

## "ON BEING LOCKED IN"

TEXT: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse, therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19)

### INTRODUCTION

I came across an unexpected bonus, of sorts, in the cottage that we rented this summer in Maine. The persons from whom we rent have a number of good books on the book shelves, to be enjoyed on those chilly summer nights around the fire place. A book that caught my eye this summer was a book called Masks of Love and Life. The title of one of the chapters jumped out and hit me with the force of a jet on take-off. This was the title, "Locked In a Room With Open Doors". To me, that's a great title. I can see it yet. I jumped out of the chair and shared it with the rest of the family. My wife had her nose buried in a book and without looking up said with a note of ~~surpr~~ something other than enthus. casm, "why that's about as good as 'Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mommy's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad'". And David, with even less enthusiasm, suggested that perhaps that what they ought to do with me.....lock me in a room with open doors.

Now perhaps the title doesn't turn you on, but think about it. "Locked In a Room With Open Doors". The story behind that title is told in the opening paragraph. Says the author:

"In a family of my acquaintance were two brothers, the younger of whom had an idiosyncrasy: a dread of open doors. The older one became impatient, as older brothers will be, and, wanting to break him of his habit, he threatened: 'One day I will lock you up in a room with all the doors open!'"

### DEVELOPMENT

"Locked In a Room With Open Doors". What an image those words conjure up. If you think about them long enough they are likely to make your palms moist and create some strange feelings of uneasiness within, for they are suggesting that a person can be immobilized by inner weaknesses as well as by outer obstacles.

To be sure, there are people in our society who are locked in a room with shut doors. And that's what most of the noise is about now-a-days - people trying to open doors - doors to more adequate education, to decent jobs, to good health, to better housing, for a fairer share of political and economic power. And I, for one, am glad that the Christian Church in this country has found its muscle and is helping to propel the battering ram forward. In a democracy, closed doors are out, indefensible. Under our constitution, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are guaranteed to all.

However, there are times when we are likely to overlook that man can still be a prisoner when all the doors are open. The enemies are not all out there. Some are on the inside. Remember what the son-in-law said of Scarlet O'Hara's father at the funeral service:

"There warn't nothing that come to him from the outside that could lick him....not Yankess, nor carpetbaggers, nor hard times, nor high taxes, nor even downright starvation. There ain't nothing from the outside that can lick any good rebel. But he had our failings, too - 'cause he could be licked from the inside. That weakness that's in our hearts can lick us in the time that it takes to bat your eye...."

It is so easy to fall into the habit of blaming our unrealized selves on outside forces. The mood of our day might well be caught up in a paraphrase of one of Shakespeare's better known lines: "The fault dear Brutus is not in ourselves, but in our systems that we are miserable". Indeed, systems can be oppressive. None is perfect. None is likely to be perfect. And under God we have a mandate to improve the system and remove as many of the impediments to freedom as we possibly can. However, there is no reduction of obstacles on the outside that can guarantee freedom within.

Samuel Johnson was right when he said:

"How small, of all that human hearts endure,  
That part which laws or kings can cause or cure!  
Still to ourselves in every place consign'd  
Our own felicity we make or find".

HATRED "Locked In a Room With Open Doors". Consider a number of things that are locking people into the rooms of life to which there are open doors.

Some, for instance, are locked in from life by hatred. They are prisoners of the spirit of vengeance, unable to shake that urge, that instinct to get even. Hate is such a cruel master. It hurts the hater as much as the "hatee". Nothing durable has ever been built in this society or any other on hate.

I feel the current racial unrest in this land poses some very serious problems at this point. There can be no social progress without indignation. Moreover, unless this indignation is organized and directed it will not prevail. When righteous indignation is thus organized, polarization is inevitable - in the church, in the home, in society. We should not shy away so long as we see polarization as a middle step. A line must be drawn and opposing sides identified before meaningful debate can take place. The trick is to be able to become sufficiently aroused and indignant without allowing deep feelings of person hatred to set in and take over. By hating, we become like that which we are seeking to exorcise.

Hate feeds on stereotypes. It has to continually shut out certain truths and experiences in order to maintain its fires. It has to shut its eyes at certain points and refuse to listen. A critic who shall remain nameless was honest enough to say one time in commenting on a performing artist:

"Something I wrote about him once so prejudiced me against him that I cannot enjoy anything he does".

Jesus said it plainly: "We are to love our enemies and pray for those who despitefully use us". We are forever coming up against those words and telling ourselves that he really didn't mean our enemies. Ours are always different, special, diabolical. But, of course, he did mean our enemies. As Christians, we are to deal with others as God has dealt with us.

WORRY "Locked In a Room With Open Doors". Not only are some of us locked in by hate, but many of us are also locked in by worry.

What James Thurber once said of Harold Ross may be said of us: "He lived at the corner of work and worry".

There is such a thing as secure poverty. There is the poverty of little children in deprived homes who, even though they feel the pinch of want, they have security in believing that somehow, some way their parents will provide. But there

is also in our country and surely in the world at large what might be called insecure poverty. Such poverty exists among the fathers and the mothers who must do the providing for their families and are driven frantic by the fact that they cannot.

Of course it would be foolish for me to suggest that all worry about money and income is unworthy of faith. A certain minimal level of income is required if one is to be lifted above the grubbing and drudging stage of life. But I'm thinking of those of us who have passed that level, myself included, and seem not to know when to stop; who are always salivating for more, always anxious, always perturbed, forever feeling that they don't have enough. To turn life into one unrelenting hustle is to remain locked in a room even though all the doors are open. Up to a point, our acquisitions and possessions can liberate. After that point is reached, they tend to only clog and jam our lives. This is why a sage prophet once suggested that each of us needs at least one good fire in his lifetime.

A mystic from India was being introduced to New York City. His guide, with more nerve than wisdom, took him down to the subway station at the peak of the morning rush hour. The visitor was appalled at what he saw - people with attache cases pushing hard and driving madly. He could only think to ask: "Is there a wolf behind them?" "No said the friend, "but there's a dollar in front of them!"

Will Durant, the great historian, once made this observation:

"A life devoted to the acquisition of wealth is useless unless we know how to turn it into joy; and this is an art that requires culture and wisdom. A succession of sensual pursuits never satisfies for long; one must understand the ends of life as well as the art of acquiring means. Men are a thousand times more intent on becoming rich than on acquiring culture, though it is quite certain that what a man is contributes more to his happiness than what he has."

Jesus commended us to the faithfulness of God. Is that really too simple for us to come down to? "Take no thought for your life - what you shall eat, or what you shall drink". Is it not possible that we have acquired too many necessities that aren't really necessary? It very well could be!

CHANGE: THE NEW

Hatred. Worry. "Locked In a Room With Open Doors". Some of us stay locked in that room because we are afraid of the new.

Every so often one sees in the paper where a man who has served a prison term goes out and violates some minor law so that he might return to jail where the perimeters are fixed and the routine is familiar. I am told, too, that when you take goldfish out of one of those little decorative bowls in which we usually keep them and turn them loose in a pond, they will continue to swim in small circles for some time. They are afraid of the new.

We are afraid of new experiences. The author, in that chapter with which we launched this sermon, says:

"The world is open for travel in all directions, but the well-trodden thoroughfares are generally preferred to fascinating nooks and by-ways".

It reminds me of something Dr. Metzner remarked about a couple of years ago upon his return from a trip to Europe in which he got caught up in a tourist group. He was struck by the fact that one couple in particular in that tourist group could

think of nothing more to say when confronted with the new than "That's just like ours", or "That's not like ours". As though the little experiences that they had tracked were the norm by which to judge everything else in the world. This is to live deductively when we might live inductively, taking on each new experience as it comes to us without fear and apprehension.

We are afraid of new people. We see in new people a threat to our equilibrium we have managed to establish in our management of life. I recall being at a church conference out in Cincinnati a few years ago. Following a delightful meal, the person serving as the Master of Ceremonies twiddled the crowd. He said:

"Now I know you are enjoying yourselves. You made a point of sitting with your own group from your own conference in your own state to be sure that you would have a good time".

And sure enough, it was true. We had come to the conference in groups. Most of us had arranged to room on the same floor as groups. We were taking our meals at the conference as groups. Fear of new people.

After the service this morning, or any other Sunday, see how this instinct works in us to make our way immediately to someone we know - either up here or perhaps even more - at the coffee hour. We go to that table where we are known and see that person or persons with whom we have something in common. But there is growth and expansion and education awaiting us in those whom we do not know. Good things might happen here if we could discipline ourselves each Sunday as persons in this congregation to speak to two or three people that we do not know before we speak to someone that we do know.

But the most oppressive lock-in of all centers in our fear of some new ideas. After all, we have our faith all worked out, and such as it is, we do not wish to have it disturbed or upset by something new. I guess it's something like the feeling that my wife and I have around nine o'clock at night when we have the kids all tucked in and we breathe a sigh of relief. We don't want any one of the three to kick off the covers and spoil that wonderful calm and quiet. We fear exposure to the new. I am not suggesting that we ought to question the fundamental conviction that we have met God in the person of Christ. But I am thinking of what we make of that experience - how we interpret it, how we say it, live it, apply it.

I think we are guilty of striving to be justified by consistency rather than by faith. In a pluralistic, technological, revolutionary age - no man can expect to get it right the first time - every time!

Years ago when Mike Wallace began to make a name for himself he built a reputation as a hard interrogator. I can still see him as he sat there with sheets of notes and confronted the "lamb" in the other chair whose articles and utterances he had carefully studied. Wallace would lean over and say, "Sir, you once said...." The guest would begin to climb about in his mind to see if he could recall what he had said in years past. There was even a story going around that Mike Wallace in the life to come would sit down in the presence of the Almighty and say, "Sir, you once said in Genesis...." The implication behind this line of questioning is that anyone who is worth his salt intellectually ought to be consistent. For my money, there is more honesty in the kind of intellectual leadership that has the courage to revise itself as life moves on.

What draws us to some of the great men of our time is the courage they have mustered to revise themselves on some great issues. "Sir, you once said". "Yes, I did - but I have since received more light". Begin to think about some of the

great issues that come before us, issues involving war, peace, race, abortion - just to name a few. Beware of that imagined need for consistency that keeps us locked up in a cell of thought when all the doors are open. Some people can be so rigid that they remind one of a doll without joints. A young Rabbi in this city put out an intriguing sermon title a few days ago at the beginning of the holidays of our Jewish friends. The title was simply "U- TURNS PERMITTED". U-turns are not only permitted, friends, but are encouraged, needed, demanded of us on some issues. Where did we ever get the idea that once we conceived a point of view that we had to defend it to the death.

GOOD NEWS FOR US Yes - there are doors on the outside that need to be opened.

But remember that this is only one front. The other front centers in those doors within our selves that keep us stopped and stymied. Nathaniel Hawthorne understood this uneasiness about which we have been thinking together when he said:

"What other dungeon is so dark as one's own heart!  
What jailer so inexorable as one's self"

But - remember, too, that there is good news for all of us. If you are locked in, you need not stay there. For besides that inner misery that makes you want to get out, there is the call of God that summons you out. As our text puts it:

"I have set before you life and death, blessing and  
curse - therefore choose life: that you and your  
descendants may live".

Jesus came preaching "release to the captives" and since it is not recorded that He went to any of the jails of Palestine to liberate the captives physically from such dungeons, we are permitted to conclude that He was intent on liberating men and women from their fears, their inner "hang-ups", those lurking in the dark corners of their hearts. He comes before us as the WAY - and this is something that starts where each one stands. We do not have to search for its starting place. It starts where we are:

"As you are,  
Where you are,  
What you are"

He will meet you and bring you out. This is our faith. "Locked In a Room With Open Doors" - He is the door, the way.

"I have set before you life and death, blessing and  
curse - therefore choose life: that you....may live"  
life - with Him

PRAYER

O Thou, who art the author of all liberty - forgive us the constricted and the fear-filled existence that we so often settle for when we might have life in such great abundance. By a knowledge of our inner frustrations and the awareness of thy love, lead us out of these rooms into which we have locked ourselves in - that we may serve thee and our fellow man in the freedom of love. Amen