

Every important movement faces those critical moments when an obstacle is encountered and it appears that the obstacle is too great to overcome. Every life worth living faces those critical moments when an obstacle is encountered and it appears that the obstacle is too great to overcome.

Think about that. When you have been a part of creating something that was worthwhile, has it always been easy? Was it always smooth sailing? Or were there moments when you encountered an obstacle and you said to yourself, "I just can't do it. This obstacle is too great." Have there been times when you said to yourself, "I am just going to give up. I don't have it in me."

I was raised by a wise woman who taught us many things. And one of the core values she taught her 5 children was that life's problems and tragedies can clear the way for people to show what they are really made of: strength, compassion, and resilience. Obstacles will arise. Do you have the courage to overcome them? Do you place your trust in the strength of God to help you to overcome these obstacles in life?

In our Scripture reading today, we will be reading about a pivotal moment in the life of the advance of Christianity. It is one of those occasions when a huge obstacle is presented to the message which Jesus and his followers were trying to deliver. It is one of those moments when Jesus and his followers have to decide whether they are going to move forward or whether they are going to turn back. Whether or not the obstacle is too large.

Just prior to our reading, Jesus has given his twelve disciples their marching orders. They are to go out into the towns and preach about a radically different life that is available to anyone who follows the ways of Christ. And if folks don't accept what they teach, the disciples are to wipe the dust off their feet and head to the next town. But then we read about this very capricious act which presents a huge obstacle to the advance of their message.

Read Mark 6:14-29 from The Message

John the Baptist was a central character in this new movement which the twelve disciples were told to proclaim. And now they know how dangerous it is to follow Jesus. Following Jesus could lead to death. Senseless death. One of their charismatic leaders has been unjustly beheaded. What are they going to do? A huge obstacle has been thrown down in front of them.

I want to share a story. A story about a soldier.

The decision came only days after Jerrod Fields, a United States Army corporal on a 2005 reconnaissance mission in Baghdad had his left ankle and foot mutilated by a roadside bomb. After managing to drive his four troopmates back to base — valor that earned him a Bronze Star — Fields woke up in a hospital in Germany with a choice: have surgery and be discharged, or amputate and stay a soldier.

“Cut it off,” he said he told doctors. “I want to go back to Iraq.”

Fields, 27, grew up in a South Side Chicago neighborhood he recalled as “flooded with gangs and drugs” and hazed in negativity. His mother died of lung cancer when he was 5. His father was shot and killed when he was 11.

“They said he was murdered outside of our home in Chicago,” Fields said. “Six shots, I think. It was intentional — it was something planned. We never found out the killer or why it happened. Anything.”

Fields became a fringe member of the Gansta Disciples but focused enough on sports and school to attend Tennessee State University for two years. He then enlisted in the Army and was deployed to Iraq in January 2005. A month later, reports of a dead dog on a Baghdad road — animal carcasses were often booby-trapped with explosives — led his platoon to drive in to investigate.

The dog itself was harmless, but still a trap. A small bomb went off nearby. Fields laughed because he thought he had dropped a grenade. But then another explosion destroyed his lower left leg. Fields kept his wits enough to drive his Bradley armored vehicle and fellow troops out of danger. He was then taken to a hospital in Germany. It was in this hospital in Germany that he made the decision to have his foot and ankle amputated

A fellow soldier suggested that he apply to the World Class Athlete Program. Two days before being redeployed to Iraq in August 2007 — he had worked himself back into combat shape — Fields was accepted and immediately stunned his new coach and former Olympian, Al Joyner.

Within a year of receiving a prosthetic leg and foot, Fields was running 100 meters in 12 seconds flat. He is now a leading qualifier for the Paralympics in London. In reflecting over the obstacles that he has faced, Fields says, “We don’t know what’s in us until we get the opportunity that pulls it out of us.”

Obstacles are a part of life. It’s overcoming those obstacles that separate us. We can back down to the obstacles in front of us. Or we can see obstacles as opportunities to find out what is really in us.

But you and I do not need to face those obstacles alone.

We can seek out the strength and courage of God to be with us.

Obstacles can be places where faith in God is discovered and built. AMEN.

-Swartz, Alan, "An Injured Soldier Returns as a Sprinter," New York Times, August 14, 2009,
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/14/sports/14fields.html?th&emc=th>

-Text: Mark 6:14-29

-Given: August 16, 2009 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)