

# *Everything Happens*

First Presbyterian Church - Charlotte, NC  
Rev. Anna Dickson

# Kate Bowler Crash Course

Read:

- NYT article, “Death, the Prosperity Gospel, and Me” (2016)

Read (If you have more time):

- *Everything Happens for a Reason (and other lies I've loved)*
- Consider the devotional *The Lives We Actually Have*

Listen:

- Podcast “Everything Happens”

# Kate Bowler



- Duke Divinity School professor (history), author, podcast host, 2025 Willard Lecturer :)
- Books: *Everything Happens for a Reason (and other lies I've loved)*, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, *The Preacher's Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities*, *No Cure for Being Human*, several devotional books

# Tacit Beliefs

“I would love to report that what I found in the prosperity gospel was something so foreign and terrible to me that I was warned away. But what I discovered was both familiar and painfully sweet: the promise that I could curate my life, minimize my losses, and stand on my successes. And no matter how many times I rolled my eyes at the creed’s outrageous certainties, I craved them just the same”  
(xiii-xiv)

# Questions for Discussion

- Who/what has most informed your own understanding/experiences of difficulty? Where have you gotten messages about these things? What faith practices/messages you've experience have been the most harmful? Most helpful?
- The title for the book, *Everything Happens for a Reason (and other lies I've loved)*, plays on a common phrase of comfort offered to those in need. Name some popular phrases you have heard or used to respond to a friend going through a hard time. Kernel of truth?

# “Lies”/ “Half Truths”

- “Everything happens for a reason”
- “God is writing a better story”
- Apparently God is also busy going around closing doors and opening windows. He can't get enough of that. (xv)
- “God has a better plan”
- “This is a test and it will make you stronger”
- Romans 8:28 - We know that for those who love God all things work together for good
- “At least...at least...at least” - I had been stripped down to the studs and everything of worth I had accumulated was being appraised with a keen eye (xvi).
- “God needed an angel” ...because God is sadistic like that

# 3 Types of Life Lessons

- Minimizers
  - Spiritual Minimizers
  - “At least”
  - Calamity Olympics - you think YOU have it bad?
- Teachers
  - All suffering is intended to teach us a life lesson
  - “I hope you have a Job experience!”
- Solutions
  - “Have you tried...?”
  - Power of Positive Thinking

# There is no “life in general”

“This is the problem, I suppose, with formulas. They are generic. But there is nothing generic about human life. (memories). **There is no life in general.** Each day has been a collection of trivial details - little intimacies and jokes and screw-ups and realizations. My problems can’t be solved by those formulas - those cliches - when my life was never generic to begin with. God may be universal, but I am not. I am Toban’s wife and Zach’s mom and Karen and Gerry’s daughter. I am here now, bolted in time and place, to the busy sounds of a blond boy in dinosaur pajamas crashing into every piece of furniture.

“Who’s my baby?” I ask him.

Zack is running long loops around the room and stopping at every ledge to run his car along it. He turns to me.

“A boy?” he says hopefully.

“Yes,” I say, scooping him into my arms. He tolerates my tight hug for a few breaths and then squirms his way out, laughing. “Yes.” I say. “But not just any boy. You.” (124-125)



# An Alternative to Explanation - Witness

- **“The basic thing is not all pain has to be explained. I wish people would just, like, take a breath, notice the person in front of them, and realize that it’s probably a hard day and maybe they just want to talk about “The Bachelor.” It’s a good season.”**
- Here’s the deal. The human soul doesn’t want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed — to be seen, heard and companioned exactly as it is. When we make that kind of deep bow to the soul of a suffering person, our respect reinforces the soul’s healing resources, the only resources that can help the sufferer make it through. - Parker Palmer

# An Alternative

I think God might be a little prejudiced.  
For once he asked me to join Him on a walk  
through this world,  
and we gazed into every heart on this earth,  
And I noticed He lingered a bit longer  
before any face that was weeping,  
and before any eyes that were  
laughing.

And sometimes when we passed  
a soul in worship,  
God too would kneel  
down.

I have come to learn: God  
adores His  
creation.

- attr. St Francis of Assisi

# An Alternative

- Bonhoeffer, writing from prison - “only a suffering God can help” - 20th century focus on the “suffering with-ness” of God
- Gregory of Nazianzus, “That which He has not assumed, he has not healed”
- William Sloane Coffin - “God’s is the first of all hearts to break”, signing letter, “Your heartbroken sister”

# An Alternative to Explanation - Showing Up

- “At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God, 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....When they sat beside me, my hands in their hands, my own suffering began to feel like it had revealed to me the suffering of others, a world of those who, like me, are stumbling in the debris of dreams they thought they were entitled to and plans they didn't realize they had made.
- That feeling stayed with me for months. In fact, I had grown so accustomed to that floating feeling that I started to panic at the prospect of losing it....St Augustine called it ‘the sweetness.’ Thomas Aquinas called it something mystical like ‘the prophetic light.’....The feeling will go. The sense of God's presence will go. There will be no lasting proof that God exists. There will be no formula for how to get it back.

# The Imprint of An Unbidden God

But they offered me this small bit of certainty, and I clung to it. When the feelings recede like the tides, they say, they will leave an imprint. I would somehow be marked by the presence of an unbidden God.....It is not proof of anything. And it is nothing to boast about. It was simply a gift (121-122)

# Ring Theory - "Love in, dump out"

