

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 3, 2017, Year A
Father Mike Holloran

I had the radio on during lunch and heard a commercial for an outfit that can remake your body. They will take tissue from here and put it there. The procedure sounded a little like something Dr. Frankenstein might do, and maybe for that reason the commercial bluntly asked, “And why not? You own your body.”

I almost choked on my ham sandwich. I own my body? You mean like I own my TV or my car? It strikes me as radically incompatible with my entire world view. To an extent, sure, I have basic say-so over my own life, including my body. If someone else has it instead of me then I would be their property, their slave. But I've never thought of my body as a piece of property that I own. I've always thought of it as being, well... me.

The commercial, in its bluntness, must be an indicator of how many people do consider their body as an object, a thing to be used and manipulated, a piece of property over which they have absolute right to do as they please. An example came to mind, something I heard about a few years ago.

A young woman in Raleigh, North Carolina named Jewel Suping, had what psychologists call Body Integrity Identity Disorder, BIID for short. From her earliest childhood she wondered what it would be like to be blind. I did too when I was a kid. We had a cousin who had lost his sight, and after our families would visit I'd experiment around our house, wondering how long I could go about my normal routine with my eyes closed. I don't think I ever lasted more than fifteen minutes. And what a relief to open them and be able to see what I was doing, and the beauty of the world.

But in the case of Jewel, she became obsessed with the thought, to the point of becoming convinced that she was supposed to have been born blind. She eventually found a psychologist willing to help her. After knowing her for two weeks he decided that she really wanted what she was asking, so he put drain cleaner in both of her eyes.

She says she has no regrets, is happy blind, though she does wish she could see her father's face again; out of the question anyway since he has passed away. And she wants to help others who suffer from what she admits is a mental disorder. She has said, “Don't go blind the way I did. I know there is a need, but perhaps someday there will be a treatment for it.” No regrets? Really?

The story about Jewel quotes a Dr. Michael First, who coined the term Body Integrity

Identity Disorder. He raises the issue whether it is ethical to blind the eyes or amputate the limbs of a healthy person just because they want it done. He thinks an argument could be made in favor, if one thought of it as relieving someone's emotional distress, but the drawback is, what if they change their mind after it's too late?

Is that really an ethical argument? That if someone wants to blind themselves badly enough, and won't regret it later, that it's okay for them to do it, and okay to help them, do it? This kind of ethics can only work if you do, indeed, own your body. But do you own your body? Or, to put it more broadly, are you the Lord and Master of your life? Blinding yourself to satisfy the craving of a mental disorder is an extreme example, but there are many ways we all try to seize mastery over our own lives.

That has been the modern project since about 1789, when the French Revolution tossed God off His throne and proclaimed the emancipation of mankind. But really it goes back to the Garden.

“Eat the fruit, do the forbidden, transgress the command and you will become like gods.”
“...hmmm. It does look good to eat. Here, Adam, try some.”
And we've been eating rotten fruit ever since. Like in today's Gospel:

“God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you!”

Simon Peter! And so soon after your rock-like profession of faith. No wonder Jesus called him a Satan. He was thinking as humans do, fallen humans who think like Satan thinks, not like man restored, who thinks like God thinks. “Get behind me”, said the Lord. Watch how I live. Learn from me. Begin to think as God thinks.

Those who do start to have a different perspective. St. Paul had been trying to be master of his life, thinking as fallen man thinks. That's why he was such a zealous persecutor of Jesus, who was weak, a loser, a false Messiah. But Jesus showed Paul that he was the loser, thinking the way he was thinking, misunderstanding his place in the scheme of things. With a little forceful intervention on the Lord's part Paul came to understand what he expressed later in a letter to the Corinthians:

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body.” (1 Cor. 6:19-20)

This new perspective is also behind what he said in a letter to the Romans:

“Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice to God. Do not conform yourselves to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern the will of God, what is good, pleasing, and perfect.” (Rom. 12:1-2)

This renewed way of thinking, this Christian perspective which opens our eyes to what is good, this genuine ethics, is summed up by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (par. 2280)

“Everyone is responsible for his or her life before God, who has given it to him. It is God who remains the sovereign master of life. We are obliged to accept life gratefully and preserve it for His honor and the salvation of our souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us.”

Stewards, not owners. That's why that commercial sounded so odd, “Why not, you own your body”. How regressive, a throw-back to the old, futile, self-destructive way of thinking. It is radically incompatible with the fabric of creation. We are stewards, not owners, of a life entrusted to us by the Master of Life. And when our service is at an end, and we lay our trust faithfully down before Him who gave it, we will inherit what is truly ours, and receive in full what these thrilling words will convey:

“Well done, good and faithful servant. Come, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” (Mt. 25:21, 25:34)