

## 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

### Cycle C-2025

One of the greatest gifts we have received from God is free will. Free will involves our “ability to freely choose our own actions and determine our own outcome.” The \$64,000 dollar question is, “Do you believe you have free will?” Studies have shown that our answer to this question makes a substantial difference in our lives. Those of us who have a strong belief in free will are more likely to exert control over our actions. We are better decision makers. We are more committed to developing virtuous habits. We are more likely to actively engage with the world. This flows from a deep sense of being true to ourselves, which provides us with a sense of authenticity. Free will leads us to hold people accountable for their unethical, illegal, and immoral behavior, even while tempering justice with mercy as needed. On the other hand, research has found that if we do not have a strong belief in free will, we are more likely to be dishonest, aggressive, and to conform to the thoughts and opinions of other people. Since we are less

in touch with our true selves, we feel less authentic and do not believe our actions reflect our core beliefs and values.

I believe that in our culture today, we are suffering from a crisis of free will. On one side, there are people who do not want it. They want others to make their decisions for them so they will not make a mistake. They in turn can blame the other person if things do not turn out well. On the other side, there are those who contend we have little to no free will. They claim we are fatalistically enslaved to our genetics, family background, personality traits, personal inclinations, and how we respond to our life circumstances.

As Catholic Christians, what do we believe about the existence of free will? The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “Freedom is the power rooted in reason and will. God created humanity as a rational being, conferring on him the dignity of a person who can initiate and control his actions. God willed that humanity should be left in the hand of his own counsel, so that he might of his own accord seek his Creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to Him.” In a most

eloquent manner, the Church is telling us that God has provided us with the capacity to freely choose good or evil in our lives.

In the television series “Jesus,” there is an epic scene between Jesus and Satan in the Garden of Gethsemane. The devil makes his final attempts to convince Jesus that His death will be in vain. He provides Him with a glimpse of the future in which people we kill in Jesus’s name. He also shows Him the brutality of world wars. Jesus responds: “The Father loves humanity so much that he gives them freedom of choice. He has not created them so that He could be their dictator. He gives them the choice of doing good or evil. I am in the hearts of my people. I will die for the everlasting kindness of the human heart created by the Father, so that humanity will make His image shine once again. And those who will want to, will find in me, the strength to love until the end.”

Ongoing reliance on Jesus Christ helps us to experience the inner freedom to be partners with Jesus in building up the Kingdom of God in our own slice of the world. Our Gospel reading gives us a taste of this when the rich

man commends the dishonest steward for using his free will to help rectify his situation and to prepare for his uncertain future. This passage is not meant to encourage dishonesty but to illustrate the importance of using our free will generously and creatively in the service of the Lord. Even though God has given us the free will to choose for or against Him and His will, St. Paul reminds us that as Christians we are called to use it for all that is good, true, and beautiful.

The ultimate Scriptural revelation that God honors and upholds our free will is captured in these following words of St. Paul: “For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive recompense, according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil.”(2 Corinthians 5:10) God believes in our free will so much He has given us the power to choose heaven or hell as our eternal residence. That’s some serious freedom! Since God takes our free will so seriously, may we be inspired to do the same. In our experience of judgment, Jesus shows us mercy by taking into consideration any impediments to our freedom. Examples include lack of knowledge, grave force or fear,

diminished mental capacity, lack of maturity, or force of habit.

Our Catholic faith acknowledges that our free will has been affected by the reality of Original Sin, which in turn can blur our reason, and weaken our will. The Church also acknowledges that some people have embraced a sinful habit or way of living for so long, they come to experience a deep spiritual, mental, emotional, physical, and/or relational bondage to it. As a result, people can have the interior experience of feeling like their free will has been compromised. Even though both the Scriptures and Church teaching acknowledge this reality of being in bondage, it does not mean that we no longer have free will. There is no such thing as a free pass. There is a reality called “reacquired freedom.” We can gradually regain our internal freedom by continually surrendering ourselves, our sins, addictions, and life circumstances over to Jesus Christ. It may be that we also experience his healing power by seeking out spiritual and professional assistance from other people. Jesus is our Savior who can bring deliverance and restore that sense of internal dignity that comes from freely choosing good

over evil, God's will over our will, and God's power over a fatalistic attitude. As Jesus proclaims in the Gospel of John: "Who the Son frees, is free indeed."

So, in the end, we are ultimately responsible before God, about whether we continually strive to be set free by Jesus Christ our Lord. We are responsible for seeking out spiritual healing through the ongoing conversion of our minds and hearts and seeking out the grace and mercy of God. There is a powerful tendency to remain in bondage because we seek to avoid the pain that comes from breaking or weakening our attachment to a particular person, behavior, or lifestyle. We can be deceived into believing it is easier to remain in bondage versus the growing pains that we may experience as compulsions, restlessness, emptiness, deprivation, or grief. If we embrace and ride out the growing pains, instead of avoiding them, we gradually become a new creation in Christ. We notice that the things that formerly enslaved us are gradually losing their power over us. This is a result of freely choosing to allow our free will to be continually touched by the grace of God. I would recommend that we habitually pray something like this:

“Jesus, touch my free will with Your grace, so that I may freely choose to love You and do Your will.” Our personal and spiritual transformation always involves a collaborative effort between us and Jesus. A strong belief in free will makes all the difference in how we view, engage, and respond to the circumstances of our daily lives. Believe it or not, every day, we have the freedom to choose love and mercy over anger and a lack of forgiveness, service over selfishness and indifference, kindness over rudeness and disrespect, and hope over discouragement and despair.

In their song “Free Will,” the rock band Rush sings: “If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice.” We can also use our free will to choose to do nothing in the face of circumstances where we know action needs to be taken. Instead, we put our heads in the sand, ignoring it all together, or hoping it will blow over soon, so we do not have to do anything about it. Rush reminds us that in doing so, we have made a free will choice. We are responsible for that decision. The more we exercise our free will to choose good, we will experience the

glorious freedom of the children of God. In the process, we may inspire others to do and experience the same!

Remember, you do have free will. Treasure it. Use it for the glory of God. It is the greatest gift that God has given to us. After all, it has the power to determine both our earthly and eternal destiny.