

The Elephant in the Room

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. —Romans 8:1

Many of you have probably gone to Bush Gardens or Tampa Zoo and seen the elephants there. We have spent much time watching them with Narek. And it's quite amazing if you think about it that these 20 ft long animals weighing 6 tons are trained to stand obediently and eat apples from a 5 ft. tall 130 lb. summer intern trainer. How elephants-the largest and most powerful land animal on earth- become reduced to such a docile and helpless state, reveals a powerful hidden force of this world, which as Christians we should be aware of to ensure that our potential greatness and power is not similarly reduced.

Here's how it happens. When the elephant is young and relatively manageable in size, he is tied to a large tree. For weeks, he will strain and pull, but the rope holds him fast. So eventually the elephant learns that escape is impossible and gives up. But in a matter of months, the elephant is big enough to easily break the rope. Yet no rope is needed at all and the elephant won't even try to escape. Why? Because it has over-learned that escaping the restraint is impossible. Not only this, but this highly intelligent animal starts to submit to the overall authority of its master in everything it does. That's why elephants can be led around with tiny ropes, eat apples next to trainers and be ridden like giant ponies. In essence, the elephant has learned that it is helpless, it cannot escape and it must submit to the will of its master.

This fact of animal behavior would just be an interesting and sad fact, if it didn't hit so close to home. But the truth is more tragic, because "the elephant syndrome" doesn't just effect elephants, it effects people too. We too are conditioned by, and often captive of, fears, sins, neglect and shame that we suffered in the past. Though what we suffered is now over, we often remain chained to a diminished sense of who we are now in the present. This happens to individuals and to communities. I saw a great interview this week with a guy names J.D. Vance, he wrote a best-selling memoir "Hillbilly Elegy," about how growing up in a working poor family in Appalachia chained him in a dozen different ways to poverty and dysfunction. The heroic part, though, was not that he survived this terrible upbringing, it was that he refused to remain chained to poverty, addiction, and fatalism once he grew up and sensed he could wander free of it.

I believe that the Armenian Church, though we have made progress, is still chained in significant ways by our experience of Genocide. That because we were near victims of ethnic extinction, we have over-learned the threat to our ethnic survival. What was once an understandable response of protection; that the church must maintain language & culture as a first priority, that we must marry in the tribe, that the church is only for Armenians...these are now often chains which can keep us from being all God calls us to be as a church in a totally different world than our ancestors. And instead of charging boldly forward on the main mission our church has always had, which is bringing the love of Christ to any and every one, we tend to stay chained to our ethnic circle. We do sometimes act as if the Armenian Church is only for Armenians. We sometimes act as if speaking Armenian is as important as speaking about Christ. We sometimes act as if the only thing the Armenian Church has to give the world is our horror story of Genocide instead of a unique witness to how Christ the savior and blessing of all people, has saved and blessed this particular people.

So what makes the difference between the individual or group that remains chained to a difficult past, and the one who rises beyond it? The one who opens their Bible and takes to heart today's epistle reading from Romans, arguably Paul's greatest. In it he exposes the source of evil power, back from the days of Adam and Eve, that seduces and reduces us to being less than we might be; that holds us captive. But Paul assures us that as Christians we are much stronger than the chains which hold us, whatever they might be. We have been set "free from the law of sin and death," Paul says, and there is "no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." Even though the enemy of our soul would have us believe that we must huddle together, look inward and protect what little we have, today Paul exposes the elephant in the room; and it is us! "For freedom Christ has set us free;" Paul says in Galatians "stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Gal 5:1

My prayer today is that whatever chains keep you and I believing that we can only be so much, may those chains be broken by Christ, in whom we are all set free. For we are all called as individuals and church to be much much greater than what we think we could be; now and always; amen.