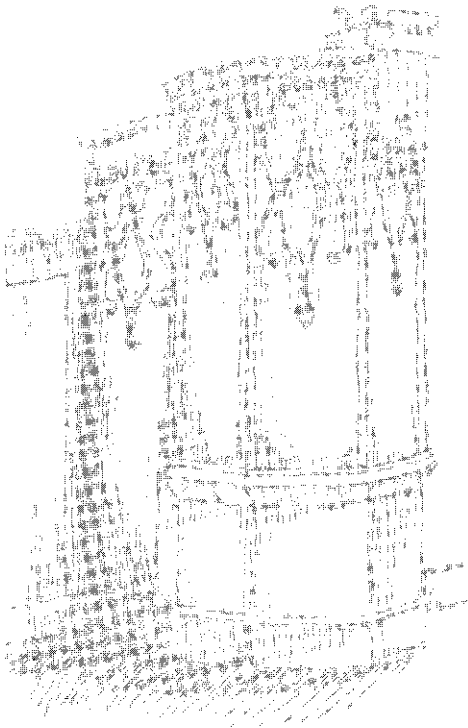


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# The Southminster Pulpit



"HOORAY FOR 'BIG NUMBER 12'!!"  
A Sermon For and From  
The Handicapped

Text: "I have learned, in  
whatever state I am, to be  
content."

Philippians 4:11

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One of the continuing anomalies in our understanding of the complexities of human nature, to me at least, is the enormous impact which, in an incidental and even momentary meeting, one person can have on another. How we influence each other can build and deepen through the years and decades, but an apparently casual brush across the surface of one life, like a hurried line in a good Modigliani drawing, can also change the meaning of our lives and countenance; can lift our spirits; can give us hope, and at the wide extreme, can change us permanently, almost as if there is some mysterious antenna circling all we do that is turned perfectly to those certain few who become a part of the music that we make, and it does not matter that the duet is but a few notes long.

As I was working out the introduction to this theme, I ran the tips of my memory over that bank of information which has to do with the chance occurrences in my life, and how they have affected me. Some, from just a single meeting or a momentary glance, or word, have been absorbed into my makeup, and it is true to say that they are often more a part of me than people I have known for twenty years. One such is a man I've mentioned here before, who in a few moments' time some years ago, gave me a new look at race relations. Some others I depend on in memory, or Christmas letters even though we haven't met for years.

Well, the hero of our sermon is one such man, or rather one such young man somewhere near his early twenties, I saw ten months ago. In actual fact, I never met him or spoke a word to him. I never learned his name, never even came within a hundred yards or so of where he was while I was having dinner in the Lobster Shanty Restaurant

over in Point Pleasant, with my family. He was on the outside, across the corner of that tiny cove where between us, to my left, at mooring bobbed the hulking, rusting Lobster Queen, which brought the fish in each sailing day. Well, he was anchored too; my Number Twelve plopped down there by a couple of the larger boys, who now were practicing their evening softball game. The ballyard was a square and tidy thirty yards or so, which had been once reclaimed, and now was well-protected by the piling jetties, that flanked the two sides facing me: the surest way to get and keep a backyard on the water. He was in the farthest corner with a big right arm, like Ted Kluszewski's, and with pitch black hair and sturdy jaw and pleasant looks, a handsome man, you'd say for sure, and even from that distance his eyes sparkled with a newfound joy each time they blinked and opened.

I like him. I like to think of him balanced there on the corner of a three-foot high, little wooden frame, which formed an elevated garden near the house. He was the batter, perennially you'd have to say, as he alone hit out the balls to what I guessed were younger brothers and some friends. It was later in the summer and, funnily, he wore a football shirt; and as if he cared for Terry Bradshaw more than we, on that black and golden jersey he was wearing Number 12.

They all had done this before, I guessed. He would hit and they would run, and laugh and chatter, as coaches teach their players to help the psyche: "Come on, Number Twelve - hang in there, Twelvie Boy;" he outfoxing time and time again with little tweeners and Texas leaguers, with bunts and bloopers all; they enjoying every chance to be a hero, whether it was to make a mighty catch or

to co-author, with big Number Twelve, a line drive double just out of reach along the inside boundary of the yard. Each one got a turn, and each one loved the batter; a lovely scene of a family-neighbor evening play.

The only trouble was that Number Twelve was crippled, paralyzed in both his legs. He couldn't move an inch without the help of chairs, or willing friends. And to add a touch of further misery his left arm was a sight; so much so that he had to wedge the bat between his elbow and his ribs. I never learned what strange, unwelcomed malady or what barbaric accident took his legs away. Perhaps some sudden twisting pang at birth, or some misfortune while a helpless infant; or was it the tiny devastating remnant of those microorganisms which destroy the muscle cells we need to stand up straight. Or almost worst of all, worst at least to forgive and understand, was it the sad result of some drunken lunatic driving his life recklessly on the public highways, and then the bright lights at the emergency room of the nearest hospital. I doubted that, but I never knew, or asked.

What was certain was the pain of years since first the doctor said that what had been unknown would now be known, and all the hope and compromises since that day. Each grunt a lovely song.. each cursed word a prayer...each brace the upright of a cross...each tear a drop of holiest water set aside for sacramental reenactment of the suffering Christ himself....each strained muscle a tightened wish for peace...each fall a prostrate giving of one's self. The living gospel of what a man or woman does if and when they manage to take the hand of all that our text here with St. Paul can

mean and march ahead to glory, to inspire the rest of us and cut a little closer to the truth of what this life of ours should be.

I love the handicapped. I've never met a person with a problem that didn't give me something strong to lean upon. You know others, too, I'm sure, who let a tiny flaw obsess and drive them to a lower level than the self. Things like being overweight, or being misproportioned -- too much here, too little there; or a disfigurement of some muscle, some line of age, which leaves them a little less than perfect, but makes them rant and rave. While others on whom the world and all caved in can handle the irritation and the guilt in style, and learn to live and laugh at it.

I love the handicapped - a mighty people. I saw a sign one day outside the Veterans Hospital in Butler, in the parking lot: "These spaces are reserved for friends who are physically handicapped." Aye, they are. At latest count, 24 million Americans who cannot carry on at full capacity; 500,000 new ones join the ranks each year because of accidents or illness; and 100,000 handicapped children come into the world each year....like little children leading us to hope and peace.

But back to Number Twelve. Oh, the stages that he went through before the night I saw him: distinctly five, they say, but all come and go together: shock, expectancy, mourning, defense, and then adjustment. But he had made it to the end, not without reluctance, not without a grudging look, not without some fantasy and wishful thinking. To capsule it, before I left, the littlest one of all those players shouted out with gusto: "Hooray for big Number Twelve; he's my man." And so, enshrined

with all my more-than-mortal heroes, up there with the likes of Stan the Man, and Maurice Stokes, and Giacometti, and big Babe Ruth, and the Poster Boy or Girl each year, is Number Twelve, my man.

In our text Paul writes to the Philippians, "I have learned in whatever state I am to be content." You see, for Paul that was a monumental, grand conclusion. He spoke about the thorn which pierced his flesh and nearly broke his heart. Those who study all he was say that most likely he was an epileptic. And worse, was called a fanatic who saw visions, and making enemies, fought his way to jail. What a pity to be driven so. He was born with so much more potential in Tarsus of Cilicia, well-known for its great culture and education - a prominent city. He was named for Saul, the first King of Israel, and he had studied in the strict tradition of the Jews. Good brains, great promise, and then the ugly thorn; born with all that potential, and then this rotten trick. Thrice he says, or was it three thousand times, he sought the Lord to release him from its grasp: Oh God, why me? And the answer came back simply: My grace will be your strength; that is sufficient for your needs.

So Paul says, I have learned the secret..... that's the verb we need, which in Greek literally means "I have been initiated into the mystery of it all." Only those who have taken the degrees can know it. To be content: sufficient to myself; not happy, not without remorse or tears or pleas. I've learned to be content. You do not arrive full blown - you have to learn it. Oh, time can help, maturity and friends can help, family and your faith can help, but people tell me you must do it! You must find the help you

need. It's like building a new house out of the debris left over from the mass tornadoes --- some borrowed clothing, some interested neighbors, a foundation stone here and there, then the floor and the joist and the roof, and add to all that the new things you need, and finally in time - and oh so tired - you come to grips with the power of that prayer which teaches you the difference in the things that can and cannot be.

You have to learn it. The Greek word means to become a student of the teacher, like learning a new language, or becoming a disciple, or like the ancient Pharisee who worked for thirty years before he caught it and was allowed to teach it. It takes time and work and Will, but glory be - one day it's learned. The island we leave behind is always best, they used to say in World War II, and, aye, it truly is.

But the needs of the handicapped are not unlike the needs of all the rest of us. The need to be a person who has his inner strength that's anchored so deep within the sea that no movement of the surface can ever move it. The handicapped need friendship and acceptance, someone to talk to; they need patience and not pity.

I saw another one some years ago on the floor at Pittsburgh Presbytery; a wreck by any other standard than the one which seeks to measure, however inadequately, the worth of the human soul and spirit. He had been deformed, congenitally, we say, one of those cruel tricks which nature plays on the human frame and psyche. Grotesque, you would have said, from some objective point of view out there on Mars with the likes of Nietzsche and his kin, who see in any imperfection the curse of

all the gods, and who would cast out those who were not so round in head or long in arm or clear in speech as were themselves. Whoever told us what the standard was for allowable living among the supermen of Earth. Sure we value prowess of the body and the mind, but we usually mean it in the alien context of how strong and quick we are, as if the mightiest purpose of what and why we're here is to excel in things like running races or leaping giant buildings. There's something weightier, of course, which lies beneath our differences however noticeable they are.

Grotesque, well no, not with that boy at Presbytery. You would have said the opposite if you had listened to the statement of his faith in preparation for what we call our trials of ordination, the latter being tough indeed to even extraordinary mortals. But they were tiny, little cakewalks to the likes of the one I remember ever better in those soul-destroying moments when he slaved to lift himself up that one 8 inch step into the library at the seminary, with excruciating pain. And never, to my knowledge anyway, did he make it. Sometimes miracles are missing, and we must learn to live with the maladies we have.

Well, he was there to tell the world and all that God had called him to the Christian ministry, even if he had to say it perched precariously on top his trusty stool, which he later quipped was borrowed from the nearest bar and grill. We were there to examine him, to see if he was fit to announce the good news that God has brought us all into the boundaries of his love. We were there to examine him, this walking, seated, wheelchaired sermon, the gospel of what a man can do when he sets his course into the center of the great North-

easter and, while others run and pout and hide, he lashes back into all that is wearisome and wrong.

We examining him - that was some kind of joke. For we, who could run circles all around him if we were budding referees, or umpires, or Wall Street errand boys, were babes in arms when entering that high and silent hall of who is worthy to be a servant of the Lord and King. Tiny infants, we, worried over our next call to some better paying job; scheming to manipulate the people of our parishes to do what we ever knew was right; we, who judge each other out of jealousy, and snicker when embarrassed by how weak and shallow is the servanthood we claim. And there was he, and this his final statement: "It has been a long, long road since that first day I learned that I would never walk again, a long, long road. But all along the way, I kept remembering that to whom much had once been given, much more was now expected. So I offer back to God himself the life He gave to me."

The needs of the handicapped are not unlike the needs of all the rest of us: the need to be affirmed as persons, not as problems. They have needs peculiar to themselves, just like the rest of us. In our English language the word comes from an ancient betting game, where the stakes were held in a cap in one's hand. The loser forfeited what was in the hand and cap. It came to mean in things like golf and races, an extra burden. But curiously, in both those sports, the stronger are the ones who must take the extra strokes or weight. The stronger take the extra burden, and that seems wrong at first. It seems the weaker get the extra burden when you see him sitting there in pain. But if you look longer, it's the stronger ones indeed who can carry it in style! The handicap is yours

and mine, not theirs, in the matter of the soul and of the spirit.

In a moment we will sing, "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go." George Matheson, the composer, was troubled from youth with failing sight, and by 18, he was totally blind. He wrote this hymn while Pastor of the Scottish Free Church, at a time when the rest of the family were away in Glasgow, and he was alone and depressed and feeling sorry for himself.

So to you, too, my friend, broken in body or soul or spirit, be certain now -- God gives you a special grace. If it's age that has you, or disappointment, or a reluctance to celebrate the body God gave you, think about Big Number Twelve. I mean it. Right out loud, every time you feel disgruntled, discouraged that God and fate and life have wiped away your golden dreams and hopes, say it right out loud: Hooray for Big Number Twelve! And learn, with him and Paul and so very many others that I know who shoulder things that would crush the rest of us, their extra burdens - and learn in whatever state you are, to be content.

Amen.

April 28, 1974