

"When the Way Is Hardest"

Job 7:1-11; II Corinthians 12:6-10

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

October 15, 2017 – 19th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Football is in full force at this time of year. Professional basketball is gearing up for its coming season. But baseball is at its zenith right now, with the World Series right on the horizon. Even with Cleveland out of the picture, we're all about America's Pastime. Who's going to be the last one standing?

Today Jackie Robinson is remembered as the first African-American to play major league baseball. It's not that no Black ever had enough talent before then, but prejudice and tradition put an effective lid on having the opportunity. The wheels of equality move ever so slowly and we still await the day when people will have the access and privilege of the majority.

Perhaps because Jackie Robinson was such an outstanding athlete he could not be denied. At UCLA he was a star forward in basketball, a bruising running back in football, and a record-breaking broad jumper in track. He played a little baseball, too.

When he was signed by the Brooklyn Dodgers Robinson showed that he could live up to the promise the scouts saw in him. In 1949 he was named the National League's Most Valuable Player. He could hit for power; he could hit for average; and, in his prime, was always among the stolen bases leaders. He made a lot of money. It seemed like there wasn't much that Robinson couldn't do. In his personal life, however, the same couldn't be said.

For all his athletic ability, his monetary success, the close support of his wife, Jackie Robinson had a major problem which he could not avoid. This problem was his son. Young Jackie Jr. never found his place in life. He fell into crime and drugs. Things went from bad to worse and, in 1971, he was killed in a high-speed crash after losing control of his car.

Hall of Famer Jackie Robinson, Man of the Year Jackie Robinson, MVP Jackie Robinson had a thorn in his side in the person of his son—and it hurt terribly. Nothing he was able to do could change that fact; still, he had to go on.

We find that Job in our Old Testament story must also endure what he cannot change. He suffers greatly from his afflictions. His friends suggest various reasons for his circumstances, but these attempts at explanation are not helpful. So he is ultimately left with his condition unabated and unresolved. He is left to make sense out of what seems to make no sense at all; still, he had to go on.

In our second reading Paul, too, speaks of personal adversity. This section of the letter to the church at Corinth is distinctly autobiographical. Even though, he says, there could be reason enough for him to boast of his successes, and in this way elevate his authority, he refrains from doing so. What keeps Paul from being inflated with pride is what he refers to as a "thorn in the flesh." This is something which made his life difficult; still, he had to go on.

What that “thorn” is, we don’t know. Some have guessed malaria or an eye disease or stuttering or epilepsy. Nowhere does he call it by name or describe it more fully, nor do other sources from the same time shed any light. We can only speculate that it was some kind of chronic physical or emotional problem.

Paul asks God that this condition be lifted from him, but gets no relief. His prayer, however, does bring a response. And what he hears God saying is this: “My grace is all you need, for my power is realized most in your weakness.” My power is realized most in your weakness. But what does that mean?

However Paul understood that answer, it was apparently sufficient for him. He says it gave him the assurance he needed to go on, despite his circumstances. “I am most happy... for my weaknesses,” writes Paul, “because then I rely all the more on the power of Christ within me. I can contend with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties when I do the work of Christ; for whenever I am personally weak, then I find my true strength.”

It is said that Abraham Lincoln also had a number of personal thorns in the side during his presidency. Historians believe that the most painful of these were some of his own cabinet members—men who were largely disloyal to him and sought to undermine him. Lincoln was once asked why it was that he didn’t replace one particular member who constantly opposed him on issues. He answered indirectly with this story.

“Some years ago I was passing a field where a farmer was trying to plow with a very old and decrepit horse. I noticed on the flank of the animal a big thistle that the wind had blown until it caught on the animal’s hair, and I was about to pull it off when the farmer said, ‘Don’t you remove that thistle, Abe! If it wasn’t for that sticker, this old hoss wouldn’t move an inch.’”

Perhaps that was Lincoln’s way of saying that challenging people kept him at his best. The more they irritated him, the more he had to reach for a greater strength within himself. He succeeded most often not in spite of his opponents, but **because** of his opponents. He had to go on.

Now we tend to believe that we do best when everything goes our way—that seems only logical—but maybe Lincoln’s story is really closer to the truth. Without tension we’re not usually challenged beyond our normal best. It’s when we are pushed and squeezed and opposed that we are forced to tap into a greater strength, a deeper reserve, then we otherwise would have had to do.

That was evident to me back in high school when I ran track. We had one fellow on the team who was really outstanding in the 880. He was clearly the best runner and at practice no one could beat him. We were in a league of rather small schools and so the competition wasn’t always that strong. A few teams did have some pretty good half-milers, still Jim defeated them all.

The interesting thing about Jim is that he almost always won by just about the same margin, ten feet or so, no matter what the caliber of his competition. If it was an easy opponent, he’d win but run a slow race. On the other hand, if there was somebody who could push him, he’d run a bit faster. His performance was directly proportional to the strength of his opponents.

Jim had great promise and hoped to get to the state meet; unfortunately, he never made it out of the district. The problem was that once he ran against athletes from some of the track powerhouses, he couldn't compete at that level. These fellows had greater competition all year and so had been pushed repeatedly. They had to do their utmost each meet and anything less would not have been enough. When it came to running at their best, they were ready.

Jim had all the natural abilities, but no one challenged him sufficiently in the regular season. He learned to succeed doing just enough to finish slightly ahead of his more mediocre opponents. I have no doubt that he could have been one of the best runners in the state, but he was never forced to develop himself. He won regularly, but never improved.

So here we have Paul dealing with his infirmity, his limitation, his thorn in the flesh in such a way that he actually ends up being thankful for it. He knows that it works against him but, even as it does so, it works for him. His weakness is also the secret of his strength. His condition reminds him that to boast of himself would be hollow. What he can do of his own ability is tempered by his limitations. His "thorn" is a constant reminder that God provides the real strength to overcome the things that threaten him.

Paul's ministry was fraught with obstacles all along the way. His opposition was strong and real as he preached the Good News. He risked himself constantly in traveling from place to place and teaching in hostile settings. Yet, Paul was not to be denied.

Now, I would expect that there's a thorn or two or three in the side of each one of us. No one escapes some limitations or problems, and some of us seem to get more than our share. Life can be hard. Maybe it's particularly hard for you today. If so, I can feel for you. I know what it's like. The last few weeks have been particularly difficult for me. One thing is certain, though: our adversities will either strengthen us or they may ultimately defeat us. Some things in life we simply cannot change, but how we respond to them is largely up to us.

Am I the only one to whom life has ever dealt a difficult hand? We see our afflictions, our limitations, only too clearly. Sometimes we allow them to control our lives, rather than learning how to move around them or through them. They can immobilize us, if we let them.

There was a couple in a former church of mine who had a child that was a great disappointment to them. They couldn't understand what went wrong, nor why. That child caused them much worry and tears. Yet this couple was strong in faith. They asked God to give them the strength to go on with their lives, to continue to love this recalcitrant daughter, and to raise their two younger children in the best way possible. They also prayed that their lives, as a whole, might continue to witness to the power of Christ at work in them despite their heartache.

These two people took what would have devastated and embittered others, and they became stronger for it. They had a terrible hole in their midst that couldn't be forgotten, but they were the kind of folks I think about when anyone describes a strong family. They modeled for all of us at that church an example of parental love that would not be defeated by the terrible disappointment brought by one very troubled child.

“I am thankful for my weaknesses,” said Paul, “because then I rely all the more on the power of Christ within me. I can contend with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties when I do the work of Christ; for whenever I am personally weak, the I find my true strength.”

We are never promised that life will be easy. If you expect that, you will surely be disappointed every day. Those setbacks, however—which we all have—serve to remind us that the source of our real strength is entirely at the meeting of our spirit with the power of God’s Spirit. That will be our sufficiency to overcome what comes our way. Adversity teaches us that sometimes we grow best, we become our strongest, when the way is hardest.