

Called to Make Room

2 Samuel 9:1-7, 9:13

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

Sunday, July 22, 2001

[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

When God keeps drawing your attention back to your disability and weakness, it is only because he is helping you discover your true strength. For your strength is always hidden in your weakness.

Mephibosheth was only five years old when his father Jonathan and grandfather Saul were killed in battle by the Philistines. On that day everyone in his home began to panic. The Philistines were ruthless and would surely try to kill all of Saul's household. Meanwhile David and his guerilla troops were wandering around. The managers of Saul and Jonathan's house were terrified that if the Philistines didn't get them, David surely would. So they grabbed what they could and fled. When the nurse grabbed Mephibosheth and fled with him she tripped and the boy fell, breaking both his ankles. The ankles didn't mend well, and Mephibosheth was lame the rest of his life.

A great many years later, after David had become securely established as the new king of Israel, he called a man named Ziba into his presence. Ziba had been the chief steward of Saul's house. David asked Ziba if there was anyone left who was a descendent of Saul's. Ziba said, "Well, the only person left is a crippled guy who is the son of Jonathan." Maybe Ziba meant, "Don't worry. There's only a crippled man who couldn't be a threat to you." If a king were trying to establish a new dynasty, it was typical for him to worry about this. If there were anyone left from the previous dynasty, that person could always claim to be the rightful heir to the throne. But David wasn't worried about that. He was worried about his covenant with Jonathan.

David and Jonathan had been close friends whose souls were knit together by God. And David had promised that if anything happened to Jonathan, he would take care of Jonathan's children. So David asked Ziba, several times, "Is there anyone remaining in the house of Saul to whom I may show kindness?"

The word for kindness in the Hebrew is actually *hesed*. It is hard to find the best translation for the word in English. It involves both love and gracious commitment. It refers to the kind of tender love we have received from God. "Is there anyone," David wants to know, "to whom I can be as kind and lovingly committed as God has been to me?" Ziba answered, "Just a cripple." And all that David wanted to know next was "Where is he?" He didn't ask, "How badly crippled?" or "How did it happen?" Just, "Where is he?"

That is the only question the kind, loving *hesed* of God wants to know about you as well. Where are you? He is not asking, "What happened to you?" or, "Who is to blame for your problems?" Just, "Where are you?"

Ziba didn't even use Mephibosheth's name. He just called him the lame son of Jonathan, as if the weakness has defined him. And he told David that Mephibosheth was in a place called Lo-debar, which means "place where there is no pasture" or "barren place." That is always where we end up when we are defined by our weaknesses...in the barren place.

For some, like Mephibosheth, the weakness is a physical disability. They cannot walk, or see, or hear, or think clearly. For others the weakness is a disability of the spirit. They struggle with self-esteem, or are riddled with self-doubts. They were hurt a long time ago and still crippled by it. They still can't believe they are the pretty one, or the smart one, or the beloved one. We all have some weakness or disability.

It doesn't matter how successful you become in Lodebar, you know that if you allow yourself to be defined by the hurt, life will still feel so barren. That is why we prefer to ignore the weakness and define ourselves

by strength. But God only asks, "Where are you?" That's because he wants neither to gloss over your weakness nor define you by them. All he wants is to find you and bring you back home to the palace where you belong.

How many years did Mephibosheth live in fear of the day he would hear that knock on his door? Then one day, the royal messenger came, saying only that King David wanted to see him. Mephibosheth must have thought that this was his end. King David would surely feel threatened by Saul's grandson and want to kill him. Can you see the pathos of this scene as Mephibosheth appeared in David's presence? He hobbled into the throne room, while everyone backed up as they often do when a disabled person walks in. When he saw the king, the crutches went flying as this lame man fell on his face in front of the man he had always feared.

To Mephibosheth's amazement, the King says, "Do not be afraid." It is amazing how many times that sentence appears in the Bible. That's because life gives you a lot of reasons to be afraid. And it's because you've always worried about the day your weakness is exposed. And it's because the anxiety has made all of life seem like a barren land. When God, the King of Heaven, sent his angelic messengers to find those living in barren places, they always began by saying, "Fear not! I bring you glad tidings of great joy." While Mephibosheth lay on the ground expecting David's sword to fall on his neck, he heard, "Fear not, I will show you kindness, tender hesed, for the sake of your father Jonathan."

David doesn't just use words, but also actions, as you must when you are expressing love. He restores all of Saul's land to Mephibosheth, so he has income. He gives him a place at his own royal table, so he has honor. He essentially adopts Mephibosheth, making him, as the text says, "like one of the king's sons."

Like Mephibosheth, we have all fallen. Every one of us. Some of us fell into bad health, and others fell into bad habits, or bad illusions about life. All of us have fallen into sin. As a result, we are all crippled and unable to walk out of the barren place where life has taken us. This is why it is so central to the Gospel that, in Jesus Christ, God has come looking for us. When he finds us he gives us grace and loving hesed. He restores us. He gives us a place at the eucharistic family table. He adopts us into the King's family where we too are the beloved. If that is so central to the Gospel, then it has to be central also to the ministry of the church.

For some reason, the church has always seen it's mission clearly when it comes to caring for those who've fallen into grief over loved ones who have died, or fallen into despair, or addiction, or even sin. We know how to care for those who have spiritual disabilities. But historically, we have not always been as clear about our mission to those with physical disabilities.

There are 54 million people in our country with physical or mental disabilities. According to the last census, that's more than 19 percent of the population. Almost 20 percent. But a lot of our churches do not know how to make room at the table for one in five of us. Maybe it's because we don't think it is a very spiritual issue. But this reasoning is particularly troubling when we remember that Jesus spent so much time with those who had great physical disabilities. The Gospel will never let us separate the physical and spiritual. We cannot care for one without the others as well.

The elders of our church have recently committed this congregation to joining The Accessible Congregations Campaign of the National Organization on Disability. In making this commitment we covenanted that we will value those with disabilities as individuals created in the image of God, and we will strive to remove the barriers that prevent them from full and active participation in our church. We have been at this for a little while now and do you know what we have discovered? The greatest barriers that we find are not architectural, but barriers of the heart.

The greatest barrier of all is that we want to think that people with disabilities are different. The reason we want to think that is because the disabled threaten us by revealing the disabilities in our own lives that we've been trying to hide. The politically correct in society don't want me to even use the word disability. They prefer that I speak to you today about the rights of the "differently-abled." But I think that is a huge step in the wrong direction for the church. Here we ought to have the courage to say that church is exactly where the disabled belong. Because all we have here are people with disabilities. It is just that some of us

have been cursed with an ability to hide it. Like Mephibosheth, we have all fallen or been dropped into something, and the hurts just stay with us the rest of life.

We live in a society that has taught us to get rid of things that are broken. It's too much trouble to fix the old washer and dryer, or to keep repairing a car. If the car gets in a bad accident we say that it's totaled, which means it isn't worth fixing. "Besides, you're a busy person. You don't have time for that. Just throw it out and get a new one," we say. All too easily this translates into thinking that people who are broken are a hassle. "She has a drinking problem. She's totaled. I have to get a new friend." "He has a sexuality problem. That's too hot for me." Then, it is a very small step to say, "He has a physical handicap, and I don't know what to say to someone like that. I'm afraid I may say something stupid." So we say nothing at all, which means we have relegated disabled people to the barren land.

Recently one of our young mothers told me about the first time her three-year-old son walked into a room and saw a woman in a wheelchair. At first he looked startled. Then he exclaimed, "You have a hat!" A great smile broke out on the woman's face because she wasn't being defined by her weakness. When you're little, you know how to do this. It is only when we get older that we are intimidated by weakness.

When we separate ourselves from disability, be it our own, or someone else's, we think that we are severing ourselves from weakness to stay strong. But just the opposite is true. We are missing the gospel's open secret that claims strength is found in the weakness. In the words of the Apostle Paul, the power of Christ is made perfect in weakness. Why? Because in our weakness we know we need a Savior. In the fourteenth chapter of Luke, Jesus describes his kingdom as a banquet hall filled with "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." Why? Because these are the people who know they need a savior.

The goal isn't to avoid disability. The goal is to find the Savior. And our dis-ability is always the means for discovering the Savior's ability. That is the miracle of what is going on in your disabled life. You have discovered something far more important than being healed of your disability. You've found the God who is with you in the midst of the weakness. That is also the miracle of what is going on in the disabled community called church. For whenever we make room for Mephibosheth, we are making room for Christ.

Lord God, we are all your disabled children. But it never feels like family if any of your children are missing from the table. So give us all the courage to come home where the Savior changes us from disabled into beloved. Amen.