

“PRISON MINISTRY?” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul Untied Church of Christ, Taylor, Michigan, May 3, 2020

Congregation, life's strange. In all my years of working on the Lord's behalf, I have contemplated serving him in many different places and in many different ways. Yet I never imagined that I might end up doing prison ministry which is what I seem to be doing right now. What do I mean? Well, as I talk to folks more of them than you might guess lament about now living as if in prison. The “Stay Safe, Shelter in Place” mandate—all in response to the pandemic—has left many feeling as if they are incarcerated, hemmed in in by the four walls of their own homes. It has spurred incredible, gun-toting protests at the Michigan State Capitol and without any social distancing stand-offs with the Capitol police charged with maintaining everyone's security and safety.

I do understand the claustrophobia. To put it mildly, my own existence is more than a bit constrained right now too. However, I doubt that anyone's home is as bleak as the federal penitentiary out in Milan, Michigan or the Wayne County Jail downtown. What all this may be revealing is our enormous difficulty as a people in simple standing still as our broader social lives and economy go into necessary hibernation.

As Americans we seem to be addicted to motion and commotion. Oh, it's great to get about—to go places. Our own City of Detroit put the nation on wheels more than a century ago. But there's something to be said for standing still, particularly when there's a lurking pandemic outside our door and motion and travel puts ourselves and others in hazard's way. Literally, our itch to go and do could be the death of someone else, especially the vulnerable or the essential workers and health care professionals who are doing their best to help us get through this time. Do we grasp that? Do we care?

Why are down-time and solitude so difficult for so many? Are we afraid of facing ourselves? Or perhaps hearing someone else speak to us in our enforced pause? I “get” that people want to get up and go--especially to work. In some cases there is huge anxiety about paying bills and keeping a job at all. But what's happening is first and foremost a health crisis, not a permanent economic crisis. If our government properly administers and distributes to ordinary people the funds that Congress has allocated, a lot of economic pain and dislocation can be considerably diminished. And in time, as this health crisis slowly but eventually abates, the economy will emerge from hibernation and a lot of pent-up demand will fuel recovery. Things may not be same. Yet they can be good again. In the meantime, we all need to be as patient and forbearing as possible. This crazy time could even help us restore some sanity and good sense to our lives.

Remember God's thunderous commandment from the Old Testament Book of Psalms?

Be still and know that I am God! (Psalms 46:10) It's still true that God is most likely to be heard in our lives when we give him some still time like now to get a word in edgewise. We might all do better to stop chafing at the bit and stressing ourselves out about what we can't do, while running away from ourselves and God. Our downtime can really be an uptime with God and for ourselves. What first presents itself as an obstacle can be the occasion of rich opportunity. Yes, being an outward prisoner of circumstances can prove to be a time of spiritual liberation and discovery for us. It's all a matter of faith and outlook. Do we trust the Lord to see us through this time? Do we not have confidence in the resources of heart and mind that God has implanted in us from birth?

A couple of weeks back, I encouraged us all to "look for the blessing." Today, I go further, inviting you to *count* your blessings. And while you're at it, why not take a fearless moral inventory of your life as it stands? Leading up to these days, have your values and priorities been right—or skewed? How true and faithful have you been to the way of the Christ whom you profess? How might that be impacting your way of looking at things right now? Misplaced or distorted values, fed by selfishness, often have a way of fomenting our own greater frustration, discontent, and unhappiness.

Folks, I feel sorry for all those truculent people brandishing AK-47s in the rotunda of our state capitol. They're out to intimidate everyone else because they are running so scared. I can't exactly read their hearts and minds. But their anger and hatred suggests a huge faith deficit.

In our morning lesson from the Gospel according to John, we have Jesus' own telling, prophetic words that we all need to hear and heed right now. It is sin and selfishness, he declares, that enslave us. (*John 8:34*) Conversely, "If [we] hold to [his] teaching, [we] are [his] disciples." And "then [we] will know the truth, and the truth will set [us] free." (*John 8:31-32*) Being faithful to Jesus Christ in spirit and in deed can empower us to break out of a prison mindset.

Although I don't doubt it actually happened just as the Apostles Creed says it did, I count it importantly metaphorical that this teaching of the early church describes Jesus—himself freed from death--descending into hell after his crucifixion and before his resurrection to liberate Satan's prisoners. Likewise, the Book of Acts of the Apostles gives us separate accounts of jail breaks by both Peter and Paul. According to the Book of Acts the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of Christ, miraculously opens the prison gates in each instance, allowing Peter and Paul to walk free, unmolested by guards without any violent contest on their own part. (*Acts 5:10-25; 12:1-19; 16:16-40*) Check it out.

Confusing as it may at first sound to our own ears, there are many other Christians in history who have testified through deed or spirit that they never felt so free as when they were in prison—or despite prison. Did you happen to take notice of the words from our Christian hymn sung today? The first two verses from “Faith of Our Fathers” are eloquent and very revealing. The first verse goes: “Faith of our fathers, living still, *in spite of dungeon, fire and sword*; oh, how our hearts beat high with joy when-e’er we hear that glorious word! Faith of our Fathers, holy faith, we will be true to thee till death!” The hymn’s second verse is no less relevant and compelling: “The martyrs *bound in prison chains were still in heart and conscience free*, and bless’d would be their children’s fate, if they, like them, should live for thee! Faith of the martyrs, holy faith, we will be true to thee till death!” If we are living for Christ and know it, we don’t have to be lonely even when we are alone. We don’t have to feel trapped even when circumstances prevent or inhibit us from going places as we might like.

Few people have thought more about physical prisons, versus prisons of the spirit, than the late Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn. He spent more than a decade in one of Stalin’s Siberian prison camps. He then devoted the rest of his life to writing about his experience through both fictional novels and a series of long documentary works which he entitled *Gulag Archipelago*. At one point later in life, years after he was freed from the Soviet prison camp, Solzhenitsyn wrote: “Bless you prison, bless you for being in my life. For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul.”

I don’t cite the apostles, recite the words of our morning hymn, or quote Alexander Solzhenitsyn to glorify prison or to glamorize our own social isolation as we “shelter in” at home for this pandemic. Yet I do want to underscore that this time of our own constraints can be a teaching, growing, deepening time for us all—morally and spiritually. It’s up to us to use it well. Opening ourselves faithfully to God and his guidance will most certainly help. Through God’s grace, restrictions on customary ways of doing things can be a goad to tapping our God-given creativity and discovering new, even exciting paths for the future.

Did you know that the Apostle Paul, who lends his name to our church, wrote two of his most stirring epistles—his Letters to Timothy—while spending time in a Roman jail? (*1 and 2 Timothy*) And the English mathematician, physicist, and theologian Isaac Newton discovered gravity under an apple tree in 1655 when an outbreak of the Great Plague in London town and elsewhere across England shuttered Cambridge University where he was a student and forced him to chill out on his family farm for a year or more.

Ironically, in 1942 the French writer Albert Camus wrote much of his world-famous novel entitled *The Plague* about a plague while hunkering down and hiding out from Nazi authorities in the small southern French town of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. From this experience and others, Camus later wrote: “I realized then that a man who had lived only one day could easily live for a hundred years in prison. He would have enough memories to keep him from being bored.”

The marvelously energetic 20th century artist Henri Matisse would have undoubtedly agreed. Though he was never incarcerated, he too had to lie low for a long time when a serious illness left him bed-ridden. Unable to get up and paint as he loved to do, Matisse asked that scissors and paper be brought to his bedside. He began cutting and cutting and cutting—all kinds of shapes, but especially the human form. Ultimately, this opened up a whole new phase of Matisse’s artistic career which he continued with even when he was well again. These cuts-out from his “imprisonment” days in bed are now displayed in museums around the world. Matisse also found his cuts-outs could turn a double profit. He ended up selling to his enthusiastic patrons both the cut-out forms, which he mounted, often as collages, and the remaining cut-up paper that might have been discarded, which offered a reverse image. Imagine that!

Congregation, we need to be more faithful and creative too. This can be a time to stop and smell the roses. Or even plant some, now that at least several restrictions on outside activities have been lifted. Get your garden and household in order. Take a neighborhood hike while honoring social distancing, or pick up that exercise routine you’ve too long deferred. Take some time to read your Bible—as you’ve always wanted to do. Relish this opportunity to devote more time to immediate family, talking with your kids, helping them with their online schoolwork, and teaching them practical household skills that will help them for a lifetime. Reach out also by letter or phone to those grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins that you haven’t talked with for a long, long time. Likewise, dear grandparents, remember your grandkids with a card and a message. They are likely to appreciate and cherish what you share in these moments more than ever. Meanwhile, let’s none of us forget God!

In this time of my own solitude I still come to the office every day, walking the dozen yards from the parsonage next door. Yet, rather than driving around town I used to do, I pick up the telephone and call. Friends, I do miss meeting up with you face-to-face. However, I now have time and opportunity for more conversations across the breadth of our congregation than I have ever had before. I am trying to use this opportunity well—for us and for God.

There are other blessings too. My wife Eileen and I are sharing more meals together than ever. Also, for the first time in our 38 years of married life, Eileen, who is working from home, is making more dinners than I do. Turns out, she's a pretty good cook!

Additionally, late at night I enjoy moments of prayer and contemplation, as well as the consolation of history. My mother and father raised me to look to history for insight—both Biblical history and the stories of men and women from more recent generations. Recently, in the midst of our own “war” against the coronavirus, I have found myself watching brief YouTube-videos from the Second World War in which my dad fought as a soldier. He landed as part of the American D-Day invasion of Normandy and never expected to get off Omaha Beach alive. When I watch these wartime videos and see the death and devastation that he and millions of others experienced in that terrible period, I am humbled. Our present pandemic is bad—very bad. Yet it doesn't compare to the carnage and suffering that our parents and grandparents witnessed and experienced in their day. They got through that awful time. We will get through this awful time. And in a more humane and gracious way if we trust God to help lead us through the worst of it and we live in the loving, caring ways his son and our savior, Jesus, has called us to embrace.

In the midst of watching those World War II videos, there was a sidebar pop-up that caught my attention. It offered a song by a British singer of that same era who is still alive at age 103. Her name is Vera Lynn. Her song is aptly entitled, “When the Lights Go On Again All Over the World.” Sung in the dark depths of wartime, Vera Lynn's dulcet anthem dreams of that glad coming day when neither her native Britain, nor the rest of the world, will have to endure protective “blackouts.” Only rain and snow—not bombs—will fall from the sky, and “a kiss won't mean good-bye” but hello to love. Yes, congregation, it's a little schmaltzy, as you might find first-hand if you search for Vera Lynn's on YouTube or simply remember it from days gone by. But the sentiments that Vera Lynn shares are haunting and something that we can appreciate more than ever in this time of pandemic when we can all use some promise of an eventual return to a semblance of normality.

When “normal” returns, I hope that we are all better people for it. What is happening is a test of our own moral character. It's also a challenge to our spiritual fiber and faith. May God not find us wanting in either department!

Let me close this day with the words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah—words that Jesus also recited to those gathered to hear him read from the synagogue scrolls in his

native town of Nazareth. (*Luke 4:14-20*) They are words of proclamation on God's behalf intended to comfort and strengthen, filling us with hope.

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has appointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives, and release from darkness the imprisoned,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...
to comfort all who mourn and provide for those in grief in Zion,
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of joy instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor...” (*Isaiah 61:1-3*)

Dear congregation, may our daily lives, grounded in our Christian faith, be “oaks of righteousness.” By the positive hope with which we meet fear and despair and the kindness and compassion with which we answer what is mean and rude, let us each be “a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.” **Amen.**