

Column – My Way or His Way

Frank Sinatra's 1969 hit "My Way" strikes a positive note in the psyche of many Americans. We admire rugged independence and self-reliance. The "pursuit of happiness" spoken of in the Declaration of Independence makes self-determination a national right and identity.

Perhaps this is one reason the writings of Ernest Hemmingway are so highly prized: they contain a spark of the American spirit. According to one commentator, Hemmingway embodied a philosophy of self-reliance, stoicism, and independence in both his life and literature. Less praiseworthy, he carried this spirit of self-determination all the way to the end of his life, committing suicide on July 2, 1961, at the age of 61.

Living life on your own terms sounds very appealing, but, as seen in Hemmingway's life, it comes at a cost. Left unchecked it may well lead to disillusionment and destruction. If you think about it, "I did it my way" is the philosophy behind Adam and Eve's fall in the garden as described in Genesis.

What was the sin of our primeval ancestors? Instead of going God's way, they chose to go their own way, and we humans have been following in their footsteps ever since. The result was and is misery and alienation. Some have gone so far as to call "I did it my way" the philosophy of hell.

There is no shortage of characters in the Bible who followed Adam and Eve in this regard. Moses comes to mind. Though a great servant of the Almighty, Moses had his moment of failure. When commanded by God to speak to a rock in order to bring forth water from it, he struck it with his rod. He did it his way. His disobedience came with consequences. He was not allowed to enter the Promised Land.

A second example is Saul, the first king of Israel. He got off to a good start but chose later to disobey God in how he handled the captured Amalekites and their possessions (1 Samuel 15:22-23). The result was alienation from God and in the end destruction.

A third character – this one from the New Testament – is Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus’ chosen 12. He enjoyed great religious privilege, but in the end sold out his Lord in order to gain 30 pieces of silver. He did it his way and died an ignoble death.

If going one’s own way is the way of death, what is the way of life? Jesus famously tells Thomas, another member of the Twelve, in John 14: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

And so, before each person opens two ways, one celebrated in Sinatra’s hit; the other the way of Jesus. The great paradox, as Christians have discovered down through the centuries, is that the way of Jesus does not cancel human freedom but restores it. A mirage in the desert becomes a reality when a person’s life is handed over to the God of creation and redemption.

Which will it be with you, the way of Hemmingway and the Bible characters I have highlighted or the way of Jesus, the way of imagined freedom or the way of real freedom?

O ALMIGHTY God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men; Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the Fourth Sunday in Trinity, Book of Common Prayer)

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