

The Gospel According to Peanuts: Charlie Brown, Failure, and the Grace of God

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

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In his biography of Charles Schulz entitled *A Charlie Brown Religion*, tells this story about when, in May 1965, Charles Schulz was approached about creating a Christmas special featuring the beloved characters from his *Peanuts* comic strip. Apparently, he jumped at the opportunity. The only hitch was that he had just a few days to come up with a plan for a show that would successfully carry the 4-frame comic strip into a 30-minute, animated TV program. He got to work with his producer, Lee Mendelson, and co-creator Bill Melendez, and they began fleshing out a plot line based loosely on Hans Christian Anderson's story, *The Fir Tree*.

In the still young world of television production, there were already a few conventions for TV Christmas Specials including, Lind says, "emphasis on a universal non-religious "spirit of Christmas", inclusion of a "Scrooge" character, use of carols as an aesthetic device, centrality of the Christmas tree, and the ubiquitous presence of Santa Claus." But Schulz had priorities of his own. While *A Charlie Brown Christmas* would follow some of these conventions, Schulz insisted that the program be about the true meaning of Christmas, which meant it would be religious, specifically Christian. In fact, it would include one character, Linus, reciting the Christmas story from Luke 2.

Schulz's collaborators were worried. American culture had shifted away from any direct conversation about religion in public places, and they were afraid either their sponsor, Coca-Cola, or the network, CBS, would nix the show if it was so blatantly religious. But Schulz wouldn't budge. Meanwhile, as the show went into production, the team made some revolutionary but risky decisions. Actual children (not adult actors) would provide the voices, the characters would move very little, there would be no laugh track, and the music score would be jazz.

With just one week until it was scheduled to air, Mendelson took the finished program to New York to show it to the executives at CBS. It did not go well. In fact, they were very unhappy with it. The pacing was too slow, there was no laugh track to inspire laughter in viewers, the child voices sounded unprofessional, and, maybe worst of all, it was religious!

That said, the show had been widely publicized, and the whole country was hyped up to see a Peanuts Christmas Special. It was too late to cancel. That would have been more devastating than running a bad show. And so, on December 9, 1965, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* aired for the first time and was a tremendous success! Americans didn't reject the direct telling of the Christmas story, they embraced it! Still today, for many of us, the season isn't complete without watching the Peanuts Christmas special.

I share this story with you because it highlights something we sometimes overlook about Peanuts. Christian religion and theology come up in all sorts of ways in Schulz's comics, which is why we're going to spend a few weeks this summer exploring the gospel according to Peanuts. Each week, we will focus on one character, their struggles and triumphs, and what they can teach us about ourselves and God.

But first, a little bit about Charles Schulz and his faith journey. Schulz did not grow up attending church, but when he was in his late teens and about to leave to fight in World War II, his mother died of cancer. His father had invited a local clergyman to sit with her during her last days. He was so impacted by that pastor that he began to attend the local Church of God where he served. When Charles returned from the war, he went to church with his father and quickly came to admire the pastor and the church community. Over the years, he developed close friendships with several of the pastors who passed through. They talked about theology, scripture, and some of the hard questions we all ask during our lifetimes.

When Schulz and his wife moved their family to Sebastopol, California, there wasn't a Church of God locally, so he began to get involved with the United Methodist Church there, which happens to have been my grandparents' church. Schulz didn't attend worship much. He didn't care for the high liturgy of Methodist worship. But, for 14 years, he taught a weekly adult Bible Study where participants could struggle with scripture and questions of faith.

Schulz's own faith continued to mature and eventually he moved away from organized religion, but the influence of scripture and theology is seen in hundreds of his comic strips. From the Christmas story as Linus tells it to Lucy reciting Ecclesiastes 3 (the "for everything there is a season passage") before pulling away the football as Charlie Brown tries to kick it, the Peanuts comics reflect on the same issues of morality and faith that we all do still today.

Speaking of Charlie Brown, we're going to start our sermon series with him, the great lovable loser of the Peanuts gang. Charlie Brown, whose kite always crashes to the ground, who never wins a baseball game, who time after time ends up flat on his back when Lucy pulls away the football just as he's going to kick. On Halloween, all he gets from trick-or-treating is a bag full of rocks. At Christmas, he picks out the saddest Christmas tree you can imagine, and all his friends mock him for it.

This constant failure seems to lead him into a near constant state of existential crisis. He asks deep and profound questions. Is God pleased with me? What is the true meaning of Christmas? Why don't people like me? What is my place in the world? Why should I keep trying?

And this is exactly what draws us to him. We all have times of feeling like failures, of doubting God, of doubting whether there is reason to be hopeful, of trying to figure out what the meaning of life is. Charlie Brown is a kind of everyman who speaks aloud some of our deepest insecurities. What is remarkable about him is that he keeps trying. He keeps coming back to try to kick the football, he keeps flying his kite, he keeps playing baseball. He never stops hoping that something good will happen, one of these times he will succeed.

Charlie Brown's struggles put me in mind of the apostle Paul in his second letter to the church in Corinth. Just before the start of today's scripture passage, Paul has just acknowledged that he has a "thorn in his side", some sort of physical or emotional handicap that limits him as he goes about his work of starting churches. We never hear what exactly it is, though most scholars believe it was a physical malady, but it is upsetting enough to him that he prays three times that God will remove it. Yet, God continues to answer him saying, "My grace is enough; it's all you need." You don't need physical perfection. You don't need to be liked. You just need my grace.

Perhaps ultimately that is where Charlie Brown gets his hope and the strength to keep persisting. Perhaps deep down somewhere he knows that even if the world seems to hate him, even if he fails over and over again, that isn't what matters. What matters is that God loves him anyway.

The world may measure our worth based on our successes - did we win the baseball game, keep the kite in the air, kick the football across the field? Or, more literally, how much are we worth, do we have a great career, live in a fancy house, have accomplished children, and so on. But God doesn't care about those things. God's grace means that God loves us no matter what our successes or failures. God's grace isn't earned. Not by worldly success. Not even by doing our faith "right". We don't have to believe a certain doctrine or pray every day or read the Bible faithfully in order for God to love us and accept us. Those things help us to know God better and to grow in our faith. But they don't earn God's love for us. That's what grace is all about.

The other thing God says to Paul is "my strength comes into its own in your weakness". It's one of the most confusing and, for some people, disturbing lines in scripture. People have left Christianity over this sentence because they interpret it as saying God uses our suffering to make God stronger. Which, coming immediately after God says "my grace is enough; it's all you need" just doesn't make sense.

Yet, what does it mean? In what sense is God made stronger through our weakness? I would suggest that our suffering, eventually, leads us to trust in God more and, in time, to become witnesses to God's love in the world. And that makes God stronger - and us, too. The great preacher John Piper writes that this whole scripture passage redefines what Christian power is. It is not physical power. Rather, "it's the power to take a heart that would be bitter and angry and resentful and self-pitying because of my thorn and make it glad." Make it glad, make it hopeful, give it strength to keep trying.

Take a moment and consider, is there something happening in your life that leaves you feeling a bit like Charlie Brown? Perhaps there is someone who consistently misjudges you or makes you doubt your own competence. Maybe you are coming out, and your family is upset with you. Maybe you recently lost your job or are feeling helpless in the face of a recent diagnosis. You may be struggling with a hurdle at work or feeling defeated by all the craziness in the world. As you think about this, ask yourself, "where can I see God's grace at work in this situation?" How can the assurance of God's unconditional, unearned love give you hope, persistence, reason to keep trying?

And then, go out there and try to kick that football one more time!

May it be so. Amen.