**Community *en Christos*** Rev. Dr. Julia A. Carlson

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost The House of Hope Presbyterian Church Matthew 10:40-42 Saint Paul, Minnesota

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I use Facebook to keep up with friends and sometimes, it gifts me with awakenings. Former co-moderator of the PCUSA, Greg Bentley startled me this week when he wrote: “Coming to the realization that many of us don’t want to live in liberation but just want to be comfortable in captivity (has opened my eyes to the path forward in ministry. TBTG.)”

Over the years I’ve seen many expressions of limitation in the face of great possibility; I’ve watched it in folks around me and see it in myself. We speak of comfort zones and then a prophet reveals it for what it is: captivity. It’s like a self-imposed imprisonment or detention and the opposite of freedom.

Sometimes I imagine theology as a metaphoric map of the world. We all have our theological home, Calvin for Presbyterians, a legacy defined for the modern era by–Karl Barth to Paul Tillich, the Neibuhrs and Shirley Guthrie. And then came Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, and Diana Butler Bass; John Philip Newell and Richard Rohr; Rachel Held Evans, Annie Lamott, and John Pavlovitz.

Some of these folks speak to our theological roots while others take us into new territory and still others push us out to the borderlands. Early feminist writer Carol Christ used to take groups of women to Greece to visit the sacred sites of the goddesses as a part of Christian practice. Decades ago that startled me but, is it so different from visiting Lourdes’s in the name of Mary? The Liberation theologies of South America formed the current pope; he is demonstrating the love of Christ for the world in a new a powerful way but some Catholics feel he is pushing the boundaries their church. New and broad theologies written by people of every race and nation, every gender, including non-binary, and of many faith backgrounds are adding to our understanding of who God is. “For freedom, Christ has set us free” my friends!

God cannot be contained. The Bible is not a crate or receptacle–it’s a launching pad. It is such an expansive document that it has proffered truth for millennia. Perhaps our theology should begin not with a map at all but with the image from space of Earth as the big blue marble.

Yes, I get carried away with images! Because we need to engage words **and** The Word **and** theology **and** imagination to engage God and God’s calling. *Theos* is an invitation to go big! Because captivity has consequences.

In the midst of a bout of writer’s block, Auguste Rodin suggested that Rainer Maria Rilke go to the Jardins des Plantes and look at the animals. It is said that Rilke sat in front of the cages for nine hours before he wrote this:

**The Panther**

His vision, from the constantly passing bars,

has grown so weary that it cannot hold

anything else. It seems to him there are

a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.

As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,

the movement of his powerful soft strides

is like a ritual dance around a center

in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.

Only at times, the curtain of the pupils

lifts, quietly--. An image enters in,

rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,

plunges into the heart and is gone.

Today’s gospel reading is remarkably short. It is, in its simplicity, offering us that refreshing cup of cold water. It is the offer of hospitality from Jesus to the community in his name; an invitation to receive his words once again. This text tells us it is immensely simple and possible to follow the Way; it collects and orders many chapters and verses of Jesus’ teaching into only two things: welcome the prophets and practice righteousness.

The prophetic is what startles us and offers us correctives and larger visions. The prophetic contains invitations for spiritual growth and exploration throughout our lives. Righteousness is to be in right relationship with God and one another, therefore, (theologically) righteousness is also justice. These few verses are of course linked with the long reading from last week and with a lengthy sermon begun five chapters previous when Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor….” This is a post-lecture check-in, a suggested introspective examination of what we believe God is asking of us.

Because, if we are honest about the past, the spread of Christianity was also the spread of the ways of Whiteness. A limited theological map was imposed on the earth’s geography. Last week, John Wilkenson suggested we read *What Kind of Christianity?: A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church* by William Yoo. This has been our lived theology. The Church (capital C) I learned about in my early religious education was actually the co-opted Christian story in service to Colonialism and white-supremacy-thinking on a global scale. Far from being completely authentic and faithful, my African colleagues have said it was a system of taking land and profits from indigenous peoples on every continent in exchange for a Bible. It is time to imagine something new and inclusive–which means listening to theologies from Asia, Africa, and Indigenous peoples. The prophets of our age are calling us forward, including Old Testament scholar Wil Gafney, who wrote: “Before the truth can set you free, you need to recognize which lie is holding you hostage.”

This was a literal reality in our reading from Jeremiah. What we heard in our Old Testament reading was a debate that took place at the beginning of the Babylonian exile; Hananiah believed that the Israelites could rise up and, in two years of fighting, defeat Nebuchadnezzar to restore their temple and country. Hananiah spoke what the people wanted to hear, Jeremiah spoke God’s words of truth–you have already fought and lost. In the words of one commentator “In a gesture of steeled nonviolence, Jeremiah walks silently out of the temple”; indicating his message: “Beware of any voice who will sell the soul in order to announce good news that makes for [popularity]. There is a critical cost for peace. Peace requires **soul** justice and **social** justice” (*Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3; 175).

Our calling is the praxis of theology, practicing what we know of God. Grappling with who God is through the ups and downs, and twists and turns of both the scriptures and life on this planet, is not comfortable because it challenges our choices. It invites us to see people, circumstances, and actions through God’s lens and scope. Anything else is captivity to the gods of our own making.

The word ‘church’ came down through the centuries from the word for ‘house’ in the Greek, the concept of the Lord’s house goes back a long way. Before all that etymology, followers of Jesus were known as the *ekklesia* *en Christos*–the community **in** Christ; not **of** but **in**. Many know the word, *koinonia* which is translated as community, however, e*kklesia* has the further connotation of being a gathering of those summoned or called into mission. I find it refreshing to think in these terms from time to time because the word ‘church’ carries baggage; *ekklesia* gives us freedom.

Commentators on our short gospel passage define its ultimate message as that of hospitality both given and received. God’s hospitality, both the acceptance and welcome of The Christ is immense and the hospitality the *Ekklesia en Christos* is called to enact.

In a discussion about his book, *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*, David Whyte stated, "There is a core delusion at the center of our struggles in all organizations. A core delusion that narrows our sense of self and ignores the greater world beyond the organization. It is a world that can inform us of our personal destiny, but also a world [where] we have lost the time and inclination to investigate thoroughly. Trying to ignore this greater world, we forge a small identity held within the narrow corridors of the building in which we work. Rather than breathing life and vitality into work from the greater perspective which is our birthright, we allow our dreams and desires to be constricted and replaced by those of the organization and then wonder why it has such a stranglehold on our lives. … The first step to preserving the soul in our individual lives is to admit that the world has a soul also, and is somehow participating with us in our work and destiny” (<https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=1000> 6/30/2023, 8:26 a.m.).

On this 4th of July weekend in 2023, I am newly aware of a captivity that infuses our lives–however, the poets have long seen our professional, social, and even religious constriction. As the diversity of this world opens up to us as a global society, some want to tighten the stranglehold–choosing force over justice and shrinking freedom itself into the comfort zone of a few small-minded folk who are driven by power and greed. Theologically, this is the antithesis of God, a soullessness in denial of humanity.

Whyte continued, “There is a sacred otherness . . . that is not defined by our human worries and preoccupations, and it never will be. Its refusal to concern itself solely with our personal ambitions is its greatest mercy; it reserves itself for another kind of nourishment, one we come to when we are ready to drop our reflexive self-concern and look beyond our exhausting self-importance. … Taking the first vulnerable steps into our own experience, no matter how small or hidden at the beginning, opens us to a more generous life, where what we have to give figures as largely as what we receive. We stop trying to draw infinitely from a finite world and begin to learn how little is necessary to live a life that honors the soul of the world.”

In 1831 Samuel Francis Smith took the music from “God Save the King” and put in the words, “Let Freedom Ring!” Christianity as we know it now is not intended to be a partner for any nationalism but is its prophetic and righteous companion. It means living from the presence of freedom founded in the love of Christ–a Christological and theological love from the perspective of the Big Blue Marble –

God has always asked us to “proclaim liberty to the captives” though we were wrongly taught that meant other people and not ourselves. It is ours to claim and share–let us be about this work together in our neighborhoods and in our own hearts.
Amen.