

2021 01 24 Philippians: Freedom, Captivity, Commitment

[Mark 1:14-20](#) - Jesus calls the first disciples

[Philippians 1:12-26](#) - Paul's present circumstances

Today, I'm thinking about freedom, captivity, and commitment.

Holy one, be with us today. Help us to hear from you, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

In this preaching series we are exploring the letter to the Philippians, wondering what this ancient document, probably a composite of different various letters from Paul, can speak to our time and place. Personally, I'm hoping to learn how to spell Philippians - so far I still get it wrong about half the time. I'm also hoping that this series can give us an appreciation for the specifics of the case - the reality of Paul as the writer, and his recipients and recorders in ancient Philippi. Preaching Team each decided to address specific parts of this letter.

Last week, Alison led us all the way from ancient Philippi, to the Atlantic Triangle, to the Genesis Planet and back again, tracking the amazing grace upon grace - the immense, life-correcting power of God's saving love. And Alison showed us that the path is not smooth. It takes us humans some time to align our lives with God, to understand how to respond to God's call on our lives. That's the nice way of putting it. It's simpler to say - we keep hurting people. Even when we do the right thing in the end, it takes us time to get there. But this teaches us that God's grace persists, grace upon grace, leading us home.

The week before that, Michele began our series by exploring what we know of the Philippian church, apparently begun by a community of women in this unusual Roman colony city in response to the rather madcap adventures of Paul and Silas as they were imprisoned, were miraculously rescued, and refused to escape from prison to save the life of the gaoler. In the aftermath of these unusual events, this unusual community was formed.

Forming communities was the sort of thing that happened a lot for Paul and the other apostles. As we go through this preaching series, I encourage you to take the time to listen to the new *On the Way Cafe* podcast, exploring the Mind and Movements of Paul. John begins with the question - what exactly did Paul do? Not 'what did he believe', or 'how did he do his work', but 'what did Paul do'? And how does that 'doing' continue the work that God does throughout our scriptures?

We learn that God gathers people into communities. And Paul's life and work is to travel the ancient world, forming communities of disciples of Jesus' life and teachings. These communities continue the work of Incarnation - becoming the mystical body of Christ on earth. After his resurrection, Jesus ascends to Heaven, and we become his body, bearing the Holy Spirit. These communities that Paul and his comrades created do the things that all communities do - they take meals together, they argue over politics, they learn ways to care for other people who have no support. In other words, they continue what Jesus did on earth.

One of the things that the Body of Christ does is share wisdom and discern together. We've decided to use the faith formation hour before the Sunday Service to go a little deeper into our sermons, too. This morning a group gathered to respond to Alison's sermon, and next week I'll be trying to remember what I was trying to say this morning. I'd love to see you there!

I want to start with one of the answers to the podcast's question. What did Paul do?

Paul spent time in prison. He spent time in prison because he made a ruckus, because he did things that disturbed the imperial peace, and because he was willing to leverage his Roman citizenship just as often as his Jewish Pharisee credentials. Anything for the cause! When he was in prison we know that he sang hymns, he prayed, he remembered the people who had helped him and he remembered the people who had not, and he wrote letters.

Those letters have profoundly shaped our faith. And that's not just because of their content, although his words and concepts have been so powerful, so debated, so dangerous, that sometimes we need to spend the whole sermon just trying to understand some of the other possibilities of his words. But even the fact that his letters have been preserved and made into canonical, truth-defining documents has shaped our imaginations.

There's a bit of a tendency for men put in prison to spend their time writing. Oscar Wilde and Martin Luther King Jr both wrote letters from gaol which people read at universities. Some read the writings of Leonard Peltier, Nelson Mandela, or Mumia Abu Jamal. And then there's me - at university I read *La Morte Darthur*, the great epic composition of Arthurian legend, which was written by Sir Thomas Malory while in prison, either for stealing sheep, burning down a nunnery, or supporting the wrong side in a war, depending on who you ask, but apparently locked up in a library tower with a generous paper allocation to keep him busy. In fact, I have four copies of his book on my shelf behind me.

It's easy to imagine these great souls as activists and advocates, prophets and truth-tellers, busy fighting the good fight, and finally able to write these great and urgent works because of their forcible confinement. We might wonder what would have happened to literature if justice had been done. We might note the powerful things that can happen to a movement when its figureheads are imprisoned. In our gospel reading, John the Baptist is put into prison - and Jesus takes up the call, and starts to build a movement.

But prison is the end of John's story. And prison has been the end of the story for so many hundreds of thousands over the decades and centuries. Let's be honest about that. Great theologians, poets, parents and partners were lost to us, because they died in prison.

Prison is hellish. Forced incarceration is a deep violation of human dignity and thriving. There are situations when restricting people of their liberties makes sense. As a matter of safety, certainly. Perhaps even as a form of punishment. But mass incarceration systems are about punishing poverty, weakening communities, especially Black and Indigenous communities, and

providing a labour force. The Prison-Industrial complex makes its own justifications. It sets itself up as the default answer. Refugees are put in detention. People without homes are taken into custody. Political dissidents are removed from society. People suspected of a crime are incarcerated if they can't afford bail. And while they are there, they work for pennies and pay dollars for phone calls and books and peanut butter. This is a business, and they are the product.

Going back as far as you like, you will find people being thrown into prison because they said or thought or did things that were inconvenient to the powerful. They pay for it in the theft of time, of productive years of life, of the chance to learn, of the chance to grow in relationship. They become a disposable class of people - drafted to fight wildfires, dismissed as unworthy of vaccination.

Paul has no shame from his incarceration. He finds a way to rejoice, and I want to take him at his word, but I also want to take the reality of incarceration seriously. Trent suggests that we can try reading this letter twice. The first time, we imagine Paul writing during his two years under house arrest in Rome. Perhaps he is sitting on a terrace one evening, discussing his travels with visitors, writing in thanks to his comrades across the Empire. Then we read it again, imagining Paul in a dungeon, perhaps the prison in Philippi. It's more of a cave than a prison cell, a hole dug in the rock to form the room, with only the hole in the ceiling to receive food and company. Paul is locked away, perhaps alone, or perhaps crowded with strangers. Prisoners don't eat unless they have friends outside who will risk visiting to bring them food and news. Paul's visitors perhaps bribe their way to get for extra time to talk to the man down in the hole. Does that change how we read this letter?

For me, it changes things a lot. Are these the words of a man who is able to teach, to stroll, to dictate letters and ponder his experiences? Or words rising up from a dungeon pit, from a mind left starved of company, facing a likelihood of imminent death, speaking knowing it may be the last time. Are these the words of a man who can see the sun?

Let's read some of his words again, looking at that section in the middle, verses 14-18.

I want to hear your thoughts on that section of scripture. As I read it again, listen and put a few words in the chat about what you hear. What picture do you have of Paul dictating these words? What is most important to him, or to you, in what he is saying? What's your response?

Paul writes:

"most of the siblings, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defence of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my

suffering in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.”

What stands out to you? Put a few words in the chat.

[check the chat]

I really wonder what the divisions are in the Christian world - are people saying that Paul has been imprisoned as a sign of God's disfavour? It certainly seems that there is some factioneering occurring.

I wonder if the Philippians who got this letter would have understood exactly what Paul meant - is he talking about factions in their own community, or in the larger Roman world?

A sort of optimism - everything works together for God's purpose. Paul is quite in line with a particular stream of theological interpretation that sees God's purposes unfolding behind every circumstance, no matter how dire. That can be a stumbling block for us.

My initial reaction to reading this is to roll my eyes. I don't mind admitting that it's all a bit dramatic, especially the assertion that Paul's rivals in the Christian community are specifically doing what they are doing in order to hurt him, personally. I also find it quite satisfying, as well. I don't mind the occasional sassy retort. Sometimes it helps.

Later on in the reading, he is contemplating whether it would be better for him to live or to die. I wonder just how real that possibility is to him. Is it a rhetorical device to emphasise his faith over his life? Or is it a pressing concern and fear? Is he facing the idea of death, or is he facing death? Does he think that these are his last words?

Even though I love the saltiness, the sassiness, of Paul's words here, I have to say I resonate more when I take them at face value. I don't know, but I can imagine that these words can come from a man not expecting a public trial, but a quiet execution. It would be so easy for him to disappear - moved to another cell, or enslaved, or simply killed and disposed of. And part of his concern is not to change that situation, but to ensure that the Gospel of God's Grace will not be lost as a result. He does not want his comrades to lose heart or to begin to listen to the rumours which are circulating, or which he can imagine people are using to explain his misfortune.

Paul's words are an ultimately hopeful response to a situation I shudder to imagine. 'What does it matter?' he asks.

'It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.' (Phil 1:20)

But we are not in the prison cell. We are not facing that uncertain end.

When Paul says that some proclaim Christ out of envy and rivalry, I wonder what he would have to say to some of the loudest and proudest Christians in our world. Does it really not matter, since Christ is proclaimed?

I don't think that I need to offer a litany of the ways that Christians cause harm which they justify by their faith, or which their faith drives them to commit. Pick something that's wrong in our world, and you will find, somewhere in there, a Christian at work, perhaps someone proclaiming Christ out of selfish ambition, insincerely.

Well, I know I've lost at least 20% of you now, who are working out something that's wrong with the world that can't be laid at the feet of Christians! I don't doubt that you'll find something, but I don't think it will bring you much joy.

Climate change. Militarized borders. Misogyny and sexism. Racism and White Supremacy. Those are just titles of concepts. They don't even begin to get into the twisted details of how exactly a person can speak the name of Jesus, and pull a trigger, or tweet a lie, or sign a bill, or call the police.

I believe it was Dorothee Solle who coined the term 'Christofascism', and we've seen, conclusively, that many people who call themselves Christians believe that faithfulness to God means taking power, exerting violent and coercive power over their neighbours.

And I have to say, I think it matters. I don't think I can agree with Paul on this one. Because their actions and desires oppose our witness to Jesus as a healer and a liberator, a person who calls people to leave behind their homes and occupations and become vulnerable. It's not just that we have a difference of opinion, but that by claiming the name Christian while proudly doing harm, they are hiding the nature of Jesus, the full gospel.

I think it matters that those who witness to Christ do so in their whole selves. I think that part of being a Christian is being willing to let go of ways of being that don't belong in drop the things that made sense in the life you had beforehand. Jesus calls the fisherfolk, and they come and follow. But some want to follow and bring along with them their prejudices, their racism, their pride of origin, education, or wealth. They want to bring their sins into their life with Jesus.

And we know that many who are attracted to the way of Jesus, even some who are very gifted, can still be violent, abusive, and opposed to liberation.

Many churches are wrestling with the legacies of men who have contributed to our theological and cultural life, and who have been exposed as abusive, violent, and hypocritical. Who have been protected by church institutions, and been allowed to continue to cause harm. As we come to terms with the complex mix of betrayals and failures and hypocrisies behind such abuses, we also try to deal with the legacies of such individuals and their achievements.

And that's not just something that happens in church. Without trying, I could list a dozen authors, actors and politicians whose legacies have been questioned and re-evaluated as a result of truth becoming known, sometimes due to courageous testimony of survivors. Behind me on my bookshelf with all my King Arthur books is a book by Marion Zimmer Bradley, a woman who did evil things in her life. Profoundly evil things. I don't know if I will ever read this book again. But it's there, on my bookshelf, and in my memory.

It's not just churches which are checking their hymnals and theology texts, puzzling out the relationship between art and life, between author and public.

So there are the people who are unjustly imprisoned, and who write great works of theology. And there are unrepentant people who do great evil in their lives, and are defended as great artists. for their art. What a mess!

To be fair to Paul, he's talking about a different context. But I am troubled by his words: *'what does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.'*

I think it matters. I think it matters for us as the church, because when Jesus calls us to follow, we are enabled to drop the things that don't build God's community. Failing to drop our tools of violence and control is a refusal of that call. It is a pretense. And I think it matters because we are the Body of Christ. When one part of the body hurts, we all hurt. When one part is poisoned, the whole is threatened. When the Body does not function properly, it does not witness to the healing and liberating power of Jesus.

If I know anything about the Liberation that God has brought into the world, it is that some of us need to be liberated from our positions of power. Salvation sometimes looks like letting go of a weapon. It might look like letting go of our treasured memories of songs and stories, and allowing their creators the space to come to God in the humble way that we all ultimately do. Allowing people who have misused their positions of power to be seen only as Children of God, not as authors, activists, theologians or songwriters. After all, God came to gather a family, not a work crew.

I'm thinking, today, about freedom, captivity, and commitment.

Our teaching, our Good News, is that Jesus has come into our lives to free us from the things that keep us from true life. Not just personal sins, failings, and weaknesses. Not just systemic structures of oppression and violence. Not just physical peril and sickness. Not just our broken relationships with one another and with the created world. Not just our fractured image of the Holy One.

And Paul wants us to know about this freedom. It's the core invitation urged from the man sunk in the dungeon-cave, doing whatever he can to transmit the fire of his words back to his beloved friends outside.

Jesus says 'follow me'. And we can choose to respond. No prison can overcome that freedom. And that freedom has to extend to all those who are trapped by the structures that build and maintain prisons, and demand our allegiance, like White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism, and Cis-sexism and Transmisogyny, and forms of Christianity that steal and kill and destroy.

May we hear Jesus, and respond in all truth. Amen.

As we come to a close, I wanted to float an idea to us as a congregation. If you're someone who is concerned specifically about how to reach out to friends and relatives who are captivated by the false promises of QAnon, Donald Trump, or Christofascism, we are thinking of having a special session on Thursday evening to talk over how to respond. If you're interested, please contact Michele or me. It's hard to face this alone. Let's see what freedom the Spirit is stirring. Amen.

Questions

1. The Gospel reading puts together the calling of the first disciples with the account of the arrest of John the Baptist, suggesting that this arrest prompted Jesus to take action. What are the events in your life, positive or negative, that have moved you to take action?
2. This part of the letter to the Philippians gives us a glimpse of Paul's personality - his willingness to be sharp with those he considers rivals or misguided. Does imagining Paul writing this in a dungeon, awaiting a possible death sentence change your experience of these words?
3. Jesus offers us the freedom to choose to follow. Is that freedom a burden, or hard to grasp? What else do we need to live a good life and follow Jesus?