

**Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A
(Feb. 13, 2011)**

Freedom

Freedom! We have been hearing a lot about freedom these days. The Egyptians and the Tunisians demand freedom from the people who have been ruling them. Southern Sudan has just freed itself from the tyranny of the north. Over two hundred years ago our own nation rebelled against an unfair king and found freedom. And ever since then as a nation we have been obsessed by the notion of freedom and our right to be a free people.

People have suffered imprisonment because they sought freedom: Lech Walesa in Poland; Nelson Mandela in South Africa. People have been killed for advocating freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr., here in these United States.

Freedom is also very much a part of our spiritual heritage. Jesus says, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” In one of those extraordinary Christian paradoxes Paul tells us if we want to be truly free, we must surrender ourselves completely to God or as Jesus says it even more paradoxically, we must lose ourselves if we want to find ourselves, and for him that’s the only true freedom that there is.

You remember the story of the rich young man who came to Jesus asking him what he must do to be saved. Jesus said keep the commandments. He replied that he had done that. Then the Gospel says that Jesus looked on him and loved him and told him, “If you want to be perfect then go, sell what you have, give the money to the poor, and come and follow me.” But the man went away sad because he was very wealthy. Now he was not a bad man. He had kept the commandments and Jesus loved him. But he was not free. He was not free to accept the greater challenge to a more perfect life that Jesus was offering.

In our readings today we hear about choices. Choices of course presuppose freedom. Ben Sirach says if you choose you can keep the commandments and they will save you. But then he says, before you are life and death, good and evil, whichever you choose will be given you. But the implication is that anyone who chooses evil would be foolish. Well, we

know from history and also from what we see and hear in our newspapers and on television that there have been and still are many foolish people in our world. And when people abuse their freedom to make evil choices, this has repercussions and affects not just themselves but many people, possibly entire nations, possibly the whole world.

St. Paul speaks about making the right choices in freedom. Listen to what he says to his friends, the Galatians: You were called for freedom, brothers and sisters. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, rather, serve one another through love. For the whole law is served in one statement, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another.

Jesus sets choices and freedoms of another kind before us in today’s Gospel. These are some of the greatest challenges of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus asks us to use our free will to choose rightly. But the choice here is not between good and evil or life and death. The choice is whether or not we will use our freedom to reach beyond the commandments and follow the far more challenging law of love. Jesus challenged his listeners – and he challenges us as well – to leap beyond minimum observance into that realm of love where there is no measure, no limit, no end. “You have heard it said,” he challenges, “but I say to you.” That challenge points directly at human freedom and to all the possibilities for good that are inherent in this gift. That challenge recalls and affirms the invitation of Jesus, “If you would be my disciple.” That challenge assures us that even when we, like good servants, have done everything prescribed in the law, we have only scratched the surface of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Our love for him leads us to choose in freedom, not the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law, which is love. If we do this daily and deliberately, then we can call ourselves disciples.

Oh, but Father, you may say, it’s too hard. Yes, it is hard, but remember, we are not alone in what we do. We have a good and gracious God who is constantly calling us, urging us on, showering us with grace and the help we need to do what He asks us to do. Remember too, what may seem impossible for us, is possible for God. We have to pray for the strength, the courage, the conviction of a Paul who said, “I can do all things

in him who strengthens me.”