

*“ . . . Nor Iron Bars a Cage ”*

The sixteenth-century English cavalier poet, Richard Lovelace, wrote from prison, “*Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage; Minds innocent and quiet take That for an hermitage . . .*” He was writing to his beloved, named Althea, and was essentially communicating that, as long as he had her to think about, he would always be free.

You may recall that, almost a decade ago, three women in Cleveland were imprisoned and held as sexual slaves in a house on Seymour Avenue. Michelle Knight, Gina DeJesus, and Amanda Berry may have good reason to disagree with the poet’s assessment. They were confined by locked doors, by chains in the basement, and by fear and intimidation. For nearly a decade, these three survived and we may never learn the full extent of what that required of them.

A seamstress who survived 17 days before being rescued from the collapsed garment factory building where she worked was panicked, dehydrated and suffering from insomnia as she recovered in a Bangladesh hospital. Poet Lovelace stands corrected; there are many forms of imprisonment that do not require stone walls or iron bars, and do a very effective job of keeping people inside.

Few of us have had the experience of a prison or jail cell. I have come close.

In 1967, I had an auto accident on my way to college in Ft. Wayne when I slid off the off-ramp from I-75 to get onto US 30 in Lima and wrapped my car around a girded sign post. I was charged with “driving in excess of limiting conditions” and taken to the Lima police station. I was not committed to a cell, was given a chance to call my parents, who contacted a family friend, Pastor Paul Single, who served a church in Lima; he arrange my bail.

In 1987, I was threatened with a cell by a judge in Painesville when I refused on the witness stand to answer a question about what a person I had counseled revealed to me. In chambers, I had to educate that judge

that the confessional rules did not apply just to Roman Catholic priests; I had to do so very circumspectly, since I was angry at his lack of knowledge and, had I let my feelings be made evident, I might have enjoyed a Contempt of Court citation — it would have been appropriate because I was contemptuous of this man’s stupidity.

As a high-school youth, I would accompanied my pastor to Walpole State Prison in Massachusetts to serve as an acolyte when he led worship there. To get to the chapel, we had to walk through the cell block — a passage that meant being paraded past inmates who I was sure were looking on me a fresh meat (it is a feeling that made me very happy that there were irons bars and stone walls between them and me).

And I have been inside the visitor’s rooms of several penal institutions, from which you do get a view of the inside — a view that has convinced me that I never want to spend any time there.

In today’s first lesson, we read about Paul, Silas and Luke being tossed into prison. Our reaction is one of distaste, since the story makes it plain that the only charges that should have been leveled, should have been leveled against those who beat the two of them. Paul had done the caring act of freeing a young slave girl from her *“spirit of divination.”* Not only was she thus possessed, her master was using this possession as a way to make money off her misery. But once Paul freed her, this man recognized that his “cash cow” had been shut down, so he dragged Paul and the others into the main marketplace, made a general accusation that they were troublemakers, and they were beaten and jailed. It puts me in mind of the accusations made against Jesus before Pilate, *“If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.”* [John 18:30] (Wow, that’s specific!) And the result is essentially the same: a nebulous accusation results in a most exact sentence.

But God made it plain that His justice and that meted out by human authorities were of two very differing natures. Jesus, condemned to death, did not stay dead. Paul and Silas and the others (we are not told how many are included in the plural “we”) were locked in and chained up; the locks sprang open and the chains fell off. How they dealt with both the

imprisonment and their release become instructive for how we are to live.

I don't know if any of us here have been incarcerated because of violations of the penal code, but many of us have the experience of imprisonments of our own making. Very often in life, we experience events that lead us to make what is called an "inner vow." These often start out with a phrase like *"I'll never . . ."* That may lead to some behavior that you pledge to yourself. *"I'll never let myself get used like that again."* *"I'm done with that organization."* *"I'll never give them my business again."* *"I won't ever talk to her again!"*

Often these inner vows are really just emotive ejaculations — a way to vent our anger, our hurt, our frustration. This can be healthy; it is far better to vent than to hold in such negative feelings (more on that in a moment). We make the vow inwardly, but the next day (or three weeks or three months later), we forget about having made it, or we repent of the decision. Not talking to your sister forever begins to pale when compared to the fact that she mailed you the invitation a day later than she did to your other siblings. Since that business you vowed never to use again is the only business that is near you that can supply the items you need, you do shop there again when you really need that item.

When we make an inner vow and then hold on to it (maybe even repeating it over a long period of time) that inner vow becomes what is called a "bitter root judgment." Inner vows are most commonly based upon judgments which we make about another person. Here's the real problem: When we vow not to do something, we will end up doing it most of the time. The vow often lies dormant for a number of years before it kicks into action, at which point it is a bitter *root* judgment buried beneath our consciousness.

Inner vows put us on a track we can't remove. It is the deepest level of decision. We grow up and often forget about these vows. But the vow is still in operation, directing our life course. These vows often resist and oppose the will of God for us. Inner vows most often involve things like relationships, money, pain . . . and God. Inner vows bind us to the strength and energy of the flesh to try to keep them. Therefore, they keep

us from tapping into the power of God to walk in the Spirit.

How should we handle these kinds of self-imposed imprisonments? We get insight from today's First Lesson. Imprisoned well into the night, ***“Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God . . .”*** Imagine that! Locked in the innermost recesses of this jail, in what had to be pitch blackness, they were singing and praying. The praying part we get; who wouldn't pray in such a situation to have that situation no longer be a situation? But singing? Who sings when shackled to a wall?

That is precisely the point! Because you do not want to sing, that's the very moment when you must sing. What this all means is that, in those moments of life when people, or events, or life itself seems to be treating us disdainfully, we must bring all that before the Lord.

I said earlier that *“it is far better to vent than to hold in such negative feelings.”* But it is crucial that we understand how and to whom to vent such negative emotions. If someone has hurt us, mistreated us, broken trust, lied to us — our very human and very sinful reaction is to lash back and to let them know in no uncertain terms how we have been hurt (we often erroneously conclude that this venting will hurt them back). Venting against the person who has wronged you only perpetuates the sin and may even escalate the problem (as it certainly does the tone in the room).

So how do we vent? Listen to the Psalmists: ***“Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the grave.”*** [Psalm 55:15] ***“O God, break the teeth in their mouths.”*** [Psalm 58:6] ***“May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.”*** [Psalm 69:28] ***“May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow.”*** [Psalm 109:9] ***“How blessed will be the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.”*** [Psalm 137:9]

Pretty nasty stuff! These are all examples of what are called Imprecatory Psalms. They are not seeking personal vendettas from God on their enemies. The psalmist in each case is venting where venting needs to take place: before the Lord — this is called a lament. If you read through these psalms you will discover in every case that they wind up something like

this: ***“I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving. For the Lord hears the needy, and does not despise his own that are in bonds. Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them.”*** [Psalm 69:30, 33-34]

At the end of lament comes doxology. That’s how it works. Why does it work? The psalmist told us: ***“... the Lord hears the needy, and does not despise his own that are in bonds.”***

Let me dwell on that word “despise” for just a moment. We have turned that word to mean something worse than hatred: *“I don’t just hate her, I loathe, no! I despise her!”* That is not what despise means; it means to have little or no thought for, to be purposefully and pointedly unconcerned about someone; to regard that person as not worth wasting your time or energy on him or her. It is more evil than hatred; at least with hatred you acknowledge the person as a person. Despising has little or no regard for the person.

God never thinks little or negligently about us — His concern for us is always intense. There is nothing in our lives about which God is unconcerned or disinterested. Because God is interested in everything, He is present in every moment (we often fail to recognize Him there, especially when we are enraged and our sight is so woefully distorted . . . when you’re seeing red, you don’t see much else).

He feels with us; He loves us; and in His love He says, in effect, *“Let it out! Let it out! I can listen to you all day long, if that’s what it takes.”* When we let out the anger, the hurt, the pain, the disappointment — when we lament — it’s like letting the air out of the balloon; all that pent-up emotion dissipates, and we are freed from it.

In the Formational Prayer Seminars run at Healing Care Ministries every January and June, one of the experientials involves this: Participants are instructed to take a walk and to ask God what sin, what dysfunctional behavior, is most in the way of their ongoing journey to wholeness. As God reveals that sin, they are asked then to look for a symbol, a tangible object, that would represent that sin.

One woman had not been generally inclined to join in these activities in small group and was somewhat belligerent in response to these instructions. But she begrudgingly went on the walk, and reported this: *“I said, ‘Okay God, what is this sin I’m supposed to focus on?’ and almost immediately I heard God say, ‘It’s your unforgiving manner.’ And I said, ‘And is there a symbol that I need to bring back?’ And the Lord told me to look down, and there on the ground was a piece of sting about six inches long. I asked, ‘What kind of symbol is that?’ The Lord said, ‘Pick it up.’ I reached for the string, and as I pulled on it, it just kept coming up — until it was almost five feet long. Only a little showed on the surface; the rest was all buried underground.”* Once she saw the enormity of her lack of forgiveness, and how it had hardened her in bitter root judgments, she repented and began the journey to peace and wholeness.

Paul and Silas and the rest were released from their imprisonment. The miraculous earthquake that shook open the locks and broke apart the chains was apparently not intended for their release; that was for the release of the their jailer. Their release came . . . well here’s how Luke recorded it: *“When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, ‘Let those men go.’ And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, ‘The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace.’ But Paul replied, ‘They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.’ The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. After leaving the prison they went to Lydia’s home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.”* [Acts 16:35-40]

Praying and singing in jail . . . what a dumb thing to do! Except when it isn’t. Holding on to inner vows and bitter root judgments seems to make us feel justified and righteously angry . . . except it isn’t justified and it has no righteousness attached to it. It is a prison of our own design and

making. It may well be that stone walls and iron bars cannot imprison us; but all too often we do it to ourselves.

Christ Jesus set you free. That is both a declaration and a benediction. By His death and resurrection, Christ has set you free from every form of bondage sin induces. I therefore can bless you in the prisons you have designed and manufactured in your heart: “*Christ Jesus set you free! Be free!*”

Amen.