

May 2, 1982
Romans 8:16-28 (NE)

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"MAN IN THE MAKING"

The Belgian physiologist and Nobel Prize Laureate, Corneille Heymans, in an autobiographical article written a few years ago, restated what has come to be known as the "Harvard Law of Animal Behavior". He put it like this:

"In our laboratory, a cartoon of a funny looking dog is hanging on the wall. The dog is looking at a syringe ready to give him an injection. Beneath the dog...is written: 'Under the most perfect laboratory conditions and the most carefully planned and controlled experimental procedures, animals will do what they damned please!'"

Certainly few if any would deny that human beings--the human animal--will act in precisely the same way. It is all a part of a theological principle which we refer to as "free will".

But, of course, in the absolute sense, no one is free. We are all, to some extent, the victims of our heredity and our environment. We all have limited intelligence, limited talents and abilities. We are all subject to the consequences of our actions in this orderly universe, so that we are not free to do anything we please, anytime we please, in any way we please, with perfect liberty. Some wag once put it this way,

"Thank God we live in a free country where a man is free to do what he pleases as long as he's not afraid of his wife, his neighbor, or his boss."

II

This whole problem of freedom comes sharply into focus in my own mind when I consider the evil actions of which my fellow men are capable. When I read of foul murders, the cruel neglect of children on the part of some parents, blatant disregard for private property, man's terrible inhumanity to man, the human propensity toward greed, envy, and selfishness, I must then ask myself if this is something normal and natural in man or is it learned behavior. If a human being is free to be Christlike or to be an embodiment of evil, why would he ever choose the latter? If man is free, why does he not exercise that freedom to be noble and good instead of ugly and destructive?

It is an argument which has been going on for thousands of years. Is man basically good or basically evil? Is he angelic or demonic in nature? And what is it that makes him whichever he is? Was Shakespeare on target or engaged in poetic license when he wrote,

"What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, how moving! how express and admirable in action! how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god!"

Or was Isaiah nearer the mark when he argued,

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way..."

Or perhaps Pascal who wrote:

"What a chimera, then, is man! What a novelty! What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, imbecile, worm of the earth; depository of truth, a sink of uncertainty and error; the pride and refuse of the universe."

Well, I am not going to try to solve that problem this morning. Certainly we can say this much; that man at his best is capable of becoming a noble and a saintly creature; at his worst, he is like a devil.

My point this morning is that man is capable of becoming either, depending on how much and how well he struggles to use his free will to attain his ends, and what ends they are which he seeks. Many men and women live a long time before they become motivated to use their freedom to accomplish their highest and best potential, but they are always free to make that struggle.

The day on which a person discovers that he is free is one of the most important and glorious days of his life. Here is the story of one such man whom I knew personally and who went through that very struggle. He was a professor of English at the University of Chicago. Hear what he writes about his experience:

"I recall very sharply how in the autumn of 1939, as I was driving one afternoon across the monotonous prairies of Texas to begin my third year in this post, it came to me like a revelation that I did not have to go back to this job which had become distasteful. I did not have to go on professing the cliches which were becoming meaningless to me. I saw that my opinions had been formed out of a timorous regard for what was supposed to be intellectually respectable and that I had always been looking over my shoulder to find out what certain others, whose concern with truth I was beginning to believe to be not very intense, were doing or thinking. It is a great experience to wake up at a critical juncture to the fact that one does have free will and that giving up the worship of false idols is a quite practicable proceeding."

We human beings are naturally indolent. We certainly prefer the Garden of Eden to the harsh realities of the wilderness. We find it easy to say, "I can't." Much easier than to say, "I will." The former requires no effort; the latter often requires a harsh and painful struggle. Our biggest obstacles to change, to growth, and to development, are usually indifference and fear, but we are always free to try even though we may not be free to succeed.

III

St. Paul once wrote, "The whole created universe is struggling toward perfection." I accept that, not only as Paul's opinion, but as scientific fact. The world is incomplete. You and I are incomplete. Everything in this universe, including you and me, is part of an evolutionary process. I don't much care whether God created me out of a monkey or out of the dust of the earth. A monkey, it seems to me, might be preferable. The point is that having created me, God expects me to labor as a co-worker with Him in a continuing creative process.

Surely, this is what Jesus was talking about when he admonished his disciples and us, "Be perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect." Be perfect in your struggle to grow toward God but don't assume that you are God. Go on growing and evolving, don't just sit there vegetating. You can do it! You can quit your bad habits. You can go back to school and do what you always wanted to do. You can change your life. You can change your job. You can retire. Oh yes, you will pay a price, there are consequences, but you are free to do it!

Evelyn Underhill, the great English mystic, wrote,

"...Each human spirit is an unfinished product, on which the Creative Spirit is always at work."

But you and I, with our apathy and indifference, can prevent the Creative Spirit from having its way with us. We must cooperate. We are free to cooperate.

Although I have shared it with some of you before, I must here again share a story Henry David Thoreau tells in his Journal--that wonderful diary he kept while he was at Walden Pond. He walked one day into the village of Concord and there he saw some men cutting down an elm tree. It wasn't just any elm tree or one which had contracted Dutch Elm disease. This was a very large and very old elm tree which had stood at the outskirts of Concord for many, many years offering to all its beauty and its shade. Now this venerable tree had died of old age.

Thoreau, writing of it, lamented that at its demise none of the citizens of Concord had gathered to pay their respects or express appreciation for the service of this great tree. He felt there should have been a public gathering, a "wake" if you please, to honor the passing of this giant. And then, Thoreau, in speaking of this beautiful thing of nature, concludes by saying,

"Its virtue lay in its ability to go on growing and expanding right to the very end."

And so it is with you and me. Our virtue lies in our growing, expanding, improving, serving, right to the very end.

That same Evelyn Underhill I quoted a few moments ago has written these words:

"...so many Christians are like deaf people at a concert; they study the program carefully, believe every statement made in it, speak respectfully of the quality of the music, but only really hear a phrase now and again. So they have no notion at all of the mighty symphony which fills the universe to which our lives are destined to make their tiny contribution and which is the self-expression of the Eternal God."

Don't let that happen to you. Don't die without ever really having lived. Go on growing and expanding right to the very end. We are not man, complete, finished, done. We are "man in the making", on our way toward a divine destiny, ordained by the same God who gave us the original spark of life. He made us in order to use us, not for our purposes, but for His.

PRAYER

O Lord, Thou art our rock, our fortress, our deliverer, in whom we trust. We call upon Thee, who art worthy to be praised, and ask Thee to save us from our enemies.

Save us, O Lord, from indifference and laziness, which are two of our worst enemies. Do not let us become unconscious of the pain and suffering of our fellowmen nor of the many evils which exist in our world. Give us the will and the energy to fight for the right and always to oppose that which is destructive of thy will.

Save us from the enemy of pessimism and discouragement. It is Thy world. Thou art not dead. If we serve Thee and Thy purposes, right will prevail and peace and brotherhood be realized. We are in Thy hands and nothing can separate us from Thy love.

Give to each of us, and especially to the sick and the dying, a sense of the reality of Thy presence, and a portion of Thy strength.

Our fathers and our mothers trusted in Thee, Lord, and you delivered them. May we trust in Thee also, and not be separated from Thee by doubt or fear.

Remember not our sins and weaknesses but redeem us for Thy mercy's sake and enable us to live a Christlike life. It is in his spirit that we pray.