

# ACCEPTING WEAKNESS

May 16, 2010

Texts – II Corinthians 12: 7 - 10  
John 17: 20 - 26

“Have a good day.” We say it without thinking. No response is called for, though one woman has developed a curmudgeonly response. Weary of hearing the phrase every time she turns around, she now responds by saying, “No thanks. I’ve got other plans.”

“Have a good day.” What would a good day be for you? Most of us know about bad days. I’ve had an article stuck in my “Sermon Ideas” folder for years which is entitled “How You Can Tell When It’s Going To Be A Rotten Day.” “You can tell it’s going to be a rotten day,” it says, “when . . .

- you wake up face down on the pavement
- you call suicide prevention and they put you on hold
- you want to put on the clothes you wore home from the party and there aren’t any
- your boss tells you not to bother to take off your coat
- the bird singing outside your window is a buzzard.”

The article is signed, “Author Unknown, But Troubled.”

Most of us know about those kinds of days. Every life has its share of bad day troubles, though some of them moderate with age. I used to worry about having “a bad hair day.” Now every day with any hair at all is a good day indeed!

It’s not hard to make a list of the problems which some face with the morning light of every new day. Depression, failing eyesight, the collapse of a career, anorexia, migraines, stroke, widowhood, arthritis, divorce, heart disease, Alzheimer’s, cancer . . . it just goes on and on, doesn’t it? Some are obvious and public and visible. Others are invisible, behind the scenes,

less limiting perhaps but no less challenging. Sooner or later we all run up against them.

But come back to my question: What is a good day? Most of us answer by saying it is a day when all goes well. The marriage is ticking along nicely. The kids are healthy. The job is challenging and rewarding. The in-laws are out of town. Friends are friendly. Life in general is comfortable, enjoyable, agony free. That's a very good day, isn't it?

But now, let me ask you: If all our days were very good days like that, would life really be good? Is not some amount of struggle and challenge, of pain and reversal, disappointment and discomfort essential if we are to grow into seasoned, mature, contributing and caring human beings?

A study was done of the home backgrounds of three hundred highly successful people, people who had made it to the top. Men and women such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Helen Keller, Winston Churchill, Albert Schweitzer, Clara Barton, Einstein, Freud. Three-fourths grew up in poverty, or were children of broken homes, or had cruel and rejecting parents. Seventy-four of eighty-five writers of fiction or drama, and sixteen of the twenty poets in the group, came from homes of severe trauma. Physical handicaps characterized one-fourth of the group.

That isn't to say that "bad days" are the making of us, or that there is anything automatically good about suffering or misery. But it does, I hope, point out the obvious – there's nothing unusual or inherently unjust about suffering or pain. Our culture, of course, doesn't agree.

The Associated Press carried a story some time back about a California grandmother who sued Disneyland because after she was robbed in a Disneyland parking lot, the park security people took her and her grandchildren to an office where they were exposed to the sight of Disney characters climbing out of costume. The suit insisted that this caused severe emotional distress by exposing her grandchildren to the reality that the Disney characters were, in fact,

make-believe. There can be no bad days in Disneyland.

Our faith argues otherwise. It is precisely in the worst of times, this old book says, that God may be most powerfully at work. It may not feel that way. In fact, the primary experience of suffering and defeat may be the sense of having been abandoned by God. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus cried on the cross. But for Christians that cross opens up a whole new way of viewing the downside of life. For right where God seemed totally powerless and absent, in the death of Jesus, God proved to be most powerfully at work in the human story.

Take this seriously, and it can lead you beyond bitterness and complaint – it’s unfair . . . why me? – and you may find yourself able to ask the saving questions . . . questions like: “Why not me?” and “What is God up to in my life?” and “What good is God trying to work in all of this?”

None of us seeks out pain and trouble, not for ourselves and God knows not for our children or others we love. But we do know, don’t we, that struggles and troubles can discipline and mature us, give our lives new direction. If all we ever know are good days, it would not be good for us . . . nor would it be good for others.

Thornton Wilder wrote a little three-minute play which tells of an ailing physician who stood one day by the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem, waiting for the water to be troubled so that he might be made whole again. But the angel who troubles the water came to him and said, “Stand back. Healing is not for you. Without your wound where would your power be that sends your low voice trembling into the hearts of men and women? We, the very angels of God, cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children of earth as can one human being who has been broken on the wheels of living. In love’s service only wounded soldiers will do.”

Only wounds can heal wounds, Wilder says. It’s true, isn’t it? Aren’t those who inspire us most often also those who have been wounded most?

*“A thorn was given to me in the flesh,” Paul writes, “a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but God said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ .... 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: 7-10)*

Have you a “thorn . . . in the flesh”? Examine it carefully. Ask yourself: What purpose does it serve? Is there a message buried in it you need to hear? What good might come of it in your own life? Just as importantly, ask as well: What good might it bring for others?

When I was nine years old, my family moved from the small town in north central Oklahoma where I was born to a large affluent suburb of New York City. No one asked me if I thought it was a good idea. I hated it. On our first full day in our new home, two neighbor boys rang the door bell and asked my brother and I to come out and play. Within five minutes we learned our first swear words. We were teased for our lack of sophistication. We were told we talked funny because we had an accent. I hated it. For three years I day-dreamed of running away and running back to the safety of my old hometown. Though I did eventually grow out of it, I never completely lost the sense of being an outsider, a stranger in a strange land. That sensitivity remains with me today. What was a curse has become a blessing, for there is a part of all of us – isn’t there? – that yearns to be accepted for who we are, that day-dreams of a homecoming that is really a reunion, a recapturing of the unconditional love we once knew.

Hardly a “thorn in the flesh” worth comparing to the calamities and tragedies so many face, I know. But this is not about who has the biggest cross to bear; it is not a competition. This is about recognizing and acknowledging that none of us have it all or get it all or deserve it all. This is about realizing that limitations are part of living, and that ultimately we are dependent on

a power and a grace beyond our simple and oh so mortal selves. All of us. Each of us. Every last one of us.

“In the bulb there is a flower,” the hymn says; “in the seed, an apple tree ... In the cold and snow of winter there’s a spring that waits to be . . . . In our death a resurrection, at the last a victory, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.” Our bad days can teach us that; the thorns implanted in our flesh. Let us look to them, and strive with Paul to learn to say, *“I am content with (whatever comes my way) . . . for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”* Amen.