

13th Sunday after Pentecost: Jer 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

Who *guarantees you* your freedom? Because people are concerned right now about the protection of individual liberties and many nations are in a state of unrest. And so, who do we turn to as citizens of the United States of America to insure freedom? Psalm 146:3 says to us: “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal man, who cannot save.” Which raises the question to us, where do we place our allegiance? In leaders who cannot save or in the One who saves? Because what good is freedom apart from salvation? For I say to you, it be only a temporary triumph.

This month of September is Prison Awareness month for our Diocese. And so, it is relevant today that Paul is writing from prison. Twice in our reading today, Paul refers to himself as a “Prisoner of Christ Jesus.” Which is interesting. Paul does not call himself a prisoner of Rome, or a prisoner as a result of injustice, or a prisoner of his own people – the Jews who persecuted him relentlessly. Paul does not use terminology that references himself as a victim. Paul knows that Paul is voluntarily a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Because Paul has elected to follow Lord Jesus at all cost. Paul *understands* what Jesus says to us today in the Gospel, that by comparison, all the things of this world take a back seat to following Jesus. And in following Jesus, there is no one who can victimize Paul because he is victorious in Christ Jesus. Paul says that for him to live is Christ and to die is gain (Phil 1:21). Which means *nothing can touch him*. His life is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3). Through the One who leads him, Paul lives victorious.

And today Paul is writing from prison. And in this letter to Philemon, Paul is writing about Onesimus who is a slave. And we know that Onesimus has become a believer in Christ Jesus because Paul refers to him as his child and to himself, Paul, as his Father. Their relationship had become a parent-child relationship based on faith, and Paul refers to Onesimus as his “own heart.” Onesimus, a slave of Philemon’s, must have heard Paul share the Gospel because when he flees his owner, he seeks Paul out in prison. There was something that so impacted Onesimus about Paul’s message about Jesus Christ, that when Onesimus fled, he fled to Paul. And Paul asks Philemon in his letter to forgive Onesimus any wrongs and to receive him back as more than a slave, in fact, forever as a beloved

brother. And the reason that Paul is confident that Philemon will do so is because of Christ Jesus. Philemon is leading the church in Colossae and Paul is confident that because of Philemon's faith in Christ Jesus he will treat Onesimus as a beloved brother. And we have good reason to believe that this happens given Christian tradition has it that Onesimus may be the same Onesimus who is later established as Bishop of Ephesus. Which means Onesimus went from slave to beloved brother to Bishop.

These three individuals are participants in an imperfect society. Though Rome prided itself on laws and leadership, Paul was unjustly imprisoned for his faith, Onesimus was a slave, and Philemon was a slave owner. They lived in a system infringing on freedom. And yet Paul writes confidently that all three of them have overcome because of Christ.

Paul speaks today of "all the good that we may do for Christ." Because there are *acts of doing good*, and there are *acts of doing good for Christ*. Though the former helps, the latter saves. Paul is saying to Philemon, don't merely free Onesimus but receive him as your brother in the faith. It is not enough to physically free someone apart from seeking and hoping to also spiritually receive them into the faith. Because social justice without Jesus is temporary assistance, not eternal salvation. Humans can physically free someone temporarily, but God spiritually frees eternally. And where therefore do we place our allegiance? In societal leaders whom we elect to make things better? In programs or nations well led? God says today in Jeremiah that he *plucks up* nations if they continue in evil. As easily as a potter with a lump of clay. Three times today, God mentions turning from evil or the entire nation will fall. We *mock* God if we think we be able to maintain a free nation that does not seek God. That we apart from God "*insure* the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity." In Psalm 10:4 we are told: "In his pride the wicked man does not seek [God]; in all his thoughts there is no room for God." Wickedness is actually described in scripture as believing you have no need for God and as not seeking God. Imagine that. We think of so many things as wicked, but this is the evil that God is upset with today in Jeremiah. His people have turned from him and no longer seek him as the leader of their lives. And so, is our hope in our allegiance to the leaders of our "land of the free?" And if so, what type of freedom have we received? Labor Day began back in 1882 as

an effort to protect rights for workers. We will always battle to maintain our freedoms because evil seeps in. Even the best societies infringe on freedom.

Yet Jesus says to us in John 8:36: "If the son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Does this mean free of every hardship or every prejudice or every injustice? No. It means free *regardless* of every hardship, every prejudice, and every injustice. In Philippians Chapter 4, Paul explains this hard to fathom freedom saying: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength." Jesus never promised to remove trials for us in this present age, even extreme ones, like unjust imprisonment, or a pandemic, or even living paycheck to paycheck laboring so hard while all the while still fearing your car will get re-possessed. Which happened to me once. I was working two jobs and had a used Volvo. And my daughter, Raini, was a baby, and I was struggling to afford to put plumbing in a dilapidated trailer I had purchased which had pre-HUD windows that wouldn't even open in the event of a fire and the carpet was bad because the previous owner had shot his Pitbull in the Living Room after it bit him and wouldn't let go of his leg. That's when you realize that you might actually be a redneck. When that's the best of life you can afford. But I was so proud of my first home purchase though it wasn't the Taj Majal to say the least. And I was laboring hard to make it, and I was a couple hundred short of making a payment to keep my car. And I needed a particular payment to arrive which I did not know when it might come because I was working as an independent and there was no pre-determined pay-period. And so, I prayed. And *the* very last day by which I needed it, the check arrived. And so, I believe that what Lord Jesus says to us is true when he says to us: "In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world." I thank God for every day that I have struggled, because every struggle has made me cling to Jesus Christ.

Last Thursday, September 1st, was the feast day of David Pendleton Oakerhater. Oakerhater was a warrior and leader of the Cheyenne of Oklahoma, and he became the first Native American Anglican to be designated by the Episcopal Church as a Saint. To put this into a timeframe, Oakerhater was ordained to the diaconate in 1881 just one year prior to St. Paul's being built. And as a result of

his leading Cheyenne fighters against the U S Army over land rights, Oakerhater was put in prison. But an Army Captain cared about the spiritual condition of his prisoners. And Oakerhater came to Christ. And then returned to his own people and ministered to them for 50 years by establishing missions and schools. And like the Apostle Paul, he did not preach himself a victim of injustice but rather a prisoner of a Victorious Leader. In fact, Oakerhater's first words to his people upon his return were:

"You all know me. You remember when I led you out to war I went first, and what I told you was true. Now I have been away to the East and I have learned about another captain, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he is my leader. He goes first, and all He tells me is true. I come back to my people to tell you to go with me now in this new road, a war that makes all for peace." *

Oakerhater preached of winning the unseen war. Beckoning others to follow the Leader whose Kingdom is not of this world. Not guaranteeing a world without oppression but preaching God's Spirit as the deposit in our hearts guaranteeing what is to come (2 Cor 1:22). For we can only be *guaranteed freedom* if we be "prisoners of Jesus Christ." *Amen.*

*www.satucket.com/lectionary/DPOakerhater.htm