

"STRENGTH THROUGH WEAKNESS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
July 3, 1994

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### INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Franklin's quick wit and down-to-earth wisdom opened many a door for him and for his newly-independent country. He served as the Ambassador to France following our Revolution and at a State Dinner in the year 1781 where the guest list included the "powers" of that day, the French Foreign Secretary is reported to have stood and offered the following toast to King Louis.

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This weekend marks the 218th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Along with the fireworks we will enjoy tomorrow, we remember our struggle for independence and the legends and the stories that have grown up around it.

### DEVELOPMENT

Richard Shenkman has written a book entitled, I Love Paul Revere, Whether He Rode Or Not, in which he attempts to discuss these legends and how closely they resemble the facts.

He writes that some of the most famous paintings and poems and stories that we regard as symbols of patriotism were not really intended to be patriotic at all. For example, the idea that Betsy Ross made the first flag was conceived by her descendants, he claims, to make themselves appear more important. And a Dr. Emmanuel Leutze painted Washington crossing the Delaware not to inspire Americans, but to encourage the people in his native Germany to follow the lead of America and revolt. And Longfellow's famous poem about Paul Revere was written during the Civil War to impress Northerners with the necessity of fighting for liberty.

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TELLING THE FAITH STORY

So...perhaps some of the events out of our history have been embellished over the years, being made more dramatic and more exciting with every re-telling, but that happens a lot with stories. It happens sometimes when people tell about their faith. You know how it is...each time the story of their conversion is shared the details become more amazing.

Apparently the little congregation at Corinth was having this problem. Some of the brothers and sisters there began telling others of their own mystical experiences and visions and every time they told their stories.... well...they embellished them to make themselves look better than they really were. And soon these people began to think pretty highly of themselves because of these experiences. And then as more and more people told better and better stories, they began to think that everyone had to have some sort of a dramatic religious experience in order to qualify as a Christian.

Why they even began to ask questions about the Apostle Paul. Paul had never bragged about any dramatic personal experiences, so was he really someone to look up to? Was he really "with it?" Was he part of the "inner circle?" Perhaps there were other leaders in Corinth who were claiming that because of their experiences they were better than Paul and should be listened to. Well, that was going too far, and Paul sat down and wrote the Corinthians warning them about false prophets who were misleading the faithful.

In response to questions about his leadership, Paul asserts,

"I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven..."

Think of that! "Caught up to the third heaven". I don't know just what he meant, but it sounded pretty good. Most Biblical scholars agree that Paul here was actually talking about one of his personal experiences. In essence he's saying that he could play the "same game" as the others, but that he won't. His over-riding concern was not for his status, but for the unity and the strength of the Corinthian congregation.

Paul knew from his experiences that boasting about spiritual superiority doesn't build up the faith of others. It doesn't lead others to a saving knowledge of Christ, but instead creates hard feelings and usually ends up dividing a congregation.

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Paul's point is that our attention should be on Jesus and not on someone's personal experience.

One Sunday morning Lolley was scheduled to be the guest speaker at a small church. As he was waiting for the service to start, he decided that he needed to comb his hair and straighten his tie. There was no mirror near at hand, but he did find a glass-framed picture hanging on the wall by the door and by turning a certain way, he could see himself well enough in the reflection to comb his hair and straighten his tie. Then he noticed something else. The picture behind the glass was one of Jesus. When he stood at the proper angle to see himself, he couldn't see Jesus. But when he turned to another angle to

see Jesus, he could no longer see himself. He either lost himself in the image of Christ, or he lost Christ when he concentrated on himself. He couldn't see both at the same time. Lolley was deeply touched by that experience and he says he never forgot it. Nor should we!

Faith is the willingness to take our eyes off of ourselves and trust God as we lose ourselves in the image of Christ. So Paul doesn't boast about himself. Instead he shares his weaknesses in the hope that others will identify with him as a human being, so that he may lead them to Christ as equals.

Paul goes on to describe his weaknesses like this, "Therefore, to keep me from being too elated...a thorn was given me in the flesh". Now we're not certain just what Paul's "thorn in the flesh" may have been, but whatever it was, it bothered him enough that he prayed to have it removed. "Three times I appealed to the Lord" said he!

#### GOD COULD USE HIS WEAKNESSES, TOO

Then Paul made a great and wonderful discovery. He discovered that God could use his weaknesses just as God could use his strengths. Instead of slowing Paul down or limiting his ability to lead the early church, the thorn in his flesh saved him from that touch of spiritual pride...which in turn helped him to advance the cause of the Gospel.

Most seminarians now-a-days sign up to take a course in pastoral care as a part of their seminary training. I remember days and hours in Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston working as a part-time chaplain as well as two summers working as an orderly in a Terminal Hospital in Boston Harbor. That's why this story about Jim Moore's experience caught my attention. It seems that Jim was asked to visit a woman in the hospital who had lost her will to live. She had no cards or flowers and she sat all day in a darkened room. Jim Moore was terrified. He felt too inexperienced and that he wouldn't know what to do or to say and his nervousness affected his visit.

First he pushed the door open too hard and it slammed against the wall. Next he walked over and accidentally kicked the bed. He stammered. He stuttered and said all the wrong things in between long periods of embarrassed silence. Finally he got up the courage to try to say a prayer, but even that didn't come out right. He left the room that day with tears in his eyes, ready to quit the ministry. He felt ashamed that this person had needed him and that he had failed her.

But a few days later Jim got up his courage and returned for a second visit. Imagine his surprise when he found the woman sitting up in bed writing letters. Flowers and cards could be seen. She recognized him at once and began thanking him for the visit he had paid her several days before. He was confused because he knew that he had really messed up his first visit. He had done everything painfully wrong, and he confessed as much to her. Then she said to him,

"But that's just it...I felt so sorry for you! It was the first time I had felt anything but self-pity for months. That little spark of compassion for you gave me the will to live...."

Our weaknesses are often blessings in disguise.

Paul prayed to have his weakness removed before he finally realized it was really a source of strength. He learned to depend on God in his weakness and pain and that very weakness helped him to grow strong in faith. So Paul told the Corinthians in that memorable line,

"I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then I AM STRONG!"

What a great discovery. We can find meaning even in our deepest distress because God is with us.

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Put that down as the final point of this sermon. We can find meaning even in our deepest distress because God is

Dwight Gooden is going to need all of our prayers and support if he is going to come back and earn our respect. And then there's the tragedy of O. J.. Remember the tragedy that hit Roy Campanella? Confined to a wheelchair following that terrible accident back in the Winter of 1965 out on the Island. Roy once said that he found an important resource in his faith. He had felt only anguish and despair immediately following that accident; he spent many nights crying himself to sleep. He healed poorly in those first few months and one day his physician came in and told him quite frankly that if he didn't become responsible for his own healing, he would never recover.

Campy knew he would never leave his wheel-chair. He knew he would never play ball again. He also knew that his doctor was right. All of his life he had found help in his faith. And now, from the depths of his despair, he turned once more to the Lord. He had a nurse read him the 23rd Psalm. From that moment on Campy began to improve. It wasn't too long ago that Campanella died, but to his final days he often said he knew that God was on his side.

A Baseball Hall of Famer, Campy was at Cooperstown several summers ago and I made a point of going over to him in the parking lot behind the Otsego. He sat there in his wheel-chair, hands limp on his lap. I touched those hands and about all I could say was "thank you".

Sometime back Campanella had an encounter with an elderly woman down in Florida. He was sitting in his wheelchair at a ball park when he noticed a crippled, elderly woman working her way slowly up a steel ramp. She had braces on both legs and a crutch, but she struggled up the ramp until she reached him. Then, panting from all this exertion, she looked at him and then took his hand in hers. And she thanked him for her life.

She had been a patient in the same hospital in this city when he was recovering from his accident. Was it the Rusk Institute of NYU Hospital. I don't know, but a stroke had left her paralyzed on one side of her entire body and she had lost her will to live. But the doctors told her about Campanella and his courage and his faith in the save of overwhelming adversity. She had been so inspired by his story that she determined to make the effort to go on with life. And now she had traveled over a thousand miles to meet him in person and to thank him. Time after time we have seen people who were physically weak develop such spiritual strength that they have inspired others.

CLOSING

Paul knew that boasting never won anyone to Christ. And on that day long ago when Paul discovered from his "thorn in the flesh" that God could use his weaknesses to encourage others....that was a step in the right direction. He believed...yes, he knew that whatever the crisis in his own life, God would not forsake him. Thus, from his vast storehouse of life experiences, St. Paul would one day sit down and write,

"Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak...then I am strong".

And so may it be with us. Shall we pray.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to your nearness and to Your presence and Your power in these quiet moments, O God. Wrestle with each of us in the hidden corners of our lives...where weaknesses may be present. Through faith in You, may they be transformed into a strength...for the race is short and we would run it well and always to Your glory. Amen.

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"I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships,  
persecutions and calamities for the sake of Christ.  
For whenever I am weak, then I am STRONG!"

Truly a great discovery. In other words, we can find meaning in our deepest distress as we come to know that "YES"...even there, God is with us. And this forms the final point of today's sermon. Even in the shadows of the valley, He is there...with us...

#### GOD IS WITH US

I've found myself in recent days thinking more and more about Roy Campanella. Confined to a wheelchair following that terrible automobile accident in the Winter of 1958, Campy once said that he found an important resource in his faith. At first he felt only anguish and despair in the weeks that followed that accident. He spent many nights crying himself to sleep. He healed poorly in those first few months and one day his physician came in and told him "quite frankly" that if he didn't become responsible for his own healing, he would never recover.

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"Therefore, I am content with weaknesses,  
insults, hardships, persecutions and  
calamities for the sake of Christ. For  
whenever I am weak, then I am strong"  
(II Corinthians 12: 10)

And so may it be with each of us. So may we find strength through our weakness.

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments, O God. Wrestle with each of us in the hidden corners of our lives, where weakness and temptation may be present.

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your love. Bless and heal those we mention before You in our prayers this hour.

Bob Timmerman, grandfather of Tara  
Toni Berns, grandfather of Camerson and father of  
Antonia.  
Coralie Bailey  
Daisy Herrick  
Doug McPheters friend David McDandless battling cancer  
in Arizona

Encircle the bereaved with Your warming, lifting presence. Point out markers along the trail for those who may have lost their way. And help us to run well the race that is before us...this coming week. In the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen.