

"HOW TO LIVE IN THE REAL WORLD"

A Sermon By

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### INTRODUCTION

There's an escape artist who calls himself "The Fearless Manzini". The thing about escape artists is that they always work alone. They're the classic "Id rather do it myself" type. I don't think Fearless Manzini is working alone anymore. In fact, I'm not even sure he's still working...I've lost track of him. To my knowledge, he hasn't worked in about ten years, and I'll tell you about the incident that caused him to quit.

### DEVELOPMENT

It happened in Philadelphia at one of those sport shows, where they have boats and camping equipment. He used to do those shows. Floyd Vivino, Fearless' associate and friend, stood up to the microphone to introduce him. His job was to tell the crowd what a great performer Fearless Manzini was, to tell them he had escaped from a federal prison, from the Hudson River, and from a chained refrigerator. Then he said that The Fearless Manzini was now going to attempt the most challenging feat of his career. He was going to put on a straightjacket, and then be handcuffed, and suspended 90 feet in the air from a rope tied to his ankles. The rope would then be set on fire, and Manzini would have only a few minutes to get himself free from the straight-jacket before the fire burned through the rope and the rope broke.

After that introduction, Fearless Manzini himself comes out, dressed in white tights and a leather aviator's cap. They put the straightjacket on him, handcuffed his hands, tie the rope around his ankles, light the rope, and then hoist him up 90 feet with this crane. Immediately he struggles to get free, and the crowd begins to laugh because with all that twisting and turning trying to get free, his tights are coming down his legs. Three minutes go by. He's still struggling and not succeeding, except in exposing more of his posterior to the crowd. The rope continues to burn. Seven minutes pass, and he still hasn't succeeded in getting himself free. So now he's shouting down at Floyd to get him down before the rope breaks. But Floyd is torn, because the crowd is shouting to leave him up there. They think that this is all a part of the act.

Well, finally Floyd lets him down, and the Great and Fearless Manzini learns an important lesson about life: when you have a hang-up you need a friend.

### EPISTLE LESSON

Which gets us into the Epistle Lesson from the Book of Acts that Deborah read a few moments ago. You notice that Paul also is in trouble, and he finds friends unexpectedly. Paul was something of an "escape artist" himself...but this time when he's arrested he's taken to Rome under guard, through a perilous journey, storms and shipwrecks, encounters with wild beasts, he's even bitten by a snake. All kinds of dangers and perils on his trip to Rome.

Our text picks him up on the final leg of the journey to Rome. It says that they sailed to Syracuse, which is on the island of Sicily, and then to Rhegium which is at the very toe of Italy, and then to Puteoli which is located on the Bay of Naples. Then,

"And so we came to Rome. And the brethren there when they heard of us came out as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. And on seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage."

All they did was go out to meet Paul. But when Paul saw them he thanked

God and took courage. Paul didn't know these people personally. He'd never been to Rome. He didn't know who they were, but they knew him. Everybody knew Paul. He was notorious throughout the Church. But they just knew of him. They had heard of him, and what they had heard of him was mostly rumor, some of it not good because Paul had detractors throughout the Church who told stories about him. So they knew about him, and they knew that he was being brought to Rome to be tried. That's all they knew. They knew he was dangling from a rope and twisting in the air.

The word came that the boat had landed at the Bay of Naples. They thought,

"He will be coming to us along the Appian Way. Let's go out to meet him. Think how he must feel, a prisoner in a strange land."

And so they went out to the Forum at Appius...which was about 40 miles in those days from Rome. That means they had to walk about two days to meet him. And then some went out as far as The Three Taverns, which they say was about 10 miles from the city. So we have two groups of people from that Church who went out to meet Paul, just to let him know they were thinking of him, to let him know that he had friends in Rome as he approached his ordeal.

They went out to meet him, and "Paul thanked God and took courage". And ever since then, hospitality and friendship and fidelity have been the marks of a Christian. It's sort of basic. You can find it everywhere in the New Testament. You can find it everywhere in the Church: friendship and hospitality and fidelity to strangers. And how grateful we are when we encounter it.

Even the author of the Letter to the Hebrews mentions it in his letter. He mentions it almost incidentally, like "...by the way, don't forget this..." Near the end of his letter he says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." That's a reference to the passage in Genesis where Abraham entertains three strangers in the desert, invites them into his tent to feed them, and discovers after they leave that they are messengers from God bringing him good news.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. So simple, so basic, and yet so necessary if life is going to be human. They offered it to Paul. And Paul thanked God and took courage. A great line.

#### TEACHING OF JESUS

You can see how important this is by looking at the teaching of Jesus that thoughtfulness to others is the standard by which we are going to be judged. He taught that in a number of places and in a number of ways. But wherever He taught a parable of judgment, that was the standard that He used. Friendliness. Compassion. Fidelity to others is the standard by which we are going to be judged.

The reason why the Parables of judgment are so important in the New Testament is because they go so quickly to the heart of the matter. If you want to know what matters ultimately in this world, then ask what's going to matter at the end. And everytime Jesus said the only thing that is going to matter in the end is: were you faithful to other people? And did you treat them as if they were your friends?

That's a part of the message in the New Testament Lesson from the Gospel of Luke. A particularly apt one, because the steward in this parable is not that much different than the model held up for success in our culture. Oh, perhaps a little more ruthless. Most of us don't go around beating up the maid-servants and the men servants. But still an example of the same creed held by an increasing number of people in our time.

#### RADICAL INDIVIDUALISM

Robert Bellah, in his book, Habits of the Heart, calls it "radical individualism". He says that it often passes as Christianity, but what it really tries to do is to get Christianity's blessing. It's the opposite of Christian instruction about how we're supposed to live in this world, and you can see that in the way that Bellah defines "radical individualism". He got the diagnosis from a psychotherapist who formed it on the basis of his practice. He said he was seeing people "who believed that in the end you really are all alone...and therefore you don't have to answer to anybody but yourself." That's "radical individualism" and it makes its appeal.

You can see the difference. Jesus says in the end you're not alone, and you have to answer to "how you related to other people". It's so simple in the teaching of Jesus. So fundamental about life. We are to think of other people. And yet, I suggest, that's under attack in our time by the most popular myth of our time, "radical individualism", that says you only have to answer to yourself.

#### ITS APPEAL IN OUR TIME

I wonder if you have ever taken the time to analyze what you see on television or in the movies or in advertising. Look at the person who is held up as the hero or heroine in the popular media, and I think you will notice that they are most always always single and always autonomous. Their relationships with other people are always temporary, with little intention of making them permanent. In fact, people who have made permanent commitments are always pictured in popular culture as being trapped and lifeless and withering away. The alive and bright and vital people are always those who answer only to themselves, who are a law unto themselves. They enter relationships when they are pleasurable and they exit from them when they become painful. Intimacy for them is not a sacred covenant. It's another form of pleasure.

And I suppose that makes sense if in the end we are alone, and if in the end we are responsible only to ourselves. But if not, if indeed we are made for each other, made to have community with one another, made to care for one another, to have concern for one another, then my life is going to be found only if I do care for others and seek their welfare as well as my own. And, most completely, will my life be found when I enter into relationships where fidelity and loyalty and responsibility to other people are more important than my own desires.

It may sound like heresy to some of you to say that. Now-a-days you expect people to justify almost anything only on the basis of whether it was pleasurable or desireable for me. That's why I was shocked when I went to the movies a few months ago. I used to be shocked when I went to the movies and saw torrid sex scenes on giant screens and heard people talk dirty in Dolby Sound. But I've gotten use to that now. I saw a movie called "The Shooting Party". It's about the European aristocracy at the end of the 19th century, the beginning of the First World War. The party was held at a country estate, with several couples invited for a week of hunting and elegant dining in this beautiful country mansion.

A man and a woman are attracted to one another. They meet secretly, apart from the others. Finally the man seeks to move the relationship from romance to intimacy. The woman protests with words that may shock you as they shocked me. She said, "We still have to live in the real world...the world with other people in it."

I couldn't believe my ears. The movie was actually suggesting that maybe my little world isn't the entire world. That...maybe my desires are not the most important thing in the universe...that...my autonomy, that is to say my genuine right to decide what I'm going to do with my life, ought to take into consideration those who depend upon me. And -

CHRISTIAN FAITH PROCLAIMS IT I believe that that's what the Christian Faith proclaimed right from the beginning. It said, if you want to talk about the real world, then you've got to talk about other people - because they're there. Other people are in your world. You can name them. And the most important thing in your life is that you are tied to them. And the smartest thing you can do in your life is to pay attention to that fact!

Well, I feel our culture is increasingly questioning that, and sometimes it flat out contradicts it. So that this simple command of Jesus to "love your neighbor" is increasingly something of a radical and subversive act. That's why kindness and compassion to strangers is so often misunderstood and even held in suspicion in our time. That's why fidelity and loyalty to those who are dependent upon us is considered a chain by so many people. That's why self-sacrifice is looked upon by so many people as being a neurosis rather than gallantry. And that's why Joseph Sittler said, rather inelegantly, "In our time fidelity takes guts". Amen. It does.

A FRIENDSHIP STORY Let me tell you a wonderful story about a friendship. It's about fidelity. Abraham Lincoln is commonly depicted as a loner, and I guess that in a sense he was a very lonely man. But he said this once about a certain man, "He and I are about the best friends in the world."

His friend was one of Lincoln's strongest supporters in the early days of his Presidency. It was observed that this man, his friend, was the most attentive listener at the 1861 Inaugural. It was this friend who escorted Mrs. Lincoln in the Grand March at the Inaugural Ball. And during the critical period before the War, when so many people were deserting Lincoln, this man stood beside him and defended him and spoke out for him. He even toured the South and tried to persuade the southern leaders to change their minds. Then he toured the North and tried to get Democrats and Republicans to unite behind the President.

Three months after the inauguration in 1861, Lincoln's friend took a fever and died. Lincoln, on hearing the news, wept openly and ordered the flag flown at half mast. Some say that if he had lived, this friend, he would have been Lincoln's running mate in 1864. And, of course, if that were true, then he would have been President. But we don't know that. We do know that for a critical period when the President needed a friend, he was there.

And this is surprising. Most history of that period pictures these two men not as friends, but as adversaries. We hear mostly about the heated Lincoln - Douglas debates, and about the fact that they were members of opposing political

parties, and that they ran against each other in the presidential election. But what you don't hear is that Lincoln's best friend on earth was Stephen Douglas, who died helping a friend.

That movie haunts me because it clarified the issue. This is the issue: what is the real world, and how are we to live in it? The real world is the world with other people in it, and we are called to live with them as friend. Even if they are strangers, Jesus said, treat them as friends. Even if they are enemies, treat them as friends.

Two thousand years ago that way of living, that fidelity took guts. I think it still does. Two thousand years ago that way of living began to change the world. I believe it still can...even today in our time. Paul saw them coming down the road. He didn't know them and they had only heard about him. But he was still a stranger. Paul saw them coming, singing, "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love, the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above". He saw them...heard them and he thanked God and took courage. Can we not do the same?

PRAYER Lord, in the quiet of this hour before Thee, we would pause to ask for a surer knowledge of who we are and what we are all about as followers of the Christ. Show us the relevance of Christ for the life we live within and the world we make for others....that we may no longer live to ourselves but unto Him whom we call Lord, Master, Saviour and Friend. Amen

PASTORAL PRAYER: October 26, 1986

GRACIOUS LORD and FATHER of us all, as we come together this day in worship and fellowship, we pray that we may be instruments in Your hands.

- To alleviate some of the heartache, some of the pain, some of the tears and sorrows in this world.
- As we - in the spirit of Christ - try to return good for evil, return the soft answer of caring for sharp criticism.

WHEN WE ARE TEMPTED, O GOD - as we so often are - to make critical or harsh judgement,

- Keep us from speaking the barbed words that hurt and stab.
- Keep us sweet inside that we can be gentle with others, gentle in the things we say and kind and loving in what we do.
- Keep us from unkind words and unkind silences.
- Help each one of us to change the spiritual climate of our homes, of our families, of our community, and ultimately of the world. Yes,
- In gentleness and in love, show us how to check our hasty answers, our sharp responses - that we can simply short circuit some of the bitterness, some of the unkindness that poisons the spirit, shrivels the soul, and ruins the beauty of a day.

BLESS EACH ONE OF US, O GOD, every day as we try to live as Christian men and women.

- Where we are inclined to be satisfied with ourselves as we are, we want You to make us willing to be changed... and changed for the better.
- Give us a more sincere kind of faith - adventurous, liveable, strong - not just for an October Sunday - but the kind of faith that we can use on Monday and Wednesday and right through the week.
- Inspire us, O God, to carry into the everydayness of our lives all that to which we aspire. To carry into every day of this week before us the things that we value and feel and see so clearly in this hour of worship.

MAY OUR FAITH have feet and hands, a voice and a heart....that we may minister to others in the spirit of Him whom we call Lord.

- And may the Good News we profess this hour be seen in our faces, that it may be seen, and felt by others in their lives.
- All this we ask in the Name and loving spirit of Christ, our Lord.

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