

Date: April 2, 2006

**SUNDAY:** Lent 5

**SERMON: Freedom in Obedience**

Text(s): Hebrews 4:13 - 5:10; John 12:20-33

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This past year, Carol's sister Sharon and her husband Jerry lost their dog Lizzie, who was about 14 years old. Lizzie was a chocolate Lab, and like most of her breed was a wonderful people dog. Since Sharon had never owned or trained a dog before, she took Lizzie to obedience school to get her properly trained. The training was very successful; by the time the course was finished, my sister-in-law had won the prize for the most improved owner, meaning that she had learned to obey Lizzie's every command! I suspect anyone who's been a dog owner has long ago learned who the real boss in the family is, and it's usually not the humans, is it? Cat owners don't even bother with the delusion of obedience training; they already know that the cat is the sovereign ruler of the household.

Obedience is a word that doesn't get very good press these days, at least in modern Western culture. It smacks of authoritarianism, of control, of repression. It doesn't sit well with us to feel that we are under someone else's authority. In fact, there's been a cultural sea-change throughout most western cultures in just the past century in the attitudes people have toward the notion of instilling habits of obedience in children. Nineteenth century parenting manuals gave advice such as that found in an 1845 issue of *The Mother's Assistant*, in which a certain Professor George Whipple says, "the first and indispensable duty of every parent is, in the strength of God, and with fervent prayer, completely to subdue the child's will. There is no alternative. This must be done. . ."

Whether you laugh at these examples as hopelessly archaic or nod your head in agreement will probably say something about which generation you belong to. But in much of the Western world, I suspect, these notions would now seem quaint at best, or even positively

barbaric.

Anatole Broyard sums up the change in cultural attitudes when he says, "There was a time when we expected nothing of our children but obedience, as opposed to the present, when we expect everything of them but obedience."

Perhaps the struggle that modern parents have over the question of how much obedience to require of their children is the reason why author Gore Vidal says that no one should have children— only grandchildren.

If the concept of obedience is such a problematic notion for us today, then what are we to make of the biblical writer's assertion in our epistle lesson that Jesus' humble obedience to God in submitting to death on the cross is the model for all those who follow Jesus?

*In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to deliver him out of death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 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 those who obey him.*

Certainly obedience has long been a major motif in the teaching of the church. Think of the old gospel hymn that many of us grew up singing:

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way  
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

So what about this matter of obedience? Is God looking for unquestioning submission from us? Does God want to subdue our wills, as the Victorians thought should be done to children by their parents? Or is there a different kind of obedience that our epistle writer is talking about when he says that Jesus learned obedience, and is the model for how we need to learn obedience as well?

As we approach Holy Week and turn our minds again to the story of the passion of Jesus, this question assumes an even sharper focus. In fact, our confirmation class spent most of

yesterday morning discussing these very questions, and they got really engaged in them. Did God really will that Jesus die on the cross, and is that the obedience God demanded of him— to be the perfectly sacrificial victim in some divine plan of salvation? That has often been the way Christians have looked at Jesus' passion and tried to make sense of it. One has only to visit any of the museums where medieval paintings are on display to see how pervasive the theme of Jesus as divine victim has been at various periods in Christian history. And many— far too many in some people's minds— of the hymns we sing during Holy Week tend to dispense strong doses of this "divine victim" theology.

But to conceive of Jesus' obedience to God or our obedience as his followers in that way does not do justice to the richness of interpretations, either in the New Testament itself or in subsequent Christian discussions. Nor does it offer us any grounds for confidence in a God who would demand such obedience from Jesus or from us. If we are all just destined to be cannon fodder for a God who demands our submission, then there are a lot more attractive options out there that we would be well-advised to take. I can't think of any pressing reason why I need to be crucified. I'm sure a few other people could think of a good reason or two, but I'd just as soon pass if it's up to me.

But there's the crucial point. It's *not* up to me. Jesus' crucifixion was not up to him, either. It was something done to him, not something he did to himself. Jesus was crucified for the same reasons that we still crucify others or get crucified by others today. People whose power was threatened by his message, people whose fear of losing control, people whose vested interests he challenged, an imperial state's intolerance of anyone who threatened its domination— these were the ones who crucified Jesus. The cross was the work of human beings; God does not crucify people; not Jesus, not you,

not me. Crucifixion is human work, not divine work. Most often the crucifixions we see around us today are as undeserved as was the crucifixion of Jesus. Do the families in Darfur who are victimized by the Sudanese government-backed militias deserve the crucifixion they are receiving? Have the civilians killed in the fighting in Iraq or the families of the soldiers who have died deserved their crucifixion? They've all died as a result of human violence, and their deaths do not in any way fulfill God's will.

So if crucifixion came to Jesus, not because it was God's will, but because of the bent and sinful actions of other individuals or the bureaucratic ruthlessness of imperial power, what is the point of this business about obedience, then? What does it mean to speak of Jesus' reverent submission, or of his learning obedience through his suffering. Does it mean he deliberately chose to die on the cross? If so, how or why should that be a model for us?

Thomas Merton once wrote that suffering is just that— suffering. In itself it confers neither virtue nor enlightenment. In itself it is a destructive waste with no inherent meaning. However, he went on to say, we can give our sufferings meaning, we can make our sufferings holy by what we do with them. By offering them and ourselves to God with them, we allow God's power to transform our sufferings into something holy, something redemptive, not only for us, but for others as well. We discover a freedom within that suffering that we cannot know in any other way.

This is why Jesus could go to the cross, not kicking and screaming, not cursing or threatening, but praying for his executioners, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" In the midst of his suffering, a suffering inflicted on him by others, he nevertheless remained free to choose how he would react. He chose to be faithful to his calling, a calling that he had received at his baptism. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche,

though he's not someone that Christians normally look to for guidance, at least got it right on one point. He said, "The greatest thing in heaven and earth is a long obedience in the same direction." That's the sort of obedience Jesus modeled for us— a freely-chosen, life-long commitment to living his life in a certain way in relationship to God and to others. Because of that obedience, the writer says, "*he has become the source of salvation for all who obey him.*" The fact that his calling led him into conflict with the powers that be, and resulted in his crucifixion at the hands of those powers, didn't turn him aside from that obedience. Instead, he freely offered his cross to God and trusted in the power of God to redeem his suffering and make it the instrument for the redemption of others. And so it has been.

How do we learn such costly, yet life-giving obedience? Perhaps the clue is in the word itself. For the word translated "obey" literally means "to adhere to," "to cling to." Austin Farrer, one of the last century's greatest minds and spirits, for many years preacher to Oxford University, puts it as well as I've ever heard it put:

*Christ's dying into life has the power to carry us all through the same motions; and so, what we have to do is not simply to imitate, but to adhere: to take hold, by faith, of this strong swimmer in the gulf of death, who not only supports us, but makes us swim with him. For we do not hold him with our hands; we consent that he should hold us by his spirit. And his spirit is an invisible bond which has this strange power, that it links our hands to his hands, our feet to his feet, our heart to his heart, in such wise that, without visible contact, our hands move as his hands move, and our feet follow the motions of his feet; and yet we are not dragged through the movements that we make, we make them freely; for our heart is linked to his heart; it all comes from there.*

*So Christ dies our death and achieves our life for us; and we die our death, and enter into*

*life, through him. And this happens because, on his side, God is in him; and on our side we take hold, adhere, or believe. . . I must adhere to him, that is all. He asks nothing but sincerity of my adherence; all the rest is his.*<sup>1</sup>

In our congregation in Malaysia, there was a young woman named Mary Foo, who was president of our young adult group. Mary was a vibrant young Christian in her early 20's, to whom Carol and I became quite close. She came from a traditional Chinese family, and in the time-honored customs of her culture, she and her sister Maggie deferred their own university educations and worked to put their younger brother through first. But eventually, Mary's turn came; she majored in English at the university, and was asked to fill a high-ranking post in the state department of education. Carol and I were back in the U.S. by this time, but we kept in touch and followed her career with interest.

Then, when she was in her early 30's, and engaged to a young man in seminary, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She fought it, and it went into remission, but about five years later, it returned and metastasized to several other places in her body. To make matters worse, her fiancée felt he could not continue their relationship when her prospects of living were so slim. But through disappointment and pain, Mary fought on valiantly as, inexorably, the cancer spread.

Certainly her faith was severely tested. A year before she died, she traveled to the U.S. to visit us, for what we knew would be our last time together, and we spent hours talking and she told us of the dark night of doubt and fear that she was going through. But she was learning obedience— learning to adhere to Christ— in her sufferings.

During the last year of her life, when she

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<sup>1</sup>Austin Farrer, *The Essential Sermons*, "Atoning Death," London: SPCK, 1991, 47-48.

was often so weak from the chemotherapy she was undergoing that she could barely stand, Mary was a living example of the freedom that is to be found in a “long obedience in the same direction.” She freely chose to use her sufferings as an opportunity to bear witness to her trust in a God who was the author of life, even though her own body was full of death. As people who knew her talked to other people about her, invitations began to pour in from other churches and community groups, asking if she would come and tell her story. And she did, even when she was so weak she had to sit in a chair because she couldn’t stand. She inspired so many people during that final year, that several whole congregations and many people who were either nominal Christians or people who were losing hope through their own sufferings, were transformed by her witness and example. Cancer support groups sprang up in a place where such things were unknown and culturally suspect. When she finally died, most of the Christians in that city of 200,000, as well as many beyond the Christian community had heard of Mary Foo.

That’s really what it means to follow Jesus— to adhere to him come what may. Only then will we realize the freedom that belongs to the children of God.