

5 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 11 – Year A – July 17, 2011
Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
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In the fall of 1970, shortly before her death, Janis Joplin wailed out one of her best in her version of the song, *Me and Bobby McGee*. Her performance topped the singles charts, posthumously. The classic line written by Kris Kristofferson and Fred Foster is “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” As a whole, the song is a sad prayer about a lost love. The “me” of the song has learned that it feels good when Bobby sings the blues, and in their intimate moments. Joplin bemoans the lost love, and the fact that Bobby leaves nothing behind, just a longing to trade all her tomorrow’s for one single yesterday. The death of hope is almost palpable. Given the current national debt crisis there’s probably a number of elected government officials who are seriously considering their own interpretation of “freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose”. But let’s not go there today, when we have such a great passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans to explore.

As Christians, we have our own way of looking at debt, quite contrary to the world’s ways. According to Paul, we’re debtors to the Spirit. It certainly doesn’t sound promising to be debtors of anything. In fact, it might be confusing to think of ourselves as indebted in any way, given that Christ has died for our sins and our freedom, once for all. Debt owed to the Spirit isn’t a millstone around our necks, but a life-giving gift of God’s grace. The more we rely on God’s grace, the greater our debt to the Spirit becomes, but the deeper and richer our spiritual bank account grows. Again, contrary to all worldly systems, it isn’t the debt that’s a concern. The crux of this passage is to Whom the debt is owed.

There are at least three ways of looking at this paradox of divine grace. The first is that in God’s gracious economy, when we are good stewards of God’s gifts, we are blessed with increased responsibility in God’s kingdom. Luke (19:26) says, “I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given.” It’s an example of how the Spirit’s movement within us, allows God to work through us. The good and trustworthy servant is also a great example of the life-giving debt we owe to the Spirit, honoring God with our service to the glory of His name.

Our second way of looking at this paradox of grace is to consider a common experience. Long before our children are grown, many parents plan and save for their education. Helping to pay for college puts our son or daughter in our debt, but not like a bank loan. Most of us don’t ask for repayment, and interest seldom accrues. The gift is freely given, in love, and not according to the laws of the world or the Law that reminds us of our sins. When a parent lends in love it is to “open the debtor to the future, not to bind him or her to the past” (Steven D. Paulson). Abba, God our Father is constantly giving in love, just as any parent would do, to open our hearts and minds to the possibilities and joys of the future. Abba, Father, gives so that we might live in the hope of the present as well as the hope of the future, and not let our lives be lost by living in the past. God gives so that we might share the hope that dwells within us. With this Spirit of love and freedom, our own Spirit groans with sighs too deep for words. These are groans of recognition that not all is right with the world yet. However, God is working for the redemption, and freedom of all creation, whatever we are currently experiencing. These are in-between times. The kingdom of God has been inaugurated, and yet there is still a powerful force for evil roaming the world. In our groaning spirit is the expression of disquietude. In the hope of our baptism, we’re empowered to confront the evils of the world, and to work as co-creators with God in expanding His kingdom. We’re reminded that the hope of our faith is rooted in the fruit of the Spirit – more specifically, the fruit of patience.

The third way of experiencing our debt to the Spirit is truly part of our freedom in Christ, and a much more profound way of understanding freedom as “nothing left to lose”. Each of the four Gospels quotes some form of Jesus’ paradoxical wisdom: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” (Matthew 10:39, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24, and John 12:25).

Our freedom in Christ is greatest when we truly having nothing left to lose, because we have given ourselves completely to the Lord. Asking God, our Father to reveal those areas in our lives that we have not given over to Christ is definitely worth our time and prayer. It's an ongoing process, and a means to move forward and grow in our spiritual journey. Few of us can honestly say that we're one hundred percent lost in the Lord. Losing our lives for the sake of the Gospel becomes evident in the details of living a life in the Spirit. According to Episcopal priest, Blair Pogue, Romans 12 describes a life in the Spirit. It's "about obedience in the whole of our lives. We are to love what is genuine and hate what is evil, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, offer hospitality to strangers, bless those who persecute us, and, perhaps hardest of all, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12: 9, 12, 13, 14, 18).

Paul speaks of freedom in a way that resonates with his audience. The Jewish believers recall their history of God's liberation in the Exodus story, which is God's gift of freedom to the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Those who are current or former slaves in the households of the Roman Empire know their freedom in Christ as adopted sons and daughters of God, and heirs with Christ in the eternal kingdom. They know that they are free in Him, if not in this world, and that they are beloved in God's sight. For others, perhaps including ourselves, the Spirit of God that makes us children of God, leads us to freedom in and through living into the promise of abundant life in Christ. We are free from condemnation, free from sin and death. We're also free from slavery to false gods, and are members of a new family in Christ by adoption. As heirs with Christ, we can develop an ever deepening and intimate relationship with our loving creator. The glorious freedom that Paul talks about is freedom within a restored creation. It's the freedom of an embodied life that reflects the image and glory of God, and it's what we are called to live each day, and look towards in hope.

Being a child of God is a Christ-shaped pattern of life. Theologian, N.T. Wright notes that "the road to the inheritance and the path of glory lies along the road of suffering." In Christ, hope and suffering are not contradictory, they are inseparable. Consider a woman in labor. The suffering and pain of childbirth is held in tension with the desire for the pain to end, but also with the overwhelming love and joy of receiving God's gift of new life. Paul's attitude is that believers who experience suffering are essentially confirmed as God's children, witnessing to their adoption and kinship with Christ in their suffering. Not if, but when we suffer, we do so with faith and patient endurance, knowing that God will redeem all the suffering of our lives.

Paul's final message is that in Christ, we gain a freedom that is filled with God's grace, love and hope. No one would have guessed that sin and death would be crushed by the love of God in the Word made flesh, setting us all free through His resurrection, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul speaks of the mystery of the glory about to be revealed. In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear about the final harvest of wheat and tares that have grown together in the world. The identity of the fruit of the harvest is evident when it ripens to maturity. The wheat is heavy and bends low in its goodness. The weeds, probably darnel, stand defiantly erect. The two grains are now easy to separate, just as the fruits of our own lives become more and more evident for all to see. The details of the redemption of our bodies may be just as surprising to us as the revelation of that final harvest, and God's glorious gift of salvation, grace and freedom in Christ. In the hope and freedom of Christ, we have a special gift for a desperate world. There's nothing so bad that it cannot be redeemed. And not even death can separate us from the glorious love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. The one debt we can afford to run up is the life-giving debt to the Spirit, which is bursting with possibilities, both now and into the future.

Amen.