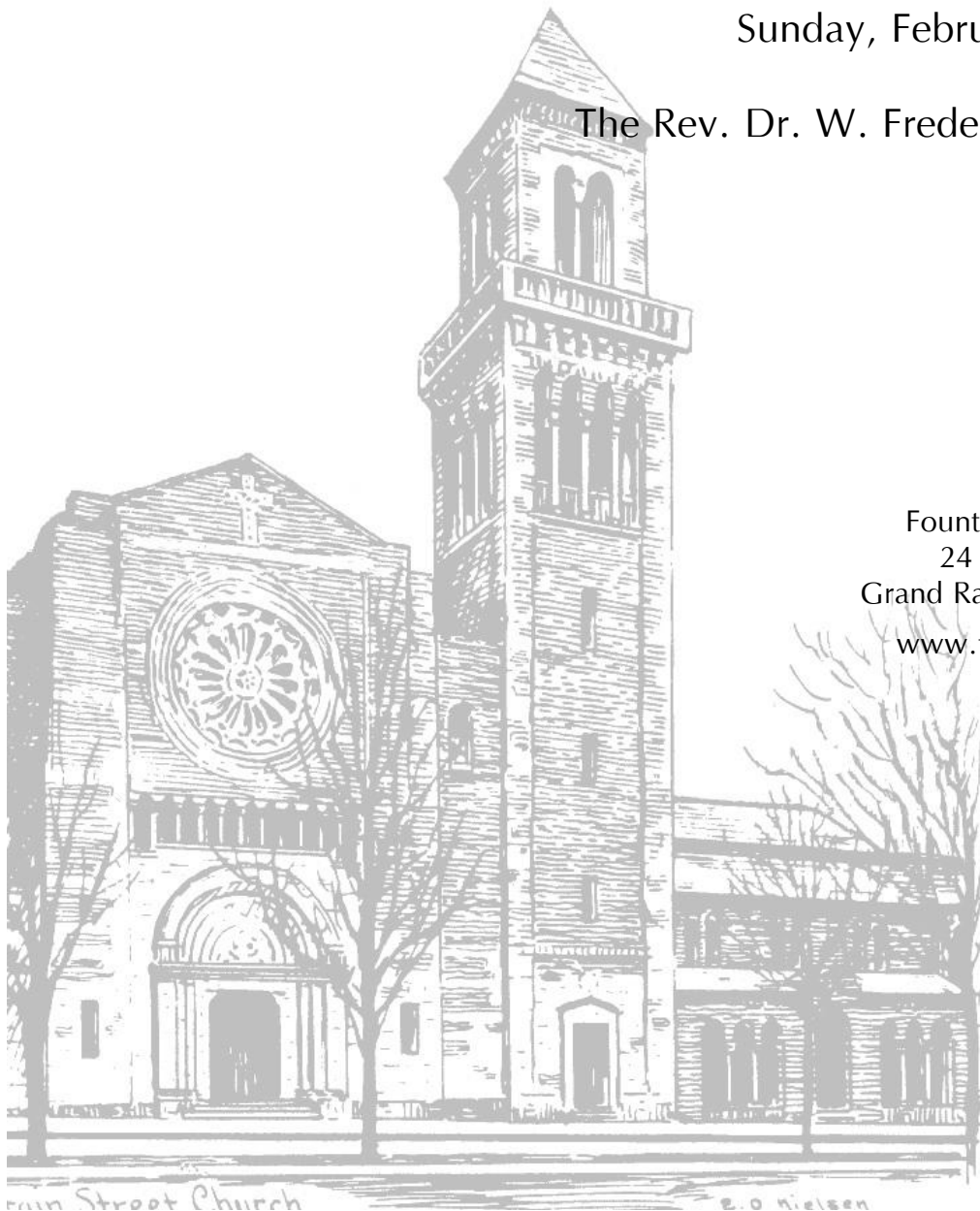


“I Wish I Knew How It Feels”

Sunday, February 8, 2008

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To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“I Wish I Knew How It Feels”

READINGS

Philippians 2:12-13

“Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

e. e. cummings

“To be nobody-but-myself – in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else – means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop fighting.”

From the *Hadith*, the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, a vast collection that complements the *Qur'an*.

The Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) is said to have called the internal jihad the "greater jihad". On his return from a battle, he said: "We are finished with the lesser jihad; now we are starting the greater jihad." He explained to his followers that fighting against an outer enemy is the lesser jihad and fighting against one's self is the greater jihad.

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SERMON

My sermon title comes from a spiritual we will sing to conclude the service. It is black history month which called that spiritual to mind, as well as the words of Frederick Douglass from the hymnbook, “Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are people who wants crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder, they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters.”

I cite these words because we are spending this month looking at oppression, which is political and social, but also spiritual and mental and emotional. Last week I spoke of mental oppressions, dogmas of the mind, ideas we get from parents and culture that shape what we see. I noted how dogmas of the mind are like that saying, “If

all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” We tend to see what we know more than know what we see, as Rabbi Heschel said last week.

Freedom of all kinds is a struggle. It is certainly political, as Douglass noted, but also mental as Heschel described. Today I want to talk about the oppression of the heart, the bondages that keep us in emotional prisons, the way oppression of the mind keeps us in intellectual prisons.

Emotional prisons have deep foundations. They go back to our youth, when we are forming our first connections to the world. In a famously brutal experiment over 200 years ago – a king ordered an orphanage to divide the babies into two groups – one of which were nourished only in body and another who received not only food but affection. Many of the former died despite having plenty to eat. In our century a primatologist placed baby monkeys in a cage with a wire “mother,” a mannequin made of wire but with a bottle placed where the breast would be. He also created a sort of “mother” with soothing fur but no bottle. The babies preferred the soft mother even though they went hungry. Our emotional needs are so basic that before we know it we are forming ideas about love and trust and more.

Erik Erikson, a psychologist who followed and broke with Freud, developed a theory called psychosocial development that builds on this notion, describing our earliest days as when we decide whether we trust the world and ourselves, or whether we will find life fearful and shameful. Far from being mere emotions, how they combine truly forms our sense of self. And because none of us get a perfect infancy or childhood, all of us are imperfect emotional selves. To speak of emotional bondage is to speak a universal fact, just as we all have mental bondages as I said.

Still, we have moments at least when we feel real, strong, sure; times when we momentarily get that sense of what freedom feels like. Go ahead, think about one of them. Chances are it was when you met the challenge of some inner ghost or demon, an emotion that has chained you – fear, shame, guilt, anger, envy, to name a few. We deal with them all, but one of them is likely to have a more powerful effect.

My personal challenge has always been fear and its challenge is courage. And for me a moment when I was five stands out as a triumph over fear. We were moving away from our townhouse apartment and the playground where there was a pine tree of some height. Other kids had climbed it many times, but I was always too frightened, unsure of myself. The day we moved was gray and cool, so there would not be many kids out and about. I somehow got there and in the solitude slowly mounted, branch by branch, until I stood at the pinnacle looking out. The view was unremarkable, but the feeling was triumphant. This was my first tastes of liberation, liberation from my own fear.

Liberal religion, is about liberation of course. It usually means we are free to believe whatever we want and so on, that there are no forced doctrines. But that's a half truth. Not just intellectual liberation is involved, but emotional liberation, to be who you are, not who someone else says you are. Self-determination is not just a political goal but a personal goal. "To be nobody-but-myself – in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else – means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop fighting."

No one is ever completely free, though. To be a religious liberal is to enter a life of spiritual struggle, struggle to see and overcome the oppressions of the mind, heart and soul so we can be truly free. It is a series of lessons to be learned, in sequence.

Now the world is full of step-by-step lessons for enlightenment. They run the gamut from Randy Pausch to Rick Warren, and even movies like "The Big Lebowski." Everyone is teacher, I think, but few are learners.

To be a religious liberal, though, is to be a student more than a teacher, and the first lesson is to unlearn what you think you know so you can learn what is actually so. Ironically, the Islamic concept of jihad is a model. It literally means struggle and the *Hadith* teaches that there is a greater and a lesser jihad, especially in the Sufi tradition. For every outer lesser jihad like war, business, success, competition, there is an inner greater jihad about our struggle with the urge to violence, the fear of defeat and failure, our parent's expectations and our desire to be accepted by others.

To be a religious liberal, then, is not to arrive at liberation but to begin it. We are not the destination of your spiritual journey, but the beginning, for this is a lifelong task, as both Erikson and Cummings knew.

But to what end, you may ask? Serenity? Purity? Salvation?

Liberation of mind is what allows us to know the truth as the truth, as I said last week. Liberation of heart allows us to know ourselves for who we are. And as the mind cannot refuse to accept the truth when it knows it to be true, the heart cannot reject the self when it knows it to be the self.

Erikson talks about the psychic challenge of integrity, often met only late in life if then, when we come to accept our lives as worthy and good even if imperfect, that we could have chosen other paths but that the one we tread is as honest as others.

It is not automatic, this acceptance of self as good including all its imperfection and failures. We cannot get there if the other challenges of living have been avoided, denied, evaded. "Becoming," as poet Francis Anderson says, "often awaits the nourishment of tears." Now and then, as Paul Tillich observes, "a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted. You are ac-

cepted, accepted by that which is greater than you'..." But these are mileposts and markers that urge us on.

Next month we will talk about how to we obtain liberation of mind and heart and body, but right now it is important to realize that the first step is knowing we are not yet free, that we face a lifetime of spiritual effort and struggle. This may not be welcome news if you seek cheap grace, as theologians call it – an easy step-by-step guide to wisdom, virtue, meaning and love. Who wouldn't want that, of course?

Me. And those like me for whom practicing the spiritual scales, conjugating the moral verbs, and running the emotional laps is part of what makes life worth living.

This is not an easy way, liberal religion. No messiah, no minister, no ritual, no membership relieves you of the task to "work out your salvation in fear and trembling," as Paul wrote. We are each utterly on our own in untying the bonds that tie the mind and heart and soul. But we are not alone. In the company of others who share the struggle, we cheer each other on, rest on each other's shoulders, weep in shared frustration and fear, and joy in the moments of freedom that harbinger a day when everyone will be truly free.