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“Surviving Setbacks”

Mark 2:1-6
Phillippians 1:19-21
June 28, 2009

This month we have been looking at certain life lessons that help us
as we maneuver through life.

We have considered The Golden Rule, Six Essential Words,
Many Kids, Many Fathers,
and today we are considering ways to survive setbacks.

Now, it is a given that life is going to bring us heartache and difficulty.
Life is frustrating and painful for everyone.

But the simple truth is that we can not only survive setbacks,
we can learn from them and grow because of them.

Now, this sermon series was inspired by all of the things I wanted our kids to
know before they leave home. I want them to know that so much of life is what
you make it, so much is determined by your attitude.

But I also wanted them to know that life will most certainly break your heart.

You will get sick. Lose a friend. Lose a job. Do and say things you regret.

Have to say good-bye to people you love.

There are so many unpleasant random things that can happen to you in this life.

Did you know there are documented cases of spontaneous human combustion?

Did you know that plastic mini-blinds emit brain damaging lead dust?

You could be among the 200,000 people each year injured in their bathrooms?

These are realities of human life on this mysterious earth.

What makes life bearable is that for every one of those negative life experiences,
there are far more that are wonderful and good.

Falling in love for the first time, watching a sun rise, making a true friend,

hearing beautiful music, being loved by a child, the list goes on and on.

So while life is hard for everybody, for most of us the blessings far outweigh the
setbacks.

So my first piece of advice on how to survive setbacks is not to take your blessings
for granted. Counting your blessings will help you endure life's difficulties.

Appreciate your blessings long before they are gone.

After my father died our family moved to Morrison, Colorado.

I was 16 years old and felt like I had gone to heaven because I could walk to
concerts at Red Rocks to see James Taylor, Led Zeppelin, The Who, it was great!

But for a teenager the best seats at any concert were down front right near the speakers. So my siblings and I would always sit as close to the stage and the speakers as we possibly could.

For 10 years I went to concerts at Red Rocks and sat in generally the same place. My ears would be ringing for several days after, but my hearing always came back.

It never occurred to me that I might suffer some permanent hearing loss that I would miss when I got older. Youth is indeed wasted on the young.

We all do this to some degree. We don't take care of ourselves like we should, we engage in behaviors that are unhealthy. We all take our health and energy for granted. Until it starts to go and then we realize what we had.

So appreciate your blessings while you have them.

Secondly, know that your setbacks are not the will of God.

Now sometimes in the church we promote a simplistic theology that can be less than helpful in surviving life's setbacks. We say things like:

"Everything happens for a reason." "God needed an angel in Heaven."

"It is the will of God."

That works when things are going well, but breaks down when things do not.

If you believe God helped the Lakers win the NBA Championship, then do you also believe that God also planned the subway train crash in Washington DC that killed 9 people and injured scores of others last week?

Does God inflict awful tragedies upon people?

Is that God's will? Absolutely not.

The Bible tells us that God is loving, just, merciful and kind.

God's will is always for our growth and good.

God is the one who is our refuge and strength, the one who sees us through.

God is absolutely not the one who inflicts pain and suffering upon us.

It is the nature of free will in a hazardous universe, and God is the one who will sustain us, help us, and give us a strength and resilience we did not know we had.

The trials of our lives do present opportunities to grow and change.

There is a Roman Catholic idea that I really like—that of redemptive suffering.

The idea is that no suffering is ever wasted.

It is not caused by God, we know that. But it can be used by God to shape us into better and more sensitive people.

And in my experience suffering makes us more patient, compassionate and kind, far more willing to reach out to help others.

The passage Julie read today from Paul's letter to church in Philippi offers just such an example.

This letter is just 4 chapters long, written when Paul was in prison, waiting to find out whether or not he was going to die.

And it is known as the Epistle of Joy.

Paul has the idea that his suffering provides an opportunity for God to work.

His imprisonment is allowing him to witness to the prison guards, write letters, and reflect upon his life and death.

He says he would like to face his death in such a way that others are emboldened to live, serve and give in new ways.

Of course, the best example of this principle is Jesus Christ who suffered horribly.

He was betrayed, denied, mocked, humiliated, and murdered.

Yet all of this was used for positive purposes, to reveal the nature of God.

Third and closely related, when setbacks come, do not view yourself as a victim.

It is a cliché, but the rain falls on just and unjust alike.

Everybody suffers, and unfairness and bad luck are universally distributed.

Your suffering is not that different from that of so many others.

There was a time in my professional life when I felt like a victim and really started to get a chip on my shoulder.

Of course, it was all because of the "woman minister" thing.

I was asked to leave an ecumenical clergy group, of which I was a part, because some of the other clergy had trouble with a woman minister.

I was told I could not officiate at some weddings for the same reason.

And then a member of my church decided to leave the church because she was told that her salvation might be in jeopardy because she had a female pastor.

I received mail addressed to "The Bride of Satan," and so on.

I began to feel bitter and singled out for special suffering because of something I did not choose and could not control.

But it is never helpful to feel or act like a victim.

Life is unfair for everybody, and it should motivate us to stand up to injustice and work for equality.

I will never forget Ethel, who was confined to a nursing home after having both legs amputated. She could have been bitter, but instead had a beautiful spirit.

She never felt sorry for herself, but only wanted to bless other people.

So she put together these little gift bags with lotion, bath soap, candy.

Every nurse and visitor who came to see her was given a gift bag.

She was dearly loved by everyone, because of her remarkable attitude. In 2Corinthians Paul wrote, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, we are perplexed but not driven to despair, we are struck down but not destroyed. This momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory. What is seen is temporary, what cannot be seen is eternal.”

My fourth bit of advice for surviving setbacks is:
have people in your life who will carry you.

God’s primary means of working in this world is **not** through supernatural miracles. No, God most often works through human beings created in God’s image.

Human beings are the instruments of God’s comfort, care, and grace.

The Gospel lesson that Julie read for us from Mark’s 2nd chapter is really amazing. Jesus is in Capernaum and a crowd gathers around a house where he was teaching.

There are so many people jamming the entrance that nobody could come in.

Some men arrive carrying a stretcher with a paraplegic on it.

They obviously cannot get in the doors, so they start tearing the roof off the house, grab some ropes and lower the guy down through the roof.

While I am sure the homeowner was not too happy, it demonstrates great boldness and determination.

Jesus has to be smiling at this paralyzed man, who has friends like this, in fact the Message tells us: “Impressed by their bold belief, Jesus says to the parapalegic, “Son, I forgive your sins.”

Interesting that when Jesus saw THEIR faith, he healed the man of his emotional and physical paralysis.

We all need friends like that who will carry our stretcher when we cannot walk on our own and even cut a hole in the roof for us.

Who carries your stretcher? Who can you call at 2:00 in the morning and know they will not be upset that you called, and that they will be at your side instantly?

Who are the people who will take care of you when you are sick?

Who will bring you food, flowers, and not just show up at your loved ones funeral, but be offering care a week later and a month later and a year later?

Who are those people who carry you?

And perhaps even more importantly, whom do you carry?

Most likely there will not be people who carry yours, unless you carry some stretchers for others.

That means being there for those who need to be carried during their times of

emotional and physical paralysis.

Never be too proud to ask for help and do not underestimate the power of family and friends.

Invest deeply in the people in your life; offer to carry their stretchers so that one day they will be there to carry yours.

Also, find what brings you joy and never let it go.

Whether it is music, athletics, books, science, hiking, nature, service projects.

Find something you are passionate about and keep it up.

Do those things when things go well and when things do not.

This will comfort you in times of adversity and bring you peace.

Now, in study after study of people with good mental health researchers have found that they look at the positive side of life. They do not have easy lives, but they give the good things in their lives the majority of their attention.

And they do something else, as well.

Bruce Larson spent three years researching the question: What constitutes a mentally healthy person? His research was funded by Lilly Endowment, and he traveled to such places as the Menninger Clinic, Dr. Paul Tournier in Switzerland, and many other centers of mental healing. At each one he asked what constitutes mental health. He said there were a number of characteristics mentioned. But the one that appeared on every list was this: A mentally healthy person is a risk-taker. They would risk fear, embarrassment or humiliation for the sake of learning and doing new things. They would always try something new.

Finally in surviving setbacks know that everything changes and no sorrow lasts forever. With God's help you will get through whatever life sends your way. As I was thinking this past week about how I have survived the setbacks in my own life, I realized that so many of you are my inspiration.

Some of you live with chronic pain and never complain.

Some of you endure great sorrow with dignity and grace.

Some of you have suffered terrible tragedies, but you are not bitter.

A woman who lost her husband recently said to me:

“So much good that has happened in my life, how could I not be grateful?”

So in surviving the setbacks life sends your way, remember these things:

Appreciate your blessings while you have them.

Remember that our suffering is never the will of God.

Do not allow yourself to become a victim.
Nurture your relationships so that there are people who will carry you.
Find the people and things that bring you joy and peace.
And more than anything else, lean on the God who loves you, the God who never
lets you go. Let us pray...

Our Dear God:

We walk by faith, and not by sight. We so often have no idea where we are going, no idea what the future will bring. But we continue on this journey, in hope and trust. We continue to rely upon you, our hope and our salvation. Today we are here to rest in your love and remember your grace. We have gathered here on this summer Sunday to seek your guidance, grace, and peace. We have gathered to celebrate life and to acknowledge you as the creator of all of life. Teach us to embrace everything about this precious life and to live more deeply, love more freely, give more generously. Teach us to treasure the people you have given us to love, to be open to new experiences, relationships and ideas. Teach us to be faithful disciples of Jesus the living Christ, who is with us and within us. We are thankful for your presence and power, giving us the wisdom and understanding we need just when we need it.

We have come here today with different struggles and setbacks in our lives. But we know this is where we find help and peace. Thank you for that gift that offers a wisdom beyond ourselves and a community of care. Thank you for this church and its mission in the world. Guide and help us to share the love of Jesus Christ in all the days ahead.

We leave this sacred place with just a little more hope, a little more peace, a little more faith and for that we give you thanks. Amen.