

“OUR FREEDOM IN CHRIST,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, September 4, 2022

Some time back I came across an unforgettable true story about an overseas Baptist medical missionary. Working in Haiti in the face that island country’s many woes, the medical missionary discovered that his hospital supplies were being constantly pilfered. Upon investigation, it turned out his very own trusted staff members were doing the stealing. When the medical missionary confronted them, every last one disclaimed responsibility, insisting that they had no control over their own thefts, even though they were personally profiting from the black market resale of the medical supplies. Instead, evil spirits made them do it. Blame the evil spirits, not them, the staff members said. The medical missionary was taken aback at his staffers’ alibi or excuse for bad behavior. Alternating between shock, frustration, and despair, the medical missionary found himself asking how any society can build a stable future if citizens—and professed Christians at that--can’t or won’t take responsibility for their own deeds.

Although that situation in Haiti sounds pretty wild, it has a lot of relevance for us in the United States. If nothing more, it begs the question of how much responsibility we as Christians should assume in our own lives for whatever happens and the extent to which we are prepared to be accountable before God and fellow men and women for our personal actions and deeds.

Historically, there has been a wide range of opinions on this double question. On one end of the spectrum there are Christians who contend that whatever happens evidences God’s will. Our lives are completely predetermined by him. Even the dates of our birth and death, they say, have been inscribed by God in a Book of Life before the beginning of time. We can’t add or take away a day of our life since it’s all pre-ordained by God. This seems to be the mindset of the Old Testament sage Ecclesiastes whose “wisdom” we read today. He says that there’s nothing new under the sun and God is in charge of it all. (*Ecclesiastes 1:1-15*)

As it turns out, those Christians who in the same spirit as Ecclesiastes today preach and teach that God is always in total or near-total control and everything’s up to him are not alone. They are actually joined by secularists, who may not believe in God per se, but insist that our lives are predetermined by either genetic inheritances or by the social environments which from our birth are beyond our individual control.

Meanwhile, on the opposite end of the Christian spectrum, rejecting almost any degree of pre-determinism, we have folks whom I would call “radical free-willers.” Enraptured with the idea of human freedom, only the sky’s the limit to their way of thinking. Moreover, according to their implicit brand of theology, if they talk theology at all, “God only helps those who help themselves.” In their mindset, God bestows his grace strictly on those who stop making excuses for themselves and, putting on big boy or big girl pants, exercise personal initiative

and effort. If our lot in life is a sorry one, it's our own fault, the result of stupidity or laziness. Shame on those who don't take advantage of the boundless opportunities to get ahead presented at every turn.

Often, we see and hear this very attitude expressed through a lot of political language, touting America as the land of the brave and the free and telling our kids they can be whoever they want to be. Ultimately, the whole notion of radical free will is constantly employed to justify our economic system where freedom and opportunity are celebrated while outcomes are all too often ignored as irrelevant.

Obviously, our morning worship is not the time and place to debate what should or should not be the American way. However, it is very appropriate for us to reflect on the better and wisest Christian way forward in the face of contending attitudes and outlooks. Indeed, amid such a clash of theological and philosophical ideas about divine versus human control, *how very important it is for us to understand where we stand as God's children and our moral responsibility amid the daily challenges and temptations of human life*. Who controls what in life? What's up to God in his grace and what's up to us? What exactly do we believe? Friends, the stance we embrace, consciously or unconsciously in these matters, ultimately shapes our expectations of ourselves, others, and God.

Fortunately, in sorting things out, we are not without the guidance of Jesus, New Testament scripture, and the learned traditions of our own United Church of Christ. All this can save us from falling prey to any of the extreme positions out there that ignore the complexities of real life.

In our gospel lesson from Luke, Jesus informs us that, just as God has his eye on the lowliest sparrow who can be bought for less than a quarter of a penny for sacrifice at the altar of the Great Jerusalem Temple, he has his eye on us down to the hairs of our head and is deeply concerned about our spiritual well-being. (*Luke 12:4-7*) Yet Jesus doesn't say here, as some might have us believe, that God dictates all the circumstances of our existence or determines and controls the outcome of every moment of our lives. To the contrary, throughout his gospel, Jesus actively takes issue with those who view as every human handicap or experience of misfortune as punishment or retribution from God. Specifically, he challenges those of his day who attribute physical blindness to sin. He goes right ahead and heals people, refusing to be intimidated by those who claim that he is thwarting God by acts of love and mercy.

Meanwhile, as he teaches by word and example, Jesus calls upon people like you and me to make a choice for God, a choice for love, and a choice for righteousness. What we think and feel and how we act as individual men and women very much matters and have big consequences for ourselves and others. Truly, Jesus believes that we do have freedom to act. At the same time, Jesus has great compassion even for those who have trouble making the right or best moral decision or choice. He recognizes that we can be captive of extenuating

circumstances, whether because of an upbringing that we can't control or habits which we have acquired that make us more susceptible to temptation and sin. Amazing all the pious people of his own time, Jesus treats foreigners, Roman soldiers, prostitutes, and tax collectors with respect that no one else thinks they deserve. And remember Jesus' sympathy for a young rich man, even as he acknowledges to his apostles that that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone of wealth like him to enter heaven because of his attachment to all of his worldly possessions? (*Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-27*)

All in all, Jesus demonstrates a very nuanced understanding of our human condition. He views men and women are *both* free and bounded in the choices they can make. On the one hand, affirming free will, Jesus calls upon everyone to be morally responsible for how we conduct our lives. On the other hand, he never denies that there are some situations that are outside human control, either because God's will must be done or because there are life circumstances that simply have a momentum all their own that is hard to escape or overcome.

The great Christian theologian and United Church of Christ pastor Paul Tillich studied Jesus' ministry closely and came to the conclusion that we honor the way of Jesus best when we recognize that fate, freedom, and destiny are all at work in our lives. Fate, Tillich explained, is a combination of those things over which we as men and women have no control. That includes our genes and physical make-up, as well as the particular time, place, and environment in which we are born and raised. However, as Tillich emphasizes, human freedom is also very real. Freedom can be defined as the opportunity that God gives us to exercise initiative and control, allowing us to take charge and give a particular direction to our life.

Finally, our destiny as men and women can be understood as the outcome of our exercise of freedom in the face of those things that are fated or predetermined for us. We can put it in a simple formula: Fate + Freedom equals Destiny. As Tillich notes, we can't change our fate. That's the predetermined part of our lives. Yet by using our freedom well we can shape a destiny that makes any unhappy fated aspects of our life more palatable and livable.

Let me illustrate what I am talking about. Someone born blind is faced with a handicap that they didn't choose and can't control. But by exercising their freedom, using their creative talents and tapping the talents of others, they can learn how to navigate so that they can still go on to have a rich, full, meaningful life. They can rise above their fate to shape a positive destiny. The same thing goes for someone born into abject poverty. If they can identify and make use of helpful resources available to them and put them effectively to use, they can build a future brighter than either the past or status quo.

The whole tenor of Jesus' healing ministry makes clear that God does not want us to needlessly suffer and despair. Instead, God wants us to be a whole, healed people, enjoying a prosperous present and happy future.

Ironically, coming from the same impoverished household we can have two children who end up with very different destinies. Blessed from birth with a more positive, can-do, and adventuresome personality, one of the children may see opportunities that his brother can't. Accordingly, while he or she forges ahead in life, using the opportunities he discovers to build a better life, his or her sibling remains stuck in the circumstances of their birth and upbringing, unable to emotionally overcome all the disadvantages. Real-life scenarios like this, which happen all the time, underscore for me the fact that both predestination and free will are real. While it is important to cheer on those who prevail in freedom against all odds, we need to have empathy, sympathy, and compassion for those who can't get it together to shape a more positive destiny for themselves.

All this said, the message of the gospel that I want to emphasize today is that our fate—the things we can't control in life—doesn't have to be our end. Through the grace of a God, who loves us, we can accomplish good things regardless of the hand that we are dealt at the beginning or as life goes on for us. Our fate can be a cross, a terrible cross. However, Jesus told us, whatever our circumstances, to pick up our cross and carry it and God will grant us the wherewithal to carry that cross well so that it doesn't end up the terrible burden and curse that we feared it would be. (*Matthew 16:24-26; Luke 9:23*)

Here at St. Paul we say that “Churched people have a better chance” because in church we hear the word that God loves us and wants to help us redeem our lives, transforming them for the good. Any misfortune that confront us is not a matter of divine punishment but, rather, an obstacle that God wants to help us overcome and transcend. No, we can't control our fate—those aspects of our lives that are already set and determined. But, yes, we can direct our destiny and shape our future. In every difficult situation we need to look for God's blessing and trust that through his grace we can make something good and positive of what is.

It seems fitting to close with the wisdom of Reinhold Niebuhr, another famous theologian, who for a dozen plus years was a United Church of Christ pastor in Detroit. That wisdom, embodied in his so-called “Serenity Prayer,” is probably familiar to you already. But it bears hearing again. So let me share it anew:

***God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed,
courage to change the things that should be changed,
and the wisdom to know the difference.***

***Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time,
accepting hardship as a pathway to peace.***

***Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it, trusting that you will make all things right
if I surrender to your will, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with you forever in the next. Amen.***