

**Proper 24B – October 18, 2015**  
**Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37c; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**“...whom to serve is perfect freedom.”**

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read, “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” And in our gospel reading, Jesus says to his misguided disciples, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant...For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...”<sup>i</sup>

Scarcely has Jesus, for the third time, spoken of the harsh and dreadful destiny that awaits him in Jerusalem, than the disciples’ ambition again gets the better of their momentary fear. After the earlier dispute along the road as to which of them was the greatest, we see the apparent ambitions of these two sons of Zebedee to secure for themselves good places of authority, fame and glory in God’s Kingdom. As these disciples jockey for favored positions, they know what they want; and so do the other disciples, in spite of their self-righteous anger at the more blatant James and John.

But no, these disciples do not know what they are saying. Jesus corrects their presumptions about their roles and presumed “place” which were based on notions of merit and reward. The popularly held notion of merit assumed that people could acquire rights over God for good deeds done. Their assumptions about reward followed directly from this—I do this for you, God—I hang tough with you, Jesus—so, you owe me, as it were. Jesus addresses this by saying that the true disciple can aspire to only one thing, namely, to share the passion—the sufferings—of the master. As for the reward, no one can claim anything—God is free to do what God likes with God’s gifts. True greatness, then, consists in serving, and the serving is its own reward. The only genuine form of ruling is to serve—Christ our King himself has shown that to us. And, all of this requires obedience to God’s will—to God’s desire.

Obedience. Frederick Buechner points out that, on the one hand, in recent times “obedience” has become a *bad* word, seemingly incompatible with *good* words like “independence”, “individualism”, “ambition” and “freedom.” Obeying authority has come to be confused with obeying “the authorities” such as government officials, or monied institutions - someone who is earning ten or a hundred times more than you do. Who wants to obey them? Some parents these days seem to have given up asking their children to obey them, and just hope they won’t burn down the house or someone else’s. Buechner adds that in a lot of public and religious life, obedience has been relegated to first responders or the armed forces; or to join its partners, poverty and chastity, in monastic life. If the Commanding Officer, or the Mother Superior or Abbot tells you to do something, you’d better do it. But for the rest of us, we hear “let your own conscience be your guide” and we take no guff from anybody. And even this is changing, as the phrase “obeying your conscience” has been replaced by “listening to your conscience,” or just going with whatever your gut feeling is.<sup>ii</sup>

On the other hand, in many peoples' version of Christianity, obedience plays a key role. The poet Friedrich von Schiller wrote, "Courage can be shown by any fool. Obedience is the Christian's jewel." But what kind of obedience are we talking about, and to what kind of God is Jesus calling us to?<sup>iii</sup> In our generation, as in previous ones, we have seen too many people give over their reason and conscience to someone else—whether to another person, or corporation, or government or ideology or religious authority (who claims divine authority). Again, what kind of obedience to what kind of God? We have seen the rise and fall of many an authoritarian regime, and this continues to play itself out on the world stage. We have come to recognize and reject such authoritarianism and the involuntary obedience it demands. We should also reject authoritarian Christianity whatever forms it takes.<sup>iv</sup> It's no coincidence, for example, that authoritarian Christianity went hand in glove with the rise of the Nazi State. A religion that required unquestioning obedience to God and God's authority figures in the home, at school, and in the government had dangerous ramifications, to say the least. Let's listen to a confession from one person: "I was brought up by my parents to give due respect and honor to all adults, particularly older persons... Wherever the need arose, I was told it was my primary duty to be of assistance. In particular I was always directed to carry out the wishes and directives of my parents, the teacher, pastor, in fact, of all adults... without hesitation, and allow nothing to deter me. What such persons said was always right. Those rules of conduct have become part of my very flesh and blood." With this strict "Christian" upbringing, the man who spoke these words, Rudolph Hoess—obeying others and their orders—was the Director of the infamous Auschwitz concentration camp. What kind of obedience to what kind of God?<sup>v</sup>

As William Sloane Coffin points out,

"The trouble with the usual notion of Christian obedience is that it sees obedience in relation to God's power, rather than to God's love... The trouble with the usual notion of Christian obedience is that it represents a childhood model of living. Fearing confusion, a child naturally wants supervision and direction. A child wants a superior power to provide order, to direct [his or her] destiny—and so do childish adults. But let's face that desire and call it what it really is [—childish]. For we are called to obey not God's power, but God's love. God wants not submission to power, but in return for love, our own [love]."<sup>vi</sup>

God doesn't want us narrow-minded, childish and subservient, but loving, mindful and free for one another as God's love is freely poured out for us.

And yet, in spite of the justifiable rejection of authoritarian Christianity and its demand for blind obedience to God's, and human, power we should be wary of throwing obedience out altogether. Discerning obedience to God's love has a significant place in the context of Christian freedom. Just as obedience without freedom is oppressive, so also freedom without obedience is a myth as Jesus so aptly reminds his disciples in today's gospel. For we all have a master, as it were, and as Frederick Buechner points out, we'd do well to choose a master in terms of how much freedom we get for how much obedience.<sup>vii</sup>

Scripture speaks of God as the master, and as St. Augustine put it, is the same God “whom to serve is perfect freedom.” Service – perfect freedom? That paradox is not as opaque as it may sound. It means that as we obey God, the God of love and justice, who above all else wishes us and all his creation well, we embrace the freedom to be the best and gladdest that we have it in us to become.<sup>viii</sup> It is generally supposed that to obey somebody is necessarily to do something only for their or somebody else’s sake. But that is a serious misunderstanding. When Jesus asks us to serve and obey above everything the God of love, it is for our own sakes that he is asking us to obey. Now, binding ourselves in service to God or to anyone or anything else may appear on the surface to limit our freedom. Many of us find ourselves bound to – even feel enslaved by – our many commitments and pursuits, gadgets, and passions and distractions, whether serious or trivial. And in all this we find ourselves seeking both more profound and enduring ties *and* greater freedom.<sup>ix</sup>

It is that service of perfect freedom which is what being a Christian is about. It means no longer being bound to our many masters,<sup>x</sup> but bound to God alone. That *service* is true *freedom* because it is based on the service to the One God who sets everyone free. For as William Sloane Coffin pointed out, what is so wonderful about our relationship with God is not only what God gives in terms of hope and strength, challenge and courage, purpose and power, but also what God never takes away, namely support. It’s a wonderful thing to be loved by someone who is never in competition with you, someone who wants only your well-being. Christ is that someone, the One who dispensed with his kingly prerogatives and lived and died as one of us; the One whose only crown on earth was a crown of thorns; the only one in your life who will never compete with you. Thus, binding ourselves in service to God means coming to our true selves and therefore being free to share that true self with others. To *bind* yourself to Christ is *perfect freedom*.<sup>xi</sup>

So, let us have continually in mind the voluntary obedience of Christ to the will and desire of God, and the involuntary obedience of the poor and the oppressed to the many forces at work in our world. Like Christ, we as Christians must come not to do our own will, but to do the will of God who loves us and sends us as servants and stewards, and sets us free.

---

<sup>i</sup> In our other first reading, Isaiah prophesies about the Messiah of God as suffering servant: “The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”

<sup>ii</sup> Adapted from Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 89-90

<sup>iii</sup> As William Sloane Coffin put it,

“Surely there is a difference between [a] discerning obedience and blind obedience? Discerning obedience [we] can understand as a legitimate religious concept. But blind obedience is something I [just] cannot understand. [In Scripture, for example,] Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac[—on several levels,] I find that [totally] incomprehensible, not to say reprehensible. How could Abraham have conceived God’s Love to be something *less than* human love as we know it at its best? Actually, some [rabbinic interpretations of this story (from the Midrash)] say that God was so disgusted with Abraham’s blind obedience to what he misconceived to be God’s will that God hastily

---

dispatches a ram to save Isaac's life, and swore never to speak to Abraham again, which in the Bible God never does." William Sloane Coffin, Living the Truth in a World of Illusions (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p.2.

<sup>iv</sup> As Coffin put it,

"To followers of authoritarian Christianity, God's power is more important than God's love, and self-denial more important than self-realization. In authoritarian Christianity the cardinal sin is not a refusal to love, but a failure to obey norms of [belief] and behavior fixed by [others] in some other [place or] time. And the followers of authoritarian Christianity tend to be reactionary. [Their goal in life] is less to change the world than to reproduce [or re-enact it], generally according to an earlier and presumably simpler model." Coffin, *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>v</sup> The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard posed the following fable as a way to get at this question. This is a fable of a king who fell in love with a maid:

"When [he] asked, 'How shall I declare my love?' his counselors answered, 'Your majesty has only to appear in all the glory of your royal raiment before the maid's humble abode and she will instantly fall at your feet and be yours.' But it was precisely that thought that so troubled the king. He wanted her glorification, not his. In return for his love, he wanted hers, freely given. The one thing he did not want was her submission [—obedience—]to his power. What a dilemma, when not to declare his love spelled the end of love, and [yet] to declare it [in that way] spelled the end of his beloved! Finally, the king realized love's truth, that freedom for the beloved demanded equality with the beloved. So late one night, after all the counselors and courtiers of the palace had retired, [the king] stole out a side door and appeared before the maid's cottage, dressed as a servant." Coffin, *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>vi</sup> Coffin, *Ibid.*, p. 4

<sup>vii</sup> As Frederick Buechner describes it in simple terms—and I paraphrase—people have freedom to the degree that the one whom they obey grants it to them in return for their obedience. We all have a master, as it were. And we would do well to choose a master in terms of how much freedom we get for how much obedience. For example, if our master is the law of the land, then to obey the law of the land leaves us our constitutional freedom but not the freedom to follow our conscience wherever it leads. And if the master is one's conscience and its dictates, then to obey these directives of conscience leaves us freedom from the sense of spiritual or moral guilt, but not the freedom to gratify our own strongest appetites. If then the master is one's strongest appetites—for power, revenge, money, more stuff or whatever—then to obey these appetites leaves us the freedom of an animal to take what we want, when we want it, but not the freedom of being truly human. People—from individuals to whole nations—are free in this world to live for themselves alone if they want to and let the rest go hang, and they are free to live out the dismal consequences as long as they can stand it. Humanity has, on the one hand, a total and spine tingling freedom which, on the other hand, can be the most enslaving thing of all. Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 29-30.

<sup>viii</sup> The only freedom Love denies us is the freedom to destroy one another and ourselves, and then life has a way of being consequential, as it were.

<sup>ix</sup> Christ is the source and goal who links us with these commitments and energies and empowers us with God's goodness, truth and beauty. Ours is a freedom that has no higher loyalties than to God and to God's law of love. (See similar themes in Proper 9A).

<sup>x</sup> ...whether they be, for example, our strongest appetites, or say, the law of the land, or others' expectations; or even our conscience or reason, or virtue or sense of duty...

<sup>xi</sup> An Episcopal leader Lelanda Lee put it,

---

“Jesus gave himself completely, without measure, unto death upon the cross. Can we profess to follow Jesus and do less than prayerfully moving towards [sharing our hearts and] emptying our pockets to serve the neighbors God has given us to love and care for? God calls us into a generosity of spirit that is much more than just being generous with our material wealth. When we pour ourselves into relationships with the poor, the sick, the widowed, the lonely—becoming friends and family to those who are not easy friends and have no family—then we are living into our baptismal call to bless others with all of ourselves, all of who we are, marked as Christ’s own. Being a blessing is an important element of being a steward of the Good News of God in Christ.” Lelanda Lee, “Blessed to Be a Blessing” ( [www.episcopalchurch.org](http://www.episcopalchurch.org) Stewardship Reflection Series 2012)