

## **Free to Follow**

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Graduate Recognition Sunday

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 and Luke 9:51-62

“...The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.”

Maybe some of you remember the day you learned to ride a bicycle without training wheels. Often when I'm out riding on the forest preserve trails I'll think about the morning when I was four or five years old when my Dad removed the training wheels from my brand new red and white Schwinn and sent me on my way. One moment I could feel him behind me, big man that he was, always dressed in his overalls, guiding me along the winding, smooth, clay lane in front of our house, and the next moment he was standing several yards behind me with his hands at his sides and a big grin on his face, a grin as broad as my own, I'm sure. I was on my way.

It didn't go so well the afternoon that I taught Isaac to ride his bicycle without training wheels. One bright Sunday afternoon, while we were living in student housing at the seminary in Hyde Park, I finally got around to removing the wheels after several weeks of Isaac pleading with me, and the two of us headed out to the cratered ally adjacent to the courtyard behind the old apartment buildings. As I recall, everything was going pretty well as we went back and forth several times, Isaac admirably weaving in and out between the potholes, and Dad running awkwardly behind admirably trying to help him keep his balance. Just as Isaac was beginning to pick up speed, the bike started gliding to the left heading directly toward a massive utility pole jutting up from the middle of a wrought iron fence which enclosed the courtyard. And from what I can remember of that day, Dad took a heaving lunge to the left, trying desperately to wedge his body between the bike and the fence, thus preventing the boy from a head-on collision with the utility pole.

Well, I'm not sure just how, but it worked. Isaac rode off unscathed, never again to use training wheels, while Dad lay sprawled out in the middle of that cratered ally after smacking into the utility pole, then hitting the concrete deck. Throbbing everywhere. Jane and I spent the rest of that afternoon at the UIC emergency room visiting with the attending physician about religion and science as he put at least two layers of stitches in my chin and bandaged up my elbow and knee.

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At graduation time several years ago one of my favorite columnists had this to say about raising children: “I see children as kites. You spend a lifetime trying to get them off the ground. You run with them until you're both breathless. They crash. They hit the rooftop. They get tangled in trees. You patch and comfort, adjust and teach. You watch them lifted by the wind and assure them that someday they'll fly. Finally they are airborne: they need more string and you keep letting it out. But with each twist of the ball of twine, there is a sadness that goes with joy. The kite becomes more distant, and you know it won't be long before that beautiful creature will snap the lifeline that binds you together and will soar as it is meant to soar, free and alone. Only then do you know that you did your job.”

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I suppose we all need to soar free, but I think not alone. We all need someone to follow, someone to guide us. Small children need to follow their parents. Students need to follow a course of study. Teenagers need to follow their friends most of the time it seems. Employees need to follow their managers if they want to hold on to their jobs. All of us, whether we are willing to admit it or not, are following a path to some place, and all of us are being guided by some thing or by some one. We may call it conscience, or ambitions, or dreams, or power, or motives, or desires, or passions, or stuff. Our graduates this spring have been told

repeatedly by family, friends, teachers and administrators to “Follow your dreams. Follow your heart and your dreams will come true,” they’re told, and all other such drivel.

Follow your dreams? Follow your heart? Is this all we have to offer them, each other, ourselves? Have we no one better to follow than ourselves? It was the great American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne who asked, “What other dungeon is so dark as one's own heart! What jailer so inexorable as one's self !” St. Paul recognized how readily we surrender our freedom to follow Christ when he cautions us to “stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. . . For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence. . . .”

“What jailer so inexorable as one's self !” We are free to follow Christ in service to others, Paul tells the Galatians, not to be enslaved to the self. The question is, “Whom will we follow? Who will determine the course of our lives?” The response that echos everywhere it seems is one small word: Me. “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.” What a lonely, lost person to follow. “What other dungeon is so dark as one's own heart!”

Here, on this summer morning, Jesus has taken a turn onto a different path from what he has been following. Up to this point in the story, Jesus has been following the path to Galilee; he has been in what some have called a sort of “Galilean Springtime.” Remember that Jesus came from this backwater called Galilee, from a town called Nazareth, a land of simple, rural people, many of them fishermen, a place where he was safe at home.

Galilee is where many of you young people have been up to this point in your lives, a place where you are safe at home, but a couple months from now, a few years from now, it’s no longer going to be Galilee but the halls of Hinsdale Central or Dominican University. It’s no longer going to be safe at home. So, the Preacher of Ecclesiastes asks that his young listeners remember, “remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them. . . .’” You see, life takes many strange turns, and some of those turns are very sharp and unexpected and dangerous and troublesome. If you’re like me, when I was like you, you want to take those turns as fast as you can go.

When I was riding a Yamaha, long before Yamahas were pianos—what a pity that a Yamaha should be a piano—I always wanted to see how fast I could take the sharpest turns, avoiding the utility poles and the guard rails along the way. That was always a lot of fun; it was thrilling and exciting. I loved it. But it could also really hurt, especially if you hit loose gravel, and not just your elbows and knees, but mostly your pride. You’re going to get hurt like you’ve never been hurt before. You are going to need someone with you besides your lonely little self with its dreams that fade with the break of day.

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Today, Jesus takes a sharp turn from the road to Galilee, and the text literally says that “he hardened his face like stone” to take the gravel road to Jerusalem. It wasn’t a turn that he wanted to make for himself. Now, it’s really going to hurt. Jesus “hardened his face like stone,” and, if you look carefully at that face, you may see the deep marks of self-giving, self-sacrificing, struggling love for our sake. Jesus had warned his disciples, “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.”

Following Jesus is costly. So you might ask yourself the question today, “What is following Jesus costing me?” If the answer is little or nothing, then you can be fairly certain that you’re not talking discipleship. You may be talking about church membership, but you are not talking about following Jesus as he talks about following. Church membership costs us nothing. We’re in it to benefit ourselves. Discipleship costs everything. We’re in it for the love of Jesus. As one of the martyrs of the last century wrote, “When Christ bids a man, ‘Come and follow,’ He bids him come and die.” Jesus bids us come and die to ourselves for the sake of others. “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence. . . .”

“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Something that costs us little or nothing means little or nothing to us. Something that costs us our lives means our lives to us. Where will your heart be? In a house? In a car? In a degree? In a job? In making money? In a relationship? In a family? Those are all nice things. Much of the time, God grants us to travel that road to the quiet countryside of Galilee where there is plenty of time for quiet walks along the dusty paths and meditations under an olive tree and good food to eat and a nice place to live. But we also know that God grants us those turning points when we are offered the possibility of walking with Jesus to Jerusalem through times of struggle and obedience and sacrifice and even suffering so that we might know better the depth of his love for us.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.”

“Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”

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