

## Loosening the Bonds

April 23, 2023

### Psalm 116: (1-4) 12-19

*<sup>12</sup> What shall I return to the LORD for all his bounty to me? <sup>13</sup> I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD, <sup>14</sup> I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people. <sup>15</sup> Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones. <sup>16</sup> O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your serving girl. You have loosed my bonds. <sup>17</sup> I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the LORD. <sup>18</sup> I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, <sup>19</sup> in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the LORD!*

### 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:17-23

*<sup>17</sup> If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. <sup>18</sup> You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, <sup>19</sup> but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. <sup>20</sup> He was destined before the foundation of the world but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. <sup>21</sup> Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God. <sup>22</sup> Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. <sup>23</sup> You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.*



As we begin this time together, hearing about loosening the bonds, let us begin by reviewing what binds us, what holds us captive. Last week we talked about suffering and trials and persecution. These are certainly things that would bind

us up. There are others. Grief due to an unexpected loss can set in heavy upon us, binding us up. We can suffer from a financial difficulty or from an unwanted change in a relationship. These too can immobilize or hold us captive. We can find ourselves ostracized or even enduring ridicule or abuse because we stood up for our faith or because we were led to speak out against an injustice. And, of course and perhaps more commonly, sin can bind us up and hold us captive. We can become trapped in a pattern of behavior, or we can be reluctant to repent of a sin. This too can require a loosening of the bonds. Now this brief review is certainly not all-encompassing. There are many other things that can bind us up and hold us captive, limiting our connection to God, separating us from the living hope that we find in Christ. As we prepare to explore the loosening of our bonds, let us pray...

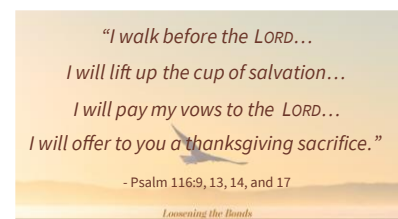
Please turn with me to Psalm 116 as we begin this morning. Before picking up the passage in verse 12, let's look at verses 8-10. This is David's response to a near-death experience. These verses lead into today's passage; they inform us about verses 12-19. In verses 8-10, we read: *"For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I walk before the LORD in the land of the living. I kept my faith, even when I said, 'I am greatly afflicted.'"* David is grateful that God rescued him. Because he no longer is in tears, because he no longer stumbles, he can once again walk before the Lord. This is David's expression of how God loosened these bonds. We connect to this in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:18. Here we read: *"You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors."*

Both David and Peter express a trust in God. This trust is based upon God's action in the past. David expresses what we heard from Peter last week. Salvation is ours even when greatly afflicted, even when suffering profoundly. The big question for today is this: What is our response?

The psalmist asks the question this way: *"What shall I return to the Lord for all God's bounty to me?"* The bounty is God's answer to prayer, rescue from enemies, and new life in the Lord. David's first response is to lift up the cup of salvation, to celebrate this gift of new life that he has received from the Lord. His second response is to call on the name of the Lord – to publicly worship God as an expression of his thanksgiving. David's gratitude is so profound that he repeats all that he will do. In verse 16, David proclaims, *"O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant."* Verses 17 and 18 pledge a thanksgiving offering to the Lord along with a commitment to worship the Lord *"in the presence of all the people."* This is all a response that reflects David's gratitude at having a second chance in life. When all seemed lost, God intervened. This is David's answer to the big question for us today: What is our response to God's love?

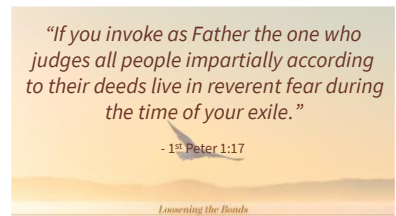
Last week the question was about living our faith inside – inside our hearts, inside our heads. In Psalm 116, the response clearly has a public aspect to it - *"in the presence of all the people."* This pledge to let others know what the Lord has done for him is one that we are called to live out as well. So let's pause for just a moment to consider what these four offerings would mean in our lives. Here they are:

*"I walk before the LORD... I will lift up the cup of salvation... I will pay my vows to the LORD... I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice."* Take a minute here and begin to reflect on how you could live these out. Then go deeper with GPS #1.

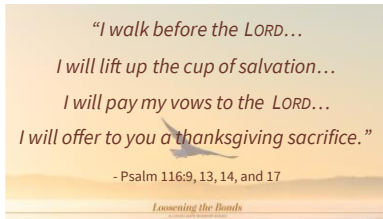


I believe that last week's big question is a question to ever keep before us. We can feel safer keeping our faith private. We can avoid some difficult situations or decisions if we compartmentalize our faith to just Sunday mornings. A private faith, an individual response to God, saying our faith is just between God and me – this is the easier path for sure. This is a response that we can offer to the many blessings that we experience in this life. But that is far from the witness that we find in the scriptures. From the Old Testament and right up through the New, our faith and our response to God are practiced and lived out in the community of faith and in the world. The surest sign of a faith that is real and true and deep is that we are willing and able, and that we work to share our joy, offer our praise, and live with hope with those we meet. In short, we practice these four actions in the church and in the world.

Now, please turn with me to 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1. In verse 17 Peter writes, *"If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds live in reverent fear*

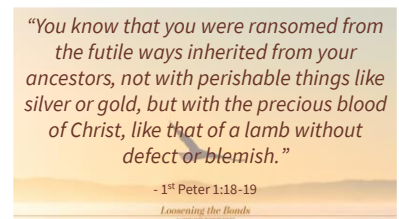


*during the time of your exile."* Let's unpack this verse. There are a few things to note. First, Peter uses "if" but he knows that his readers DO call on God as Father. They, like us, are children of God. So they, like us, call on and have access to God as *Abba Father*. This term, Abba Father, would invoke an image of a child running to their daddy as a source of love, comfort, and security. We too can claim this Abba Father as our God. Second, God is the one who judges. God, being who God is, will judge everyone impartially. And we will all fall short. So we can expect discipline. In the world many cringe at that word – discipline. In our faith, though, discipline aligns us with behaviors that lead to goodness and growth, to living in reverent fear of the Lord.



To live in reverent fear aligns with these four behaviors. And here we also find a dual meaning for the word “exile.” It connects to Peter’s opening verses, where he declared them “elect exiles” – people chosen by God, people favored by God, living in a pagan world. Here we can read “exile” as one who is living on earth but whose true home, whose eternal dwelling, is in heaven. Today acronyms like “NOTW – not of this world” and expressions like “In the world but not of it” reflect our exile status.

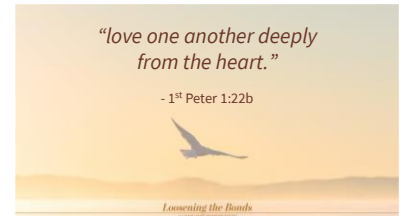
As we turn to verse 18 and 19 Peter points out the bounty that has been given for us. In these verses we read, *“You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.”*



These words remind us of the lengths that Christ went to for our salvation. They remind us of what it cost Jesus to ransom us from the futile ways of the world. Jesus did not give something perishable, like gold or silver. No, he gave his blood and ultimately his life for us. Ransomed, as Sarah Wright points out, is a well-chosen word. We, by our human nature, are enslaved to sin. We have no ability to free ourselves. We need someone greater than our sin to save us. We need Jesus. The one who was without sin – *“a lamb without defect or blemish”* – took on our sin so that we could take on his righteousness. Because of the gift that God through Christ gave for you and for me, we can place our trust and our faith and our hope in God. The gift cleanses us, it purifies our soul, it brings us Christ’s righteousness.

The gift exposes us to genuine love, to unconditional love. That's the love required to do what Christ did for us on the cross.

And now look at the last part of verse 22. Here is Peter's response to the bounty, to the blessings of God that we receive in and through Christ. The third possible response to God's blessings in our lives is this: *"love one another deeply from the heart."* In essence, Peter is saying that all this that has been done for us in Christ, all of this love that is now inside our hearts, all of this love from God that fills us – our response is to let the love out. Love each other deeply, from the heart.



Peter argues that the only response to being ransomed by love is to love others equally and fully in return. His call is to an extravagant and generous love. It is a call to love completely – in service, in attitude, in presence, in word and deed. It is a call to love others in ways that makes them and the world take notice. Loving in this way, of course, is not easy. Loving deeply from the heart comes with a cost. It makes demands on our time, on our resources, on our energy. It calls out the divine living inside of us.

To illustrate this cost, I'd like to summarize a devotional that we studied a few weeks ago at Art with Heart and one student's response to the devotional. Each week we do a devotional, and each week focuses on a word. The week that I am referring to focused on the word "Sensitivity." As a quick summary, this young man's youth leader challenged the youth to be sensitive to those who were on the fringes, to be aware of the outsiders and outcasts. The leader challenged them to love "such as these."



This student took the challenge to heart and first befriended a boy who always ate alone at lunch. Soon enough, though, the kid was following him everywhere, wanting to do everything with him. After establishing some healthy boundaries with the young man, he then offered to walk a girl who was always alone to her next class. You can probably guess this, but she wanted to be his girlfriend from that point on.

The young man's friends began to tease him about these newfound friends. Soon he began to question if loving others as Christ loved him was really worth it. The question at the end of the "Somebody Just Like You" section was this: What would you do if you were this young man? One of our boys, a fifth grader, said he'd get some new friends. When pressed, he further explained: If his friends teased him for being kind to others, then it was time to get new friends. That's what loving others deeply from the heart is all about – loving no matter the cost, no matter the price, no matter what.

There are people in all of our lives who eat alone or who do most things by themselves. There are people in all of our lives who do not know the living hope that we find in Jesus Christ. Both of these groups of people are bound up by their situations, by their circumstances. Like the young man in the devotional, we should all be challenged by our faith to love others as Christ loves us. Doing so, we will help to loosen their bonds. The practical question for us is this: How do we love like this?



To find an answer to this practical question, please turn with me to Acts 2. In verse 14 we read, *"But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.'"* Peter is bold for his faith. Peter speaks with confidence and assurance.

What gives Peter this boldness, this confidence, this assurance? Not too many days before this first Pentecost moment, Peter was scared, he was filled with doubts. There in the courtyard of the high priest, Peter denied even knowing Jesus. In the days that followed, Peter was consumed by his guilt, by the shame. And yet, here in this passage from Acts 2, Peter is standing tall. What led to this change in Peter?

On the one hand we have this bold, confident Peter, speaking to a crowd about his faith in Jesus Christ. On the other extreme, we have Peter afraid to tell a handful of people gathered around the warming fire that he even knows Jesus. Most of us fall in between the extremes, a few are on each extreme. On our bad days, we hush-hush the Holy Spirit and act in ways that would lead others to believe that we do not know Jesus. On our worst days, surrounded by the wrong crowd and in a tough situation, we too can outright deny knowing Jesus. And on our good days, we can share about our faith in the public arena, or we can tell others what Jesus has done for us. Depending on where we stand on this spectrum, how we witness to our faith comes down to the same thing that it came down to for Peter. It was what allowed him to stand with the other 11 disciples.

A week after his death, the resurrected Jesus came to Peter and the others, and he breathed the Holy Spirit upon them. Through the Spirit, a new connection to Christ was established. The permanent, indwelling presence of Jesus was now abiding in Peter's heart. And that empowered Peter to abide in Christ. Author Sarah Wright defined abiding as "to remain stable or fixed in a state." Because the Spirit was now dwelling in Peter's heart, his faith was stable. His fixed state was "in Christ." The bold, assured Peter stands and addresses the crowd, moving 3,000 to faith that day. How? He abided in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit abided in him.



My friends, the same Holy Spirit abides in you and in me. The question for us is simply this: Do we boldly and fearlessly abide in the Holy Spirit? When we abide in the Spirit and the Spirit abides in us, we too are empowered to love others deeply from the heart.

The love of Christ in us is a sincere, genuine love. Because God's love in us is sincere and genuine, we are not free to hate. We are not free to hold grudges or to seek revenge. Being born anew of imperishable seed, we love not out of obligation or out of a sense of duty. Because of Christ's love for us, the bonds have been loosed from these human tendencies and weaknesses. In his love we are freed to remember who we are and whose we are. We are free to be filled with God's love so that we can pour out that sincere, genuine, unconditional love upon others. We are free to love one another with a powerful, transforming love. May that be how you and I love this week. Amen and amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. Look again at Psalm 116, verses 9, 13, 14, and 17. In which of these four behaviors have you grown most this last year? What should be your focus next?
- 2) *Pray*. As you consider the challenge to love those who are bound up, who comes to your mind or heart? Pray for the Holy Spirit to help you reach out to them.
- 3) *Study*. Read 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:11-12. How does this passage connect the idea of being set free from the bonds of sin to the practice of loving others deeply?