



"Surrender Bitterness"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
On August 11, 2024, from Ephesians 4:1-4, 11-16, 25-32*

The Nobel Prize winning Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, once wrote:

Human beings suffer,
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted or endured.

The innocent in goals
Beat on their bars together.
A hunger-striker's father
Stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
Faints at the funeral home.

History says, don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.ⁱ



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One of the few certainties of life, along with death, taxes, and change, is that at some point we will get hurt, likely by another human being, because human beings hurt each other. It's not always intentional. It may be accidental, collateral damage, or tragic, but suffering is an inevitable aspect of human existence. One of the most profound spiritual insights I've learned from Richard Rohr, and my own life, is that when it comes to relationships, great love and great suffering are two sides of the same coin. The more we love, the more we will suffer. Rohr contends, there is a straight line between love and suffering. If we love greatly, it is certain that we will suffer greatly, because to love another person fully we have to open ourselves up to the possibility and inevitability of pain and loss.

However, Rohr also claims that love and suffering are life's primary spiritual teachers, the "gateways into deeper consciousness and the flowering of the soul," as they have the power to remind us we are not in control and open us up for growth and transformation. Yet Rohr is careful to point out that "suffering can lead in one of two directions: It can make us bitter and close us down, or it can make us wise, compassionate, and utterly open, either because our heart has been softened, or because we feel like we have nothing to lose."ⁱⁱ When we pray, "deliver us from evil" in the Lord's Prayer, Rohr states that "we aren't asking to avoid suffering. It is as if we were praying, 'When the big trials come, God, hold on to me, and don't let me turn bitter, to that evil that leads to so many other evils.'"

Paul was well aware of the reality of human suffering and the danger of bitterness as he sat in a prison cell writing his letter to the Ephesians and a constellation of churches in the Lycus River Valley of Asia Minor. Thirty-five percent of Paul's letter to the Colossians is also contained in his letter to Ephesians, which has led scholars to imagine this may have been a cover letter on a compendium of epistles that were circulated to churches all over the Roman empire. Paul wagered his entire ministry on the double task of challenging the destructive pathology of the empire and building up the body of Christ on a foundation of inclusivity and equality across race, class, and gender rooted in a theology of peace, love, and justice. However, this lofty epistle was not written in an ivory tower, but from a dungeon, by a political prisoner of the empire. Like Jesus and Peter before him, Paul was arrested and imprisoned by for his preaching, teaching, and ministry. He was pressed not crushed, persecuted not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed. Paul was suffering in prison for righteousness's sake when he wrote to the Ephesians.



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In the middle part of the twentieth century, during the darkest period of the Cold War, this epistle, with its emphases on peace and overcoming division, was a favorite text of three notable social movements: international ecumenism, nuclear disarmament, and civil rights.ⁱⁱⁱ However, over the last forty years it has fallen into disfavor in mainstream Christian circles. One of the reasons movements for justice found Paul's peacemaking manifesto so compelling is because this letter to the churches in the Lycus Valley was written by a political prisoner. It is the very context of incarceration that infuses Paul's letter with its power and relevance. Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, Malcolm X's *Autobiography*, Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Nelson Mandela's *Prison Letters*, Angela Davis's *If They Come in the Morning*, or George Jackson's *Blood In My Eye*, Ephesians should be read as Paul's "letters and papers from a Roman prison," which means everything he writes here contains a critique of the very empire that bound him in chains.

In the few verses we did not read from chapter 4, Paul was adamant that the followers of Jesus in Asia Minor must turn away from the logic and impulse of the Roman empire. He wrote, "Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live [as the Romans live] in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity." Paul's critique of imperial culture was unflinching, yet he did not succumb to bitterness against his captors. He confronted the empire, yet at the same time worked to establish an inclusive, interethnic, interreligious community called the church where there would be "neither Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female."

In a rather clever form of wordplay, Paul used a single Greek word to describe both his unjust incarceration and the intimate social relations he believed should characterize unity in the church. He wrote, "I the *desmios*—the **bonded one**, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called...making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the *sundesmos*—the **bond** of peace." *Desmios*, the Greek word "bond" was as a term for the way ligaments unite parts of the body. But Paul employed it here as a double entendre (a word with two possible meanings) to create an analogy about the kind of unity he felt should exist in the body of Christ. Paul was telling the followers of Jesus in the Lycus River Valley that they should be bound to one another as strongly and seriously as ligaments bind our bones and sinews together in the human body, but also as strongly and seriously as iron bars was bound Paul to the empire in prison.



We'd likely have a hard time recruiting new members to the church today if we told them that being in community here is like being in prison. It helps to remember that just like today, being imprisoned by the Roman empire meant that a person was a ward of the state until they were released. What Paul was trying to convey is that the bonds of unity among the followers of Jesus should transcend the bonds of nationality and ethnicity. How else would Jews, Greeks, Romans, Barbarians, Scythians, Samaritans, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, Cretans and Arabs, all become part of one united body? It would require a bond that was stronger than family, or tribe, or nation, or religion. In fact, Paul proclaimed that for the unity of the church to be this strong it would require a seven-fold bond of one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God the Creator of all people.

When we look at Christianity in America today, it is obvious that for most people it has become more about following America than it is about following Christ. The unapologetic rise of White Christian Nationalism is simply the most recent evidence that the Church has capitulated to the power of the empire—an addiction we've been struggling with since the 4th century. American Christians remain divided by race, ethnicity, creed, belief, denomination, and political affiliation. You will not find true unity anywhere in the America church, only uniformity, homogeneity, and sameness. In Paul's day, the same divisions we still struggle with today were challenging the unity of the church back then, yet Paul believed there was something underneath all the fissures that separate us that was a much more dangerous threat. Bitterness—bitterness that leads to wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, and malice.

Bitterness, as a state of being, originated in the mouths. It developed from the feeling of disgust we experience when tasting something brackish. Over time, bitterness evolved to complaining, or grief, or mourning uncontrollably and the taste of salty tears that roll down our cheeks. Later, it became a word for an immoral attitude, behavior, or characteristic—a term for a salty disposition, a vice that soured relationships among people and threatened the harmony of the community. By the time Paul began using this word in his letter to the churches in Asia Minor, it meant an incensed attitude of mind toward one's neighbor that grows and festers over time. Bitter is another word for contempt and resentment, for nursing a grievance, holding a grudge, and refusing peace and reconciliation with our neighbors.



Some years ago, I was serving a church with an elderly woman who deeply despised me. She hated me with the fire of a thousand suns. Every time I walked by her, she squinted her eyes and scowled at me. And whenever she had the opportunity, she would tell anyone who was willing to listen, exactly how horrible I was. She was a bitter woman filled with contempt and resentment. Eventually, she died [it will happen to us all], and I had to do her funeral. I called her daughter to express my condolences and the first thing she said to me was, "I'm so sorry about the way my mom treated you. I know she hated you and was terribly mean to you. But you need to know her mother, my grandmother, treated her like she was never good enough, derided her for marrying the wrong man, and was awful to her until the day she died. The pain and trauma of the way her mother treated her into a bitter and angry woman." I was stunned. I'd never wondered what made her so bitter and this revelation helped me to realize I needed to forgive her.

Paul was not advocating some kind of magical unity that happens accidentally or automatically without any labor or struggle. He offered specific virtues, practices, and activities that were necessary for the followers of Jesus to adopt, which serve as the adhesive, glue, and epoxy that binds people together and has the power to maintain unity—a very difficult thing to maintain. Paul spelled them out very clearly in his letter to the Ephesians: humility, gentleness, patience, love, kindness, tenderness, and forgiveness. Elsewhere, he calls them the "fruits of the Spirit," the gifts, graces, signs, and evidence that the Spirit of God is working in and through us impacting the lives of other people and building up the community. Without these virtues, practices, or fruits of the Spirit, Seamus Heaney's pragmatic realism that "human beings suffer, torture one another, get hurt and get hard" which inevitably happens to us all, will lead to bitter resentment and destroy our fellowship over time.

I recently found a parable about bitterness, of all places, on HBO Max in the series *House of the Dragon*, a prequel to the show *Game of Thrones*. You don't need to watch the show to appreciate the relationship between its two main characters, Alicent Hightower and princess Rhaenyra Targaryen. When the story begins, the girls are childhood best friends who casually stroll through the castle together, talking, reading, sharing their love for one another and their dreams of the future of traveling on dragon back to see wonders across the sea and eating nothing but cake.

In early adolescence, however their relationship changes when Alicent's father schemes to get the King, who is Rhaenyra's father, to marry Alicent, forcing her to become the stepmother of her childhood companion. As you would expect, because of this new power dynamic and various love affairs, their relationship unravels. By the end of season 1, Alicent has usurped Rhaenyra's throne and made her son king, while her other son kills Rhaenyra's child—creating a bitter rivalry.



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The women feud over the throne, the men they love, and the life and death of their children, further eroding the bonds of their relationship into bitter resentment and it spins the entire continent of Westeros into all out civil war with dragons. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. After untold destruction, the women eventually seek each other out and try to reconcile. But it is too late, thousands have died, families have been torn apart, the kingdom is in ruins. In a final heartbreaking plea Alicent confesses to Rhaenyra, "I lost my way, or it was taken from me. I put my faith in my husband, my father, my lover, my son. I made virtue my banner. I clung to it in defiance of you, because you so disdained it. I have been alone of late, walking outside the city walls, and felt a weight lifted. For the first time I thought of what I would choose if not for the duty I put before all else. I do not wish to rule, I wish to live, to be free of all this endless plotting and striving. I am at last myself with no ambition greater than to walk where I please and to breathe the open air unremarked and unnoticed." Alicent pleads with her childhood friend, "Come with me," but alas, Rhaenyra will not leave and sends Alicent away.

House of the Dragon is a cautionary tale about how bitterness and resentment can destroy our lives, relationships, families, neighborhoods, churches and cities, as well as entire communities and kingdoms. While it's never too late to seek forgiveness and reconciliation, the longer we wait the more damage is done and the more lives are lost. If we wait too long there may be nothing left to repair and all we will be able to do is walk away. Alongside Paul's warning about the dangers of bitterness and resentment, there is a promise that the virtues of humility, gentleness, patience, love, kindness, tenderness, and especially forgiveness, have the power to heal the wounds left from hurt, pain, and suffering, and the power to build a beloved community where all people are embraced as beautiful children created in the image of God.

The Bible offers us a story of two women that stands in stark contrast to that of Alicent and Rhaenyra. It too is filled with hurt, loss, conflict, pain, suffering, and bitterness, yet it has a different ending. In the days of judges, there was a woman named Naomi and a daughter-in-law named Ruth. Naomi lost her husband and her son, becoming a widow with no means for survival in a harsh and patriarchal world. Her grief was so deep she changed her name to "Mara," which means bitter and proclaimed to the whole town of Bethlehem "Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me." But instead of lettering bitterness become a contagion that ruined their lives, Ruth and Naomi bonded together in their grief as strong as the ligaments that bind sinew and bone, and as strong as the iron bars that keep people bonded to the state.



They clung to each other and Ruth made this fervent vow to Naomi, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus, and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!”

No one gets through life unscathed. We suffer, we torture each other, we get hurt and grow hard, yet no matter deep the pain, bitterness and resentment will never help us, heal us, save us, or liberate us for beloved community. It is a futile response to suffering. Paul knew that we need each other to survive and thrive in the pain and suffering of empire. The only way through this world in peace is to surrender our bitterness and resentment, to cling to each other with humility, gentleness, patience, love, kindness, tenderness, to practice forgiveness and reconciliation as often as we can. Life is hard and we lose so much. It will always be easier to give up on hope than to believe like James Baldwin did, that “hope is invented every day.”

“History says, don’t hope, on this side of the grave. But then, once in a lifetime the longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme. So hope for a great sea-change on the far side of revenge. Believe that further shore is reachable from here.” Let us put away all bitterness, bind ourselves together like ligaments, and forgive each other, as God has forgiven us. Then we may find the strength to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we’ve been called and become the people and the community that Christ inspired us to be.

ⁱ Seamus Heaney, from “The Cure at Troy,” 1990.

ⁱⁱ Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*, Crossroads: 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ched Myers & Elaine Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation, v. 1: New Testament Reflections on Restorative Justice and Peacemaking*, Orbis: 2009.