



Abilities!

by Mark Brunner

“Filling In The Spaces!” (Exodus 3:11)

There are so many differing levels of ability. When I look around at other people who have more patience, more courage, more determination and more endurance than I do, it can be disconcerting. There are so many things in life that I have yet to accomplish; so many things that I’ve done I would like to have done better. If only I had half the ability of others, the things I might accomplish? It just doesn’t seem fair that God has made abilities so diverse, so discriminating.

Here’s a story: We live in the middle of a deciduous woods here at Beech Springs. Because there are so many trees, thickets and ravines, there are dozens of different birds. On any given spring or summer day you can see woodpeckers, wrens, thrushes, buntings, sparrows, doves, finches and jays. Throw in the occasional Coopers Hawk, Peregrine Falcon and Barred Owl, and the menagerie of bird life is continuously changing throughout the day. Some of these birds are songbirds and others not. And, among the songbirds there are virtuosos and, well, those that try hard. The Wood Thrush, for example, is probably the Frank Sinatra of the bunch. His flute like tones carry for miles. The tones are haunting, unforgettable. The cooing of the Mourning Doves is so peaceful and the gentle whistle of the Bluebirds flits across the lawn liltingly. Then there are the others. They fill in the spaces. The

screeching Blue Jays and the monotonous repetition of the Robins. I noticed the other day something rather remarkable, though, about the woods. The Wood Thrush is heard rarely as is the Bluebird. The Dove coos are so quiet that a gentle breeze can mask them. If these talented singers were our only residents at Beech Springs, the woods would be mostly silent during the course of the day. It's the fill-ins, the sparrows, wrens and others that set the orchestration for the symphony of our woods, the less talented but always available and ready singers.

Phillip Brooks has said, "It is almost as presumptuous to think you can do nothing as to think you can do everything." Yes, it's true I don't possess all the talents that I would like. I may never achieve those great tasks I see others achieving. I think that inside of each of us there is a Wood Thrush longing to shine, but it's not always God's plan. He needs fill-ins in His plan without which the entire orchestration would be thrown off. I think that God often chooses us to do good things precisely for our lack of ability. It's presumptuous on our part to think we are not good enough or too good. Rather, we are our own brand of good; we have a tune to sing that nicely fills in the melody of God's plan. In that sense I guess it's okay to be a Wren, a Robin or even a Jay. I know God will use me to sing the song He wants to be sung.

"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matt 6:34)

"Something Of Ability!" (Exodus 4:11)

As I get older I'm often reminded of my weaknesses. From the moment that I touch my toes to the bedroom floor in the morning I'm reminded of my arthritic knees. When I grab the bar on my weight bench it's the knuckles and wrists that complain. The bathroom mirror reflects a bald, graying guy with a slight paunch and ears that seem to grow larger as the years pass. But it's the other weaknesses, the character ones, that really give me pause. When I start to enumerate these, they dwarf the physical ones. There's impatience, anxiousness, lack of trust, anger, lust; well, the list is a long one. Throw in

covetousness, pride and envy, and the sorry picture is complete. My character weaknesses are like clouds on a mostly cloudy day. There's occasional sunshine and room for hope, but the clouds always linger in the distance.

I'm a guy who likes to count assets and use whatever assets I can find to achieve better things. Unfortunately character flaws don't ordinarily reveal themselves as assets. Yet, God tells us that each day is another opportunity to witness, disciple and evangelize. How do my weaknesses help me do that?

Here's a story: My High School Art teacher, Miss Manthey, was a skilled artist and sculptor. Although I had some artistic skills, I had no talent in sculpting whatsoever. As that happened to be one of the requirements of the curriculum, I was introduced, somewhat reluctantly to the art of working with, tinting and baking the clay. I can still remember rolling the cold pieces of clay and trying to shape them into place and then spin the potters wheel while guiding the form of my sculpted pot. The harder I tried, the worse it got. I was about to give up when Miss Manthey reached out and grabbed my hand and placed it back on the spinning mass of clay. She held it there and finally the pot began to look like something. I can still remember her gentle but firm touch. Her ability took my inability and transformed it into something of ability.

It's been said, "When you have nothing left but God, then you become aware that God is enough." As Miss Manthey guided my hands, never letting go until something of beauty took shape, that's exactly how God takes our weaknesses and transforms them into beautiful works of divine art. We tend to focus on our shortcomings, but God doesn't care about those. He's more interested in USE-ability than Ability. Our weaknesses are just what He's looking for. They're fertile ground into which He can pour His glory, His ability and His strength. As our weaknesses are humbling, it's only in humility that God works grand plans. Are you feeling weak, perhaps useless today? Who knows; it may be God tapping you on the shoulder and telling you, "Turn around my weak friend. Look at the great things I have for you to do!"

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“When All You Have Left!” (Exodus 9:27)

I’m stubborn by nature, always figuring that if I get myself into a tangle I will find a way to get out on my own. It’s that old adage, “You’ve got to be able to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” that commonly comes to mind when I find myself in a pickle. Although I’ve always wondered what that adage meant, having no straps on any pair of boots I own, I felt that when trouble came, Mark would be able to figure his way out of it. Self-reliance, independence, true grit? Those all-American traits have always appealed to me. Whatever problem I find myself facing there’s always some cliché I can rely on to bolster my confidence and spur on the will to fight it through; that is, until that one problem comes along and I’ve no idea what to do and, grabbing for those bootstraps, there’s nothing there to hold on to.

Unfortunately, when real trouble brews and I’m looking around for answers, I tend to grab at straws rather than looking for help; holding out hope that, in the end, Mark will figure a way out of the problem.

Here’s a story: Recently I had to change the spark plugs on my old Corvair. As jobs go, it’s not too bad. You simply find the right wrench, pull the plug wires and then unscrew the plugs. That works for five out of the six cylinders on this engine. There’s that one cylinder that’s the exception. Because the carburetor is in the way, you need to use a wrench with a special, elbow attachment to reach behind it. I knew that but didn’t have that special tool at hand. I would have to look for that. Even though I knew it would be the best tool, with the best chance of getting that plug out, I opted to use a regular wrench and chance pulling the plug with some effort, a bit of Yankee ingenuity and a lot of grit. In the process I ended up stripping the aluminum cylinder head and causing more damage. My grit and Yankee ingenuity failed me.

That special wrench would have saved me money and time. In the end, it was all I had left to fix what I had already ruined in the first place. As old adages go, “Pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps” has a nice ring to it, but it leaves a lot to be desired. There’s a time for grit and a time for wisdom. When only one will do, wisdom beats grit every time. As we confront the

“gritty” problems of this life, we ought always to keep one thing in mind, reaching for God, despite our worst or even best efforts, is always the right first choice. Leaving that choice to the end may get you out of the scrape but it won’t prevent the consequences of the damages already incurred by trying to do it yourself. Funny thing is, when I finally did put the right wrench in hand I got the job done in pretty quick time. Similarly, when you and I have nothing left but God, we will quickly become aware that God is and has always been enough.

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“Something Good With Something Bad!” (Exodus 9:27)

Do you have enemies? I met a guy, a local farmer, a few years back who said he didn’t. We were both running for political office at the time and were waiting for one of those small town parades to start. We would be walking the route, waving, shaking hands, the whole nine yards, and began chatting about each other’s chances of getting through the primary process. I made the remark that, “I guess, it depends on the ratio of friends to enemies.” He smiled a big farmer’s grin and declared, “I guess that makes me the winner; I don’t have any enemies, just friends.”

Life would truly be great if that were true. Unfortunately, it’s the rare man or woman that doesn’t make an enemy sometime. The enemy may not be someone who wants to hurt you or ruin your reputation, but odds are you will run into somebody that simply dislikes you, makes it known and does or says something to test your patience or make you burn with anger. There are two ways to deal with enemies. You can live with them or, like the old man that was being interviewed by a reporter and was asked this question: “What are you most proud of?” he asked. “Well,” said the man, “I don’t have an enemy in the world.” “What a beautiful thought! How inspirational!” said the reporter. “Yep,” added the centenarian, “outlived every last one of them.” (Source Unknown.)

I guess you can outlive them; but, is there a better way?

Here's a story: Peter Miller, lived in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, and enjoyed the friendship of George Washington. In Ephrata also lived Michael Wittman, an evil-minded sort who did all he could to oppose Miller. One day Wittman was arrested for treason and sentenced to die. Miller traveled 70 miles on foot to Philadelphia to plead for Wittman's life. "No," Washington said. "I can't grant you the life of your friend." "My friend!" said Miller. "He's the bitterest enemy I have." "What?" cried Washington. "You've walked 70 miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in different light. I'll grant your pardon." Peter Miller took Michael Wittman home to Ephrata—no longer an enemy but a friend. (Lynn Jost.)

Treating our enemies with love isn't an easy thing to do as it doesn't come naturally. Yet, that's exactly what God asks us to do. When we purposely single out for love those who don't show us love, we open our enemies to the something they can't resist, the love of God through us. God uses our enemies to glorify Himself. When they do bad things to us and we show them good, God is glorified and our enemies are shamed. When I think of that old farmer who said he didn't have an enemy in the world I guess I now feel sorry for him. No enemies means few opportunities to glorify God. At least one enemy gives you and I a leg-up on doing something good starting with something bad. Not a bad tradeoff after all.

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"Good Face or Good Council!" (Exodus 10:10-11)

How much power do you have? The vast majority of people I know aren't presidents of anything, officers of some authority, possessors of great wealth or held by many in extraordinary high esteem. I guess that would mean, for the most part, you and I possess little in the way of authority or power. Not all power, however, lives in position, office, wealth or popularity. For example, perhaps you're a parent. As a parent you possess power, authority and, hopefully, some respect. Maybe you're a supervisor over others or, if God has blessed you with special talents or physical traits, others aspire to be

like you. All of these aspects of “being” evoke the idea of “power.” When we possess power, whether actively or passively, it’s still power, and power has a character that blesses or curses; depending on how we use it.

Power has a way of making us think better of ourselves. As a parent we feel we need to know more than our child. As a supervisor we need to make the decisions. Yet, sometimes our take on the “power” we possess is often founded on shaky ground. I remember watching a Tournament of Roses parade years ago as a beautiful float suddenly came to a halt, blockading the parade route, out of gas. The funny thing was the float was sponsored by the Standard Oil Company. Despite that fact, someone forgot to fill the truck’s tank with fuel. The driver when asked about it later said he had advised those responsible for the float to check the fuel but his advice had been either forgotten or overlooked. The image of Standard Oil, powerful and resourceful, took a beating that day because a little thing, had been forgotten. So often go those of us who feel secure in whatever power we feel we might possess.

Advice, overlooked is often the one thing that will bring a powerful person to their doom. Here’s a story: During the Battle of the Wilderness in the Civil War, Union general John Sedgwick was inspecting his troops. At one point he came to a parapet, over which he gazed out in the direction of the enemy. His officers suggested that this was unwise and perhaps he ought to seek cover. “Nonsense,” snapped the general. “They couldn’t hit an elephant at this distance.” A moment later Sedgwick fell to the ground, fatally wounded. (Today in the Word, August 30, 1993.)

When you and I become focused on the power we have, we often neglect the good council that will not only save face but may even save what little power God had granted us to play with. Listen to your children, those you supervise or simply people who may be looking up to you. When they speak, God may be speaking through them to you. The last thing you would want to do is ignore the most Powerful Force in the universe, God himself. That puts foolishness on a whole new plain when you think about it.

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