

CAGED

Ellsworth Kansas, population 3,000, has a small archaic zoo. As was common, years ago, the animals are kept in small, barred cages.

The cage for the lone majestic grizzly bear was about 15 feet by 30 feet with a concrete floor and heavy steel bars.

His world was very small.

When I was there, the bedraggled bear paced endlessly back and forth in the 40 degree heat; his eyes stared out at forgotten dreams, as teenage boys taunted him.

Back and forth he went – on his journey of dying.

It was a pitifully sad sight to see.

Putting animals in cages for our own amusement is a strange human behaviour.

At home, we have a gerbil in a cage, and that troubles me. He is well cared for, but I don't like how his captivity affects me.

I don't want to regard nature and creatures in such a manner—to contain them solely for personal pleasure.

This is merely my opinion.

There are many different types of cages, including walled fortresses.

Sometimes we are glad to be in a cage, such as a shark observing cage.

Nevertheless, all cages confine, restrict and alter our perception of life.

The “sense” of security and safety of a cage comes at a very high cost.

The loss of nature's true vibrancy, of freedom, of choice and of consequences may lure us into complacency, apathy and dread.

Long term prisoners are often afraid and unprepared when released.

That was the beauty of allowing prisoners to work with animals on a farm setting. They were able to engage outside the bars—interacting with natural forces and uncertainty.

Confinement behind walls / in cages can make us afraid of change, afraid to risk, afraid of the many wonders and hazards of freedom.... Living in a cage will hold us down and makes us afraid to be whole.

An example, as we will see, is the synagogue leader on the Gospel reading.

As I said, there are all sorts of cages: some are subtle, even porous, and some are very confining and destructive. Most of our cages are intangible—not made of concrete and steel.

A closed, homogenous community or culture can be a cage.

Investments and retirement accounts for self security contains the mind and soul like a cage.

Relying on brute force, such as the military, for protection is a cage.

Poverty is a cage,..... as is hoarding wealth.

More often than not, we build our own cages.

What usually happens is we slowly entrap ourselves in a cage we construct with poor choices, fear, ignorance, bad luck, bad theology and....the simple, base desire to protect and rationalize our inward focussed existence. A life of gathering inward, for whatever reason, serves to build a hubristic, eclectic pile that forms the walls of self imprisonment.

Living in cage, regardless of its construction, destroys the soul... and is not living in fullness. Captivity can easily lead to the process of spiritual decay and death.

There are tell tale symptoms / characteristics of cage dwellers, including neurotic, even psychotic behaviours, such as the grizzly bear's pacing back and forth.

The world will appear dark and threatening to the entrapped spirit.

Xenophobia and the unwillingness to embrace change is another trait.

Captivity can make a person obsessive/ compulsive—where controlling routines, conditions and behaviour, including the behaviour of others, is essential.

Nothing is done correctly; no one else lives up to expectations,.... for the caged, because complete living is lost, and so reality must be manipulated.

For those in bondage, there is anger, sadness, despair and fear, and introspection can Never be allowed to happen..... because it would be too painful. And, giving / helping others feels like a sacrifice, and so must be rewarded. There must be a payback for giving when one is caged.

People in such a state tend to judge, belittle and condemn others not like themselves. Everyone else must be wrong in order for the little world in a cage to be tolerable, and tolerable is rarely sensed.

In addition, caged people frequently strive to cage / entrap others, too.

Those in power are very good at enslaving the weak.

Moreover, in time, the body reflects the anaemic soul.... causing the shoulders to curl in—an instinctive defensive response to fear. The stance bends over, and not just from aging. Frowns on the face grow pronounced, and the eyes.... THE EYES..... have no spark.

Ultimately, the glow of hope can completely disappear.

Many things can cripple the body, yet nothing cripples both body and soul so thoroughly as living in cage.

In the latter stages of Jesus' ministry, he rarely taught in the synagogue, so this occasion stands out. Perhaps, his reputation had become well known.

As Jesus was presenting the Sabbath lesson, he noticed a woman who's body was severely bent over. The woman had been in bondage from a "crippling spirit" for 18 years.

When Jesus saw her, he called her to him.... so that he could heal her.

But then,..... he remembered the cultural expectations for the Sabbath / those understood rules that formed the walls of their religion, and thought to himself, "Oh, I don't want to upset anyone, so I'll let her suffer another day."

Actually, that is not what happened.

Of course not, Jesus was not bound by such banalities. He was capable of living “outside the box”, and so was not restrained by the pressure to conform.

Jesus told the enslaved woman, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment” – the bars of your cage are gone.

He touched her.

A touch from outside the cage is powerful, very powerful indeed.

The woman immediately rose in stature..... and confidence. She was no longer afraid of the rules.

She—an uninvited woman—spoke out during the Sabbath synagogue lesson. She sang out her praise for God.....for all to hear...!

Her spirit was set free; SHE was empowered.

And Suddenly, the status quo palisade / the walls of conformity began to crack.

Quickly the leader of the synagogue, a layman, sought to mend the breach. Homeostasis / *the way we've always done things* had to be defended..... because.... any deviation leads to the “slippery slope” – Rules / expectations must be kept or there will be discomfort with uncertainty....choices would then have to be debated,... individuals will start thinking on their own.... Control would be lost....and... where would the people find comfort and safety?

Calling the people back into the cage, the leader yelled out, “WE have six days to do work, come back on one of those days to be cured, and NOT today / not now. Good grief, we are in the middle of doing what we always do on the Sabbath. Please get back into your cage and comply.

Is my interpretation accurate? I believe it is. Take note of what he said, and notice that the leader did NOT address Jesus, his obvious adversary in the story. He spoke to the crowd, not Jesus.

He knew that the thoughts / opinions of the crowd needed to be restrained.

Apparently, the conformity of the people was more important than healing; at least pacing back and forth is predictable and safe,..... *and so is death.*

Jesus counters to everyone present, citing that they take the time / the work to free their animals on the Sabbath so that the animals can have access to water. Jesus argued that they don't allow their own possessions to suffer and be weakened, so why should the woman's suffering / bondage be ignored?

His opponents felt the unease of losing an argument.

Everyone else rejoiced at the amazing things Jesus was doing.

Yet, the story doesn't mention anyone else being healed.

//// I don't think they understood.

I think they were more “wowed” by the physical aspects / the supernatural instead of the natural.

Jesus was not doing a card trick with the crippled woman's life.

I don't think they got the point of the message / the lesson in the story.

I don't believe they grasped how healing happens / how salvation comes about.

It seems that they failed to appreciate the way of Christ / the nature of God.

This story is not in Luke's account to impress us with magical, curative powers.

This episode in the synagogue is Not really about physical change, but rather about the spiritual.

Encountering Jesus / receiving Jesus' touch brings freedom and wholeness –true healing.

It was a nasty, demonic spirit that enslaved / crippled the woman.

What is not from God, consumes, devours, enslaves and destroys because the flow is inward.

Inward focus is selfishness, greed, lust, deception, lies and fear.

The demonic steals life and pulls the spirit inward.... into a cage to live a self focussed life. And, when a person's spirit no longer reaches beyond self, a person becomes crippled by the confines of a closed world.

Jesus took the initiative, and reached out to the woman, even though doing so would mean ridicule.

Reaching out, in spite of the risks, is the way of Christ – the nature of God..... and the heart of the Gospel message—which is part of God's redundant invitation to “get it.”

God has been trying to implant this understanding for a long time.

The nature of God is reaching out, an outward flow of the spirit.

As the Psalmist proclaimed, *God abounds in steadfast love.*

God is love, and love pours out. Love is life giving and not self centred.

Today's Psalm passage celebrates God's passion for justice—for freeing the oppressed. The Psalmist praised God for being gracious and forgiving—another example of risking and investing beyond self.

The Isaiah text also presents the passion and nature of God....which is also the way of Christ and our path to healing and wholeness.

This way is reaching out / an outward spiritual flow that is also manifested in our physical actions.

Isaiah is speaking for God – telling us to cease an inward focus –to be free of the yoke that pulls us down.

In God's Spirit, we can offer our food to the hungry and assuage the afflicted. We can discover the way of love that brings joy and healing.

Life and creation will rise into a healthy vibrancy when we give instead of taking and hoarding.

The text implores us to stop “pursuing our interests” and to cease serving our own self interests.

In other words, embrace the way of love / the way of Christ... the nature of God by choosing to let go and allow an outward flow.

God is love. God's way is love—reaching outward, creating, growing, healing, restoring and even changing.

If God is merely a selfish, inward focussed super, almighty entity, then God would be like a giant star that consumes itself.

Eventually, all stars finally completely self consume and die, becoming just a cold, dark mass. As we know: God creates, gives and restores.

The nature of God is life giving, and life giving is also our way to true living. As Jesus lived and taught: hope, healing—salvation comes by embracing God’s outward, giving Spirit of love.

We’ve all heard this message before, yet we tend to still be hesitant to completely leave our little self constructed cage.

Many still have the opinion that salvation is based on fear and the selfish compulsion to save one’s hide from hell.

Focussing on self and personal redemption is an inward focus.

As Jesus lived and taught, the journey to healing and wholeness, what we call salvation, is NOT about trying to be saved / striving to guarantee our own survival.

That attitude is selfish inward thinking.

I believe healing begins when we can say and live “Not me, help them.”

Jesus did not follow God’s will to be comfortable or to be safe and secure. Jesus embraced the nature of God because he understood love.

He had love.....God’s Spirit.

When we see our culture in the bondage of fear and greed, addicted to the illusion of military security, can we / dare we risk our safety and comfort by proclaiming Christ’s message of peace?

Can we reach out and tell others that we strive to live Christ’s way of nonviolence, justice and grace?

Do we have enough love to break out of old patterns and invite everyone to join in our struggle to break free?

Dare we try bring healing to a hurting world even if by so doing we may alter what we hold as sacred—our customs and security in our patterns and habits?

How do we respond to the hungry, the afflicted, the exploited, the greedy and the fearful?

The measure of our response is reflective of the flow of our spirit.

Our actions / our bodies can be revealing.

We can choose to abide in a cage. As long as we don’t look out, maybe we could get by...????? Perhaps, we won’t even notice that the burden of self centeredness has bent us over? We could even blame our travesty on others? And, maybe we could pretend that we don’t notice Jesus and we could assert that God doesn’t reach out.

But, the irony / the rub is that we are created with the spark of God in us. The tilt of our inner being / our soul actually wants to be free.

Our pain is our inner longing for wholeness and love trapped in a cage.

YET,..... here is the big conditional “Yet”: our hope/ our freedom begins only when we look out, with love, for the healing and wellness of others. When we lose our lives, we discover true living.
How can that be? How can that happen?