

Num 6:22-27

Ps 67:2-3,5,6,8

Gal 4:4-7

Luke 2:16-21

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One of my fondest childhood memories is my Dad teaching me how to ride a bike on the parish schoolyard. In retrospect, a paved venue was probably a poor choice, given the number of times I came in sudden and rapid contact with the ground. But it was a wonderful experience. I can remember being excited and scared, trying to go fast but not too fast, trying to keep my balance, trying to impress my father by staying between the lines painted on the schoolyard ground. I recall how strange my arms and legs and feet felt: they had always worked together in the past, but now they acted as if they had never met before. I learned a lot on that Saturday afternoon. I learned what your stomach feels like when you take a risk, and how your spirit feels when you're successful. I learned about my tolerance for pain and a little blood. I learned a few new words from my father, who, as he watched me tumble into the rosebushes next to the convent, said some things he would normally never have said in front of his children.

Today we begin a New Year. Many of us may have made some resolutions about learning new things: reading more books, working on our family genealogy, practicing a musical instrument. Some of us may have our hearts set on learning how to fish, or how to hit a baseball, or how to drive car, or how to work a computer. Some may want to take dance lessons, or learn to ice skate, or figure out how to balance a checkbook. Perhaps some of us will return to school, finish a degree or start taking night classes. This new year lies before us with countless opportunities to learn.

So it is with our faith. We are disciples, from the Latin word *discipulus*, meaning one who learns. Christians are the ones who follow, watch, and learn from the Lord. We are perpetual students of Jesus Christ: we never finish our classes with him, we never complete our homework, we never graduate from his school. There is always something new to learn from Jesus. Perhaps some of our New Year's resolutions concern Christ: to learn greater patience, greater mercy, greater trust; to learn how to pray better, serve the poor more often, turn away from sin more readily. This new year lies before us with countless opportunities to learn more about following Christ.

How fitting, then, that we begin with this feast of Mary, the mother of God. She is the greatest student of the Lord, the first and best disciple, the master apprentice, the upperclassman from whom we greener students can learn the ropes. As Pope John Paul wrote in several of his encyclicals, every Christian disciple can learn from Mary (e.g., *Redemptoris Mater*, 45; *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 7). Mary is *the* tutor all of us need in learning how to follow Christ more closely.

Mary teaches us so much. On this New Year's Day let us focus on two of her lessons: Christian freedom and Christian courage.

In the Annunciation, Mary shows us that the Lord does not force us to obey Him, but invites us to do His will. Mary offers the perfect Christian response: "Let it be done to me

according to your word.” In her obedience to the command of God, in her fulfillment of the law in presenting Jesus in the Temple, Mary shows that true Christian freedom is not the license to have whatever we want, but the liberty which comes from choosing the good for which God has made us. For us, who have so many choices, opportunities, and advantages, the Blessed Mother’s lesson is that obedience to God is the only true and lasting freedom. Choosing to gossip rather than stay silent or speak well of someone may feel good; choosing to purchase the biggest car or the newest computer rather than something more modest, saving our money and sharing some of it with the poor, may make us happy; choosing to seek sexual pleasure outside of marriage may thrill us: but none of these will make us free and happy. Their joy is of the minute, their novelty soon grows stale, the flush of happiness they bring is soon revealed to be only a momentary fever. Mary teaches something quite different, quite unpopular, quite hard to hear. “First and last, seek God’s will and obey. Obedience is your only real freedom, your only true happiness.”

Mary also tutors us in Christian courage. A young, pregnant girl, she travels alone into the hill country of Judea to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. A new mother and wife, she is forced into exile with her son and husband, under the shadow of a mad king’s wrath. A widow, she endures the unimaginable sorrow of watching her only son die in horrible pain. She commands no troops, she explores no unknown continents, she leads no dangerous expeditions. But Mary is a woman with guts. Again and again she shows courage, and so teaches us that disciples can be weak, but they cannot be wimps. Learning from her, we can respond to our own opportunities to be courageous for the Lord: when our faith is ridiculed; when our good intentions are doubted; when the sacrifice of raising children in the faith and sustaining commitment in marriage grows sharp; when the harsh lash of loneliness, sickness, and grief falls upon us. Mary says, “You must be brave. Do not be afraid! With God all things are possible. His Spirit will be your strength, His grace will be your courage. Turn to God, ask, pray, cry out, implore, and the Lord will make you strong!”

Freedom and courage: these are two of the lessons we learn by contemplating Mary, by reading the Scriptures, by praying the rosary. Mary does not come between us and Christ, just as the men and women who taught us how to read did not come between us and books, but opened the way to them. We need Mary the same way we need Dads to teach us to ride a bike, to take a punch, to swing a bat; the same way we need Moms to teach us how to play, how to cook, how to share with our brothers and sisters. We need Mary the same way we need people to teach us physics, word processing, sewing, and poker. No one who wants to learn how to fly a plane pushes his teacher away, saying, “No, you’ll only be in the way!” No one who wants to learn how to scuba dive tells her teacher, “Don’t get between me and the water. I’ll do this on my own!” Neither of those people would learn how to fly a plane or how to scuba dive. All they would learn is that life is short.

Teachers do not get in the way. Teachers open the door. Mary and the saints are students like ourselves, but they are all advanced students, prodigies in the Christian craft, experts in the fields of fortitude, fidelity, and forgiveness. In His great mercy and love, God has appointed the saints as our tutors, and Mary as our head tutor, that we might better learn the way of our Master. Mary cannot follow Christ for us, but she can teach us a great deal about what it takes to stay on the path.

In this New Year, as we resolve to be better students of faith, Mary says to us what she said to the waiters at the wedding feast of Cana: She points to Christ and says, “Do whatever he tells you.” That is our homework today, tomorrow, and in all the days ahead.