



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

June 22, 2014

"Paul's Burden" - Acts 17:16-34

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My message this morning, is meant to speak to those of us who have experienced a personal setback or loss.

The question I'll attempt to address is, "Why do some of us crumble under the weight of adversity and shrink from life, while some rise above it, and blossom, to be of service to others?"

The answer, I believe, has to do with how God works through the adversity in our lives, to reveal His plan for us, by implanting a burden in our hearts that allows us to respond in a positive way.

When we experience pain or loss, we often receive a God given burden to help others, and in helping others, we find purpose and meaning in life.

The burden I am speaking of is "the good and light burden" that is placed on us by God, as said in Matthew 11:30 "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

In what may seem to us like tragedy or disability, may in fact be, God's plan unfolding before our eyes.

Scottish born pastor, Alister Begg, has said, "Although pain may appear in the disguise of the enemy, in reality it may prove to be a gift."

The Apostle James encourages us that, when faced with these trials, we should welcome them as friends, rather than resenting them as intruders. Instead of running and hiding we are to face them in the awareness that they can improve us.

James 1:2-4 says, "*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*"

God can use the trials in our lives to work in us. He can use our trials as opportunities to get our attention, and to plant His love and empathy in us so that we might have those things for others.

God can use our setbacks as a step forward in His plan for our lives. God can turn our disability, into a supernatural ability.

That's probably been true for some of you. I know it's been true for my dad. He's an amputee; a bi-lateral upper extremity amputee, meaning that he is without both arms and hands.

One warm summer afternoon when my Dad was 11 years old, he was out exploring his

hometown of Columbus, Nebraska with his dog "Happy." A lone cherry tree, growing in the alley behind the Eagles Hall, got his attention.

He shinnied up into the branches, the cherries growing bigger and sweeter the higher he climbed; each bunch of cherries just a little further up, and a little further out, than the last one.

Happy's incessant barking eventually drew someone's attention, and when they arrived in the alley, they found my dad lying on the ground, unconscious, his head was bleeding from having landed on the Mason jar he had brought with him to collect bugs. A slender broken branch with cherries still attached was lying at his side.

A country doctor with more whiskey than wisdom, performed surgery on him that night, but it did not go well. His recovery was slow and eventually infection led to amputations to save his life.

His prosthetic arms became something that set my Dad apart from the other kids at a very young age, and by the age of 18, he was already working, demonstrating and selling artificial arms for the company that had made his.

He spent the next 50-plus years as an artificial arm evangelist and was instrumental in the spread of upper extremity prosthetic education and the research and development of new prosthetic devices. He overcame a mountain of challenges to become a businessman, a pilot, a bowler, and a pretty darn good fisherman.

Like the Apostle Paul, my dad experienced a life-changing event that must have seemed like a cruel tragedy at the time. But ultimately, it resulted in a life marked by serving his fellow amputees. After his fall, his mission became to reach those who had suffered loss, while Paul's mission, after he was struck blind, was to reach those who were lost.

In our scripture this morning, we find Paul doing just that. We find him in Athens, Greece on what is known as his second missionary journey.

Acts 17:16 – *“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.”*

Paul wasn't in Athens because of his plan, he was in Athens because of God's plan. Paul had literally been run out of Thessalonica, the last city he visited.

Acts 17:5 - *“But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city (Thessalonica) in an uproar, and attacked the House of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.”*

Acts 17:10 - *“The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went*

immediately into the Jewish synagogue.”

Paul flees Thessalonica ahead of an angry mob, travels some 50 miles to Berea, and thinking he's safe, goes directly to the local synagogue and starts preaching Christ. It seems 50 miles wasn't quite far enough because in verse 13, we see the Jews from Thessalonica catch up with him in Berea.

Acts 17:13-14 – 13 *“But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too. 14 Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea (to Athens), but Silas and Timothy remained there (in Berea).”*

Not part of his original plan, but part of God's plan, Paul arrives in Athens and waits for Silas and Timothy to catch up. Paul is on the run. He's on the run from people who want to hurt him or kill him because he is proclaiming Christ.

Acts 17:16 – *“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.”*

Although Athens was once the center for the arts, learning, and philosophy, it was fading in importance by the time Paul arrived. Even though it was past its prime, it was still a vital cultural center with beautiful architecture and art forms everywhere. The city was filled with examples of artistic beauty and grandeur, particularly in its buildings and statues honoring the Greek gods.

Paul was deeply troubled by what he saw, troubled by what

the art represented. He was troubled because Athens was full of idols and idol worshippers

Acts 17:17-20 – *“So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbling wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.”*

Acts 17:22-23 - *“So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”*

Paul was speaking at the Areopagus, or as it is more widely known, by its Roman name, Mars Hill. Not far from the Acropolis and Agora (marketplace), Mars Hill served as the meeting place for the Areopagus Court, the highest court in Greece.

Under Roman rule at the time, Mars Hill remained an important meeting place where philosophy, religion, and law were discussed.

Paul is speaking to the intellectual elite and speaks in terms they can identify with. He isn't preaching at them, he is acknowledging them, and using a cultural frame of reference to make his points.

Whenever we are out in the marketplace, we too should look for opportunities, like Paul, to share the gospel. Not by being judgmental, righteous or forceful, but by seeing things from the perspective of our audience and approaching them with love and respect.

Because the people of Athens had more gods than they could name, they made one for an unnamed god, just to cover their bases, and Paul uses this well known "unknown god" statue as a way to point them to the known God.

Had we been there, we likely would have seen heads bobbing up and down in agreement as he talked about their art and architecture, and used their understanding of an unknown god to proclaim the God that can be known, the creator of the universe.

Acts 17:24-28 – *"The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.*

26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one

of us, 28 for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring."

Paul is driving at the heart of wrong religion in his sermon. He points out the folly of thinking there's something we can do for God. This wrong religion he's arguing against is the religion of "If I do X for God, God should do Y for me." It's the wrong religion of, "protect me, save me, bless me." It's the wrong religion of, "I serve God because then he will serve me and my needs."

Like Paul was teaching the Athenians, we should also learn and remember there is nothing we can do for God to put Him in our debt. He doesn't need anything from us. He's created everything and we owe everything we have to Him, not the other way around. Paul is saying that God "gives" life to every human on earth—we don't give life to Him.

Acts 17:29-31 *"Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."*

You see, Paul takes advantage of an unexpected stop in Athens to share the gospel! That's what Paul does. Not because he has to or because it's his job; not because he has a need to climb the Apostle's corporate ladder

hoping for a year-end bonus. He does it because of the burden Jesus has placed on his heart, a burden that drives his compassion for the lost.

And if we know Jesus, we too should have this kind of burden for the lost. Whatever we are doing, wherever we are, we too should carry a burden to share the good news of Jesus Christ. We should carry with us a burden for those who don't know, or for those who simply misunderstand the meaning and implication of what Jesus has already done. That's a burden that is light, one worth carrying around.

Not many years after becoming an amputee, my dad accepted the burden of his condition, and it turned it into a deep felt compassion and passion to help others.

One morning back in the 1960's, PJ, our family dog, was seriously injured when a passing car hit her. The driver took little PJ to the closest vet's office and left her in his care. Once stabilized, the doctor contacted my mom to deliver the news. PJ had been hit by a car, was seriously injured, and likely wasn't going to make it. He was recommending she be put to sleep. This was not a decision my Mom was prepared to make, and insisted he call my dad.

After calling and explaining the extent of PJ's injuries to my dad, he again repeated the heartbreaking news that PJ should be put down. "Have you done everything that you can do to save her?" my dad asked.

"Well, there's really only one other thing that could be done," the doctor said.

And what's that doc?" my dad replied.

"I could amputate her leg and save her, but I can't imagine why you would want a 3-legged dog."

"Well doc, you are going to be really surprised when you meet her owner, but in the mean time, get to it and amputate." PJ's life was saved that morning and she lived 11 more years as a three-legged dog.

My dad responded that way because he could identify and empathize with PJ. She was hurt, about to die, and separately needed someone to reach out and help her. It was the experience of his life, changed through pain and suffering, that allowed him to have empathy and compassion for PJ.

Isn't that the kind of compassionate, empathetic, loving burden that we all want to have instilled in our hearts? Don't we all want a burden for those who haven't yet placed their faith in Jesus? Don't we all want a burden to speak truthfully and lovingly to those who have not heard the gospel?

32 *"Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." 33 So Paul went out from their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them."*

Paul takes every opportunity to share the gospel, and on this unexpected stop in Athens, many come to know Jesus as their Lord and Savior and are saved as a result.

Are you burdened by the knowledge that there are people in your life, perhaps family and friends, who do not yet know what it means to accept Jesus as their Lord and savior? Are you taking every opportunity to share the good news of Jesus with them?

The next time you're hanging out at Coffee Bean or Starbuck's, or sharing a meal with a friend, remember Paul and his layover in Athens. Remember how Paul took the time to proclaim the good

news, and take some time to share the good news with them.

Let someone know there is a God who loves them and can turn trial into triumph. Let them know there is a God who has already done what needs to be done, and He's a God that they can know, right now, and forever more. Amen.