# "Half Truth: A Bible That is Falling Apart Usually Belongs to Someone Who Isn't"

A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – August 20, 2023
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Lesson: Matthew 14:22-33

Loving God, thank you for meeting us in our lives. Help us to take notice of your compassionate presence in each moment of our daily living. And, in this time of worship together, may we especially take a moment to pause, to breathe, and to open our hearts to you. Amen.

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Our summer sermon series on "half-truths" continues today as we explore some familiar (and perhaps some less familiar) sayings of our Christian faith – popular statements that have an element of truth, but are also problematic in some ways and therefore call for some deeper reflection. Today, we're taking a look at the phrase, "a Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't." Has anyone ever heard of this one?

I had *not* heard this one before. But Dave took all the obvious half-truths, so I had to go digging for something to preach on today! ☺ It turns out that this is a quote by Charles Spurgeon who was a 19th century English Baptist pastor. He was a well-known and revered preacher both during his lifetime and beyond. He had some admirable qualities. He spoke out against slavery, for example. He also sounds like he was a pretty tough cookie, but also had a sense of humor. He suffered from gout. And apparently, one time when he preached during a painful flair up in one leg, he said he didn't have gout in his tongue and people don't preach with their legs – so, why should his gout stop him?

Spurgeon was fierce in his faith and passionate about scripture which is probably why he said that "a Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't." I suspect this statement was born out of his own experience, at least in part. No doubt his faith was a source of strength for him in his life.

What is true about that statement is that in all times, including in times of struggle, we can turn to the practice of our faith as a resource. Reading and studying scripture is part of our practice of faith and it can bring us hope, comfort, instruction, and a reminder of God's presence with us in whatever we're facing. That's all good.

What troubles me about this statement is what it implies about people who are falling apart in some way. Is it implying that those who feel like they are falling apart are *un*faithful? Or that they are just not practicing their faith with enough dedication, passion, and persistence? Those are harmful implications that can bring more shame, guilt, and isolation to people who are already suffering.

I don't think that is helpful. And I don't think that is true because faith and falling apart are not opposites. We know that faith won't prevent us from falling apart at times. Faith alone can't fix every human difficulty. And the Bible doesn't answer all of our questions or provide solutions to all of our problems. That's ok. The Bible is not a fix-all book and it doesn't have to be.

Having a strong faith doesn't mean you never waver, have struggles, have doubts, ask questions, feel sad, or experience hopelessness. Instead, I think that some of the most profound expressions of faith I have witnessed are when people are honest about these things. And simply choosing to stick with a practice of faith in light of such experiences is itself an act of faith.

I don't think faith calls us to put on a happy face all the time. Faith invites us to be honest. It's great to be joyful, think positively, and have hope when faced with life's challenges. Sometimes that is how we make it through something. But when thinking positively becomes a way of hiding, suppressing, or avoiding our real feelings, it can become a problem. And sometimes those suppressed feelings get pent up and then explode in destructive ways that can cause more harm to others and ourselves than if we had dealt with them earlier.

Part of our call as a community of faith is to provide a safe space where people can put down the masks, lay aside the façades, and be real. That can actually bring spiritual growth for people on a lot of levels. But people can only be honest and vulnerable when they feel safe and know that what they have to share will be received with love, grace, and care. That is what we strive for here as a church community. That's also what Dave and I strive to offer as pastors when anyone needs a listening ear.

We don't have to be perfectly put together to be faithful. And, actually, this is an affirmation that is backed up by many biblical stories. So, instead of hoping that the Bible will keep us from falling apart, how about we turn to the stories of our faith for inspiration from people who *did* fall apart at times – people who had their struggles and failures; people whose challenges, doubts, and questions reflect our own; people who learned resilience and gained strength as they lived through their own times of suffering and found new life on the other side. The Bible is full of faithful people who also fell apart from time to time in various ways. And Peter is one of them.

Peter, the faithful disciple; chosen, called, named, and taught by Jesus; empowered to do the work of bringing God's grace and love into this world; was also a human being who fell apart plenty of times.

In today's story, Jesus had gone up the mountain to pray after teaching the crowds and left the disciples on their own in the boat overnight. Come morning, they had been pushed out to sea by the wind and the waves. So, Jesus comes walking on the water towards them. That got their attention and freaked them out. "Agh! It's a ghost!" they yelled. "Don't be afraid; it's me," says Jesus. "If it *is* you, Lord, call to me to join you," says Peter. "Come on out, the water's nice," says Jesus.

Peter's ok at first. But then the wind and his fear get the better of him and he begins to sink. "Lord, save me," he cries. And so, of course, Jesus reaches out, pulls him up, and gets him back into the boat.

Sometimes, when considering this story, people get caught up debating the physical impossibility of a human being's ability to walk on water (though there is a lizard that can run on water – if you don't know about the Jesus Lizard, look it up). But, rather than focusing on whether Peter could

walk on water or could have done a better job of walking on water if only he had a little more faith, I think a more compelling question is whether he even needed to try.

As Jesus saves Peter, he says to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" I don't read that as a harsh judgment or a scolding. Instead, I think we can hear it with the reassuring tone of a teacher speaking to his student, as a mentor, as a friend, saying, "you can trust me. I'm here for you."

And Jesus' words aren't just about Peter's inability to walk on water. Perhaps Jesus was also asking, "did you doubt it was me in the first place?" "Did you doubt I'd come back to you and join you in the boat?"

Now, I don't blame enthusiastic Peter for wanting to try to walk on water. He didn't do anything wrong. But he also didn't *have* to do it if he didn't want to. Part of the message of this story is that Jesus will join us in the boat. Part of the invitation of this story is to trust that God comes to us when the storms of life have pushed us out to sea.

We don't have to walk on water. Good news! So, we can free ourselves from the burden of thinking we have to be perfectly put together all the time. We can free ourselves from the guilt and shame that can develop when we do feel like we're falling apart (for whatever reason).

And when we feel like we're sinking, when the wind and waves overwhelm us, God is there to help us stay afloat, and (if we have gone overboard) to help keep our head above water and get us back into the boat. I've literally been out on the Sea of Galilee in a boat called Faith. So, I like the idea that faith is the boat that helps keep us afloat.

And, in that boat, we are in the company of other disciples. It takes a crew, a community of support, to keep faith moving in the right direction. And, far from all being perfectly put together, our fellow disciples all face the same sorts of struggles and challenges that we do.

Rather than *preventing* us from falling apart, our practice of faith is a resource for us when we do.

One of the reasons I wanted to explore this idea is because it is still vitally important for us to destigmatize mental illness in our society and in the context of communities of faith.

Perhaps more often than those dealing with other types of physical illnesses, people dealing with mental illness still hear the message within our society that they can and should just "get it together." But what they need is support, acceptance, encouragement, and access to comprehensive physical and mental healthcare.

This is important because at least 20% of adults and 17% of youth ages 6-17 in the United States are affected by mental illness. Anxiety is the most common mental health issue. Depression is second. Whether or not you are personally dealing with a mental health issue, chances are you know someone who is. And the statistics probably *under*represent reality because the average delay between symptom onset and treatment for mental illness is 11 years. And a little less than half (47%) of adults living with mental illness get treatment in a given year.

Part of the delay in treatment is because it may take people a while to recognize that they can and want to seek treatment for what they are experiencing. But destigmatizing mental illness and increasing access to mental healthcare can also shorten this delay.

There are a lot of wonderful people and organizations working on mental health in our country. And I'd encourage you to check them out to learn more if you haven't already.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) has a lot of educational materials and resources (that's where I got the statistics I just shared).

There is an Interfaith Network on Mental Illness that provides resources to faith communities on how to support people who are living with mental illness.

And our own denomination has a United Church of Christ Mental Health Network and a Minister for Disabilities and Mental Health Justice, Rev. Dr. Sarah Lund. She has a graduate degree in social work and is also the author of three books on faith and mental health (including one specifically about youth and children, which I just started reading). I actually just happened to meet her briefly in Kauai because she was there when I was there and we happened to visit the same church on the same day (it's a small UCC world).

Both the Interfaith Network on Mental Illness and the UCC Mental Health Network have resources on how congregations can become WISE for mental health (Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged). This is important because many people living with mental illness are looking for supportive, inclusive, and caring spiritual community. And participating in a spiritual community and engaging in spiritual practices are healthy compliments to professional treatment for mental health.

All of these organizations encourage education, talking about mental health in order to reduce the stigma around mental illness, including and supporting people who are dealing with mental illnesses, and recognizing that mental healthcare is important and should be part of our physical healthcare (our brains are part of our bodies, after all).

Faith may not keep us from falling apart. I'm afraid we all fall apart sometimes. But faith can be part of a holistic approach to our integrated physical, mental, and spiritual wellness.

So, if you are dealing with illness, physical or mental, know that you are not alone. If you are struggling in some other way, know that you are not alone.

And know that you belong in this boat. God is here too. And together, we will continue to navigate the stormy seas of life. Amen.