

August 26, 2007
Psalm 130, Luke 13:10-17
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“From Bondage to Freedom”

There are moments in our lives when it seems as though we have fallen into a deep pit and we cannot get out. Luke tells us about a woman who has been suffering for 18 years from a terrible medical condition. She is crippled. Her back is bent double and she cannot stand up straight. According to Luke, Jesus puts it this way: “Satan has bound her for eighteen long years.”

We are bound in so many ways. Our fears keep us captive. In a recent television interview, the noted Savannah celebrity chef, Paula Dean, told Larry King of her twenty year battle with agoraphobia. Her parents died not long after she married; then her marriage became troubled; her husband lost his business; she became a prisoner in her own home. Her illness kept her from taking her children to their activities and participating in their school events. She said that if they didn't walk, they didn't go. When she and her family moved to Savannah, she cried constantly and was unable to get out of bed for two months. She lived in the dark depths of agoraphobia and depression and she could not climb out.

We are afraid to try new things, meet new people or explore a new career. We cannot let go of the past. We nurse some old wound and see everything and everybody through the lens of that trauma. We are ashamed of something we have done. Even though it seems that others have forgiven us, we cannot forgive ourselves. We cannot move on. Life becomes little more than a litany of regrets and “what ifs.” We are bound by a mental illness, a foolish mistake or by some chronic medical condition that keeps us in its grip. We understand the cry of the psalmist:

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice!”

Who has not known some moment when these words have surged up from the darkest places in life? One scholar has written, “The depths from which the psalmist cries are the deep, dark waters, an image that is capable of referring to various experiences: the nearness and threat of death, a spiritual abyss into which the mind and heart have fallen, a terrible overwhelming fear, the hostility and dangers or enemies and foes.” (p.139, *Interpreting the Psalms*, Patrick D. Miller, Jr.)

The psalmist is pleading with the Lord for deliverance, mercy and forgiveness. Underneath whatever particular trouble the psalmist is facing, there is a profound recognition of separation from God. The psalmist recognizes his own sinfulness and his need for God. God is righteous. Before God, no sinner can stand. His sin has separated him from God and brought his life down into the pit. He does not have the power to get himself out of his desperate situation.

One of the great gifts of Alcoholics Anonymous and similar groups is their recognition that we cannot save ourselves. Some problems are bigger than our capacity to handle alone. By ourselves, we cannot undo, overcome or mend the consequences of our actions; only a higher power can set us free. AA understands what we so often forget. We think we have the power to fix ourselves if we just try harder; we think we can repair our relationships by buying our way out; we think we can undo the harm we have done if we just promise to be different. Only God can lead us to forgiveness – to accept God's forgiveness, to experience the forgiveness of others and to forgive ourselves the wrong we have done. In our prayer of confession this morning we hear the reality of our bondage to sin: “Our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo; So we cry: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!”

The psalmist knows the character of God. God is righteous, yes! God is also described as forgiving, full of steadfast love and having the power to redeem. There is no contradiction in the character of God. We misunderstand the righteousness of God. We think that what God demands is perfection before he will love and accept us. What God demands is our faith

and our repentance. God's righteousness is God's mercy. To understand this mystery we simply look at the person of Jesus who perfectly embodies both God's justice and God's mercy. In Jesus, God comes to us in our brokenness, pain, sin and hopelessness.

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus comes to a synagogue to teach on the Sabbath when he encounters the woman who is crippled and bent double. Jesus sees her physical bondage and sets her free from her condition. Standing up straight for the first time in 18 years, she begins to praise God. Not everyone welcomes this act of mercy and healing. The leader of the synagogue is alarmed at what Jesus has done. He sees this act of mercy as an affront to the law and to the righteousness of God. To heal is to do work; such work is forbidden on the Sabbath. Like the psalmist, Jesus shatters this distinction between God's righteous demands and God's merciful action. As the psalmist says, "With the Lord is steadfast love and great power to redeem!" God is glorified whenever people are set free from the bondage of pain, sin, trouble and death. The people rejoice in the powerful work and word of Jesus. What is the purpose of the Sabbath? The Sabbath is God's gift for the spiritual and physical restoration of God's people and for the praise of God. The healing of the woman who has been held captive in a twisted body for so many years is a sign of God's action to redeem the people from all their dark troubles and deep sins! On the Sabbath, the righteousness and mercy of God are revealed.

The psalmist knows the character of God. In the midst of his trouble, he waits for God to come to set him free. He is like a guard who keeps watch on the city wall, waiting for the morning light to come and the dangerous night to be over. He is like a mother who sits up all night with a sick child, waiting for the morning to come, the crisis to pass and the child to fall into a peaceful sleep at last. He is like you and me when we keep the embers of hope glowing deep in our hearts as we wait for a soldier to come home or a troubled friend to find peace. The psalmist waits with absolute confidence that God will come and set him free. The psalmist believes the promises of God. He puts his trust in the word of God. Maybe the woman who has been bent double for so many years goes to the Synagogue because that is where the Spirit of God rekindles the fire of hope in her heart. It is the place where she will hear the promises of God to redeem the people. Her hope is in the Lord. The Lord comes to her and sets her free.

Some years ago, a young man just out of college came to see me. Outwardly, you would think he had everything in the world going for him. Inwardly, his life was in turmoil. No matter what he did or tried to accomplish, another part of him would mock his own efforts and tear down the value of what he did. He ridiculed himself. He was hard on himself and unforgiving. He was struggling to know who he was and what he valued. Underneath all the manifestations of his struggle, he was searching for love and acceptance. I do not think he could find it, because he did not know that he was loved. He was in a dark pit of self-loathing and he could not climb out. His prayer became, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!"

He waited. He struggled with the demons of perfectionism, self-contempt and fear. Then, bit by bit, the Lord came. You might say he quit the struggle and surrendered himself to God; he found the peace he had never known. He discovered he was forgiven and loved. He was set free from his bondage and able to love himself. He found that with the Lord there is forgiveness, steadfast love and great power to redeem.

When you find yourself in the pit and there is no way out, may your cry come unto the Lord who merciful, loving and ready to redeem.