

In light of all that has happened during this past week, Mothers' Day should provide a sort of respite, maybe even a weekend free from being captive to the barrage of news of national politics and political events before we return to them tomorrow. Yet I am not going to facilitate that escape, because the Scripture on which I want to base today's remarks draws me to a feeling of "good riddance" that occurred as both part of the news and part of the cause of the chaos in which this past week ended.

I believe I can say this is non-political, but the "good riddance" is to the candidacy of Texas Senator Ted Cruz, and my reason for piping in is because of the seeming eloquence with which he engaged in politically useful religious hypocrisy. All successful politicians lie, which I use as a self-serving explanation of my own failure in politics, but then again, not all politicians wrap themselves in religious robes as they do so, and I strongly suspect that one reason that this son of an evangelist failed among evangelical Christians had to do with an issue on which the evangelicals are more faithful to the Bible than a good number of us, which is in answer to, "What do we do with otherwise law-abiding immigrants who are here illegally?"

You and I may disagree on the answer, but I do not know of a single other current events issue on which I can say that my Christianity drives my political view as it does on this particular issue. As those who have studied Old Testament with me know, in the Torah — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the first five books of the Bible, — there are two verses, the only two in the entire Old Testament, one of which is conveniently shuffled aside, only two verses that lead some to condemn gays and lesbians, yet in the Torah itself we read about five times, "You shall love the alien" — sometimes the word is not "alien," but "sojourner," or "non-resident," or "foreigner who is among you," depending on how the particular translators choose to translate a Hebrew word phonetically pronounced "ger" or "gar" — "You shall love the alien who is among you, for you were an alien in Egypt." No mention of legality or illegality, and borders do not figure into Christianity even though the Hebrews' "Promised Land" is described by rivers and seas. The command was given because the nation of Israel had experienced (and by the time of the final form of the Torah, had experienced twice) what it was like to be aliens in a foreign land, so those living centuries later were told to be sensitive to foreigners living among them since earlier Israelites had lived in a land not their own; they had *sojournd*, lived for 400 years as resident aliens in Egypt.

But it was not just that most evangelical leaders favor immigration reform while the Bible-thumping-when-convenient Senator opposed finding a way for immigrants here illegally to stay that upset me, it was that Senator Cruz, who must have been a brilliant law school student since he had clerked for a US Supreme Court justice, it was that Senator Cruz repeatedly accused a group of his fellow Senators of favoring *amnesty*. Any first year law student would know that to require individuals *to pay a fine* is not *amnesty*; it is *plea bargaining*. *Plea bargaining*, like taking a defensive driving course after getting a speeding ticket so that the ticket doesn't stay on one's record. His dishonest hypocrisy on this issue poisoned my attitude toward Senator Cruz, even as talk radio personalities, who probably did not know any better, were using the same *amnesty* term.

But of course, Senator Cruz and his campaign are no longer relevant, and I wish him and his family nothing but the best — outside of politics. The reason I mention him is not for political purposes, but to get to that term, *amnesty*, in the context of today's wonderful story from the book of Acts. The part of the story on which I am going to concentrate is the meaning for us of the opening of the prison doors that would have permitted Paul and Silas and the other prisoners to walk out free.

Pinal County, and obviously Florence in particular, is an appropriate venue for using being freed from prison as a *metaphor*, an *image* — last week's words — for something Jesus does for us. And I do this without hesitation, since I am not sure whether the writer of Acts is describing an actual event — I don't think an earthquake would have undone shackles, — or whether he is simply trying to tell of how God was on the side of Paul and his ministry; I just do not know.

But Paul ultimately gets out of jail! He gets out of jail, even though we can assume that what he had done would have been sufficient under the Roman law to keep him there.

I want us to assume Paul is guilty, because, well, because what I am interested in discussing is how at least some of the guilty ultimately “escape” imprisonment, and why it is meaningful for you and me.

One way they “escape” prison, of course, is for the guilty to complete their imposed sentences, which is one way of interpreting the wonderful line of second Isaiah: “*Comfort ye my people . . . cry unto Jerusalem that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned.*” “*Pardoned*” here does not fit our legal sense; the meaning of the verse is rather that Israel — and here we are referring to the captivity in Babylon in the sixth century before Christ — the meaning is rather that Israel has served her sentence, whether with time off for good behavior, we do not know.

A second way of escaping imprisonment though guilty is what we know as *parole*. In parole, of course, the release is conditional on future good behavior; parole can always be revoked.

Clearly, neither completing his Roman sentence nor being let out on parole would come close to defining what happened to Paul; he was simply freed, released, even if guilty of his crime!

And that is sort-of like *amnesty*, and that kind of freeing from what imprisons us, I think. What God through Christ does for us! We are guilty of many crimes, but we do not have to serve a term. Our continuing freedom is not conditional, as is parole; it is a sort of *amnesty*.

A sort of *amnesty*, but then again, only *sort of*. We have not paid a fine, but in the classical Christian concept of *sacrificial* atonement, Jesus has paid the fine for us, so there is not true *amnesty*. Yet from our *personal perspective*, we have been granted *amnesty*; we have been granted freedom from prosecution, freedom from having to pay a penalty for our wrongs, for our sins!

Just as Paul and his companions were set free, so have we been set free. If Christ's death means that we have not quite been granted what lawyers label as "*amnesty*," the difference is one you and I understand *only* because we appreciate what God through Jesus has done for us.

But sometimes that is a message we just cannot hear any more clearly than we can hear God trying to shout, "I love you!" to us. Cannot hear, or have trouble believing. And perhaps our inability to hear and believe is one reason God gave mothers to most of us.

I am not going to be saccharine, as I said. For some of us, Mother's Day is *not* a happy time. Sometimes this is because of the failings of our mothers; sometimes it is because of our sense of *our* failure as mothers, due to what we perceive as the shortcomings and errors and even emotional distance from us of our children. But even that lack of happiness is due to an awareness of what we do expect from mothers and from ourselves as mothers: an unconditional love, a love in which we are not on parole because nothing we can do can end that love, just as it was nothing we did other than to arrive into their lives that, ideally, led to that unconditional love in the first place.

I most sincerely pine for those who are mothers but not experiencing love from their children, and for those adults, whether men or women, who never knew warm love from their own mothers. Yet whether we knew it or not, we always knew what it was *supposed* to be: *freedom* from worrying about whether we were loved.

And that is what we find in God through Christ! Assurance that just as Paul was freed from that jail whether guilty or not, so we are freed from the prison of worrying that we will be punished or have not been punished enough. And "no," I am not saying that this is license to be indifferent to how we live, but rather that I share Paul's and Luther's confidence that, as our response to knowing God's unconditional love, as our response to knowing that release from our own shortcomings, we will desire to do what our mothers' — or God — would want us to do; would want what God teaches to be how we live our lives.

An *amnesty* from punishment from our sins. From our perspective, that is what it is — but God's unconditional love is an *amnesty* given us through Christ. Through Christ, freeing us, like Paul, from imprisonment *by* our sins..

But let's be honest; there are other prisons, other factors that *imprison* us, other *imprisonments* that contain us: imprisonment because of grief; imprisonment because of family troubles; imprisonment because of emotional or mental challenges; imprisonment by disease or finances. While our faith does not provide a complete "Get out of jail free" card to us, when we do take to God in repeated prayer — and I emphasize, *repeated* prayer — when we do take to God in repeated prayer our pleas to be freed from those factors imprisoning us, we may not obtain *amnesty*, but we will at the very least realize an easing of

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our conditions. We will go from feeling we are in solitary to knowing we are not alone, so that the grasp of those imprisoning factors upon us will not be as confining as they were.

I try several times a year to make plain that there are those conditions that cannot be cured by faith and prayer alone, conditions that do master us, do confine us. *But they need not imprison us*, and one way we ease the conditions of that confinement — but do not let it be the only way, accept professional help — is through prayer that can help us to know God's love is with us still, and will be with us until the day all our individual prisons are opened.

Then we shall be greeted with more than *amnesty*, but with the figurative arms of God embracing us — God, our heavenly father who shows how to love like a mother.

Amen.