



Expensive Experience

A preacher friend of mine—a fellow for whom I have a lot of respect—got invited not long ago to preach a series of sermons on the dicey subject of divorce and remarriage.

In the large congregation that assigned him this topic, several people were struggling with it. And the leaders in that church were finding out what the Pharisees knew when they tried to embarrass Jesus with questions on this subject. They had learned that nobody's ideas about divorce will ever please everybody.

My preacher friend surmised that he got the invitation to address this hot topic because the inviters thought his own experience equipped him to know all about it. He had been preaching almost four decades, so he knew what the Scriptures say. But, perhaps more important in this case, this preacher has been married three times, buried one wife, and got divorced by another.

Instead of bragging or celebrating his hard-gained insights, my friend said he would much rather have been a novice on the topics at hand.

I understood what he was saying. A few of my buddies have thoughtlessly popped off about my handicap parking tag. They wish out loud that they had a permit to park as close to the door as I do. So far I've managed to bite my tongue, but instantly in my mind I yell, "I wish I didn't!" With all my heart I wish I didn't qualify for that permit. I wish that the stroke that stole the feeling in my foot and leg never had happened.

No sensible person wants to hurt. None of us welcomes the damage of a divorce or a stroke. But no amount of faith or righteousness makes any of us exempt from life's disasters. Even the best people lose jobs, bury children, get cancer, go broke.

Bad experiences never are entirely bad, though. My friend's hardest days prepared him to offer genuine pastoral guidance and solace to those who now are hurting just as he did.

Surely the apostle Paul wasn't elated that he got to spend multiple years in prison and in chains, but later he realized that this harsh experience taught him to trust more fully in God's grace.

Who knows? Your present pain may be drawing you closer to the Lord. Your breaking heart may be getting you ready today to repair someone else's heart tomorrow.

By Gene Shelburne