

Help! I Need Somebody!

March 5, 2023

Help!

Do you ever struggle with something, even though the tools to make your effort easier are readily available?

The other day, a box arrived in the mail. As I sat down to open it, I realized that it was taped particularly well. I struggled and struggled as I picked at the edges of the tape, turned it around to work on the opposite side. I probably spent close to three minutes struggling, even though I was in my kitchen and there was a drawer full of knives, scissors, and other tools not four feet away.

Help is often right at our fingertips and yet how often do we stick to our own devices, not availing ourselves of that which will make things better or easier, often for no reason at all?

A friend told a story about this all-too-human dynamic this week that had me in tears, I was laughing so hard. It seems she had a woman in her church who, years ago, had gotten her dream job as CFO at a big, well-established company. She was the first-ever woman in the upper levels of management and was keenly aware that some of her colleagues didn't think she should be there. She worked day and night, getting into work before everyone else and leaving later than the others.

A couple of months into the job, there was a big, week-long visioning retreat for the executives in Jackson Hole, and she was determined to make her mark. They had the usual meetings by day and schmoozing by night. She planned everything, prepared to the gills – from studying and researching and planning, to being deliberate about her wardrobe (being careful to bring only clothes that would project an image of power and strength).

On the third day, after a grueling set of meetings, there was a group horseback ride into the mountains. She had known this was on the schedule, and brought jeans and boots and a plaid shirt. She was a little nervous, having not ridden since Girl Scout camp when she was in high school.

And so she was glad when her horse was trotted out last, so that the others didn't get to watch her struggle to hoist her petite frame onto the horse. Everything seemed to go well. They trotted and cantered and climbed, took in the beauty of the mountains, communed with the marvelous animals they were riding. Most importantly, they bonded with one another.

She was feeling good about the exercise, even triumphant that she had broken into the inner circle. When they got back to the stable, despite the rich bonding they had just shared, she was suddenly conscious again that she was desperately trying to show herself as someone strong, someone who could hold her own in this old boy's club. And so, despite the fact that she had struggled to climb onto the horse, she decided to follow the others' suit and dismount by herself, without the staff's help. She leaned far forward, and as she swung her right leg over the horse, her bra caught on the horn of the saddle, and her left boot slipped. There she was, having worked for decades to get into the executive suite, having been so deliberate in her preparations, having worked harder than everyone else in the room for years, and now she was hanging by her bra off

the side of a horse because she had been so fixated on not taking the help that was right there. Not wanting to ask for help resulted in her hanging from her underwear off the side of a horse.

Scriptures

As we start to hit our stride this Lent, I'm so conscious of how often we try to go it alone, how often we don't avail ourselves of the help that is right in front of us, the ways we contort ourselves rather than seeking help. Our Hebrew scripture which Brittany read for us today, tells us to look to the LORD for help, and assures us that God's help is steadfast and sure.

In caring for us and helping us, God will not slumber nor sleep, providing shade, keeping us from evil. The intimacy and the assurance of this text is so beautiful. We belong to God, and God's got our backs, much like my Christmas sermon this year, in which I spoke of God wrapping their loving arms around us and saying, "I've got you."

In Psalm 121, the psalmist looks to the hills for help, but ends up finding that help in God. Our Gospel is a little more cryptic. There is more in this passage than one could possibly expound on in one sermon, so I'm going to just lift up a couple of points that I think are particularly salient.

First, Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night. Even without the benefit of Hollywood, our Gospel readers know symbolism, and the author of the Gospel of John likes to beat us over the head with it. By portraying Nicodemus as coming to Jesus in the night, we're supposed to see Nicodemus as needing light, an interpretation bolstered by the fact that John's Gospel is where we read that Jesus is the light of the world. Darkness often symbolizes fear, evil, even ignorance, and so one aspect of this passage that can be meaningful for us today is the prospect of seeking out God in our darkness, coming to God in our fear, in our unenlightened-ness, even with our faults and wrongs. Nicodemus comes to Jesus in his darkness, but with sincerity and earnestness, modeling for us to do the same.

The second aspect of our Gospel that I'll draw your attention to today jumps way ahead to verse 14, where Jesus says, "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." This alludes to Numbers 21, in which poisonous, deadly snakes slither among the Israelites, symbolic of the poisonous, bitter, contradictory claims they are making against God. As the people acknowledge their wrongdoing and seek help, God tells Moses to fashion a bronze snake and put it on a pole for all to see, and that all who were affected by the snakes, upon seeing this bronze snake, will live.

As Jesus refers to Moses and the serpent, my colleagues at the Salt Project write:

"There's a fascinating theology of the cross evoked here, distinct from both 'penal substitution' theory (the idea that Jesus absorbs punishment on our behalf) and 'Christus Victor' theory (the idea that Jesus conquers the powers of death). While God could have saved the Israelites by having them look upon any object at all (or in some other way entirely), the chosen remedy is a bronze serpent, a vivid reminder — even in the midst of healing and restoration — of

- (a) the deadly, self-destructive nature of sin, and
- (b) God's gracious transformation of even our worst into our redemption.

Likewise, the Christian cross can play this dual role, reminding us of

- (a) the many ways we turn against each other in violence and betrayal, and
- (b) God's graceful, transformative forgiveness and deliverance."

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The third image that I'd bring your attention to is in verse 16, where we read, "God gave God's only son." This is an allusion to the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, in which we read of God telling Abraham to sacrifice his only son, his beloved, in a gruesome tale often portrayed as assessing the degree of Abraham's devotion to God. In that one phrase, "God gave God's only son," we are told of a devotion without limits. God's love for us knows no bounds.

Conclusion

It's interesting, even with John 3:16 being arguably the most famous verse in all of the New Testament, churches vary drastically in how we interpret what it means. I fall on the side of universal salvation, that God loves the entire world. Others land on a much more exclusive view, that only those who believe will be saved. Here again, my friends at the Salt Project can help:

"Does God love the world, but intend to save only a remnant, only those who 'believe in him'? Though some Christians try to read this passage in those terms, at least five* key factors point in the other direction:

- (1) the reference to God's love for 'the world' [kosmos], not just a few;
- (2) the emphasis on unearned deliverance for 'everyone' in the Numbers story of the bronze serpent;
- (3) the emphasis on extravagant, non-transactional devotion in the Genesis story of Abraham and Isaac;
- (4) the emphasis on love (and not condemnation) in John 3:16-17; and
- (5) the foundational ideas in Christian theology that love and humility should govern our reading of scripture, and that we have no right to impose limits on God's graceful, saving work."

*(1) added by Pastor Bridget

I started out this morning talking about how often there are people and ideas and tools well within our grasp that could make things in life so much better, if we would just avail ourselves of them. From the scissors in the drawer to open a package to the Gottman "Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work," which Julie Harder taught here several years ago, to getting therapy or going to AA, to trusting that our help will come from God, what I hear in today's scriptures and this second Sunday of Lent is a critique of the mental and spiritual gymnastics we will go through not to seek help. My prayer for us this week is that we will reciprocate God's love for the world by seeking out the help we need.

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Psalm 121, John 3:1-17
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