

“Beyond Clichés: Seeking a Deeper Faith: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves”

Psalm 10:14, 17-18, 18:6, 16

May 10, 2020

When Jay Leno was the host of the Tonight Show, there was an occasional segment of the program titled “Jaywalking,” in which Leno would randomly approach pedestrians on the streets of Burbank, California and ask them questions about a whole range of topics, from American history to world leaders to sporting events. A favorite was, “In which state is the Kentucky Derby held?” One unsuspecting soul answered, “Kansas, I think...is it Kansas?” In one installment, Leno asked the people he encountered to name any of the Ten Commandments. While some were able to identify one or more of the actual commandments, the most common incorrect response was the cliché we’re taking up this morning. *God helps those who help themselves*. Of course, the phrase is neither a commandment nor is it Scriptural. But it is telling that a survey conducted by the Barna Group, a Christian polling firm, found that more than 80% of Americans believed it was biblical. We can be forgiven for thinking so.

Like so many of the pious platitudes we hear and repeat, the phrase sounds biblical. We would not be surprised to find it in Scripture, and indeed there are passages that sound similar. In First Thessalonians, Paul chastises members of the early Christian community who have given up meaningful work as they anticipate the coming of God’s kingdom, reminding them that industriousness is far more Christ-like than indolence. And, though this cliché owes its popularity to Aesop and Ben Franklin rather than the pages of our sacred text, it has the ring of rugged individualism and personal responsibility that we admire and strive to maintain. In one sense, the statement holds practical truth. God helps those who help themselves. Even as we pray for healing, we also seek medical treatment. We might ask God for

help in finding a job, but we also prepare a resumé and network for options. Our trust in God does not negate the importance of human effort. Hold on to that thought.

It is precisely the air of pragmatism that makes this cliché precarious for people of faith. Within the church, we have the responsibility of living by a different set of standards than those that govern the world surrounding us. We are called to examine our personal and communal assumptions in the light of Jesus Christ. And, when I do that, I find the notion that God helps those who help *themselves* severely lacking in theological substance.

In a culture overcrowded with self-help books, personal improvement plans, happiness manuals, and life coaches, we should (I think) confess the ease with which we slip from self-help to self-obsession, from healthy confidence in our God-given abilities to idolatrous denial of our reliance on God and one another. And, we must also acknowledge the ways in which some popular and prominent voices have accommodated and even encouraged this shift toward pop-psychology propped up with supporting Scripture texts. Often, in these feel-good gospels, God’s help comes in the form of material blessings and on-demand answered prayers for faithful believers. God helps those who help themselves. It contains enough truth to be dangerous, but the words do not carry the heavy weight of real-life experience or, Scriptural witness.

When I look to Scripture for descriptions of God’s help, what I find there is grace. What I find is a God who, over and over again, reaches toward those in deepest need whose ability to help themselves has run out. The God I encounter in Scripture is the One who

provides streams of water in the desert, manna from heaven in the wilderness, salvation as gift and not a reward, unconditional love and unmerited mercy. This is not a God who examines our worthiness or who pauses to see whether we have helped ourselves enough to deserve divine blessing. This is the God of grace...grace enough for all.

When our ears and my heart are open, we find this truth not only in the stories of Scripture but in the stories of our lives and our life together. Almost every day, I have the privilege of hearing experiences of God's grace. And, in most cases, that grace comes not when it is most deserved but when it is most needed. It comes when every other option has been exhausted and every other avenue closed off. It comes in the hospital room. It comes in the middle of an anxious and restless night. It comes in the inexplicable feeling of peace in the midst of a raging storm. It comes in a moment of laughter when the tears have become too heavy. It comes not because in our strength we have helped ourselves but because in our weakness we have allowed God to help us.

I think of those I know and love who have been haunted by the demon of addiction and who have found a pathway to recovery. To another, these courageous souls describe reaching a point where self-help and reliance on their own abilities left them empty. It was, instead, the acknowledgment of powerlessness that gave them strength. And so perhaps we could edit this cliché. God helps those who cannot help themselves. That is the very definition of grace. God accomplishes for us what we cannot do for ourselves. This is the plea we find in the Psalms. A plea for mercy from those who can no longer rely on themselves. And God responds.

There is another important way in which this popular and unscriptural phrase misses the mark. We find it in the New Testament book of James, where the author describes a situation to which we might relate, "if a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply

their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." The passage is a rebuke to those who would tell someone in need that God will help them if they first help themselves. In the Old Testament book of Leviticus, the people of God are instructed to leave the edges of their fields unharvested. Why? For the poor and the resident alien. In other words, for those unable to make ends meet and for those who are strangers in the land of promise. The command of God maintains the dignity of work and insists on an ethic of compassion and charity. God, who is the giver of every gift and the source of all our blessings, commands us to help those who cannot help themselves, to serve those who are in greatest need, to practice compassion and grace modeled on the grace that God has offered to us. Remember, our trust in God does not nullify human effort. But the efforts to which we are called are not self-serving. Last week, a friend shared two commandments (also not on the list of ten) that are helping him navigate the choppy waters of this pandemic reality. ***Bring what you have. Ask for what you need.***

Bring what you have. Maybe it is an abundance of free time, some extra food, a sewing machine, the gift of words, financial resources, a grocery run for a neighbor, sidewalk art, or simple prayers offered in silence. God's help often comes through us. This week, I've been thinking of ways that we as a congregation can bring what we have to this moment. Of course, in many ways, this part of Christ's body is doing exactly that each day. But it has also struck me that God may be asking more of us. I've been praying about that, searching my own soul for the spark of the Spirit, studying the words of Scripture, and listening to the voices of trusted friends. It has come to me that God asks us to use the voices we have, the trust we are given, the abundance we might take for granted, in courageous and faithful ways. In the face of raging hatred and more subtle injustice, we must not be silent. As mothers weep this day for lives sacrificed on the altar of racist bigotry, we are called by the demands of our faith and the powerful

witness of those who came before us in this place, to take up their cause. As our literal neighbors and God's beloved children are in dire need of minimal necessities of survival, we must not grasp tightly onto what we claim as ours. God's Spirit dwells with those who speak prophetic truth and take faithful action. We cannot, we must not sit on the sidelines in this moment of testing. Will we speak? Will we act? Will we confess that we have been timid disciples, that we have left justice undone, that we have proclaimed a God of abundance without bringing all that we have to the work of the Gospel? Now is the time, I believe, for us to bring what we have...humbly, prayerfully, boldly, and faithfully.

Ask for what you need. This is not the time for obstinate self-reliance. Share your needs with those whom God has placed on your journey. Open yourself to the love and support of another. Give the gift of vulnerability so that another can serve you. Confess your lack of understanding and listen for those who can teach you. Acknowledge your weakness and call on the gifts of those who might strengthen you.

When we say that God helps those who help themselves, we mean well. We want to encourage proactive participation in the work of God in the world. But this cliché falls short of God's grace, a grace that we experience most tangibly when we let go of our own abilities, either by choice or (more often) by force, and rely solely on the strength of God and the love of community to carry us forward. This cliché fails to convey the weight of our responsibility for others who share this journey of humanity with us. Our call is not to help ourselves, but to help somebody else. The church exists not to meet the desires of a select few but to serve the world God longs to redeem. If we miss that truth or ignore it on our pursuit of self-help, we've bypassed the Gospel for something less...something less challenging, less soul-stretching, less transformative, less faithful.

When we remember it, we can cry out to God. We can acknowledge that our strength, confidence, faith, and self-reliance are not enough to sustain us, that the

next step feels like more than we can handle alone. We can pray for the courage to trust in God's grace, to rest in God's grace, to extend God's grace, to freely offer God's grace. Together, we have work to do. Amen.