



Hands on the Plow
Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (June 26, 2022)

For freedom Christ has set us free (Galatians 5:1). But what is freedom? People today often disagree about that, and the fact that Paul has to explain freedom to the Galatians suggests it wasn't a settled question then either. Perhaps one solution is to examine the results. If the way you exercise your freedom results in the fruits of the Spirit, then it is likely to be the freedom that comes from Christ. But if the way you exercise your freedom results in the "works of the flesh," you might be acting out of selfishness, not freedom. Two questions to be asked, then, are: Is your freedom causing you to suffer in the long run? Is it impinging on others?

Let us remember that my freedom ends where your freedom begins. So, yes, it's a matter of boundaries, of respect of all involved, of honoring and promoting the greater good in all ability, honesty, and transparency, of protecting the sanctity of life, of upholding human dignity, and finally, of supporting human rights for all people.

Paul spells out the mission before us. Last week, he pointed out the power we've been given through our baptism. Now he explains that with the Spirit of God within, our lives should be different. He contrasts the work of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit. We are called to use our freedom in Christ for good, so that God can transform our lives and empower us for ministry.

So, we need to ask ourselves, in our freedom, obtained by grace through faith, how can we best honor God? How can we promote the coming of the Kingdom? How can we labor for peace and spread the news of God's love and light to our neighbors and the world?

In our distinct individuality, we all are called to love our neighbor and let the light of Christ shine through us as we listen to people in their pain and grief, as we support them in their struggle, as we speak words of kindness and offer a helping hand.

But as a church, how can we collectively address the needs of our neighbors and world? Surely, we feed the hungry and clothe the naked, we quilt, we support people in their immediate needs to keep the lights on and a bed to sleep in. What if our "youth ministry," so desired and requested, were to be off campus, helping college kids stay in college? What if we engaged in conversation with the local school district about its effort to develop a healthy emotional and intellectual program? How could Nativity be of support in the many cases of domestic abuse, affordable childcare, or afterschool supervision? And how about simple respite for overworked parents?

In the gospel, Jesus has "set his face toward Jerusalem." This section of the gospel of Luke describes Jesus' determination to complete the mission given him by the Father and, therefore, to journey towards Jerusalem where he will face rejection and torture to death. Because he is so determined, the Samaritans wouldn't host him along the way and support his mission. In the face

of this resistance, the disciples felt indignant and offered to vindicate him by commanding fire from heaven. Jesus would have none of it. Violence is not his way. (Lk 9:51-56)

There seem to be people interested in his mission, though, and want to be his disciples. Yet, they conjure up all sorts of excuses why they can't start right away. Jesus will have none of it. He's calling and he wants a straight answer now. You're in or you're out. He makes it clear that answering his call and living the life of discipleship requires no less than everything.

Discipleship is difficult. Following Jesus requires to be clear about the radicality of one's commitment: what happens to Jesus must also be expected to happen to his disciples. So, Jesus tries to drive home three points: that he has nowhere to lay his head; that the dead are left to bury their own dead; and that there is no looking back when plowing. There is no false advertising in his message. And this gospel passage in particular is hard, confrontational, demanding. It's offensive.

Jesus has nowhere to lay his head (Lk 9:58): one who follows Jesus loses any claim to shelter, family, friends, and a place to call home, including culture and nationality. Jesus is above all that and expects total allegiance. A follower of Jesus releases the right to attachment and protection and becomes utterly vulnerable. A disciple lives and dies for God and in God (see also Paul in Romans 14:7-8). Following Jesus is hard: expect to be inconvenienced and rejected. What do we do with rejection? How do we keep on keeping on when wounded? Vulnerability is the place from which Jesus reaches out to others. Can we see the richness of that poverty? Can we offer mercy and forgiveness rather than resentment and revenge?

The dead are left to bury their own dead (Lk 9:60): how can that be in a culture where burying one's dead is sacrosanct? Jesus himself attended funerals (at least, Lazarus' – and he was criticized for his tardiness.) Unless...he means for us not to be overly concerned with those who are so immediately disinterested in a true relationship with God (dead inside?) that no amount of attention will bring them back to life. This is a job for God. We are not allowed to wish or even bring death (by fire or otherwise) on others just as we are not expected to do miracles (bringing people back to life from the cliff from which they have jumped.)

Hands on the plow: no looking back. For a plowman to be successful in his work, he must concentrate on the job he started. He knows that the only way is forward and not being distracted by the things left behind. No nostalgic sighs. Jesus' call is urgent and radical: no hesitation. He knows that we can find all sorts of excuses to an immediate response. We are ready to follow him *after*...a long list of things we "need" to take care of before we can dedicate him any of our time. But he wants to be on the top of our list and not at the end.

This kind of message doesn't get people in the pews!

As Debbie Thomas writes in her blog, "Jesus is perfectly indifferent to the rules of good salesmanship. He doesn't wrap his product in slick packaging. He doesn't minimize costs to attract more customers. He doesn't hide the hard stuff in fine print. He never rushes his pitch to close a deal."¹

So, we need to ask ourselves: what version of Christianity are we passing on? When we expect to hear messages that console but do not challenge, messages that give us warm feelings but are not

¹ [Journey with Jesus - Truth in Advertising](#)

transformative, are we expecting to hear Jesus' message, or do we expect an a-la-carte message? Jesus' message comforts the afflicted but afflicts the comfortable. He's set his face to Jerusalem, towards the cross. Are we facing in the same direction? I get tired and discouraged also, but I have a sense that when that happens, I'm looking backwards.

It's a question of understanding our vocation as human beings. And the question is twofold: Whom are we praising (worshipping)? And: Whom are we serving? In other words: Is God the focus of our praise and service? We have many choices in life but one vocation. When we make those choices, do they align with our vocation, do our choices honor and serve God? If we say we love God with all our soul, with all our heart, and with all our strength (Dt 6:5-6), where is our mind, where do we invest our strength?

These are the terms we were created for, and Jesus knows it. he is not ambiguous about it. Our version of Christianity has become too comfortable and therefore less appealing. Why should people join the Church (not simply Nativity but the whole Church, capital C) when they can join any other more attractive club? Deep down we know it: there is something in us that aches for a life of purpose, a life of meaning, a life we can pour out in love until we are spent and reborn. That's what attracts people. That is what they want modeled.

It's the Spirit of Jesus in us that leaves us restless, uncomfortable, until we find rest in Him. Our hearts cry out for renewal and transformation.

May we be blessed with the courage to follow. Amen.