

Church of the Crossroads
First Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2007
Neal MacPherson

FREEDOM'S GIFT AND BURDEN

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Luke 4:1-12

I can never hear the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness without recalling the story of *The Grand Inquisitor* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. It is found in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The setting of the story is in the city of Seville during the height of the Spanish Inquisition in the 15th century. Jesus returns to the city, appearing quietly. Yet everyone recognizes him. The people rush towards him and follow him everywhere he goes. In the words of the storyteller, "The sun of love burns in his heart, the beams of Light, Enlightenment, and Power flow from his eyes and, as they stream over people, shake their hearts with answering love." Jesus, out of compassion, proceeds to bring sight to an old man, blind since childhood, and then raises a dead girl whose coffin is being borne into the great cathedral.

It is then that the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor arrests Jesus and puts him into prison. At the heart of the story is the conversation that takes place late at night between Jesus and the Grand Inquisitor. Actually, the conversation turns out to be a monologue because the Grand Inquisitor does all the talking. The gist of the monologue is the Grand Inquisitor's argument that Jesus made the wrong choices in the wilderness. Jesus chose not to turn stones into bread, not to throw himself from the pinnacle of the Temple only to be caught in the air by angels, and not to bow down to the devil in exchange for authority over the nations of the earth. These choices were wrong, insists the Grand Inquisitor, for they were made in order to safeguard the freedom of human beings who must choose to follow Jesus freely and not because he can overpower them with miracle, mystery, and authority.

After all, says the Grand Inquisitor, freedom is a burden, simply because human beings will forever be anxious and troubled over the choices they must make. Burdened by freedom, human beings will never be happy.

The Grand Inquisitor insists that he has corrected the wrong choices Jesus made in the wilderness, and has made people happy by offering them the miracle, mystery, and authority they desire in exchange for their freedom.

Therefore, the Grand Inquisitor cannot allow Jesus to interfere. Jesus remains silent throughout the monologue, but at the end kisses the old Grand Inquisitor. The kiss, an act of compassion, does nothing to change the heart of the Grand Inquisitor, who, in the end releases Jesus into the night, warning him to never return again.

And so it was that I once again recalled the story of *The Grand Inquisitor* as I began to prepare for today's service. Dostoyevsky's story also came to mind as I recalled something that John Cobb shared about the gift and burden of freedom this past Monday morning when he spoke to a group of clergy and laity gathered at the First Methodist Church.

John Cobb, employing the philosophic thought of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, speaks of each ethical decision as an event in the life of human beings. In each event, each ethical choice, we human beings are acting out of a freedom that is built into the very nature of the universe. In each choice we face, we bring with us all our past experience and are given an opportunity to choose that which is life-giving and new and introduce it into the world. Or, we can decide to choose the option that misses the mark. Choosing the option which misses the mark is what the Christian faith has called sin.

Human freedom is both a gift and a burden. It is a gift because through it we human beings are granted a dignity and worth beyond compare. We are granted the power by which we can choose that which is life-giving and restorative in the world.

This is the gift Jesus wanted to preserve in us when he resisted those temptations in the wilderness. In his ministry, Jesus did nothing to compel others to follow him. He did not turn stones into bread. He did not perform feats that would elevate his status and notoriety. He did not choose the way of political or worldly power. Respecting the human dignity of all, he wanted others to follow him not out of compulsion, but out of their freedom.

And yet, as we well know, human freedom is also a burden, for it asks us to struggle with each choice we make, and some of those choices we

make will be not life-giving, but life-denying choices. John Ralston Saul says that each morning when we get up we must put on our ethics just as we put on our clothes, for ethical choices will confront us time and time again, and many of those choices will be difficult. Freedom, then, is not only a gift. It is also a burden.

Let us return the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. I have often thought that the choices Jesus made in the wilderness were the choices that shaped his ministry. In his ministry, he refused to approach his listeners out of position of power defined as might. He refused to dazzle his listeners through miracle and mystery. The power Jesus employed was the power of love. In love and vulnerability, he chose the way of weakness rather than the way of might. His journey led him not to a glorious throne but to a cross. Out of freedom, we may choose to follow him.

Is not this the way that God approaches us also? John Cobb says that God enters into every ethical decision we must make. Involved in all of life, God works through human beings in order to introduce that which is new and life-giving into the world. But God does not force us into making right choices. God does not take away our human freedom and dignity in the process. God's power, just as the power of Jesus, is known in love and vulnerability.

Another story comes to mind. It is the story of the King and the Maiden and was told by Søren Kierkegaard. The king, in order to win the heart of the maiden, does not approach her in all his power and finery which would only force her into submission, but instead appears before her as a beggar. The king does so in order to preserve the human dignity and freedom of the maiden. She must choose him freely out of her love for him, and not because of his power. That is how Jesus chose to approach those who gathered around him. He came in weakness and in love, as a beggar. He wants us to follow him out of our own love and freedom.

And that is how God comes to us also. God comes to us in weakness, as a beggar. As William Sloane Coffin once said, we want God to be strong so that we can be weak; but God chooses to be weak so that we can be strong.

To follow such a Jesus, and to worship such a God, my friends, will put us at odds with the world that so often worships the power that acts

quickly through force rather than through the power of God's involvement in the world which comes slowly through love. It disheartens me and probably you when the Christian church sides with the kind of political power that resorts to warfare and violence in the world. The ethical choices you and I must make on a daily basis are matched by a great ethical choice that our nation must make. This great ethical choice was clearly delineated by a military general who once said, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed." That general was Dwight D. Eisenhower, the 34th president of the United States.

In the wilderness, Jesus made choices that were life-giving and life-affirming. He made choices that would preserve the human freedom and dignity of those who would gather around him in his life and ministry. He chose not to utilize miracle, mystery, and authority in order to gain a following. Instead, he chose the way of love that would preserve the freedom and dignity of all.

Those same life-giving and life-affirming choices are ours to make also. We can choose to support the freedom, the dignity and wellbeing of others or we can choose not to do so. We can choose to uphold and increase the health of the earth or we can choose to carry on as usual. We can choose the way of excess or the way of simplicity. We can choose the way of love or we can choose the way of might. God grants us the gift of freedom so that we can choose rightly. God help us so to do. Amen.