

## Does Everything Happen for a Reason?

Romans 8: 26-39

Sermon Preached at St. Matthew's Presbyterian Church, Silver Spring, MD

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My husband, Kevin recently told me about a contest he heard about on a Christian radio station. The radio announcer reads a phrase on the air and a caller is chosen to answer the question: "Is this phrase in the Bible or not?"

So, I thought we could try it together this morning. I'll give you a phrase. Give me a thumbs up if you think it's a Bible verse. And a thumbs down if you don't. If you don't want your neighbor to see your answer, you don't have to raise your thumb too high 😊

Let's start:

God helps those who help themselves. (Thumbs up or down?)

Most of all God wants you to be happy. (Thumbs up or down?)

Cleanliness is next to godliness. (Thumbs up or down?)

The answer is thumbs down to all of the phrases.

While the ideas of these phrases might have some string of attachment to teaching in scripture, it's not true that God helps those who help themselves, most of all wants us to be happy or desires for us to clean our bathrooms to be godly (like your mamma might have told you once in an effort to get you to scrub the toilet harder) . . . at least according to the literal words of scripture. Our culture and tradition has given us this advice.

In the same vein, the phrase, "Everything happens for a reason" is a piece of advice that has also worked its way into popular Christian as well as secular culture, though it's not in the Bible either.

It's a phrase I've heard people offer when they find themselves in traffic meaning they miss dinner with their family. Saying, well, I guess everything happens for a reason.

It's a phrase I've heard people offer when they don't get the offer they want on their dream job. Saying, well, I guess, everything happens for a reason.

It's a phrase I've heard people offer in the stickiest of situations like a funeral greeting lines or at a hospital beds or in front of a divorce court clerk. Saying when they have nothing else to offer, well, I guess everything happens for a reason.

I don't know how you feel about the phrase. But I took an unofficial poll on my Facebook and Twitter page this week. And the reviews were mixed of the question: "Does everything happens for a reason?"

Folks responded with everything from "Hell, no" to "I believe it's a great way to approach life's problems" to "I've always believed that everything happens for a reason. But lately I've also come to believe that sometimes the reason is very stupid."

Yet, if you wanted to show any connection between this phrase and the Bible, you'd need to go nowhere further than our scripture lesson for this morning taken from the book of Romans.

For as Paul is writing to the church at Rome, he says this in verse 28: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

Good, can come out of suffering, Paul tells us.

Emily McDowell, a 38-year old living in Los Angeles, CA, received the news one day that no one ever wants to hear: "You have cancer."

In the months that followed, what she said she received piles and piles of cards that said a lot of "Get well soon" and visitors who offered her commentary about her diagnose (even if she didn't ask for it) like "Everything happens for a reason."

But is it possible for good to come out of everything? Maybe “everything happens for a reason” is the spiritual Band-Aid that we’ve all been looking for like Emily’s well-wishers were offering her?

I want to interject here and say I believe that all us, when we find ourselves or a loved one in a situation full of pain, we want to make sense of our suffering. Don’t we? We want to believe suffering is not senseless but is for a purpose. We want to have or give some comfort to make it better.

I believe in his address to the church in Rome, Paul was speaking to a community in need of just this kind of comfort.

Being a Christian in secular Rome was hard. Remember this was long before the days of Constantine declaring the Roman world to be under the directives of Christian teachings. Signing up for a Christian journey in Rome meant a life of ridicule, second-class citizenship and exile from family members.

How in the world, then, were they going to stay true to their faith AND be a citizen of their country too?

Paul saw their struggle with suffering and offered them hope—which is our good news for today.

For not only does Paul say: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” But, he adds this: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first born within a large family.”

The language of the book of Romans can feel dense, so let me break it down for you here. In these words, Paul is drawing attention to God’s gift of community. We’re reminded here again that we’re made in the image of the Jesus, the Son, an expression of the Triune God. We’re reminded again that we belong not only to God but to each other as Jesus was the “firstborn of a large family.” Most of all, we’re reminded again of our belonging thanks to the redemptive work of Jesus on our behalf. So much so that Paul writes in verse 31 that “God is for us!”

(What a gift of encouragement to repeat to ourselves over and over again: God is for us! Amen)

SO, while what you and I might most crave in times of suffering comfort wrapped up in packages of phrase with neatly tied bows like “Everything happens for a reason,” what God offers us instead, according to the book of Romans, is community.

God offers God’s own self to us—God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

God offers us our human brothers and sisters to see us, encourage us and abide with us in this journey of life.

God offers us LIVING, ABIDING, and EVER present encouragement.

We find that comfort we crave in the abiding with one another, never doing life alone.

I was having coffee this week with my new friend, Ann.

One thing led to another and I found myself sitting across from someone with tears in her eyes telling me about one of the most profound conversations she ever had with her mother only weeks before she died (though she didn’t know it at the time).

Ann’s mom, a life-long church member, active in women’s circles, a Vacation Bible school teacher, and really any activity that the church offered, taught Ann from an early age about the sacredness and importance of the teachings of Jesus. Church and things of God came first always in their home. And because of this, Ann always admired the strength of her mom’s faith.

So, with all of this true, Ann, said she was so blown away by her mother’s death bed question to her of “How can I be sure that God is with me?”

“Mom,” she exclaimed, “Why are you asking me this? I’m the kid. You’re the parent! Of course, you know that God is with you! I thought you figured that out a long time ago.”

But she insisted on asking again so Ann answered, “Mom, don’t you see this pile of cards? Every person who’s written you since you’ve been here. Mom, don’t you see your window seal lined with flowers and sweet notes? Mom, don’t you remember ALL the people from our church and others who’ve come by to see you? And the doctors and nurse who’ve treated you with loving kindness? These are all symbols of God’s presence. I know God is with us right now. God’s presence is in this very room.”

Ann said her mom replied: “Yes, yes, I see what you mean. But just because I grew up in church—it doesn’t mean that I don’t doubt sometimes too.”

And what a balm God’s gift of community can be for our doubt! What a balm God’s gift of community can be in the times when loss feels so near! What a balm God’s gift of community can be when we need to know as Paul wrote in Romans that God IS for us!

If there is anything I know for sure about the Christian journey it is this: It’s through community God infuses love into our lives. Love that carries us all the days of our life and our soul into the life to come.

Maybe then, this is why Paul concludes chapter 8 with one of the most beautiful monologues about the nature of love in all of scripture.

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Let me lay it to you straight: love is stronger than the worst thing that ever happens to us. Always. Stronger. Always.

Maybe this is why we still feel the presence of loved ones who have died cheering us on . . .

Or maybe this is why we feel the comfort of a friend praying for us though they may be an ocean apart from where we are . . .

Or maybe this is why we find ourselves worshiping her this morning a Savior named Jesus that none of us have ever actually seen, but we've experienced his love in the hands and feet of one another, so we believe!

Does everything happen for a reason?

I don't want to take that away from you if such is a sacred part of your journey. But as for me, it's not something I offer myself as comfort or others that I minister to as a pastor. Because I know that trying to make sense of senseless suffering is impossible. It's not a gift you and I have on this side of eternity. You and I live in a sin filled and sick world. Bad things are going to happen to us, our loved ones, our nation, our world. And there's nothing really that we can do to change that.

But what we do have and can offer others in the hard times is community. We can be in relationship with a communal God that teaches how to love in the first place. We have each other to bring us back to God when we lose our way. And most of all, we get the promise of love—love that is stronger than even death.

And hear this good news: God does promise us that God will take care of that stuff we don't understand. The possibility of bringing good from pain is always possible.

I'll tell you that Emily, that younger cancer patient from California, months later found herself with a remission diagnose. Praise be to the Lord. And with it, decided she wanted to do something important with her second chance at life. She couldn't get her mind off those unhelpful cards that she got while undergoing treatment. And so, a voice whispered into her spirit: "Well, do something about that. Make your own."

And from that nudge, the first empathy cards were born! Cards that said words like "I didn't know what to say. I'm sorry I wasn't in touch" Cards that helped

givers and receivers feel community support and unconditional love. What birthed out of a horrible season of sickness in her life was an entirely different way of speaking care to the hurting. AND these days, the [Emily McDowell](#) line of cards that is one of the fastest growing online brands in the country.

Good, from sorrow.

Hope, from pain.

Love, from community.

What a testimony! These are God's good gifts to us.

My friends, we may never get the **why** questions of ours answered. But God always gives us the strength to move through the **how** we get through to the other side.

Hold on tight to each other. Keep praying to your God. And believe God's going to see you through whatever it is you're going through this week. This I know for sure.

AMEN