

Gracious God, May these words be your words of grace. Amen

This weekend is one where we gather at cemeteries of our ancestors. We decorate the sacred places where we have buried the people we lose. It is a time of remembering and cherishing life...and giving thanks for family. It is on this we pause and realize that we are connected to a huge family that extends way beyond who we see before us.

Garrison Keillor tells a story. I think I have told this story before. But it is worth telling again. Each year at Lake Wobegone, people gather at the cemetery for a service. And a 3rd grader is asked to recite the Gettysburg Address. All year long the 3rd graders have been practicing. But on that day, they all get a lot of religion as they pray that they will not get chosen by their teacher. Inevitably one is tapped. And the child begins...the voice is shaking, "Four score and seven years ago"...there is a pause and the child begins to trip over words...The crowd gathered begins to mouth words; "our fathers brought forth on this continent"...the group then begins to whisper the words to encourage the child on. And by the end of the Gettysburg Address, the whole group is reciting the Gettysburg Address with the 3rd grader, "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish..." Our saints surround us, give us courage, and words when we find we have none. Our saints hold us up and remind us we are not alone.

Our scripture in Acts tells us quite a story. Paul, as always is in trouble. When he gets a mob angry, off to the prison he goes. He and his partner in crime, Silas are put in the most inner part of the prison. There is no way that anyone could break them out. They could have given up. They could have gotten lost in darkness and hopelessness. They could have focused on the impossible mess they were in. But, instead, they began to sing. Sing great hymns of their faith. The whole prison could hear them ...now we have no idea what they sang. BUT, imagine stuck in a cell, shackled, suddenly hearing the songs of our faith – sung at the top of our lungs, "Rock of Ages", "How Great Thou Art", "O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing". Imagine how that prison rocked. Such inspiration and hope filled people's cells. The walls felt less close. The darkness not as blinding.. You know, I should have called this sermon, "Jail House Rock". The earth began to move. The doors flung open. And even in the darkness, the prisoners were freed. ANOTHER person was given freedom that night too. The jailer was so beside himself and knew there would be so much to pay for the prisoner's escape, that in his desperation, he was willing to die...instead of being brutally punished by his superiors. BUT Paul stopped him. He called for light. Paul told the guard that the prisoners were still there. He was not alone in the dark. Imagine caring that much for a guard who had kept you in chains. Paul offered him Christ that night. He accepted Christ and then invited them all home for dinner. Once enemies, they became brothers and sisters in Christ. The doors of imprisonment were flung wide open in so many ways.

What are the ways that we are imprisoned? What are the ways that we ache for freedom? Our fear paralyzes us. Our history holds us back. Our addictions straight jacket us. We

feel as if we are stuck in quick sand – unable to make a move. But, then we know that we are surrounded by a community that will hold us up and guide us.

We understand that Christ offers us freedom even in the darkest of times, when we are holding on for dear life to our faith. We understand that God's freedom gives us light. We understand that freedom breaks down barriers that keep us from being brothers and sisters.

In the movie "On a Clear Day" we hear a story about a man who is laid off from his job. In an effort to find some kind of meaning, he decides to swim the channel from England to France. He trains vigorously with the help of his friends. In the midst of his training we find out more about his past. When his sons were 8, one drowns. He insists that one son stay on the shoreline as he frantically swims out to try to save the other one. Since that day, he became a prisoner – as he encased his sad heart. He is not able to have a relationship with his other son who lived. His grief is so great, he walks in darkness. His son too is frozen by that moment. Though they see each other everyday, they cannot seem to find each other on a deep level. BUT, during his swim across the channel he faces that which he has never wanted to face. His grief is raw and real. He yells and screams as he remembers. On the other shore, we find his son waiting for him. The historian is waiting to record the completed swim. The son sees his father is totally exhausted trying to make it out of the water. He reaches out his hand to his father. But the historian yells, "You cannot touch him, or the swim will not count." The father looks as the son and reaches out his hand as if to say, "This DOES count...You count...We matter." They embrace. And the shackles of grief begin to fall. In tears of joy they just hold onto each other, the grief will always be there. BUT, they are no longer alone. They find a new freedom...LIGHT.

This week we saw the devastation of the tornado that hit Moore, OK. Houses wiped off the map. Nothing left. We are grateful for so many lives saved. And we grieve with those who lost their children. We question: Why? Why the devastation? Why is life so unpredictable? Why would God let something so devastating happen? Harold Kushner wrote a wonderful book, ages ago. A timeless book – "When Bad Things Happen to Good People". He believes and I agree that God does not cause horrible things. BUT God does inspire, nudge and guide people to care for one another in ways that are beyond human comprehension. Through Christ we are able to break through our limited love to find overflowing love. We are given light.

So, in the midst of the darkest of times, God meets us. In our fear God offers us anchors of faith and flings wide open the doors of freedom. God gives us light...and gives us a community of grace.

Thanks be to God.