

TO WHAT (OR TO WHOM) ARE YOU IMPRISONED?

(07/30/2023)

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 first chapter and the first verses of the third chapter, the chapter that we read last week.

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 something new--*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. This is the gospel, the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When he uses the term *shalom*, Paul is talking about inner peace. Inner peace is a gift. Even though it 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. Ultimately, however, the peace that passes all understanding is a gift. It flows from the grace of God.

This reminds me of a Buddhist story. It is told by Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield in their book, *Stories of the Spirit; Stories of the Heart*.

A Zen master was invited to a great Catholic monastery to give instruction in Zen practice. He exhorted the monks there to meditate and try to solve their koan or Zen question with great energy and zeal. He told them that if they could practice with full-hearted effort, true understanding would come to them.

One old monk raised his hand. “Master,” he said, “our way of prayer is different from this. We have been meditating and praying in the simplest fashion

without effort, waiting instead to be illuminated by the grace of God. In Zen is there anything like this illuminating grace that comes to one uninvited?"

The Zen master looked back and laughed. "In Zen," he said, "we believe that God has already done his share."

The Zen master, whether he knows it or not, is very Christian! As Christians, we believe that God takes the initiative to reach out to us. And God already has—in Christ! All we have to do is respond—but we do need to respond! And being open and receptive to God's Holy Spirit, whom we experience both among and within us, is the first step in responding.

From his own personal experience, Paul knows that Jesus Christ was and is a special channel of God's blessing. As we deepen our relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ, we deepen our relationship with God, and we become more fully the experiential 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 passages of chapter 3, Paul suggests an answer.

We know that at the time 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 newly emerging Christian 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, just as he challenges us, to move past our egocentrism to become Christo-centric, to live in a much bigger world!

As we heard last week, 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. He was imprisoned *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! I believe both are true of Paul.

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. *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, though this was indeed the case, 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, being a prisoner, 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 or in the wrong things!

As we noted back on our country’s Independence Day weekend, 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, not connected to, not committed to anything. In fact, the root meaning of the word *religion* means to yoke, bind, or connect. In Latin, *ligio* means to bind or connect, as a ligament connects muscle to bone. *Re* means again, as in recall, repurpose. So, the word “religion” actually means to re-connect, to yoke or bind once again, to join that which was originally whole, but which has become separated or broken or alienated. Paul suggests that we need to be connected, related, yoked, bound, even imprisoned to something greater than ourselves. He then 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 by our expectations of them or our need to control them. 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 enthrone 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 would 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 the following 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 not for Althea, not to another human being, but our love to and for Christ.

In 1890, George Matheson wrote the words of today's 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 would 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. It will deepen our commitment to each other, and it will deepen 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
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.

RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

The apostle Paul founded and supported many churches around Asia Minor. He knew, just as we know, how central the message of sharing is to our Christian faith, the sharing of the Gospel in word and deed. He knew how important the sacrament of giving was to the survival and the mission of these early Christian churches. Paul not only knew the joy of giving; he knew that giving does not deplete us; hoarding depletes us. I know it doesn't seem to make sense, but we actually end up with more when we give.

In 2 Corinthians 9:6-8, Paul says, “The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”

God has given us so much. We in this country have, to use Paul's words, “every blessing in abundance.” We have, as Paul says, “enough of everything we need.” It is out of a sense of gratitude for our blessings, for our abundance, that we share cheerfully and abundantly with the world through this church.

Let us consecrate our morning offering, our mission offering, and the many gifts we joyfully share with our church and with this world. Let us pray.

Thank you, Creator God, for your bounteous grace, for this dedicated community of faith, and for the precious gift of our lives. Bless the offerings that we return to you, and grant that they might further the realm of your kingdom here and, through our mission outreach, to the wider world. Work through each of us and through all the ministries of our little church that we might show forth your light and love to all your children.

We ask this in the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.