

“A WEAK LIBERTY”
I Corinthians 8: 1-13

February 1, 2009
University Church of Chicago
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

Kierkegaard told a parable of a man who had perfected the trick of walking away from a friend. Instead of turning his back and walking away, this man would turn his face towards the one he was walking away from. While incessantly declaring, “Here I am,” giving assurances again and again that he was coming immediately toward you, the man was really getting farther and farther away, thus making it not so easy to become aware that he was not a true friend.

Kierkegaard commented, “So it is with the one who, rich in good intentions and quick to promise, retreats backward farther and farther from the good. All intentions and promises seem right, he is turned in the right direction, but he really moves away from the good. It seems as if he takes a step forward, and yet he not only remains standing still but really takes a step backward.”

You know people like Kierkegaard’s friend, don’t you? Some of us resemble him. We are driven by our guilt, by our inability to live up to our own standards of goodness and truth. We make passionate protestations of our love for God but our best intentions get drowned in the daily activities of the world. We forget to pray; we, indeed, forget how to pray. Our ego-needs become like a narcotic: they require constantly stronger stimulation in order to become intoxicated with our own self-image. We need approval from others more than from God, and the sirens of the world call us away from the adventure of the open waters toward the rocky shoals of money and success and power.

And we have a lot of trouble with truly good people, don’t we? They seem to us to have sold out to some loyalty beyond the appropriate reach of their mortal commitments. We all know people who match Mark Twain’s description of an acquaintance as “a good man in the worst sense of the word.”

Kierkegaard, in *Either/Or*, expressed a preference for the men and women of the Old Testament because, he said, they know how to sin! The rest of us, he lamented, are too lacking in moral vitality to achieve real sinfulness. Martin Luther’s famous dictum was “Love God, and sin boldly.” He did not mean that we can do anything that we want if we love God. Rather, Luther was declaring that Christians sometimes think of themselves as less than fully human, that we neither sin out of our conviction nor live a life of love and commitment. We are bland, vanilla, kind of insipid-type people. “Lukewarm” is the way the writer of the Book of the Revelation describes us: neither hot nor cold and so disgusting that God spews us out of His mouth.

George Jean Nathan, the drama critic of an earlier generation, once wrote that he was sick and tired of plays in which the leading character is a bartender who dispenses homely wisdom to his customers, a bank robber who loves canaries or a prostitute “with a heart of gold.” What he was complaining about was the tendency of modern dramatists, novelists and journalists to make part-time heroes of people whose daily (or nightly) lives are spent in amoral or immoral pursuits while those who allegedly represent religion and social responsibility are paralyzed by their virtue.

In Meredith Wilson’s play, *The Music Man*, when Professor Harold Hill alights from the train in the small Iowa town, the con man not only sells his musical instruments and gets the people excited but he also saves the town from its smug hypocrisy. He serves as the catalyst to force them to examine their values, to learn how they abuse and use each other in the name of civility and gentility. The citizens are paralyzed by their virtue.

When we tell the story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2 and 3, the Bible is not declaring that the Fall produced a blighted humanity. Instead, it is saying that the story of the man and the woman exemplify full humanity, beings compelled to exercise what we know today as the most prized of human attributes, freedom with an eternal dimension, the self-defining choices between good and evil, despair and hope, heaven and hell.

In today’s Epistle Lesson Paul is writing to the Christians who live in Corinth, one of the most licentious cities in the first-century Roman Empire. He brings up the topic of “knowledge” vs. love. “All of us possess knowledge,” he declares. But the problem with knowledge, with smart people like you and me, is that knowledge puffs us up. This is not a general anti-intellectual declaration as though Paul were glorifying ignorance. “Knowledge” here refers to the religious attitude of the “liberated” Christians in Corinth who parade their “enlightened” Christian freedom.

“Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge,” Paul writes, “but anyone who loves God is known by God.” What they, first-century Corinthians, and we, twenty-first century Chicagoans lack is not content. The problem is not what we know but how we practice what we know.

The worst part about sin is not that we give in to temptations, but that we gradually adjust to the temptations and begin to see them as normal. After a while, we are living in what the psalmist calls “the pit” and we begin to think the pit is true living. We embrace the distortion that sin has made in our lives and we justify our ways. Temptations and evil become part of the furniture of ordinary life. This is what the Bible calls Sin, and out of it arise those daily, hourly sins that drive us into hypocrisy and self-righteousness and clever denials.

But the distorted state of life is Sin, a state which is so primal and universal that it seems built into the nature of things. Hence, we call it “original.”

But, of course, you and I have those so-called “secular” friends who defensively want to claim that human beings are really good and that religion is the problem, because religion, they maintain, induces guilt. But the problem is really much different and much deeper than that. Those “irreligious” friends of ours use religion as a whipping-boy to keep from dealing with their own shame and guilt.

When he was chaplain at Yale University, William Sloane Coffin, Jr., wrote a letter to the freshman class at Yale in 1969. In it, he said:

“I have noticed that few people ever seem to get over the religion of their childhood, which they either hated or loved. Either way the results are disastrous. These people don’t read Teilhard de Chardin, Buber, Bonhoeffer. They skirt the uncomfortable, rationalize the unacceptable, let the tough questions of life go gently unanswered until at last they become Hamlets in the supermarket. To buy or not to buy, that is the question.”

Paul is very concerned about how we practice the liberty that God has given us: “Take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”

The Christian life is not limited to one’s individual convictions before God, but takes into consideration how others are affected by one’s actions. It is quite possible that a “strong” Christian with “knowledge,” by doing something that in itself is perfectly right or innocent, still can damage the faith of a “weak” Christian who does not understand.

Sam Houston, the founder of Texas, said that some Baptists kept imploring him to join their church. “They told me that by joining I would wash away all my sins. If that be the case, I pity those poor souls living downstream.”

Ann LaMott says we are not punished for our sin but by it. We live with its consequences, with the disasters we bring on ourselves by the stupid choices we make, the self-gratification we pursue with such alacrity. “All human sin,” said Reinhold Niebuhr in *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, “seems so much worse in its consequences than in its intentions.” When we sin, we don’t intend for it to hurt others or hurt ourselves or make us live with shame and guilt, but those are actually and often the consequences of our sinful choices.

Then there are others who claim that we could attain a sinless purity if we would only turn away from temptation, as if human will power were enough to render us perfect. Some withdraw from social or economic or political life to isolate themselves from evil, as

if all temptations can be identified “out there.” One of my heroes in the faith is Thomas Merton, the Carthusian monk who lived in the monastery and later his own hermitage at Gethsemani, Kentucky. He was a great writer, a spiritual man if ever there was one, a man who made the choice to leave a rich, sophisticated life in New York society because he knew that living as a monk was the only way he could save his own soul. But even Merton had his vanities. There was that illuminating moment when he refused to have a movie made of his life unless Gary Cooper would be the actor selected to portray him. Even the religious recluses and the most spiritual people live with their ego-needs and their sin.

Consumerism leaves us with a dizzying array of products from which to choose. We are compelled to buy, get, and accumulate. Life becomes so acquisitive that we forget that we don't have to live this way. Perhaps freedom is always an illusion. Perhaps the issue is never, “Will I be free?” but rather “To what am I attached?” When we have nothing greater to give ourselves to than relentless accumulation, we become victims of advertising which tells us that in order to have meaning in our lives we must buy this or go there or do that.

The Little Prince put it like this in the story of the same name: “If you were to say to the grownups, -- I saw a beautiful house made of rosy brick, with geraniums in the windows and doves on the roof,’ they would not be able to get any idea of that house at all. You would have to say to them, -- I saw a house that cost \$20,000.’ Then they would exclaim, -- Oh, what a pretty house that is!”

In his book, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring*, Parker Palmer tells of talking with a friend who has worked for many years at the Catholic Worker, a ministry to the poor in New York City. Daily, she tries to respond to waves of human misery that are as ceaseless as the ocean's surf. “Out of my deep not-knowing I asked her how she could keep doing a work that never showed any results, a work in which the problems keep getting worse instead of better. I will never forget her enigmatic answer: -- The thing you don't understand, Parker is that just because something is impossible doesn't mean you shouldn't do it.”

We have not displeased God because we have robbed banks or snatched candy from the hands of innocent children or broken six of the Ten Commandments. Rather, we have committed the sin of underliving life.

My ultimate baseball hero, Lou Gherig, is wonderfully portrayed in a biography, *Luckiest Man* by Jonathan Eig. I remember when I first realized that I could hit a baseball with some ease. I found that if I shortened up on the handle of the bat, I would not hit for distance but I would get on base. I hit little line drives between first and second, or weak

humpback liners out over the shortstop's head (I am left-handed). I never knew the thrill of real hitting until my manager said, "You are such an admirer of Lou Gherig. [I had seen Gary Cooper play him in the movie, "Pride of the Yankees," and I bawled like a baby when he had to retire from baseball. I am not old enough, thank you very much, to have actually seen Gherig play, but I had read a number of books about him also.]

"Then study his style. You won't ever hit four home runs in one game. You shouldn't even try to. But hold that bat down at the end and swing full." I did, and what a sweet feeling it was. I would sit through hours of school and work just waiting for another chance to get that feeling in my hands again.

God calls us to live the impossible, to move from underliving our lives to living with holy boldness, We are called to live as forgiven sinners, to live with boldness in our love for God and for each other, to swing from the heels and to feel the pure pleasure of giving our lives to the One who has given life itself to us.