

True Freedom Comes through the Word

July 13, 2014

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Isaiah 55.10-11;

Romans 8.18-23;

Matthew 13.1-23

By David Mills

One night on the New York City subway, two young friends reported, a middle-aged, nicely dressed woman got on the train and standing in the aisle began preaching a restrained fire-and-brimstone sermon. She spoke calmly, almost flatly, they said, and spoke mostly about repentance and grace rather than judgment and damnation. Though one woman nodded her head and quietly said “Amen,” most people either ignored her or looked embarrassed, and a few made rude remarks.

The subway evangelist got off the train a few stops later. As she left, my friends noticed above the door an ad for the bestselling pop psychologist Andrew Weil’s new book, *Spontaneous Happiness*. According to the publisher’s description, Weil teaches that “true satisfaction and well-being come only from within.”

Which sounds great. It sounds like good news. You can make yourself happy, without having to submit to any religious authority or do anything you really don’t want to. You’re free, and the sky’s the limit. It’s a gospel, a statement of good news, and one that appeals. Hence the book’s sales.

But of course this “from within” also means that if you can’t do it yourself, it’s your own fault, even your own most grievous fault. You’ve got happiness somewhere within you and you’re just not pulling it out. You can’t pull it out or you won’t pull it out, but in either case you’re stuck, trapped, sinking in quicksand. And no one can help you because no one else can reach within you. That message cruelly says you are free when you know from experience that you are not free. It’s also the world’s main gospel and so well proclaimed that even Christians confuse it with grace.

Something Wrong with the Universe

Things went very bad for man very early. And not just for man, but as Saint Paul says, things went bad for the whole creation, now enslaved and suffering. The biblical story is that we had it all, and we threw it away.

Quacks like Weil aside, we all know something’s wrong with the universe and with us. Small children are tortured to death by horrible diseases. Tyrants set up police states. We enjoy being unkind to the grocery clerk and saying mean things about a neighbor. We tell ourselves that today we’re going to live like Mother Theresa and then find ourselves acting like Josef Stalin. At our better moments we feel this as bondage, as slavery.

Too often we are the path the seed — the Word of God — can’t penetrate, or the rocky ground that can’t sustain it, or the thorns that choke it. Sometimes we are blessed to be the good soil that receives the seed and in which it grows and bears fruit. But not always. Look at Saint Peter, alternately Jesus’ bold and brave disciple and a coward who betrays him. He was us: in Chesterton’s words, “a shuffler, a snob, a coward — in a word, a man.”

Sitting in the pew at Mass, listening to the gospel reading, we tend to think of ourselves as good soil. We could be sleeping in, or playing golf, or reading the Sunday paper in the coffee shop, and here we are at Mass. The next day we find we are sinners, despite our best intentions.

“We try, when we wake, to lay the new day at God’s feet,” C. S. Lewis wrote in *The Problem of Pain*, but “before we have finished shaving, it becomes our day and God’s share in it is felt as a tribute which we must pay out of ‘our own’ pocket, a deduction from the time which ought, we feel, to be ‘our own.’”

“All day long, and all the days of our life,” he concluded, “we are sliding, slipping, falling away — as if God were, to our present consciousness, a smooth inclined plane on which there is no resting.” By “smooth,” he meant “slick” or “slippery” or “covered with oil.” Left on your own, you’re going down.

Even Saint Paul admitted in his letter to the Romans, “I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.” Referring to this verse, Benedict XVI explains this as “the expression of the alienation of human beings, of the destruction of our freedom, the circumstances of our being because of original sin.” Under sin and on our own, though we are seemingly free to act as we please, we do not know and cannot be who we truly are.

The Word of God Tells Us Who We Are

Only the Word of God — Christ the Word and the words of God conveyed to us in scripture and Sacred Tradition — brings freedom because only it tells us who we are, both who we are now and who we truly are in Christ, and offers us the help we need to stop being who we are now and to be who we truly are in Christ. True freedom isn’t the ability to do whatever we want because nothing’s stopping us, but the ability to be the kind of person God created us to be because we’ve been freed from slavery to our sins. Freedom, Pope Benedict explains, quoting Saint Paul,

is never identified with licentiousness, nor with the possibility to choose evil, but rather with “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control” (Galatians 5:22). This is true freedom: actually to be able to follow our desire for good, for true joy, for communion with God and to be free from the oppression of circumstances that pull us in other directions.

Pope Francis put it this way: “What does freedom mean? It is certainly not doing whatever you want, allowing yourself to be dominated by the passions, to pass from one experience to another without discernment, to follow the fashions of the day; freedom does not mean, so to speak, throwing everything that you don’t like out the window. . . . This is freedom: to have the courage to make these decisions with generosity.”

Pilate famously pointed at Jesus and said, “Behold the Man,” having no idea that he was saying far more than he intended. As *Gaudium et spes* puts it, “[O]nly in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. . . . Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”

Unavailable to Ourselves

In the late 1960s, a young man from Long Island named Jimmy Slattery turned himself into Candy Darling and became a transvestite star of Andy Warhol’s famous Factory. He earned a small fame in the sixties, as one of the subjects of Lou Reed’s hit “Walk on the Wild Side,” and was mentioned by the Rolling Stones in one of their songs.

An admiring recent documentary called *Beautiful Darling* ends with a quote from Slattery’s diaries: “You must always be yourself no matter what the price. It is the highest form of morality.” That is what the viewer is supposed to admire in the young man.

The problem is that, as Saint Augustine noted in the *Confessions*, we are unavailable to ourselves. We don’t know who we are. We put on the wrong clothes. We like wearing the wrong clothes. We can’t keep wearing the right clothes because we don’t like the way they feel.

One gains something by putting on other clothes. Slattery gained a degree of fame and fortune. A younger Jimmy Slattery with a girlfriend would never have seen the inside of the Factory or found himself immortalized (or pseudo-immortalized) by Lou Reed and the Rolling Stones.

But there's a loss as well – not that everyone recognizes the loss. Slattery doesn't seem to have seen it, though he described it hauntingly. In a letter written on his deathbed to Warhol and his circle, he wrote, "Unfortunately before my death I had no desire left for life. . . . I am just so bored by everything. You might say bored to death. [D]id you know I couldn't last? I always knew it."

Freedom through Friendship with Christ

The Word, speaking through the words of God in scripture and Sacred Tradition, tells us who we are now and offers us the way to be who we truly are. Christ reveals man to himself, not just generically but particularly. He reveals you to yourself. If you truly want to know who you are, look at Jesus, and imitate him as best you can, and read the scriptures and follow them as best you can.

Any small effort to do what Jesus did and what scripture requires helps you see who you are now (not nearly as great a guy as you thought), and makes you a tiny bit more who you truly are (someone God loves and will change). Taking up your cross, following him, losing your life for his sake are all modes of self-knowledge.

"Are we not perhaps all afraid in some way?" Benedict asks. "If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom?"

That is what we naturally fear, thinking freedom simply the absence of restraint. Benedict emphatically rejects this. "No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide."

Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation. And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ, and you will find true life.

That fire-and-brimstone lady may annoy people on the subway, but she's also telling them they're not on their own, that they've got a friend in high places, that they can find themselves and live freely. She, not the Andrew Weils of the world, is the one who's telling them how they can really find happiness. "Only the person who entrusts himself totally to God finds true freedom, the great, creative immensity of the freedom of good," Benedict explains.

The person who turns to God does not become smaller but greater, for through God and with God he becomes great, he becomes divine, he becomes truly himself. Freedom is not an opting out. It is an opting in – a participation in Being itself. Hence authentic freedom can never be attained by turning away from God. Such a choice would ultimately disregard the very truth we need in order to understand ourselves.

David Mills, former executive editor of *First Things*, is a writer and editor. His weblog can be found at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidmills>.

FOR FURTHER READING

Benedict XVI, Homily at the Inauguration of the Pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI (April 24, 2005), available at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/documents

Benedict XVI, Homily at Yankee Stadium (April 20, 2008), available at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi

Benedict XVI, General Audience (May 16, 2012), available at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2012/documents/

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1730-1748, available at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/

Francis, Address (May 4, 2013), available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/>

John Paul II, "Christ Reveals Man to Himself," available at: <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/>

IN SHORT . . .

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- ***The Word of God brings freedom because it tells us both who we are now and who we truly are in Christ.***
- ***Any small effort to do what Jesus did and what scripture requires helps me see who I am now (not as great as I thought), and makes me a tiny bit more who I truly am (someone God loves and will change).***
- ***This is true freedom: actually to be able to follow our desire for good, for true joy, for communion with God, and to be free from the oppression of circumstances that pull us in other directions.***