

The Power of Limits

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Now as (Jesus) passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ And Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.’” (John 9:2-3).

When we suffer, or see others suffering in weaknesses and limitations, like the Lord’s first disciples we may wonder whether this is the result of some evil in our lives. And while it is true that all suffering arises from some disorder, the Lord here assures us that we are not always at fault. In fact one important lesson we need to learn is that the finite limits the Lord either places or allows to be placed on us almost always have a vital, positive potential in our spiritual lives.

At first this may seem like nonsense. Surely, we say, limitations are what hold us back and prevent us from having or doing the things we might otherwise do. But it isn’t so. Constraints and conditions, like the shape and size of a magnifying glass, tend to concentrate power, making it more effective. Therefore we can be truly thankful for the Lord’s love and wisdom in providing or permitting them.

Just think: all order is based on distinctions making one thing unique and separate from another. Without the boundaries and borders, the definitions, restrictions and qualifications that mark the END of one thing and the BEGINNING of another, there could be no order for there could be no arrangement of parts or entities, all being Infinite (or limitless) and thus ONE. To take a simple example, think of your desk at home, or in some office somewhere: the beauty of that desk – and its functional utility – lie in the fact that it is not part of the floor or the wall, it is not some sort of extension of the things you put on it – or of yourself, for that matter, but it is a unit unto itself, a thing with definite size and shape, made of particular materials formed in a distinct manner that invites a certain kind of activity, maybe reading, maybe writing; whatever. If the desk were not a unique and distinct entity the kind of work normally done at a desk could not be done, or would have to be done somewhere else. So the desk provides for use, it actually confers power through its limitations. Again, taking this illustration to an extreme, if the desk had form and substance but were too big, say as big as the room itself, of course it would be useless as a desk; so there is power even in limitations of size.

This is also true in a car engine: sure, there is more power in a bigger engine, but all that power depends on the proper maintenance either of the fuel injectors or of the carburetor, small parts with tiny valves that run best when they are constricted in a certain way. And if there were no precision instrument, distinct and separate from the rest of the motor as a fuel injector is (although integrated with it) the whole motor would be perfectly useless. In fact, any part of that motor or ANY machine can illustrate this principle in the same way: the parts cannot work together unless they are made separate, every one with precise limitations as to quality, form and size, and only WHEN the limitations (sometimes called "specifications") are rigidly adhered to does the equipment run well.

Isn't it the same in human life? You are unique because of your particular heredity, background and disposition. Your effectiveness in life is also due to the particular skills and talents through which you channel your energy. Tradesmen, doctors, nurses, lawyers, scientists, engineers, technicians, consultants are all the same in this respect: they have focused their skills and disciplined their talents into some relatively limited area of life so that by concentrating on that one thing they can excel and make a significant contribution to their fellow men, whereas without that narrowing of thought and effort all their work would be diffuse and ineffective, totally lacking in imagination and force. Naturally specialists in our world make the most money: the reason is people VALUE their services and are willing to pay for the benefits of their expertise.

Again, think of the generation of electrical energy by water power: There is no electrical energy in a mass of water lying still behind a dam; but useful energy is created when a relatively small flow of that water is allowed to pass forcefully through a restricted channel in order to move specific, precision machinery designed for the induction of electrical current.

Now the Lord has made each one of us unique and He has gifted each one of us with special talents. He has also provided (or at least permitted) that each one of us will experience life a little differently from everyone else, either as to what we sense and in what order, or as to how we respond to it, or both. Some are swift, some are slow; some are tall, some are short; some dark, some light; some are craftsmen, some are philosophers; some are leaders, some followers. Moreover, some are born with keen eyesight or perception, some are born blind; some have strong hearts and strong stomachs, some can't take much stress; some heal quickly when cut, some are hemophiliacs; some people are very athletic, others are confined to wheelchairs or beds. In the story of the building of the ark and the tabernacle Moses was not told by God to have everybody work on it, but the Lord said, "See, I have called by name Bezaleel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. And I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to design artistic works, to work in gold, in silver, in bronze, in cutting jewels for setting, in carving wood, and to work in all manner of workmanship. And I, indeed I, have appointed with him Aholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and I have put wisdom in the hearts of all who are gifted artisans, that they may make all that I have commanded you..." (Ex. 31:2-6).

Other people were given other talents, but these were called by name for this work. And so it is that each of us is called to a specific work, and this not only by the nature of our gifts but also by the nature of the things we lack.

When the disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him." You and I are relatively healthy and well, and how many people have we helped to learn about the Lord in His new revelation? 3? 5? 25? 100? And yet how many thousands have discovered the truths of the New Church in the life and works of Helen Keller, blind, deaf and dumb almost from birth? This is just one of her MANY accomplishments including innovations and support for the blind everywhere! Of course we are not all Helen Kellers: that is exactly the point. But we are all gifted by the Lord with some special talents, which gifts often come as much or more from our disabilities as from our abilities; all we have to

do is wake up and realize what potential is there, both within us and in our circumstances, and make use of that as the Lord intends.

Can you think of any great invention that did not come about as a result of some need, some recognition of limits? “Necessity is the mother of invention.” Adversity is the crucible of success.

In an abstract sense, God, being Infinite, can do anything, and all things. Yet we also read in the Heavenly Doctrines that nothing is actually done or finished until it takes form in the materials and actions of the natural world, and specifically that “Divine Order is not terminated except with man in his bodily things, namely in his gestures, actions, and so on” (AC 3632). How is the Infinite fulfilled in finite things!!? Only in this, that in creating LIMITS and boundaries wherein distinct things can take their individual existence apart from Him, He provides for the reciprocal relationship we call LOVE. And in creating each of US distinct and separate, everyone with his or her specific limitations, He provides for the necessary sharing and cooperation that is the whole substance and real joy of human life.

Imagine being ALL ALONE. Even a thief loves to share the stories of his exploits with others. By contrast think of the fulfillment and satisfaction of contributing your part to a greater whole and sharing your talents and your needs with others. All these needs and uses come about as a result of limitations, no one being complete in Himself but God... And even God longs for conjunction with others outside Himself.

Now we often complain about our lack of power, our inability to do as many things as we want as fast as we want or with as much perfection as we want; we lament our lack of time, our lack of skill, our lack of money, sometimes even our lack of love and wisdom. But how often do we look at these constraints as the messengers of opportunity and human incentive that they really are? What motivators! What teachers and prophets they are!! What indicators of the Divine Will and Wisdom for our lives, if we only look at them this way, from the perspective of use. In the parable of the talents the Master did not give every servant an equal share of riches to invest, nor did He ask every one to return the same final account, but in each circumstance He asked, and still asks, that His servants take what they have and do the best they can with that.

Order, and in fact the truest forms of freedom, come from the recognition of limits. – Not that we should simply acquiesce in our circumstances, giving up all noble aspirations and efforts to excel or taking set-backs as signs that we were not meant to continue along a certain course... Life is full of set-backs brought about by the threats and challenges, the temptations of the hells! But real limits are one thing; errors, disappointments and illusions inspired by the hells are another. Surely the Lord can teach us the difference. One has genuine, positive power, the other in itself has no power at all.

So let us rejoice in our distinctness. Let us thank the Lord that we all have special gifts and limits within which we may work... but let us not be deterred by the limits. As we read in the Arcana, “The nature of the Lord’s Providence is such that it is linked together with Foresight; the one does not exist without the other. For evil things are foreseen, but good ones are provided; and the evil things that are foreseen are constantly being turned towards what is good by means

of the Lord's provident arrangement, since the Divine end, which has good in view, governs everything. Nothing is therefore allowed to happen except to the end that something good may come out of it" (AC 6489).

That good may be spiritual and not natural, but even so, is that any reason to be discouraged? The whole point of life in this world is to learn and grow in spirit and with the Lord's help we can do it, but it requires discipline and focus, and a real effort to narrow our interests and concentrate on what is most important.

So first, in keeping with the first rule of charity, we have to give something up: we have to stop wishing we were someone or someplace other than we are. We have to let go of that old adolescent feeling of omnipotence and concentrate on one main area of work. Naturally we'll have second thoughts but these are healthy expressions of insights being gained: we can either ignore them or accept them and change course, but we can only be on one course at a time. The message for spiritual life here is very clear.

Along with this, there is one kind of limitation we simply have to reject and that is the self-constraining obstacle of influx from hell. Nothing stops progress and destroys confidence like the cowardly, shadowy spirit of what is evil and false, arising as it does from our own past or from a new sense of arrogance or conceit. These, like the sins of the tribes of Israel, must be put aside through repentance and a new life so that the Lord can work His miracles of healing and forgiveness, opening our eyes to the deeper realities of life, showing us the positive power of His Word no matter what our circumstances may be.

Then, finally, we have to make a decision and follow it through to do the best we can with whatever resources we have – not that we shouldn't use these to gain more, but we have to use the materials supplied to us, as Bezaleel and Aholiab did. If the Lord can indeed dwell in a tabernacle of wood, metal, leather and linen how much more will He dwell in the spirit of a man or woman, no matter how affected by injury or old age, who is dedicated and determined to receive Him and to work with Him in spite or even because of our limitations!

AMEN.

Lessons: Exodus 35:4-19, 30-35 & 36:1
John 9:selections
Heaven & Hell #56