

14 Sunday Ordinary Time, B

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In our reading from the second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul talks about a personal problem that he describes as “**a thorn in the flesh.**” No one knows exactly what it means. The only thing we know for sure is that the great Apostle had some sort of personal limitations which he prayed to be rid of, but to no avail, and finally, he had to settle down and learn to live with it.

That should strike a responsive chord in the heart of everyone here today. I have never yet known a man or a woman who in some form or another was not having to handle some kind of personal limitation. This is simply a fact of life. We all have them – some physical, some mental, some emotional, some social, some financial. Some are more obvious and more severe than others, but no one is entirely excluded. Among the few things that hold true about us is the fact that each one has a limitation, which he did not choose and at times has wished to escape.

So, we all can identify with the experience of Paul. His thorn in the flesh was not a matter of personal choosing. He said it was given to him. He did not want it.

But after a time, Paul learned to live with his limitations, and he did it so creatively that many years later the world was still celebrating the beauty of his life.

That is the part of his experience that you and I need to know more about. Our question is: how did he do it? What is Paul's secret? We need to know it so that we might do the same. So, from our reading and from life itself, I want to lift out two or three suggestions about living with our limitations.

The first thing we must learn to do is take a positive attitude toward limitations.

Now, I realize that it is not an easy thing to do, and our initial reaction almost always flows in the opposite direction. Questions arise in our minds: why me, what did I ever do to deserve this? Our emotions organize themselves into a protest demonstration. They carry signs that read: life is unfair, the universe is unjust, God does not care. It was a common human failing that prompted Job's wife to suggest to her suffering husband that he curse God and die. Given the same set of circumstances, you and I might have reacted similarly.

But we have to recognize that these are only emotional reactions and not rational conclusions about life. We must deal with ourselves more intelligently and courageously than that if ever we find the grace that enables us to live with our limitations.

Instead of asking, why me, perhaps we should try asking, why not me? Do you and I believe that we are victims of some kind of divine discrimination?

So, we suffer setbacks, so we experience disappointments, so we carry a thorn in the flesh, who in the history of the race has not? If we have not learned to do that, we have never grown up, and we are not prepared to face life.

As soon as a person begins to take this positive attitude toward his or her limitations, they begin to look more like opportunities than problems. That is what Paul discovered concerning his thorn in the flesh. It was still there. It was still whatever it had always been, but in Paul's mind, it had changed from minus to plus.

A second thing we must do is stop comparing ourselves with others who appear to be better off than us.

It is a great day in any person's life when he decides that he has only one responsibility, not to be like anyone but to handle his situation as best he can. I think that is what psychologists call self-acceptance. There must be that kind of experience somewhere in Paul's life. His anger about his thorn in the flesh had to come, at least in part, from a comparative look at others. Whatever it was, it was probably not unique; but at least it was unusual. Most people did not have to endure it; and Paul, being human, must have felt the unfavorable comparison.

You and I often do the same thing; and many people, as a result, turn to bitterness and self-pity. Paul made no such foolish mistake. By the grace of God, he was given to see that he was accountable for no situation but his own. He accepted his limitations, which he could not help, and set

about to do the best he could with the tools at his disposal, and as the saying goes, the rest of the story is history.

There may be some here whose entire life could be transformed by this same kind of self-acceptance. This important thing is not what you do in comparison with others, but how you handle your special situation. God does not judge us in groups. If you take what you have and give it your best shot, you will someday hear him say, **“Well done; you had a tough situation but handled it excellently.”**

And finally, though limitations may restrict our outward achievements, there is a sense in which they increase our opportunity to be of service.

One of the reasons we are listening to Paul today is because we know he had a serious problem but would not give in to it. There are few more inspiring sights in this world than to see someone who has an excuse to quit but courageously refuses to use it. We may not appreciate Beethoven’s music, but we can all appreciate the courage of the deaf man who composed it. It is one kind of experience to watch the Olympic Games, held once every four years. Their performance is often exciting, but few of us are moved to follow their example. They are too far beyond us; we could never hope to perform at that level. It is another experience to watch the Special Olympics. Almost everyone is thinking - if they can do that, what rights have I to complain?

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Such is the inspiration of limitation handled with courage. Do not despise your thorn in the flesh. It could be your greatest opportunity. Listen carefully and you may hear God saying, **“My grace is enough for you, for in weakness power reaches perfection.” Amen.**