

Why? (Half Truths #1)

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Luke 20:9-19, Romans 8:28-39

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/08/sermon08-27-2017.mp3>*

You've heard them before. You've probably said them yourself a time or two. You might even believe them. I'm talking about those pithy sayings which, when uttered with just the right inflection and tone, have the sound of righteousness and wisdom. They sound like the kind of common sense that "everybody knows".

Cleanliness is next to Godliness.
God works in mysterious ways.
God helps those who help themselves.
Love the sinner, hate the sin.

You've probably even heard them in church.

The thing is, though, is that they are not in the Bible. I understand that they are often used by well-meaning Christians to try to communicate some sort of comfort or challenge; they may also seek to provide some rationale or basis for behavior. But most of them are just not quite right.

Author Adam Hamilton calls them "half truths"¹. They sound spiritual, and are certainly a good fit for the 21st century American ethos. However, as theologian Miroslav Wolf says, "the nuggets of wisdom we often let guide our lives may contain some serious levels of contaminants."² Because they are common sentiments, if not common sense, we'll be taking a look at a few of these sayings in the weeks to come.

¹ I am indebted to Hamilton for the idea for this entire sermon series, which was inspired by his book of the same name (Abingdon Press, 2016).

² Wolf's quote is on the back cover of Hamilton's book.

If you're like me, you probably don't remember the first time you heard any of these. They are so enmeshed in our culture and identity that it's tough to recall. I do, however, remember the first time that one of these really got under my skin.

My freshman roommate at Geneva College was a young man from Coraopolis named Tim. He and I were born on the same day in the same year – we had a lot in common. I vividly remember sitting in the student union building on campus and being told by another friend, “Well, Tim died. It was his heart.”

What? In my world, 18 year olds don't *have* heart attacks, thank you very much. But Tim did.

Four years later, all our finals were done and the papers had been turned in. There was a smaller group of us on campus celebrating “Senior Week”. We were packing our belongings, saying our goodbyes, and preparing for graduation, jobs, marriages, and so on. I got a call: “You better get on down to the softball field. Steve has collapsed. I think he's dead.” And like that, another young friend who we all thought had “his whole life in front of him” died of a heart attack. At age 22.

I will never forget roaming the halls at Geneva College, sitting on a bench overlooking the Beaver River, and yelling skyward, “Why? Where are you now, God?”

And on each of those occasions – and a thousand others since, someone who loved me very much came and put arms around me and said, “Well, Dave, you'll get through this. Don't forget... everything happens for a reason.” And some of my more spiritual friends even backed that up with a quote pried away from its scriptural context, “all things work together for good”, right?

My first response to that phrase was one of relief and release. “Oh, good,” I thought. “The world may appear to be a red hot mess right now, but I can relax, because God is still in

charge. There's no need for me to be sad or to worry, because God is going to sort things out. Tim and Steve – they are in a better place. I'm OK. It's all good, right?"

But the more I thought about things, the closer I got to my second reaction, which was "*Are you kidding me????* Everything happens for a reason? What reason could there possibly be for apparently healthy young men dropping dead? What about babies dying? Cancer? Lynchings or slavery? Starvation? Child abuse? I mean, if *everything* happens for a reason, someone's got some 'splainin' to do."

There's a deep theological question here. If everything happens for a reason, then we can say with integrity that everything that happens, happens because it's a part of God's plan. If everything that happens happens because God has planned it, then the choices and decisions that you and I make, as well as the actions we take or fail to take, have absolutely no bearing. Why bother wearing a seatbelt, saving money for the future, or voting in elections if everything is a part of God's eternal plan? "Let go and let God," right (also not in the Bible, along with "Jesus take the wheel")?

Do we really want to say that all the horrible stuff in our world is divinely planned? That God's eternal providence mandates the drowning of toddlers, the devastation of atomic bombs, the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, or the senselessness of 20 years of futility for the Pittsburgh Pirates? Are you going to pin all of that on God? Because that's what you're doing when you say, slowly and compassionately, "everything happens for a reason." You are essentially saying that God is, well, a real jerk.

The Bible's answer to the question, "Who's in charge around here?" is, not surprisingly, fairly complex and at times bafflingly incomplete.

God, obviously, is in charge. But some Christians – often

Presbyterian Christians – have taken that view to the extreme and espoused a doctrine known as “determinism”. The line of thinking goes like this: God is all-powerful. As such, then, anything that happens happens because God made it happen. God planned – or determined – that it would happen. People who hold to this view of a micro-managing God would be logically compelled to recognize that the Divine plan for this day included your choice of socks for today, the President’s latest tweet, and the price of tea in China. If God is power and God is strength, then God is power and strength everywhere, and his control is absolute.

And in our zeal to rebel against that sort of controlling, despotic, notion of the Deity, we say, “Well, yes, of course God is all powerful – but God’s goodness is no less complete than God’s power. God does not visit destruction and chaos on the universe or the world he loves. God doesn’t cause drunk driving or bridge failures or adulterous marriages...” So some people swing to the other extreme and say that the only thing for which we can account is the impact of personal responsibility. It’s all up to me. I can’t depend on God, if there is one, because he is unable or unwilling to intervene in the operation of the created order. If he could, he would; but since he’s all good, and wouldn’t *want* any of that bad stuff to happen, he must be unable to prevent it, and so it’s up to me.

Fortunately, a rigorous reading of scripture preserves us from either of those two alternatives. God is both all-powerful *and* all-loving. God cares for the creation enough to invest it with some measure of freedom. For us, that means that we make choices and our choices matter – but that nothing we do can ultimately thwart God’s ultimate intentions for his universe. Those intentions - clearly outlined in Romans 8 – are for the good of the creation. It is impossible, it says, for anyone to act in such a way that isolates one’s self from the love of God in Christ Jesus. There are just some places that are too far for us to go, and *pretending* that we can live outside of God’s love and care and

compassion does not make that possible.

That being said, the parable in Luke points out that human decisions have very real and direct consequences. What is simply remarkable in the story that Jesus tells is that God appears willing to take some of the pain and grief that are the results of our decisions upon himself.

Luke 20 contains the account of Jesus telling a story to a group of religious leaders a few days before he would be killed, in large measure, because of choices that those same religious leaders would make. In his parable, Jesus describes God as a man who entrusts what is dear to him to a group of other people, even though those people continue to prove themselves to be wholly undeserving of such trust. In spite of this, the man continues to allow those people the opportunity to make different choices, and ultimately he becomes vulnerable to the point of intense personal pain and loss.

You know, I'm not really sure that I can fit this into a 17 minute sermon, much less a sympathy card or an internet meme, but here's what I think that scripture says in regard to my "Why?" questions...

God is the source of all that there is and ever will be.

The heart of God is love.

God does not cause tragedy, but often reveals himself in or through it.

God gives you and me the freedom to make choices – even spectacularly poor ones – and promises to walk with us through the blessings, joy, chaos, or carnage that result from those choices that we and others make.

There are times, apparently, where God is willing to intervene in some sort of supernatural ways. More often God

tends to work in and through people like me and you.

At the end of the day it is *not* my responsibility – nor is it even within my capability – to understand and explain God, or God’s actions or inactions. I must confess that God is God and I am not.

At the end of the day it *is* my responsibility to claim the fact that God is with me in joy and in pain, and to do my best to live as Jesus did. I do this when I do all I can to stand beside those who struggle, to stand in front of those who would do evil, and to stand behind the Jesus who promises that no mistake I make or tragedy I suffer is beyond the power of his resurrection love.

You could say it’s not fair. I asked “WHY?”, and God said, “you’ll get through this.” That’s not a direct answer, but it is, in my view, the answer from scripture.

Not everything happens for a reason. I get that. But there is nothing that happens in such a way that isolates us from the presence and power of God’s ability to bring healing, hope, and resurrection. I don’t know why some of these horrible things happened, nor can I predict where and when and why they will happen again. But I can tell you that you and I have the opportunity and responsibility to choose how we will respond to the tragedies that fill our world. May God bless you in your suffering, your choices, and your participation in God’s intentions for the world. Thanks be to God for those intentions. Amen.