5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Cycle A, 2.9.20
Isaiah 58:7-10/1 Corinthians 2:1-5/
Matthew 5:13-16

UNCHAIN YOUR HEART AND LET IT BE FREE

A couple weeks ago I offered a visual introduction to the city of Corinth as it would have been around the time of St. Paul as we began a few weeks of readings from St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEHPfMlyLfc
I suggested that we don’t spend much time reflecting on the epistle readings for Sunday Mass. We usually focus on the gospel of the day. But the epistles offer us much food for thought and inspiration for our Christian living. I found that especially true today in the short excerpt from Paul’s letter. One author entitles this little section: “The Power of Paul’s Preaching.” Well, the truth is, St. Paul didn’t feel very powerful much of the time.

In fact, when he came to Corinth, he came as a broken man. We learn from the Acts of the Apostles that Paul’s attempts to dialogue with the people of Athens went nowhere for the most part. When they heard him use the phrase “raising Christ from the dead,” the listeners split. Some laughed at him and walked off making jokes. Others said: “This is very interesting; let’s hear this again... some other time.”

After Athens Paul went to Corinth.

Paul had other issues as well. We’re not sure what it was, but he had some affliction which he called “a thorn in the flesh.” He wrote: So I wouldn’t get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan’s angel did his best to get me down.... At first I didn’t think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it... three times I begged. It seems that Paul wasn’t very attractive either. He knew what some people said about him: His letters are severe and potent, but in person he’s a weakling and he mumbles when he talks. So this preacher of the gospel, this disciple whom even Peter and some of the apostles picked fights with, wasn’t the epitome of success and perfection. He had a lot of hard lessons to learn. It took him quite a while to recognize that it wasn’t about him. It was about the power of Christ shining through him.

Fr. Paul Dechant shared with me a story told of a child who went to church on a sunny Sunday morning. That church’s walls had four stained glass windows on either side. The child was enthusiastic about the many colorful figures that the sun traced through the stained glass windows onto the church floor and across the pews. Excitedly, the child asked who these colorful
The child’s Dad whispered that this window depicted Mary and Joseph; there was St. Patrick and that was another saint and so on. Sometime afterward, in religion class, the teacher asked if anybody knew what a saint was. The excited child, raising a hand, said “I do”. “A saint is somebody that the light shines through!”

This was Paul’s lesson articulated so well for us today: I came to you in weakness... no persuasive words of wisdom... except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

That took courage on Paul’s part and great risk. The proclamation of Christ crucified was the most scandalous feature of the Christian message for Jew and Greek alike, yet it was the heart of Paul’s teaching, a theme that was always at the forefront of his message. The Jews expected a Messiah who would be victorious, not one who would be convicted of a crime and then executed. The Greeks would be repelled by an unlettered peasant, especially one who appears to have been a failure. Yet that’s the mystery of Christ Jesus and the paradox of the gospel: what appears to be failure is really victory; what seems foolish is divine wisdom. It’s the Spirit and power of God that works the wonders, and God works them through mundane elements of life such as light and salt. Unfortunately, we don’t always appreciate the significance of this truth in our own lives.

I caught a song this week by a musician I hadn’t heard before – Devon Gilfillian. He grew up in Philadelphia and was influenced musically by blues, hip-hop, soul and rock music, to which he adds his own unique spin. To the music of his father’s era that influenced him – Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder, The Temptations – Gilfillian adds the beats and rhymes of more recent music icons – Wu-Tang, Kanye West, Jay-Z. The song I heard is entitled “Unchained” and the second verse of his song sings:

Breaking through the mirror  
Seeing clearer Taking back the power  
I hear the sound of Whispers all around me  
They can’t drown me out No, no, no, no  

Unchained and my heart is free  
I’m still the man I was born to be,  
Oh Nothing’s gonna hold me back  
Nothing’s ever gonna hold me back  
Unchained  Unchained

The artist explains that the song was written about his younger brother Ryan. At age 17 his brother was in a severe car accident that left him disabled from the waist down. Devon made a music video* for his song "Unchained" which depicts a day in Ryan's life, showing his will to live and love fully, despite any setbacks. Devon explains, “This song is about becoming the best version of yourself no matter what obstacles get in your way. My brother is a prime example of that. He doesn’t let anything hold him back from being his fullest self.”
The touching music video shows his brother getting out of bed in the morning to brush his daughters’ hair and driving them to school. From his wheelchair he maneuvers himself into the driver’s seat and, from that position, he dismantles the chair and gets it into the car. Then, he wheels himself around the neighborhood, passing out flyers to promote a local neighborhood talent show. He’s unchained and his heart is free... Nothing’s ever gonna hold him back. St. Paul could have written those lyrics. Neither the mockery of his debating opponents nor the physical ailment he suffered would stop him from fearlessly and unceasingly proclaiming the Gospel and the message of Christ crucified. He got to a saturation point where he could say: I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me. He didn’t tell people about Christ, he showed them Christ shining through himself – a strategy for witnessing that cannot fail.

Prophet Isaiah issued? Shelter the oppressed and the homeless... If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech; if you bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted; then light shall rise for you in the darkness, and the gloom shall become for you like midday. Into the midst of our darkened spirits over the sad divisions in nation and world, over the fear of a deadly virus and the reports of more gun violence, the light of God tries to break through, urging us, as Devon’s song does, as St. Paul does, to become the best version of yourself no matter what obstacles get in your way, calling us to be light bringing out the God-colors in the world... to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. Unchained by Christ, with our hearts set free, nothing can hold us back from letting the light of Christ shine through us so that others too may give glory to God.

Reflecting the Light of Christ

What about us? Do we believe in the truth about the way God works. Extraordinary things are accomplished through ordinary people. God chooses the weak things of the world to confound the strong... the insignificant people to outstrip those who are celebrities. Do we allow ourselves to be deceived by the current political language that tells us we’re the greatest, and the strongest and the richest and we’ve never done better? Does the veneer of supposed material prosperity and financial success camouflage the truth of the Word of God? the challenge that the

John Kasper, OSFS

*Video of “Unchained” by Devon Gilfillian: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQiMULQikxw