

## “Beyond Clichés: God Won’t Give You More Than You Can Handle”

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

May 17, 2020

Brené Brown is a professor, lecturer, author, and podcast host who first became well-known for her 2010 TED talk on the power of vulnerability, which has been viewed online more than fifty million times. In this talk, she speaks of vulnerability as the “core of shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness” *and* as “the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of love.” I love that.

There is another video of Brown’s that I find both inspiring and challenging. It is on the subject of empathy. She begins by describing nursing scholar Theresa Wiseman’s four attributes of empathy: perspective-taking (the ability to put yourself in someone else’s shoes), non-judgment, recognition of emotion, and communication of support. She goes on to describe empathy as a sacred space in which we choose to join in someone else’s pain or suffering, where we say, “you are not alone here.” Then, Brown offers this wise guidance: “Rarely, if ever, does an emphatic response begin with the words, ‘at least...’” *At least* is a phrase we use to distance ourselves from emotional discomfort and relativize another’s suffering. It is an understandable reaction. After all, it is not easy to join someone else in their suffering, to stand silently in that sacred and tense place. We want to fix, to solve, to answer, to resolve, to remedy, to rectify. We want to speak the perfect words that will magically transport us from a place of suffering to a place of comfort. I’ve found the temptation is particularly strong in moments of grief. “At least you had him for all those years.” “At least she’s in a better place.” “At least you can have another child.” But, as Brown says, the words fall short. And often our attempts become barriers to empathy.<sup>1</sup>

***“God won’t give you more than you can handle.”***  
Like all of the clichés that we have confronted this

month at Second, when we speak these words, we intend to be a source of inspiration. We want to offer encouragement to be strong and take heart in the face of adversity. Unfortunately, in my experience, the words rarely have that effect and often bring the polar opposite of empathy—shame. Shame is that sense of unworthiness that goes beyond humiliation or guilt and works its way into our deepest selves, suggesting that there is something wrong with us. If I am lost in grief, overcome by pain, in an overwhelming place, and you tell me God would never give me more than I can handle, my conclusion could be that something is wrong with me. I don’t have enough strength or faith or trust. I haven’t prayed enough. I’m just being whiny or weak.

One of the great gifts of the biblical witness in our time is its clear-eyed description of human life. In Scripture, we do not find a Pollyanna optimism that ignores the reality of suffering. The Psalms are filled with the earnest pleading of faithful souls who have had more than they can handle. The Apostle Paul, who writes so powerfully about the victory of Christ and the eternal weight of glory that awaits us, also offers honest testimony of his suffering. At the beginning of his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul does not paint a rosy picture— “we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.” Christian faith is not wishful thinking.

I thank God for that, especially these days when so many people in this world are burdened with more than they can handle. I would suggest that *all* of us encounter situations in which more is placed on us than we can handle. For some, it may be a temporary situation of overwhelming pressure, anxiety, fear, or pain that comes and goes with the passage of time. For

others, it is a lifelong struggle to bear the challenges that life brings. It is simply not true to say that we will be able to handle every situation and circumstance that this life may bring. Can you imagine saying to a grieving mother, “God will never give you more than you can handle?” Can you imagine speaking these words at the scene of a violent crime, or on the battlefields of war, or in the doctor’s office following a difficult diagnosis? Can you imagine speaking those words to a frontline worker today? The cliché fails to carry the weight of life in this broken and often heartbreaking world.

Beyond this experiential refutation, there is a deep theological deficiency in this morning’s cliché. It comes in those first four words, “God won’t give you...” Quite simply, this is not my picture of God. I do not believe that a God of grace *gives* us horrible, painful, hurtful experiences, and would find little comfort in the caveat that God will stop just before we reach our breaking point. I think it is a mistake to suggest that God sits on the heavenly throne casting down disasters, suffering, or global pandemics like lightning bolts.

So, what *can* we say about the presence and purpose of God in overwhelming times?

First, I think we must acknowledge that suffering is part of life in this world. The promise of faith we find in Scripture is *not* that life will be easy or painless for those who believe. In fact, the lives of God’s most faithful saints are often filled with struggle and painful chapters. Nowhere in our sacred texts do we find a guarantee that we will be able to handle by ourselves everything that life throws our way. What we *do* find is the promise that at all times, good or bad, God will be with us. We find the promise that we will never be abandoned or forsaken or left to face our struggles alone. God is with us.

I imagine what some of you may be thinking: “Is that enough?” Is the promised presence of God enough to see us through the most difficult times

of our lives, when we are burdened with more than we can handle alone...when, as the morning’s psalm dramatically describes, “the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, waters roar and foam, mountains tremble in tumult?” Is God’s presence enough? It’s a good, fair, understandable question—especially now.

I believe that it is. I believe that God is as the psalm says, our refuge, and our strength. I believe that God is present to help in the midst of trouble and uncertainty and suffering. We are called to be still and trust, not because life will be carefree, but because God will be God. We do go through more than we can handle alone. And so, if we were to rewrite this morning’s cliché, we might choose these words, “God will help you handle all that you’ve been given.” Therefore, we will not fear. God is with us.

Of course, this is easier said than lived, especially in those moments when we are overwhelmed, when the mountains are shaking and the waters roar—when we are holding more than we can handle. And, I would venture a guess, that these days that is most if not all of us.

This week, as I was preparing to write this sermon, I decided to make a list of all the things I cannot handle right now. On Tuesday afternoon, I was lying on the floor next to our son Ben’s crib waiting for him to fall asleep so that I could sneak out of the room and catch up on emails, and I started the catalog. Pro-tip: I don’t recommend starting this exercise while attempting to enforce nap time. My list got very long, very quickly. Over time, I realized that what I was doing (subconsciously, I think) was forming another version of a to-do list. Collect all the things beyond my control, and then attempt to get control over them. Pro-tip number two: that doesn’t work.

Having exhausted other options, I returned to the words of Scripture. In Paul’s words to the Corinthians, I read something I had missed before. Writing to this fledgling community of faithful and weary believers, Paul does place his ultimate hope in God’s plan of

salvation. But he finds another God-given source of God. Listen again— “our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.” Paul lifts up the power of a united community to share both suffering and comfort. Friends, the burdens we bear are made heavy by the suffering of friends and loved ones, the strain of caring for children and parents, the silent and unspoken fears that cause our weariness, and keep us anxious. But these same burdens are made lighter when they are distributed.

This week, one of you shared this wonderful reminder with me— “The church is not empty. The church has been deployed.” You see, if our only definition of the church ten weeks ago was a place we visit once a week, our understanding of Christian community was already impoverished. When the world has been given more than it can handle, this moment calls us into action. That’s why the church exists. To bear one another’s burdens, to walk the journey together even when we are apart. To be for a suffering world the hands and feet and heart of Jesus Christ. The promise of God is to be present when we encounter more than we can handle on our own. The community of faith is the fulfillment of that promise.

It was one of those conversations that lasted long enough to go very deep. A group of twenty and thirty-somethings sitting around a fire-pit in the backyard discussing how we might support a friend who was going through far more than she could handle. We were trying to find the right words to say and lamenting our lack of answers. At that point, a new member of the group, who had been listening, spoke up: “I’m not sure if it’s the right thing to do or not, but I usually just tell the person how sorry I am. And then I make some taco soup and drop it at their house.” It was a revelation. We all nodded in agreement, remembering times when taco soup or a casserole or a phone call or tears of empathy offered far more comfort than words could. Five years later,

I still reflect often on that wisdom. We may think we want the right answers, or the magic words. But the truth is God more often shows up in taco soup.

The cliché that God won’t give us more than we can handle offers empty spiritual calories. *This* is what the God of grace *gives* us. Each other. The church deployed. No one stands alone. No matter what. Not a cliché. A promise of presence. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/partnering-in-mental-health/201408/bren-brown-empathy-vs-sympathy-0>