



***Do You Want to Know a Secret?***  
**"I CAN DO ALL THINGS!"**

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Scripture: Philippians 4:10-20

Most of you know that we have an active mission in Haiti led by John and Nancy Smith. When our mission team was in Haiti in March, they went to the small mountain village of Chiraque to distribute to the school children your hand-made dresses as well as shorts and T-Shirts. Nancy and Shawn David, both nurses, did triage and exams on some of the people, including Pastor Felix of the Methodist church in Chiraque. After our mission team's visit a year ago, Pastor Felix was cutting back some of the overgrown forest with a machete when he accidentally cut his right leg.

This kind of injury could have easily been treated in the U.S., but the wound likely developed gangrene and required a below-knee amputation. Felix has since been using crutches. He has been a lay preacher for thirty-seven years, is married and has three grandchildren.

In the last chapter of his letter to the Christians at Philippi, the apostle Paul wants to share with his friends and partners in ministry one last secret of joy. What is that secret? "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

I believe in the importance of scripture memorization as a spiritual discipline and as a great comfort for us in our everyday life. If there are any verses in the Bible that all Christians should memorize, Philippians 4:13 should be one of them. We're going to repeat it together throughout the sermon so that when you get home, this verse will be etched on your heart. Our Duke intern, Emily, is also going to sign this verse every time we say it. Will you join me? **I can do all things through him who strengthens me.**

When I heard about Pastor Felix, I said to myself, "Here is a pastor who is carrying on ministry in the most primitive of conditions with one leg." How can he do that? And the words that immediately sprang to mind were Philippians 4:13. Our First Church mission team was shocked to arrive in Chiraque in March, only to learn for the first time about the accident and the amputation of Pastor Felix's leg. Nancy and Shawn examined the condition of his stump and found it to be well healed except for two tiny pencil eraser size wounds. They cleaned the area, left medical supplies, and taught Pastor Felix how to care for his wounds.

As Shawn put it, she then had an "aha" moment. It was really a God moment. Shawn thought that if she measured his leg circumference, length, and stump size, she could perhaps find a prosthetic leg for Felix once back in the U.S. Then Nancy and John could arrange to have it sent to him.

After the mission team returned home, all of Shawn's calls to local and national medical vendors who deal with prosthetics were met with rejection. The companies all said they would need to see Pastor Felix in person and then build a custom-made prosthetic leg for him. Shawn was told that their liability risks do not allow resale of used prosthetics. Naturally, she became frustrated and discouraged. Then, her partner, Tom, who is always browsing eBay, said, "Look on eBay for a leg; eBay has everything!" So she did. Why? **I can do all things through him who strengthens me.**

From our scripture for today it's evident that the Philippians had repeatedly supported Paul financially, not only when he was a traveling preacher but even when he was suffering, went to court and was thrown into prison. In chapter four, one of the church members in Philippi, a man named Epaphroditus, was sent to Paul with financial help, but Paul seems conflicted about the gift. On the one hand, he's glad for the help and even chides the Philippians, saying, "I rejoice that at last you have revived your concern for me."

On the other hand, Paul says that he doesn't need the gift, nor did he seek it. "Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have." Paul knows what it is to have little and to have plenty. He knows what it's like to be well-fed and to go hungry.

A few verses later, Paul claims contentment not because of any money that he might receive from the Philippians but for the profit that would accumulate to the Philippians because of the ministry that could be done with their gifts. Paul has learned how to be content with whatever he has. He simply will not allow his spirit to rise and fall with circumstances. Paul can endure anything. Why? Because of the secret of his joy. **I can do all things through him who strengthens me.**

On Easter Sunday afternoon, April 20, Shawn sent me an email with the subject line "Easter Miracle." She wrote:

God works in the most awesome ways! I have been searching for a prosthetic leg for our Haitian Pastor in Chiraque since we came home. I've been watching eBay and saw many left legs (we need a right one) and many above the knee prosthetics (we need a below knee) and others that were sizes 19" long or 25"-27" long (we need one that is 21" long) and finally one with a stump circumference of 12.

So after church today, while watching the Tigers winning, I went on eBay again. And there it was, in all its splendid "leggy-ness," a prosthesis with the exact specifications we needed!! So I bought it for only \$275, with the Haiti mission fund covering the cost! What a blessing! I am having a wonderful Easter, and there is a Pastor in Haiti who will have a wonderful new lease on life!

How did all this take place? **I can do all things through him who strengthens me.**

Shawn said, "Once the leg arrived in Michigan from California, a local prosthetic shop said it was probably a \$2,200 dollar leg! Then, at our UMW rummage sale, the perfect small carry-on suitcase with wheels was found that fit the leg." The leg in the suitcase was delivered to the

Haitian team leader at Central United Methodist Church in Detroit, who was delighted to deliver it in person to Pastor Felix when they left on their mission trip on May 16.

I have no doubt that Pastor Felix would have made out quite well without a prosthesis because of his deep faith and ability to adapt to whatever happens to him. He knows where his strength comes from. But, like Epaphroditus and the Philippians, the First UMC mission team wanted to give Pastor Felix a gift.

Some people think Paul should be more effusive in his thanks for the financial help of the Philippians. Has Paul become hardened and indifferent because of his prison experience? Is Paul cushioning himself against further pain by claiming not to care what his circumstances are? It's almost as if Paul is saying, "Thanks, but I don't really need the help because I can tough it out."

Do you know people who are like that? Maybe you're one of them! Do you find it difficult to accept gifts? Are you good at giving but reluctant to receive? Some say Paul could not receive gifts well. My take on Paul is that he really is grateful, but he doesn't want to be dependent on things or people. There's a tension between Paul's pleasure at the gift and his need to be free of materialism. We do know that Paul often refused money and worked as a tent maker to support his ministry. While he did accept gifts at times, Paul did not want to be obligated to others in order to pursue his call from God.

In short, Paul wants to define himself neither by wealth nor by poverty but by contentment. Paul's relationship with Christ and our relationship with Christ do not depend on any external circumstances. What is the secret of Paul's joy? **I can do all things through him who strengthens me.**

Paul does not glorify the gift, the giver or the receiver. Rather, Paul moves those gifts to the altar. He calls them a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And where do we receive offerings? Right here, in the church, by a congregation. The giving of our gifts is not an interruption to worship. It's integral to worship, for gift-giving is a sign of God's grace. In the end, you and I are called to share in one another's needs because we are partners in ministry. We are not dependent, we are not independent, and we are not co-dependent. We are interdependent. We are one human family.

Many of you know that Mark and Lindsay Gursky from our congregation had premature twin boys on March 2. Luke weighed two pounds, ten ounces, and Casey weighed two pounds, seven ounces. Casey was in the neonatal unit May 15, and Casey came home just two days ago with oxygen. We've been trying to support Mark and Lindsay as best we can, knowing that they spent many days dealing with bedrest during the pregnancy, then many more days pretty much living in the neonatal unit, which is always a roller coaster of progress and setbacks.

Lindsay and Mark have been overwhelmed by your prayers and support. They couldn't have made it without their friends and church family. Lindsay said:

Here's one of many stories of how our church family is everywhere and really praying for us. Yesterday one of my girlfriends had a baby on the 6th floor, so I took the elevator up a floor with Luke to say congrats and so we could each show

off our babies. On the way out, I wasn't able to get the door to open. It took me a second to realize it wasn't opening on purpose.

The receptionist asked if that was my baby. I said he was and that we were just visiting my other son on the fifth floor and decided to pay a friend a visit. She asked my name to confirm the story. When I told her 'Gursky,' she said, "My church has been praying for you for a long time!" She said she had been thrilled when they announced that Luke had been released. I told her how much the prayers had meant to us and briefly explained that we had several miracles for these guys to be where they are today. Such a warm, reassuring feeling to be surrounded by people praying for my boys. Community and praying believers have a huge impact beyond the praying person's imagination!

How have Lindsay and Mark made it through this challenging time? **I can do all things through him who strengthens me.**

And so God asks each one of us today, "How will you define yourself? And what is the secret of your joy?" When you've received a diagnosis of cancer, can you still say with confidence, **"I can do all things through him who strengthens me"**?

When you've been futilely looking for a job and are about to give up in despair, can still you say, **"I can do all things through him who strengthens me"**?

When you don't know from one day to the next whether your babies are going to make it or not, can you say, **"I can do all things who know who strengthens me"**?

When you are tempted to reject the gifts of others and go it alone, can you say, "It was kind of you to share my distress" at the same time as you proclaim, **"I can do all things through him who strengthens me"**?

When you seem to be in a hopeless position, like Paul when he was in prison, or Pastor Felix when he lost his leg, can you say, **"I can do all things through him who strengthens me"**?

When your contentment in Christ sparks a holy discontent in your soul, prompting you to work for justice for the poor and the homeless and the oppressed and the loveless, can you say, **"I can do all things through him who strengthens me"**?

Whether you are rich or poor, well-fed or hungry, have plenty or are in need, can you say with joy, **"I can do all things through him who strengthens me"**?

By the way, the Central UMC mission team was able to deliver the prosthetic leg to Pastor Felix. His first appointment to have the leg fitted was on May 29 in Port-Au-Prince with a mission group called "Prosthetic Professionals" from the U.S. who are training Haitians to learn this craft. Can you imagine what Pastor Felix is saying right now? **"I can do all things through him who strengthens me."**