

Freedom's Stumbling Blocks: Uncritical Traditionalism

From the Lenten sermon series: Freedom: Costly and Conflicted

Text: Mark 3:21, 32; Luke 7:19

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Spring Lake, Michigan
Lent IV, March 5, 1989

Transcription of the prepared text

Jesus reveals God; in his face we see into the heart of God. But Jesus is a double revelation; he is also the model of a fully human being. Jesus is the human person according to which we are being shaped by the Spirit of God. Jesus thus reveals who God is and what as human persons we are called to be. In our Lenten reflections this year we are focusing on a central facet of Jesus' person, the magnificent freedom with which he lived. He knew who he was and what God was calling him to do. As we saw in the first message in this series, Jesus had a sense of identity and vision. He was a truly free person.

Jesus modeled out that freedom. Jesus calls us to grow into that freedom by the liberating power of God. Not freedom understood as autonomy; rather, freedom to live out of our own authentic being, freedom for God, freedom for others.

Such freedom is not won without great cost; it is not won without conflict. Sometimes the stumbling blocks to authentic human freedom stem from those closest to us; sometimes from the very relationship and association we might suppose would seek to enable that freedom. Jesus encountered stumbling blocks to freedom – as uncritical traditionalism that was no longer open to the movement of God's Spirit that creates freedom and calls persons to the transforming newness of the Kingdom.

Jesus lived out of his own centered being – out of his sense of who he was and his vision for the ministry to which God was calling him. That sense of identity and vision came only after his own personal struggle. The Gospel writers make it very clear that Jesus' ministry flowed out of his call and empowering by God's Spirit experienced in connection with his baptism. The Gospels then record the wilderness temptations – a portrayal of Jesus' personal wrestling who he was and what shape his ministry would take. We saw him last week as Luke portrayed him, inaugurating his ministry in his hometown using the text from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

What at first seemed to be a successful sermon for this hometown boy turned out to be a near disaster when the home town folks realized that Jesus' vision of a radical grace that reached far beyond the bounds of the Jewish people threatened their supposed special coziness with God.

Jesus was undeterred. He carried on a ministry of healing and liberation. His teaching was full of grace and his deeds were gracious deeds restoring persons to health and wholeness. He announced the Good News of the Kingdom and offered forgiveness to all.

The Galilean ministry caused quite a stir. The word was out: a great prophet was present. God's care was being manifest for God's people. That is what Luke reports in the verse preceding our lesson. It would seem that Jesus was well on his way. He had a great future. Wouldn't everyone rejoice and celebrate such an obviously God-graced person?

Well, we already know the answer to that question – no, everybody would not celebrate that gracious, liberating ministry. The ordinary folk rejoiced, praised God, and experienced the freeing words and deeds of Jesus. But it was soon clear that Jesus would be strongly opposed by various groups. How would he react? How would he respond? Would he be able to maintain the vision, living out of that center rooted in God's call and **empowering**? In a word – would Jesus live out his freedom or would he be detoured by the stumbling blocks cast in his way?

We have already noted in the first message of the series that John the Baptist was troubled by the reports of Jesus' ministry. He sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask,

Are you the one who is to come or are we to expect some other?

That must have been a tough question for Jesus. John had baptized Jesus. John had pointed to him as the mighty one who had been promised. The Fourth Gospel tells of an earlier Judean ministry of Jesus at the Jordan near where John's ministry was carried out. It is reasonable to assume that John had been a model for Jesus and had impressed a model of ministry on Jesus – a model taken from the prophet Malachi:

Look, I am sending my messenger who will clear a path before me.
Suddenly the Lord whom you seek will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant. ...Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand firm when he appears? He is like a refiner's fire....Malachi 3: 1-2

John was a serious preacher of righteousness who pronounced the judgment of God on the evil and darkness and unrighteousness of the world. John longed for

God to call history to a halt, to vindicate the righteous and damn the wicked. John hoped Jesus would bring the fire of God's judgment on the earth. Instead, he heard of Jesus' healings and grace. His question arose from the confusion he experienced when the program of God's Kingdom did not fit his expectations.

Jesus affirmed John. John was a true prophet of God and an honest preacher of righteousness. But John failed to sense the marvelous inbreaking of God's grace because he was so certain that he knew what God's next move must be.

Jesus demonstrated his freedom in his response to John. He did not argue or debate. He respectfully announced, "Go tell John what you have seen and heard."

There was no breaking of relationship – at least on Jesus' part. He distinguished his own ministry from John's, his own understanding of what God was doing from John's expectations. But he affirmed John. He honored John.

Jesus demonstrated real strength. He remained true to his vision, to the **shape** of ministry he discovered – not in Malachi as John had suggested, but in Isaiah. I don't suppose that was easy. If John were his mentor; if John, the elder prophet of God, was recognized by Jesus as a faithful servant of God, it must have been difficult to follow a line quite at odds with John's viewpoint.

Jesus demonstrated freedom and maturity – the ability to be his own person, to differentiate himself from his mentor but to maintain relationship. That was not easy, especially because of the high esteem in which he held John.

I wonder if Jesus' response caused John to review his conception of the tradition critically. I hope so. Otherwise he robbed himself of the very great comfort and joy he might have experienced.

The lesson from Mark's Gospel tells of the negative response of Jesus' own religious leaders and his own family. Here too the rejection comes after Mark has **recounted** the powerful ministry of Jesus, healing, exorcising the demonic, and announcing forgiveness freely to all.

The religious leaders representing the established religion of Israel decided he was demon-possessed. They claimed his power was of the evil one. Jesus refuted their accusation and warned them of the peril of refusing to acknowledge the power of God at work in his healing ministry of grace.

Here he stands against the traditionalism of the Jewish religion. We need not demonstrate how he shattered the accepted practices and understandings of his day. He manifested a freedom from the bondage of religious customs, rituals and rules that had become a heavy burden binding the human spirit.

His response to the religious establishment is not moderate and affirming as is the case of John. The religious leaders angered Jesus – not because they opposed

him, *per se*, but because he knew they had distorted the intention of God as revealed in the Scriptures and had bound the human spirit, crushed the soul of the people, making religion a burden to be borne rather than a power to liberate.

Jesus had courage. It did not take the establishment long to sense that Jesus was a real threat to their institutions, their positions of power and prestige, their religious customs by which they controlled the people. And it certainly did not take Jesus long to recognize that he was in a serious conflict that could well end in his death.

I wonder if he ever considered giving it up and going back to the family business. I wonder if the anger he felt, which manifested itself when, for example, he routed the money changers out of the Temple, sometimes alternated with honest fear, a sense of despair at the entrenched blindness of his own religious leaders.

That he struggled to the very end we are told. Yet it would seem that he did not look back nor did he question the vision, his sense of identity and his sense of mission.

It takes a deeply grounded freedom to set oneself over against one's own tradition. Over the years most of you have come to Christ Community from somewhere. You have joined because you believed in the vision, the tone quality of grace, the ambience of freedom. But, for all who have come, there are folk who have been similarly drawn but, in the final analysis, could not break out of a deeply rooted tradition – even when they sensed something seriously distorted or missing. The promise to conform, to accommodate, to compromise with is very powerful indeed. Jesus took on his whole significant national, cultural, religious world and broke free of its uncritical traditionalism.

I think it may have been more difficult to distance himself from John than from the Temple crowd. But I suspect that most difficult of all was the differentiation of himself from his own family. In Mark 3:21 we read that his family, hearing the reports of his ministry, “set out to take charge of him; for people were saying that he was out of his mind.” That is the NEB translation. The RSV has “his friends” but the NEB is correct here and we can see that if we go to verse 31:

Then his mother and his brothers arrived, and remaining outside sent in a message asking him to come out to them.

Do you get the picture? Do you sense the kind of pressure this must have put on Jesus? I suppose we will all feel this scene in terms of our own family relationships but, even for those whose families are quite “laid back,” it must be obvious that this was the crucial test of freedom. And if you happen to be fortunate enough to be part of a tight-knit family and extended family, can't you sense a knotting in your stomach?

Stop to think about it: the whole mission of Jesus might have been derailed by a well-meaning mother. Can't you just hear Mary saying to her other boys, "We're just going to go over there and bring that boy home. He's making a fool of himself and embarrassing the family."

The word in Greek to describe what they were saying about Jesus means "beside oneself," "to stand outside of," to be "eccentric" – that is, to be "off center" or as the word is translated "out of his mind." And the word used to describe their intention means literally they set out to seize him. Mary was serious! She wanted her boy home!

We read that he was told his mother and brothers were outside wanting to see him and his response was

Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?

His eyes sweeping the room, he must have gestured as he replied,

Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, my mother.

To be able so to respond in that situation evidenced a freedom few of us will ever attain. Put yourself into the situation. Sit where Mary was sitting.

What thoughts and feelings must have pulsed within her being! What do you suppose she said to her other sons? What would you have said?

We have all been children growing up and outgrowing our parental home and many of us have been parents experiencing our children outgrow our oversight. It is not easy. It is often fraught with tension, not seldom laced with pain. Had you been Mary, would you have been able to let go, commit to God, return home without your son? Love, honor, respect: these are things required of a son or daughter. But finally every son and daughter must find their own center of being, envision their own truth and respond to the call of God that comes to them.

That is where we see again the freedom of Jesus. He differentiated himself from his family but never broke with the family, never broke relationship.

In the *Atlantic*, September 1988, there is an extended essay introducing the family system theory, which, unlike psychoanalysis, sees human beings as persons in a situation of interlocking relationships rather than as autonomous psychological entities. The article is entitled "Chronic Anxiety and Defining a Self" – a title which speaks volumes and gives a clue to what is set forth, namely, that a failure adequately to differentiate oneself from the network of relationship given one in the family structure results in chronic anxiety. An unhealthy emotionality in family relationships results in chronic anxiety where the self is not well defined. The rebel, on the other hand, is a highly reactive person whose

self is also inadequately developed. He operates in opposition to parents and others.

Jesus did not argue with John's disciples as he responded to John's question. Jesus confronted the distortion of the truth of God as he encountered it in the religious leadership of his day because of the damage it did not the people who should have been helped and healed. Over against his family he simply did not respond at the point of their total misunderstanding. Reason would not have worked anyway. Mary was afraid and defensive for her son over against the word being spread and she was embarrassed.

I am happy one word of Jesus from the cross was an expression of care for his mother. It shows he never cut himself off from his family. But neither did he deny his own truth and vision simply to pacify them when they were caught in a traditionalism that blocked their coming into the spaciousness of God's new movement. Isn't it good to know that Mary was part of the post-Easter community praying for the Spirit and James, Jesus' brother, became spiritual head of the Jerusalem church? Of course, James remained a rather conservative law/righteousness person. Yet it was he who was able to provide the compromise at the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15 that bridged the gulf separating Paul and the Gentile mission and the strongly Jewish Christian contingent centered in Jerusalem.

Jesus is a model of magnificent freedom He lived it out and in his life we can see the beauty of an authentic life lived out of its own identity and vision – out of its own center and truth. The secret lay in Jesus' rootedness in God. Being rooted in God Jesus was free over against every form of human bondage. In the words of the hymn writer,

Make me a captive, Lord;
Then I shall be free.

Only when one is free, in possession of one's life because that life is anchored in God, does one have a life to give away. This is what concerns me about so much religious posture. So much of the religious establishment in all forms of religion bind people, **imprison**, weigh down, manipulate and thusly control. There is so much "group think" encouraged by religious leadership.

Jesus established his being and vision over against the powerful pull of traditionalism and Jesus calls us to freedom as well.