

Sermon for Proper 8, Year C
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson
Holy Nativity, Plano
1 July, 2007

We have before us today, as we do every day, a choice. It is the most important choice in your life, this choice you make every day. In a certain light, one might say it is the only really important choice you will ever make. And, to make matters worse, only you can decide if your decision is irrevocable. If you haven't absolutely made up your mind, it is always tempting to revisit the options. But the choice itself is not one we can avoid.

About this choice, there is good news and bad news. Good news first: In this age of vaunted pluralism, it is refreshing to know that the choice we face is a binary choice. There are only two options. It's really very simple. There are many ways of describing it, but St. Paul puts it this way in our reading from Galatians: Freedom or slavery. Or in other words: Live according to the spirit of God, or live according to the flesh. It's all the same thing. The same choice that we make every day. Each one of you is a battleground between these two opposing forces.

On the one hand, there is God, who made the whole world with everything that is in it. He created it out of nothing, out of sheer pleasure at making good things. And we are a part of his making. We were made not just to satisfy the vanity of a puppeteer. We were made to be actual relational beings with whom the maker could share himself, his love, joy, and peace. We were made to be free, persons who could actually respond in that same love, joy, and peace found amongst the persons of the Holy Trinity; not creatures that simply do what we are commanded to do. Even now the Holy Spirit works in us by virtue of our baptism, calling us to this true freedom.

On the other hand, there is the flesh. Almost from the beginning, the world that God made has rejected God's gift of freedom. In St. Paul's thought, our flesh stands for that part of us which is tied to the world, bound in allegiance to the devil, and under judgment. The world, the flesh, and the devil are the forces of rebellion against God. They would like to say that they stand for freedom, but in reality they beget a kaleidoscopic host of behaviors that wall up our lives against the love, joy, and peace for which we were made.

So we can have our fornication, impurity, and licentiousness, our pathetic sexual fumbings of whatever stripe. We can try to find ecstasy in serving created objects, idolatry. We can dedicate ourselves to making those objects serve our desires, sorcery. We can nurse our enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, and all the other modes in which we reveal or

conceal our gnawing, petty hatred of and opposition to one another. And to top it all off, we can have a wild party at which we all pretend we are deliriously happy, and at which we encourage each other into all kinds of excesses to deaden the pain of our miserable, loveless existence.

Or we can give ourselves over completely to Jesus, live by the Holy Spirit, crucify our flesh with all of its passions and desires, and serve one another. If we do this, we will become fruit-bearing trees, offering the very life of the Holy Trinity to the world around us. Instead of the tawdry imitations of fornication and impurity, we will offer up a robust and confident love. Instead of the studied abandon of license, we will have true joy. Instead of enmity and strife, peace. Instead of jealousy and anger, we will have patience, long-suffering. When we would have been selfish, we will be kind. For the darkness of idolatry we will have goodness. In exchange for dissension, party spirit, and envy, we will be faithful. Instead of the destructive power of sorcery, we will be gentle. And we will abandon our drunkenness and carousing for self-control.

All of these are aspects of one thing: the fruit of the Holy Spirit. And this entire unified character will grow in us, if we give ourselves completely to Jesus and accept the life of the Holy Trinity into ourselves. That is the true freedom, the freedom to live as God created us to live. Anything else that masquerades as freedom is really slavery.

That's the good news. It's a simple choice. Only two options. The bad news is: Those are the only two options. There's nothing in between. See, that's the problem with most of us. We think something like this: "OK. I understand about the wild party stuff. Sorcery and idolatry sound weird. And of course we can't have off-the-wall sexual behavior, or rampant alcoholism, or anything like that. But I don't want to be a saint. That way you don't get to have any fun. Can't I just be human and keep my personal life under control?"

Short answer: No. We all want that middle way. We want to have our ugly lives and still feel like we're OK. We want to enjoy hating each other as long as we're quiet about it. We want to have sexual license as long as we can feel genteel about it. We want the law. Just give us the rules, and then we'll know how far we can go.

But St. Paul is clear. If we want to be justified by keeping the law, we're in trouble. Because the law actually points to all the destructive desires we would like to indulge. Once you begin to devour one another, "take heed that you are not consumed by one another." The law isn't what we think it is. It's not just a list of rules to get around. It's "love your neighbor as yourself." Half measures inevitably take you right back where you didn't want to go. Slavery and works of the flesh. You can't have a veneer of goodness and still stand. The only way to really bear fruit is to give yourself to Jesus, and let him change you.

“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” If you’re following Jesus, don’t look behind you at the ground you’ve already plowed up. You can’t keep any of it. You can’t go back. The Holy Spirit is going to keep pulling the plow through the hardpan of your heart. And you’re going to start growing. If you’re not following Jesus, maybe you should start.