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SUNDAY: Ordinary 13

SERMON: Setting Our Faces

Text(s): Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

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If you're a follower of professional tennis, you're aware that Wimbledon is in full swing right now. There's still a whole week of tennis yet to come before we get to the final match, and as in most tournaments, anything is possible. Though if I were a gambler, which I'm not, I wouldn't want to bet against Roger Federer on the men's side of the tournament. On the women's side, the possibilities are a bit more open.

Nobody gets to a Wimbledon final on sheer talent alone. Every one of the top-ranked players are there because they have pursued their goal of becoming a championship player through years of hard work, single-minded commitment, and self-discipline. Perhaps some of you saw the interview with Andy Roddick after he won his third round match. He was asked whether his coach Jimmy Connors tells him a lot of stories about how he managed to become one of the greatest players of his own day. Roddick said, "Not really. We both believe that there's simply no substitute for hard work, so when we're together in a coaching session, that's what we do." In fact, a recent article on the web that some of you may have seen, suggests that long, disciplined, and repetitive practice actually produces changes in the neural pathways in the brain, so that the best athletes have their brains programmed by to be able to make those great shots.¹

Being able to perform at the peak of our potential is a very freeing experience. However such freedom is not something that comes naturally, though we often make the mistake of thinking that it does. We imagine that being free means that we never have anyone tell us what to do and we have no restraints of any kind placed on our behavior. Lots of choices before us, and it's totally up to us to choose what pleases us.

After all, that's the underlying premise of the consumer economy that we so often mistake for democracy. Having almost unlimited and unfettered choices in everything, from the lattes we drink to the cars we drive to relationships we form or discard—that's freedom, or so we think.

But it's not, really. That's just self-absorbed individualism that blinds us to the fact that such illusions of freedom are very much under the control of the marketing industry. We actually are very predictable creatures, despite the illusion of having unlimited choices. We heard this warning sounded again and again in a variety of ways this past week at our General Synod by virtually all of the keynote speakers, from Bill Moyers to Marilyn Robinson to Peter Gomes and John Thomas, our General Minister. If you haven't already done so, I urge you to go to the UCC website and you'll find some of those speeches in the video archive, and you can listen to them.

Real freedom is not about unlimited and unfettered choices and behavior; real freedom is the ability to bring all of our abilities and potentials to bear when they are needed. Real freedom is the product of long-term commitments and long-practiced habits, whether it's the freedom of the top athlete or the freedom of the citizens of a democracy to attain our full potential as human beings in a just society. It's why we spend so much time training our very young children or grandchildren to do things like pick up their toys, refrain from throwing their food, learning to say "please" and "thank you." We want them to learn those things by heart so that they don't have to think about it—they'll just naturally know how to act in a more or less civilized manner. As they get a little older, we take them to soccer practice or ballet or piano lessons, not because we all expect them to become world-class athletes or performers, but because we want them to learn the freedom that comes from persistent and disciplined practice in the hopes that the habits of the heart they learn on the playing field or in the studio will serve them well in many other areas of endeavor.

Although it's probably not common for Christians to look to the nihilistic 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche for guidance, one of the many true statements he made is this important one: "The one thing essential to a meaningful life, is a long obedience in the same direction."² Though Nietzsche undoubtedly would have defined the nature of that "long obedience in the same direction" differently than Christians would define it, his basic point is hardly arguable. Our fundamental, long-term commitments are the things that give our lives meaning and shape, that form and reveal our characters. The ability to discipline our desires, to accept certain restraints that keep our energies and desires focused is essential to gaining the freedom we seek.

That somewhat paradoxical relationship between the restraining force of disciplined, long-term commitment and the freedom to which it leads is evident in both of our lessons this morning. St. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians sounds a trumpet call to freedom. "*For freedom, Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*" The yoke of slavery to which he refers is the old thinking among some of his fellow Jewish followers of Jesus about how non-Jews could also be Christ's disciples. This old thinking insisted that non-Jews had to become Jews by accepting the practice of male circumcision and obedience to the Mosaic Law.

Paul was convinced that the death and resurrection of Jesus had turned the world upside down; no longer did the old distinctions between Jew and Gentile mean anything; a new reality, a new way of being human in the world, had become a possibility for everyone. "*In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith (trust in God) working through love. . . you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom for self-indulgence, but through love, become slaves of one another.*"

How can Paul speak of being called to

freedom and of making ourselves slaves to one another at the same time? How can Serena Williams or Maria Sharapova be free to play their best—free to win a Grand Slam tennis tournament and at the same time, be a slave to a rigorous discipline of training and practice?

What is true for great athletes is also true for great Christians. We may become Christians in a moment of intense religious experience, or we may have just drifted into Christianity because our parents brought us to church long enough for us to be more or less socialized into it, but neither is sufficient for helping us to become persons of real faith, faith that transforms our lives and makes us transforming agents of God's love in the world. To be Christians like that, we need the freedom of a long obedience in the same direction. That's why all of the spiritual giants of faith have spoken about our need, not for information about the faith, but spiritual formation in the faith. The one is a matter of head; the other is a matter of life-training.

We see this dynamic tension between freedom and disciplined commitment in Luke's story of Jesus. "*When the days drew near for him to be received up,*" Luke says (and that phrase "received up" is clearly a euphemism for being crucified and resurrected), "*he set his face to go to Jerusalem. On his way they entered a village of the Samaritans, but they did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem.*"

His face was set. What a wonderful expression for a settled and disciplined commitment! His face was set. Even his disciples' anger at the inhospitality of the Samaritan villagers doesn't distract him. They want to stop long enough to call down fire from heaven and consume these ignorant and arrogant people who will not roll out the welcome mat for Jesus, but he has no time for such petty concerns. Luke says, "*He turned around and rebuked them. Then they went on.*" Jesus is out in front, with his face set toward Jerusalem; his disciples are behind him worrying about the insult to their dignity they think they've

suffered. But Jesus knows what he's about, even if they are less than clear about what he and they are about. He refuses to be distracted; he's going to Jerusalem. He's submitted himself to the discipline of a long obedience in the same direction, and even though it will lead him to a cross, he accepts it freely, and discovers the freedom of a radical trust in God, a God who, as St. Paul reminds us, is a "*God who gives life to the dead, who calls into existence things that do not exist.*"

"*No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God,*" Jesus tells them. If you've ever spent any time around a farm, you probably know that it's nigh unto impossible to plow a straight line while looking backwards. Your eye has to be fixed on the goal, on where you want to go, not on past failures or successes, not on remembered injuries, old resentments, former destructive patterns of behavior, old relationships. Commitment is always forward-looking. It always has the destination in view. It takes courage, perseverance, discipline. A disciple is one who puts himself or herself under discipline— who accepts the rigors of training and preparation, the hardships and obstacles that have to be overcome in order to reach the goal. Discipleship is not a vacation, but a vocation; it's not a playing field, but a battlefield. It's not an excursion, but a life-long journey. To follow Christ means to set our faces to go with him regardless of the cost. And as Jesus, and we, discover, there is always a cost, and sometimes the cost can be so high we wonder if we can pay it.

Jesus didn't get crucified for talking about love and peace and good will and tolerance; he got crucified because he demanded justice for the poor and the marginalized. Earlier in this gospel, Luke tells us that in Jesus' hometown synagogue at the beginning of his public ministry he read from the prophet Isaiah, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to the*

captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and the coming of the Lord's jubilee." That last bit doesn't sound like much to us; jubilee sounds like a nice word to our ears. Sort of like a festival or a celebration. But to the people who heard Jesus use that phrase, it had a very different meaning; the Jubilee was a command in the Law of Moses providing for cancellation of all debts and the restoration of land to its original owners every 50 years. In an agrarian society, it made sense. If you were a peasant, and you had a couple of bad years and were forced to sell your land to a rich man in order to survive, you or your descendants were supposed to get it back in 50 years. It was a law designed to prevent the development of a society with large permanent inequities between rich and poor that were based on acquisition of large masses of land by a few, relegating the others to the status, at best, of tenant farmers or feudal serfs. Now that begins to sound downright political, doesn't it? Jesus' preaching about social justice threatened the vested interests of the powerful and the monied classes, and that's what got him crucified.

Clarence Jordan, author of the *Cotton Patch Gospels*, a rather funky translation of the New Testament, was deeply concerned about the poverty he saw in the rural southern United States. His commitment led him to found an interracial and ecumenical Christian community called Koinonia Farm in the state of Georgia. Koinonia was a community dedicated to racial reconciliation and social and economic uplift. Initially, it drew a fair amount of opposition from the same sort of people who threw Jesus out of the synagogue— people whose self-interest was threatened by a community that made them look bad by comparison. Jordan was invited to speak one evening at a large church with a well-to-do all-white congregation. After the service, the pastor was giving Clarence the red-carpet tour of the church building. With pride the minister pointed to the beautifully-carved pews, the original and costly works of art that decorated the

sanctuary. As they stepped outside, darkness was falling, and a spotlight shone on a huge cross atop the steeple. “That cross alone cost us ten thousand dollars,” the minister said with a satisfied smile. “You got cheated,” replied Jordan. “Times were when Christians could get them for free.”

If we really do set our faces to follow Christ, we will find plenty of crosses along the way that are free for the carrying. But in the very act of shouldering them, in bearing them for the sake of the gospel, we will discover the freedom that such a long obedience in the same direction brings. That’s the call that we heard from the speakers at Synod last week. That’s really what we were celebrating as we observed the 50th anniversary of the United Church of Christ. We were celebrating the faithful and long obedience of so many who have committed themselves to bearing witness to God’s justice and love in this world.

The commitment to follow Jesus is a commitment that has to be renewed all the time. We live into our commitments as much as we live by them. Every time we keep a commitment, we increase our ability to keep it again. Practice makes perfect. That’s really why we come to church week after week— this is our practice field for being disciples. If practicing hitting a ball over a net repeatedly carves new neural pathways in our brains, so does repeatedly reminding ourselves in the context of worship that we are called to work for justice and to serve others in love rather than our own self-interest. By practicing love for one another within the community of faith, we gain the skills to love those beyond our walls who are perishing for the lack of someone to love them. Where will the voices for justice, for reconciliation, for compassion come from, if not from those who have themselves experienced the love of God in Christ, and who are discovering the fulfillment that comes from a deep and long commitment to being Christ’s disciples?

1. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/02/sports/tennis/>
2. Freiderich Nietchze, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

