

“Freedom In Captivity”

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 8:18-27

“We groan inwardly in this world of suffering as we await the redemption of our bodies.” Romans 8:23

One of my more memorable walks down a hallway took place in Florence, Italy. The hallway is located in the Accademia Art Gallery in Florence, Italy. The name of the corridor is the “Hall of Prisoners.” Lining the sides of it are half finished sculptures sculpted by the famous artist, Michelangelo



He is often quoted as saying, “My job as a sculptor is to set the captives free.” He believed that the figures he sculpted were held captive in stone and that his task was to liberate them. And so this particular corridor of the Accademia is called the hall of prisoners.

Each of the sculptures that line the hallway have a particular name. Though they are half finished you can recognize the figure of a human being

in each one. One sculpture is called the “Awakening Slave.” Another is “Young Slave.” Still another the “Bearded Slave.” There is also “Atlas Slave,” named after the Greek God Atlas whose responsibility it was to hold up the entire world on his shoulders. His head has not emerged, and the weight of even the stone presses down upon him. He seems to be pushing something so great that he may collapse and compress back into the stone beneath his feet. This sculpture, together with the others in the Hall of Prisoners, create an incredible picture of deliverance and struggle. On the one hand, these figures are being delivered and set free, liberated from their captivity. On the other hand, they are still struggling in the environment surrounding them. At the same time free and struggling in the world of stone around them.

This story of freedom and struggle is the same story that Paul communicates in the section of his letter to the Romans that we are considering this morning. As we remembered in our sermon last week, the baptized, believing Christian is fully a son and daughter, a child of God. The Christian is fully an heir of God. This is your present identity.



This is my present identity. We have received the Spirit of adoption and live now as Children of the Spirit of God. We are in the Spirit and in Christ. We are fully experiencing the freedom of the Gospel and the work of God in Christ in the present.

At the same time, Paul can tell us in the reading this morning that we are engaged in a struggle. We are engaged in a struggle because we live in a world where suffering exists. Paul calls these sufferings “the sufferings of this present time” (Rom 8:18). He also says that the “creation is subjected to futility” as a result of the Fall into Sin (Rom 8:20). He says that the creation is in “bondage and decay” (Rom 8:21). Finally, he can tell us that the “whole creation groans together in the pains of childbirth” (Rom 8:22) and that we too “groan inwardly” (Rom 8:23) as we wait the full redemption of our bodies. This is language that communicates suffering and struggle. It is language that echoes the personal struggle and suffering that Paul identified in chapter seven of his letter, the struggle of being a sinner and a saint at the same time. The struggle in which Paul says, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (Rom 7:19).

Now Paul takes this struggle to a cosmic scale and claims that you and I are engaged in personal struggles and sufferings even though we are the redeemed children of God. We do so because we live in an entire creation that has been subject to the Fall of Sin and is still awaiting its full redemption. So the groaning of our small, personal, private struggles and sufferings are echoed by the groaning of a creation experiencing bondage and decay, no longer what it was originally intended and created to be. So you and I are free and experience freedom as children and heirs of God through his Spirit even as we live in a world of suffering, so far from what it was created to be. Like the sculptures in the corridor of the Accademia in Florence, Italy, we too, though we are free and liberated in Christ, are unfinished, awaiting our full redemption at Christ’s return.

So how do we live as finished, yet unfinished children of God? How do we live in a world of suffering, experiencing that suffering all too often in our own personal struggles? How do we live in a creation that is awaiting its full redemption? Paul tells us three ways that Christians live as those who are free yet struggling and waiting.

Paul tells us that we wait in prayer. He says, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom 8:26). I think that many Christians probably experienced recently what it is like to wait in prayer through the help of God’s Spirit. As we hear news stories and read media headlines about the immigration mess here on U.S. soil we struggle in our own minds how we can, at the same time, show the compassion that God wants us to show to those suffering in violence and oppression and honor the laws of the land. As we look to Iraq and the Middle East our stomachs turn over the senseless violence and insatiable quests for power and control and we shake our heads as we know that a fallen, sin-filled world is not what God intended. And in those moments, in the murmurs of those groanings, can be heard a longing for an end to it all. We can call those murmurs and groanings, prayers. Our hearts and minds hope for what Paul calls the full redemption of all of creation. The redemption and restoration of all things at Christ’s return. And so, in moments like this and in other ways, we wait in prayer as God’s children who are free and yet struggling in this world.

Paul tells us also that we wait in patience. In his portion of the letter that we read he paints a picture of the future, eternal life of restoration, redemption, and recreation for the children of God. He

says that you and I as Christians share in an inheritance in this future picture. Yet, it is a picture that is not yet fully realized. We cannot see it. And so as we do with everything else that we long for in life but cannot yet have, we wait in patience. We wrestle with being patient.

I find myself experiencing what it means to wait in patience and wrestle with being patient. As most of you know, the due date for our little girl is July 23. Talitha and I are both excited for our child to arrive. We are excited to see what it will be like to be parents. We have heard others talk about what it



will be like. We have ideas of what it will be like. We can paint a picture of this future, but it is not complete. What we can think about and prepare for is only what we create in our imagination. It is not reality. We have to wait in patience for the reality. Similarly, as God's children and heirs, we wait in patience for his greater reality.

If we are people that wait in prayer and in patience then that means we are also people who wait in hope. Paul

says that we eagerly wait for the full, future picture of redemption, recreation, and restoration of our bodies and all of creation at Christ's return. He also says our salvation rests in the hope that we have of this picture one day being revealed for us as children of God. We wait as children of God who are free yet struggling in this world as part of God's greater story. We wait for the full completion of his greater story in Christ. As those who are led by the Spirit of God and have the Spirit of adoption, we wait in prayer. We wait in patience. We wait in hope.

At the beginning of the sermon I took you with me on a stroll down the hall of prisoners at the Accademia. We looked at Michelangelo's half-finished stone sculptures and reflected on his often quoted saying: "My job as a sculptor is to set the captives free." Those who are held captive in a world of stone are liberated at the hand and genius of Michelangelo. Yet, for those who have been to the Accademia Art Gallery, you know that there is more to see. Indeed, most people do not go there just to walk in the Hall of Prisoners. They want to see Michelangelo's sculpture that rests high on a pedestal at the end of the corridor. They want to see his rendition of the biblical character, David. And the effect is absolutely incredible. After having walked down the hall of prisoners, looking at this famous artist's half-finished works, the observer now stands beneath his fully-finished masterpiece. Unlike Michelangelo's "Atlas," there is no stone block concealing David's head, weighing heavily upon his shoulders, squishing him back into the stone beneath his feet. No, David is completely free and liberated from the world of stone by the one who is the Son of David, yet also David's Lord. This shepherd boy stands as a completely breathtaking specimen. He is triumphant. He shares in his creator's victory of freedom and liberation. He is complete, just as his maker had intended from the beginning.

Brothers and sisters, this is the picture for which we wait for in hope. This is a glimpse of God's greater reality for you. Even as we struggle as free and liberated heirs and children of God in this world, we long for the full and complete ending to God's greater story—which is really a new beginning! We

wait in prayer and patience even as we gaze at something like Michaelangelo's David and imagine what the complete picture of redemption, recreation, and restoration of our bodies and souls will be like. "For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope . . . But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Rom 8:24-25). Amen.