

Twisted Logic

"As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' ... Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

I have noticed 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 for this Scripture---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 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 18 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 and Great Recession proved to many, including myself, it is *not* security and it most certainly is not freedom.

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*. As I heard somewhere once: "The Gospel's call always summons us to perfect freedom. *Always*. Yet the freedom to which Jesus calls each and every one of us, in light of the human preference for bondage, can be a haunting, terrifying freedom."

Here we are in 2018, seeming as though we have learned nothing since 2008 when the housing crash devastated so many people's hope for the future. We *still* have a propensity to seek 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.

It is also important to note 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. What Jesus does do---time and time again---is call us out of bondage. Jesus calls us into freedom from whatever keeps us enslaved and very often that is an attachment to what we own and what we are fearful of giving away.

True freedom and security can only be found in trusting God and giving away our illusion that money gives us control. I've tasted this freedom 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* another word for all Jesus gave his life to gain.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+