"RISE ABOVE IT!"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
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INTRODUCTION

Nothing perplexes the sensitive heart more than the problem of human suffering. Studdert-Kennedy used to say that anyone who was undisturbed by the problem of pain was suffering from one of two things: either from a hardening of the heart, or a softening of the brain. And he’s right on target... absolutely right.

One often wonders: is there any purpose to pain? Is there any advantage to adversity? Any solace in suffering.

"Don't be discouraged, Charlie Brown" Schroeder tells him. "These early defeats help to build character for later on in life." "For what 'later on in life'?" asks Charlie Brown. "For more defeats!" replies Schroeder. Charlie Brown then invests in five cents worth of Lucy's psychiatric insights and help. At first her advice sounds a bit more sophisticated. She says,

"Adversity builds character... without adversity a person could never mature and face up to all the things in life!"

"What things?" he asks. "More adversity!" she replies.

DEVELOPMENT

Our text today from Hebrews is a bit perplexing. It speaks of Christ being made obedient through suffering. We read in verse seven of chapter five:

"Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to Him who was able to save Him from death and He was heard for His godly fear. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered; and being made perfect He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him..."

(Hebrews 5: 7,8 and 9)

We don't know how Jesus learned obedience through suffering. After all, He was the Christ, but still we know that He suffered and because He suffered there are some helpful and hopeful conclusions we can draw upon and think about.

PAIN IS AN INEVITABLE PART OF LIFE

The first is that pain is an inevitable part of life. Even Jesus could not avoid pain and complete His mission and neither can we.

In another Peanuts cartoon, Charlie Brown walks away from Lucy after a baseball game... head down, totally dejected. "Another ball game lost! Good grief!" moans Charlie. "You know I get tired of losing... everything I do, I lose!" Lucy replies, "Look at it this way, Charlie Brown. We learn more losing than we do winning." Charlie shouts at Lucy, who is startled and flips over backwards, "That makes me the smartest person in the world". "Don't worry, Charlie Brown... you've got a lot of company."

How true! Dr. John Drakeford, a well-known Christian psychologist says that at any given time... one out of every ten people is going through a crisis experience. So this sermon today is for fifteen of you... maybe more. Who knows?
Certainly the Bible knows about pain and crises and suffering. There's Moses gazing upon a promised land that he will never enter. There's Hannah, downhearted...unable to eat because of a child she is not able to bear. There's Elijah, fearful of his life, fleeing into the desert...alone, miserable. The widow of Nain, distracted by grief over the loss of her only son. There's the Gadarene demoniac, so emotionally wrought he is mutilating himself. There's the woman with the issue of blood...12 years of hemorrhaging, seeing doctor after doctor, all to no avail. Blind Bartimaeus. Mary and Martha at their brother's tomb. And Jesus, of course - on a cross. The list could go on and on.

The Bible knows all about suffering. All kinds of suffering. Physical. Emotional. Spiritual. Many of us know about suffering, too. We've known pain and disappointment and failure and grief.

Resting in the afterglow of the Super Bowl, we can feel for the members of the losing team...many days in the offseason to brood over their loss. We can sympathize with former Tampa Bay Buccaneers pro football coach, John McKay. In the midst of a long, losing season, McKay was once asked what he thought of his team's execution. His answer, "I'm in favor of it." That's a joke for the football fans present. What life does to us sometimes, however, is no joke. Pain is an inevitable part of life. Point one. But let's move on.

ESSENTIAL FOR OUR EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Some pain may even be essential for our emotional and spiritual growth. All sunshine makes a desert...so we say. Lucy was essentially right in her advice to Charlie Brown. "Some adversity does build character". Tug McGraw once said, "Yes...on the debris of despair character is built".

Consider the unique situation of birds in New Zealand. That island nation has more flightless birds, I understand, than any other country on earth. Among these are the kiwi and the penguin. Scientists tell us that these birds had wings but lost them. They had no use for them. They had no natural predators on those beautiful islands and food was plentiful. Since there was no reason to fly - they didn't. Through neglect, they lost their wings.

Necessity is the mother of invention. Scholars point to the advanced technological progress of nations in the colder climates of the world. Where food and shelter are easily attained, there is no drive to innovate, to problem solve. We live in a hard world in order that we might grow to our full stature as children of God.

However, how difficult it must be for God to watch us seek to cope with this hard and demanding world that is our home.

Peter James Flaming tells of a young man who had been thrown from a horse and paralyzed as a result. Slowly, but surely...he began to respond. He had gone to the large regional hospital for further therapy and on the day he was to take his first step, the people who had been helping him stand stood by. He fell flat on his face and wept in pain, but nobody moved. A chaplain, a friend and confidant of the family, felt every instinctive push to rush to his aid. But the therapists would not let him. Again the boy tried. Again, the agony of the fall and the defeat. Again and again the cruelty continued for it, indeed, could have been called that.
Pain was the product of that entire episode, of the whole occasion. Every part of that experience was painful. Dreadfully painful to the young man, to the therapists who watched, and painful to the chaplain who empathized.

But the boy walked! There came that day when he walked. Flamming contrasts that young man's painful experience with a cartoon he saw that showed a mother helping her son in to a wheelchair. A nearby friend said,

"I didn't know your son couldn't walk". The reply, "Oh, he can...but thank God he doesn't have to."

And he goes on to say,

"From everything we know in the Scripture, God is not like that mother. He is more like the therapists. He wants us to walk, to run, to soar. He is about the business of soul-making. If He needs to work through this stained, bent-out-of-shape world we live in, He will. His will for us is not to make us happy or unhappy. It is to make us - us - as only He knows we can be. To will for us fullness and growth, He weaves into the tapestry of our lives both joy and pain. He will not give up until we all attain to the 'unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God...to mature manhood...to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ". (Ephesians 4:13)

Yes, pain is inevitable in life. And pain may be essential to growth.

PAIN CAN EVEN PROVE TO BE BENEFICIAL

I read somewhere recently that the sound of a violin is determined by the type of wood from which it is constructed, as well as by the skill of the musician playing it. Did you know that the best wood available today for making violins is found in the timeline of the highest mountain ranges. Here in the United States, craftsmen will seek the wood found on the peaks of the Rockies, 12,000 feet above sea level. Up there where the winds blow so fiercely and steadily that the bark to windward has no chance to grow, where the branches all point one way, and where a tree to live must stay on its knees all through its life...that is where the most resonant wood for violins is born...and lives...and dies.

Through pain and perseverance is born the most beautiful music. In the same way there are those who will tell you that a painful and heart-wrenching experience turned out to be one of the most fortuitous events in their lives.

Did you know that Julio Iglesias was a professional soccer player in Madrid when a car crash ended his career and left him paralyzed for a year and a half. A sympathetic nurse gave Iglesias a guitar to help pass the time in the hospital. And though he had no prior musical aspirations, Iglesias went on to become a huge success in the pop-music field. That assicent marked a watershed in his life...a turning point after which everything else changed!
Or, here's another interesting story from the field of music and entertainment. A less serious event changed forever the fortune of an old-time vaudeville performer by the name of Al Jolson. Apparently he was starring in the musical, Honeymoon Express, early on in his career when he came down with a serious Ingrown toenail on his left foot. The pain was so intense that he was on the point of dropping out of the show but instead he managed to relieve the pain that night by getting down on one knee halfway through the performance and pouring out his sentimental ballads with a great show of emotion. He developed that technique into his famous, "My Mammy" number, long after the toe healed. As you know, it began his trademark and helped to make him a star.

Tim Hansel in his book, You Gotta Keep Dancin', says this,

"We have two choices when we hit adverse trials. They can break us or we can break them.

Not surprisingly, some of the great achievements of men and women in the past have been achieved by those suffering the fires of personal trial. But unlike most of us, these men and women wrung from their adversity the determination and insight to do what others have not done.

The book Pilgrim's Progress was not written from a pleasant mountain getaway, but from the dingy British jail cell that became home for John Bunyan. Florence Nightingale did not reorganize the hospitals of England from a top-flight, lushly decorated health management office...she managed to do it while bed-ridden herself. Pasteur was semi-paralyzed, but still attacked others' diseases. American historian, Francis Parkman, suffered so terribly that he could work no more than five minutes at a time. Yet, he managed to turn out twenty classic volumes of history. These men and women broke their trial. Others let it break them."

Pain is inevitable in life. It's a part of what it means to be human. Some pain is essential and some pain can even be beneficial, a spur to growth. But on to point four and the "good news" for this day.

Whether our pain is mild or severe, I believe that Jesus can help. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews was saying to us that since Christ has been made perfect by His sufferings, He is the path of salvation for all who obey Him. Yes, He knows what it is to suffer...thus He is equipped to aid us in our time of suffering.

People will sometimes ask me where I get my sermon titles...here's a hint for today's. Listen carefully. Frank Lloyd Wright, the noted architect whose trademark signature you can see on the front of the Guggenheim Museum, once recalled how he was awakened one night by a frantic phone call from a client whose house had just recently been completed. It seems it had been raining...the roof leaked...the living room was flooded. "What should I do?" asked the voice on the phone. And calmly, Frank Lloyd Wright, replied: "Rise above it!"
And friend I believe that this is what our faith in Christ allows us to do...or should allow us to do when it's in good shape. Yes, it allows us to rise above our disappointments and discouragements, our fears, failures and frustrations, our pain, or grief. By our faith in Him, by our obedience to Him, we can be victorious. That's the "take home" message for today. Pain is inevitable in life. Some of it is essential, some even beneficial. But always remember that we can rise above it by our faith in God who comes to us in Christ Jesus.

PRAYER

Speak to each of us the "word" we need to hear. If we have come in here this morning...troubled and fearful...speak to us that calming word, that quiet word that can make a difference in our lives.

Visit our sick and our loved ones with the assurance of Your love. Encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing presence.

"Drop thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress
and let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace"

We ask this in the name and spirit of Christ in whom we see life's highest hope as well as its deepest meaning. In His name we pray. Amen
ANTHEM: "Turn Back O Man"

"Turn back O Man, forswear thy foolish ways. Old now is Earth, and none may count her days, yet thou, her child, whose head is crowned with flame, still wilt not hear thine inner God proclaim 'Turn back O Man, forswear thy foolish ways!'

Earth might be fair and all men glad and wise, age after age their tragic empires rise. Built while they dream, and in that dreaming weep. Would man but wake from out of his haunted sleep earth might be fair and all men glad and wise.

Earth shall be fair, and all her people one, nor till that hour shall God's whole will be done. Now, even now, once more from earth to sky. Peals forth in joy man's old undaunted cry 'Earth shall be fair, and all her folk be one'."

ORGAN POSTLUDE

The organ postlude - a final offering of our praise to God - is played after the Benediction. Time permitting, we invite you to share in the beauty of it.

FOR THOSE WHO SING

New members are always welcome to audition to sing in the Choir. Rehearsals are held on Sunday mornings at 9:30 in the downstairs Choir Room.

WEAR YOUR NAME TAG

And if you need one, mention it to Walter Spencer.

CONFIRMATION CLASS

The Pastor's Confirmation Class for teenagers is meeting Sunday mornings from 9:45 to 10:30 in the fourth floor library. It's not too late to join.

"HOUNDS OF HEAVEN"

The "Hounds of Heaven" will meet on Tuesday evening at 6:30 in Fellowship Hall. New friends as well as old friends are most welcome. Lynn Clarke is leading the group in its study of Your God Is Too Small by J. B. Phillips.

ALDERSGATE CLASS

The Aldersgate Class meets on Wednesday evening at 7:30 in Fellowship Hall. Anna Delson and Janet Ernst are leading the group in the study and discussion of the Ten Commandments. New friends as well as old friends are most welcome.

SATURDAY RUMMAGE SALE

The mid-Winter Rummage Sale is "in the works" for this coming Saturday. Workers are needed. Be in touch with Dianne Keller (876-2037) if you're available to lend a hand.

PICK UP YOUR COPY

Be sure to pick up your copy of the February issue of our monthly news sheet. Copies are by the door in the narthex as well as on the table in the Russell Room.
PLEDGE CARDS STILL BEING RECEIVED

Pledge cards are still being received in the church office for meeting the 1992 financial goals. To date, 219 pledges have been gratefully received toward our goal of 250. Get your pledge in now. Help us to reach our twin goals of $150,000 and 250 pledges. We can do it!

LOOKING AHEAD

The Ortorio Society of New York will present Brahms' Requiem with Lyndon Woodside conducting at Carnegie Hall on Saturday, March 7th, at 8 pm.

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The Gospel of John has been described as the most beautiful and spiritual of the four gospels. It contains some of the truly powerful words of Jesus: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son . . ." and "I am the bread of life. Who ever comes to me will never hunger . . ." In addition, people who are important for our understanding of Jesus and His ministry, such as Nicodemus, the women at the well, and Lazarus, are mentioned only in John's gospel.

We are beginning a study of the book of John in our Sunday morning Bible Study. The group begins promptly at 9:30 in Fellowship Hall on the 3rd floor. Coffee, doughnuts and fellowship are available beginning at 9:15. Discussion is always lively and interesting. Duane Thompson, Student Assistant, will be serving as the leader of this study. We hope you'll be able to join us.
PARK AVENUE
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FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPiphany
February 2, 1992
ORDER OF WORSHIP
11 A. M.

ORGAN
"Arioso" Bach

CALL TO WORSHIP
HYMN NO. 64 "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty"
APostles' Creed
Gloria Patri

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SCRIPTURE Hebrews 5: 7 - 9 Page 1046
PARISH CONCERNS

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ANTHEM
"Turn Back, O Man" Holst

PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY
HYMN NO. 453 "More Love to Thee, O Christ"
SERMON
"Rise Above It" Mr. Clarke

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PRAYER

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION
The Invitation
The Great Thanksgiving (Page 9)
The Sanctus
The Lord's Prayer
The Breaking of the Bread and Cup
The Prayer of Resolution

HYMN NO. 358 "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind"

Benediction

ORGAN
"Fugue in B Minor" Bach

*** Interval for Ushering

LAY READER

We welcome Mavis Roberts Vann to the lectern today. A native New Yorker, a graduate of Spellman College in Atlanta, holder of an MBA in Marketing from Western Michigan University, Mavis is a Divisional Director for the United Way of New York. She and husband, Michael, were married here in September and joined the church in December.

ALTAR FLOWERS

The flowers on the altar today are in honor of the 93rd birthday of Paul R. Russell, given by his wife, Helen.

GREETERS AND USHERS

The greeters today are Eric de Freitas and Sandra Van Cleve. The ushers are Len Williams, Ken Barclay, William Chambers, Carl Condra, Bob Lewis, John Lombardo, Kim and Scott Taylor and Wayne Wiebe.

AN INVITATION

Coffee and tea will be served in the Russell Room following the service. Members and friends are invited to share in these moments of warmth made possible for us today by Marie Birillo, Diane and Brad Barnes, Richmond Bates, Jennifer Karim and Walter Spencer.

CHURCH SCHOOL AND NURSERY CARE

Sessions of Church School for children are offered Sunday mornings from ten-thirty to twelve. Nursery care for infants and toddlers is available on the fourth floor.

ADULT BIBLE CLASS

The Adult Bible Class meets on Sunday morning at 9:30 in Fellowship Hall. The Gospel of John is being studied. Duane Thompson is class leader.