

Jan 14 –

Sermon: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves

Scripture: Psalm 18:1-6, 16-17

The Barna Group, a respected polling organization focusing on religious topics, found that eight in ten Americans think “God helps those who help themselves” is in the Bible. For the record, the Bible contains no such verse. It seems to have originated in Greek mythology in the fifth century before Christ. Over time, it has been echoed by various philosophers, most notably for us in the United States, by Benjamin Franklin in his Poor Richard’s Almanac. This, “God wants us to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps,” is so much a part of our national psyche that it colors everything from politics, to relationships to religion. Adam Hamilton, in his book calls this statement, not a “Half-Truth” but a third of a truth. It has some worth but in most ways it is harmful to others and it is often used as an excuse for our not caring about the plight of the needy.

So where do we find the truth? There are times when we can and should help ourselves and God and life blesses the activity. God is not going to drop food on your table, force someone to hire you for a job you are not qualified for or make people spend more for your home than it is worth. He talked about a family needing to sell their home. They put it on the market with an unrealistic value. No one was interested. They continued to pray. Their realtor told them they needed to drop the price by \$10,000. They refused. They came to Pastor Adam asking why God was not listening to their prayers. What he said is, “You are not asking God to help you sell your house. You are asking God to give you \$10,000 that you don’t deserve.” They went home, did some more market analysis and realized the agent had been correct. They lowered the price and the house sold in a few days.

We can pray and pray for things but we also have to do some work. God blesses us with brains, strength, and wisdom. God provides others that can give us wise counsel, like that real estate agent. We are called to pray for what we need but then we also need to roll up our sleeves and go to work. Benedictine monks use a Latin phrase “*ora et labora*” which means pray and work.

So here is the truth in the idea that God helps those who help themselves. We don't sit around waiting for God to miraculously take care of things. The scriptures show over and over that God works through people. We are instruments God uses to change the world, our lives. So, when we work hard we will most likely see the blessings of those efforts. When we struggle hard to grow in faith we will see real gains. There is some cause and effect in life. Work, devotion and commitment on our part will be blessed.

But there are many other ways that this statement is less than truth, in fact it is a lie. Sometimes this phrase is used to avoid our obligations as Christians to help others, of doing our part to love our neighbors. The truth is some people cannot help themselves. They are in a hole so deep that they cannot climb out without help. What are some of those deep holes? People end up homeless through no fault of their own. They have a serious illness that wipes out all of their savings or a divorce leaving them without resources. People get downsized out of a job and all of a sudden do not have enough money to put food on the table. People take pain med's following surgery and become addicted. Yes, there are many things that we can't fix ourselves. This is why we have food banks and heat assistance and other supports. One of the things that saddens me is that in the realm of politics these "so called" handouts are now seen to be wrong somehow. We are told that they just are enabling them to stay in their situation. And yes, that might be the case, for some. But don't we want to err, as a society, on the side of making sure people are warm and sober and not hungry? Yet this phrase or a similar one, "They have made their bed let them lie in it" is used as the reason for not helping.

No matter how hard we try there are times we cannot help ourselves. We need help but because we have embraced this independent "I can or should do it myself" attitude we often reject help and then feel lost. I see this a lot in Sequim among our more mature population. Because of health or age related issues they cannot do what they have always done. Things are slipping, whether it be the ability to take care of their place, to drive, to shop and cook but they do not ask for help or let their families know how difficult things are. After all, "God takes care of those who take care of themselves."

The Biblical truth is that God helps those who cannot help themselves. The Psalmist shares this truth, “From on high God reached down and grabbed me;...God saved me from my powerful enemy...who were too much for me.” When you read through the Bible one of the reoccurring themes is God’s care for those in need. From words in Genesis, about taking care of the stranger, to the early Christian church making provisions for widows, our loving God cares about those who are lost, who are hungry, who are hurting.

I haven’t directly observed God sending angels to bring food, clothing, and shelter down from heaven. What I have experienced is the way God puts it on our hearts and on the hearts of others to help. This is what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves.

We can and do get into theoretical arguments about what constitutes helping those who are in need instead of just perpetuating cycles of neediness. I have had quoted to me the old fable, “Give a man a fish and he will be hungry in a day, teach him how to fish and he will never be hungry” as justifications for not meeting needs. If you only are concerned about teaching them to fish but they starve before they catch their first fish you haven’t been very beneficial to them. For the sake of this sermon, it is enough to see that not everyone can help themselves, and God cares about all, and we are the agents to make sure God can reach down and save people.

I recall reading about a man who got a big bonus. Instead of spending it on something for himself he gave it to a soup kitchen. When asked why, he said, “Not too many years ago I was struggling, without work and hungry. I went there and they gave me a nourishing meal but, even more, they let me know I mattered. I was not put down for needing their services. I left encouraged and vowed that if there was ever a time I could repay them for their kindness I would do it. This was the time.”

Finally, we need to hear God is there when we can’t help ourselves, not because we are poor or destitute or without resources but because we have descended too deeply into sin or despair. God is the God of the hopeless cause, who loves sinners, who walks with us through our darkness and helps us find peace. God rescues,

redeems, and forgives. Even when we have made a mess of things and can't fix them, God extends mercy to us. There is a word for this, we call it grace.

When you find you can't help yourself, and that will happen, God says "I am here." These are times from which you simply cannot save yourself, no matter how hard you try.

A woman talks about how she went into such a deep depression after her son died in an auto wreck that she gave up on living. She quit eating, not even getting out of bed. Her church friends came over, fixed her food, sat there until she ate and took care of her until she could take care of herself.

I think of a person who lost his job. He felt that it was all his fault. If he had worked harder he would not have been one of those laid off. After a few weeks of finding no one interested in hiring him, he gave up. He decided he was a worthless employee. It took friends to come along and encourage him and get him looking for work and giving him back his self-worth.

Yes there are times we can't help ourselves and God's grace is present. In those moments we cry out to God and God reaches out and picks us up and says I love you and will not abandon you. God says, "You matter to me. Nothing, no matter what, can separate you from my love."

So yes, do what you can to work for and with God. Pray and work. Help out others when they are in need and, when it is your time, reach out in your need knowing God will be there with you, walking along side you and helping you.