

Freedom and Death

Today's readings take us to perhaps the most important intersection in our Christian life.

They take us to the intersection of freedom and death.

And they tell us, in no uncertain terms, that freedom and death are two sides of the same coin.

It's why we begin every baptism class by asking:

"So you want to be baptized?

Are you ready to die?"

Because the Christian life, contrary to what passes for Christianity these days, requires a renunciation of, even a dying to — the way things are.

And as human beings who are hardwired to embrace the status quo, to embrace tribes and "me first," rejecting those things feels like dying.

Yet, in that dying, the first glimmers of real freedom begin to shine.

The bottom line of our faith is that "but for the grace of God, I am nothing more than a walking pile of future dirt!"

But for the grace of God, there is only death.

But because of the grace of God, we are already freed from our slavery to the way things seem to be!

Paul announces:

“For freedom Christ has set us free.

Stand firm and do not submit to a yoke of slavery.

For you are called to freedom, brothers and sisters.” Gal. 5:1;13.

And yet, that freedom necessarily creates conflict with the things that enslave us!

Paul describes it as a conflict between “flesh” and “spirit.”

But let’s be clear with our terms.

When Paul talks about the “flesh,” he’s not talking about our bodies - although many of us have been taught just that.

That mistaken way of thinking ends up making people hate themselves.

It has folks at war with their emotions, feelings – and their mistakes.

That kind of thinking leads to centuries of people thinking Paul is telling us to deny sensation, emotion, sexuality, and romantic love.

Which, if you follow through on that can turn you into an angry, judgmental, dried up, and bitter prune.

But that’s not where Paul is coming from.

When Paul talks about the “flesh,” he’s talking about life lived within the prevailing culture.

A life that embraces the status quo.

A life that treats the norms of society as sacred, holy and eternal.

And Paul rightly sees that this kind of life is the very definition of slavery.

Because no matter the century you're born in or the nation or your economic status, that life is always separating people into "us against them."

It's a life where competition is inevitable because all of life is seen through the lens of scarcity.

It's a life where guilt and shame, fear and anger, rule the day, because, as they say, "might makes right" and "peace only comes through strength."

But Jesus, according to Paul, opens the door to an entirely new way of living life.

A life where cooperation, not competition, prevails.

Paul comes to see that in Jesus, the life God wishes for us is completely different from the status quo we reinvent in every generation.

In Jesus, there is no more rivalry.

Not between people.

Not between people and God.

In fact, in Jesus, the greatest rivalry, the rivalry between life and death, is finished.

Allowing us to encounter one another, and God, without fear or worry or anxiety.

But for the grace of God, I am nothing but a walking pile of future dirt.

But there it is!

The grace of God!

In Jesus, we discover the God who is not "concerned with the inevitable mistakes we all make.

Who knows that perfection is the enemy of learning and growing.

That God wants us to be able to discover for ourselves what is good and proper.

That God wants us to discover what we shall make of the adventure that is this life!" J. Alison, paraphrased.

This is God's freedom.

It grows from the good soil of love.

In one of the gospels (that didn't make it into the official canon), Jesus says:

"Don't make any more rules other than the one I gave you."

Jesus knows we love our rules.

Rules create that world “according to the flesh.”

That’s because, with rules, we get to exclude and judge and dismiss.

But Jesus has just one rule:

“Love one another — as I have loved you.”

And here’s the thing, how we love one another — looks exactly like how we love ourselves.

“How we relate to someone we love . . . it’s a mirror of how we relate to ourselves.” John Welwood, modified.

If I’m uptight, bossy and moody with the ones I love, chances are — I’m uptight, moody and bossy with me!

Which is painful — and exhausting!

And it happens especially when I believe that love is something that I create.

That I give.

That I control.

But Jesus says, love doesn’t come from you.

It comes from a Source that is always there.

Just waiting for us to step into it.

And when I recognize the source of love, amazingly, the uptightness, bossiness and moodiness fall away, because I can at long last step out of my own way and step into the Flow, who is also known as God.

From that place of letting go, we get an entirely new perspective on the whole point and purpose of relationships.

We discover "that relationships aren't just places where we can find comfort and consolation.

Relationships are the very place where we can (and must) confront our deepest needs to grow and change.

Embracing relationship as a path to growth and change transforms the everyday difficulties that arise in every relationship into opportunities to stretch.

To blossom.

To connect.

Not just with a partner.

But with ourselves.

And, with the wider community too." Id.

When Dostoevsky's old priest tells the rich woman that "love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing," he says so because the essential point of love is transformation.

Metamorphosis.

Change.

To quote Mr. Rogers: "this change begins when we strive to accept the other person — exactly the way they are.

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 really 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 truths.

To become more fully human.

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

They're gifts that don't **solve** our problems — they're gifts which **reveal the problems** we need to face in order to enter into God's freedom.

Because, they give us the daily opportunity to try – and try again!”
J. Welwood, paraphrased.

It's often said that freedom isn't free.

We usually hear that when wars are being rationalized, or when bloated military budgets are being justified.

But truth be told, the freedom Jesus offers isn't free either.

Its' price isn't paid in money or violence.

Its' price is paid in the willingness to die.

To ego.

To “me first.”

To “my way or the highway.”

We do that by letting go.

By letting things be.

Trusting in God's overflowing mercy.

Our human notions of freedom usually result in division, separation and alienation.

Just take a gander at the evening news, where “freedom” is so often defined as my ability to trample on you.

To own an assault rifle even at the expense of slaughtered children.

To refuse baking a cake for couples I don't approve of, and so on.

That's what freedom means when one has not yet died to self.

It's a freedom that often alienates and undermines.

But God's freedom?

It's an explosion of "love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Galatians 5:25.

As I take my leave from you for a couple of months, may God's freedom – invade your life!

Fill your heart!

And blow your mind!

+amen