

Shining as Lights in the World

12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; **13** for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

14 Do all things without murmuring and arguing, **15** so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. **16** It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. **17** But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you— **18** and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

Homily Life Worth Living: A New Responsibility, Philippians 2:12-18

Pray

Stroking his beard, an old man sits quietly. After singing a haunting declaration of faith in Jesus- humble, obedient to the point of death on a cross, yet exalted - Paul's aging but agile mind moves from praise to application. In ch. 2 of Paul's letter to the Philippians, the exhortation of "working out our own salvation", resonates down the centuries. Following Jesus then and now, gives us a new heart, a new purpose, a new attitude and a new responsibility.

Many in our society are unwilling to take responsibility for their actions. There is an increasing tendency to try to shift responsibility in an increasing litigious society, blaming government, the economy, employers, the medical profession, parents, husbands, wives, children, the weather. The refusal to take responsibility goes right back to the time of Adam and Eve when he blamed her for the disobedience to God of eating the forbidden fruit. Eve blamed the devil. Ultimately whatever the mitigating circumstances, we are all accountable for our actions and our lives.

Every Christian must take responsibility for his or her life. Paul urges the Christians in Philippi, "Therefore, my beloved, just as you always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For God is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" vs. 12, 13. Paul begins this section of Chapter 2 of Philippians with a 'therefore' connecting the song of faith in the previous chapter and the application to be responsible. Jesus has set an example of obedience in working out his responsibility, that we are to follow, to work out our salvation – the only appropriate response to Jesus' great self-giving for the world.

Two weeks ago, I asked the congregation to write down any questions they had on God, faith, the Church. One question was submitted on a cue card with no name, asking, 'what is salvation?' Salvation is perhaps the most important word in the New Testament. For any who find the word difficult or an embarrassment, freedom is an excellent substitute. To be saved by Jesus Christ is to be set free. Jesus sets us free from our guilt, our addictions, and our fear of death, among other fears. Jesus sets us free to know God the Father, to love others, and "to be our true selves as God meant us to be." (quoted by Nicky Gumbel in *A Life Worth Living*, pg 44)

Freedom and responsibility go hand in hand. As author George Bernard Shaw put it, "Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it." We all have free will and are therefore responsible for our actions. Christians enjoy an even greater freedom, "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). With this greater freedom comes greater responsibility.

Something to think and pray about this week:

If life's purpose lies in getting what we want, as our culture insists, then freedom becomes a very big deal. Freedom, we think, is what allows us to exercise our "inalienable right" to the pursuit of happiness. With this view of freedom, it's easy to feel threatened by constraint. Our instinct is to resist it with all our might, for constraint impedes our ability to live the life we think we want. We are free to gun down innocent children and teachers in a school or not. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. There is general agreement that some constraints to freedom, and consequences to our actions, are fundamental to a civil society.

Yet to maximize freedom requires that we minimize or even eliminate serious relationships. For the more we rely on others or others rely on us, the less free we are to go wherever we wish to go, pursue whatever we wish to pursue, and do whatever we wish to do. Love constrains us. And in a society devoted to personal self-fulfillment, the cost of love often seems too high. We want the cheapest, easiest, most convenient, paying little attention to the true cost or our true selves.

Surprisingly, freedom is a very big deal in the Gospels, too. However, here it means something quite different...When Jesus says that "the truth will make you free" (John 8:36), he does not mean free to pursue personal happiness. When St. Paul says that it is "for freedom Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1), he does not mean we now have permission to satisfy our every impulse and whim. Quite the contrary. In the Bible, the "free" person, the one liberated with a no-longer-hardened-heart, is the one no longer plagued by the burdensome quest for money, violence, pleasure, possessions, social status, convenience and political power—the very things that our culture says will satisfy our deepest wants and make us happy. Those are counterfeit gods. (Paraphrase of a selection from *A Season of Mystery* by Paula Huston)

Paul tells us to 'work out' our salvation, our freedom. This is quite different from working FOR our freedom. It is not an "objective yet to be reached" or a benefit to be merited or awarded, but rather a possession to be explored and enjoyed ever more fully. Our freedom is to be worked out, in relationship with God and others.

As with gardening, the growth comes from God, but the gardener has a vital role to play. God's work in us includes our wills. Many fear to trust God with their futures, because they fear that God will make them do something, which they have no desire to do, or that God will make a mess of their lives. Of course both these fears are without foundation. If our will is surrendered to God's will, God will give us the desire to do whatever He called us to do. If God is calling us to a ministry with the poor, that is where our heart will be. If God is calling us to teach, God will give us a desire to teach. If we surrender to God's will, God will work out his good purpose. What God wants for our lives is good. It will not necessarily be easy, but we will not be able to improve on His plan. In fact, working out our salvation means fulfilling our potential as the whole person we were created to be.

Working out our own salvation, our freedom in Christ means a responsibility to society, as crooked and perverse as it may be and responsibility to the Church, as broken as it sometimes is. Perhaps God is calling you to step back from something and take on some other area of responsibility. One person I know observed that every parishioner should sit on Parish Council and see what it takes to be the church together, what it costs in time and money AND to hear the stories of faith and ministry that inspire us around the table at Parish Council.

Our "working out our own salvation" includes our financial contribution. Are we intentional about our giving? Is it responsible stewardship to give to the church only when you attend? If we value the presence of a place of prayer and a ministry of integrity and faithfulness that is here month in and month out, we can give intentionally, regularly, and proportionately; PAR – pre-authorized remittance - is no less a faithful way to contribute to God's work. The Annual Stewardship Campaign, this year a mail-in pledge, not door to door, is an opportunity to consider your level of giving as a reflection or and thanksgiving for, our freedom in Christ.

"I'm a millionaire," the boastful parishioner testified, "and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. I can still remember the turning point in my faith, like it was yesterday:

I had just earned my first dollar and I went to a church meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work. I knew that I had only a dollar bill and had to either give it all to God's work or nothing at all. So at that moment I decided to give all I had to God. I believe that God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today."

The congregation applauded, and as he took his seat a little old lady rose and said, "I dare you to do it again!"

The main character in the beloved novel for children called *The Little Prince* finds a planet where the single occupant says, "Je suis responsable de ma rose" ("I am responsible for my rose"). Sounds like the TV Show *Bachelorette*, which I don't watch directly, only if my wife or daughter are watching it, not that there's anything wrong with a guy watching the *Bachelorette*...

Anyway!

The rose is our gift. I am responsible for it, to care for it, to look after myself, to share what we've been given. We are saved in Christ, set free to offer our rose, our gift, ourselves, to the church, to the world, a world where some exercise their freedom to shoot innocent students in a college or school or blow up a hospital in Afghanistan. On the contrary, we can be a force for good. Pray. Give. Serve, in the Name of Jesus. The Lord may be calling some to full time service in the great work of salvation.

The pastor of a tiny country church had been having trouble with stewardship and tithes and offerings. One Sunday he announced, "Now, before we receive the offering, I would like to request that the person who stole the eggs from Widow Jones's chicken coop please refrain from giving any money to the Lord. God doesn't want money from a thieving sinner."

The offering plate was passed, and for the first time in months everybody gave.

In Libby Purvis' book *Holy Smoke*, she devotes a chapter to her encounters with various Christians. She writes:

"Even more unforgettable was Jackie Pullinger, a radical young Christian musician who set off across the world with a quixotic naivete to find where she was called to work. She came upon Hong Kong's walled city, in Cantonese 'Kowloon', City of Darkness, with her work of sharing the good news of Jesus with prostitutes (ages 10-70), drug lords and gangs, establishing houses of refuge, where ex-prostitutes got saved, healed, and went back out to offer Jesus' saving hope toward others. Jackie shared the rose of her life with others, response-ability.

Working out our own salvation"" is a partnership, that the holy spirit makes possible, like the team runners on Macfarlane movie, a cross-country

running team, where points come for all seven runners wherever the finish, the total of which gives them the victory as a team.

Our new-found freedom is a gift from God and even in the working out of it we need God's help. No sin can be conquered or anything of lasting worth can be accomplished without God's help. We are invited to cooperate with the Spirit of God in all that we do. Obedience, not convenience. Obedience to God is better than the alternative, of falling back into sin, remorse, guilt, deceit and shame. The responsible life of faith is indeed a counter-cultural mindset, not a fad or a flavour of the month, not is it for the faint of heart. We need a tankful of God's energy to keep us going, a heart and mind set apart in praise and worship. We are not submit to any lesser god that ensnares us. It's a "Call of Duty" (to name a popular video war game) in a spiritual battle that has at stake one's very soul.

Like walk it, talk it, live it, give it, know it, show it, teach it, preach it.

We are in Christ, a shining star, to the world around us, a people of faith that causes Paul to rejoice and be glad, even though others may have to point out when we shine, because we'll be too busy enjoying God and the good work God calls us to do, for God's good pleasure.

You can follow up, in the study group discussion on Wednesdays at 10:30 or Thursdays at 6:45 at the Greer's home.

Amen.