

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

2nd Sunday of Advent
Year B

Duane M. Harris

December 6, 2015

Text: Galatians 5:13-15

Title: "Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam: Christ Came to Set Us Free"

During the second half of my senior year of high school I was struggling. I was not in a good place. My life was active and full. I worked part-time at JC Penney's, had a full load at school and grades were solid, had a girlfriend I met in chemistry class, was captain of the wrestling team and was undefeated at the time. All the signs from the outside looking in appeared to be fine, like I was a college bound young man with a bright future. But then I contracted Mononucleosis. I can still hear my mother's voice, "You're going to get sick", as I kept trying to lose weight for wrestling. Sure enough.... I missed school as a result, slept a lot, and just felt unwell. The prayer of Psalm 88 spoke for my condition at the time:

¹ O LORD, God of my salvation,...
incline your ear to my cry.
³ For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.
⁴ I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
⁵ like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.
⁶ You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.

I was not in a good place. Told my girlfriend at the time we needed a break but that meant it was over, went back to try to wrestle again but it just didn't work and the undefeated season was over. I never wrestled another match. I was just stuck in so many ways, felt imprisoned.

Life is a journey, not a destination and along the way we find ourselves in places we may not want to be, feeling imprisoned by one thing or another. Maybe it's feeling undervalued in a relationship or at work or school. Maybe it's something else, but most people know what it's like to feel imprisoned by something, whether it's our own fears or illness or a dead end job or the brokenness sometimes experienced in families. We know what it means to be tied up in some kind of brokenness. And sometimes, though it doesn't always seem to make sense with all the happy songs heard over radio and store speakers, the bedlam of the holidays is a prime time for such feelings to appear.

The Apostle Paul offers the good news of God when he writes his letter to the congregation in Galatia.

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

The yoke of slavery Paul refers to is the law. And the congregation he established and left to start another elsewhere was being taught by subsequent leaders that Christ did not offer complete amnesty from obeying the religious laws, that the religious laws were still required if they were to be aligned with God. Those leaders were called Judaizers by scholars as a result of their attempts to abolish Paul's teaching by insisting that people are not justified with God by faith in Christ alone but rather by obedience to the law. In other words, the Judaizers were insisting that people had to earn God's favor through strict observance of the laws, something Paul was preaching against when he wrote that Christ has come to set us free from the law. God's favor is a gift we have not earned and cannot earn because God gives it freely. Divine love is not a payment for good behavior. Divine Love is a generous gift of grace that God gives you and me and all people. You can't earn it. Jesus' birth was freely given.

Yet, that gift isn't to be squandered. It isn't a gift to be used to cause harm. Paul writes:

¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. Love drives freedom to serve, not just keep or pamper oneself. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:13-14)

The gift God gives us--this love Christ has come to express--by its very nature is to be shared. Paul underlines what Jesus confirmed: "the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" With this love there is no cause for pride. I can't claim I am more valuable than you are, better than you are, nor can you claim superiority over me. You are valued because you are a gift of God, because you are loved by God. Period. In that we are all free.

I don't remember the context of the conversation now but the last time I was in the seminar on family emotional processes in Lombard, IL, I was talking with an Episcopal priest

from Detroit. She suggested I read a book written by Dr. Donna Hicks, entitled Dignity. I started reading it last week. Dr. Hicks according to her own telling is “a hick from the sticks”, a country girl of Polish ancestry who found herself studying at Harvard University totally out of her element and eventually leading conflict resolution sessions between warring parties in countries like Israel-Palestine, Northern Ireland, Cambodia. In her work she discovered that invariably, when the onion-like layers of conflict were peeled away, in every case those involved in the conflict had at some point had their dignity violated. Dignity, she says, is the notion “...that all human beings are imbued with value and worth...” (p.4) “Dignity is a human phenomenon. Our desire for it is our highest common denominator. We all want it, seek it, and respond in the same way when others violate it. No one wants to be harmed, and we have powerful self-preservation reactions to violations [of our dignity].” (p. 17).

She goes on to observe that when we have suffered some kind of indignity that “...We are not free to enjoy ourselves or to extend ourselves to our families and other significant people in our lives if we are too busy protecting ourselves and licking our wounds to enjoy being with them. Suffering puts our lives on hold.” (p. 20)

In other words, we can be imprisoned by wounds we have suffered to our dignity. When someone violates our sense of value and worth—whether intentional or not, it hurts us and can leave us unable to move on with close relationships.

Which brings me back to Paul who shared the good news that we are valued and of inestimable worth in God’s eyes because Christ has come to set us free. That is not to say that our relationships with others from whom we have suffered some harm are easily or automatically healed and reconciled. But rather to echo Paul’s conviction that Christ’s coming gives life and freedom and joy knowing that in spite of what has happened to us, God values you and me and all. In spite of indignities we might have suffered, in spite of the ways in which we have felt less than valued by someone, in spite of the experiences of feeling imprisoned by something or someone that is not how God wants it. Christ was born to set us free.

In that dark period of my senior year in high school, I went to church one Sunday. Church has been a major part of my life from the time I was born. Our mother saw to that. So as I found myself in the psalmist pit, I went, listened to the sermon and felt drawn to hang around and try to talk with our pastor. Everyone else had left the church and he was busy in his study putting things away. I hung in the doorway, chatting. He asked me how I was doing, knowing I’d been home and sick. I said, “Okay....physically.” I said, “Do you have time to talk?” He had another commitment but said we could set up another time later in the afternoon.

I went to his home at 2:30 that afternoon and spent time sharing my story. He listened and offered the comfort and grace of God through his wisdom, his words of love and care, and I found my dignity being restored. I felt valued, of worth. And when we prayed together at the end of our time, I felt free again, joy filled again, almost as if I was able to fly. Christ had come to set me free from the burdens that weighed heavy on my soul.

Now that didn’t mean everything was reconciled. I didn’t get the girlfriend back or the wrestling season back but I did have my dignity and that made all the difference. It gave me the courage to later enter another relationship with Lynn who became my life long partner. And it gave me the strength to walk the path to ordained ministry by God’s grace. God gave me the gift of grace and by that grace I was set free to love.

So how is your dignity? Are you feeling of worth, valued as a human being created by God? Be mindful that in the bedlam of this season in which we seek the peace of Bethlehem in which Jesus was born, we can find ourselves too busy or preoccupied or news worn to care for our own souls or allow Christ to do so. Don't forget that the freedom offered in Christ is given out of a profound love for you and it is a love that is not designed to be kept to ourselves, for our own pleasure alone, but a love to be passed around. It is—as is appropriate for this season—a gift to be given away even as we receive it ourselves. And if you find--as so many do--that this season takes you to places you'd rather not be physically or otherwise, maybe you would find the longest night service the UM churches in our area share together helpful to you. It's being held at Fremont Ave. UMC on Monday, December 21 at 7 p.m. and is designed for those who find the season less than happy and joyful. Take whatever steps you can or think wise in order to recover your God-given dignity.

Because the truth is that we all have value and worth in God's eyes which is why Jesus has come. And when we know this, when we experience it in the depths of our souls, we really are free, free from whatever imprisons us and free to pass on the gift that has been given to us. As the old hymn has it:

The world behind me, the cross before me.
no turning back, no turning back.