

"BEND, BUT DO NOT BREAK"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
February 15, 1987

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### INTRODUCTION

On the Christmas letter of a former member of our Church was penned a note, part of which read,

"...and how about a sermon sometime in praise of the resilient fiber of the human spirit...able to endure and spring back again after each horrid solar plexus blow we endure practically every day?"

The suggestion struck a responsive chord with me back there in December as an important theme for our day - hence this sermon, "Bend, But Do Not Break".

### AS PERSONS

First-off, this is an important word for us as persons. One of the clear observations of my years in the ministry is that people do possess a remarkable resiliency. Buffeted by storms of various kinds, temporarily battered and crushed, persons do have a way of coming back again to a usefulness and a hopefulness that they would never have guessed in the midst of a storm. Resilience is the word for today's sermon.

The dictionary defines resilience as "the power to return to the original form or position after being bent, compressed or stretched". Not always "to the original form" as far as people are concerned...sometimes a finer form, sometimes a lesser form - but, at least, there is this amazing ability to come back again after "being bent...compressed...or stretched."

I find a parable in these Winter storms that have been hitting us in recent weeks. What a dim and dreary outlook it is - at least for adults who must get up and get out - to peer out in the morning's light and realize that it is snowing or sleeting or dripping icy rain. But dig out - and slide out - and get out - we do. And gradually gain perspective that we are not isolated, or immobilized - at least not permanently so.

Strange how the weather can affect us. I had another sermon idea ready for launching on Tuesday afternoon, but after being out and around in the wind and the wet snow of Thursday afternoon, I found myself taking up this theme of resilience. "Bend, But Do Not Break".

My retired step-father, living in White Plains, made an interesting observation some time back. In his spare time he has produced over the years one of the most beautiful gardens in his neighborhood. He mentioned back in January that on one of the worst days of Winter a rose catalogue arrived in the mail. He said that his first reaction was to put it aside as untimely and inappropriate. Then he began to reflect on its message. Looking out the window and across the way to his ice-shrouded rose bushes, he realized that they were not as frozen and forlorn as they appeared. And that indeed, it is right to remember and to plan for another day when the roses would bloom in all of their beauty once again.

Remember those lines of Robert Frost:

"The rain to the wind said, 'You push and I'll pelt!'  
They so smote the garden bed, that the flowers actually knelt  
And lay lodged, though not dead.  
I know how the flowers felt."

Of course he did - and you do - and so do I. But the really significant line is that line, "And lay lodged - though not dead!"

And so it is with people. In our journey through life we invariably encounter rough weather. No one's exempt. We experience sickness and heartbreak and grief. We agonize through our children's growing pains. We feel the hurting of people that we know. We run into hard problems in our work. We despair at the gloomy news casts with which we are pelted. Yes...there are those days in our lives when it seems as though the hard rain and the adverse winds of life have conspired against us by saying, "You push and I'll pelt".

But thank God for the recurring realization that "no night is forever" and that no storm is without its clearing. At least it need not be. All of us can think of exceptions among our acquaintances...storm swept souls who are blown into some cove of self-pity and for some reason never seem to get out of it. But that is the exception, I am convinced.

And this morning, I salute the resilient people that I have known. Sick people, perhaps faced with an uncertain future, but cheerfully engaged in a gallant struggle. Grieving people, stung by death of one dearly cherished, but facing the future with courage and hope. Working people, phased out of one job, but now training themselves for another. Single people, deprived of or uncoupled from a marriage, but avoiding self-pity, and building useful lives. Stop to think about it...how many resilient people we are privileged to know and to read about. I think of someone like Brigitte Girney whose name has been in the papers again in recent days. What a story there. Barbara Walters interviewed her on TV on Thursday evening of this week. It brought tears to my eyes.

#### FOR THE CHRISTIAN

Especially for the Christian, resilience should be no stranger to our souls. For if the Faith has grasped us at all, we must have moments when we glimpse that we are not alone, that we are empowered by One who is not finally defeated. This does not mean that we are exempt from suffering, or that we have the explanation of all suffering, but it does mean that we have good reason to be resilient - because in Jesus Christ we have glimpsed enough of God to know that we never drift beyond the circle of His sufficient love and care. And this I believe.

And this explains the passage that we had read from II Corinthians. How can you get any more resilient than these words:

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...so we do not lose heart."

Some of you have heard or read those words written by a person whose prayers were not answered at all in the way that he had hoped, but they were answered in a different way that resulted in a beautiful resilience of the spirit. I have read somewhere that these words were found on the body of a Confederate Soldier, but whatever their source, they belong to the select group of inspired writing.

"I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;  
I was made weak, that I might learn to obey."

I asked for health, that I might do greater things;  
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.  
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;  
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of  
God.  
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;  
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I had hoped for;  
Almost despise myself, my unspoken prayers were  
answered.  
I am - among all men - most richly blessed."

Our "friend from former days" who wrote that little "PS" on the bottom of his Christmas letter is right. Let us praise God for that "resilient fiber in the human spirit", and especially as it is given substance by the power of God at work within us, to renew us and to set us on the "high road" once again.

AS A NATION            And then I feel that this is an important word for us to  
carry with us as a nation.

In times of storm and stress nationally, it is easy and tempting to become cynical and despairing. But in the midst of such days, we need some perspective, some "stabilizer" to keep us on course.

Resting today, as we do, between Lincoln's birthday and Washington's birthday, it's well for us to reflect upon the resilience of leaders past. I came across a word that Thomas Jefferson once wrote. Said he, "It is part of the American character to consider nothing as desperate." And he earned the right to say that, considering the rugged circumstances of his personal life with the early deaths of his wife and of all their children, save one - as well as the fragile hold on life of a new nation that he did so much to nurture.

Maybe it would be a good idea for someone to put together a collage of scenes from our national history that demonstrate the resilience of our predecessors - and we might study them when we are waiting for that subway that seems to take forever to come, or shivering on a street corner trying to get a cab, or contending with the slow moving line or the latest shortage or whatever the frustration may be. Scenes like that first Thanksgiving of the Pilgrims, when the survivors of that first rugged Winter gathered to thank God, like the bleak days of the Revolutionary War when George Washington knelt in the snow at Valley Forge and prayed with the ragged soldiers, like the sorrowful days of the Civil War when a nation was born asunder, and later when Lincoln called his countryman to "bind up the nation's wounds", like the days - the "Radio Days" of the Great Depression that some can remember as affecting us as children and youth, when we were very poor in things, but very rich in love and friendship and simple pleasures and not-so tarnished values.

I believe the common denominator in all of those scenes of such a collage is faith. There are people of great faith in each of those scenes. And not surprisingly so. Because real resilience is ultimately a derivative of faith. Said Lincoln, "Again and again....I have been driven to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go".

I'm sure that it was his faith that enabled him to "bend, but not to break" as he experienced defeat and failure across the years of his life. I reviewed once again these vital facts in the life of one of our greatest men that country has produced as we celebrated his birthday on Thursday.

- 1831 - Lincoln failed in business.
- 1832 - He was defeated for the Illinois Legislature.
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And remember his words when he prayed, "not so much that God would be on our side" he said, "as that we might be found on His side". Therein is the path to resilience. To be "on God's side."

#### CONCLUSION

So how can a Christian be permanently "fog-bound" in these days?

It may never be "back to normal", or "back to nostalgia", but it will be on to something worth having, maybe with greater integrity and some sturdier values and greater love and appreciation for one another, and for the God of all mankind who has come closer to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Each of us has his or her own favorite Bible verses. What are yours? I think if I were to select four or five favorite verses or phrases, I would certainly include in that number Paul's simple declaration, "We know that in everything, God works for good with those who love Him". That's a promise well worth standing on. "In everything" - not necessarily good in itself, but "in everything....God works for good with those who love Him". It's a tremendous assertion, and it is that confidence that finally is the reason for this "bend, but do not break" sermon on resilience that our friend from former days was celebrating when he penned that little "ps" on his Christmas letter,

"A good word for that resilient fiber of the human spirit...able to endure...to spring back again after each horrid 'solar plexus' blow we endure practically each day..."

#### PRAYER

Move in our hearts this hour, dear God. Our lives are not always easy and we often do feel "storm-swept"....down and low....afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, as Paul tells us he once felt.

But then lead each of us in our private pilgrimage of faith to that peak and point where we can sing with Paul, 'afflicted, yes - but not crushed.... perplexed, yes, but not driven to despair....persecuted, yes, but not forsaken... and struck down, yes - but not destroyed. We ask this in the name and the spirit of Christ, whose eternal resilience is our guiding light of life for each of us. Amen.

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