

“Unchained”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
October 13, 2013

2 Timothy 2: 8-15

I have a question for you this morning. How many of you have complained about something in the last week? Go ahead, raise your hands! Yeah, most, if not all of us, huh? It's a pretty basic human behavior, to complain. What are things we complain about? (Ask people to share their complaints and repeat.)

As humans, we can complain about lots of things. From things as benign as the weather or the traffic on our morning commute, to things as pointed as a coworker's attitude or a family member's behavior. For some of us, we are reticent to complain very much, not wanting to seem negative or needy. For others of us, complaints tend to dominate our lives, as we voice our unmet expectations in this way.

Many times, complaining reveals our loss of perspective on life. *In the movie “Shenandoah,” Jimmy Stewart plays a pacifist farmer who is trying to raise seven children without his wife's presence, but with her instructions to help them become good Christians. So he prays over their bountiful dinner, “Lord, we cleared this land; we plowed it, sowed it, and harvested it. We cooked the harvest. It wouldn't be here; we wouldn't be eating it, if we hadn't done it ourselves. We worked dog-bone for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you just the same anyway, Lord, for this food we are about to eat. Amen.”*

Olive Hinnant writes: *At times, we can become self-focused. We worry about our work, the results, our successes or failures. If our work is raising children, we concern ourselves with their abilities in the world, if they will be accepted or rejected. Whether we are the head of a corporation or a teacher in a classroom, some days it feels as though the world rests on our shoulders. At times, we are tempted to list our accomplishments as if we have done them all alone. Complaining is one way we get to the bottom of our humanity, and there we come face to face with our strengths and weaknesses, our abilities and our limitations. It is a way of saying, “God, help me.” Even if we cannot recognize that God created the land we cleared, provided the human effort and the materials necessary for building, we are bent toward prayer, wherein proclamation can begin”* (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 158-160).

When you read this passage from 2 Timothy, it might sound like the apostle is complaining about his lot in life to Timothy. “This is my gospel, I am suffering hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. However, I will endure for the sake of the gospel and never be

ashamed of my proclamation.” Think for a minute about all Paul has done for the early church. He’s preached the gospel in foreign cultures; been imprisoned for his testimony; served on the front-lines of the spiritual battles of first-century Christendom. “It’s my gospel, for which I suffer hardship.” When you read this, it almost sounds like that prayer of Jimmy Stewart – where’s God been in all of his work?

However, if we read this from a slightly different perspective, we might see more clearly the writer’s intention for his protégé, Timothy. And in doing so, we also might hear the encouragement and foundation on which we are to lean every day as disciples of the one who will never be chained down.

Instead of hearing this as a litany of complaints, consider how Paul is writing to Timothy, who is discouraged and downtrodden. Timothy had been mentored by Paul, was taught the faith by Paul, and now was one of his young disciples, seeking to spread God’s Word. But now, he hears that Paul has been imprisoned for his teachings, and likely is being persecuted. How would you react if your mentor was held captive? You might be scared, worried, and anxious, and you might begin to doubt yourself and your abilities to fulfill your calling as a preacher and teacher of the gospel.

Paul, too, was probably worried about his young minister, how he was doing in his setting and how he would react to the news of his imprisonment. So, Paul begins by saying, “Remember.” “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David – that is my gospel . . .” When everything else seems to be going haywire, when everyone around you keeps demanding your time, when you are struggling with the mundane tasks and the stressful crises – remember Jesus Christ.

There is so much that is biblical in the word “remember.” “Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8). “Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Corinthians 11:24). When we hear “remember,” it is a recalling us to the sacred in our faith. It is an invitation to return to God in a special way, in a sacred way, so that our lives might be reoriented and rebalanced. “Remember Jesus Christ . . . that is my gospel.”

It is because Paul remembers Jesus Christ in all that he does that he endures his trials and tribulations with faith and hope. “It is this gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect.” Paul’s suffering and imprisonment is also on behalf of Timothy’s parishioners – the elect – and all who would call on the name of the Lord. For that is the mission of the body of Christ: to stand up for all who would seek to know God’s love which is unchained in Jesus Christ.

Peter Holmes writes: *We find the language of remembering again in verse 14: “Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they*

are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening.” Some were wasting time and energy arguing and fighting over semantics. So he wrote, “Remember Jesus Christ.” When we forget to listen to the living Word, we can be given to wrangling over words. We can lose sight of what matters, which is not simply achieving a goal – be it church growth or better infrastructure, a bigger stewardship draw or a better web site – but gaining a Christ-like character.

When the mentor writes in verse 11, “If we have died with him, we will also live with him,” he has upped the linguistic ante, to be sure. Dying and living are the topic, not the color of the pew cushions. The mentor is calling for an end of petty arguments and proud posturing, so that we may come alive to the love and compassion of Jesus.

However, discouragement threatened. The thought of his mentor in chains was upsetting, and the temptation to quit must have been real. Fully aware of the discouraging image of his chains, the mentor wrote, “But the word of God is not chained” (2:9). The protégé is to remember the risen Christ and, therefore, in the midst of life’s setbacks to know that God’s love always has the last word. Regardless of circumstances, God is always doing something greater (ibid, 161).

How do we hear these words from 2 Timothy with 21-century ears? How do we trust and believe Paul’s message that God’s Word is unchained? How do we remember Jesus Christ in all that we do?

A young couple struggles with infertility, yearning for a child and wondering why God is not on their side. Parents receive devastating news about their young child’s health, and struggle with what the future holds for them and their family. A young adult makes poor choices, and now faces the consequences of his actions, causing worry and angst for those who love him.

Yet, in the midst of these struggles, God’s Word is unchained. “If we endure, we will also reign with him. Remember Jesus Christ – that is my gospel.”

As we mentioned earlier, you are invited to pick up your stewardship materials today. This includes a brochure sharing stories of how people’s lives have been changed through God’s Spirit here at John Knox, and a pledge card for you to prayerfully bring with you two weeks from today on Stewardship Sunday.

As you will read in your materials, one of your elders writes: “Often, investing in the church is not at the top of our list. We don’t take our church money off the top. We think somebody else will give a lot so it doesn’t matter how much we give.

“Do we ever calculate what 5% of our take-home pay would be if we pledged it to the church? Or even 3%? Or 10%? Do we ever try to max out what we can give? Think what we could do if that was our goal. Do we spend more eating out every week than we give to the

church? Is our cell phone bill more than our church pledge? Can we make a step-up in our giving, so that we might exceed our goals and truly be the open, caring, community God intends for John Knox to be?"

Will our giving to the church reflect our affirmation that "we will endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that all may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus?" "Remember Jesus Christ - that is my gospel."

We will conclude with where we began. As human beings, we love to complain. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are tempted to lodge complaints against our brother or sister in Christ, without much worry for how those complaints might cause harm. More often than not, we give in to those temptations. More often than not, we fail to see how our complaints about others speak more to our unwillingness to acknowledge how we have failed to live up to God's expectations of us.

"Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening."

"Remember Jesus Christ - that is my gospel." When we are tempted to deny, when we are tempted to complain, when we are tempted to give up hope, when we are tempted to believe that God is chained and bound - remember Jesus Christ, for that is our gospel. May everything which we do reflect that proclamation, now and forevermore.

Thanks be to God. Amen.