

Freedom is to choose Jesus Christ and to follow His ways

Homily by Bishop Samuel J. Aquila, D.D.

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13th Sunday of Ordinary Time

In our readings for this weekend we hear of what true discipleship is about in terms of freely following the Lord and embracing his ways.

In the first reading from the book of Kings, we hear of the call of Elisha, the prophet. The Lord speaks to Elijah and sends him to Elisha. Elisha asks to take leave of his family. Elijah gives him that permission. He goes and says goodbye to his family and then we are told that Elisha left and followed Elijah as his attendant. Elisha had no idea what lay ahead of him, but rather he chose to freely follow Elijah and was obedient to the call God had given to him.

In the Gospel reading, we see the demand made by Jesus to be even greater. He calls three different disciples. He reminds the first, “The Son of Man has no place to lay His head.” He reminds the second, when he asks to bury his father, “Let the dead bury their dead. But you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” When the third asks Him if he can say farewell to his family, Jesus says “no one who sets his hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God.” Jesus reminds each one that he is to always keep his eyes fixed on God and doing the will of God. Jesus was consumed in following the will of the Father and He let nothing interfere with it. The disciple is one who freely chooses to follow the Lord and to live in that relationship with the Lord.

Our second reading from St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians helps us to reflect on what it means to be free and to freely choose. It is important for us today, particularly, to reflect upon the meaning of freedom, because what does freedom mean? If I were to ask each and every one of you here, “What is meant by freedom?,” how would you respond to that question? How do they differ, that is, the way that society and the world understands freedom, and the Christian view of freedom -- freedom as understood within Sacred Scripture and our tradition?

St. Paul reminds the people of Galatia, “For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery...You were called for freedom...Do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love.” This statement by Paul reveals to us and helps us begin to understand what freedom is. Freedom is rooted in the love of one’s neighbor. Freedom is rooted in doing good for others.

What does society mean by freedom? For us as Americans and especially today, freedom means being free of constraints, being free to do things. It means that I am physically free, or it can also mean individual liberties, that I am free to choose whatever I want to choose. It could mean political freedom of my participation in the political process. But Jesus tells us of the uniqueness of freedom for us as Christians, for us who believe in Him. He tells us in John 8, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

So freedom for the Christian is to choose Jesus Christ and to follow His ways. That is what freedom is. It is freedom *for*, it is not freedom *from*. It is freedom for God, freedom for good, freedom for choosing the right. And yes, we as Christians are free; we are free to choose the way of God. The “Catechism of the Catholic Church,” in defining freedom, gives somewhat of a mouthful of a definition, but it is an important definition. “Freedom is the power rooted in reason and will to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform some deliberate actions on one’s own responsibility. Human freedom... attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude.” (CCC 1731) So the way we truly become free is to choose the good. The way that we most fully become human is to always choose our God and the ways of God. When we fail to choose the good, we become slaves of evil or sin.

That is what St. Paul is speaking to in this reading. He says, “For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ but if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another.” Beware that you might kill one another, is what he is saying. He’s saying, yes you are free to do that and to become slaves to that, but true freedom is found only in loving one another. Now for us, as Christians, that means that yes, we are free in our actions to choose either a good or an evil. We are free to say “yes” to God or to say “no” to God. We must also realize that all of that has consequences. We are responsible for our actions. In that responsibility, we are always called to choose the good or we will suffer consequences if we choose the evil.

At times, evil can look and appear good. All we have to do is look at the examples in Sacred Scripture of people who exercised their freedom. When we look at the story of Adam and Eve, Eve was free to choose the apple. It appeared as a good to her. The devil tempted her and said, “You know, it’ll taste good. You will know the difference between good and evil. You’ll have the knowledge of God. You will be God.” So she saw that as a good. Now the greater good was that God had told her, “Do not eat of that tree.” By failing to choose God, the good, there were all sorts of consequences. When she ate of the apple and Adam ate of the apple, God asked “What have you done?”

When we look at the story of Cain and Abel, two brothers offering sacrifice to God, Cain sees that Abel’s sacrifice is received in a better way by God. Cain becomes jealous and envious of his brother and, yes, he is free to kill his brother or to love his brother. He chooses to kill his brother. And what does God say to him? God says to him “What have you done? Where is your brother Abel?” And what is the response Cain gives? “Am I my brother’s keeper?” He has failed in that great commandment of loving one’s neighbor which St. Paul summarizes to the people.

We can look at the story of David. David is married. He is attracted to another woman. He is free to choose. What does he choose? He chooses not only to commit adultery, but he also chooses to kill the woman’s husband to cover up his sin. Once again the prophet goes to David and says, “What have you done?” David says that he has sinned. He, at least, recognizes his sin and repents, and God chooses him as king of the people.

It is important for us to look at freedom today, particularly in all of the debates and all of the discussions that are taking place, especially around abortion and euthanasia. We, as Catholics,

understand both abortion and euthanasia to be grave evils. We understand them to be the taking of human life. Our civil laws are called to protect the common good, to protect life. All of our laws have some restraint involved within them. All of our laws have a moral element to them. To say that abortion or euthanasia is a religious belief that has no impact on society is nothing but a lie. It is faulty thinking. It is allowing people to choose an evil that directly impacts the common good, and that goes against the will of God.

We, as people, need to look at that. Oftentimes we say, “Well, you know, because society says it’s okay, it’s okay.” That is not true. All of us know what adultery does to families. All of us know that we are restrained from going up to another person and slugging that person in the mouth. There are consequences for those actions and society controls those actions, because it is a failure to love one’s neighbor. If we begin to tamper with human life and to say, “Well, this older person’s life is no longer valuable, therefore we’re free to kill her” or “This person’s suffering is so great, we’re free to kill him,” where does it stop? How do we stop it? We’re the ones determining the value of the human person. Based on that kind of thinking, one can justify Nazi Germany, one can justify an act of terrorism, because humans are free to choose to do those actions.

My sisters and brothers, if we are truly free, we will always choose the good. We will always choose the will of God. That is what it means to be a disciple. That is what it means to follow Christ, to always seek the will of the Father and not our own will. We in 2004, in the world in which we live, have a real misunderstanding of freedom. If we are truly to be free, we are to grow in holiness. We are to choose the will of God and to do good. We are to recognize that with freedom we are free for God for whom we have been created. True freedom is always found in the love of one’s neighbor as oneself. The unborn child in the womb is our neighbor; the person with Alzheimer’s or dying of cancer is our neighbor. They are innocent life and we are called to choose life for them.

As we continue with our celebration of the Eucharist this evening, I encourage us to reflect upon the words of today’s readings for us. First of all, let us reflect upon how we understand freedom. Do we understand freedom from the viewpoint of Jesus Christ or from the viewpoint of society? Who forms our concept of freedom? Do we see the connection between freedom and truth, between freedom and good, between freedom and holiness, between freedom and discipleship? My sisters and brothers, read the “Catechism of the Catholic Church” and the section on human freedom to understand more fully freedom from a Christian stance.

Second, let us also reflect upon how we are called by our God to be faithful disciples, to be a disciple like Jesus. Jesus has revealed to you and me what it means to be free. He is the one who shows us freedom. He is the one who shows us what it means to do the will of the Father. We are called to imitate His discipleship and walk in the same freedom.

Finally, let us reflect upon the words of St. Paul, “If you are guided by the Spirit you are not under the law.” Why are we not under the law if we are guided by the Spirit? Because we will always be choosing the good. We will always be choosing to love our neighbor as ourselves. If we are truly guided by the Spirit, we will walk in true freedom. May we come to know that freedom which is found in Jesus Christ and may we be His true disciples each day.