

John Sampson
"Letters from Solitary"
Text: Philippians 1:18b - 30
Preached at KVCC
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Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer. AMEN.

The Bible opens with two creation stories. The first is the story of God creating the universe, and everything in it, in six days, and then resting on the seventh day.

The second story of creation is the one where God molds the first human out of clay and then breathes her spirit into it, bringing it to life. It's in this story that we hear that God wanted the first human to have a companion, that it wasn't right, from God's perspective, for the human to be alone.

So what follows is a kind of comedy of errors. God brings all of the animals she's created before the human and asks it to name them. She hopes that as the human meets and interacts with other beings that it will finally find a true friend and soul mate. But nothing works. Animal after animal is presented to the human and named, but no companion is found. Finally, God gives up and decides to create another human for the first one out of its very essence, out of its own body. So God puts the human to sleep, removes one of its ribs and fashions a second human from it. This second human is called Eve. When the first human awakes and sees Eve it finally recognizes another being that is truly its friend and companion. Suddenly, the human is no longer lonely, no longer alone.

What this story tells us is that the authors of the opening stories of our Bible saw our desire for human relationship not as a luxury, not as something we could live without, but as a Divinely recognized human need. Without one another our existence isn't fully human,

and we don't live into the full blessing that God has intended for all of her children.

It's in the light of this story that we should hear the letters that were shared with us today.

It's in the ongoing power of the first stories of creation that we should hear the words that Peter and Jane, Leslie and Betsey read aloud, and that Carol told from her own experience.

It's with the image of the first human finally embracing its one true companion, and feeling a sense of belonging for the first time, that we should hear the words of Paul from his letter to the congregation in Philippi.

It's in light of these stories that we should look into the practices of solitary confinement, practices used extensively throughout New York state, and other states across the country.

But it's important to know what we're talking about. When we say 'solitary confinement' what do we mean?

Here are some facts cobbled together from The New York Civil Liberties Union, The Correctional Association of New York, and Solitary Watch:

- People in isolated confinement in NY State spend 22 to 24 hours a day locked in a cell the size of an elevator, alone or with one other person. They may be permitted 1-2 hours to exercise alone in a cage; they do not receive any meaningful programs or therapy, and cannot make phone calls.

- The sensory deprivation, lack of normal human interaction, and extreme idleness can lead to intense suffering and severe psychological damage. 40% of all suicides in NYS prisons are in solitary.
- Most people sent to isolation in New York State prisons spend months or years there; some individuals have been in solitary confinement in New York's prisons for more than two decades.
- The UN Special Commission on Torture has denounced solitary confinement exceeding 15 days.
- On any given day, over 4,500 men, women, and children are in isolated confinement in NYS prisons; hundreds of others are in solitary in local jails.
- Black people represent about 13% of all people in NYS, but represent 50% of those incarcerated in NYS, and 60% of people held in long-term solitary confinement units in NY.
- Most people are sent to solitary confinement for relatively minor non-violent infractions of prison rules.

These are the facts. But our faith asks that we don't stop with the facts. It asks us to respond to the facts of our lives, the facts of something like the practice of solitary confinement in our prison system, with a sacred vision that sees human existence as predicated on the necessity of companionship and connection. For in the very opening stories of our Bible we hear that to be alone, to live our lives in isolation and alienation, is not the will of God.

It can be easy to forget that sitting at the foundation of the Christian tradition are stories of incarceration, and even of execution. There is the story of Jesus being wrongfully accused, sentenced to death, tortured and executed with the stamp of approval of the Roman Imperial state. There are the stories of Peter and Paul, and other early followers of Jesus, spending nights in jail, being brought before judges for trial, of knowing the bite of handcuffs on their wrists, of spending long periods of time in cells without contact with friends

and family, not knowing what might happen to them next. In a fundamental way the stories and letters we heard shared today by members of our own community echo what we know of our faith history.

At the end of the passage we read from Paul's letter he writes, "since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had." He is writing these words to his community in Philippi, but he could just as well be sharing these words with those in our prisons today, because Paul knows what it's like to be in prison, and he knows what it means to be in solitary confinement without contact with anyone except his jailors.

He prays for deliverance. Do not all those in solitary also pray for deliverance from the box they live in day after day after day?

Paul hopes not to be put to shame. Unfortunately, have not all those in solitary already experienced the corrosive power of shame?

Paul writes about intimidation, and can't say when he will meet his friends again in the flesh. Is not the very threat of solitary confinement a form of intimidation? And does not solitary deny an answer to when those incarcerated might be in contact with their loved ones again?

Paul is so desperate that he desires to be released from this life, and only keeps on living for the love of his friends. Are not the levels of suicide for those in solitary elevated because some inmates feel their only release from ongoing isolation is to end their lives? That their lives are not worth living if they can't be lived among others?

Do Paul's words not resonate with the words we heard shared from our friends here this morning? Is not their story in some ways also his story?

But when I read Paul's letter I am struck by how it is imbued with hope, even in the midst of his incarceration, cut off from his friends. There is a sense that his experience is visited by God's presence and Spirit, that his trial is not an expression of the absence of God, but the very location of the Divine presence. There are difficulties and challenges, to be sure, but there is also a sense of looking beyond his immediate circumstances to the possibility of reunion and reconnection. Paul seems to operate with a deep faith that his isolation and confinement will not always be his reality. Can Paul have such a faith because he remembers the stories of creation that open God's teaching, God's Torah? Within the confines of his cell can Paul imagine a life beyond the bars and mistreatment of his

jailors because he remembers that God created us for relationship, and not for solitary existence?

And can Paul believe all this not because his faith is some wish fulfillment based on desperation, but because he received the simplest, and most mundane expression of love – can Paul believe because of a letter?

Perhaps those in solitary confinement can't receive phone calls, but they can receive, and write letters. Do you remember a time when you were in a bad place and you received a letter from a friend, or someone in your family? Do you remember how it made you smile and gave you just a glimmer of hope? I do, and I bet some of you here this morning do too. Think how much more precious a letter would be to you if you lived your life in a space no bigger than a box, and with no connection to anyone else for days, and weeks and maybe even years.

For letters can be acts of love, a practice of connecting those who are separated, a discipline of remembering that which threatens to be forgotten. And letters are physical. You can hold the paper, and feel its weight on your fingers. You can smell the paper, and sometimes even the scent of the person who wrote it. You can see where the writer struggled to put into words what they were feeling and had to cross out phrases and sentences several times to get it just right. Letters are not people, but in hard times they can sure come close. In hard times they can be the difference between making a decision to “remain in the flesh” or to “depart” from the world. Yes, Paul witnesses to the truth that something as simple as a letter can have the power of life and death for those living in the most inhumane environments, environments like prison, environments like solitary confinement. Letters can be expressions of love, and a manifestation of God’s original desire for all of us to live in community with each other.

We hear a story like the creation of the first humans by God and wonder what possible meaning it can have in our lives today. And we can dismiss it as a myth and the fantasy of a primitive society. But we can also mine it for its meaning and live into that meaning here and now. The first stories of creation tell us that human connection is of ultimate value, and we can actualize this truth by something as simple as writing a letter to someone who we don't know, who we may never meet. We can write a letter to someone who lives their life on the edge of hopelessness and invisibility. We can write a letter to someone struggling to decide whether or not their lives are worth living. We can write a letter to open ourselves to the struggles of another person, and we can write a letter to bring just a little light into the darkness of another person's life. And we can write a letter as a means to travel more deeply down the path our faith tradition asks us to walk.

If you are interested in learning more about how you can write letters to inmates in solitary confinement you can ask any of those who shared their letters today for more information during coffee hour. To experience the impact of letter writing on a different level you are also invited to attend performances of the play, *Mariposa and the Saint*, that will be offered throughout the North Country in the upcoming week. Information about the play and performances was distributed via email earlier this week. If you missed it please reach out to Jane, Martha Swann, Naj, or myself for more information.

And so, as I close this reflection, I share with you the words that the first human said to Eve. Perhaps these are the words that describe the feelings of someone in solitary who receives a letter after so many days, a letter that saves their life:

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”

Because at last that human realizes that they are not alone.

AMEN.