



BIRMINGHAM FIRST

A UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Half Truths:

“EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON?”

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First United Methodist Church

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See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish...

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deuteronomy 30:15-20 selections)

In early January, 1983, Alex Coffin, the son of the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, and his friend Thomas Beaudoin were returning from a tennis game when the car Alex was driving plunged into a South Boston channel shortly after midnight. Beaudoin escaped through a car window, but Alex was trapped in the car and died. They were driving in a terrible storm, had a few too many beers, and missed a curve along the harbor, driving directly into the harbor.

Ten days later, Bill Coffin, who was the Senior Pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, preached a sermon called “Alex’s Death” in which he reflected on how some people came to his aid while others compounded his grief. Dr. Coffin wrote:

When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died, I was sitting in the living room of my sister’s house outside of Boston when the front door opened and in came a nice-looking, middle-aged woman, carrying about eighteen quiches. When she saw me, she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen,

saying sadly over her shoulder, “I just don’t understand the will of God.” Instantly I was up and in hot pursuit, swarming all over her. “I’ll say you don’t, lady!” I said. “Was it God’s will that Alex was driving too fast in a driving rain? Did God have his hands on the steering wheel? Was it God’s will that Alex had a few too many beers to be driving that night? Was it God’s will that that stretch of road on Boston Harbor had no signage warning about that dangerous curve?”

In his sermon, Coffin went on to say:

For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn’t go around this world with his fingers on triggers, his fists around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths. And Christ spent an inordinate amount of time delivering people from paralysis, insanity, leprosy and muteness. Which is not to say that there are no nature-caused deaths—I can think of many right here in this parish in the five years I’ve been here—deaths that are untimely and slow and pain-ridden, which for that reason raise unanswerable questions... But violent deaths, such as the one Alex died—to understand those is a piece of cake. As his younger brother put it simply, standing at the head of the casket at the Boston funeral, “You blew it, buddy. You blew it.” The one thing that should *never* be said when someone dies is “It is the will of God.” Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.¹

In our first lesson from our Lenten study, *Half Truths*, Rev. Adam Hamilton raises this question: “Does Everything Happen for a Reason?” He’s not talking about mere causality, the law of “cause and effect.” Naturally, all of our decisions and actions have consequences. In the scripture we read today, Moses is preaching about “cause and effect” and is urging the ancient Hebrews to “Choose this day whom you will serve. I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God and loving him...” Moses is saying, “You have choices in life, and your decision will have consequences.” So much, he says, hinges on your choice. You can freely choose—so choose to follow God.

But there’s a half-truth that people circulate which comes from a misunderstanding of our God. And this half truth is that God determines everything. We see it in that phrase that woman with all the quiches tossed over her shoulder at Dr. Coffin, “I just don’t understand the will of God!” igniting Coffin’s anger that God should be held responsible. I’ve heard, and I’m sure you have, too, similar sentiments that are meant to console us in our grief. We hear, “It must have been God’s will,” “It must have been God’s plan,” “It must have been their time,” or “It was just meant to be.”

While such sentiments attempt to be a form of comfort to someone bereaved, they raise all types of problems. Primary among them is the underlying belief that God alone has power—that God controls everything, determines everything, that the events of our lives are immutable and we

don't have the power or free will to change a thing. And Hamilton rightly illustrates that this holds God responsible for the worst events in human history:

- Why would God will millions of Jews to die in the Holocaust?
- Why would God will the destruction of the two towers of the World Trade Center?
- Did God really want 28 children and teachers to die in the Sandy Hook shootings?
- Why would God wrathfully send monster Hurricane Katrina upon Louisiana, causing billions in damage and taking 1,577 lives?

As one wise commentator says, "Such a belief turns God into the devil." Because it makes God responsible for all the evil things that we humans do or that nature causes.

The other great difficulty with this half-truth that God determines everything is that it absolves us human beings of any responsibility for what we do. This is a crucial point. If we're not responsible for our actions and the pain and evil we cause, then why do we bother with a Prayer of Confession every week? If everything we do is determined by God, then "Hey! We're Not To Blame!" Even some devil isn't responsible. God's in charge of it all. This belief means that you and I don't have any power to do anything. We're just puppets God is controlling. And it says we don't have power to decide or do anything.

Adam Hamilton and I can offer some good illustrations:

- "Honey, I forgot your birthday. Fortunately, it must have been the will of God!" Right. Just try that one out and see if your husband or wife buys it. You'll find out who has some power.
- Or, "Darling I cheated on you. And I know it's caused you and the kids a lot of pain. But don't you understand that it must have been God's will?"
- Or, "Yes, I was drunk and I still drove my car and someone was killed, but it must have been their time. Don't you understand that God was using me for a greater purpose? I was only doing what God willed me to do!"

No one is going to hold you blameless, or judge you innocent, because you plead that you had no choice in these matters, that God forced you to do them. Moses said, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him." Choose! he said. He's telling us we have choice. As John Wesley would say, "You have free will."

Do you remember your membership vows here? We ask this of those who come for baptism as well: "Do you accept the freedom and power God offers you to resist evil and oppression in any form they present themselves?" Our belief is that God gives us freedom and power, and as children of God we are charged to use that freedom and power responsibly and lovingly. God does not dictate our choices. Instead, as Wesley and Hamilton and even your own pastor have said, "God gave us a brain, a heart, a conscience, the Spirit, the Scriptures, and the ability to interpret them as guides to help us select the right path." God treats us as free moral agents and gives us real choice, but we are the ones who must choose.

Our scriptures say that there is a time for everything. They do not say that God controls everything. In the 13th chapter of Luke, Jesus receives a report that the Galileans, while in worship, were slaughtered by the Romans. Can you imagine our doors being knocked down and our lives being plundered here on Sunday morning? Those same people report to Jesus that 18 people were killed when the Tower of Siloam fell. These people, likely Pharisees, in essence ask Jesus, “Why did this happen?” And Jesus replies, “They were not worse sinners than anyone else. No one sinned.” Elsewhere Jesus says, “The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike.” By which he was saying God did not cause this slaughter, God did not cause that wall to fall. God was not punishing anyone. People do evil things; random things happen. Do not hold God responsible. Jesus was saying, “All explanations of a world that have God inflicting evil on any human life are a lie.”

The classic formulation of the problem of evil, what we call “Theodicy,” boils down to this: “If God is all-loving, then God does not want any pain to come to anyone. And if God is all-powerful, then God can prevent anything painful or evil from happening. So God is either not all-powerful or God is not all-loving.” That false dichotomy lies behind the wrongful notion that “All things happen for a reason.”

Here’s a better understanding. Whatever you may believe about God’s power, what our scriptures say unequivocally is that God is Love. And in my experience, love involves risk and vulnerability. The very essence of human parenting is knowing the limitation of your love and power and influence. As with God, you cannot ultimately protect your child from all harm. One day you have to let go of the bike and allow them to pedal alone. You feed them and dress them warmly and warn them to look both ways before crossing the street, but if you love them there comes a day when you do not and cannot protect them from all risks and all harm. Love means vulnerability. And God is love. God is most like a nursing mother, a waiting father. God gives freedom because God loves, and when tragedy results, God shares it, and stands beside us, and holds us up in the midst of it. As Bill Coffin said about his son’s death, “My own consolation lies in knowing that it was *not* the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.”

With Adam Hamilton, I agree completely: I do not believe God gives God’s children cancer; I do not believe God causes people to commit murder; I do not believe God’s will is for someone to die in a car crash. God does not micro-manage and control all things. Yet, as revealed in the Cross, I do believe in God’s power to redeem all things. I believe that God can bring good to come from tragedy. I doubt that there is a person here for whom God has not brought something good and beautiful out of our most painful experiences. That’s certainly the case in my life. But that does not mean God causes the bad things to happen.

In Lent, we once again approach that week we call Holy because it ends on a hill outside the city where Jesus is crucified. And we Christians are called to ponder the cross, to wrestle with the most difficult questions and to stand for a while, as the hymn puts it, beneath the cross of Jesus. For nowhere is our understanding of God more transparent than in Christ’s death on the cross. It’s here we see God’s vulnerable, suffering love. God does not intervene. God suffers on the cross as we humans choose to do the worst we can to God and to one another.

This was an almost-insurmountable revelation to the Gentiles, who wanted to see acts of power from a God, any god. But, as Paul understood, God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, and God chose what is foolish to shame to wise. God's strength was made known in weakness, and God's love was shown on a cross.

May we pray? Gracious God, we're all too eager to avoid responsibility and seek someone to blame. Forgive us when we blame others for what we do, and most especially, forgive us when we blame you. You have graciously given us freedom to choose between life and death, blessing and curse. You have given us power to make choices that really matter. As we now come to your Table, help us to pray for a right spirit within us, and to do all things in your vulnerable, sacrificial love. Amen.

ⁱ "Eulogy for Alex," William Sloane Coffin, Jr., 1/23/83.