

The Freedom Lecture

Biblical Faith and the Ethical Revolution

Grace be unto to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Christ Happening Is in This World, Now

You probably have noticed that the way I come at life is always to begin with the “is” and not with the “ought.” Each person and each authentic community forges their “oughts” out of the concrete “ises.” In terms of theology, my mind always goes this way.

You and I do not present Christ to the world. Christ *is* already Lord of this world. Our job is to pull off the mask. At the very depths of personal and social going-on-ness is the Christ Happening. That is the way it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be at the end. There’s nothing religious about it, there’s nothing Christian about it, there’s nothing pious about it. The self-understanding that I point to with the Christ Happening is what it means to be a human being. The problem is, most of us have blinders on as to what it means to be a human being. Or we do not see that Christ, or what we point to with that symbol, is the Lord of this world.

I see my task in life, whether I do it with skill or not, is simply to pull the mask off of our eyes, that we may see, in the very depths of the great human adventure, that there is one – only one – eternal, unchanging, never passing truth and happening, and that’s the Christ Happening.

A Radically New World

Our subject today is *Freedom: the biblical faith and the ethical revolution*. I have to come at it in this fashion: you and I are living in a radically new world, and the Christ Happening is to be found right in the midst of this world. That’s where it’s always been. If we’re looking any place else other than in the midst of the scientific revolution, the urban revolution, the secular revolution, we haven’t the slightest chance of seeing the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We have to begin by looking hard-headedly at the actual world, for Christ never rules over any of our dream worlds. He only rules over the actual world we’re in. We begin there, and then we try to say to ourselves the meaning for us of this Happening of happenings.

The Style of the People of Faith in this New World

I want to deal with the style of life that issues from that Happening and place it in the context of the new image of the church in the 20th century. Before I do that, I have two bits of poetry. One is from my friend D. H. Lawrence:

Those that go searching for love
only make manifest their own lovelessness,

and the loveless never find love,
only the loving find love,
and they never have to seek for it.

(“Search for Love,” *The Complete Poems . . .*, p. 661)

And now from my friend Paul:

Oh, you dear idiots of Galatia, who saw Jesus Christ the crucified so plainly, who has been casting a spell over you? I will ask you one simple question: did you receive the Spirit by trying to keep the law or by believing the message of the gospel? Surely you can’t be so idiotic as to think that a man begins his spiritual life in the Spirit and then completes it by reverting to outward observances? Has all your painful experience brought you nowhere? I simply cannot believe it of you! Does God, who gives you his Spirit and works miracles among you, do these things because you have obeyed the Law? Or because you have believed the

gospel? Ask yourselves that. . . . At one time when you had no knowledge of God, you were under the authority of the gods who had no real existence. But now that you have come to know God, or rather are known by him, how can you revert to dead and sterile principles and consent to be under their power all over again? Your religion is beginning to be a matter of observing certain days . . . [or believing certain ideas]. Frankly, you stagger me, you make me wonder if all my efforts over you have been wasted! . . . *Plant your feet firmly therefore within the freedom that Christ has won for us*, and do not let yourselves be caught again in the shackles of slavery. . . . *It is to freedom that you have been called*, my brothers [and sisters] (Gal. 3: 1-5; 4: 8-11; 5: 1; 5:13 – JBP).

What a poet. If you, along with Augustine and myself, can allow yourself to say that “All that is, is good” – which is to say there is one God and not two – then you’ll understand how I am persuaded that if this one God is “wroughting mighty wroughts” in the midst of the historical going-on-ness of our time, then one God is at the same time upheaving creation and its people.

Faith vs. Ethics: the Real Problem Is Faith

I want to go to that individual now who’s standing in faith. The category in and through which the style of life that flows out of faith is delineated more adequately than anything else is the category of *freedom*. My friend Luther made use of it, and Wesley made use of it, but he meant something a little different than most people mean. Certainly Paul made use of it. Now, you could use other categories, but I think this is the primary one. The person in Christ is free. Period. Paul was very clear the fruit of the Christian life was undivorced from faith. That is, to be a person of faith is to be a free person, and to be a free person is to be a person of faith. I don’t become a person of faith and then go out to be free. A person of faith is a free person. The Christian has always understood that the basic problem is not the ethical problem, but is the faith problem. It is the problem of deciding who you are going to be.

We’ve got to put a little content on that. I like to think of freedom as the freedom to be *lucid*, the freedom to be *sensitive*, the freedom to be *exposed*, and the freedom to be *disciplined*.

The Free Person of Faith has the Freedom to be Lucid

The person of faith is delivered unto lucidity. This is to say that the person of faith knows everything that there is to be known, minus nothing. I repeat, the person of faith knows everything that there is to be known, minus nothing – a person of utter lucidity.

You remember the picture by Camus in the *Myth of Sisyphus*? He has Sisyphus pushing the rock up the hill, his shoulders are dug into it, his muscles tensed, his face furrowed with strain. He’s dripping with perspiration as he edges that rock of life up the hill. And when he gets it up the hill, he steps back and watches it roll back down again. Camus says this is the moment of the pause in which one becomes utterly lucid about one’s lucidity – utterly lucid about just the way life is.

The person of faith doesn’t have to kid himself any more about his showed-up-ness in history. He knows damn well that he just showed up. He just appeared, without any consultation on his part. He showed up a male and not a female, or she showed up a female and not a male. His color was white, or her color was black, slant eyes, or straight eyes, my neurotic problem, or yours. The free person dares to see that what is, is what is.

The free person doesn’t have to lie about death, but knows that one day they’re going to stick her in a hole in the ground, and that the worms are going to eat her. That’s all she knows for sure. She doesn’t have to conjure up some Platonic scheme of a body with a soul in it with three parts, the appetitive, the irascible, and the rational, the bottom two of which rot away in the ground because they are so intimately connected to that body, and that the rational part floats up to heaven when she dies and defeats death. But she doesn’t need this kind of a rationalized escape. She can face life as it is. She’s liberated to be lucid about herself. She knows she’s going to die with a warped and scarred psyche. She also knows that her very scars are her gifts, and that her problem isn’t that she’s scarred, but it’s having guts enough to pick up those scars and shove them into history. She says, if you take my neurotic pattern away from me, you take my gifts as well.

The lucid person understands his neighbor. He knows that his neighbor is an S.O.B. before he ever meets him, and he doesn't have to go around pretending otherwise. My neighbor knows that I know things about him that he wouldn't tell his own mother, and yet he never told me a thing. If he's a lucid man, he doesn't have to go around kidding himself. He doesn't have to go around pretending anymore. He knows that everybody lives in an illusion and that it's possible to pick up your tent and move out of the illusion once it's disclosed. This is the lucid one. This is the person who is in faith, who is stamped with the approval of great God Almighty, the one who understands that the great human venture is going on in God's world, and that God loves us and pronounces all creation good, including us.

The Free Person of Faith has the Freedom to be Sensitive

Secondly, the free person in Jesus Christ is the one who is sensitive. I'd like to use the word "love," but that word has been abused. The one who is in Christ dares to be present to every situation. The French have the term "disposabilite," one who dares to give himself to the situation, to be sensitive to it with the filed down finger tips of the safecracker, who can feel what's going on way down inside the lock. This is the one who dares to be present with the third ear. He or she doesn't pay any attention to any questions that anybody asks, but pays attention to the context out of which the question is asked. He or she doesn't pay any attention to what someone says but pays attention to what that person is most trying to reveal and conceal at the same time in what is said. The sensitive person dares to care about another person down deep in the spirit dimension of that person, where the real problems are. This is what I mean by sensitivity

The sensitive person takes a washrag and wrings the last drop of meaning out of it. The ancient Hebrews were clear about this when they saw that the divine activity was not only on the upbeats of life, but also in the downbeats of life. Getting an "A" in a course or getting an "F" in a course are equally significant. Having a good sex night with your wife is no more significant than having a bad sex night with your wife. Not only those great successes but those failures have meaning. Not only the "yea's" of life but also the "nay's" of life resound with the eternal "yes" said over existence. Not only getting born, but getting died is significant. Who is to say which is prior to the other, as Calvin would put it?

Camus used the figures of *the lover*, *the actor*, and *the conqueror*. *The lover*, as the free person, is the man who loves every woman he meets to the hilt, and when he finishes he leaves her so that he can be ready for the next woman, ready to love her to the hilt. Now, if you've got Puritan morality in your veins as I do, you like to hasten on to say that he's talking about life situations. This is a person who takes every situation as it comes and squeezes every bit of meaning out of it, then lets it go to be ready for how God is confronting him in the next situation. He then moves into that situation and wrings it out.

You don't have any more lifetime than you have right now in this room. You never had any more and you never will have any more. One of the great tragedies of life is that we don't experience most of our lives. We don't stand at attention. Think of the living that you and I have done since we got up this morning and did not have selfhood enough to stand at attention long enough to take it into ourselves. We were at a worship service. There's a lot wrong with that worship service, but what was wrong with it was just as important as what was right with it. The person of faith dares to be sensitive. She marches through life at attention, as the one who loves and does not lose her soul to any moment. Yes, yesterday was given. Tremendous. But tomorrow is at hand. I move on to embrace it.

The free person is *the actor*. He plays many roles in life. My gracious, I'm just amazed at the number of roles I play. Being the husband of Lyn is not an easy role, but it's an exciting one. But Lyn isn't the meaning of my life. However, that's my role, and I live it to the hilt, but I don't lose my soul to it. I'm also a clergyman. I tell you, in our day that's a hard role to play. What does it mean to authentically create the role of a clergyman? I am the clergyman of the 20th century. I say, let every clergyman be exactly like me. That's what it means to play a role to the hilt. Now, granted, there have been many Hamlets played, but a man who did not say to himself, "Mine is the greatest Hamlet," didn't know what he was doing. And he never came off with it. That's what I mean, you play your role to the hilt without losing your soul to it.

You play many roles, and they're complex roles, and you play each one as if it's the only role you have, while at the same time you're wholly detached from it. Luther called this a holy nonchalance toward life. An utterly serious attachment that makes the pharisee think you're a pharisee, and an utter nonchalance

that makes the pharisee think you're a libertine: this is the person of faith who's never boxed in. About the time you pigeonhole him over here, he's over there. It's that kind of a picture. He's giving himself with all that he is to the other in any given situation. This is the one who really cares about life. He cares about people. He is the concerned one.

And Camus said that the free person is *the conqueror*, the one who sees that life has a billion causes and stands before them all. This is to say with Paul, everything is permitted, and yet not everything is expedient. He meant you just have to choose. Everything is permitted and yet you have to choose. That's frightening, because you know that when you stand before that woman and say "yes" to her, you are saying "no" to all the rest. And so it is in choosing a vocation, the overwhelmingness of possibility.

With some little narrow god I don't have much of a problem. However, the person of faith has insecurity, for everything is good and everything is permitted. The person of faith dares to launch into a cause, knowing that that cause is not going to save his soul, that that cause is not going to save history's soul. They tell me that even the pyramids are beginning to round off. He sees that every cause in the world is finally a ridiculous cause, because if bodies in the sky collide and earth isn't anymore, then our human history isn't anymore.

He's like the man who sees that ten thousand years from now somebody is going to pick up a broken cup handle, take it to the archaeologist who's gonna say, "Mmm, that comes from those people who came roughly between Ramses I and Einstein." And anyone who doesn't see that, and embrace it, doesn't know what it means to love. This is the person who is sensitive. This is the one who cares. This is the one who creates for some other reason than feeling good about a job well done or life well lived.

The Free Person of Faith has the Freedom to be Exposed

The person in faith has the freedom to be exposed. By exposure I mean the one who dares to act and takes within herself the risk of acting. She acts without any appeal. Finally, no one has any three good reasons that justify any act ever done.

If I decide that this criterion is going to approve my act, my question is How did you decide upon that criterion? Every moral deed is finally without any appeal. This is what Paul meant when he said that a man is only justified by faith. The free person is the one who dares to risk himself without ever again seeking any unambiguous knowledge that he did the right thing.

And he's the man who lives with the consequences of his act. This is to say you never do anything in which you know the consequences beforehand. The person of faith takes into himself the consequences, whatever they may be, before he does his deed. Therefore, after the deed he does not say that's the fault of my having a neurotic Papa, or that's the fault of that campus chaplain who advised me to marry this slob. No. He takes responsibility for his own actions, his own existence.

I tell you once again, I came out of a family where my Papa was neurotic. Am I the product of a neurotic father? No! I am Joseph Wesley Mathews. I am responsible for every ounce of me. That's what it means to be a free man in Jesus Christ. It wasn't that I married some old shrew and therefore became this mouse. I resent it when someone says that women castrate men. Now, mark you, they do that, but when you find a man who excuses himself as castrated by his wife, hell, he had all sorts of possibilities and decided to be castrated. He's accountable if he is sexless. This is the free man. He blames nobody or nothing. No external circumstances have anything whatsoever to do with my life. I am my life. That's the freedom that's in Jesus Christ.

The Free Person of Faith has the Freedom to be Disciplined

And lastly, this person is free to be a disciplined one. I don't mean by disciplined those schedules that a freshman puts up in his room about when he's going to brush his teeth or when he's going to get up in the morning. I don't care when he gets up. I'm interested in what he does when he gets up.

By discipline I mean the one who's taken upon himself to be himself in the civilizing process. This comes to me in the form of the indicative and the imperative. The Gospel of Jesus Christ strikes me as the indicative. That's just the *word*. Joseph, you are loved of God. But when I receive that indicative as the

indicative of my life, it becomes the imperative of my life. That is to say, I shall be what I am. I am a forgiven man. Therefore, I will be a forgiven man in every life situation. I am a received man. Therefore in every life situation I will be the received man. This is to say that I can receive you. Do you understand that? It is not an imperative that comes from the outside. It's my imperative, the one I put on myself. I shall be what I am. I shall ever become what I be.

The person of faith is set free to be the utterly disciplined person. In the great indicative of the gospel, I expect you to expect to find me, wherever you meet me, under whatever circumstances, standing as a free man. I must expect you and all of history to expect to find Joseph Wesley Mathews as the free man he is and has decided to be.

Now, whether you find me that way or not, that's beside the point. I'm not even talking about that. That all people shall always expect to find me a free man, that's what I mean by discipline. I must always be, and mark you, it's a twenty-four-a-day job, a life-long job. I'm the one who disciplines myself, demands of myself, demands that history demands of me that I be standing here giving myself for the civilizing process.

You're never going to decide how I give my life. I alone decide. But you must always demand that my life be given.

Let's pray. Prayer is the most horrifying human activity in the world. Whatever else it is, it means you come to terms with who you are and have decided to be. You may have thought you gave up private devotions because they didn't have any meaning. Today that's not the real problem. You know now you have to come to terms with your freedom to be in every moment.

Oh Thou, who dost ever remain the naught that intrudes in our life as the only fullness, have mercy on us. Amen.

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