

May 13, 2018

Mother's Day

John 15: 9-17

Prayer: Dear Lord who is father and mother to us, we pray that our worship please you. We seek to honor you on this Lord's Day and all days. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

'I Have Called You Friends'

Kate Bowler is an assistant professor at Duke Divinity School. She landed the prestigious position in her early 30s after graduating from Duke University, then Yale Divinity School.

Kate, in fact, had even more going for her. She was married to Toban, a man she'd loved since she was 15. And then, to top it off, she got a publishing contract for the book she wrote in her area of study: the prosperity gospel. The book is titled *Blessed*.

Kate had traveled all over the country, interviewing televangelists and pastors of the prosperity gospel at their big, impressive churches. And as you might expect from a Duke faculty member, she rolled her eyes at some of their outlandish pronouncements.

As I read about her, I knew exactly what she was talking about. A megachurch preacher here in town once invited me to count the Mercedes and BMWs in his parking lot. His point was that his church and his church members enjoyed God's favor, God's blessing.

I wish I could make that promise to you. Instead, I have to say: That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.

Had Kate Bowler been here, we would have rolled our eyes together.

It's easy to see how silly it is to claim God's favor via General Motors. But there is a sneakier, more subtle, more insidious form of the prosperity gospel that we may buy into without realizing it. Such as:

God blessed Kate Bowler. Or Duke Divinity School. Or Triune.

Everything happens for a reason.

Whenever God closes a door, he opens a window.

A few months after her book came out, Kate and Toban had a healthy baby boy. Kate is a bit of a smart aleck, and so on her 34th birthday, she sent her family and friends a picture of baby Zach sitting on his little frog bathtub cushion. It came with this note:

Contrary to reports that 33 (The Jesus Year) must end badly, this was officially the best year of my life.... Thanks for supporting me until I got to this, my own little prosperity gospel.

Her Duke Divinity students heard about the mail-out and sent her a giant gift basket. Plastered across the top was an enormous sign that read *BLESSED*.

As many of us do, Kate felt that God had a plan for her life. She thought any setbacks would turn into opportunities. She believed hardships would simply be detours on her long life journey. Teaching pastors, studying among pastors, living among pastors, she believed God would make a way.

She no longer believes that.

Because at 35, Kate Bowler was stricken with Stage IV colon cancer.

She'd been going to doctors for months with stomach pain. By the time doctors realized what it was, the cancer was so advanced they rushed her into surgery within two days.

At first she thought she literally had only a few weeks to live. And all she could think was "But I have a son." It was the best argument she had.

It turned out that she had a rare form of cancer that researchers in Atlanta are working on. With the help of her Duke contacts, she got into the study and began weekly flights to Atlanta for chemotherapy. Now she goes every three months for a scan. If the doctors say there are no tumors in her liver, she's got three more months to live.

Kate is a brilliant and funny writer and has found a new career as a speaker about what it's like to live under a death sentence. What not to say to people in that situation.

In January of this year, she published a column in *The New York Times*, headlined "What to Say When You Meet the Angel of Death at a Party."

And she somehow managed to write a stunning memoir called *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*. She spends much of the book telling the rest of us what *not* to say to someone who is suffering, how not to minimize or compare to our Aunt Judy or offer lessons God is trying to teach her. How, instead, to bring lots of presents.

In an interview on NBC's *Today* show, Kate said, "Everything happens Period."

And she concluded the interview this way, "If I could pick one thing, it would be that everyone simmers down on the explanations for other people's suffering and just steps in with love."

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I found Kate's memoir fascinating for many reasons, not the least of which is that we all struggle with how to respond appropriately when someone is suffering. Even we pastors have no magic words. But I probably wouldn't have included her book in a sermon except for the revelations about her faith.

For Kate didn't lose her faith. Quite the contrary. She just began to see God and his created world in a different light. All the clichés about things happening for a reason or lessons she was supposed to learn or windows opening made God a cruel teacher.

That just couldn't be right, she knew.

And despite the bumbling of so many people, it was her personal cloud of witnesses that she believes revealed God's true nature. Here's what she wrote: "It seemed too odd and too simplistic to say what I knew to be true -- that when I was sure I was going to die, I didn't feel angry. I felt loved." (*Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, p. 121).

When I was sure I was going to die, I didn't feel angry. I felt loved.

Her feeling, in fact, matched the findings of the Near Death Experience Research Foundation. As you might imagine from the name, the foundation has interviewed many people about their near death experiences. We've all heard about the white light at the end of a tunnel. The warmth. The reluctance to come back to earth.

And many people summarize all that as an overwhelming sensation of love.

“At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God,” Kate wrote, “I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees, bringing notes and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered with words of encouragement. They came in like priests and mirrored back to me the face of Jesus.” (p. 121)

I wanted to share Kate’s story this morning because it sounds so much like John’s story in today’s Scripture. Jesus is speaking to his disciples, preparing them for his death. He was not sick like Kate, but he was terminal. And like Kate, there was only one thing worth talking about as the end neared: Love.

John 15: 9-17

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹² This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever

you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

When everything else had been said and done -- when he had turned water into wine and walked on water and turned over moneychangers' tables and washed his friends' feet -- Jesus wanted to leave those friends with a message about love. And while he talks a lot about commandments, he tells them they're not his servants any longer. They're his friends. Friends whom he loves. Friends who must love each other.

If this passage sounds familiar, it's because we read very similar words from the epistle of I John for all of April. I didn't just pull these selections out of thin air. The church recommends that we read them after Easter.

Why? Because we need to remind ourselves of what Easter meant. And in a nutshell? *That God loved us so much that he sent his only begotten son....* Or, in other words, that God loved us so much he climbed on the bus with us. That he came to *befriend* us.

Therein I think lies the answer to how we deal with suffering. For whatever reason, God chose not to end suffering but to come into the world and suffer alongside us.

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“I have called you friends,” Jesus said in the final hours before his crucifixion.

“When I was sure I was going to die,” Kate Bowler said, “I didn't feel angry. I felt loved.”

On this Mother's Day, I can't help but think about this young mother who lives in three-month increments. And while she may be supremely annoyed with people who try to tell her what God is teaching her, she is not annoyed with God.

"Everything happens.... period," she says.

She separates into three categories the people who want to instruct her on God's intentions with her Stage IV colon cancer: the Minimizers, the Teachers and the Solutions People.

The Minimizers usually start a sentence with "at least." At least, you have the financial resources to deal with it. At least, you know you're going to heaven. And my favorite, which a stranger on a plane felt compelled to share with her sister, "At least, she didn't have to live through the Iranian Revolution."

The Teachers are sure she is supposed to learn something from this experience -- if only she would be open to it. "I suppose this is the ultimate test of faith for you," wrote one man, who then urged her to accept God's will.

The Solutions People include many inside the prosperity gospel movement. "Keep smiling!" one instructed her. "Your attitude determines your destiny!"

If you are like me, these comments can make you cringe – because I've heard myself say things that are pretty darned close. And I hear myself saying "God has blessed Triune." And I hear myself saying every single week, "Go with God's blessing."

While I don't think we need to censor every little thing we say for theological correctness, perhaps we do need to be mindful of what we say to those who are suffering. In chaplaincy training, we call it a ministry of presence.

In other words, the important thing is to simply be there. To show up. To come alongside. Don't worry about saying something wise or profound. And don't stay away because you are afraid of saying the wrong thing.

In the wake of her *New York Times* column, Kate Bowler receives all sorts of mail, most of it in the minimizing, teaching or solutions categories. But there are also letters that speak truth to her.

Those, she said, "don't talk about why we die, they talk about *who* was there. When you were afraid that the end had come, were you alone?" (p. 119)

One man wrote to her about a horrific episode in which armed intruders forced their way into his home and threatened his family at gunpoint. His family escaped but the next morning his neighbor was found hanging by a rope.

The letter writer did not try to rationalize why his family was spared and his neighbor was not. He didn't suggest that God had a plan for his family. He didn't suggest that God tried to extract good from the terrible event.

He said only that he knew God was there because he felt an indescribable peace, and it changed him forever.

He ended his letter with these words: “I have no idea how this works, but I wish this for you as you move forward.” (p. 120)

What was it Paul said in I Corinthians? **“For now we see through a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully....”**

(I Cor. 13: 12)

There is no shame in not understanding how God works.

Perhaps you may simply *know* – like this letter writer, like Kate Bowler – that God is with you during some necessary moment.

Or perhaps it is in the love of your friends that you glimpse God’s love.

“I have called you friends,” said Jesus. **“... Love one another.”**

Amen.