

HOMILY

The Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time *February 22, 2009*

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This is one of those stories you see circulating on the internet. The author is unknown, but the sentiments hit home. It's called *The City of Regret*.

I had not really planned to take a trip this year, yet I found myself packing anyway. And off I went, dreading it. I was on another guilt trip. I booked by reservation on Wish I Had Airlines. I didn't check my bags—everyone carries their bags on this airline. Once I landed at the Regret City Airport, I caught a cab to the Last Resort Hotel, the driver taking the whole trip backward, looking over his shoulder. And there I found the ballroom where my event would be held: The Annual Pity Party.

As I checked in, I saw that all of my own colleagues were on the guest list:

- ✦ The Done Family—Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda.
- ✦ Both of the members of the Opportunity Family were there—Missed and Lost.
- ✦ Shattered Dreams and Broken Promises would be there, too, along with their friends, Don't Blame Me and Couldn't Help it.
- ✦ And, of course, hours and hours of entertainment would be provided by the renowned storyteller, It's Their Fault.

As I prepared to settle in for a really long night, I realized that one person had the power to send all those people home and break up the party. **That was me!** All I had to do was return to the present and welcome the new day.

The City of Regret. Have you ever been there? I wonder if the paralyzed man in today's story from the Gospel of Mark was living in the City of Regret before he met Jesus. When we pick up the story, Jesus is preaching in Capernaum. So many people gathered at the house where he was staying that there was no room left, not even outside the door. Some men came, bringing to Jesus a man who was paralyzed. Since they could not get the man to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "*Son, your sins are forgiven.*"

What an interesting thing to say to a paralyzed man: "*Your sins are forgiven.*" Could it be that this man's physical condition was in part a product of a spiritual need? Could it be that his paralysis was due in part to his having taken up residence in the City of Regret? We know that the way we think and the way we feel can have a paralyzing effect on us. People have had their bodies shut down because of powerful emotions. "Psychosomatic" we call it. It doesn't mean that the pain or paralysis is imagined. It means that it originates from a hurt not to the body but to the psyche. How we think and feel can have a crippling effect on us. This is true not only physically but socially and professionally. How many people live in the City of Regret today, looking back over their lives and counting the times when they had the opportunity to better their lives but failed to do so because they were paralyzed mentally and emotionally?

Once there was a Navy man who dreamed of writing stories for the movies. He wrote a screenplay about the great naval hero, John Paul Jones. He sent the screenplay to Julia West, who was then the story editor for Paramount studios. She rejected it. Later, this writer told Julia West how disappointed he was over the rejection. He came to see that fear could be a paralyzer. He also learned that the best way to overcome the fear of failure was to go on with the determination to succeed. In March 1933, this writer spoke to our nation. He was the newly-elected

president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who said, "...the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convey retreat into advance."

Fear can cripple us. I won't ask you to raise your hands, but millions of people this past year watched their retirements shrivel as the Stock Market sank. Many of these people were in 401-K plans. Their stock was in their own companies and they were helpless to do anything but watch. There were millions of others, however, who could have acted to minimize their losses but did nothing. They were like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights. Today they are living in the City of Regret because they could not respond to a changing market environment. How we think and feel can have a devastating effect on us.

And that brings us to the last thing to be said. One of the keys to emotional, physical and mental health is to reach out to God in Jesus. This is what salvation is. It is wholeness, wholeness of mind, body and spirit. It is a new beginning, a new beginning without the guilt, without the despair, without the complications of a life of sin.

Perhaps you have heard the story of retail genius J. C. Penney. In the early years of the Great Depression, Penney lost a large part of his fortune and the fruits of thirty years of hard work. He suffered a nervous breakdown. In the hospital, which he could ill afford, the 58-year-old businessman confronted his deepest fears and questioned his most dearly held values.

One night, he became convinced that the end of life had come for him and that before morning he would be gone. With the conviction that it was the last night on earth for him, he got up from bed, wrote farewell letters to his family, returned to bed and fell asleep. To his surprise, he was still alive the following morning. He went downstairs to the dining room intending to have breakfast when the sound of singing led him to a chapel in the hospital. A small group of people were praying morning prayer. Lo and behold, as he sat in the back seat, the very Scripture from Mark was read.

"As I listened to the story of the man lying paralyzed on the mat, I realized that man was me. I bowed my head and cried, 'Lord, like the man, I can do nothing. Will you take care of me?'

“Something I can only explain as a miracle happened to me in that quiet chapel. An appalling weight was lifted from my spirit, and I passed from darkness to light. I had entered the room paralyzed in spirit and helplessly adrift. I left it with an exhilarating sense of relief from the thought of impending death and a reborn hope in life.”

J. C. Penney had walked out the City of Regret—not of his own power, but by the grace of God. Like the man who was lowered through a roof long ago, Penney found deliverance and a new life. That new life is available today to all who would trust in Jesus. Our emotions can cripple us. Guilt is one of the most destructive emotions. Hear the words of Jesus to the paralyzed man:

“Your sins are forgiven.”

