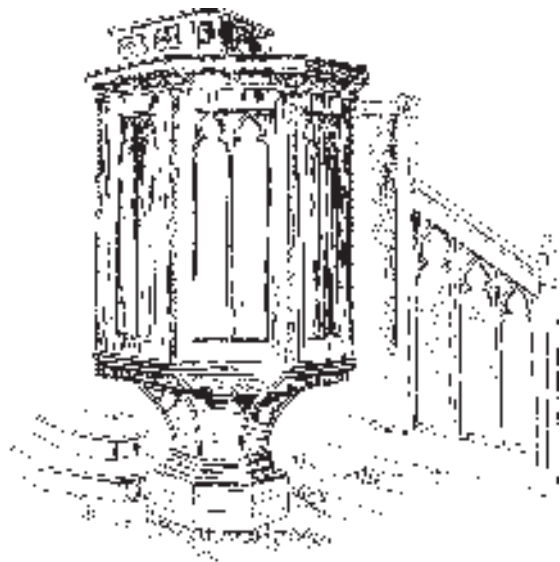


June 14, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

When Life Knocks You Down by The Reverend John W. Neely

Romans 8:14-39
Psalm 23

I want to tell a story that some have heard before. It is a true story and I will never forget it. It seems that in the middle of the night, a burning odor filled the air at the family vacation cottage. Everyone in the house got up and looked high and low for the cause. Absolutely nothing was to be found. With great apprehension everyone went back to bed. Of course, no one slept very soundly.

One member of the household awakened in the wee hours of the morning - uneasy, restless - and went downstairs to read. The thought of a nicely toasted English muffin was appealing. Over to the spring loaded toaster she goes. Now a spring loaded toaster is one that does not have a lever to depress in order to get the bread to go down. When you put the bread in it goes down automatically. In goes the muffin. But wait, something is stopping it from being inserted in the toaster. What in the world is in there? O, of course, one of the kids left a piece of crust in the toaster and it's jammed. Haven't we all had this happen? No problem, just pick at the crust until it dislodges. No...wait a minute; this piece of crust has fur and little eyes! Boys and girls, in your worship bag you'll find at the front of your bulletin a picture of.....Upon closer examination it was discovered that the culprit was not a piece of crust but a little mouse in search of a delectable morsel of food. You guessed it - the mouse hopped onto the spring and down it went. Upon trying to get out - not

being toasted enough - down went the spring, then up comes the spring, down goes the spring, up it comes again, and so on. Here was the culprit – the burning smell. Poor little mouse! It chose the wrong appliance in search of food. And, even more than this, it chose the wrong side of the toaster – the side for one slice of toast! You see, the other side would not operate with just one slice of bread.

Humorous? Yes! But isn't life like that? Sometimes it seems as if we're meant to get all the hard knocks. Sometimes we just can't get up when life knocks us down.

I know a recent college graduate—a better-than-average student—eager and ambitious—who can't find a job. I know a mother, with three children, and a mortgage, and other debts, and a significant birthday behind her, who, recently, like quite a few other women in her econo-mizing company, got a curt message stating that her services are no longer required. I know a man who is youthful and vigorous, com-petent and very promising in his field, but now his doctor has warned him that the future is going to be much different from what he planned ... if, indeed, he has any future at all. I know a husband who walked into his own home and found his wife, whom he loved dearly, with another man. I know many others—men and women and young people— whose lives are in defeat, maybe not dealing with disasters as bad as those mentioned, but just as discouraged by rou-tine disappointments and futile frustrations constantly knock-ing them down in life. And what all those people yearn to know more than any-thing else—what everyone yearns to know, in order to go on living—is this: when life does knock us down, how do we get back up and go on?

I believe that in this church this morning there is sufficient power being released by God, and sufficient help available from God that anyone who needs it, and came in here spiritually crawl-ing, can go out walking; that anyone who wants it, and came in here morally downhearted, can go out lifted up; that anyone who is willing to use it, and came in here bewildered and baffled can go out confident of new re-sources of strength!

Jesus Christ lived far more than just a "good life." The bit-terest critic has yet to find in it anything to refute that Jesus lived the most spiritually successful life of all time. Still, while yet in his thirties, the shouts to "Crucify him!" and the shadow of Calvary knocked him down - knocked even him down.

And in the face of that, what did Jesus do? Three things he did . . . listen carefully, and mark these. First, and most important of all, he did not abandon his faith in God. He did not give up God at the first sign of adversity. Trouble some-times becomes even worse for us because we do just the op-posite. As soon as any trouble appears we tend to *blame* God, rather than to *use God's strength* as a resource.

A sad note was folded into a Christmas card. It was from someone who, because of a change of administration in her office, was to lose her job. She wrote: "My world is falling apart, and my talents no longer seem to be needed. It seems strange at this point in my life that *God has let me down*." That woman is deeper in a state of despair be-cause she is deliberately turning away from, and even accusing, the one Source that could help her up, now that life has knocked her down. When Jesus faced the worst, he did *not* abandon his faith in God.

Second, he prayed about his crisis. Jesus had no martyr complex: He didn't want to die; he possessed the keenest sense of the worth of life. At first he asked that he might avoid the cross—natural enough; no normal person chooses voluntarily agony and pain. But when it became evident that the cross could not be bypassed, then Jesus prayed for strength to endure it and to overcome it. Trouble sometimes becomes harder for us because our praying doesn't get past the plea that God will miraculously change the outward circumstances when, perhaps, it is not God's will to do that. But, perhaps, God will answer a prayer that asks for the stamina to confront outward circumstances and surmount them. When Jesus faced the worst, he prayed.

Third, Jesus trusted himself in God's hands. He wasn't afraid. He was certain enough of the love and goodness of God to be sure that any obstacle in the path of life which could not be removed, could be conquered. You see, for a Christian, even death is conquerable. Trouble sometimes becomes harder for us, because while we may *believe* in God, we do not *trust* ourselves in God's care. We don't actually feel safe that whatever happens to us is within the hollow of God's hand. I surprise myself the way I'll get on an airplane without knowing anything about the pilot or the condition of the engines, and yet go straight off to sleep for the duration of the trip. In other words, the way I'm willing to trust myself to strange people and metal, and yet I will nervously question God, the Creator and Maintainer of the universe! When Jesus faced the worst, he trusted himself in God's hands.

Claudio and Maria Turella were a young married couple from Rome who took a weekend holiday at an Italian ski resort. They were not skiers, but their hobby was photography. They were devout Catholics. One Sunday morning, after Mass, they set out for a less crowded glacier field, 11,480 feet above sea level. They found themselves alone there, and were taking pictures. Suddenly the snow and ice beneath them cracked open and they fell into a crevice 60 feet deep. They were not seriously injured, but they were trapped. The temperature averaged 14 degrees Fahrenheit. And there they were from about noon on Sunday until rescuers finally hauled them out on Friday morning. Now this is what I want to tell you: on Thursday, after having stood in that narrow ice-hole five days and four nights, Maria Turella came to this conclusion: that they were in God's hands, and that God would help them either to live, or to die; whichever hardly mattered now. What mattered, even over life or death, was the sense of God's presence and supporting strength in the face of whatever happened. That's what I mean about Christianity overcoming, conquering, death—among all other things. On Friday morning they were rescued, and lived to tell the harrowing adventure. But of greater importance to them was to tell of the amazing love and power of God, which to them was the same whether they had lived or died.

Most of us are not facing problems like that—yet, too few of us have found even a fraction of faith like that. But we must! Obviously, the only way to get up when life has knocked us down is with God's help. What else did the Psalmist mean when he wrote: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me." (Psalm 23:4) You and I can have, can appropriate, that same companion, that same kind of help, when we walk through our own dark valleys. Our sole sustaining hope, the only thing in the world that we can count on for sure, the one thing that neither fades nor fails, *is God!* To battle the storm with our hope resting in anything trivial or temporary leaves little prospect other than despair.

There are marvelous episodes in history — “proof of the pudding” you could call them—proof that faith in God does work. For example, during the Quaker persecutions in England in the 1670s and '80s, 14 Quaker families who were determined to escape and be free, secretly bought an old boat, suitable for no more than smooth sightseeing on the Thames, and set sail to join friends already in America. Not one in that crowd knew the first thing about sailing or navigation or even adequate supplies for a long voyage. But with the cool characteristic composure of Quakers, they drifted out of London in the dark of one night, confidently, unquestioningly, trustingly, putting themselves into the hands of God. They went on as if they knew what they were doing. They encountered one storm after another; they were chased by an armed ship; they were set motionless for over a week because of the lack of wind; they had no idea where they were, except that the sun set in the west. And, at the end of their incredible journey, even more incredibly they touched ashore on Long Island, *two miles* from where they had wanted to be, and their journal contains no mention that they were surprised—for, after all, hadn't they committed the whole thing to the care of God? As for us, we expect too little, and we get what we expect!

When life has knocked you down, and you want to get back up stronger than you were before, you must be absolutely sure of these three things: First, you must know for certain that God is behind your life, that you and I are not here by mere chance. We live because it is God's purpose that we live! In the 138th Psalm, the author puts it this way: “God enfolds me, behind and before.” (Verse 51) In other words, God surrounds me: I am hemmed in by God's love and mercy. I find that idea very secure. God planned our existence; and only as we trust our lives back to God do we discover in full how great life is.

Many years ago there was a man named William Cowper who found himself coping with a deep and unrelenting despair. He spent more than an hour one night riding through the dark streets of London in search of the river, of a bridge, where he intended to throw himself in. The fog that night was so thick that the horse-drawn carriage moved blindly, and the river was nowhere to be found. In utter frustration Cowper cursed the driver, and tore open the door of the cab—only to find himself directly in front of his own doorstep! He went up to his room, took pen in hand, and that night wrote these words, which we sang as our second hymn:

“O God, in a mysterious way
Great wonders to perform;
You plant your foot steps in the sea
And ride upon the storm.

“O fearful saints, fresh courage take.
The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.”

When life has knocked you down, and you want to get back up stronger than you were before you must know for certain that God is behind your life, that you and I are not here by chance.

Second, to get up stronger when life has knocked you down, you must affirm that God is not only the Creator of life, but is part of your life. God has not left us like strangers in a foreign land, where we don't speak the language. The Psalmist says, "God enfolds me, behind and before." At the time of personal tragedy- with the death of a loved one for instance – we have heard these words over and over again: "We don't understand this, but we are sure that somehow God's love is in it! We have actually felt God's presence and God's strength far surpassing our own . . . and it's going to be all right." That's what I mean by the Christian faith conquering even death! As long as we face each day, armed with the sure knowledge that God is in our life, part of our life, we have no cause to be afraid. We *will* experience worries and woes, troubles and trials, hurts and hardships, disease and death; yet none of these will be able to separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:39). To get up stronger when life has knocked you down, you must affirm that God is not only the Creator of life, but is part of your life.

Third, to get up stronger when life has knocked you down, you must have established ahead of time your friendship with God. The problem for many of us is that we try to manage our lives without giving God a chance to help. You come here Sunday after Sunday and listen to these things; in fact, you've heard them all your years. Still, there are many, many, who haven't ever really believed, and who, even now, won't *do* anything about it; who go on, quite oblivious to the role God might play in their lives, and then come to crisis, and haven't got what it takes to get through—because what it takes to get through is a close relationship with God.

We don't let our children wait until they are filling out their first income tax form to learn how to add and subtract. And we are very foolish as adults if we wait for an emergency, and then think we can just break the glass, pull the handle, and get God. *Now* is the time to put your whole self into God's hands, so that no matter what, you will have learned ahead of time, before the emergency, how to be a conqueror over life through friendship with God.

And so when life has knocked you down, and you want to get back up stronger than you were before, you must realize for certain that God is behind your life; you must affirm that God is not only the Creator of life, but is part of your life; and you must have established ahead of time your friendship with God.

That is my prayer for all of us.

Prayer:

Our gracious God, who picks us up when we are knocked down, if anyone of us needs the peace and refuge of Jesus Christ this morning; if any one of us needs a place to turn in the storm of life, help that one accept what you offer through Jesus Christ; and let that one go out of here a new person in Christ. Amen.