

August 9, 2009 Prisons & Prisms

A number of years ago, a well-known Presbyterian preacher and author by the name of Bruce Larson spoke during a spiritual retreat at St. Luke's, and talked about the Bible passage we have for this morning; what he said in telling that story has stayed with me all these years. The Bible story is that of a man who had been paralyzed for 38 years, and who went each day to lie beside the pool of Bethesda near one of the gates of the city of Jerusalem. He and the others there believed that when the waters of the pool stirred each day, the first person to enter the water would be healed of whatever infirmity he or she suffered.

Larson had an interesting "take" on the man who'd been there 38 years, commenting on the question Jesus asked the man: "Do you want to be healed?" If we stop to think about it, that's a pretty on-target question. After all, you'd think that after all those years, the guy would have come up with some idea, some contraption that would propel him into the water before anyone else, if, indeed, he wanted to get well. But no, for 38 years, he kept repeating the same thing day after day after day—going to the pool, waiting for the water to move, and watching someone else get into the pool first.

The way Larson described the guy made it apparent then, and it was once again recently as I read and studied this passage in preparation for today, that this story is not so much one about Jesus literally healing the guy, or about the uproar that came about because of the healing and carrying of the bedroll, which was considered to be forbidden work on the Sabbath. Rather this story has a deeper metaphorical meaning: perhaps the guy wasn't so much paralyzed physically as he was stuck, trapped in a no-win, going nowhere situation. He was in a rut, caught in a routine, blaming others. Using today's imagery, it was like he was in prison—confined and lacking in any ability to alter or remedy his situation.

I suspect some of us can relate to this guy's dilemma, because we, too, have sometimes found ourselves stuck, virtually paralyzed, unable to move, unable to act, unable to take a step. We feel helpless, maybe hopeless, and in any number of ways.

Someone has said that we get imprisoned by our obsessions, compulsions,

dependencies and addictions, and I suspect that's accurate—at least in some cases. We may believe that we're trapped in a relationship that's going nowhere, or in a dead-end job, and yet find ourselves reluctant to move away from where we are, typically out of fear. Being afraid is probably one of the major reasons some of us see ourselves as stuck, trapped, with no way out.

Sometimes it's not that definite, but it's more like we just allow ourselves to be captured by the "same old, same old." Ted Dreier, author of *Take Your Life Off Hold*, gave an analogy of what it was like for him when he found himself totally stuck in a rut. Sharing that he grew up as a Kansas farm boy, he talked about the cows on the farm and how intrigued he was by how they explored new fenced-in pastures. He said that each spring, his Dad would turn the cows out to graze in new, green wheat pastures. To keep them from roaming over the whole field at once, he would put up some temporary electric fence. It didn't take long for the cows to figure out where the fence was, because some of the more adventurous cattle would venture out and get an unexpected electric shock, and from that time on, they would stop when they got to where the fence was. Any observer could tell, too, because the grass inside the pasture was cropped very short, while outside it was lush and green. Once that part of the pasture had been sufficiently grazed, his Dad would move the fence out farther. Nonetheless when the cows came out, they would only go as far as where the fence had previously been located. They had tried to push their luck once, gotten shocked, and had determined that they didn't want that again. Now they played it safe, allowing their fear to keep them from the greener pastures.

It's possible that you and I get imprisoned by our fears, just like those cows, but it's even more likely that we just get caught in our same old habits and routines. Paula D'Arcy, in her book *The Gift of the Red Bird*, described her own situation with these words: "I see how I am lured by the security and comfort of a routine. The physical routine of how I do things and get places, but equally important, the emotional routine of who I've decided I am and how I've decided I'll always react to events. Safe in my little rut, I've become blind to the possibilities of my life." Probably some of us can identify with what she had to say.

What do we do if we are stuck, imprisoned? Is this the way our lives are

supposed to be, or is there another way to look at things?

That's where the image of a prism comes to mind—a very different image from that of a prison. A prison is a darkened, trapped, dead-end place, with no possibility of getting out. That's the kind of thing we experience when we get paralyzed by our fears, or stuck in the ruts and routines of life.

A prism, on the other hand, conjures up a very different picture. I'm sure many of us have seen prisms, but being of a very unscientific nature, I have no idea about the science around a prism. I only know that prisms are typically made of glass, and that they both refract and reflect light because of their transparency.

We have a cut glass design hanging in one of our kitchen windows at home, and the light shining through the glass is really fascinating, especially in the winter. Somehow, the sunlight coming through the glass causes the color coming through it to change, creating almost a soft rainbow-type effect. The light reflects and bounces off the walls of the room displaying a myriad of colors and shapes, all created by light coming through the prism.

If we shift our thinking our image, and use that of a prism instead of a prison, everything changes. We can see almost endless possibilities, and varieties of colors that are too many to count. A prism tells us that there's no such thing as a dead-end road with no way out; we don't have to be stuck and imprisoned.

That's well and good, you may be thinking, but how do we get out of our boxed-in lives? That's where we may need to think back to our Bible story. Remember that Jesus asked the man at the pool, "Do you want to get well?" When the man said he did, Jesus told him to pick up his bedroll, and walk. In other words, the man had to action, take responsibility for getting himself out of his current situation, and change his circumstances.

Well, how do we "pick up our bedrolls" and walk out of our prison cells? I believe it starts when we stop blaming others for our dilemma, and begin looking at role we've played in getting ourselves to this place. We have to take responsibility for ourselves and for our actions, or lack thereof, and not expect someone else to do it for us. Bruce Jenner put it like this: "If you're stuck and you don't know how to rise, don't look outside yourself. Look inside

Then it means we have to choose, we have to decide to move, to take that first step to make things different. In other words, we have to devise a game plan, and start moving. The surest way to stay stuck is to not move, but you and I have to take responsibility and act, and move, as frightening as it may seem. As Marquise du Deffand said, "The distance isn't important; it is only the first step that is difficult."

It is hard, but even if it's in the wrong direction, or doesn't work, we have to take that first step. It's critically important to take responsibility and move, and if we fail, we have to try again, and again. We have to scratch and claw our way out of the rut we've dug.

I believe that's what Jesus wanted the man at the well to do. So, maybe he didn't instantaneously pick up his bedroll and walk away. What if the words Jesus spoke to him instead awakened in him a sense of creativity and adventure? What if he decided to rig up a pulley of some sort that would slide him into the water the second it started moving? What if he asked a friend to sit with him and shove him at the first sign of movement? What if, instead of sitting there, stuck, doing nothing, he took responsibility for himself, and managed chose to act? By doing so, he would find himself out of his prison cell and in a new place, with unlimited possibilities.

The same thing is true for us. If we decide we want things to be different, then we have to step up and take responsibility for changing things. Certainly, we can solicit help or assistance from God, or more likely from God working through others, but mostly things don't just happen without our putting forth some effort. We have to play the biggest role. When we do that, I believe we will find ourselves energized and totally amazed by all the possibilities that lie before us. Those prison walls will fade away, and we can experience the wonder of a multi-faceted prism.

So, I guess the question is: Where do we want to be? In a prison cell, or standing in the wondrous light of a prism? You choose.

Closing:

Paul Robeson has said, "My future depends mostly upon myself." How true that is, but we don't have to walk into the future alone; God goes with us.

Have a good Sunday and go in peace.
Amen.

