

“Free for What?”

Last Sunday I preached someone else’s sermon. I was up front with what I was doing, so it was all completely above board. It was the first time I have ever preached someone else’s words as if they were my own. Sure, I often quote others in my sermons, but that’s not the same. When you quote someone else to help you make a point, the point is still yours that you are making. Last week’s sermon was not mine at all. It was Frederick Buechner’s¹. It was an interesting experience, sort of like an out of body experience for a preacher if you will. I was the one preaching the sermon, but the words were not mine, so I was able to watch the reactions. And later as I talked to several of you about the message, I felt like a neutral third party. I had not expected this experience when I planned this out a month or so ago.

Also a surprise was that I had a lot more challenging feedback than usual. One challenge I heard a few times had to do with Buechner’s recognition that far from suffering for his scrupulous behavior, Jacob actually profited from it. For those who weren’t here last week, the sermon was based on the story of Jacob from the book of Genesis. Among other things Jacob duped his older brother out of his birth right and tricked his father into giving him a blessing that, by right, belonged to his brother. The text we read is the familiar one where Jacob wrestles with a mysterious figure in the night. At the end, the figure defeats Jacob, but Jacob, hanging on for dear life, will not let the figure go until it bestows a blessing on him. Buechner’s interpretation is that until this point in life, Jacob was able to get whatever blessing he set his mind on by

¹ The sermon is entitled “The Magnificent Defeat” and can be found in his most recent collection of sermons *Secrets in the Dark : A Life in Sermons* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006).

taking advantage of those who were weaker or slower witted than he. But now he has run up against an opponent that he cannot beat, and so must beg for the blessing he wants. Likewise, Buechner's sermon implies, there are blessings that you and I can win by taking advantage of others, but there are other blessings, presumably the one's that matter most, that can only come to us as gifts.

That's all well and good, but what some pointed out is how disturbing it is that Jacob is never held to account for his scrupulous behavior. Most of his life he takes advantage of others and profits from it. In the end he learns a lesson, but his wrongs never seem to be set right. It's the old death bed dilemma: if someone can act immorally their whole life long, then simply recant on their death bed and be forgiven, what's the point of acting ethically? If the slate can simply be wiped clean, why not run up a nice healthy tab? If you have to be forgiven for a little, why not make it a lot? What's the motivation to be good?

My response to those who posed this question about the sermon was probably not very satisfying. I defended Buechner a little, saying I didn't think it was intention to condone Jacob's behavior. Rather, it that it is a reality check. Scrupulous behavior exists and it works, often quite well. We all now people like Jacob, who are glad to use whatever advantage they have to their own benefit. But I have been thinking about this since last Sunday and I think it's a fair challenge: Buechner, and the Genesis text on which the sermon is based, do raise this question and don't really provide an answer. What is the motivation, then, to be good? Why not strive to be like Jacob? That is the subject for another sermon, I concluded.

To my surprise, when I read the text for today, I discovered that this was in fact that sermon! Perhaps I shouldn't be that surprised, after-all the question is a good one, its fresh in my head, so it is natural to see what else Scripture has to say about it. I should be clear though: I am not suggesting that in today's passage, this is the burning question that Jesus is addressing. That is certainly not the case! Rather what I am suggesting is that this snippet in Jesus' ministry may give us a way to think about and respond in faith to this question about our motivation to be good.

According to Matthew Jesus is becoming more and more frustrated at this point in his ministry. The passage begins with the rhetorical question: To what shall I compare this generation? Jesus' response, which likens them to children playing some sort of call and response game in the market place, highlights their apathy. One commentator² likens the metaphor to another familiar scene: a parent beckoning their child onto the dance floor and the reluctant child declining. "Come on, won't you dance with me," Jesus seems to be asking. But no one is joining him on the floor.

Jesus is at his wits end. John, who came before him, tried using outlandish methods to convince people to join the dance. But they made excuses and didn't respond. Jesus uses a different approach, but still the people refuse to join the dance, to join this new movement, leaving Jesus wondering what it will take the people out of their seats and on the dance floor. Yet he remains hopeful saying, "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." In other words, the proof is in the putting and so if they are not convinced by his words, he knows that they will see God's kingdom through his actions. So even if we won't join him, Jesus will just keep on dancing on his own.

² Bradley Schmeling, "Living By The Word," *The Christian Century*, Vol 125, No.13, p.22.

There is a note in my study Bible that says that the word translated as deeds really is children. The translators are interpreting here to give the reader a better sense of the true meaning of the saying. But it is interesting that he uses the word “children” because shortly thereafter, still reflecting on this low point in his ministry, Jesus begins to pray, thanking God for hiding “these things” from the wise and intelligent and revealing them to young.

Jesus often holds up children as examples for his disciples. “To apprentice oneself to a child,” one author suggests, “is to learn that the world is full of wonders, a world in which nothing is simply what it seems because everything is packed with endless possibilities of usefulness and meaning. To enter that world, all you have to do is surrender your certainty that you already know what everything is and is for; all you have to do is start over again, assuming nothing and learning to approach every created thing with awe.”³

Many of us, given the chance, would probably decline the offer to start all over again. Our knowledge and experiences are hard won. And while all of us have something we might change given the chance, for many of us it would not be worth starting again from scratch. That is why we are reluctant to dance with Jesus, because we know it means forgoing so much of what we think we know about how to dance and allowing Jesus to teach us his new moves.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (New York: Cowley Publications, 1993), p 42. This quote appears in her chapter on imagination and its relationship to faith. I highly recommend the chapter!

All of this ties in very well, not only with the question stemming from last week's sermon (If grace abounds what is our motivation to do good?), but also with the independence we celebrate as a nation this weekend. For surely, the freedom that Jesus offers us is not freedom to do as we please; it is the freedom to follow in his way, which is God's way. Another way to say this is that Christian freedom is primarily "freedom for." As Paul makes clear in his letter to the Galatians, the freedom God bestows on us is not an excuse to behave however we like. It is the freedom to serve one another in love. Our motivation to do good then is quite simply to do good; not because it is the way that most benefits us, but because it is the way God has shown us and we trust God more than anything or anyone else, including even ourselves and our own self-willed inclinations.

What we need to realize, as Christians, is that when Jesus talked about freedom he talked about yokes: "Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens," he says. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart." Yoke, you may be aware, is just another word for burden. In other words, our faith isn't necessarily about making our lives any easier. It's about making them worthwhile. And that is not an effortless task. But the promise is that we will know that we are on the right path when the burdens we have to carry don't feel like burdens at all, because carrying them not only gives us great satisfaction, but we will be able to see the difference we are making all around us. Then, and maybe only then, we will begin to understand what freedom is for.

Let us pray: *Gracious God, give us such trust in your sure purpose, that we measure our lives not by what we have done or failed to do, but by our faithfulness to you; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*