

“Handicapped Lives”

a sermon by

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Text: “And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated” (II Corinthians 12:7).

Several years ago I had the opportunity to attend a reception for the actor James Earl Jones, who spoke at the Charlotte Mecklenburg Public Library Novello program. After his talk that night he hosted a time of questions and answers. One of the written questions that came to James Earl Jones contained a poem that the questioner asked the actor to read. Jones replied by saying that he was very sorry but he was not able to read a written poem unless he had the time to practice it. He went on to say that as a boy, he grew up in Mississippi. Something happened in his early childhood and at age three he ceased speaking. He did not speak until he was sixteen years old. By that time his family had moved to a new city. For thirteen years he was mute until a high school English teacher taught him to speak again. He went on to say that he was a “stutterer” and that unless he prepared his remarks and rehearsed them, he was not able to speak without stuttering.

For those of us at Spirit Square that night it was hard to imagine how anyone with such a beautiful voice and diction could have had such an affliction. After all, he has one of the most famous and familiar voices in the world today, having appeared as Darth Vader in “Star Wars” and in “The Lion King,” as well as countless movies.

Anyone who reads biographies understands very well that some of the most outstanding lives have been women and men who suffered great handicaps. That is certainly true with many of our great Presidents. Franklin Roosevelt suffered from polio as a young man and spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair. Abraham Lincoln, while in the White House, suffered the loss of his

beloved son Todd. His wife Mary was seriously ill as well. Lincoln himself was subject to very black moods and times of depression.

I.

Biography in the Bible differs little from the life stories of those who are outside. That was certainly true of the Apostle Paul. In his correspondence to the church at Corinth he recounts a vivid experience in his own life. He received a remarkable revelation in which God took him up into the third heaven (paradise). It must have been an exhilarating experience and Paul undoubtedly told of this experience to validate his own call to ministry, which had been questioned by some of the people in Corinth. But then he speaks in darker tones. He relates that God, in order to keep Paul from being too elated by this experience of wonder, gave him a “thorn in the flesh”—a “messenger of Satan” he called it.

No one knows for sure what this “thorn in the flesh” really was. It could have been a physical ailment—epilepsy, failing eyesight, or perhaps malaria. It could have been a psychological or emotional ailment. One thing was certain. It was an impediment to his ministry. Three times he prayed to God that God would remove the thorn and three times God answered the prayer not by removing the impediment, but by assuring the Apostle Paul that God’s grace was sufficient for his weakness.

If there is one thing that all of us in this sanctuary have in common this morning, it is that one day in our life there will be a knock on the door and on the outside will be some unwanted struggle or adversity with which we will have to deal. Sometimes children and their families wake up one day to discover that there is a serious illness or disability that this child is facing. Sometimes teenagers or young adults must face the realization that the home in which they grew up in was not a place of love and support. Perhaps there was an abusive parent or parents who could not function effectively to give the nurture, care, and support that is so essential to a healthy adulthood. And suddenly this teenager or young adult realizes that so much of the suspicion, distrust, fears, anxiety, and anger are rooted in things both done and undone in a given family structure.

Others of us will face disappointments at work, and promotions that pass us by while still others will have to deal with the death of a loved one or some illness that affects us or someone we love.

So the question is not whether we will have to deal with these handicaps. The question is whether we can find the grace that is sufficient for us.

II.

One of the first steps that each of us must take is the step from self-pity to authentic acceptance. In Peter Shaffer’s play *Amadeus*, the author describes the great dilemma that beset the court composer Antonio Salieri when he came face to face with the boy genius Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Salieri had devoted his life to the service of God, when suddenly he was

confronted by this young prodigy who seemed to be able to effortlessly place on paper compositions that easily eluded Salieri's most concerted efforts. In one scene of the play the court composer lashes out in lament to God saying,

“Now for the first time I feel my emptiness as Adam felt his nakedness...Tonight at an inn somewhere in this city stands a giggling child who can put on paper, without actually setting down his billiard cue, casual notes which turn my most considered ones into lifeless scratches. Grazie, Signore! You gave me the desire to serve you -which most men do not have—then saw to it that the service was shameful in the ears of the server. Grazie! You gave me the desire to praise you—which most men do not feel—then made me mute. You put into me a perception of the Incomparable—which most men never know—then ensured that I would know myself forever mediocre!”

But there is a way other than the way of self-pity. Sometimes people are able to move beyond the natural depression and resentment that comes with a handicap and begin to see new possibilities. Last week I spoke of the interview between Katie Couric and Michael J. Fox in which Fox spoke about his struggle with Parkinson's disease. Of course, he was sorry to have such a terrible disease at such a young age. But he found something more. It was not the end but the beginning of a sense of purpose in his life. Now, he has dedicated himself to helping people with this terrible disease.

Some of the greatest stories in the Bible are stories of people whose lives started out in one way and finished in another. The Old Testament narrative of Joseph is one of the finest witnesses to God's providence in the entire Bible. Betrayed by his brothers, sold to a group of Midianite slave traders, Joseph found himself in Egypt, miles from his family and his father who believed him dead. But what started out as a tragedy ended as a great victory as Joseph became the Pharaoh's most trusted advisory and savior of his people. “You meant to me for evil,” he observed to his brothers, “but God meant it for good.” There is no more powerful witness to God's grace in human life than that.

III.

Then, too, when we consider Paul's thorn in the flesh, we are aware that limitations often provide opportunities for great achievement. Paul understood that. Three times he prayed that this thorn in the flesh would be removed from him. Three times God answered him, not by removing the thorn, but by assuring him of a grace that was sufficient for all his needs.

The lesson that Paul learned is one that all of us must one day finally learn and that is that, at the point of his greatest vulnerability, he was at his greatest strength. “For when I am weak,” he observed, “I am strong.”

One of the greatest citizen statesmen that England ever produced was a man named William Wilberforce. James Boswell once went to hear him speak in the House of Commons and observed, “I saw what seemed a mere shrimp mount on the table, but as I listened, he grew and grew, until the shrimp became a whale.” That shrimp of a man never had good health. For twenty

years under a doctor's order he took opium just to control the pain he suffered every day. But more than any Englishman he stopped the British slave trade, and as one stands in Westminster Abbey beside the grave of "The Attorney-General of the Unprotected and the Friendless" one understands that that sensitive, suffering life somehow translated itself into a persistent, unconquerable, sympathy with downtrodden people that a person of great physical strength would have probably never attained.

Paul understood this. "When I am weak," he observed, "I am strong."

IV.

There is something else about Paul's "thorn in the flesh." In a remarkable way it demonstrates that the greatest successes in life so often come out of the greatest failures. One of the finest books to be published in the last several years is Doris Kearns Goodwin's book, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. Goodwin points out that Lincoln was able to assemble around his Presidency some of the most able people of his day, all of whom at one time had been his political rivals: Edwin Stanton, Salmon P. Chase, Edward Bates, and William Seward. All of these men had been Lincoln's greatest foes. But through his remarkable ability Lincoln brought these individuals into his inner circle and created one of the most significant political cabinets in American history. The secret to this, notes Goodwin, was Lincoln's capacity to put himself in the shoes of another person and to understand their interests, gifts, and desires. That capacity, states the author, came out of the extraordinary struggles that Lincoln himself had encountered.

There is no place where this truth is more evident than at the cross of Jesus Christ. In Gethsemane he prayed, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me." That crucifixion was a thorn in the flesh.

Three times Jesus prayed that this terrible cup would pass from him and three times the answer came back to him. No cross, no Christ. Surely on that Good Friday all seemed to be lost. The best that life had to offer was suddenly in the hands of the worst. And yet, the Easter message is that God took the worst of human experience and transformed it into something no one could imagine.

On another occasion Paul raised the question, "What can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ?" That is one of the most profound questions that any of us can ask. Is it the death of a child, a crippling disease, the loss of a job, bad marriage, bad divorce, and bad relationship?

"No," says Paul, "none of these things can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ." That is our great hope and that is the one hope that will not fail us.

Amen.