

**2 Epiphany - Year B – January 18, 2012 - Homily**  
**1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

It's fitting that for the week in which we celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. that we also talk about freedom. Martin Luther King worked tirelessly to change the laws of the land in favor of equal rights for all citizens. He also changed hearts, and the mindset of many towards African-Americans, helping us all to understand what it means to respect the dignity of every human being. The Apostle Paul also worked tirelessly to help the Christian communities he founded to understand the difference between Law and grace. He opens hearts to discern the right use of our glorious freedom in Christ. He changes minds so that we continue to orient our hearts and lives rightly towards God in Christ Jesus.

Tonight's reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians begins with these words "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial." The phrase "all things are lawful for me" seems to have been a kind of slogan for the libertine attitude of the Corinthian Christians. The most obvious meaning, along the lines of "I'm free in Christ, so I'll do whatever I want to do" was prevalent. The subtle or underlying thought behind the slogan comes from the idea that the body is just a temporary shell, for earthly use only, and therefore unimportant. Paul rejects that notion, which was also held by the Gnostics. Instead, his letter seeks to reorient the Corinthians' hearts and minds rightly. Paul emphasizes that all who believe in the Lord Jesus are Spirit-filled and therefore our bodies are important, both now and in the resurrection. He reminds us that we are members one of another in the Body of Christ. Again, emphasizing that what we do with our bodies in this life, either honors God or doesn't, but is not insignificant.

Corinth presented a world of temptations in itself, as well as profound challenges for every Christian of the day. As a bustling port city, Corinth was filled with the kind of eclectic nomadic population that seeks a variety of 'entertainment' and worldly diversions as a relief from long periods at sea. As well as the ever-present temptations to take advantage of the kind of freedom that comes with anonymity in the big city, and being a long way from home and family. There's always someone willing to accommodate that kind of market – then and now – especially when the slogan "life is cheap" continues to be a widespread belief. This kind of market is also driven by a steady and eager stream of customers will pay top dollar to get what they want. The sex trade continues to thrive in many ports around the world, where children, and especially girls, are not protected by law or law enforcement. These geographical areas also seem to coincide with endemic poverty. They attract the kind of vermin who misuse their power to brutalize these children of God, and the scum who believe that money buys them the right to get whatever they want irrespective of the human cost.

Paul develops his argument for faithful living in Romans chapter 12:1-2, calling all Christians "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect." As children of God, we understand ourselves to be God's own, to stand before God, and to be accountable to God. This is why we are willing to be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, rather than simply conformed to fashion and worldly concerns. As God's children, it's God's wisdom and will that rule our hearts, and therefore what comes from our hearts in our words and deeds.

The truth is that there is a right way to live, wherein we glorify God in and through our bodies. Our freedom in Christ has been bought with a price, and we no longer belong to ourselves. As we practice giving of ourselves, we learn to discern how to serve the Lord willingly, joyfully, and with great love, in grateful response for His great gift to us. Discernment plays a role here for all of us. Paul determines what is right in the Lord, and what is beneficial, by understanding the right use of our bodies. He says, “The body is meant . . . for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.” In other words, all activities for which we use our body that do not glorify God skew and distort the fullness of life in Christ. If we’re not using our body for activities that glorify God, then we’re captivated by another object. It’s not easy to keep focused. Our lives are often ordered and committed to many different things, be it work, wealth, or power. For some their lives are mostly directed towards commitments to the nation, tribe or ethnic group. Throughout our lives, we might wear many hats – mothers or father, grandparents or Godparents, boss, worker, leader in our church, or volunteer. Nonetheless, the hat that fits us best, that helps to keep our minds and our hearts in the right place is our Christian hat. When we keep God in Christ Jesus the first thing, then everything else falls into place. We can and should be Christian parents, Christian grandparents, Christian workers, leaders and volunteers. When we only consider our “rights” according to what is “lawful”, then we’ve bought into the pervasive ethics of our culture. That is, the ethic that glorifies the individual and worldly definitions of success at all costs. On the other hand, God calls us to humble service to the Christian community, and to our neighbors.

The fact of the incarnation, God made flesh and dwelling amongst us proves that what we do with our bodies really matters. It matters on an individual level, and as the Body of Christ. The indwelling Holy Spirit that we receive at our Baptism, transforms our physical flesh and blood into a sacred temple for the Lord. By God’s grace and our faith, we’re joined with Christ in a spiritual union. So our bodies and our lives are meant for His service. The implications for daily living are enormous, but incredibly comforting as well. By God’s grace, we’re strengthened in the power of the Holy Spirit to flee from the temptations of the devil. Yet God knows we’re only human, and so in our Baptismal covenant we pray that, whenever we fall into sin, we will repent and return to the Lord. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we have the constant presence of our Lord guiding us into right living and service to others.

English statesman, Winston Churchill, says it beautifully, “All the great things are simple, and many can be expressed in a single word: freedom, justice, honor, . . . mercy, hope.” Our freedom in Christ is a great gift for living an abundant life. The lesson of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is also simple, timely, and timeless. Do not become dominated or enslaved by anything or anyone, except to be a fool for Christ, and a servant of the Lord Most High. Just because we can – doesn’t mean we should. There’s a lot we can do in life and in this world, but not all things are beneficial for us personally, or for building up the Body of Christ. Prayerful discernment is crucial to our lives in Christ.

Amen.