

HELD CAPTIVE

There is something terrifying about being held captive. I'll never forget when I was a boy seeing a bobcat caught in a steel trap in the Georgia woods – I had no great love for bobcats but I had for this captive one a fellow-creature feeling – he wasn't trying to escape – the steel teeth bit too deeply in his leg – he seemed to know the jig was up – knew his time had come – his sulfur eyes followed me with bitterness and no hope and he made a screeching sound deep in his throat more like crying and cursing. Death was his only release. The crack of the rifle set him free. Since then – I've seen humans like that, with wild eyes like that.

You can build a better mousetrap – but I'll bet you never said, "Isn't that a pretty one!" - - No, because traps are not pretty things – they make you shutter. Men and women in their own private hells – held captive there – and making a sound deep in the throat like crying and cursing.

Indeed, most of us have a fear of being held captive – trapped – shut in where we can't get out – looking for help that doesn't come – caught.

Nightmares of being caught in the twisted steel of an automobile wreck – or in a hotel fire at night – or in a stalled elevator – or a falling plane – or a fear of being caught in a family "frakas," – or a public scandal – or a habit that we can not shake – or in a low mood that will not lift – or in a dull job that has no end – or a disability gradually closing in – or in a whole life that makes no sense – and – truth is – lets face it, most of us – no, all of us – are held captive, trapped in one way or another. In this life, we are "the captives." Better to be realistic.

For example, who here is not caught in his own limitations? We must all work within our limits intellectually, physically, emotionally, etc. – the ancient genes, the early environment ... do hold us captive. Jesus taught that all of us are equally loved by God – but that God does not give us equal talents. We must simply go the limit says Jesus of our particular abilities. So never worry about being hemmed in by your limited talents (Who isn't?) – just worry about not using the ones you do have to the limit. So, if you're no raving beauty, forget it – look as good as you can and be a raving something else. If you can't be an athlete, be a scholar – if you can be neither, be a joy to live with (best of all).

In short, we are all caught in our sensate limitations – and so much the better – for if each of us were capable of everything we would have no need of each other. So, there would be no room for love.

Also, who here is not held captive by his or her commitments?

Years ago – we committed ourselves, say to medicine, to business, to homemaking, to teaching, to preaching, to marriage, to parenthood, to whatever may be our daily labor and responsibility – and by now? – by now, most of us have reached the point of no return – we are committed for life to our respective tasks. And basically this is a very good and necessary captivity. Of course, you're trapped in that nursing career of yours or in law, or in that pulpit (the very word pulpit means "scaffold") – a fine place to get hung: that pulpit, the factory, the kitchen. But ... how wildly confused life would be – how insane it is – for those who keep changing tags – keep changing jobs or professions or husbands or wives or children. This is a "move-on" society unless there is something to be said for "standing-still" society. Be glad you've got your own little trap in which to operate.

[Note: A page from original text may be missing, or perhaps Dr. B took it out when editing.]

The same is true for ideas and ideals to which you are committed. The Apostle Paul felt that a holy trap had been set for his life – he had literally been caught by God in Christ and in this sacred snare his life found ultimate significance and security, "make me a captive, Lord, and I shall be free."

Both captives in a foreign land reacted quite differently. Psalm 137:4 "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Hang up his harp, so easy to do --)

But Psalm 139:5 "Thou has beset me behind and before and laid thine hand upon me." This faith filled him with "wonder" and saved both his sanity and his soul. So be it with us.

So don't be afraid of being held captive by your commitments – be afraid if you haven't ever made any. That's when you're in trouble.

But the uncommitted are the truly unhappy people. I can think of two other kinds of captivity, that may not be so healthy or happy, and one is the old moral trap. Realizing his inability to do the good even when he wanted to, the Apostle Paul cried out, "who on earth can set me free from the clutches of my own sinful nature?" (Phillips – Romans 7:24)

Most of us are acutely aware of the downward pull of our lesser selves—that we are tempted to be as voracious, as predatory, as vicious, as we imagine the beast to be.

Carl Sandburg whom we quoted last Sunday gives a catalogue of the beasts we have in us:

“There is a wolf in me
Fangs pointed for tearing gashes, ...
There is a fox in me, ...
Oh, I got a zoo,
I got a menagerie inside my ribs
Under the bony head” –

And we feel trapped by our lesser selves. What’s to be done about it? I may determine – again and again – to be and do better – but all on my own – it is very difficult.

Agnes Rogers Allen – tongue in cheek – but all too truthfully – wrote:

I should be better, brighter, even thinner,
and more intelligent at dinner.
I should reform and take some pains,
Improve my person, use my brains,
There’s lots that I could do about it,
But will I?... Honestly, I doubt it.

In short, we’re caught

Stephen Vincent Benet wrote what he called a “minor Litany” for captives:

This being a time confused and with few fixed stars,
Either private or public,
Out of it darkness I make a Litany
For the lost, for the half lost,
For the desperate

And here’s his litany:

Valium have mercy upon us
Milltown have mercy upon us
Phenobarbatol have mercy upon us
Gin & Tonic have mercy upon us
Psychologists have mercy upon us
Life have mercy upon us.

But when Paul in Romans cries out for mercy, “Who will deliver me?” the answer is “God will.” God has mercy upon us – says the Book of Romans. Jesus Christ delivers us from desperation. He delivers us, frees us from the captivity of guilt and anxiety and ourselves. He is our deliverer.

In all the literature of escape – there is nothing as dramatic, as exciting, as this deliverance from the bondage of sin through Jesus Christ.

He is also the Christian's way out of the captivity of all adverse circumstance. Paul wrote in Romans 8:38: "For I am sure (what a wonderful thing that certainly is – "I am sure.") that neither death, nor life, ... will be able to separate us from the love God in Jesus Christ our Lord!" How firm a foundation! So that even when there is no human way out – no human exit – from our difficulty – ourselves – our death – then – for the Christian – there is always, always, a way up – an open way up to God – who grants us courage and peace at last – as Paul said – "God works with those who love him: (Romans 8:28) For the Christian there is no God-forsaken place. Nothing in life or death or captivity is a strong enough trap to keep God out, it may keep us in – but is cannot keep God out. Our Christ is always with us. We say to him, to our Lord, as the old Psalmist said to Yahweh –

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Lord Christ
or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!
If I made my bed in Sheol, thou art there!
If I take my wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there thy hand shall lead me,
and thy right hand shall hold me."