

5th Sunday in Lent
April 10, 2011
Fr. Joe Bambenek
Catholic Newman Center, 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. Even in the Middle East, a place not historically known for freedom, the world has witnessed the past few months that freedom is a desire God has planted in the depths of every human heart. Freedom is a very Christian ideal. As Christians we have a special insight on the true meaning of freedom because Jesus is the liberator *par excellence*. The theme of Christian freedom is perhaps most prominently described in the Gospel according to Luke. It has been argued that if one were to look through Luke’s gospel and identify his mission statement for the ministry of Jesus, it would be the quote from Isaiah in Luke 4 which Jesus says is fulfilled by Himself.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.”

Put another way, Jesus reveals to us that He became Incarnate and came to Earth to bring true freedom. 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 it 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

sexuality to name a few. All of these take away our freedom. These and other sins take away our lives as we knew them, make us slaves to satisfying the desires that undergird them.

The possibilities for the loss of personal freedom go beyond sin and death. We can also be held captive by fear and discouragement that 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. When we fail to forgive, 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 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. Why? Because God made each one of us out of love; because 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 when we choose to live it out, however scary it might seem at first. Just as Jesus came to Earth not for His own sake, God made each one of us and gave us each a vocation not primarily for our own sake, but to be instruments of His love for others. Yet each of the bondages, each of the ungodly restrictions on our ability to exercise our true freedom, hinder our ability to be the person God lovingly created us to be; and ultimately, hinder our ability to love.

As I was envisioning today's homily, I was thinking about the bindings of Lazarus and how they were like layers that constricted him. 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 a metaphor 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. Let us think of Lazarus' face: that unique icon of the face of God that is embodied not just in Lazarus' face, but in each of our faces. Each one of our faces 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!" 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 that way 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 quickly look at today's gospel reading for insights on how we go about gaining true freedom; how to get rid of those 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. How do we do that? We can 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 into our very bodies the Word Incarnate in the Eucharist. In the Sacrament of Penance we hear the freeing words of the priest, spoken directly on behalf of God, forgiving our sins. We hear the Word of God by reading the Bible on our own, especially when done 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 that by spending time with God on our own in prayer. First to hear God's voice to guide us, and then to 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 a topic that merits its own homily, and I realize that this homily is going to be long enough already.

The second insight is that we cannot do it 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 individualistic Christians. 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 typical Protestant phrase, 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 humility to recognize that we cannot achieve freedom on our own. We are placed here on Earth to help save one another. Once again, this 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, if necessary, through our words. We are to live our lives as witnesses to His love and His truth. We are to encourage those in our midst who are trapped by fear or discouragement. Following the example of Martha and Mary, 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. First and foremost by seeking the forgiveness of those we have harmed and also by forgiving those who have harmed us as God has forgiven us. One of the great blessings of being a priest is that God gave priests the special ability of serving as His special ministers of reconciliation in the sacrament of penance.

God also gave each one 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 we must have the humility to ask for help: to turn to God and to other Christians. Not only are we to 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. God created us as embodied, integrated beings. Experiencing wholeness comes through a healthy reintegration of body, soul, and spirit.

As Fr. Bill 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. And so I am here today, I hope it is clear in a joyful spirit of freedom, to celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving at the Newman Center. I come here with gratitude for how the 5 years I lived in Kirksville and worshipped at the Newman Center 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 an ordained priest, I am living as the man who God created me to be[: His ordained priest]. During the 17 years between my Truman graduation and my ordination day last year, there were a number of wrappings that needed to come off. Included in them were wrappings of self-will and sin. Wrappings of desires for things other than what God desired for me, even if they might have been intrinsically good. Wrappings of distortions and lies about my dignity and the dignity of the priesthood itself. And, admittedly,

I stand here before you as someone still in need of further sanctification; as do all of us except perhaps for a few of the saints. For it is only once we are in heaven that the last remnants of the wrappings will be 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 my experiences at Truman State, and the Newman Center, were ones of heightened freedom. I am grateful for the many cherished, treasured and lasting friendships that I made in Kirksville, including the many friends who made the trek up to Minnesota last May to celebrate with me, and to be here today. Grateful for friends and mentors here who saw gifts and talents in me that I had not yet seen and gave me the freedom for them to be unwrapped. Grateful for those who had the great vision to make the University what it is today, that in a special way helps its members to see the truths of the world. Grateful for all who have encouraged me on the journey to the priesthood. The support I have received has been almost overwhelming and far greater than I expected. Grateful for my parents who have been steady and sure companions with me on the journey of life and great witness of faith and virtue through the ups and downs of life and who are with me today; as well as for many other supportive family members. Here at the Newman Center I am especially grateful to Bettie Lesczynski, who many still remember, for all she did during her long tenure as the Newman Center Director. Grateful to Fr. Bill for allowing me to celebrate the Masses this weekend and his many years here of faithful service, for he has been here since soon after I left. Grateful also to Fr. Chris, Deacon Dave, [\[and Pat Lehr\]](#) at Mary Immaculate who each in their own way touched my life and helped bring me additional freedom on the path to priesthood. [\[At the 11 AM Mass: Grateful also to Pat Lehr, whose presence here this morning is a surprise pleasure. She was one of the first people to encourage me to become a priest\].](#) And most of all grateful to God to be back in Kirksville, the wonderful and special place that it is, experiencing 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, and especially during these last two weeks of Lent, to take stock of our own lives. To ask ourselves tough questions such as: what are the ungodly bindings that are tying me up right now? What is preventing me from being the woman or man who God created me in love to be? What is keeping me from reflecting in a unique way God's 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, recognizing that Jesus came not for His own sake but for others; how can I be an instrument of healing and of love, especially to those who God has placed close in my life, to help others experience true freedom?

“Untie him and let him go.”