

## Trying to Chain the Unchainable / 2 Tim. 2:8-15

<sup>8</sup> Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel, <sup>9</sup> for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. <sup>10</sup> Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. <sup>11</sup> The saying is sure:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;  
<sup>12</sup> if we endure, we will also reign with him;  
if we deny him, he will also deny us;  
<sup>13</sup> if we are faithless, he remains faithful—  
for he cannot deny himself.

<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

Our human tendency is to try to get our hands around things, to contain things, to make them easier to understand. And that, in and of itself, *is* understandable. The world around us is a mystery, something that is unpredictable and can, at times, be scary. I have to believe that is part of what was going on with the story of the Tower of Babel. We learn from the book of Genesis that people came together under the idea that they could build a city, complete with a tower reaching up to God, in which everyone would speak the same language, making it, so they thought, easier for everyone to exist together. Our God of diversity, though, seeing the error in their ways, would not have anything to do with that, according to the story.

We also learn from the New Testament of a somewhat similar attempt when, according to the book of Matthew, Peter encouraged the building of monuments during the transfiguration, that time when Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with Jesus. Peter was trying to wrap his head and his hands around what had to be an unbelievable experience for him. So, he did as so many of us would have likely done: he wanted to commemorate it by building monuments, his way of taking a selfie and posting it on Facebook or Instagram, perhaps?

We tend to commemorate things to remember them, trying to wrap our heads around an experience we want others to remember. We also, in the same vein, try to control our experiences and the world around us by trying to make the unpredictable predictable. It's what the people of China were attempting to do so

many years ago with the Great Wall of China. Let's keep out what we do not know because what lies out there, beyond those walls, is different, it's a mystery and who knows what the mystery might mean, like with the Tower of Babel, and with the Berlin Wall, an attempt to keep the people of East Germany there, in East Germany, and with the call to keep out the other that is happening today with all of the attention being directed by many towards our nation's southern border.

Much of religion today is caught up with similar tendencies: to keep certain people out, to make a black-and-white world out of what is, at best, a gray world, and trying to take the mystery out of what is, at best, a mysterious world that we live in. But as we read in our scripture passage a few minutes ago, God's power is so powerful that it cannot be contained. This notion is spread throughout this passage, as well as the book of 2 Timothy, as well as the Bible as a whole, but we find the idea particularly in verse nine, where Paul says that he suffers "hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained."

I am reminded of a phrase coined by the theologian, Elizabeth Johnson: "divine incomprehensibility." Now that's a lot of syllables and a mouthful, especially for someone who grew up in Texas, but this phrase has intrigued me since I first read it in a book of Johnson's. The idea is that God and God's ways are so higher, so vast, so beyond our comprehension, whatever you want to call it that as humans, we can, at best, try to identify what God and God's ways means for each of us in our own lives. Therefore, we need to be careful with anyone who claims to speak directly for God or have some sort of direct knowledge of God's thoughts on today's affairs and goings on. Paul goes on to speak about this in the verses that come after our passage for today.

One of the many things I love about your denomination, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, is the importance placed upon identifying what you believe and why you believe it, that your beliefs be rational, and that you be willing to discuss and learn from others. These are *wonderful* things.

Not only are these things important—identifying what we believe in rational ways and being open to dialogue—they are our responsibilities, particularly when we come across ways that others, as Paul said, are trying to chain the unchainable. Paul is imploring us not to let that happen, to, in essence, defend the divine incomprehensibility of God's power and God's love.

So we must remember that God's love is unchainable when we hear it trying to be chained. We could spend all afternoon listing out attempts of ways God's love has

tried to be chained and ways that God's love is currently trying to be chained. But I am guessing you have other things to get to besides spending your day with me. Suffice it to say that the more that we are cognizant of this, the more we are on the lookout for God's love trying to be chained, the more we see it.

One way that seems to be particularly popular now is to label things as, "Christian." While I believe that many times such efforts come from admirable places the end result is often dangerous, at best. There are large-scale efforts at this, such as claiming that certain nations are a "Christian nation" that confuse citizens of different or no religion and is a poor effort at being a witness of God's love for all to the world. There are also smaller-scale efforts of using the label "Christian." Have you ever hired someone to do work that pushed their business being a "Christian business" only to be left with sloppy work or be dealt with in un-Christ like ways? I sure hope this has not happened to you, but it is by no means unheard of. I am reminded of a pastor in a town I used to live in who was well known there and would come to lunch after church services at a certain restaurant and leave what's known as a tract, a booklet that is simplistic way of viewing salvation, as the tip for a large bill. Not exactly how those waiters and waitresses were probably hoping to receive God's love. Or have you seen a piece of merchandise labeled as "Christian" only to find out that you don't exactly or completely agree with whatever it is the product is trying to market and sell? The notion of labelling something, whether it is a t-shirt or a nation, "Christian," not so subtly indicates that whatever it is at hand is the *only* way to be Christian.

But we simply cannot chain the unchainable. Therefore, we do well to take to heart the words of encouragement from today's passage to cling to that which is helpful, to that which is enlightening, to that which draws us closer to the unchained power of God's love. This can happen in all sorts of different ways. For you, one way this happens may be daily Bible readings, along with prayer and devotional times, something that has likely been inspirational and encouraging to you for years. For some, particular authors speak to them in ways that helps them see the unchained power of God in new and different ways. For others, helping people in need, whether it is down the road at a facility offering others aid, across town helping those dealing with immigration and citizenship difficulties, or sitting with a friend experiencing grief allows them to experience God's unchainable love in fresh, encouraging ways.

I would like to offer another method: being open to the thoughts of others. This can take many different forms, some of which we have already thought about this morning. For me, one example happened in a doctor's office years ago. At the age

of 16, I was convinced that I needed to be in vocational ministry; and I have spent much of my life towards that pursuit, through college, seminary, and a number of positions on church staffs. While these were for the most part worthwhile, meaningful, and enjoyable experiences, I reached a point in my last church staff position where it became clear that my calling was leading me into something else, something different.

At the same time, I believed that God had called me to enter into and to be a vocational church minister. So, I reasoned, at the time, not to do that, not to be a minister on a church staff and to do something different, would somehow be disappointing to God. After the second panic attack I experienced as a part of the anxiety that had manifested in my life due to circumstances surrounding that particular church and my experience there, I found myself sitting in a doctor's office, unsure of what my body was experiencing and completely uncertain of what I could do to better my situation.

During the course of my conversation with the doctor, during which I learned that I had been experiencing panic attacks and that my anxiety was at a significantly high level, she asked what probably seemed to her a simple question but one that brought everything to the surface and completely changed my life. She asked: "Can you see your situation getting better?" My answer and response was an epiphany, an ah-ha! moment. I told her, "No, this will not get better. In fact, it will likely only get worse." She, of course, had no road map for what to do about it. And it would be months before it became clear as to what I needed to do with not only that job but my career path, as a whole. But by being open to the thoughts of someone else, I found something that drew me closer to the unchained love and power of God.

To be honest, I did not really have much of a choice. I was in such a bad way that I could not help but take her question seriously and be open to what she had to offer. And for us, we are often in that same sort of space, in which we do not know where to go or what to do; we do not know up from down, left from right. And thanks be to God for the people who are there for us in those times ... and for us when we can be there for others in similar times.

Much of life, though, takes place in times of less acute stress or grief. Times when we might not be quite as open to listening to others. But being open to others, even if we completely disagree and leave the conversation shaking our heads, can draw us closer to the unchained love of God because other people have a different perspective, one that we are often not able to see, whether that person is a close

family member, a counselor, or someone we are having a difficult conversation with on Facebook.

This week, as you go about trying to grow closer to the unchained love of God, may you remember stories like the Tower of Babel, that show the human yet error-filled tendency to make the unpredictable predictable, may you resist the various people and entities claiming to speak for God in today's world, and may you cling to that which is helpful, to that which is enlightening, to that which draws you closer to the unchained power of God's love.