



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 18 – Proper 23 (C)

The Unchained Word

[RCL] Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66:1-11; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

“But the word of God is not chained.” We can find strength, peace, and courage from these words in the Second Letter of Paul to Timothy. We are living in rapidly changing times. Uncertainty can be sensed in the minds, bodies, hearts, and concrete realities of many of us, regardless of our social location and context. Circumstances and situations are unpredictable. For too many, the world itself seems unmoored. Whether it’s the cost of living, finding shelter and housing, a world increasingly driven by Artificial Intelligence, or more significantly, whether one can feel secure about remaining in their community, many in our congregations and the surrounding neighborhoods are seeking a sense of grounding.

Perhaps our siblings are looking for inspiration, comfort, and compassion that is life-giving and liberating. Our neighbors are seeking embodied signs of concern and love that are not conditioned or chained by the whims of political partisanship, economic performance, or pragmatic considerations. And now comes an invitation through our lectionary to remember the words of Paul to Timothy: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.”

Paul reminds Timothy that Jesus was raised from the dead—a powerful reminder for us as Easter people that death and powers denying human flourishing do not and will not have the last word. Paul does not stop there; he goes on to speak about being anchored to Jesus through the analogy of being chained to him like people restrained in the carceral state. A troubling analogy, and one that speaks powerfully about the strong constraints Paul feels. Paul’s constraints are not limited by scarcity, winds of pragmatism, politics, and popularity; instead, Paul is reminding Timothy that he is deeply grounded in the Good News. Paul’s being is shaped, as ours should be, in the word of God that is not chained.

The word of God is unchained. It is not bound by any human-based limitation. Rather, the word of God is life-giving and breaks the chains imposed by powers and principalities. It frees us from the policies, practices, and procedures that deny the flourishing of all people. It moves with the Holy Spirit and does so at ground level. All of this is reminiscent of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry:

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“When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.”

We are called to understand the dynamic power of the unchained word of God to bring forth life-giving possibilities in a chaotic world, during crisis situations and difficult times. It is in being conjoined with the life-giving and liberating word of God that we can bear the burdens of others more fully than we might believe possible.

With this confidence, we can interrogate and understand the prophetic and pastoral words Jeremiah conveyed to the elders in exile. He tells them to “build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” The fruit of his communication is not in the literal instructions, but rather the larger meaning of engaging in the life-giving work in front of them. Jeremiah understood the context of chaotic, uncertain, and oppressive times. His words breathe the air of possibility to people who are losing hope.

It is easy for us to examine the words on abstract and intellectual levels without acting on them. Bickering about the meaning of the words and the best plans chains the word of God to the limitations of our reasoning, understanding, and fear. It is here that Paul is again helpful. He instructs Timothy to remind the people not to wrangle over words because it “ruins those who are listening.” Paul’s insight seemingly anticipates the doubt that Timothy and the community of followers must have experienced, doubt that could easily have prevented them from acting on the unchained word of God. Paul encourages them to do their best to present themselves to God as approved by God. He wants them to accept the role of laboring for God without shame.

Friends, this is our call in our uncertain times, when so many of our neighbors are looking for the embodied word of liberation, peace, healing, and compassion. We have an opportunity to “seek the welfare of the city.” As co-laborers with the Holy Spirit, we can be the hands and feet of Jesus to bring Good News to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to agitate for the liberation of the oppressed. This is the mission of God and is our work. We cannot only work to understand the unchained word of God; we must also act on it.

Robert Griffin and Durrell Watkins provide a cogent and compelling synthesis of the action of the unchained word of God when they write, “Where there is food insecurity, lack of housing, demoralization of marginalized groups, and denial of human rights anywhere, the gospel message is needed still; not because of past heroes or presumed afterlife accommodations, but because it calls us to confront injustice now with the good news that peace and justice, for all, remain possible if we will do the work.”

Today’s Gospel reminds us that those who will be healed, transformed, renewed, and liberated are not just those who are familiar to us. Rather, like the Samaritan, those who are different from us can be equally or more responsive to the unchained word of God. Think about the fact that the Samaritan whom Jesus calls the foreigner is the only person healed from leprosy who recognized Jesus for who he was. The Samaritan is the only one who fully understood the unchained power of Jesus’ healing words and actions. During this time, when so many people considered foreigners and different are experiencing the chains of fear, repression, misunderstanding, and oppression, followers of Jesus have a Gospel mandate to accompany the disinherited.

May we co-labor with God in the life-giving and liberating work of love in action. For “the word of God is unchained.” Amen.

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