

Easter Sunday

I begin by reading from Thomas Merton:

“God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. But the problem is this: *since God alone possesses the secret of my identity, God alone can make me who I am* or rather, God alone can make me who I will be when I at last fully begin to be.

And if I never become what I am meant to be, but always remain what I am not, I shall spend eternity contradicting myself by being at once something and nothing, a life that wants to live and is dead, and a death that wants to be dead and cannot quite achieve its own death because it still has to exist.”

“Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the person that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about that person....

All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life trying to accumulate pleasures and experiences and power and honor and knowledge...to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real....

But there is no substance under the things I have gathered together about me. I am hollow, and my structure of pleasures and ambitions has no foundation.....They are all destined by their very contingency to be destroyed.”

“...And when they are gone there will be nothing left of me but my own nakedness and emptiness and hollowness, to tell me that I am a mistake.”

Easter!

This morning, we arrive beautifully wrapped in the mummy cloth of our own making. We know we are wrapped in the mummy cloth. We know the dead areas in our own beings. They are of our own doing. And in a sense, we have entombed ourselves.

And so, the question is, can we find a way out of our own graves? The whole Easter event is the answer to that one question.

Close to the Easter season comes the celebration of the Passover on the Jewish calendar. The Passover happened many centuries before the events that Easter

celebrates, and is a freedom story. Do you remember the story? The plagues were visited upon Egypt and the people who were enslaved marked their houses and God passed over them and did not destroy their houses and then allowed them to escape across the Sea to freedom. The Passover celebrates that victory.

Easter is also about victory. It is about the victory of a group of people who rediscovered the power and the presence of their Leader. It is about that Presence that reinserted itself into their midst and that was so real and so powerful, that the little band of the faithful who had become weak and embarrassed by having followed Him became emboldened. And their own lives were changed. They became symbols of power and imagination and determination. They changed the world.

Fundamental to our Judeo-Christian faith then, is the issue of justice, freedom and victory. Not justice as an idea that never wins, not freedom as a concept that never reigns, but justice and freedom that reign and define our history and our common life.

That is Easter, as I understand it.

Let's look at this whole experience of God working with human beings, that takes us through the Passover and then much later to the Resurrection. You can see that what God has been trying to do in history is to increase the measure of freedom in the life of people. Our religious experience has in fact been a freedom journey. The text starts with people in bondage, physical slavery, and God says I have got to deliver them from that. And they are delivered from physical enslavement. And they come out and shout. And the text says ...the horses and the riders have been cast into the sea. Alleluia! God fighting for the oppressed. It starts there, breaking them out of enslavement.

Then, what happened? It became apparent as they crossed the sea and started out into the wilderness that once they got out of their enslavement they had no understanding of how to deal with each other. As soon as they got loose they started living for themselves. And the sins that arose were greed and covetousness. And God said well these people cannot make a statement in my behalf unless I move back and free them now from their individual sins of covetousness and greed. And God inspired the writing of the Law. And the Law said, "Thou shalt not kill." And that took care of the murderous part of human sin. "Thou shalt not mess with your neighbor's wife." They said "covet." And that took care of that. The purpose of the 10 Commandments, the Decalogue, was to free the people from this new entrapment which was their own personal greed. "Thou shalt not steal." Would you think that these people just out of slavery would be stealing from each other? Yes.

But then the people quickly made the Decalogue absolute – an iron rule with no bending, and God knew there was trouble again. Because they started doing

everything that wasn't listed in those ten points. And now we saw the entrapment of law. "That is not down here." They knew it was wrong, but it wasn't listed as one of the ten points. So God moved to free them from bondage to rigid legalisms. God said, we will appoint some Judges to rule on the law. And then God did a most amazing thing. God said, we will plant among them enlightened leaders, sovereigns, who have the power to, not just interpret the law but to make new law on the spot. You see the Judges couldn't do anything but interpret the law. They couldn't write law. The Kings could write laws. The Kings could decree. And God therefore increased the freedom. God moved the people beyond the bondage of the law. God gave an enlightened leader the right to be God's spokesperson in their midst. And you know what happened then? It wasn't long before it became apparent to God that enlightened leaders yesterday, are corrupt ones today. The leader who was enlightened . . . David . . . coveted whose wife? One of the most enlightened rulers of all time – he saw her bathing on the roof, sun bathing, and he forgot all of the enlightenment. This is the human situation.

So then God decided, I cannot trust this freedom to be preserved in this manner, so I will have to make it internal, not external – internal to the person. And that is what is talked about in Jeremiah. God says, "I make a new covenant with you. No longer will you have to trust a King, no longer will you have to trust sheer, strict, constructions of the constitution, because I am going to place the truth on your inward parts and write it upon your hearts. And I will be your God and you will be my people, directly." No longer, the text says will it be necessary for one neighbor to tell another neighbor what is right...you will know! It will be a part of your musculatory system. And God moved to create a new level of freedom so that the person owned the truth of God as an internal event, not available to being voted out of style by the legislature.

You would think that would be enough wouldn't you? Do you know what happened and is still happening today? People decided that because the truth had been written on their hearts that they were the whole truth. They decided that truth resided in them, exclusively. Now the minute you let that happen, then you see that the sin of pride has enslaved the Eternal Presence. You are in a body. That body gets shot down, run over. If we allow the me-ism of our current culture to run rampant, when your body is destroyed then we have lost an exclusive block of truth.

Then God had to deal with how to free a person from the limitations of the frailty of impermanence and of bondage to flesh. If God is trapped in fleshy definitions, then when the flesh is destroyed God is destroyed. And if each one of you has got God and they kill all of you, then God is gone. Drop a bomb and God vanishes. I maintain that at the present time in our culture we are just about there in our religious understanding. And that is the reason people tell you, 'I don't need church'.

The significance of Easter is that, in the Easter experience, God's Presence is

defined as larger than flesh. Easter confirms that the Kingdom within you is the point at which your flesh intersects with God's need to be revealed in time. The Kingdom in you does not suggest that you own the Kingdom. It confirms that there resides in your soul a meeting place between earth and heaven, between flesh and spirit – a place where God makes a tryst with you so that you can be a point of revelation, and God can have a peculiar expression in history through you.

The Easter event. They went to that place and the tomb was empty. And these little disciples had this resurgence of power and the Spirit of the Lord was among them and with them, and they said, "We know He is here." But even more importantly, under the influence of that Spirit, the disciples went out and did His bidding and changed the world.

What does this mean? It means that this is the point where we became aware that the nature of our freedom implicates us in dual citizenship. We are citizens of earth & flesh, and citizens of Eternity, at the same time. And the God in you is not in your pocket as your own plaything. It is that in you which implicates you not just beyond yourself, but implicates you beyond time! The Kingdom is that in you which frees you from the body and implicates you into Eternity. It is the Kingdom in you that is the foundation of your immortality. You are already larger than life as we experience it on earth.

In the Easter experience, we learn that the grave could not stop the force and the effect of the personality of Jesus. What does that tell me? I am properly informed that the intricacy of my own creation is not just by chance. Easter gives me an interesting clue that it means much more than most of us have thought. It at least means there is something going on here that is larger than what we see, and whose meaning is potentially larger than what is visible. Jesus said there is this business of the Soul and of the Kingdom – that part in you which will not rest with your complicity in the world's compromises. All of that is going on in every one of you.

Easter gives us a hint of what this freedom that God has been working on is about – freeing us every time we get entrapped. The reason God has been breaking us out of our entrapments, is so that we might be free to answer the address of our own spirit – free to respond to the call in our own soul. In the mythic language it says, God is lonely. What is being said is that the implantation of the Spirit of God in my life is not just for me. The Spirit of God is in me so that I might be in conversation with the rest of life and with God about God's broad design in which I am included.

And now the religious paradox, as I see it, is if I have been cut loose and made free to deal with the voice of God from my own depths, then this experience asks something of me. And it is symbolized by language that Jesus used. "Follow me." It wants me to answer, and if I answer to a call that is Eternal in dimension, it will

ask me to move out of my current understanding and be willing to commit myself. Now, this is where we lose most people in religious life. Commitment. Commitment is an act, not just of response, but of being bound. And that is where most people stop. They say, 'Well God freed me from slavery, and I am saved in my soul once and for all from sin. God freed me from rulers and kings.' What they are really saying is, 'I am not about to be bound now'. The logic of it is, if life has been a process of getting free, why then am I going to get bound? And all I can say is this: commitment is being bound to God, to your best understanding of the call of God as registered in your own spirit. But, people want to be free in that, too.

Merton helps me to understand, as does the Bible and Jesus, that to be free of God is too much freedom. To be free of the Creative Force at the foundation of life is to be lost. Freedom is not an endless succession of options. It is an exercise of options toward a point. If I go back to ancient Israel and they are crossing the Red Sea, and then the Decalogue and then the Kings, and then from the Kings to the internal parts of the person, what are the people being prepared for? Freedom for what? Freedom to respond to God. Freedom to be bound to God's desiring. The poet said,

"Make me a captive Lord, and then I shall be free, force me to render up my sword, then I will conquer Thee; I sink in life's alarms when by myself I stand, imprison me within thine arms, then strong will be my hand."

That is the nature of the religious paradox. And that is the end toward which personal freedom has been created.

People like to arrive at the conclusion that the highest form of freedom they can experience is to have endless options. But there is a higher form of freedom. And that is to make the choice to become a part of the Center out of which options are born. To participate with life, in God, wherein options have their birth. And to be therefore, with God, an option giver and definer. I think it is a higher form – to be out trying to reveal what life would look like if it used its freedom to get to its Source.

When this happens, then you become a functionary of God in time. You will reveal to people the nature of the freedom awaiting them, as you do the work of justice, beauty, truth, love. You will reveal to them that the purpose of freedom, of personal freedom, of national freedom, of group freedom, is to be! To be! To discover the meaning of self. To give exposition to the purpose of life. Jesus arriving at this consciousness said, 'Not my will, but Thy will.' And when that happens, and when you understand that to be bound to the will of God is ultimate freedom, then the body that participates in that decision becomes as Jesus's body became – God's visible actor on the stage of earth. The body becomes the center of eternity. But the amazing thing about it is, it is recognizable to finite human eyes because it is human in form. That body then carries into the world,

through its actions of justice, love and mercy, the intent and the purpose of the Eternal. And I think that is what we are brought here for. And when that happens to the body, the body is already beyond history. It has effervesced into the eternity located in the kingdom which is in its spirit.

“This is my body.” Jesus has taught me the body ought to be a living exposition of God’s justice, of God’s truth, of God’s beauty, of God’s love or at least it ought to be a living exposition of a most desperate search for those things. In Jesus, the body became God’s dwelling place. It is really no big deal that death was confounded by God. They call it Resurrection. Call it what you will. Those people who were over there, who had been faithful, waiting to see what would happen, they certified for us that God is not trapped in tombs.

I have tried to tell you that those bodies you are sitting in are potentially, wildly grand testimonies. And I hope I have gotten enough across so that every time you look at yourself, you will realize that you are the trysting place, the place where God meets time, the point upon which God depends for justice, and mercy and love and beauty and truth. You! Not systems. Not bureaucracies! You! You will not change the face of history except that you recognize the immortal uses of these mortal forms.

“Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to Thee. Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise. Take my will and make it Thine, it shall be no longer mine. Take my heart, it is thine own. Take my hands and let them move at the impulse of Thy love. Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for Thee.”

And then, when worms destroy this flesh, this spirit and flesh will be so acquainted with God that without flesh, will I see God.