

The scene has been played out in hundreds of old movies and TV shows: Someone has gone missing. But then a note arrives with the words formed out of letters cut out of magazines and newspapers glued to a page. The note demands a large sum of money, and, in return, the missing person will be released safe -- if not a bit unsound and unnerved.

The truth is, however, that the multi-letter, glued-together ransom note is really more Hollywood than history. Looking at some of the most infamous kidnapping cases that have actually happened (like the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby) we discover that most high-profile ransom notes were handwritten, hastily scrawled for maximum timeliness and impact. Of course, that was before the advent of the personal computer, and now it's possible to send a ransom note without needing any paper at all.

In fact, nowadays a ransom note might actually be found on your computer itself. Criminals have discovered that often what's most important to us isn't just the people we care about, but also the data we store. A new generation of digital kidnapers now can abduct data in a computer through the sneaky installation of special software. They then demand a ransom from the computer's owner before releasing control of the data back to them. It's called "ransomware" and it's a major crime in our digitally connected world.

It works something like this: you get an e-mail or visit a website, which looks innocent enough, but when you click on an attachment, or navigate around the website, it releases the ransomware virus into your computer's operating system. The ransomware either encrypts all your files, making them inaccessible to you, or it locks your home screen. A pop-up message then appears that states that it will cost you some money to regain access and control of your computer.

Now despite the existence of anti-virus software, and other digital protective measures, we know that we're all vulnerable to this kind of cyber kidnapping. But

if this kind of hijacking of our lives can happen online, the Bible also tells us that our lives are even more vulnerable to abduction by sinister forces. The ransomware we know as *sin* can infect all of us, and we cannot be free of it unless an expert helps us get it out of our system.

This morning in our Gospel story, James and John don't realize that they are infected with a virus. And the particular virus that they are sick with, that threatens to lock up their lives and bring their spiritual lives to a frozen halt, is pride and ambition. They come to Jesus, not with a request, but with a demand: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you!" "What is it that you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks. It's then that their pride and ambition are revealed: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Jesus, of course, knows that, if this sort of attitude infects James, John, it could spread to the other disciples, and it would totally freeze their spiritual life, and hinder any opportunity for them to be of service in the kingdom of God. So... Jesus isn't buying what they're selling. He says, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" "We are," they reply.

"The cup that I drink, you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." Then Jesus explains how he, himself, will offer his life as a "ransom" in order to unfreeze, unlock, bring to life, and rescue those whose lives are mired in, stuck in, frozen in sin.

Of course, the other 10 disciples upon hearing James and John's request were "indignant" outraged about the exchange that just took place, and most likely because they hadn't thought of the scheme first. But Jesus, the expert, pulls them all aside, and begins to talk about the problem of sinful pride that's been infecting

them all. "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them."

It is those in power, in other words, who tend to hold people hostage, requiring much more from them while giving little or nothing in return. "But it is not so among you," says Jesus to his disciples. "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

As disciples of Christ, we must always try to remember that those who follow Jesus should not hold others hostage to their ambition and personal gain. Instead, they are to pay dearly on behalf of others, giving of themselves, and their resources, to serve others. It's the paradoxical economics of Jesus: You only gain when you give away, which then leads Jesus to explain what he will be giving away: *his very life*. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a *ransom* for many."

This is, of course, a foreshadowing of what Jesus will do on the cross. He will address the problem of a people whose lives are locked and encrypted because of sin, by paying the ransom permanently, and doing a total system reboot that will keep them clean and secure forever! And although it is a steep price for him to pay, the result is a scrubbing of our internal data, and a redeeming of our sinful past, thus making it possible for us to run effectively the software of love and grace he installs in us when we follow him.

It's no coincidence then, that this theme of the cross as a ransom is prevalent throughout the New Testament. In *1 Timothy Chapter 2*, Paul makes it plain that there is only one who mediates between God and humankind, bridging the gap in the relationship caused by the virus of sin: "Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for all." Elsewhere, Paul reminds us that we were "bought with

a price" and that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us."

The death of Jesus on the cross reboots us with his divine operating system, which is based on sacrificial love. We no longer need to keep paying for the debt of sin in our lives, because it's been canceled. We are set free to operate and work as God designed us to function; to give our lives on behalf of others so that they, too, may experience the freedom and new life offered to them by Jesus Christ.

So...what are some of the things that threaten to lock up our lives? What brings our lives to a complete halt? What causes a total freeze of our love and affection for the things of God, and the welfare of others? For James and John, it was their ambition and pride. Thinking only of themselves, they sought to gain a position in the kingdom that would elevate them even above their own companions on their discipleship journey.

Perhaps we might get ideas about the things that lock up our lives if we consider the classic "seven deadly sins." For some, it is avarice that shuts down, not only our spirituality, but our humanity. For others, it is lust that ruins relationships. Some find that envy and jealousy eat away their inner lives until they are raw and bleeding. Others are too lazy to care one way or the other. Perhaps it is anger, and an abusive and controlling personality, that keeps your life frozen and dysfunctional. Whatever it is, if the gospel is anything, it is about being freed from the things that lock us up. It is about being set free! It is about being released to a new life!

Technology experts tell us that one of the ways to prevent being infected by ransomware is to make sure that we have installed security software, and to make sure that it, and all our software, is always up to date. Keeping things updated ensures that our system hasn't been allowed to develop holes that hackers can

exploit. That's good advice for our spiritual lives as well. Which begs the question, what can we do to prevent our spiritual lives from freezing up?

First we should do our best to try and **stay in God's word**. The writer of Psalm 119 wrote: "How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to Your word." In that same psalm we read, "Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path."

Prayer is another thing that can help us stay unlocked. When worry and anxiety tie us up in knots, we're instructed to pray: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Notice the "guarding" function of the peace of Christ! The peace of Jesus Christ guards us, protects us from the viruses of sin that threaten us.

A third idea involves **Community**. We find strength in numbers! It's no accident that those who are in AA go to weekly meetings. It is a key to their sobriety. Likewise, the Bible reminds us "to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another."

Many of us, if not all of us, have a personal computer or laptop, and, no doubt, every one of us has most likely experienced a frozen screen, blue screen of death, or a total lockdown. And those who have experienced this will understand the absolute frustration, and even feelings of rage, when it happens.

The message that we can cling to when something similar occurs in our spiritual lives is one of hope! And being that only a techie or an IT specialist can unlock a computer screen, we should consider that Jesus, as a "ransom for many" does something so much more meaningful for us each and every single day.

Through the sacrificial outpouring of his love, and his grace on the cross, he is able to unlock and gives us back our lives! And thanks be to God for that! Amen.