

Date: February 5, 2006

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 5

**SERMON: Necessity and Freedom**

Text(s): 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

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Those of you who are World War II movie buffs may remember the film version of Jack Higgins' novel *The Eagle Has Landed*, Michael Caine played the part of the leader of a German commando team, sent on a mission to assassinate Winston Churchill. Both the book and the movie were based on a true, if rather far-fetched story. The plot, of course, did not succeed.

There's a point in the movie when it becomes obvious that the mission is doomed to fail. Too many things have gone wrong; too many people are getting suspicious, and there's just no way that the plan can be carried out successfully. One of the members of the commando unit is arguing that they should simply abort the mission and try to make their escape if they can. But Michael Caine says something like this: "Things have reached the point where we're no longer in control of the events; the events are controlling us. We'll stay and see this thing through to its end, whatever that may be, and we'll do it because we must."

While that's a kind of tough, macho, Michael-Caine-ish thing to say, there's a sense in which that statement rubs us the wrong way. The notion that events are controlling us and that we follow a certain course of action because we must, goes against the grain. All of us like to think that we are in control of our own lives. We believe that taking control of ourselves is a good and positive thing, particularly when we're talking about freeing ourselves from the grip of addictions or compulsive behaviors or exploitative or abusive relationships.

And yet it's also true that regardless of how successfully we take control of ourselves in this positive sense in some areas, there are many other forces acting on us that we cannot control.

We often feel overwhelmed by events and not in control. It's probably one of the more common experiences of life. We lay our plans, we have a vision of what we want our life to be, and then things just happen, and we're dragged along, sometimes compliantly, but more often either kicking and screaming or simply numb. We are at the mercy of "the changes and chances of the this fleeting world," as the line from the Book of Common Prayer puts it so eloquently.

We get a job and work hard at it, often making personal sacrifices for our company, and then a recession or a merger comes along, and we get "downsized." Or we get married and some time after the wedding, we discover that the person we married is not who we thought he or she was; despite our best intentions, the relationship spirals out of control, and we find ourselves in divorce court wondering how we got there and why we couldn't keep our marriage together. Or we lay our plans for retirement, and suddenly we or our spouse develops a severe health problem or even a terminal illness that completely alters the landscape of our lives, and all our plans go out the window. At those times, like the commando leader in the movie we recognize that we are not controlling events, but events are controlling us. We do things, then, not because we want to or choose to, but because we must.

Part of becoming a healthy and mature person is coming to accept the fact that large parts of our lives are not under our control. And yet, merely accepting that we live under the constraints of necessity is not enough. We can do that, and still be miserable. It's what comes after that acceptance that makes the difference. We must go beyond resignation or acceptance to find freedom and meaning and purpose within that necessity.

In both of our scriptures this morning we encounter this fundamental paradox—that in the midst of such situations of necessity into which life throws us, we can actually discover freedom.

In defending the character of his ministry

to the Christians in Corinth, St. Paul says quite dramatically, *“Necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel.”* Paul is not complaining here. He’s not saying that he really would rather be doing something else than preaching the gospel. But once he answered that call of the risen Christ, he realized that he was no longer in control of his own destiny. He could no longer make all his own plans and set his own agendas. There was a certain necessity that came into play as a result of his answering the call of Christ. Certain things had to be done. Certain courses of action had to be followed. Certain situations had to be faced, including, ultimately, his own execution at the hands of a hostile state.

Yet while Paul speaks of the woe that would come upon him if he did not accept the necessity that is laid upon him, he goes on to emphasize that he is completely free. *“I am free from all people,”* he says. Accepting necessity doesn’t obligate him to live in passive resignation or as a victim of Fate. Rather, accepting the necessity that his calling lays on him, it is possible for him to find real freedom as he engages that call. *“I have made myself a servant to all people that I might win more of them to Christ. I have become all things to all people so that by all means, I might win some of them.”*

Martin Luther, in commenting on this paradox of necessity and freedom in Paul’s life said, *“The Christian is a most free lord of all. The Christian is a most humble servant of all.”* Both statements are true, even though on the surface, they appear contradictory. How can one be both a free lord and a humble servant? How do we discover that freedom in necessity?

We begin to discover freedom in the midst of those occasions in life when “necessity is laid upon us,” to use Paul’s words, when we let go of our need to be in control. Accepting the fact that we’re not in control is a mark of maturity. As long as we’re fighting and struggling against the necessity itself, whether it is a necessity that is the result of some choice we

ourselves made, or that someone else made or whether it’s the result of an earthquake or other force of nature, or simply a random accident or chance, we cannot find the freedom within that necessity so long as we either rant and rave about it or resign ourselves to it passively. We have to take a more active stance of engagement with that necessity. We have to actively let go of our need to be in control. Letting go is not the same as giving up. Letting go is not passive resignation. Letting go is not struggling to regain control. Letting go is a positive choice. Letting go is an act of faith. Letting go is trusting that our lives are ultimately in God’s hands and not merely in our own. It’s only by such a positive act of self-surrender that we gain the energy we need to discover the freedom of choice and action within the situation of necessity.

Actress and singer Diahann Carroll, like many Hollywood celebrities, was married four times. She lost her third husband tragically in an automobile accident. Later, in an interview, described what happened to her after that tragedy. She said that she was absolutely inconsolable. She screamed, she wept, she threw things. She couldn’t eat or sleep for weeks and weeks on end. Her friends became very concerned about her emotional stability. She really seemed to be losing her ability to cope. Those sorts of histrionic displays are to be expected in the immediate aftermath of a tragic loss, but they’re not expected to go on indefinitely. But suddenly, just about the time her friends were getting worried enough to attempt to intervene, she snapped out of her tailspin and regained some measure of equilibrium, and in fact, began to make some very positive decisions about her life. When asked by her friends what accounted for the sudden turnaround, she replied that she had come to realize that her wild and inconsolable behavior for those weeks was due not only to her grief at losing her husband, but to her own fear that some things in life were not within her power to control. When she came to terms with that

fact, she was able to let go of that fear and face her grief and deal with it, and begin to make the decisions that would give her life positive meaning. The letting go was essential, not only to her emotional survival, but essential for moving on and rebuilding her shattered life.

This positive act of letting go, which is, as I've said, an act of faith, is not easy. Some of our situations of necessity are so painful, so difficult, we just can't seem to find the will or the power to let go. How can we do it?

In St. Mark's account of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, we see how Jesus did this. He seems to have been unprepared for the instant surge in popularity that came to him as people were healed by his word or touch. Jesus could have simply given in to the hero worship of the crowd. He could have become what they wanted him to be—a wonder-worker, a charismatic faith-healer. That's certainly what his disciples urged him to do. *"Everyone is searching for you,"* they tell him. Give the people what they want. Ride the wave of popularity. But Jesus knew that when he accepted his vocation at his baptism, that vocation carried with it a certain necessity. So in the midst of this surging popularity, he withdrew from the crowds, Mark says, and got up a great while before dawn, and went out into the desert alone to pray.

It was in the desert, alone in prayer, that Jesus learned what even his disciples did not grasp, that the secret of his authority, his power to heal, lay not in his own talents or skills, not in the adulation and hero-worship of the crowds, but in his single-minded consecration of himself to the will of God. Again and again, he had to choose that path of surrendering to the necessity inherent in his vocation, even when it led him, ultimately, not to public popularity, but rejection and crucifixion.

From that prayer in the solitude of the desert, he came back to his work with his agenda clarified and his will realigned with God's will.

He told his disciples, *"Let's get out of here. Let's go on to the next villages, so that I may preach there, for that is why I came out into the public eye."* The freedom to let go of his own ego needs, to follow where necessity led him, came out of his solitude and prayer.

Our apprehension of the mysterious paradox of God's will and our freedom will also arise out of our prayer. Prayer is where we enter into the struggle with necessity, with God's will, with our own fears and compulsions. Jacques Ellul has powerfully described prayer as "combat," where we engage in a struggle with God and with ourselves to discern where the path of freedom lies in the midst of necessity. It is in prayer, in solitude, away from the crowds, that we discover how to let go of our need to control, how to let go of our fear of the future, how to let go of the driven-ness that makes us become manipulative and controlling. It is in prayer that we discover that by letting go of our need to control, we actually become freer than we ever knew it was possible to be. We discover that our true freedom is not in insisting on our own way, not in controlling all events in our lives to try to hedge ourselves about with security, not in manipulating other people to get them to do what we want, but in making ourselves the servants of others for Christ's sake. It's in prayer that we discover how we may be at once "the most humble servant of all and the most free lord of all." We discern that those are not two opposite states of being, but in fact are one and the same thing. It is in prayer that we learn to live in that paradox.

The mystery of the freedom that there is in necessity is nowhere more visible than in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Here we remember how that paradox worked itself out in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is in Mark's story of Jesus, more than in the other gospels, where we get a feeling both of the high cost and the high reward of his letting go of himself. It is in this gospel that we see Jesus

dying alone, abandoned, seemingly God-forsaken. Mark says, "*The Son of Man goes as it is written of him.*" He does not go where he wishes; he goes where, of necessity if he is God's Son, he must. He does not control events; he is controlled by them.

And yet, in surrendering to this necessity, he also surrenders to the triumphant power of God. Dying a God-forsaken death, he loses himself into the hands of the one who has the power to raise him from death. So that the final word in this gospel is not "*My God, my God why have you forsaken me,*" but rather the message given to the women at the tomb, "*He is risen; he is not here.*" Jesus' surrender of control was, in one sense, a leap into the dark, as faith always is. And only after he made the leap, only after he had experienced the ultimate loss of control, did he discover that beyond the dark was the everlasting love of God which was more powerful than death itself.

That is the mystery we touch here in these elements. Here necessity and freedom weave their complex designs. Here despair and hope come together. Here control and surrender mingle into one. Here the essential paradox at the center of life comes into focus. "*The one who would save his life will lose it, but the one who loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*"