

Preaching Discipleship: The Terrifying Freedom of the Gospel

In the last few weeks, the people of Egypt have gotten a refreshing breath of freedom with the resignation of their *de facto* dictator, Hosni Mubarak. But along with that freedom comes a great deal of change and uncertainty. Freedom can sometimes overwhelm people. In the grief study and support groups that I facilitate through the church, I have learned just how unsettling freedom can sometimes be.

In her excellent book on long-term grief, the author, Elizabeth Neeld, describes her sudden encounter with such unsettling freedom soon after the untimely death of her husband. While packing some boxes of her late husband's things, Elizabeth came across a quote from one of Jean-Paul Sartre's plays. The sentence that jumped out at her was this: "Freedom crashed down on me and swept me off my feet." When she read that quote, a sort of light bulb came on, but what it illuminated was not comforting. She describes her reaction: "When I read this, I finally understood the aftermath of Greg's death: Freedom *had* crashed down on me." Then she goes on to reflect on this enlightenment.

"Until Greg died, my life had a particular purpose and direction. After he died, I was free – within the bounds of my abilities and my resources – to do anything, live anywhere, act in any way. But this was a freedom that I despised, a freedom that I didn't want, a freedom that frightened me. For this freedom was also a form of emptiness, of nothingness. The freedom provided only openness; it offered no structure. And without structure, without some specific shape, I was dangling out in nowhere. I experienced, as Sartre's character said, a freedom that had 'swept me off my feet.'" (*7 Choices* by Elizabeth Neeld; Warner Books, 2003; page 168.)

This week as I pondered this portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, I began to question: how are these texts liberating? The truth is that after literally sleeping with the text for a couple of weeks, I had become overwhelmed with the commands of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and especially in today's text: make no vows; turn the other cheek; love your enemy. With my background in the military and my experience of combat in the Vietnam War, I can only testify to the many ways in which I have intentionally and boldly violated all three of these commands of Jesus. You know what I mean? Tired of being overwhelmed, condemned even, I asked a fresh question of the text: how do these commands of Jesus liberate us?

I suggest to you today, that these commands of Jesus liberate us in three ways. ONE: they free us from having to make compromises with evil. TWO: they free us from always having to be in control of not only all our own life, but that of others as well. And THREE: they free us from the anxiety of always having to keep score on how we are doing in the eyes of the church, and in the eyes of God. Do you think it might be good to be free of these things?

It was the late German Lutheran Theologian, Dr. Leonard Goppelt, whose *Theology of the New Testament* stated the obvious to me: namely that Jesus was referring in these texts to the ways in which God's people had compromised God's Law to account for the evil ever present in their lives. Over against such compromise with evil, Jesus takes a hard line. Jesus was essentially saying: "Since there is evil in the world, it is said, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But even though there is evil in the world, I say to you, do not swear at all." And, "Since there is evil in the world, it is said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But even though there is evil in

the world, I say to you, Do not retaliate against an evil doer.” And, “Since there is evil in the world, it is said ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But even though there is evil in the world, I say to you Love your enemies.” (*Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. 1, Eerdmans, 1981, pp. 98-105)

Disciples do not compromise with evil. Disciples really do not have to compromise with evil. The cross and the empty tomb are all the proof we need that evil has been robbed of its victory over good. Although evil still limps around in the world and in our society and in our own lives, with plenty of power to do serious mischief, evil does not and will not get the last word – Jesus’ cross and empty tomb testify to that! Disciples of Jesus Christ need not fear evil. Disciples of Jesus Christ can trust God to deal fully and finally with evil. Disciples of Jesus Christ are to make no compromise with evil. Disciples are liberated from oath taking. Every word that comes out of disciples’ mouths should be true. Disciples are liberated from retaliation; never returning evil for evil, but rather returning blessing for evil. Disciples are liberated from hatred, because their experience of God’s love in their lives has shown them the power of love over hatred and even evil. To be a disciple is to be free from having to accommodate evil. To be a disciple is to live in that terrifying freedom, the freedom of the Gospel.

That next thing that these texts liberate us from is having to be in control of everything, which seems to me to challenge the human ego. I know something about the human ego, I have a great big, sensitive one, and because it has always been joined to a relatively small human body, it has grown into Napoleonic proportions. So I know! The ego wants to be in control, the ego needs to be in control, the ego will find a way to be in control. But over against the wants and the needs and the will of the ego, come Jesus’ commands. Again, Jesus might have stated his commands this way. “Because you want to be in control it is said ‘Do not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But because God is in control I say to you Do not swear at all.” And, “Because you want to be in control it is said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But because God is in control I say to you Do not resist an evil doer.” And, “Because you want to be in control it is said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But because God is in control I say to you Love your enemies.”

And so the commands of Jesus challenge that which is most fundamental about human beings, the human ego. The commands of Jesus set disciples apart, utterly apart from non-disciples. Disciples of Jesus Christ want to let God be in control of their lives. Disciples seek in multiple ways to let God be in control of their lives. Therefore, disciples lead lives of prayer. Disciples are students of the scriptures. Disciples depend upon dialogue with and support from the community of disciples, all in order to let God be in control of their lives. To be a disciple is to be free from having to be in control and on guard all the time. So again the disciple confronts that terrifying freedom, the freedom of the Gospel.

And finally, these texts liberate us from keeping score of our efforts to comply with the rules of religion. In this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was confronting how the people of God had made God’s Law into a sort of point system that then allowed them to calculate how well they were doing in keeping the law – an altogether quantitative approach the religious life. Over against that Jesus commands an altogether qualitative transformation in people, an incalculable way of being that implies a deep transformation of the human heart. Therefore Jesus might have put his commands this way. “So that you can keep score on how well you’re doing trying to be good, it is said ‘Do not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But because I have given you my Spirit, I say to you, Do not swear at all.” And, “So that you can keep score on how well you’re doing to try to be good, it is said ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But because I have given you my Spirit, I say to you, Do not retaliate against an evil doer.” And, “So that you can keep score on how well you’re doing to try and be good, it is said ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But because I have given you my Spirit, I say to you, Love your enemies.”

Disciples of Jesus Christ want to be totally transformed by the power of God’s Spirit within them. Disciples of Jesus Christ seek a way of being that in and of itself meets all the requirements of the

Law of God. Disciples of Jesus Christ live in and rely utterly upon the love of God in Christ in order to be able to demonstrate that exact same love to the rest of the world. Last week in his sermon on the first part of these texts, Pen contrasted Law with Grace. This week, perhaps we would do well to contrast Law with Love. Disciples of Jesus Christ are loved by God, know God's love, receive and are nourished by God's love; and so disciples of Jesus Christ are free to extend that love freely and utterly to others – ALL others! So there it is again: the terrifying freedom of the Gospel. Which brings us to how to deal with this terrifying freedom of the Gospel.

My Franciscan friend and brother, Father Richard Rohr has said "Real change never comes easily. It always feels like dying. All we can really do is get out of the way by not being so defensive, so overprotective of our opinions, our nation, our religion, our gender. These are just labels, and they are all passing away. All we can really do is to *stop stopping the natural process of (spiritual) growth, and trust a larger purpose.*" (from How Men Change: A Thin Time (DC, DVD, MP3) The addition of "spiritual" is mine. The italics are Fr. Rohr's.) Yes, it feels like dying indeed. For this reason Jesus said for us to take up our cross daily and follow him. Even so, Paul the Apostle framed his life in Christ by saying that he had died with Christ and risen with him to new life. Paul even liked to say that it was no longer Paul who lived but Christ who lived in him! This "getting out of the way" spoken of by Richard Rohr is a sort of dying, all in order to live, to live a new life, a life free from having to compromise anymore with evil; a life free from have to be constantly in control and on guard; a life free from ever having to keep score of how good we're doing any more.

If, as Elizabeth Neeld has said, this freedom feels like "dangling out in nowhere," there is no doubt about it that in our religious life there is required a sort of leap into darkness, a leap which is a letting go, and a leap which must be taken again and again as we go through life. But be assured it is also and always a leap into liberation, a leap into a deep and rich and full and meaningful life, even a leap into life-beyond-life. So LEAP, I say. LEAP! And one more thing I know for sure as well: that it is a whole lot easier to make this leap if we're holding hands with someone we love, and then leap together! Dare we leap, together, into the freedom of the Gospel?