

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Psalms 10:14b,17-18a,
18:6,16,121:1-2

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Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves

Video -

<https://www.facebook.com/shilohbillings.church/videos/1717022464986558/>

There are several phrases that are associated with the Bible, phrases that are said at different times in our culture to evoke faith, and yet they are not in the scriptures anywhere. Each of these phrases has the power to both endear people to our faith and frighten others away. Over the next 5 weeks we will be exploring some of these phrases, seeking God's presence in them, and dispelling the pieces of them that cause harm to others in the faith journey.

So today: "God Help's Those Who Help Themselves"

There is a story that goes this way:

A man fell in a hole one day.

A medical doctor walked by the hole. The man yells up, "Help I fell in this hole and I can't get out." The doctor looks down in the hole and says, "It looks like you have a pretty bad cut." The doctor tosses some bandages and antibiotic ointment in the hole and moves on.

A pastor walks by the hole. The man yells up, "Help I fell in this hole and I can't get out." The pastor looks down in the hole and says, "It looks like you have lost hope." The pastor writes a prayer on a piece of paper and tosses it in the hole.

A police officer walks by the hole. The man yells up, “Help I fell in this hole and I can’t get out.” The police officer looks down in the hole and says, “It looks like you disobeyed the sign that says “Watch out for hole ahead.”” The officer writes a ticket and tosses it in the hole.

A friend walks by the hole. The man yells up, “Help I fell in this hole and I can’t get out.” The friend jumps down in the hole.

The man in the hole says, “Stupid, why did you jump down in this hole? Now we are both stuck.”

The friend says, “I have been down here before and I know the way out.”

In Adam Hamilton’s book on Half Truth’s he recounts a sketch from Jay Leno’s Tonight Show. Do you all remember the sketch Jay Walking? If you don’t it was when Jay would send someone out on the streets of Los Angeles asking questions of random people on the street. The question in this case was, “What is one of the Ten Commandments?” I wonder how many people said, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” Or “Do not covet your neighbor’s car.” Adam Hamilton shares a surprise by how many people answered, “God help’s those who help themselves.” He goes on to share that a study by Barna Group identifies that 8 in 10 Americans really do believe this statement is in the Bible.¹

Psalm 10:14b, 17-18a (CEB)

The helpless leave it all to you.

You are the orphan’s helper... Lord, you listen to the desires of those who suffer.

You steady their hearts;
you listen closely to them,

¹ Hamilton, A. (2016). *Half truths: God helps those who help themselves and other things the Bible doesn't say*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. Pg. 53.

to establish justice
for the orphan and the oppressed,

Now this statement is partially true. On Wednesday mornings, I volunteer in my daughter's classroom. I sit with kiddos as they read out loud and I offer them assistance as they go. Last week as I was working with a kiddo who just couldn't seem to get any words. Each time a there was a noise or a person went by he would lose his place. I invited the kiddo to take a deep breath and try again. It was striking how much the breath made a difference, you could see the child's body calm, and his attention sharpen.

Each morning when I get up I pray by doing prayers, that involve deep breathing. I do this to remind me to breathe throughout the day as a way of connecting to God, and re-centering myself in God's Spirit. It helps, it makes anxiety go down and capacity for thinking to increase. If I don't do this life goes on, my mind still reminds my body to breathe, but moments of life are not as clear. When I help myself by focusing it does allow God to help me more to be present in the moment.

Psalm 18:6, 16 (CEB)

In my distress I cried out to the Lord;

I called to my God for help.

God heard my voice from his temple;

I called to him for help,
and my call reached his ears....

From on high God reached down and grabbed me;

he took me out of all that water.

Roundabout, help

The challenge with our statement today is that there are many times when people cannot help themselves. Last week after I posted last Sunday's sermon, I received a message from one of my friends in seminary. He is a chaplain at a children's hospital. He shared with me the number of people who come to him with these half-truth statements

in their hearts when they face a tragedy with their children. Josh on a weekly basis sees the miracles of hope when a family receives news they could hardly believe possible, and the fearful tears when they receive news beyond their own comprehension.

For families facing tragedies statements like, “God helps those who help themselves,” is paralyzing. Parents facing moments of crisis and especially tragedy that believe God holds fast to this statement, scramble to imagine ways they can change their situation by doing something. If you spend time with Josh, you will know that these half-truths impede so many people from being open to God to help them in situations, because they feel like they need to do something to change their situation.

Or take for example addictions, people with addictions cannot help themselves. There was a rough and caring man in my previous congregation who once pulled me aside to share the dynamics of addiction. He wanted me to know for sure that people with addictions are not in a place to help themselves, and that he would be happy to connect with folks who were and explain the path to recovery. As he was describing the 12 steps of AA I remember focusing in on Step 3, “Make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the will of God as we understand God.” This tried and true method for entering recovery, recoveries that last a lifetime rely on trusting that people cannot help themselves.

And there is the tragedy that happened this last week in Las Vegas. In which people who were supposed to be having a good time, were violently assaulted with awful weaponry. Many people were helpless to do anything, they had no place to hide or go. And yet we hear stories of the heroic acts of people who went back into the zone to help those who were paralyzed by fear, or pinned down by gunfire. People who used sections of fence to move into places where people could then hide behind them to flee to safety.

This situation from Las Vegas is too close to home, Crystal and I had a friend in the crowd and others in the congregation know people who were there. We need to find ways to prevent those things from happening again. Even in this case we are helpless to understand the ways in which the shooter became tortured enough to cause this evil. The shooter in Las Vegas will continue to perplex us and we will wonder how we could have helped ourselves, when what we are called to do as Christian people is to trust that God will help us move from here to change the world, to co-create a better creation together. We are called to follow the teachings of Jesus to help direct our world to one that sustains life, instead of cursing it.

Psalm 121:1-2 (CEB)

I raise my eyes toward the mountains.

Where will my help come from?

² My help comes from the Lord,
the maker of heaven and earth.

The whole truth is that, “God does help those who can’t help themselves.” The Bible is full of stories, and our lives are full of situations where God and others need to lift us up.

Take for example earlier this year, when about 10 people in Panama City, Florida were caught in a deadly rip current and pulled out into the ocean. People on the shore could see it happen, and emergency services were still not able to reach the people who had lost all their energy fighting to get to shore. Now the 10 people were doing all they could just to keep their heads above water. Miraculously people on shore decided to form human chain long enough to reach them, first 5 people then more and more.

This human chain made up of all these people, helped save 10 lives, 6 of whom belonged to one family. The human chain was people from all walks of life working together, even when some on the shore stood by and said, “This can’t be done, we should wait for emergency services.”

One of the people who organized the chain, Jessica Simmons said, "To see people from different races and genders come into action to help TOTAL strangers is absolutely amazing to see!! People who didn't even know each other went HAND IN HAND, IN A LINE, into the water to try and reach them. Pause and just IMAGINE that."²

If any of the people in that chain had doubted for a minute they were called for such a time as that moment, that they could partner with each other and God to overcome the odds, then the chain may have failed. Instead, they trusted they needed to work together and in turn saved 10 lives.

This week as you take communion with this group of people we call our Christian community, I invite you to remember those who might be in a situation where they can't help themselves. Be in prayer about how you can partner with God to serve those people by being there hand up.

I invite you also to remind yourself that you might find yourself in a situation where you might not be able to help yourself. Be open to looking for help and support, from God and from friends.

Jesus has been down in that hole before, fellow Christians have too, and God is always with us, especially in our time of need.

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/07/11/a-riptide-swept-away-a-florida-family-then-beachgoers-formed-a-human-chain/?utm_term=.72a3d3e27dbf