

Freedom

I saw a movie the other day about a husband and wife whose 15 year old daughter died in a car crash.

The father could never bring himself to visit her grave, until his best friend died and was buried near the child.

When the man went to his daughter's grave, he saw that his wife had also put up a tombstone for the two of them, with their names and birth days listed, only the dates of death were left blank.

This infuriated the husband, who stormed home and demanded from his wife an explanation because, as he yelled: "I'm not dead yet!"

When the bishop asked me to talk about money to our various parishes, it occurred to me that whenever I think about money - particularly giving it away - it always helps me to be more generous when I realize that but for the grace of God, who am I, but a walking pile of future dirt?

A point we try to drive home to our youngsters each Halloween night when we visit the graveyard for some prayers.

Paying attention to who we actually are, to the limited time we have here, to our inevitable destiny of ashes to ashes, dust to dust, arouses in some folks real panic and anxiety, like that dad at the graveyard; in others massive walls of defense shoot up, as I noticed in some of my parish talks.

But Jesus knows full well that the facts about who and what we really are, are the keys to freedom, keys that open every door, not only to a fearless death, but to a fearless life as well.

I say this to you because perhaps our readings today are asking us to wrestle with this stuff.

Paul announces:

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm and do not submit to a yoke of slavery. For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters.”
Gal 5:1;13.

But freedom demands a confrontation with the things that enslave us!

And Paul has his finger on that pulse as he talks to us about “flesh” and “spirit.”

When Paul talks about the “flesh” he’s not referring to our bodies – even though so many of us have been taught just that – a way of thinking that ends up with people hating themselves, being at war with their emotions and feelings and mistakes.

That misunderstanding of Paul has led to centuries of people thinking Paul is telling us to deny sensation, emotion, sexuality, romantic love: which, if you follow that logic, too often turns people into angry, judgmental, dried up and bitter prunes.

But that’s not where Paul is coming from at all.

When Paul talks about the “flesh,” he’s talking about life lived within the prevailing culture, a life that accepts the status quo, that treats as “holy” the norms of whatever society we happen to be born into.

And Paul rightly sees that kind of life as nothing more than slavery, because no matter the century you’re born in or the nation or your economic status, it’s a life that always separates people into “us against them,” “insiders and outsiders,” “the saved and the damned.”

It's a life where conflict and war are inevitable because all of life is seen through the eyes of scarcity, rather than the incredible abundance that is God's creation.

It's a life where guilt and shame and fear and anger rule the day, because, we all know, that's the only way to keep the peace.

But Paul, having been blinded by Jesus after being knocked flat on his backside, has come to see that in Jesus, the life God wishes for us is completely different from the status quo we reinvent with every generation.

In Jesus, there is no more competition, there is no more rivalry, not between our fellow humans, nor between people and God.

In Jesus, the greatest rivalry, that rivalry between death and life, is eliminated, conquered, overcome, so that we may come face to face with one another, and with God, without an ounce of fear or worry or anxiety.

But for the grace of God, I am a walking pile of future dirt.

But there it is: the grace of God!

In Jesus, we finally meet the God who is not "concerned with the inevitable mistakes you will make, who knows that perfectionism is the enemy of learning and growing, that God wants you to be able to discover for yourself what is good for you, and what you will make of the adventure that is this life!" J. Alison, paraphrased.

This is God's freedom, and it grows directly from the good soil of real love.

In one of the gospels that didn't make it into the official canon, Jesus is quoted as saying: "Don't make any more rules other than the one I have given you."

Jesus knows we love our rules because rules create that world “according to the flesh” since with rules we exclude and judge and dismiss.

But Jesus gives us only one rule: Love one another as I have loved you.

And here’s the thing, how we love one another is directly related to how we love ourselves.

Indeed, “how we relate to someone we love . . . is a mirror of how we relate to ourselves.” John Welwood.

If I’m irritated, confrontational or moody with the one I love, chances are I’m treating myself the same way.

Which is not only painful, it’s exhausting — and it happens especially when I believe love is something that I create, that I give, that I control.

But Paul is saying, Jesus is saying, that love doesn’t come from me, it comes from a source that is always there, ready for me to tap into it.

And when I tap into the source of love, the irritation, confrontation and moodiness fall away, because I can at long last step out of my own way and into the Flow, which some of us call God.

From that place of release and letting go, we get an entirely new perspective about what relationships and love are actually all about.

We come to see “that relationships are not only places where we may be comforted and consoled, they are also the very place where we can confront our deepest needs to grow and change.

Embracing relationship as a path to growth transforms the inevitable difficulties that arise in every relationship into opportunities to stretch

ourselves, to connect more deeply, not just with a partner, but with ourselves, and with the wider community too." Id.

When the old priest told the rich woman that "love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing, compared to love in dreams," he said so because the essential point of love is to be transformed, to be changed.

To quote that wonderful neighbor in the long sleeved sweater, Mr. Rogers: "this change begins when we strive to accept the other person exactly the way he or she is, right here and right now."

Notice the word is "strive" — for quite often that's the best we can do!

"That moment when we say, I accept you — even though being with you is awfully hard right now — that's love." R. Rohr

"For our relationships to flourish, we need to see them in a new way — as a series of opportunities to develop greater awareness, to discover deeper truth, to become more fully human.

That's why deep friendships, family, sexual intimacy, marriage — are such gifts from God.

They are gifts that don't so much solve our problems as they reveal the very problems we need to face in order to enter into God's freedom, because they give us the daily opportunity to try — once again!" J. Welwood, paraphrased.

It's often said that freedom is not free.

We hear that usually at remembrances of wars fought and battles won.

But the freedom of Jesus is also not free.

It comes at the price of a willingness to let go, to let things be, to trust in the absolute fidelity and compassion of God.

And while our human notions of freedom usually result only in more division, separation and alienation, (just look at the world since the end of the so-called "great war"!); God's freedom gives gifts of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Galatians 5:25

And who isn't longing for these?

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