

THE  
TWENTIETH  
SUNDAY  
AFTER  
PENTECOST

The Rev.  
Stephanie  
E. Parker

Mark 10:17-21 2012

Dear Janis...

*Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose.*

I have noticed in recent years that very often when I'm in the study portion of preparing a sermon, some other part of my mind subconsciously selects a theme song. Sometimes it's hymnody with rich theological prose, but this week---Janis Joplin! I do not question my muse I just try to go with it. *Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose.* I do think in this case, however, I can trace the connection.

As I was engaging in this very familiar story of this rich young man, my mind flashed back to a little over 11 years ago when I arrived in Alexandria, VA to attend Virginia Theological Seminary. I had a 5 year old Ford Explorer, a bit of savings and the promise of financial aid from that very generous institution.

Like many of the people I would come to know very well, I had made a decision to liquidate the accumulations of my previous life--- and trust, as many had told me I should, that God would provide. Fearful of accumulating debt and knowing the siren call of the credit card, I also decided to keep only one for emergencies and vowed to myself that it would never see the light of day.

Three years later I was commissioned with my classmates and sent back out into the world to preach the Gospel. At that point I owned an 8 year old Ford Explorer, some household possessions and I had about a thousand dollars to my name. But, thanks to God, the VTS financial aid program, and having made good on my vow not to use my credit card, I was blessedly debt free.

There I was, 41 years old, freshly commissioned to preach the gospel, and my worldly goods consisted of an aging car, some furniture and a little spending cash.

Just three years before that day I had felt like casting my trust on God was the scariest thing I had ever done, but as I pulled away from Alexandria, I realized that it felt like *freedom*.

But then, just a few years out from graduation, I still had the aging Ford Explorer, but it sat in the garage of the house on which I had a hefty mortgage, a home equity line of credit, and which was partially furnished with new furniture that I purchased with one of my many credit cards, all of which promised me *the security of spending freedom*.

And all of this *is* still the American dream, but as the real estate crash has proven for many including myself, it was *not* security and it most certainly was not freedom.

During my relocation to Seattle as I was negotiating my short sale and navigating the dissolution of my financial hopes for the future, I thought longingly of that brief season of my life when I was able to actually find freedom in owning nothing.

So today as I sit at a little distance from this rich young man and overhear his conversation with Jesus I want to shout: "give your stuff away, it will feel great, it sounds crazy, but it really will feel great."

The gift that Jesus offers this faithful man kneeling before him is *true freedom*.

I read a quote once that said that the Gospel's call always summons us to perfect freedom---*always*---and I still believe that. Yet the freedom to which Jesus calls each and every one of us---in light of our preference to bondage---can feel like a haunting, terrifying freedom."<sup>1</sup>

The human creature has a serious propensity for seeking security and freedom in that which we can acquire, as opposed to the Gospel wisdom that tells us that true security and freedom is found in what we can give away.

As George MacDonald says, "To have what we want is riches, but to be able to do without is power." What an accurate description of the lovely twisted logic of the Gospel.

But I think it is important to clarify a few things before proceeding. One is that Jesus does not teach us that there is any glory in poverty; poverty is an evil in this world that we are called to cast out.

Nor does Jesus tell us that wealth is a sin; wealth used wisely and compassionately in God's service is an excellent use of power. And we *can* own homes and seek financial security---Jesus does not envision legions of homeless people living in some kind of socialist utopia.

<sup>1</sup> Hans King Ohmeg, *Synthesis*, October 15, 2006.

What Jesus does do--time and time and again-- is call us out of old killing ways into new life. Jesus calls us into freedom from our servitude to material attachments ---he calls us away from the idea that if we just keep accumulating more stuff our lives will be good and whole.

Jacob Needleman is a professor of philosophy at San Francisco State University, and he wrote a book entitled *Money and the Meaning of Life*, in which he writes:

"We live...in...an `affluent society.' This means not only that we have much material wealth, but that *we want this wealth more than we want everything else.*"<sup>7</sup>

But, says this professor of philosophy, it doesn't do for us what we want. It doesn't make us happy or free or immortal or even content.

In fact, he proposes that our inordinate desire for money is a kind of self-imposed hell. In a chapter entitled, "The New Poverty" he writes, "Hell is the state in which we are barred from receiving what we truly need because of the value we give to what we merely want."<sup>2</sup>

Today Jesus delivers the hard truth that our attachment to material possessions and wealth will rob us from ever fully knowing the freedom for which God formed us---- because if we have wealth and we cannot share it with those who do not, we are in fact prisoners.

And conversely, if we don't have wealth, but stay locked in envy or pursuit of those who do, well then our life is lived on a hellish hamster wheel that leaves us little time or inspiration for embracing true joy or grace.

(Transition)

In what is yet another tough teaching Jesus asks us to examine where we are actually investing our lives; to take hard look and discover what it is that we are *really* counting on to save us.

Maybe it's our careers, our success, our influence, our power, or our social connections? Today Jesus invites us to release our grip on those things that actually trap us; to open our hands to let them go so that we can really follow him.

The eternal life this earnest young man seeks is offered as God's gift to us. And by eternal life Jesus is not referring to some magical event that happens after we die, he is talking about a life that is lived so joyfully and completely in the present that it is utterly timeless; it is a way of life that is free of the shadows of want, envy, greed, fear or constant grasping.

The radical personal implication, of course, is that we have to be able to accept the gift in order to receive it.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

"You cannot accept God's gift if you have no spare hands with which to take it. You cannot make room for it if your rooms are already full.

You cannot follow if you are not free to go."

The real truth is that you and I really don't own any "thing" we cannot do without. In fact, there is a sense in which we are in bondage to anything we cannot give away. This kind bondage is what Jesus saw when he looked at this very sincere young man and it utterly broke Jesus' heart. This is the kind of trap from which Jesus seeks to free us.

Many years ago I came across a little snippet from Newspaper columnist Erma Bombeck, who died some years ago of cancer. After her diagnosis she was asked if she had any regrets about things she had left undone as she stood at the edge of death and she replied:

I always had a dream that when I am asked to give an accounting of my life to a higher court, it will be like this: So, empty your pockets. What have you got left of your life? Are there any dreams that were unfulfilled? Any unused talents that we gave you when you were born that you have leftover? Are there any unsaid complements or bits of love that you haven't spread around?

*And, I will answer, "I've nothing to return. I spent everything you gave me. I'm coming back to you as naked as the day I was born."*

Jesus tells us that some way or somehow we must learn to let go of our illusion that money gives us happiness or control. A happy life, an eternal life is one in which we spend both our wealth and our love without fear or regret so that more might know the joy of returning to God naked as the day we were born!

I've tasted the freedom of this truth once and while I could not completely hold it, it still leaves a sweet aftertaste in my soul. So, with all due respect to my muse and to Janis Joplin, I have to say that freedom isn't, after all, just another word for nothing left to lose, but freedom IS, in fact, another word for all that Jesus died to gain. Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> John Buchanan