’t look at these people and see a drag on society or someone who hasn’t pulled himself up by his bootstraps and therefore isn’t worthy of our care.

Instead, being a person of faith means practicing our faith, and we practice our faith by serving all of God’s children, especially the least of these.

Friends, the Biblical truth, the whole truth, is that God helps those who can’t help themselves, or need help helping themselves. Showing compassion and mercy for those who struggle is what God does, and what God calls us to do.

In my experience, God meets the needs of others through other people. I’ve yet to directly observe God sending angels to bring food, clothing, shelter or justice. But I have experienced God putting it on the hearts of others to do that.

Look, we can – we do – should – debate the best ways of helping and creating independence; but what is not debatable is our call to help. People who call themselves Christian but have no compassion, believing God only helps those who help themselves, have missed an essential component of the Gospel – all of scripture really. Because God continually shows preferential treatment for people who cannot help themselves.

But there’s one more thing I want to make sure you hear today – because it’s very important – and it is this:

God also helps the hopeless. *The hopeless.*

God is not only the God of the helpless, God is the God of the hopeless, too. God walks with us through our darkest valleys, bringing light to darkness, and peace to times of anxiety and despair. And God does all of this *not* because we deserve it, but because that's who God is . . . thanks be to God.

We receive God's blessings even though we cannot earn them, and even when we don't deserve them. God extends mercy to us even when we've made a mess of things. God extends love to us even when we're not loveable. And there's a name of this. It's called *grace*.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like.

In her book "Travelling Mercies," Anne Lamott shares her journey of faith. She found herself broke, drunk, bulimic, depressed and addicted to drugs. She said: "I could no longer imagine how God could love me." Desperate, Anne set an appointment with an Episcopal priest.

She told him, "I'm so messed up that I don't think God can love me."

The priest replied, "God has to love you. That's God's job."

Anne's priest was right. God works full-time offering unconditional love to everyone. We call this grace, and it is amazing.

Friends, there are times when we can help ourselves, and we should.

But there are times when people cannot make it on their own, and God calls us to help, to become God's hands and feet and heart – and we should. We pray and work and we become God's answer to someone else's prayer, God's instrument of grace.

But you will find, if you haven't already, that a time will come when you cannot help yourself – for whatever reason that may be -- When you will say, like the psalmist did, "I lift my eyes to the hills-from where will my help come?" And like the psalmist, the answer is: My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

Amen.

Sources:

Adam Hamilton, Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say

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