

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

October 27, 2024

Freedom's just another word for...

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week Pastor Nickols started her sermon off with a reference to a Mac Davis song from 1980. Well, I've had a different song stuck in my head for the last week, and my sermon title is a portion of it. Rather than Mac Davis, this time it's a song written by Kris Kristofferson, though it was made most famous by Janis Joplin, who covered it on the last album she recorded before her death. The song is "Me and Bobby McGee" from 1970 and the line that's been repeating in my brain is this: "Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose."¹

Now, in the song, that line is referencing the state of both the singer and "Bobby McGee" who are hitchhiking across the country. They have next to nothing as they travel around, relying on the kindness of strangers before parting ways. But within that reality they find a curious kind of freedom. The sort of freedom one can only experience when they let go of a lot of obligations, petty concerns, and, well, stuff. They have nothing to lose because they literally **have nothing!**

This is not the freedom that Christ speaks of in our Gospel text today; but the phrase still works, in a weird way. Jesus says to the Judeans struggling with his teachings, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."² From this we understand that our freedom is grounded in the truth of God.

And what is that deep and fundamental truth? The truth is that we are limited, broken human beings, generally incapable of living in the healthy and life-giving ways that God has established for us. The truth is that when it comes to life and salvation, we are inept and powerless. The truth is that we have nothing to offer God other than our poor, limited, broken selves. The truth is, when it comes to our relationship with God, **everything** we might bring to the relationship doesn't amount to a hill of beans!

¹ Kristofferson, Kris. "Me and Bobby McGee." 1970 CE.

² John 8:31b-32 (NRSVUE)

Luther understood this, in his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed he states: **"I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him,** but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith."³ That's a whole lot of words to say that we bring nothing to our relationship with God. Nothing. Everything that we have comes to us as pure gift from God.

We cannot be in right relationship with God through our words, through our deeds, or even through our thoughts. We are beggars in relation to God. We have nothing, absolutely nothing God needs. And everything we think we **do** have ultimately comes to us through God's providence, through God's good creation.

Jesus in Mark's Gospel over the last several weeks has been stripping everything we might want to cling to away from us. In our Gospel text today Jesus makes it clear that our pedigree means nothing to God. Whether or not we can trace our ancestry back to Abraham doesn't mean anything to God. Last week we heard how status means nothing to God. James and John were vying for all the wrong things!

Even before James and John, two weeks ago the rich man learned that property, security and hoarding for the future all mean nothing to God (especially in the face of massive need in the present). And the week before that we heard Jesus inviting his followers to soft and open hearts, lifting up powerless, status-less children as having all that they need to enter the Kingdom of God...faith.

What I'm trying to point out is that the grace and salvation that God gifts us is all that we need. And it comes to us as pure gift! The freedom we can find in God's Word is freedom from hoarding resources like gold-obsessed dragons. It's freedom from competing and clawing at one another in the race for power and status. It's freedom from judging others and focusing on their judgement of us. It's freedom from wealth and stuff, and all of the anxiety and concern that things bring with them.

The freedom we find in God's truth is, in a real way, being free because we understand there's nothing left for us to lose. And the only thing that we have, the only thing that really matters in the end, is already ours! And, while we can reject God's grace and love, it is already ours!

³ ELW p. 1162

All of the stuff that we fear most to lose...Jesus is teaching us that none of that stuff really matters! Not only that, but the one thing that does matter is given freely to us! Life! Love! Grace! And the only requirement that God asks of us in return is to share that same abundant life, love, and grace with one another.

This is dangerous knowledge though, I want you to understand that. This knowledge of God's free grace to us has sparked all sorts of conflicts over the years. The Protestant Reformation was just the first. Free access to God's grace and love is not something many in the church want to acknowledge! Such free access to God could put the religious leaders and systems out of power and influence!

But this is, ultimately, what we're celebrating today. The renewed knowledge that God's love and grace come to us as pure gift. We are celebrating, as Luther put it in his Heidelberg Disputation, that "It is certain that we must utterly despair of our own ability before we are prepared to receive the grace of Christ."⁴ We **need** to know that we have nothing and we are nothing (but dust) and then we can rightly turn to the source of all love, life, and wholeness, God.

We have nothing left to lose, because when it comes to us and God, we have nothing! And when we can rightly acknowledge that fact we can then turn to the source of everything! And lo and behold, we too have everything as well! Or, as Luther put it later in his aforementioned Disputation: "The law says, **do this**, and it is never done. Grace says, **believe in this**, and everything is already done."⁵

Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose...cause we never really had anything to begin with! Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose...cause the only thing we have of any value (God's Word) isn't something we **can** lose. Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose...since we already have all that we might ever need in God.

We are celebrating our freedom on this Reformation Sunday. Our freedom to know how much we rely upon God. Our freedom to love and serve God and our neighbor. Our freedom from power, wealth, status and all those sorts of chains and shackles. You are free! And in Christ you have everything! Out of that freedom, I pray that we can be free to love and serve one another too. Amen.

⁴ Luther, Martin. *Heidelberg Disputation: Theses 18*. 1518CE

⁵ Luther, Martin. *Heidelberg Disputation: Theses 26*. 1518CE