

"ON GETTING KNOCKED DOWN"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
May 20, 1990

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INTRODUCTION

Back in January when most of America was preparing for the Super Bowl, two television sportscasters were discussing the great running backs in professional football. They talked about Jimmy Brown and Larry Conzka and others and then came to Walter Payton, the all-time leading ground gainer in the NFL. "What a runner!" said the first commentator. "Do you realize that all together Walter Payton has gained over nine miles rushing in his amazing career?" The second sportscaster thought a moment and then commented,

"And to think that every 4.6 yards of the way,
someone was knocking him down!"

Maybe that describes your life...a long and tough journey with somebody knocking you down every few yards. The writer of First Peter was dealing with persons who were getting knocked down and finding it difficult to get back up. So he advised them to "suffer with patience".

DEVELOPMENT

It's difficult to advise someone to suffer patiently. We are solution oriented. We would like to think that every problem has a nice, neat, quick fix. Self-help books promise slick, glib one-minute solutions to our every vexation. There are many problems, however, that are not so easily dealt with. Ask someone with cancer or MS or AIDS. Ask anyone with an abusive spouse or someone who has a chemically dependent child, or the person struggling with deep depression or loneliness or grief.

The writer of First Peter was writing to Christians, many of whom were getting knocked down because of their faith. And this was troubling them. They were hurting and suffering not because they were doing wrong, but because they were doing right. It was so unjust. Unfortunately, that's the way life is!

KNOCKED DOWN WHEN WE DON'T DESERVE IT

Sometimes we get knocked down when we don't deserve it. That's one thing that makes getting knocked down difficult to accept.

Once when Bob Hope received a major award he responded,

"I don't deserve this, but then I have arthritis
and I don't deserve that either...."

I suspect his comment was in partial jest. Sometimes it is difficult and frustrating to try to figure out why life has struck us down at this particular point along the way.

One sees this, of course, with children. What could the children of Northern Ireland or Beirut possibly have done to merit the ravages of war? Or how about babies born today addicted to cocaine or infested with AIDS. Or, how about those who have been the victim of drunken drivers or parental abuse? What about those born into poverty and squalor or those born in places where the food supply is dwindling away to nothing? Some suffering in this world comes from personal wrong-doing, but many of those who suffer most have done nothing to deserve it. Life is unfair.

The name of William Henry Alston of Maryland probably means nothing to you. He was an alcoholic, arrested and incarcerated and then placed in a mental hospital on charges of breaking and entering. After months of treatment, authorities finally came to the realization that they had the wrong man. A journalist with the Washington Post who reported the story posed the question, Where is justice?

If anybody has an answer to that one, share it with the rest of us. Yes, life can be unfair. We can sympathize with Joey, a nineteen year old boy who was dying of cancer at a Rhode Island Hospital. Said Joey,

"You could say it's God's fault, and when I get to heaven I'm going to ask God why he put me through this. And if He doesn't have a good answer, I'm going to punch Him in the mouth."

Pardon the irreverence, but I believe God understands. Sometimes we do get knocked down along the way and we have no idea "why".

NOTHING TO DO BUT GRIN AND BEAR IT

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Even worse, sometimes there seems to be nothing we can do but to "grin and

It's one thing to have the flu. You know that it will pass. But it's another to have a disease diagnosed as terminal. It's one thing to be 25 and lose your job, but it's another to be on the verge of retirement and to lose everything you own. It's one thing to have a lover's tiff, but it's another to watch a marriage of 25 years go down the tubes. Some setbacks heal very slowly...and some not at all.

And that's one good reason to walk through life with a sense of humor. It can be a cushion of life. Back during the Depression there were people who jumped out of windows. There were others far worse off who somehow kept their sense of humor and laughed their troubles away. Some of you may remember how Jack Benny helped so many to drive away the "depression blues"...Sunday-nights at 7:30...stretched out on the living room floor...he made America smile and laugh.

The late thirties were days of the great dustbowl in the midwest and farms and fortunes were literally being blown away. How did people cope? Humor helped. One man, for instance, said that during the thirties it was so dry that when "one man was hit on the head by a rain-drop, he was so overcome that two buckets of sand had to be thrown in his face to revive him".

And someone else said he talked to a motorist who saw a ten gallon hat on a dust drift. He picked it up and found a head under it.

"Can I give you a ride to town?" the motorist asked the protruding head. "Thanks, but I'll make it on my own" the head answered. "I'm on a horse".

Well, that's a lot of dust. Telling jokes was the only way some people knew to cope. They could not change the weather, so they adjusted their attitude and they found things to laugh at even in the grimmest of times. They survived. Some of them even refer to the Depression as the "good old days...."

Suffer with patience. Don't lose your sense of humor. But surely, that is not the entire story. Surely, we can do more than "grin and bear it". After all, we are children of the King and as such "kin" of the Creator. There is more for us than being patient.

TURN A DEFEAT INTO A VICTORY

For one thing, we can turn a defeat of the flesh into a victory of the spirit.

And there are some remarkable people who are doing that every day. Let me tell you about one such person. There was a news item recently datelined Yosemite National Park. It was about a young paraplegic who hauled himself up 3,000 foot El Capitan mountain six inches at a time over nine days, using only his arms. He wore a T-shirt that read, "See You At The Top!"

Mark Wellman, 29, and his friend, Mike Corbett, started the day about 300 feet from the top of the granite cliff, after spending the night tied into sleeping bags on "chicken-head" ledge. The climbers were a day behind schedule. They began the grueling effort July 18th and had been battling gusting winds and a 90-degree heat. Wellman, whose legs had been paralyzed since 1982 from a 1982 fall from another Yosemite peak, became the first paraplegic to make this vertical trek, doing 7,000 pull ups on rope placed by Corbett.

Wellman was hospitalized for almost a year following that 1982 fall, but since then has been as active as possible, staying in shape with sports such as kayaking and directing the park's program for disabled visitors. His example raises the question of "who's disabled?" His legs may not be the greatest, but his spirit is certainly that of a real champion. I think of some people I've known across the years in this church who have faced some giant adversaries but who have not given in...nor given up.

And certainly followers of Jesus should be among those who do not quit. Lady Julian of Norwich once wrote,

"He said not, 'Thou shalt not be troubled, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be distressed', but He said, 'Thou shalt not be overcome.'"

And thank God for the "over-comers" of this world, for those marvellous heroes who have turned a defeat of the flesh into a victory of the human spirit.

TURNING PROBLEMS INTO PROFITS

A second point. Sometimes we are even able to turn our problems into profits.

There was a program recently on television having to do with crocodiles. After they're born, baby crocodiles thrash around in the water doing the dog paddle to stay afloat. Only after some of these little creatures swallow some stones - which are used for digestion - do they gain the proper balance to swim horizontally. Maybe that's a parable. Maybe none of us get our "balance" in life until we swallow a few stones.

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John Madden once asked Montana about his style of play. The conversation was interesting. Let me try to construct it for you for it has a point to make.

"Are you going to start throwing deep?" asked Madden before last January's game. Montana never batted an eye. "No" he said. "Why not?" asked Madden. "Is your arm sore, Joe?" "No, my arm's not sore; I can throw deep, but we don't have any plays to throw deep. We never practice throwing deep" "How come?" Madden pressed.

Montana then explained,

"Look at our practice field here...most teams have two full hundred yard fields, one grass and one artificial turf. But we only have one field that's half grass and half artificial turf.

When it rains here in December, the receivers have to wear either artificial turf shoes or grass shoes, depending on which half of the field we're practicing on.

If we practice on the grass half, the receivers don't want to run out on the artificial turf with cleats. If we practice on the artificial turf half, the receivers don't want to risk falling on the wet grass with their artificial turf shoes.

When we practice plays, we put the ball on what would be the twenty yard line, so I've got only about 30 yards to work with. You can't throw deep in 30 yards. Even in the pre-game warm-up, it's the same situation. You only have half the field to work with. That's why I don't throw deep".

Montana only had a short field to work with, so he became the master of the short pass. Most people would have done otherwise. They would probably have sat around grumbling and griping and complaining that they didn't have two practice fields like the other quarterbacks. Montana didn't complain. He conquered. He took hold of his problem and I guess you could say he turned it into profit.

To borrow a phrase from Robert Schuller, he "turned a scar into a star". And that what we need to do. What can we do when we get knocked down? Yes, we should try to turn a defeat of the flesh into a victory of the spirit. We should turn our problem into a profit.

LOVE OTHERS WHO HAVE BEEN KNOCKED DOWN

Perhaps even more than these, however, is this word: we can learn to love others who have also been knocked down. That always helps!

In a Peanuts cartoon Lucy is berating Charlie Brown,

"...and I don't care if I ever see you again!" she says to Charlie. "Do you hear me?"

Linus turns to Charlie Brown and says,

"She really hurt your feelings, didn't she, Charlie Brown.
I hope she didn't take all the life out of you..."

Charlie Brown answers,

"No...not completely, but you can number me among the
'walking wounded!'"

Some of us know about the walking wounded, don't we? It reminds me of something that Thornton Wilder once said,

"The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched
and blundering children on earth as can one...broken on
the wheel of living. In love's service only the wounded
soldiers can serve."

It helps when you seek to minister to people who have been knocked down if you yourself have been there. Perhaps this is why Christ had to go to the Cross. He has been knocked down, too. Thus He can minister to us in our hour of need. Our role is to try to minister from our hurt to the hurt of others. Some of you are so good at this. Others can do better.

SUMMARY For it's not easy to get knocked down ever 4.6 yards. It's not easy to say to somebody to just "grin and bear it". Being patient does not mean being passive. Even our deepest hurt can be used redemptively. That is what the Cross is all about. He, too, was knocked down but God has lifted Him up. And that same God can lift us up as well. Remember that as you depart from here. And he who has the ears to hear, let him hear.

PRAYER **Father, God, you know our needs even before we approach you in prayer.** Be with us in those times of testing...strengthening us and sustaining us and supporting us. Lift us up when we get knocked down, remembering that the fault is not in falling down but in failing to get up and try again. In the spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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