

"FROM COPING TO CONQUERING"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
June 2, 1991

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### INTRODUCTION

How do you know if it's going to be a bad day? Any ideas? What's your personal "yardstick?" Someone suggested it's when you call suicide prevention and they put you on hold. Another said, no - it's when your horn gets stuck behind a Hell's Angels Motorcycle gang. Or, when you see a 60 MINUTES news team waiting in your office. Or, maybe it's when you're playing golf all alone...and you hit a hole-in-one...on a Sunday morning.

Once upon a time there was a cowboy out west in a heap of trouble. A wild bull was after him...head down and nostrils snorting, the bull charged toward him. The cowboy dove into a convenient recess in the ground. As soon as this bull passed over the hole, the cowboy leaped out. The bull came back, madder than ever. Right before the bull reached him, the cowboy again ducked into the hole. Then, when the bull passed, he popped back out again. He did this several times. Finally a stranger watching this scenario shouted,

"Hey...cowboy...why don't you just stay in the hole?"

Leaping out again, the cowboy yelled,

"There's a bear in that hole!" "A bear in the hole!"

Well...that's how it can be some days...we get caught between a bull and a bear.

### DEVELOPMENT

A friend was telling me recently about an airplane that was making its way from NY to San Francisco. One of the engines caught fire. The captain came on to the speaker system in an effort to reassure the passengers that the fire would soon be out and there was nothing to worry about. Besides, the plane could fly as well with three engines as with four.

Unfortunately, a second engine burst into flames. Once again, the captain spoke softly reassuring the passengers that two engines were sufficient. Then a third engine was suddenly on fire. The captain said no more. Only silence from the front of the plane.

Soon the captain appeared in the cabin with a parachute on his back. As he opened the Exit Door, he said calmly to the passengers, "Don't panic...I'm going to get us some help". Out he jumped. 'Course this didn't really happen, but still when the pilot leaves to get help, you're in serious trouble. That's the sort of thing that can ruin a day.

### ST. PAUL AND SOME BAD DAYS

St. Paul knew what it was to have a bad day. He had a great many of them - shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonment. But he knew his Pilot would never bail out and leave him alone. And that's why he could write:

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in us the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be also manifested in our bodies."

St. Paul was one of those people who was never under "his circumstances". You know how it is...someone asks,

"How are you doing?" and we answer, "Oh...all right....under the circumstances".

St. Paul never stayed "under his circumstances". He knew how to get on top of them. Whether shipwrecked or imprisoned or in chains, his life was testimony to the truth that we can be victors rather than victims.

And what was Paul's secret? He tells us here in this passage. He knew the transcendent power of God in his own life. Christ lived within Him. Therefore, nothing on the outside was strong enough to crush him. By faith in Christ, he not only coped but he also conquered and so, too, can we! Three points.

#### OPPOSITION IS A PART OF LIFE

St. Paul was wise enough to know, first of all, that opposition is a part of life. Many of us think that life should always give us "a wind at our back" so we may float through life effortlessly. We whimper if things do not go our way. We whine at every set back. If the currents against us are strong enough, we throw up our hands and say, "Oh, well...I guess I wasn't meant to succeed anyway."

Archibald Rutledge tells of seeing a bird build its nest. Patiently and hard it worked all day. That night a storm came and the next morning the bird's home lay on the ground in ruin. The bird was there, too, however....it was not mourning over the destruction. It was busy - rebuilding.

Do any of you remember the first words of Scott Peck's helpful book, The Road Less Traveled? Yes - "life is difficult" he said. The people who have made the most significant contributions have been those who have confronted that truth head on. Not only have they coped, but they have also conquered. "Life is hard, by the yard. By the inch, life's a cinch". I love that line.

I'm sure you're familiar with Wedgewood pottery. It is some of the world's finest. You may not be familiar with the fact that Josiah Wedgewood was forced to leave school when he was only nine years of age and that at thirteen he was stricken with smallpox, which crippled him for the remainder of his life. Nothing came easy for Josiah but nothing could defeat him either. Today his pottery is known world-wide for its consistent beauty.

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THIS IS WHAT THE GOSPEL IS ALL ABOUT

This is what the Gospel is all about. It's about taking that which is useless and making it usable...it's about taking that which is hopeless and making it hopeful...about taking that which has been defeated and making it victorious. That is what the cross is all about...a symbol of shame on Good Friday and now a badge of triumph.

Once upon a time there was an oriental monarch who owned a magnificent, large, perfect diamond. It was the pride of his Empire. However, under some mysterious circumstances it got damaged. Its beauty was marred by a long, hair-like scratch. The King...the poor King was broken-hearted.

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The artist had turned the hair-like flaw into the stem of an exquisite rose carved delicately into the diamond. Truly...it was more beautiful than ever before. To me, that is the story of the cross. A symbol of shame transformed into a means of salvation. It can be the story of a life present here this hour...your life, my life. We will face times of opposition in life. I believe that by God's grace, however, opposition can be turned into opportunity. And if nothing else, we will be drawn closer to Him who is our life.

That splendid preacher of the South, Clovis Chappel, who once preached the Gospel of Christ to some of your grandparents, years ago stood with others facing a situation that looked utterly hopeless. Then one daring man, like Paul long ago, stood up and said this:

"I love to get in a hard place for my Lord"...he affirmed with humble confidence...."I love to get in a place that is so hard that there is no chance to get through without getting down on both hands and knees and crawling through to God".

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And what good news that is for your life and for mine. We cannot only cope, but dear friend - WE CAN CONQUER. That is my faith and I hope it is yours, too. How? By the transcendent power of God working through our lives and turning opposition into opportunity. That's what our faith is all about. Take it from there.

PRAYER For these quiet moments of reflection and renewal here in Your House, O God, we thank you. Make us sensitive to your presence and nearness in these moments.

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Encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing presence. And point out markers on the trail for those who have lost their way. Douse with the cold water of common sense any who might this very day be on the verge of some destructive action or some unhealthy relationship. The race is short, O God, even at its longest and we would try to run it well....and always to Your glory. In the name and spirit of Christ - the life-giver. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, June 2, 1991

I. HOLY COMMUNION

- A. It has long been the custom to celebrate...and we like to announce for the benefit...the TABLE OF OUR LORD is open....one does not have to be a member...
- B. His TABLE is open to all...and we invite all of you to receive the SACRAMENT....trusting that this time may be for you an occasion of spiritual renewal...
- C. Procedure....the elements will be served to you in the pews by the ushers. Upon receiving them, please hold...

II. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. A word of greeting to the visitors...delighted you're here. Be free in the sharing of your name....fill out...sign a card. Join us downstairs at the coffee hour. Come, worship with us....work with us, too, in the outreach...
- B. Doing the Lord's work here since 1837...roots are deep in the soil....minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit.

III. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns...listed in the bulletin. Review them on your own...noting the study and spiritual growth opportunities offered weekly by the "Hounds of Heaven" (Tuesday nights) and the Aldersgate Class (Wednesdays).
- B. Two fellowship events coming along: Methodist Night at Shea Stadium. June 17th. Tickets - Jan Ernst. All Church Picnic. June 22nd. Tickets - Doreen Morales.
- C. Pick up your copy of the June issue of "A Word in Edgeways". Thanks to Lucy Dinnes...writes up our monthly concerns so nicely...and adds a touch of enthusiasm to each activity.
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