

Title: Freedom for what?

Date: February 14, 2010 (St. Valentine's Day)

Texts: 2 Cor 3:12-4:2; Lk 9:28-36

"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17)—that's what Paul says in our passage from Second Corinthians. Freedom. What does it mean to be free? I want to give you three snapshots of freedom. The first one, you will quickly discover, is a picture of a bad sort of freedom—freedom *from* others.

Katie and I watch a lot of movies—probably more than we should. I can't help myself: I'm a sucker for cheesy romantic comedies. Recently Katie and I rented *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, with Matthew McConaughey and Jennifer Garner. You don't need to watch it; it's not very good; and you should believe me, since I'm an expert with romantic comedies! I mention the movie because I think Matthew McConaughey's character, Connor Mead, offers a good snapshot of what I am going to call: "freedom, American-style."

In the movie, Connor Mead is a womanizing bachelor who sleeps with whoever he wants to, but doesn't want any commitment. He doesn't want to be tied down. Connor doesn't want anyone to change his life, to infringe on his freedom to do what he wants, when he wants. He will be who he will be—and that usually entails not having the same girlfriend for more than a week or so. He wants sex without intimacy. He wants company without relationship. He wants a warm body to ease his loneliness for a night, but not a friendship that lasts into the next day, and the day after that. With those friendships come the complications Connor thinks would infringe on his freedom.

Our lives are probably much different than *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*—at least I hope they are! Nonetheless, I think that movie puts on screen a vision of freedom that is deeply rooted in our Western culture and maybe in our lives. For this idea of freedom, other people are threats to our way of life. So, freedom is freedom *from* others; it's about keeping our distance—keeping our way of life safe from their intrusion, their invasion, their disruption. It's about establishing a way of life that is not dependent on other people; it's about the pursuit of your own happiness, and making laws to defend what you have. This is freedom *from* people. This vision of freedom runs deep within us—our politics, our culture, and our lives. This country is obsessed with freedom from others—especially from foreigners. We can see it in the increasingly militarized borders, and the massive wall along the U.S. border with Mexico. It's there to protect our freedoms: we don't want people from south of the border coming in here and messing with our lives—taking our jobs, bringing their drugs, and infecting our culture. Our freedom means freedom from them—freedom from sharing and from relationships. We'd rather buy their cheap products from a distance and without any strings attached—it's the economic equivalent of Connor's one-night-stands in *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*. We get what we want without any of the complications that come with relationships and with the intimacy that comes with having to share space, like neighborhoods and grocery stores and churches and so on.

We could also talk about U.S. freedom from the people of Haiti. This story started with the racist Western vision of freedom that put people on that island and

used them for economic growth. And now that same vision of freedom has restricted Haitians from creating lives for themselves in the United States if they want to. We are comfortable sending money and resources for the rebuilding of Haiti, but we're not about to change our immigration policy to allow Haitians into this country. We want to be free from them—freedom from the possible chaos of a mass of people invading our lives and messing with our happiness. Apparently, to enjoy our freedom means that we have to be free from others—freedom from intimacy, freedom from the complications that come with relationships.

This vision of freedom insinuates itself into our own lives. Sometimes—maybe most of the time—we think about freedom as freedom from others. We want to be free from the commitments that come with relationships: with family, with friends, with work. We want to be free to do what we want to do, without asking someone for permission, or without worrying about offending someone. We want to be free from considering how our actions may actually hurt somebody. We want to be free from changing our ways for the sake of someone else's feelings. We want to be free from being bothered—from chaotic relationships, from unpredictable people, from tensions, from whatever seems to get in our way. Freedom, American-style: this my first snapshot of freedom, a very selfish kind of freedom—one that is all around us, and in us. But none of this can be what it means to be truly free. At the very least, we know that the apostle Paul has a different kind of freedom in mind when he says, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17). What is this freedom? What does it look like? What does it feel like? How do we know that we are free? Free for what? Freed for what purpose? To what end? It can't be freedom from others; we know that much.

Let me give you second picture of freedom. I really don't know how it may relate to our lives, but I think it's worth talking about nonetheless. Sometimes it's important to tell stories without knowing how they make things clearer for us—we call this practice, "bearing witness."

On Tuesday nights some of us from church drive to the Orange County Correctional Facility. I leave my cell phone and all other contraband in my car, and walk over to the guards at the gate. After they check my ID card, the guards let me enter the prison, a world of captivity behind a chain-linked fence. We are led to the dining hall—white walls, linoleum floors, circular tables with chairs. Then a voice from a loud speaker gives permission for inmates to enter the dining hall where the visitors have assembled. I find a few prisoners sitting at a table and ask if I can join them for a conversation. Sometimes we talk about the latest college basketball game. Sometimes they share news about their family on the outside. Sometimes they tell me what God is doing in their lives. And sometimes we just sit there with nothing much to say. When the hour is up, we form a big circle and pray. I go home, and the inmates stay behind. I return to my life of freedom, and they return to their bunkhouses where they are packed like sardines, due to overcrowding as a result of state budget shortfalls—no space for freedom. I'm free, and they are not.

But is freedom as simple as being able to do what I want when I want to—like getting in my car and driving to the Orange County Correctional Facility and

then driving back home? Is that what freedom looks like? Freedom becomes more complicated for me when I hear the inmates talk about their journeys of freedom that started the day they were imprisoned. Not all of them, but a lot of them talk about how incarceration has given them freedom. Prison has, in some sense, freed them. At first, it seems like a contradiction—how can you be free while behind bars? This past week I talked with two guys I hadn't met before. Both of them told me about how getting caught and going to prison was the beginning of their freedom. Before, on the outside, they were trapped. Now, they were free from that mess of bad choices, and ready to give life another shot when they get out next year. For them, prison means freedom from themselves, freedom from their bad choices, freedom from a tangle of dangerous lifestyles.

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” How will freedom take shape in my two new friends' lives? Where will freedom lead them? By their own testimony, the Spirit of God has set them free, even while in prison. Where will that same Spirit lead them with they get out?

So far I've given you two snapshots of freedom—first, Connor the womanizing bachelor in *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* and, second, the prisoners I've had a chance to talk with. And now comes the last one, the last picture of freedom—this one is special for today, because it is Valentine's Day. And if you didn't know, Valentine's Day was first a day of remembrance for Saint Valentine. One of the problems with remembering St. Valentine is that there are possibly three different martyrs in the 3rd century with that same name—and we don't know very much about any of them. But there's one story that I think worth remembering; it is a story of freedom, although it's a strange kind of freedom.

Valentine (or Valentinus) was a priest in Rome in the third century. Claudius II was emperor of Rome at that time, and he was persecuting the early Christians—he didn't kill them off, he only restricted their freedoms. Apparently one of the restrictions he put on the Christians was that they could not be married. Maybe it was a way for Claudius to prevent Christians from starting families and having legitimate children—which would mean more Christians to populate his empire. Anyhow, Valentinus, the priest in Rome, had some religious freedom: he could still be a Christian priest and lead worship services, but he was not allowed to officiate any weddings. Christians did not have the right to marry. But Valentinus did not obey Emperor Claudius' edict and went ahead and performed his calling as a priest and married some couples. When Claudius found out about Valentinus' illegal weddings, Claudius had him imprisoned. And while in prison, Valentinus thought it was a good idea to try to convert the emperor. Claudius didn't appreciate being evangelized and so he had Valentinus beheaded. Thus he became a martyr and a saint.

Although Valentinus ends up in prison and ultimately gets killed, he is a picture of freedom—the freedom of Christ, enabled through the power of the Holy Spirit. “Now the Lord is the Spirit,” Paul says, “and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” Valentinus shows us a freedom that looks like the life of Jesus—a life that gives up everything for the sake of creating a space for love, a space in this

world where love can flow, where people can be bound together by giving and receiving love—which is the eternal life of the Holy Spirit. Like Jesus, Valentinus gives his life so that others can love one another with commitment, affection, and responsibility. That’s the freedom that comes with the Holy Spirit: *we are liberated for love*, for giving ourselves in love, for receiving who we are meant to be through love. We find true freedom when we give up protecting ourselves from others, when we give up trying to defend who we are from other people. Christian freedom invites us to become a reason for love in someone else—to become a reason for delight, for joy.

This freedom entails transformation. It means changing who you are so that someone else may find delight in your presence. As Paul goes on to say in our passage, “all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, *are being transformed* into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (v. 18). We are always moving from glory to glory. We are always changing our identity, changing who we think we are, changing how we relate to one another, and discovering new ways of creating space for love to happen in our midst. *With unveiled faces*, Paul says, *we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another*. What comes first is an unveiled face: truthfulness about who we are and about who we need to become. As Paul goes on to say at the end of our passage, “we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God” (4:2). Freedom comes through our unveiling, through being exposed, through *being made subject to the conscience of all the rest of us*. We are not free to be whoever we want to be, regardless of how we make others feel, regardless of their conscience. We are not people like Connor in the *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*. Instead, we find our freedom, the freedom of Christ, the freedom of the Spirit, when we let our presence be a reason for someone to feel loved, accepted, known and welcomed. The freedom of unveiling: to be exposed, to be known. The good news of Christ’s love for us is that we are exposed, we are known, and we are loved—all of us, loved into being, welcomed into God’s life with the caress of the Holy Spirit, which is the touch of love.

The Spirit of Christ does not lead us into freedom *from others*, but freedom *for others*: freedom to let love change us, transform us; freedom to become a presence of delight in someone else, which is also how we come to discover that we are loved. We feel loved when we become a reason for someone else’s delight. We find ourselves wrapped up in love when we create joy and happiness in another.¹ The freedom of Saint Valentine is found when you give yourself away, when you use

¹ Sebastian Moore, *The Fire and the Rose are One* (New York, N.Y.: Seabury Press, 1980): “the elemental thrust of life in the human being, the need to feel significant, the essential appetite of self-aware being, finds its full meaning and satisfaction as an act of love which creates happiness in another.... Our personal fulfillment is the life-enhancement of another.... It is no mere pious or improving cliché that we are, in our most intimate feeling of ourselves, given to each other: that to be consciously alive is to be a gift: that what I most deeply feel myself to be is a gift which enriches another” (9-10).

your life to create a space for someone to feel the love of Christ, when you make room in your self—in your life, in your ego, in who you think you are—for someone else to change you into a presence that brings delight. Then we may find ourselves transformed from one degree of glory to another, as Paul says. For all of this comes from the Lord, the Spirit of freedom, who tears away your silly borders of pride and independence, and invites you to let your life be mingled with mine, and mine with yours, and ours with the one seated by your side and across the room and next door—and to find in this knot of unveiled intimacy, of truthfulness, the presence of God, a presence of love that transfigures us, that makes us shine like the Son of God.

Lingering thoughts (not included in sermon):

- 1) Paul talks about the character of Christ's lordship as one that grants freedom—the freedom of the Spirit. What kind of Lord exercises power through providing freedom? What kind of power lets go of control for the sake of bestowing freedom? Paul seems to be saying something very strange about the power of the Lord that is a power of freedom through the Spirit. Maybe this is related to how Paul talks about how the power of God looks like the cross—weakness. Maybe freedom begins by living into my weaknesses—letting them be exposed and seeing what new life comes when I cease to be my own police, my own border patrol, my own judge. Herbert McCabe comes to mind: “No one can take upon herself life; nothing can bring itself into existence. Always we receive being from another or from others. To aim at riches is to aim at taking possession of things, even, perhaps, taking possession of people. To aim at poverty is to aim at the giving of life, and this comes from gratitude for receiving life ourselves. And giving life is a specially godlike activity.”²

² Herbert McCabe, “Poverty and God,” in *God, Christ, and Us* (London, UK: Continuum, 2003), 54.