Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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"It's up to you." When you hear that, do you believe it's true? Advertisers hawk phrases like this to imply that the "right choice" is available for a price you can't afford to pass up. When my mother would say "It's up to you," the consequences for making the wrong choice were predictably unpleasant.

How much freedom do we really have? That's the question of today's readings.

Almost 200 years before Christ, Yeshua, the author of Book of Sirach, responded to this question in a collection of the best wisdom and religious advice he could gather. In today's first reading, Yeshua asserts that human beings are free to choose life or loss. He wanted to liberate people from the idea that their lives were predetermined or controlled by fate.

Belief in fate or freedom generates a self-fulfilling prophecy. Unless your name is Sisyphus, most people who feel controlled by the fates will not struggle against them.

Meanwhile, people who believe they have free will usually opt to choose how to deal with all that happens, no matter their degree of control over their circumstances.

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 12, 2023

Sirach 15:15-20
Psalm 119
1 Corinthians 2:6-10
Matthew 5:17-37

While today's psalm promotes the idea that adherence to God's law is the way of wisdom, Paul's letter to the Corinthians offers an interesting twist on this idea. Paul calls the Corinthians' attention to a different sort of wisdom. According to Paul, mature Christians have learned the mysterious wisdom of the cross: an apparent failure that ushers in blessing beyond measure.

Paul is operating in the paradoxical realm of Gospel living. For him, real wisdom leads people to admit and accept the fact that they understand only the slightest

sliver of the truth. In Paul's way of thinking, the people who are animated by the Spirit are wise enough to trust that neither their eyes nor ears, nor even heart can comprehend what has been begun in them and will be completed by God.

Under Paul's guidance, we might read today's Gospel not as a sermon, but as a revelation of Jesus' own consciousness and wisdom.

The interpretive key to everything Jesus wanted to say is encapsulated in the phrase, "I have not come to abolish, but to fulfill." Jesus, the prophetic Jewish preacher, understood that his vocation was to demonstrate the deep meaning of everything that had gone before him, particularly of God's loving interaction with humanity.

In an oppressed society hoping for military victories, Jesus preached radical nonviolence.

In a religious tradition that cherished sacrifice as humans' best offering to God, Jesus taught that interpersonal reconciliation was worth more than any material offering.

In a patriarchal and slave-holding society, Jesus preached that looking on another as an object for self-gratification rather than as an equal subject before God was tantamount to adultery. (Remember, adultery was the most common description of Israel's religious unfaithfulness and it was more a question of the unfaithfulness of idolatry than anything sexual.)

In a society that valued physical integrity and saw disability as a sign of God's disfavor, Jesus claimed that being maimed or blind was preferable to denigrating another in thought or action. (Some early Christian fundamentalists took his hyperbole to heart and maimed themselves — completely missing Jesus' sense of humor and hyperbole.)

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Any one of Jesus' phrases summarizes his whole teaching, yet the simplest and clearest is "Let your 'Yes' mean 'Yes' and your 'No' mean 'No.' " Who could ask for a more straightforward call to the never-ending task of living with integrity? When we describe Jesus with words like holy, wondrous, loving and faithful, each of those describes a dimension of his integrity as son of God and son of man, as the person

who fulfilled the human vocation to be an image of God.

As he preached the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus revealed his own discernment about the purpose of life and the place of law. Jesus had realized that anger, resentment, the use of others for personal pleasure or gain, and the easy severing of relationships were nothing more than diverse expressions of profound disrespect for the other.

Jesus preached, not to burden others, but to invite them into profound freedom. Today, he would surely remind us that relishing anger or grudges — even at injustice — confines us in self-made mental/emotional prisons and implicitly reveals that we consider our opinion of others as infallible. Jesus' warning against lust applies also to racism, sexism, and all the bigotries that assume that our way is the norm while others are deviants.

Today's Scriptures invite us to lay claim to the freedom to live in love. We cannot control others, but we can choose how to respond to them. In baptism and every celebration of the Eucharist we say yes to Christ's way. Let our yes be yes!

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