

October 6, 2019 (World Communion Sunday) | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [2 Timothy 1:1–14](#)

TITLE: Prison Wisdom

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Sadly, one mark of every civilization, whether ancient culture or modern society, is the presence of jails and prisons. Yet what exactly is the purpose of a prison? Many say that those who break the rules of decent society need to be separated from decent society. In olden days guilty parties were exiled or banished, perhaps put on a ship to Australia or America. More commonly, guilty parties were locked up, hidden away in prisons. That's the "civilized" answer. However we know that prisons are not just for law-breakers. They are also places where people in power send those who disagree with them: political prisoners put behind bars; demonstrators locked up before they can incite crowds to overthrow an oppressive government. Prisons are designed to silence and to shame.

Yet many works of famous authors were shaped by their experience in jail. Think of Thoreau's On Civil Disobedience, Solzhenitsyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, or Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice. Great literature was actually written in prison. Cervantes wrote Don Quixote while in debtors' prison; John Bunyan wrote Pilgrim's Progress while in prison as a religious dissenter, and Oscar Wilde wrote De Profundis while in prison charged with being a homosexual. More important for us today is that great works of faith were written while their authors were in prison, such as the later writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Nelson Mandela's Conversations with Myself, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail, and most of the letters of the apostle Paul—including the one ascribed to him from which we read today, his second letter to the young Christian teacher, Timothy.

Paul wrote many of his letters while in prison, after being arrested as a rabble-rouser, spreading a new religion about a rabbi crucified on a cross who after three days had been raised from the dead. This message didn't break the rules of decent society. But it did challenge the authority of those in power. For how can an earthly king compete against the Son of God? That's why Paul was put in prison: to silence him, isolate him, shame him. But it didn't work for one simple reason: Paul professed a wisdom and faith that was stronger than the power that built the prison walls around him or held the keys that locked him in.

Timothy was a co-worker of Paul's. He'd learned his faith from his family – his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice. Can I pause just a moment to give thanks for grandmothers? God love 'em. Nobody gets here without a grandmother. And never forget how these women were often trailblazers—pushing down barriers, breaking through glass ceilings, helping all of us live better lives because of the things they endured or overcame. Also, can we notice how Paul stresses the importance of teaching the faith to your children? If a parent isn't willing to model and explain to a child what it means to believe in God, to trust in the story of Jesus Christ and the power of

goodness over evil, life over death, then where will that child learn that message? It can happen outside the home, but why would we rely on that option?

Anyway, Paul being in prison was, to some people, an embarrassing thing, so he literally had to write these words to Timothy: *Don't be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner.* Yes, we proclaim a Savior who died on a cross. Yes, your mentor is currently locked up in prison. But those are not reasons to feel shame. The world may want you to feel that way, but by God's grace there is wisdom that cannot be silenced behind human bars.

Elie Wiesel tells the story of a rabbi being taunted by a secular philosopher, who said this: *If God wanted some people to be poor, what right do rich people have to help them? Imagine a slave put in jail by his king; if you smuggle the prisoner food, won't the king be angry?* To which the rabbi replied, *Imagine a king whose beloved son is in jail. If you smuggle food to that prisoner, won't you be rewarded by the father? Therefore it is up to us to decide whether we see the poor and those behind bars as slaves or children.*¹

For many years, retired minister and former member of this church Joe Heckel wrote letters to men in prison. He sent them regular newsletters with information about possible legal reforms that might help their causes. Joe was particularly active in trying to change the laws that allow a juvenile convicted of a crime to be sentenced to life in prison. As a person of faith who believed in redemption, Joe was sure no child or youth deserved a punishment that treated them as unredeemable and fit only to be locked away forever.

About every other month I receive a letter from someone in prison. There's one person in central PA with whom I've been corresponding for over a year. Most of these men simply want a pen pal, someone that will write to them to break the state-sponsored isolation they're enduring. This is a universal human desire; no one wants to be utterly forgotten. Pastor Dave Carver has visited South Sudan and preached in refugee camps; and consistently they will say to him, "Tell others about us. Don't let us be forgotten." Voices just like that cry out today from Yemen and Kashmir, from the persecuted Rohinyga in Burma to, if we're honest, the poor and ill-served right here in Pittsburgh.

Too often in America we choose to build prisons as easy answers designed to shame and silence others when we can't be bothered to offer real help. Even worse, all around us there are shame-shrouded prisons in homes where women and children are held captive to domestic abuse. There are silence-enforced prisons in workplaces where pay is inadequate, health care is unavailable, and employees are expendable. A false worldly wisdom tells us that this is just the way it has to be. But Bonhoeffer, King, and Paul would argue that there's another wisdom that is stronger than prison walls.

Paul still speaks through the ages to us, just as he did to Timothy: *My beloved child: God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and love and self-*

discipline. Don't be ashamed of my imprisonment or the testimony about Christ. God saved us and calls us with a holy calling, not according to the world's wisdom but according to God's own purpose and grace. In our Savior Christ Jesus, death has been abolished. Life and immortality have been revealed through the gospel. Then, as a climax to the mini-sermon, Paul gives his own testimony—spoken with authority even from a prison cell: I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure he is able.

All the world over today people are gathering to worship and share a communion meal. They are hearing about a body given for us, a life poured out for the forgiveness of sins and healing of the nations. These are words spoken about one who walked with us, death for us, and rose again so we might never be ashamed or afraid. Many of the communion meals will be held in church buildings—big ones like ours, small, simple ones from here to Africa and Asia and beyond. Some of the communion meals will happen in homes, at tables set apart perhaps with nothing more than a candle and a bible, a loaf of bread and a cup of juice. And some communion meals will happen in prisons—behind bars.

Years ago, pastor Martin Copenhaver wrote these words: *A good test of the stories we choose to live by is this: Can I take this story to prison with me? Would it sustain me even there? Lots of stories may be sufficient when life is gentle and bright. But what story will hold up to reality when life is hard and rough?*²

That's part of the wisdom Paul offers us today. Not only does he remind us to listen to those behind bars, to stop believing in the virtue and necessity of confinement behind prison walls. Paul, like Mandela, like Bunyan, Bonhoeffer, and King, preach from prison with words of power, love and courage. By their very example, they too ask us to consider: What story can I hold to and take with me, even to prison? What "Yes" of God can I affirm—will I affirm—that I know is stronger than all the "Noes" of this life? What story will hold up when life is hard?

Being civilized isn't about locking people up. Being civilized is about faithfully setting people free. AMEN.

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Sages and Dreamers*, p. 233.

² Martin Copenhaver, *Christian Ministry*, Sept/Oct 1997, p. 15-16.