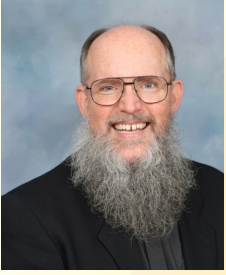


Homily Rerun: February 26, 2017 - Fr Bill



Today's readings are amazingly appropriate and of inestimable value for the cultural milieu in which we find ourselves and for the beginning of Lent. We'll come around to Lent. A good place from which to view our cultural milieu is in the exercise of free speech.

Using the word 'hate' as an adjective to define something makes that thing automatically bad, and is most helpful in turning others against that thing. Identifying speech as 'hate speech' certainly makes it seem like we should eliminate it from our midst. The term 'hate speech' is often used to identify anything with which I disagree or of which I disapprove; anything that upsets or offends me or makes me uncomfortable; anything that challenges my complacency or sense of moral superiority; anything that confronts the evil or failure in my own life; or anything else that I just do not want to hear.

Many college campuses have become prime locations for eliminating free speech. College should be a place where young men and women learn to listen to different opinions and points of view, learn the inadequacies or incompleteness of their own opinions, and learn how to respond to others and discuss issues intelligently and persuasively. This should embrace an opening of the mind in an encounter with objective reality and with the subjective opinions rooted in different experiences and points of view. Too often college is nothing more than a retreat into an enclave of like-minded automatons.

In response to this there are those who delight in offending those who attempt to shut down free speech. So if someone is offended by the word "booger" they will repeat it over and over, they'll make up a "booger" song and chant it in groups, they'll whisper it and shout it from the mountain tops – all for no reason other than to provoke someone they do not like or with whom they disagree. This abuse of free speech is not intended to make a point or persuasively win an argument but simply to offend the "others" as deeply and often as possible.

Too often free speech is deliberately and defiantly expressed in crude, offensive, degrading language and symbols. Many girls find sporting equality with the boys by imitating the foul, vulgar and ignorant language the boys use in sports. At rallies and marches, we regularly hear foul, disgusting, stomach-turning language, usually perpetrated by celebrity figures. Then there are the "women's hats" worn at a recent women's march. They are brazenly disrespectful of and degrading to women – but it was women who made and wore them. Should men have an equal rights march wearing similarly designed "men's hats?"

So, are we just supposed to accept a culture in which crass, vulgar and pointlessly provocative speech predominates? Some answer with a resounding "yes!" saying it is the price of free speech. The correct answer is a resounding "no!" However, the solution is not found in government, but in VIRTUE. Principled, respectful free speech cannot be achieved through censorship either by government or by violence, fear and intimidation. It will be achieved only in the self-censorship of virtue, faith and inspiration.

Each one of us has propensities toward good and toward evil. Liberty releases these propensities to seek their own goals. Freedom is good to the extent that good people make good of it; and it is evil to the extent that evil people make evil of it. Edmund Burke wrote: "But what is liberty without wisdom and without virtue? It is the greatest of all possible evils; for it is folly, vice, and madness, without tuition or restraint." When free speech is used for good it has become a means to or an instrument of good. When free speech is used for evil it has become a means to or an instrument of evil.

The founders of our nation knew that freedom had to be controlled, managed and directed by virtue. John Adams wrote: "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion . . . Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

There is a difference between having the right to speak and speaking rightly. The difference is found in the difference between virtue and vice in the heart of man, the difference between serving God or serving mammon, the difference between seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness or seeking first the ways of this world and its power.

It really is not all that complicated. A rock has no moral quality. If it is used to build a foundation for a hospital, it is used for good. If it is used to put someone in the hospital by bashing in his head, it is used for evil. So also, liberty has no inherent moral quality. What we do with liberty has moral quality. And only virtue can guide the use of liberty to that which is good.

All this sets the table for today's Scriptures.

✠ In Isaiah (49:14-15) God speaks through the prophet telling us that He will NEVER abandon us no matter what we have done thus opening the door to that virtue which comes from repentance.

✠ In 1 Corinthians (4:1-5) St. Paul tells us that we should present "ourselves as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" – nothing more and nothing less. Jesus is to be my all in all in every word that I say – and in every hat that I wear. This is the essence of virtue for any Christian.

✠ The Gospel (Mt 6:24-34) starts with, "Jesus said to His disciples" so if you are not a disciple of Jesus you need listen no further. [On the other hand if you are not a disciple of Jesus I really do not know why you are here and you probably don't

know either.] The Gospel continues with Jesus' teaching: "No one can serve two masters. ... You cannot serve God and mammon." God is not first on a list of priorities; He is my all in all. Rather than the top of the list, God is the paper on which the list is written.

✠ In the Gospel Jesus also says, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about ... [anything – my word not Jesus'] ... Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides." Jesus doesn't deny or minimize our needs in order to live in this world. He just reminds us that the eternal life in the next world is a lot more important. In this is rooted virtue.

We are about to start Lent. Don't Just Give Up Chocolate & but Give Up Chocolate! The Church teaches and encourages all three of the traditional Lenten practices {prayer, fasting (giving up something), and almsgiving} so that we will become men and women of virtue. We do this every year so that we become men and women of great virtue teaching our children to be virtuous. Thus we also prepare ourselves and our children to be good citizens in a nation of liberty and free speech.