

## October 23

### Faithfulness in Adversity

#### 2 Corinthians 4:7-12

When I read the book, "Boys in the Boat" I was struck with how often Joe Rantz had to rise above adversity. His mother died at an early age. When his father remarried he never got along well with his stepmother. While still young he was forced out of the home and, for chopping wood for the fire, he could stay at the school while eating at the community cookhouse. Later things seemed to be going better and he moved with the family from Idaho ultimately to Sequim. Then the depression hit. Harry, his dad, could not find work here and they were forced to move. His stepmother did not want Joe to come along. She reminded Harry that Joe was in his late teens, almost grown up. So Joe comes home from school one day to find the car packed and his step-brothers in the back seat. His father tells him that they are leaving and he won't be coming along. After some pleading his dad says: "No, that won't work. Look, Son, if there is one thing I've figured out about life, it's that if you want to be happy, you have to learn how to be happy on your own." With that Harry strode back to the car, climbed in, closed the door, and started down the driveway. ...Joe watched the red taillights recede and disappear into a dark shroud of rain. He turned and walked into the house and closed the door behind him. Over the next few weeks and months, Joe began to learn to fend entirely for himself. After some time his older brother invites him to live with him in Seattle. There he is noticed by the coach for the rowing team. He is invited to try out for the team. There are no scholarships for rowing but if he is accepted he will get one of the coveted work study jobs at the university. It was no sure thing he would get on the rowing team but he wanted an education so he risked it all, applied to the university and ultimately made the team. Then during those climatic years there were times he was removed from the lead boat. But through it all he persevered and in that perseverance his character was forged. While here in Sequim he met Joyce Simdars. Joyce knew what his circumstances were, knew how marginal his existence was, how poor his prospects. She knew that many girls would turn away from a boy like this, and that perhaps she should as well. And yet the more she observed how he handled those circumstances, how strong he was, how resourceful he could be, how he, like she,

enjoyed the challenge of solving practical problems, the more she came to admire him. After the Olympics they were married and they had 63 years together.

The Apostle Paul understood that we all face adversity. Paul writes: We are experiencing all kinds of trouble, but we aren't crushed. We are confused, but we aren't depressed. We are harassed. But we aren't abandoned. We are knocked down, but we aren't knocked out ...So death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

We all know that troubles happen in our lives. We likely do not face the severity of problems that Joe Rantz faced in his early life but we are aware of how challenging it is for some children having to grow up in homes where parents are addicted, absent and at times abusive. We need to do what we can to be supportive in these situations. All of us experience all kinds of troubles, according to Paul. We are, to use Paul's analogy, clay pots. A clay pot was cheap, easily broken, expendable. Yet, we know the love of God. We carry this treasure with us. We might choose to pray that we do not have troubles, but Paul looks at it differently. Instead of praying that we not have any troubles we should pray that God gives us the strength to be able to rise above the troubles we are facing. Hear again what he says: "We are experiencing all kinds of trouble, but we aren't crushed. We are confused, but we aren't depressed. We are harassed. But we aren't abandoned. We are knocked down, but we aren't knocked out."

Another way of looking at this is to ask a different question. When troubles happen we need to ask, "Are we going to be victims or are we going to be survivors?" Too many people fall into the victim trap when they are going through troubles. They whine, "Why me?" They let the experiences of living crush the life out of them. They let life knock them out of the ring. You probably know people like this. I think of a woman who might as well have walked around the church with a sign on her back saying, "Kick me! I deserve it." Her husband had died and that, for her, had ended her life. You went to her house and there was a shrine of pictures to him. You talked with her and every sentence seemed to refer back to when life was good. Her children came to talk with me several times about what to do with mom. Nothing would shake her conviction that life was unfair. She was all those negative sides of Paul's list, crushed, depressed, abandoned and knocked out.

Or, you can invite the power of God into your life to transform you. God doesn't make the troubles go away but through God we can see how there is a future beyond the present difficulties. Joe Rantz never attributes his steadfastness in the face of adversity to faith but we see the transformative power of God to change us if we do not allow ourselves to be a victim. Looking back we can see how all of these misfortunes were setting Joe up to be an Olympic class rower and to find his lifelong soul mate. Chopping wood, fending for yourself, working hard to make money toned his body and impressed his future wife. Joe could have given up at any time and no one would have blamed him. But in refusing to be a victim he found life.

We need to rely upon God intentionally to help us keep out of this victim modality. We are reminded that we are just clay pots. We are not in control of life and we are reminded that troubles will come to us. When they do, we are to ask God for help and be open to that transformative power. When we do, we find we are not crushed by life. We might be confused as to what to do this moment but we live with optimism instead of depression because we believe God will see us through these things. We likely will feel harassed at times because life can do that to us but we know God is with us so we never feel abandoned. Life may knock us down but we stand up and try again because of God.

How do we find this power? We trust in the God who was with the people of Israel and brought them out of slavery and returned them from bondage. We trust the God who sent us Jesus. We trust the God who raised him from the dead. Our God is a God of faithfulness and new beginnings. This reminder allows us to look beyond the moment when we feel like a shattered pot realizing there is more.

We find this power by living into the future. Joe Rantz after being abandoned here is Sequim figured out how to survive. Some of it was hard work. At times he skirted the law by poaching salmon. But he kept at it. It was that perseverance and optimism that so impressed Joyce. I see that same power when people lose spouses and come to me a few months later talking about the next chapter in their life. They are not stuck but moving forward. I see that when people are going through health challenges, like

chemo treatments, and are planning events when it is done so they have something positive to focus on.

I don't know what is happening in each one of your lives. Some of you, I know, are feeling really knocked down by life. Remember, this is not all of the story. Find the strength in the power of community to see you through this time. We are so good at being there for one another. I just had a conversation with one of you who is facing surgery. She has been so impressed by how many people have called offering help. They want her to know they are there for her. This is helping her to see beyond the surgery to new beginnings.

Others of you may appear, to all accounts, to be looking like life is great but you are feeling crushed. Don't hold it in. Let others know about what is happening. Remember God is with you and you are not alone. For all of us, strive to do one thing today that is forward looking. Take an action that is life giving no matter what you are dealing with, remembering God is with you. When you do these things you will find the power Paul was talking about.