

New hope sermon - Shalom and Freedom

Introduction

All summer and now into the fall we have been considering shalom – the Old and New Testament concept of well-being, or wholeness. It's a peace of mind and heart and body we all crave. But it's not abstract theory nor some theological ideal removed from real life. (pp.) Walter Bruggeman says "shalom is well-being that exists in the very midst of threats – It is not idyllic pie in the sky but salvation...in the very places where people always have to cope with anxiety, struggle for survival and deal with temptation." As a result, he believes that we "live toward the vision of God's shalom by our active faith in Jehovah Shalom. That name for God means The Lord is peace.

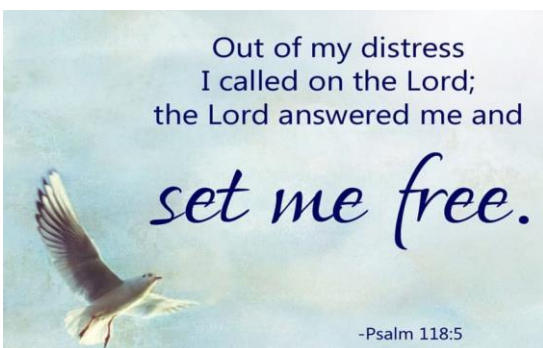
It is clear that God understands the struggles we face with anxiety and temptation and even survival because of the blessing He gave to the Levitical priests for the people (Num.6:24-26: *The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you. The Lord lift up the light of His countenance upon you and give you His peace, His shalom.* God wants to bless us with shalom.

Shalom is a Hebrew concept so I asked Bing, our staff member in Biblical exegesis, to look up the meaning of Shalom in Hebrew. Here is what he found: Shalom is a Hebrew word that means "complete peace, contentment, completeness, wholeness, well-being and harmony. Tim Keller, a popular contemporary pastor in Manhattan, describes shalom as multidimensional, complete well-being – physical, psychological, social and spiritual. It flows from all of one's relationships being put right – with God, with(in) oneself and with others.

I believe this is immensely practical as we approach the new academic year. Why? Because performance or perfectionistic anxiety will take center stage; we worry about our comprehension and speaking levels; we worry about how our classmates will perceive us and, if we are not caucasian, whether we will have a voice that's recognized and understood; we wonder if we can handle the academic load with the countless papers and readings – and all of that is just the academic pressures. Then on a personal level we deal with loneliness and confusion and culture shock – which in turn feeds our fear and self-doubt. Right?

Here at New Hope we want to bring all that part of our reality into the light of God's presence and His Word and help each other to flourish this year. We are becoming scholars, but we want to be sure that we are combining our learning with practical, transformed Christian living. The "tools" we need are God's Word, the power of the Holy Spirit and the community so when we feel our boat is sinking, we can help each other overcome life's obstacles and grow into the wholeness of Christ as individuals and a community suitable for God to use on His kingdom agenda. This is experiential living in Christ. Living into the vision in faith.

So with that background, let's pray and ask the Spirit to direct our thinking.



Biblical Basis for freedom

The text we just read in the service is from Ps. 118 and our lead verse (pp.) was v.5: *In my anguish, I cried to the Lord and he answered by setting me free.* Here the freedom is from the anguish of heart amid destructive relationships. Throughout the past school year, we have journeyed with many in their struggles and heart anguish together. We're here as a family so no one has to journey alone. **Shalom is a heart set free.**

But Jesus approaches freedom from a different context. In his discussion with the Pharisees – *John 8 He said: If the Son shall set you free, you shall be free indeed.* Notice the graphic. The law had become a cage for the Israelites and Christ opened the door to a new way of living and knowing God.

But then Jesus takes the need for freedom further. He says people need to be free from being a slave to sin: *Everyone who sins is a slave to sin*, Jesus said. So, as Christians, what kinds of sin bind us as slaves? The Bible calls these “besetting sins” (Heb. 12:2) - an attitude or word or action that entangles you or easily hinders your progress. Can you identify a besetting sin in your life – something that continually diverts you from Christ’s call and love and purpose? How is Christ setting you free in this area?

Four sins that entangle us

Today, let’s just look at four areas where we need Christ’s freedom from persistent sins. Two deal with the anguish we experience within ourselves and two deal with the anguish our attitudes cause others.

#1. Perhaps a besetting issue – which is rampant on campus – is comparing yourself with others. We make the mistake, out of our insecurity, of comparing our hidden sins with others’ shining accomplishments. Often this stems from believing the lies of Satan that say we are not good enough, we will not make it, we cannot satisfy the expectations of our parents or mentors back home, or the expectations of others on campus. We feel marginalized and defeated. But these thoughts are not the words of God – they come from the enemy of our souls – Satan the accuser and the father of lies. He will accuse us of past failings so we feel defeated or **(pp.)** emphasize our differences from others around us, so we feel incompetent.

So how do we get free and live into God’s shalom in this area? Listen to God’s answer from the story of Joshua and Satan in Zechariah 3. *Joshua the high priest was standing before the angel of the Lord and Satan was standing at his right side to accuse him. The Lord said to Satan, “The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?”* God Himself rebuked Satan on Joshua’s behalf! This truth can be coupled with Eph. 6 where Paul says: “*put on the whole armor of God so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground...Put on the belt buckle of truth with the breastplate of righteousness* –(Eph.6:13-14). When we are snared by falsehoods in our minds, we need to let Jesus drive those lies from our minds, and then put on Christ’s righteousness so God sees us in His purity, not with our past failures and sins.

Shalom is a heart set free – because it is forgiven and we are given Christ’s righteousness to replace our sinful thoughts and words and actions.

#2: *for me* my physical struggles in the past have often led me into anxiety, so a verse I quote is Ps. 94:18 and 19: *When I said, “My foot is slipping,” your love, O Lord, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul”* I’ve looked that verse up in more than one translation!! Here is v. 19 in the Passion Translation: “*Whenever my doubts and fears were out of control, the soothing comfort of your presence calmed me down and overwhelmed me with delight.”. Think of it: Set free by the comfort of God’s presence and His love.*

Shalom is a heart set free – from anxiety whatever the cause- and there will be many causes as school begins!

Then there are two other besetting sins which we may not be so aware of but which bring anguish to others.

Or, #3, perhaps we need to be set free from the sins in our words – whether in anger or slander or carelessness – words that tear others down rather than build others up. Words like worthless, idiot, childish, cannot,- words that exclude and demean and destroy. Often we slip into this sin of our tongue without realizing it. It reminds me of this Swahili story called Tongue Meat.

“The sultan’s wife was thin and unhappy. Although great riches surrounded her and servants fed her the finest food, she remained lean and listless. This distressed the sultan for he did not know how to treat her.

It happened that near the sultan’s house lived a very poor man whose wife was plump and happy. The sultan asked him “How is it that your wife is so fat, joyous and happy? What is the secret of her well-being?”

The farmer replied, “ It is not a secret. Every day I nourish my happy wife by feeding her meat of the tongue.’

Aha!” cried the sultan. Delighted with this simple solution he immediately ordered his cook to buy the tongue of every animal slaughtered at the market. For days the sultan’s wife was given tongue meat prepared in exotic sauces. Although she ate tongue meat several times a day, she remained sad.

Finally the sultan demanded that the poor man exchange wives with him, despite protests from the farmer. The farmer’s wife was delivered to the palace and the sultan’s wife was delivered to the farmer. As soon as the poor man’s wife arrived at the palace, she became sad and grew thinner with each passing day. Her happiness and beauty faded like a wilted blossom. At the poor man’s home, meanwhile, the sultan’s wife grew happier and began gaining weight. At sunset each night when the poor man returned from his work, he would tell his wife all the funny things that had happened that day. He would make her howl with laughter until tears of joy ran down her cheeks. Then he would sing her songs, accompanied by his banjo, until late in the evening and she would dance. Each night was spent in conversation, song, and story.

During the day the royal wife would chuckle as she thought about the funny things her new husband had told her the night before. Although her food was simple and the portions quite modest, she grew plump in a short time. Her hair began to shine and her skin had a healthy glow.

When the sultan saw his old wife and the poor man walking in the marketplace, he wanted her back. She refused to go, saying “I’m better off with my new husband.” The sultan was amazed at her transformation and in a jealous rage demanded “What has this poor man given you that I, a great and rich sultan, cannot offer? What has caused such a change in you?”

The wife told the sultan how she and her new husband passed each evening together in story and song. The sultan’s eyes filled with understanding and he left the couple to their happiness. He now humbly knew what the poor man meant when he said that he fed his wife “meat of the tongue.” (*Wisdom stories. Ibid, pp. 95-96*).

The Apostle Paul told the Ephesians: “*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.* This building up is directly related to the spiritual gifts of encouragement and affirmation that are so needed in the Body of Christ. It is also related to the Spirit’s prompting us with words and actions of love. Paul goes on: in Eph.5...*As dearly loved children of God live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*” (Eph.4:29, 5:2) If we have been caught in this sin of careless or hurting words, we can be restored to shalom in our heart and mind when we allow God’s Spirit to fill us with His love and let that love govern our tongue. We can give others tongue meat!

Shalom is a heart set free – from unkind or hurtful words.

And lastly, finally, free from the slavery of self-sufficiency – This is the pride that relies on our own insights and misses God’s standard of total dependence on Him. It’s when we do everything in our own strength. And neglect our time in God’s word and in heeding the promptings and directives of the Spirit.

Jesus said, *If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.* Jn.8:31-32. *These are the truth of the soothing comfort of God’s presence. The truth of Christ rebuking Satan on our behalf and our claiming His victory as we put on His breastplate of righteousness, the Truth of the Spirit’s love filling us up so our words are not hurting but helping others. The truth of God’s Lordship and a check on our self-reliance where ego is in charge. And the truth of God’s peace – peace of heart and mind. “My peace, Jesus said, I give to you. It is not a peace like the world offers.* We can break those chains on our minds and hearts. With His peace our hearts no longer need to be troubled or afraid. We can be “calmed down and overwhelmed with delight” in the Lord Himself.

One caveat, though, beloved. We need the accountability, prayer and bonding of a community to help us recognize these areas of enslavement and work together to help us “live into the vision” of freedom and shalom. Another story from the book *Wisdom Tales from Around the world* brings this lesson home. The story is from India. It’s called “The flock of birds.”

A great flock of quail lived together in the forest. Food was plentiful and life was peaceful. One day a crafty hunter, who could imitate their songs perfectly, came to the forest. When he whistled, a great group of quail gathered in response. When the flock landed on the ground, the hunter approached silently and threw a

huge net over them. With a hearty laugh, he slung the net over his shoulder and took the quail to market. Each day he played this trick and the flock grew smaller and smaller.

After some time the wisest old quail assembled what was left of the flock and said, “the hunter is skilled and can easily trick you into his net. If you work together, he cannot defeat you. Beat your wings as one and you will lift the net that binds you.”

The flock listened carefully to the old quail’s words. The next time the hunter came and threw his net over a group of quail, they were not dismayed. As one, they beat their wings. They rose, taking the net with them. They swooped down into a tree. As the net caught and snagged the tree’s branches, the birds flew out from under it to freedom.

The hunter looked up in amazement and thought, “When the birds cooperate, I cannot capture them. Each bird is small and yet together they can lift the net!”

The next day the hunter again flung his net over a large group of quail as they pecked seeds on the ground. Pleased with their mighty accomplishment of the day before, the quail began to beat their wings together. Accidentally, one quail bumped into another and started a ruckus: “Watch out!” squawked the bird. “You are stepping on my tail feathers.” “Someone forced me” retorted the other with a hard peck. “This is no time to fight,” scolded another quail, “the hunter is almost here and we must all work together and peacefully fly as one.” “You are not the mighty ruler!” sniped the first. “Stop telling us what to do!”

While they squabbled and scolded

Postured and fought

The hunter arrived and the birds were caught.

He scooped up his net

And proclaimed, “ I’m the winner!

Together they’re strong, divided they’re dinner!” (ed. Heather Stone, 1996, August House, pp. 17-18).

The very unity the birds needed to be free from their captivity was lost in their conflict among themselves. Their words, in this case, were their undoing and they failed to gain their freedom. Jesus came to set us free from the sins that ensnare us. When we live in His freedom, we can have His shalom. As Christians today let’s go forward in faith to live into that vision with Jehovah Shalom, the Lord our Peace. He alone is the One who sets us free.

In response, we will sing Chris Tomlin’s version of “Amazing Grace - My chains fell off, my heart is free!”
May it be so. Let us pray.

Dr. Mary Lou Codman-Wilson 8/18/19