

“The Transformation of the Human Spirit: 4) Finding Joy in the Midst of Suffering

a sermon by

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Text: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Philippians 4:4).

This morning, as we gather for worship, we are reminded once again that the times in which we live are ones that certainly try our souls. As we move closer to the celebration of the Fourth of July, there are many troubling issues that divide us. Support for the War in Iraq is waning among Americans. Many of us are concerned about our dependency on foreign oil, as the price of a barrel of oil moves to sixty dollars. This week President Bush spoke of the challenges before our nation as a “time of testing.”

That is true for the church today. These are troubling times for the church as well, particularly for the so-called “mainline” protestant churches. This past week the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) announced that in 2004 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) had lost another 43,000 members, continuing a membership decline that has gone on now for four decades. This comes at a time when the General Assembly Task Force for the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church is preparing its report to the 2006th General Assembly, which will no doubt bring the debate of the ordination of active homosexuals before the Presbyterian Church.

One of the most natural, most common, and most disastrous attitudes toward life is a negative reaction to trouble. Most, if not all of us, react negatively to bad news. Most of us think

of trouble as something to be avoided at all costs. It is an intruder to be resented, removed, if possible. And if it is not removed, to be endured.

I.

Over the last four weeks we have looked once again at Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. Many have referred to it as an "Epistle of Joy" for there is within it a note that Paul sounds time and time again. As I have noted on several occasions, this is one of the so-called Prison Epistles. Paul is in prison facing the end of the life. During his life as a Christian missionary Paul had witnessed great success and great difficulty. On three missionary journeys he had succeeded in taking the Christian gospel out of its Jewish setting and placed it in an international context within the Roman Empire. He had not gotten to Spain as he hoped. But he had reached Rome and because Rome was the imperial seat of the Roman Empire, the gospel was on its way to the "ends of the earth."

But there were struggles as well. As he reminds his readers, he had been shipwrecked, stoned, beaten, and placed in prison. There was dissension in the churches, including the church at Philippi. And yet, time and time again, Paul sees trouble, not just as an obstacle, but also as an opportunity. In writing to the church at Rome, he stated, "We rejoice in our tribulations." And to the church at Philippi, he writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."

II.

In the first place adversity or suffering, far from being a mere nuisance or cruelty, is one of the most important elements in all great lives. Recently I came across a story about H.G. Spafford, a Christian lawyer from Chicago, who in 1873 placed his wife and four children on an ocean liner, the *Ville du Havre*, sailing from New York to France. He was planning to join them a week later. The trip started beautifully, but on the evening of November 21, 1873, as the *Ville du Havre* plowed through the waters of the Atlantic, the ship was struck by another vessel and immediately sank to the bottom of the sea. Only a few people survived. One of the survivors was Spafford's wife, but his four children did not survive. That night, after Spafford found out about the deaths of his children, he said to a friend, "I am glad I can trust God when it costs me something." Later, as he crossed the ocean to join his wife, he wrote the words of a hymn that has strengthened many people in the time of trouble.

"When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul."

Sometimes trouble asks for things in us that in fair weather we would never be challenged to do. If our vocabulary did not have in it words like "trouble," "adversity," "calamity," and "grief," how would we ever know words like "bravery," "fortitude," "patience," and "self-sacrifice?"

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying any of us should seek out trouble. Trouble by itself is neutral. It can do a lot of things. It can make a person bitter and resentful. It can make a person hard and cruel. But there are others who are able to take trouble and make of it something noble. The Apostle Paul, in prison in Philippi observed, "I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel so that it has been known through the whole imperial guard that my imprisonment is for Christ" (Philippians 1: 12).

III.

Then, too, let us also recognize that suffering and trouble can deepen our sympathy to others and intensify our usefulness. After all, it takes adversity to understand adversity and history is a remarkable witness to those individuals who have done that. One of the most important influences in the humanitarian movement of the nineteenth century, which abolished debtors' prisons, outlawed child labor, and cleansed the English schools of some of their worst barbarities was Charles Dickens. He was not just a great novelist; he was a great humanitarian. He chronicled some of the worst experiences of his time because he had experienced them. His characters were drawn out of his own life experiences. Micawber was his own father. His father had been in debtor's prison. As a young boy, crippled by shame and poverty, Charles Dickens had visited his father in prison. He knew the humiliation that comes with having a family member in such a terrible situation. When Dickens was ten years old he worked long hours for a pittance, pasting labels on bottles in a blacking factory, and in his own person he experienced the cruelty of the English school system. Then he rose above his adversity, transmuted by magic its lead into gold, made of it deep insight, profound understanding, keen sympathy, and widespread public service. That is trouble finely used.

IV.

Then, too, there is something else that suffering can do and it is this. It can serve our intellects and our characters by cleansing us from some very dangerous illusions. In particular, it can cleanse us of the vain illusion that life is fair. Scott Peck, a noted psychiatrist began his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, with the statement that one of the things a healthy person must learn is that "life is not fair." Despite the wisdom of the ages, despite the clear witness of scripture, despite the testimony of every great life, there are those individuals who continually complain that life is not fair.

Sometimes I wonder where we get this notion. Certainly not from the Bible. Was life fair to Jesus? Was the cross just? When Jesus went to Jerusalem, did he not think he would encounter opposition? Or what about those martyrs of the church to which the New Testament bears witness--those individuals who were sawn asunder, slain with the sword, destitute, afflicted, and ill treated--was the world fair to them? Is not the beginning of wisdom to give up the idea and surrender the expectation that life will be fair?

In fact, it makes more sense in many ways that there be some element of unfairness in life. What if we lived in a world where every act of goodness was rewarded and every evil

punished? Life would then become a simple quid pro quid. Put in a certain amount of goodness, and take out a reward. Where, then, would our heroes be, those who chose honor in spite of consequence, who poured out service without asking pay, drank their hemlock, bore their cross, and expected no justice for themselves. No, the beginning of all great character and wisdom is the knowledge that life is not always fair.

V.

Then, too, suffering or trouble, when nobly used, can become a great source of spiritual strength. Paul knew that. He knew how “to abound and how to abase,” that is he knew life’s joy and its sorrows as well. When Martin Niemoller, a German pastor, opposed Adolph Hitler and the hated Third Reich, he was finally arrested by the S. S. and placed in prison. Niemoller wrote to his church in Berlin these words:

“Let us thank God that He upholds me as he does and allows no spirit of despair to enter into Cell 448. Let the parish office know that in all ignorance of what is coming I am confident and I hope to be ready when I am led along paths which I never would have sought for myself.”

In the presence of someone like that we all recognize the smallness of our own complaints. We should expect trouble and not resent it when it comes. Nor should we be asked to be spared of it. We should ask, however, that when it comes that we might handle it well. And sometimes, when there are tasks to be done that will cost the sacrifice of things we love, and the bearing of burdens that we hate, may we not seek to avoid all trouble, but deliberately choose it. Of all the shining instruments that God gave to Jesus Christ to change the world there was nothing that could remotely compare to the cross on which Jesus died.

One of the most famous Scottish ministers of the Twentieth Century was a man named Arthur John Gossip, who was pastor of the Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen. During that time his wife died suddenly of a strange illness. The next week Gossip preached a sermon, entitled “But When Life Tumbles In, What Then?” It was one of those remarkable sermons that transformed the life of a whole city. In that sermon he said, “I don’t think you need to be afraid of life. Our hearts are very frail; and there are places where the road is very steep and lonely. But we have a wonderful God. And as Paul puts it, what can separate us from his life? Not death, he says immediately, pushing that aside at once as the most obvious of all impossibilities. No, not death. For, standing in the roaring of the Jordan, cold to the heart with its dreadful chill, and very conscious of the terror of its rushing, I too, like Hopeful, can call back to you who one day in your turn will have to cross it, “Be of good cheer, my brother, for I feel the bottom and it is sound.”