

“WHEN I THINK HOW FAR WE’VE COME....”

**Text: “Do not flag in zeal, be ardent in spirit,
serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be
patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.”
Romans 12: 11-12**

**Rev. Richard M. Cromie, Ph.D., D.D.
Sharon Presbyterian Church
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You would have loved Bill, if only you had known him. He was an important figure in Western Pennsylvania back around the 1960s and 70s. He was widely known, but he never forgot the charming, compassionate grace of the small-town Southern man he was. He was honest, humble and fair, quite unlike most of the news media and paparazzi who spread their biased news around today. He was Editor-in-Chief of the Scripps Howard's paper in Pittsburgh. People actually cared about what he wrote; and when he spoke, they listened. The poor Press has long since gone the way of most newspapers in large cities, who back then had at least one morning and evening publication each. The Hearst Group came out on top, that time, and now the Post Gazette is the only paper in town.

Bill was on Boards of Directors galore; but his special passion was for those with mental-emotional illnesses. He helped to focus the attention of the community and our congregation on what we could do to help. We were blessed to have Bill in our Church, even if he was near retirement when I became his pastor. Advocating for those with diseases of the mind was not a popular idea back then. Generally, it was thought they were deranged lunatics and possessed by evil spirits. Society still locked them up as dangerous criminals, rather than try to understand what was going on inside their troubled lives.

On the more personal level, the person, not the illness, was usually blamed when things got out of hand. I still hear people say things like: "Come on now, shape up. Don't be depressed; think of all the good things that you have." Or, "Stop it; we will not have that kind of behavior in our family!" Or, I heard a pastor say from the pulpit a couple of years ago: "Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be," as if a depressed person has chosen to be depressed.

The problem is that when anxiety or depression takes control, it cannot easily be wrested away, at least not by you. Oh I know that each of us is still responsible for our own choices and decisions, and that we should never turn sins into inconveniences. But if one is afflicted by mental-emotional illness, telling the person to "Straighten up and fly right, or stop that!" is equivalent to commanding a man with a crooked leg, "to straighten up and walk right!" He would love to, more than anything, but he can't! Bill was the first one to teach me most of what I know about irrational behavior.

In 1948 Olivia deHavilland starred in the stirring movie, "The Snake Pit." Forever memorable as Virginia Cunningham, she was institutionalized in the film, following a temporary disorientation. She woke up in an asylum, not knowing how she got there. It was not a pleasant place! The movie exposed the horrors and inhumane treatment inside the institution. It was a great motion-picture, with a message. It had a happy ending for Olivia's character anyway; in fact the first time I heard the haunting melody of Dvorak's "Going Home," from the Ninth Symphony for The New World, I was sitting in the Enright Theatre, watching and listening to the end of the movie. The horrors shown in "The Snake Pit" helped to bring a nationwide focus on how the emotionally troubled were being abused and mistreated.

A few, like Bill Forrester, had been working hard to re-shape national opinion away from the decadent idea that those afflicted are crazy, and should be shackled in some faraway countryside institution. We have come to know that mental illness, anxiety and depression are aberrations of the brain, a result of a chemical imbalances and confused circuitry of the mind and psyche, and that most, if not almost all, can be treated. Bill kept saying that as society would never lock up a child who had a broken leg and had to limp around, neither should it lock up those who had diseases which caused them to limp around in their mental-emotional composition.

Thankfully, in most corners of the world anyway, we have come a long way in our understanding. Praise God! I know that some folk still recoil with suspicion when they hear the plea of temporary insanity; and

some still are bewildered when a person's behavioral pattern changes; and some still rush to instant judgment and condemnation when an outburst occurs; and many still reject the idea that bad behavior can be the result of sociological conditions in the inner city. But, if something is wrong inside the person, then we should try to discover what and why and how we can help to heal it. A person is not "bad" because some bad behavior crops up and out. The first question to ask on those occasions is, "What's wrong with him or her?" Of course we need to evaluate behavior, and apply pressures to protect society, but if the answer to "What's wrong?" is that the person is limping emotionally, then we should respond with understanding, rather than lash out in anger.

That is a favorite hobby-horse of mine, as you can no doubt surmise but I was speaking of my friend, Bill Forrester. Oh the time came, as it always does, when his body began to grow old and he could not keep pace with his wishes. Bill started to decline in health. In my opinion, life should have been kinder to one so fine and good, for it was a long, painful and uncertain journey to the end. I stayed with him as his pastor, and oh what wonderful things I learned from listening as Bill took on his final challenge. Like, one day, in his hospital room we were discussing the Book of Ecclesiastes. I asked Bill if he ever got discouraged in the battle to get people to understand the roots of emotional illness. He shifted himself a little, and while I didn't know it yet, I was about to learn one of the most important maxims I know about how you can manage to absorb the struggles of this mortal life, and still keep smiling.

Bill said, "Oh sure, I get discouraged Dr. Cromie. When I think how far we have to go, and all that is left undone, of course I get disheartened." Then he paused: "But when I think how far we've come, and all the progress we have made, I get the courage to go on." (Were you listening?) "When I think how far we have to go, I get discouraged; but when I think how far we've come, I get the courage to go on." Halleluiah, Amen.

Bill's words have served and saved me many times over ever since. When I have been discouraged and tempted to give up, I return to his words in memory. My prayer is that his advice might give the same support to you, wherever you are, or were, or one day still might be. Sure, in so many categories, we have a long way to go; but we have come a long, long way. Let me look at it with you in some different categories to see if it fits you and yours.

I.

First, continue with me for a moment longer in the matter of mental and emotional troubles. It is bewildering when you encounter someone who suffers from those mysterious illnesses. If you know them first-hand in your family or among your friends, I do not need to say another word. It can be overwhelming when you don't know where to turn, or when you seek help from expert professionals and they give opposite advice. Lyndon Johnson used to say that in the White House. "They tell me to consult the experts;" the President said, "Sure, but when I do, the experts always seem to disagree."

When a father friend of mine complained to the psychiatrist years ago that nothing seemed to be working for his son, the Doctor replied: "The problem is that our treatment regimen is not a precise science!" And a complete precise science it still is not. It can be frustrating, scary and bewildering. Yes, we have a long way to go.

But, if you turn around and take a look, when you think how far we've come....oh dear. Even in Bible times they believed that the emotionally unstable were possessed by the Devil, and ipso facto, out of touch with the Creator. It was believed that if somehow they could only manage to get it right with God,

their peculiar behavior would disappear. I still hear that in some quarters. The Gospels tell of the times when Jesus was concerned and he drove demons out of the deranged: in one case they transferred themselves into a herd of swine, as if they were independent little creatures with a will of their own. Demon possession is still believed by many in the faith.

In the Early and Middle Ages in Europe, those who acted irrationally or who had hallucinations were deemed to be “lunatics” and were beaten, shunted aside or executed. The Church and society were seldom kind to those who suffered emotional trauma. For centuries they were locked up in asylums, the most famous of which was Bedlam in London. Spectators actually paid admission money so they could observe their gyrations.

It was all the way to the 19th Century before some supportive treatments came into vogue. It was the early 20th Century before society came to offer any clinical treatment, and that came on slowly: first of a crude and primitive type, but then improving. And, it was all the way until my own lifetime before palliative drugs and treatments were available to maintain some stability among the patients. And most of our current progress comes from the past ten years.

So, yes, if you or someone you know and love suffers from a basic emotional instability, it is a long and arduous journey to set it straight. There is a long way to go, and that can get discouraging. But, as my old friend Bill would say, “When I think how far we’ve come, I get the courage to go on.”

II

Now shift the focus for a minute and look at our sermon topic from the point of view of our nation: The United States of America. Sure we have our troubles. Sure we have left some things undone. We carry around a whole sack full of burdens from previous generations, and we have introduced a few new ones in our own. When I think how far we have to go, I get discouraged. A perfectly sane, intelligent friend of mine asked me the other day if I thought we would ever get out of the national and international morass of greed and terrorists and rising prices for almost everything. She seemed to feel that the times are dangerous indeed. They are.

And it is discouraging at times to think about it. Maybe the Global Warming problems are not as acute as the extremists say. Radical, aggressive believers can distort almost any truth. But our excesses in the use of carbon fuels and our dependence on foreign oil and the pollution of our air and water do not help the situation. We have a long way to go before we can ease up on the pressures to conserve energy and manage our resources.

And we have a host of social problems. Like, we are caught in the quandary of figuring out what to do with the still-mounting problem of illegal aliens. We let it all happen, for we needed and still need their employment. But now a second and third generation is involved, it is ridiculous to try to “ship them all back to where they came from.”

And I mention in passing the old animosities in Protestant-Catholic relations. It used to be that the twain seldom met. Our daughter Courtney has just returned from a visit to the Reformation sights in Switzerland. In the City of Neuchapel, near Zurich, she photographed a statue of William Farel, one of the lesser known but important 16th Century Protestant Reformers. At the bottom of the statue, Farel is crushing the head of a Catholic priest under his foot. Violent.

I almost fainted the first day up in Quebec City in Canada, when I saw, right on the main street, a statue of a Catholic Cardinal ready to chop Martin Luther into pieces. When I brought my first Roman Catholic girl home to see my parents, my own father (God rest his soul) an avid Ulster Orangeman, told me that there would be no Catholics in our house! It turned out pretty well for me, (Although she was a pretty blonde) but I ended up with my darling Peggy, and soon to be 49 years of marriage.

But do you see what I mean? We have come a long way in 50 years in understanding and accepting each other. Some on both sides are still stuck in the mud, but in my opinion it is no longer an issue. All Christians worship the same God in different ways. Some people like the elaborate rituals. Some like a simpler form of worship. Some people need a priest to confess what is on their minds. And with an entirely different meaning, some Protestants need a Pastor to tell him, or her, what is on their minds. Or, take the matter of race relations. While many do not like to admit it, we carry the burden from the inheritance of slavery, and the injustices and inequality in the north and the south for over two long centuries. Hopefully we have outgrown the time when we formed our opinions of people by race and nationality. Yet, those lingering ideas still weigh us down. Anger is just below the surface on both sides at who has treated whom how, when, where and why. And it still is true that many of God's children start out life being shortchanged in freedom and possibilities, not only here, but far worse all around the globe. Yes, we have a long way to go before we get to the fulfillment of the dream, and figure out what it means to say that we all were all created equal.

But then, when I think how far we've come: from the times when human beings were bought and sold as pieces of personal property. We have come a long way and crossed the boundaries and leapt across barriers our forefathers insisted upon.

And when we look at the victims of increasing tribal warfare in Africa, and the incidents of enforced slavery going on currently; and when we note the freedom and opportunities available here in America, even to the point of, whatever your party or preference, of having a minority candidate for President, oh I still worry, we're not over it yet; but, in Bill's words, "I get the courage to go on." As women used to say in the 70s and 80s, "We've come a long way baby!"

I chose as our Biblical text for this sermon the words from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 12, which are printed in your program. Paul has just begun his dissertation on the ethical implications of what it means to be a Christian. His theoretical discussion on the theology of belief is over. Now he turns to good, practical advice. If this is what you believe, as he had previously written, here now are the consequences. I have told you what has been done for you in Christ, now here are the consequences. If you want to be like Jesus, this is what you try to do. Verse 9 says, "Let your love be genuine." Wonderful word that, "genuine;" it meant about the same to him as it does to us. Love can be a word you say, or it can be something you do. It must be sincere. It must lift up its eyes in honesty to embrace all the peoples of the earth.

When Jesus said, "Love your enemies," He meant it. When he said, "Pray for those who persecute you," he meant it. Genuine love looks to find the possibilities of good in others; it looks for the best in any person and every situation, just as Jesus did. Our Lord kept crossing the boundaries, destroying the conventional way of doing things. He kept reaching out to those who needed some extra help. There is no guarantee of immediate success. In fact it might not even seem to work out for you. But in God's good time, it will.

Paul adds “Be patient in tribulation.” Suffering and pain are the price you pay for being alive. Grief is the price you pay for having loved; if you didn’t care about the one who is gone, it wouldn’t hurt at all. (Are you listening?)

Had we never loved so kindly,
Had we never loved so blindly,
Never met, and never parted,
We would nae be broken hearted.

That’s Robbie Burns. (From Ae Fond Kiss.)

Paul adds. “Persevere in Prayer.” That is, do not give up; never give up; for God will never give up on you.” Remember the old bumper sticker which read, “Be patient, God isn’t done with me yet.” I sure hope he isn’t done with me. I will let you decide for you.

III.

Now, I will leave the rest to you too. I was going to apply our topic to the forward movement of all mankind: from the moment of creation to the day we were driven out of the original garden. Or, if you prefer from the long slow evolving process through the eons of time since the Universe was made.

And if I had wanted to keep you here all day, I would have explored how Bill’s statement applies to local churches, even one most of you know about first-hand. How they go through troubles, some not of their own making. How they were left holding the bag of changing demographics and other idiosyncrasies. But most of you know enough of that already. I would have said that if a congregation continues to dwell on troubles, they will get discouraged. But if they choose to dwell on their strengths of the past, and look to the future; and if they remember that the power of Almighty God is there to guide them; and if they allow that to happen, then goodness knows, churches, too, can find the courage to go on.

V.

But lastly, I want to coast it home to each one of you gathered within the sound of my voice. It could be that you are troubled today: maybe you are ill, or maybe you have a handicap of the body, mind or soul; or maybe you are just plain growing older and get grumpier more easily; or maybe you’re wondering what on earth is happening to your husband, or your wife, or your parents, or your children, or your business. Maybe you yourself are struggling to overcome some personal problem inside of you. Maybe, maybe, maybe. Maybe you didn’t like what the preacher said. Those all can get you down, and it often seems like it is all uphill.

Well, you have a choice: you can talk on and on about how far you have to go to get where you want to be. Life itself can be discouraging, as Will Rogers said, “Nobody gets out of it alive.” “No one ever told me,” Bill whispered, “that it would ever be like this.” You can hang out with the losers of the world, if you want to; after all misery loves company. Or, you can turn around and look back at how far you’ve come. Thank God for the days and decades that you had it all together, the good times.

The wonder is not that life breaks down and troubles come . . . the wonder is that it ever builds up. “Given everything,” the noted paleontologist Harlow Shapely once said, “It’s a wonder any of us is here.” The wonder is not that things break down, but that they ever built up to form a living, loving soul. The ultimate in wonder is not that we die, but that we live.

Sure, there is darkness in the world: always was and always will be. But remember, on the first day, God said, "Let there be light!" And light there was. And nothing in the history of the world has ever put it out. The other way to look at it is to end gently with a final little peek at our text from Romans.

Anyway, Paul concluded with these words in Chapter 12 of Romans: "Do not flag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer." And the God who gave you life will give you his peace.

All through the Old Testament God provided the light they needed. And the last verse of the Bible says that when we arrive with Christ to our eternal destiny in that land where all things are made whole and new again, it says, "There will be no night there, and they need no candle, neither light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light and they shall reign forever and ever."

Somewhere on yonder mountain top I see my old friend Bill, and I hear a little echo of his words to me that afternoon: "When I think how far we have to go, I get discouraged . . . but when I think how far we've come, I get the courage to go on." So do I. And so do you, I hope . . . and Jesus surely does. He is the one who said: "Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the World." For now and forevermore. Amen.