

'No More Cold Iron
Shackles On My Feet'

Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
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based on Acts 16:16-34 and John 17:20-26

I want to go back to the Opening Prayer in this morning's liturgy...at the beginning of our worship Dani greeted you with one of Saint Paul's famous greetings:

The Lord be with you....

You replied: and also with you.

But then we all began to exchange an eloquent series of invitations to join together in unity.

See what a wonderful thing it is, when sisters and brothers can live together in unity.

Though we have many differences, we are members of one body in Christ Jesus. therefore....

If one part of the body hurts, then the rest of the body shares its pain.

If one part of the body is successful, all of the body shares its happiness.

So, here we are...worshipping the Holy God who brings us together in love.

We gather as a body for many different reasons; we gather for different purposes; but at the root of why we gather is because we believe Christ Jesus brings us together...and it is the Holy Spirit that reveals that to us.

Time flies...we all know that. So it is hard to believe this is the last Sunday of Eastertide...which means next week is Pentecost! (when we celebrate the birth of the church)

Easter...our beloved season of celebration and Alleluia!...is almost over.

That means I have to go home and put away the pussy willows and pastel colored Easter eggs for another year... because something better and greater is about to take root.

What is it?

Think about Eastertide as a season of planting...and now the seeds have taken root and sprouting up! What is it?

If we were to distill down the very basic message of Easter...what would it be? Not a doctrine or essay on the resurrection...what do we celebrate in Easter that causes people like the jailer in the story in Acts to IMMEDIATELY...with no hesitation... embrace the Jesus message?

What is so compelling about Paul's words, his prayers...his songs...BAM! You believe?

I have this amazing grandson. Speaking of how time flies...he starts Pre-K next year! I don't remember what lead up to his question, but over lunch he asked, "What does hope mean?"

I had stop and think! How do I explain 'hope' to a not quite 4 year old?

I said, "Hope keeps you from feeling discouraged..."and let it go at that. He seemed satisfied the answer.

Hope keeps you from feeling discouraged...

Some of you know why I'm going to attend a few days of General Conference...and it's to meet with the resident bishop of the North Katanga Annual Conference in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Years ago he challenged a small group of us to help his people learn to start and sustain small businesses...and so we did!

Why small businesses we asked...and not money to build schools or hospitals or orphanages? Because, he said, small businesses give people hope. My people need hope.

...so we are going to go see Bishop Ntambo and thank him because what happened over the last 13 years is that locals in the Congo have been able to start and sustain small business...their children are going to school, they can afford health care, and provide for their families.

But for us? We experienced hope in the church...in what unity of purpose in the body of Christ can accomplish.

When our friends in the DRC felt discouraged, we felt their pain.

I believe the basic, distilled down message of the cross is hope...and, as Saint Paul reminds us, "hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." [Romans 5:5]

Easter tide is about embracing hope...and watching it sprout.

Today's sermon title is from a hymn written in 1929 by Albert E. Brumley.

Brumley said he got the inspiration for the song when he worked picking cotton on his father's farm in Oklahoma in the early 1920's. Feeling imprisoned by the working conditions and trappings of life isolated on a rural farm, Brumley composed the words dreaming of freedom from the hard work and isolation.

Brumley felt trapped...imprisoned...by what he felt he could not change on his own...and he turned that lament into a song called 'I'll Fly Away' with a verse that says:

*"Oh, How glad and happy when we meet, I'll fly away
No more cold iron shackles on my feet, I'll fly away"*

Unfortunately, for this sermon anyway, that verse was eliminated from the version we will sing at the end of service.

It is clear Albert Brumley was writing about freedom...and again, for the purposes of this sermon, it is the freedom one feels once they have embraced the hope in Jesus' message.

Jesus' message is rather than being bound by chains, we are bound together in love; no longer discouraged; and we live by hope.

The tables turned for the jailer in the story of Paul and Silas; once he imagined himself as one who guarded the prisoners suddenly realize he was the one imprisoned...and it was Paul's message of love and hope that freed him.

The jailer was no longer bound by the cold iron shackles on his feet.

One of the commentaries I read this week described the iron shackles or stocks that were used in prisons like the one Paul and Silas were thrown into. They limited movement and were painful to wear.

That makes it hard to imagine Paul and Silas dismissing the pain and discomfort to pray and sing hymns. I can also imagine how comforting that must have been to the other prisoners who sat in dark chambers with cold iron shackles around their feet as well. They certainly must have heard the words of encouragement in Paul and Silas' prayers and hymns.

Let's go back to my question: What was so compelling about Paul's words...BAM!
You believed and you are freed!

Paul's words were spoken out of lived experience of one who suffers greatly for the sake of Christ...so his words carry the weight of truth.

I believe it was similar words Bishop Ntambo shared with us 13 years ago!

They were words that offered hope because Jesus, on Easter, showed us all the way to freedom!

Freedom from being imprisoned by the chains that bind us; freedom from the false gods of selfishness and short-sightedness; ...even hope for freedom from long, dreary days of picking cotton in the hot Oklahoma sun.

...and the only price this freedom asks us to pay is to love God first...and because we love God first by default we love one another in unity.

If one part of the body hurts, then the rest of the body shares its pain.

If one part of the body is successful, all of the body shares its happiness.

Paul's message is one of freedom, unity and hope.

Today that may mean we have:

Freedom from fear of what will happen to us if we expose our vulnerabilities.

Freedom from fear of running out of money.

Freedom from fear of the unknown.

The Jesus message tells us to not be afraid. Why are we not afraid?

Because we know Jesus prays for us!

No more cold iron shackles on our feet...because Jesus prays for us saying:

²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

We live by hope so that Christ's love is in us as we live together in unity.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.