

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

September 10, 2017

Fourteenth Sunday
after Pentecost

Deuteronomy 30:19-20

Matthew 21:33-41

Everything Happens For A Reason?

This is the first of four sermons in a series I like to call *Christian Clichés*. I've been thinking on these for a couple years, and then this summer I read Adam Hamilton's book, *Half Truths*, and was inspired to work on them and share them now. The four clichés we'll look at are:

Everything happens for a reason (today)

God doesn't give us more than we can handle (Oct. 1)

Hate the sin, love the sinner (Oct. 8)

God helps those who help themselves (Oct. 22)

Adam calls them HALF truths, because while none of these sayings are found in the Bible, there are verses from which these notions have grown, even as they have grown away from what the Bible says and the heart of who God is. And also, there may be a partial truth in them, though (I believe) they are not, as stand-alone statements, true in and of themselves. And while we may be trying to be helpful when we say these, I think they can be, in some situations, the wrong thing to say.

So it's good for us to look at each of these and consider:

What we THINK we're saying;

What we actually ARE saying; and

What ELSE we might say.

We need to consider whether we really BELIEVE what we are really SAYING.

*Everything Happens For A Reason?**

If by this we mean that actions have consequences, that our choices produce results, then it is a perfectly reasonable thing to say. For example: texting and driving may result in an accident – the reason the accident happened, was because of the texting.

However – we usually don't mean THAT.

Usually, *Everything Happens For A Reason* is said in response to suffering, seeking to console or comfort someone.

Whatever happened must have been meant-to-be in some cosmic sense

This must have been their time or God's will

God has a purpose for causing this / for allowing this to happen

But each of these statement assumes something: That everything that happens reflects the will and purpose of God; that God is large and in charge – of EVERYTHING.

Which can lead to some silly conclusions:

"Honey, I'm sorry I forgot your birthday, it must have been the will of God."

OR

"God obviously favors the Patriots – except last Thursday when he preferred the Chiefs."

Assuming that God is in charge of EVERYTHING can also lead to some troubling questions:

Why would God will millions of Jews to die in the Holocaust?

Does God really want children to die in school shootings?

Why is God sending all these hurricanes and wildfires right now?

What on Earth could be the REASON for the horrible deaths on Common St. Friday night?

Believing that *Everything Happens For A Reason* does three things that are not helpful:

1. eliminates personal responsibility
2. makes God responsible for EVERYONE'S action
3. leads to fatalism

Why wear a seatbelt? If my time is my time, it won't matter either way...if I die in a car crash it'll have happened for a reason that my family will discover in time.

This mindset is called Determinism – God determines everything and we may not ever get to understand the purpose or reasons.

The opposite of Determinism is called Deism:

This is the belief that God made the world, set everything in motion (laws of nature, laws of physics, laws of science) and then stepped back and is now completely hands off. He will now have nothing to do with anything that is happening in the world or in our lives.

Both of these extremes – God intervenes and makes everything happen, and God has absolutely nothing to do with anything that happens, both miss the mark, and I find are NOT helpful approaches to facing the really hard stuff of life, like the deaths of Friday night.

Both determinism and deism deny what the Bible says about God giving humankind dominion over the Earth and all that God has made, in which we are given the responsibility to care for what God has made. We are stewards and God has given us freedom – freedom to make choices, for better or worse.

Just like the parable in our reading from Matthew today. God is the owner and is sovereign – we are the tenants farming God's earth, tending God's creation. The earth belongs to God, and we are free as stewards to make choices, and we are responsible for those choices.

The idea of choice is important. In fact, the Bible is the recounting of God showing human beings the right path and warning against pursuing the wrong path. And then humans mostly choosing the wrong path.

Like in Deuteronomy...Through Moses, God has led the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. As they prepare to enter the Promised Land, Moses, now an old man nearing death, has just recited the 10 Commandments and the rest of the Law, and is reminding them what God expects of his people.

There are two paths into the Promised Land, Moses says: one leads to life, the other leads to death.

1. Obey and love God, which also means loving all people made in God's image and seeking to know and do God's will in the world OR
2. live for ourselves, without regard for God or anybody else.

I **don't** believe that God dictates our every choice, or that God ignores us. Instead, God gave us a brain, a heart, a conscience, his Spirit, the Bible and the ability to interpret them as guide to help us select the right path.

God does seek to influence us. God does work in us and through us. God did send Jesus to save and deliver us. And God does, on some occasions and for reasons we may never fully understand, intervene in the world's affairs in miraculous ways. (p. 39)

I remember a few years ago, I'd had an evening meeting at church and I was leaving the Parish House sometime after 9:00 p.m. I had my big heavy bag on my shoulder and my coat on and was walking past

Carol's desk when the phone rang. I thought, "Who calls the church this late? Someone who probably just wants to leave a message." And I kept walking.

But something (or someone) stopped me; and I felt compelled to go back and answer it. It was one of you (who was expecting to leave a voicemail), going through a difficult time and needing to talk, and very surprised that I answered the phone!

I don't believe everything happens for a reason, but sometimes we discover a reason that things happen when we are attentive to God. I think God uses us and works through us as we respond to his nudging and prompting. I experienced a God-incident that night answering the phone, as did the person making the call. And we both felt encouraged, strengthened and blessed.

So since God is neither the micromanager of determinism nor the absentee landlord of the Deists - both half truths - the deeper truth must be somewhere in between.

The Bible verse that is the seed for believing *Everything Happens For A Reason* is Romans 8:28: *We know that God works all things together for good for those who love him who are called according to his purpose.*

The Apostle Paul is NOT saying that *Everything Happens For A Reason*, or that whatever happens was part of God's will and plan. Rather he says that no matter what happens, however bad it may be, God will somehow bring good out of the situation for those who love him. And I think that this is what we think we are saying when we say *Everything Happens For A Reason*. But it is important to be clear here. God does not cause evil, but he can take evil and draw from it some good.

But it takes us putting on the eyes and ears of God to perceive it, and the mind and heart of God to receive it.

When my dad was 57 he went nearly deaf (completely in one ear, and mostly in the other ear). And he tried a variety of hearing aids, but still could not hear well enough to continue working, so he retired early at the age of 59.

I had left home when my parents were 49 and so they'd had 10 years or so of an empty nest during which they traveled and hiked and camped all over the world, sometimes at high altitude. Well after dad's hearing loss, his balance wasn't so good. And they realized that it would only get worse. So they decided that after he retired, they would travel as much as possible, sometimes taking up to three trips a year.

And then after ten years, at the age of 69, he died suddenly of a rare disease. In the weeks and months after he died, my mom kept saying how glad she was that they had enjoyed so many adventures together the last ten years. It's been 16 years since he died and she still says that.

Now did God cause my dad's hearing loss when he was 57 so that they could make traveling a priority so that, when he died at 69, they'd have no regrets and a truck load of memories for my mom? I don't think so. Just because that's what happened, does not mean that God orchestrated every detail of it, including my dad's hearing loss and early death.

I don't believe God distributes disabilities and diseases.

I don't believe God sends hurricanes and wildfires.

I don't believe God causes people to commit murder.

But even - and perhaps especially - IN all these terrible occurrences, God is present. And when we lean on him and trust him, we make it through. So much of who we are is shaped by the most painful experiences of our lives and what God does with them, in us. Because Jesus can redeem any situation and every person.

Not everything happens for a reason - sometimes things just happen. And sometimes horrible things happen.

But we also know that horrible things will never have the final word. Ultimately they become part of our journey that finally reaches its end in God's eternal kingdom. That's what Jesus' resurrection shows us. Death is not the end - Love outlasts it all.

God doesn't cause tragedy - he uses it, and through it can show his love for those who suffer.

When disaster strikes, or when stresses pile up, what we need and what we need to offer is compassion and assurance of our Lord's presence and care. The danger in saying *Everything Happens For A Reason* is that it minimizes the depth of the pain, implying that we should look on the bright side before we're ready. Discovering a "reason" or "purpose" will only come in time, if at all.

So when you find yourself about to say *Everything Happens For A Reason*, either to someone else or to yourself, pause and ask, "Is this the right thing to say right now? Or is there something else that might better communicate the whole truth of God's love and presence?"

There are difficult days ahead. And these are the days which God sent Jesus to redeem. He is close - he has to be. Amen.