

TO WHAT (OR WHOM) ARE YOU IMPRISONED?

(10/08/17)

Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 1:1-2; 3:1-6

“This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Jesus Christ for the sake of you Gentiles. . .” (Ephesians 3:1)

For this morning’s reflection on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, I would like us to go back to the first verses of the third chapter, the chapter that we read two weeks ago.

As you recall, in the salutation from Chapter 1 of this letter Paul describes himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. He then extends his blessing to all the churches that were intended to receive this encyclical: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

This opening blessing is found in all Paul’s letters. Paul’s blessing of *shalom* is an ancient Semitic greeting of peace. To this blessing, however, Paul adds *grace*. Grace refers to the acceptance, forgiveness, and love that God bestows freely--as an expression and outpouring of God’s goodness. God gives to us freely and graciously, not because we deserve it but because God loves us as a parent loves his/her child.

When he uses the term *shalom*, Paul is talking about inner peace. Inner peace is a gift. We need to do our part to create the conditions that lead to this faith-filled experience. We can meditate, become still, and open ourselves to the Holy Spirit within us. We can hold others and our life situation in an attitude of prayer. We can grow in the knowledge and love of God. We can ask Jesus to help us take on his mind and his heart: to see ourselves, others, and life as he would see them. But ultimately the peace that passes all understanding is a gift. It flows from the grace of God.

From his own personal experience, Paul knows that Jesus Christ is a channel of this blessing. As we deepen our relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ we deepen our relationship with God and become more fully the recipients of God’s grace.

If we are the recipients of God’s grace, of God’s love, of God’s great gifts, why do we not feel it more strongly than we do? Why do we not experience what Jesus called “the peace that passes all understanding?” Why do God’s acceptance, forgiveness, compassion, and love not shine forth in our lives more fully than they do? In the opening passage of chapter 3, Paul suggests an answer.

We know that at the time that he wrote this letter Paul was imprisoned because he had aroused the hostility of the secular and religious authorities by preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. He aroused the hostility of the Jewish Christians by advocating the equality of Gentiles in the church. Paul seemed to have a talent for annoying people. He challenged the people of his day and the leaders of the early church to think bigger, to think outside the little boxes that defined and limited them, the boxes that imprisoned God, others, and themselves. Paul challenged them, and also us, to move past our egocentrism to become Christo-centric, to live in a much bigger world.

As we heard two weeks ago, Paul tells us that our inner being can be strengthened through the Spirit of Christ. If we have faith, Christ will dwell in our hearts. When Christ dwells in our hearts, our lives will be grounded in love. We will be able to comprehend the breadth, length, height, and depth of God's love revealed to us in Christ Jesus. We will be filled with the fullness of God and the peace that passes understanding.

In the opening verses of this letter Paul declares himself to be a "prisoner for Christ Jesus." Note the preposition "for." This implies that Paul was writing this letter from Rome where he was imprisoned *for* being a follower of Jesus, *because* he was a follower of Jesus. However, if you look down to the bottom of the page in your New Revised Standard Version of the Bible you will find an alternative translation of the passage. It says that the passage may also be read, "This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner *of* Christ Jesus."

There is a big difference between being a prisoner *for* Christ Jesus and being a prisoner *of* Christ Jesus.

In Chapter 1 we noted that Paul talks about *being in* Christ Jesus. Once again I think the choice of verb and preposition is significant. *Being in* Christ Jesus is different from *believing in* Christ Jesus. *Being in* implies oneness, no difference, no separation, while *believing in* implies a difference, a separation, a certain distance. *Being in* Christ Jesus is different from being a follower or disciple *of* Jesus, which also implies distance. The alternative reading of the opening verse of Chapter 3 implies that Paul is not imprisoned *for* being a Christian, but that he is a prisoner *of* Christ, and that through this bondage, through being yoked to Christ, he has actually been set free.

When he describes himself as a prisoner of Christ, Paul takes a metaphor with a negative connotation and gives it a positive spin. Paul suggests that the problem is not that we are prisoners; the problem is that we are imprisoned by or to the wrong things.

The goal of the Christian life is freedom, but it is not freedom. To be sure, we need to be freed from our idols, from the demonic powers that enslave us. However, we are not meant to be free-floating or detached, not tied to, connected to, or committed to anything. In fact, the root meaning of the word *religion* means to yoke, bind, or connect. This suggests that we need to be connected, related, yoked, bound, even imprisoned to something greater than ourselves. Paul suggests that this something or someone is Christ.

Whether we know it or not, we are all prisoners of something. We may be imprisoned by our past, by neurotic patterns of behavior that are the archaic remnants of early childhood trauma. We may be imprisoned by our anxieties, by our fears. We may be imprisoned by our addiction to food, alcohol, drugs, wealth, or work. We may be imprisoned by our quest for happiness or security. We also may imprison other people and ourselves by our expectations or our need for control. If we look carefully, we will probably discover that we are prisoners of something.

Paul invites us to become prisoners of Christ. He invites us to enthroned Christ in the center of our lives. The more we become connected, related, yoked, bound, or imprisoned to Christ, the more we will be free from the demonic forces that enslave us. To become a prisoner of Christ is to be truly free.

The apostle Paul would concur with the sentiment of Richard Lovelace who, while in prison in 1649, wrote to his love, Althea,

*Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take That for a hermitage;
If I have freedom in my love, And in my soul am free,
Angels alone that soar above Enjoy such liberty.*

(To Althea: From Prison. Stanza 4)

Except Paul would call us to be free through our bondage to and our love for Christ.

In 1890, George Matheson wrote the words of our closing hymn: *Make Me a Captive, Lord*. I invite us to hold these words as our prayer in the week to come.

*Make me a captive, Lord, And then I shall be free;
Force me to render up my sword, And I shall conqueror be.*

*I sink in life's alarms When by myself I stand;
Imprison me within Thine arms, And strong shall be my hand.
My heart is weak and poor Until its master find;
It has no spring of action sure; It varies with the wind.
It cannot freely move Till Thou hast wrought its chain;
Enslave it with thy matchless love, And deathless it shall reign.
My will is not my own Till Thou has made it Thine;
If it would reach a monarch's throne, It must its crown resign.
It only stands unbent Amid the clashing strife,
When on Thy bosom it has leant, And found in Thee its life.*

Yes, our faith sets us free. But if we are to be truly free, free of the demonic powers that enslave us and that lead us to hurt those whom we love, we must first become captives; we must first become enslaved; we must first become prisoners, prisoners of Christ. If we do this, the freedom we experience will not separate us from our brothers and sisters; it will connect us with them more deeply. It will deepen our commitment to this little community of faith, our commitment to becoming disciples of the Way, our commitment to each other, and our commitment to our brothers and sisters throughout the world, especially those who are struggling or going through very difficult times.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
October 8, 2017*