

5th Sunday in Lent  
April 10, 2011  
Fr. Joe Bambenek  
Mary Immaculate School Gym, Kirksville, MO

Ezekiel 37:12-14    Psalm 130    Romans 8:8-11    John 11:3-7,17,20-27,33b-45

*“Untie him and let him go.”*

Freedom. Freedom is a core component of the American dream; it is at the heart of the American spirit. The world has witnessed in the Middle East the past few months that freedom is a desire God has planted in the depths of the human heart. Freedom is a very Christian ideal. As Christians we have a special insight on the true meaning of freedom because Jesus was, and will forever be, the greatest liberator in the world’s history.

In today’s gospel account, John tells of one of the most spectacular examples of Jesus’ liberation: His releasing Lazarus from the grip of natural death. Lazarus had been dead for four days. Not only, as Martha observed, would there have been a stench; his body after 4 days of death would have known meaningful decay. Yet Jesus still is able to give Lazarus the ultimate natural gift of liberation: victory over natural death.

An even more spectacular and infinitely more important freeing experience would soon follow: when Jesus died on the cross and then rose from the dead. Jesus did this not for His own sake, but to give each one of us freedom from eternal death. Jesus has given us this freedom; He has shown us The Way. We must choose to exercise His freedom through our faith in Him and by participating in His life-giving sacrifice by conforming our lives to His. For just as all Americans have incredible freedoms, but not all of us choose to utilize those freedoms for our own good and the good of others in the same way; the same can be true of the freedoms offered to us by God.

Furthermore, we, as Catholics, recognize that the freedom Jesus wants to give us extends beyond eternal salvation; God wants to give us freedom in this life, too. What kind of freedom do I mean? At the conclusion of his last extended missionary trip to the United States, Pope John Paul put it this way: “Freedom -- consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.” The late, great Pope was speaking in particular about political freedom in that quote; but it is also true of personal freedom. Which can then get us to ask ourselves: what takes away our rights in our personal, non-political lives? What, especially inside of us, blocks our freedom? Or to use the term of the gospel, what ties us up?

At the top of the list are our sins: most especially habitual vices such as chemical dependency, gambling, pornography and the various distortions of the great gift of human intimacy to name a few. All of these steal our freedom. They take away our lives as we knew them. They make us slaves to satisfying the desires that underlie them.

The possibilities for the loss of personal freedom go beyond sin and death. We can also be held captive by fear and discouragement which, in turn, prevent us from becoming the man or woman God created us to be; from fulfilling our vocations. We may be imprisoned to hurts of the past that we are unwilling to forgive. Through unforgiveness, we chain ourselves to the event or the person that has deeply harmed us. We may be bound by lies about our value as a beloved son or daughter of God, made in God’s image. Lies that we come to believe about a

lack of dignity told to us by others or even by ourselves. We may be restrained from becoming the man or woman who God made us to be by ignorance, pride or prejudices that make us blind to God's truths about Himself, ourselves, or others. Jesus came to Earth because He wants us to be free from all of these levels of enslavement and restraint; in addition to eternal life. Why? Because God made each one of us out of love; He loves each and every one of us. He made each and every one of us for a special purpose, a vocation; one that will bring us joy. Just as Jesus came to Earth not for His own sake, God made each one of us and gave us each our vocation not primarily for our own sake, but to be an instrument of His love for others. Yet each of the bondages, each of the ungodly restrictions on our ability to exercise our true freedom, hinders our ability to be the person who God lovingly created us to be; and ultimately, they hinder our ability to love.

As I was envisioning today's homily, I was thinking about the bindings of Lazarus and how they were layers that constricted him when he was returned to life. Layers which had to be removed in order for Lazarus to live the full life that Jesus had raised him from the dead to live. In particular, I was thinking of how the untying of Lazarus is an example for our lives as Christians. First, we can think of the removal of Lazarus' head covering. The pall of death no longer covered Lazarus' face. Lazarus' face: that unique icon of the face of God that is embodied not just in Lazarus' face, but in each of our faces, as we each highlight a unique aspect of God's infinite goodness. When we accept the Lordship of Jesus in our lives it is like that burial veil is taken off of our faces, giving us life in the Lord. With our face uncovered, we are then freed to hear His Word more clearly and deeply. He no longer needs to shout at us the most basic commands: "Lazarus, come out!" With our face uncovered, we are freed to receive the sacraments so as to be nourished by His love. We are freed to be able to speak the truth to others that leads them to grow in faith, hope and love. Yet we can still be very constrained. Just as Jesus did not want Lazarus to spend the rest of his life walking around like a virtual mummy, He does not want us to go that way through life either. God wants the bindings of death that inhibit our freedom to be removed one by one; and He wants to heal the decay caused by sin and the other distortions which are underneath those bindings. With that in mind, let us then look at today's gospel reading for a couple insights on how we go about gaining true freedom; how to get rid of those ungodly yokes.

The first insight is that we must listen to the voice of God. It was at the words of Jesus that Lazarus arose from death. It was at the words of Jesus that others untied Lazarus. Likewise, we must listen for God's voice. And how do we do that? We listen to God's voice by coming here to Mass, to hear the Word of God proclaimed and preached. At Mass we also hear the Word of God proclaimed in and through the Mass' rituals and we receive the Word Incarnate into our very bodies in the Eucharist. In the Sacrament of Penance we hear the freeing words of the priest, spoken on behalf of God, forgiving our sins. We hear the Word of God by reading the Bible on our own, especially when read with good resources to help us understand the Bible. We hear the Word of God when we gather as brothers and sisters in Christ, for we recall the words of Jesus that wherever two or more are gathered in His name, He is present. We hear the Word of God by spending time with God on our own in prayer, whether it be coming to Church or some place else quiet during the day to pray; praying in the quiet of our rooms; or coming to Church on Fridays during Eucharistic Adoration at Mary Immaculate. As we do so, we should first listen for God's voice to guide us, and then hear it to give us the courage to follow Him. That is

just a quick overview of listening to the Word of God. It is actually a topic that merits its own homily. And given that this homily is long enough already, I will leave it at that.

The second insight is that we cannot gain freedom alone. Jesus does not say, “Lazarus, untie yourself!” One important way that the Catholic spirit differs from the typical American spirit is that we are not individualists. We recognize that we are placed on Earth to help each other get to heaven; we are not here to merely save ourselves. To borrow a phrase that our Protestant brothers and sisters often use, it is important, even essential, that we have a personal relationship with Jesus. However, being a true disciple of Jesus goes beyond just myself and my personal relationship with God. We must strive to help others gain freedom; and we must have the recognition that we cannot achieve freedom on our own. We are to help save one another. Once again, this topic could be a whole homily in itself, but let me outline a few key points. We are to proclaim Jesus’ message of freedom through our actions and through our words. To live our lives as witnesses to His love and His truth. We are to encourage those who are trapped by fear or discouragement. Following the example of Martha who spoke to the Lord on behalf of her brother Lazarus, we are to intercede with God in prayer for those who we love who are currently held in bondage; yoked to things other than God. And we are to be instruments of God’s love, healing and reconciliation: by seeking the forgiveness of those we have harmed and by forgiving those who have harmed us as God has forgiven us. God has given to priests the special ability of serving as His special ministers of reconciliation in the Sacrament of Penance.

God also gave each of us the ability to turn to others when we are yoked to what is not of God. We are to recognize that sometimes when we are enchained in vice or in other weaknesses, not only must we seek God’s help and the help of others in the spiritual realm, but we are to seek the help of others who have used God’s gift to humans of intelligence to learn and understand the body and the psyche. We are created as embodied, integrated beings. Experiencing wholeness comes through a healthy integration of body, soul, and spirit.

As was mentioned at the start of Mass, my name is Fr. Joe Bambenek and I was ordained last May as a priest of the Archdiocese of St. Paul & Minneapolis. One of the traditions of being a new priest is that during our first year of priesthood we are able to go back to places that have been important on our journey to the priesthood to celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving. Hence I am here at Mary Immaculate today to celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving for my ordination to the priesthood. In fact, it is in a joyful spirit of freedom that I come here today to celebrate with you. I come here with particular gratitude for how the 5 years I lived in Kirksville were a time of growing in freedom in important ways in my life. Yet I also come here with an even greater experience of freedom than I knew two decades ago. For now, as a priest, I am living as the man who God created me to be: His ordained priest. During the 17 years between my 1993 NMSU graduation day and my priesthood ordination day last year, there were a number of wrappings that needed to come off my soul. Included in them were wrappings of self-will and sin. Wrappings of desires for things other than what God desired for me. Wrappings of distortions and lies about my dignity and the dignity of the priesthood itself. And, admittedly, I come here as someone still in need of further sanctification. For it is only once we are in heaven that the last remnants of wrappings have been removed. As Catholics we can think of Purgatory as being the place of final unwrapping and healing.

Today I am grateful for the ways that Mary Immaculate parish helped prepare me for the priesthood. In particular, I would like to express gratitude to the Catholic community here at Mary Immaculate for your witnessing presence in the City of Kirksville. Gratitude, on a very

personal level, for your generosity in keeping the church building unlocked 24 hours a day, at least when it is not being renovated. For while I did not attend many Masses here over the years, I have spent many, many hours in the church building; literally days worth of time praying. This morning I was thinking that I have probably lit more votive lights at Mary Immaculate than in any other church and I can probably safely say that there is not an hour of the 24 hour day during which I have not stopped in to pray at one point or another. During those visits I also started a habit of praying about my vocation that continued until I entered seminary. In addition, I have particular gratitude for your pastor, not only because he allowed me to celebrate Mass here today, but also because back when we were both students at NMSU, when I was a freshman and he was a senior, he was the first person aside from my parents who I told I might have a vocation. You are blessed to have a pastor who inspires that kind of trust in others. Trust which, in turn, can nurture freedom. Gratitude is also due to Pat Lehr and Deacon Dave for their long and faithful service here, and for the impact they had on me during my time in Kirksville. And I also think back with gratitude to one particular time when I came here for a communal penance service to receive the Sacrament. From that confession, I gained an insight about my life that helped lead me out of ignorance, to grow in appreciation for the true gifts that God gave to me. In fact, it is an insight that allows me to live out my vocation as a priest ever more freely. Grateful for the people who have encouraged me along the way, including some people who are here at Mass today, most especially my parents. Most of all, I am grateful to God to be back in Kirksville, this very special place on Earth that it is, with a new level of freedom in my life.

Let me close by saying that as many of you may now be experiencing gratitude that this extra long homily is almost over, I encourage all of us here today, and especially during these last two weeks of Lent, to take stock of our own lives. Let us ask ourselves tough questions such as: what are the ungodly bindings that are tying me up right now? What is preventing me from becoming the woman or man who God created me in love to be? How does God want me to reflect in a totally unique way His love and His truth into the world? How can I turn to God; and how can I turn to those He has placed in my life, to experience the great gift of His healing freedom that He wants me to experience? And, how can I be an instrument of healing and of love to help others experience true freedom?

*“Untie him and let him go.”*