

For Freedom – or, Foxes Have Holes

3rd Sunday after Pentecost C, 6/26/22

“Freedom’s just another word,” it is sung, “for nothing left to lose – and nothing is all that he left me.” The most famous cover of that song has Janis Joplin singing it in a recording she made just before she died, although she didn’t know she was going to die. Heroin is like that, or whatever it was took her away. I’ve heard that song all my life, though my mother did tend to turn the volume down when it came on, as she did with “Delta Dawn” and “Angel of the Morning,” not to mention “(Oh Lord, Won’t You Buy Me a) Mercedes Benz,” no doubt because she feared I’d miss the irony, and why put ideas into a boy’s head? That ragtop red Impala’d my dad bought her cost enough. Not till I was far from home but not quite free of it, and the Impala replaced by a K-car that would leave anyone aching for a Benz and no doubt stranded in Baton Rouge with a need to thumb a diesel down, if it even made it that far, did I sit down and wonder what the words to “Me and Bobby McGee” meant and whether I believed them. Does freedom really mean having nothing left to lose? Would one want to be free if it did? Should we really want nothing because we already have everything, or should we simply no longer want anything that anyone could take away?

That Impala, by the way, would cost me \$81 large to buy back, if it’s not gone to scrap. I think a lot about that car. I have no idea how much Benz that money would buy you; I drive Bimmers and Hyundais.

The irony in the song – the singer loses someone s/he wants very much not to lose because “Somewhere near Salinas, Lord, I let *him* slip away” – does not resolve the dilemma; irony never does. It just helps us focus on them. Why did you let him slip away? Are you sure you didn’t want him to? Maybe just a little? By contrast, Dylan’s singer and the woman he can’t thrive without, in the song that most resonates for

me with “Me and Bobby McGee” – “Tangled Up in Blue” – “split up one night both agreeing it was best,” but that’s simply because he just got her “out of a jamb, I guess,” though he “used a little too much force” – which is a dilemma of a different kind. The one in “Me and Bobby McGee,” is that we can lose what we think we must desire, but don’t know whether this is freedom or the opposite. Today’s readings dance around that dilemma in their own ways. Paul’s words in Galatians spill no irony along the way; Jesus’s in Luke 9 drip with it. Which teaches more?¹

Paul, in Galatians, is giving sound and sober advice to people who seem quite keen not to stay that way. Misunderstanding freedom in Christ as the ability to play the all-licensed fool and do whatever they want without consequence, they apparently go about doing just that. Loving not their neighbors as themselves, they use them for pleasure or for sport, for exploitation or out of simple meanness. They do unto others as they’d not have done unto themselves, save perhaps for certain of the behaviors specified in Galatians 5:19. In treating one another with envy, violence, and excess, they risk consuming one another as a fire consumes wood or oil, till each has nothing left and none can remember quite why. In this they act, Paul notes, according to the flesh, which sounds as creepy in Greek as it does in English. Those who live this way do what any creature does that must compete for what Frank Herbert calls “the free energy of a system:” anything it can to get as much energy from that system as it can.² It feels as natural to do this as it does to breathe or to run, to eat, and to kill in order that we might do so. Those who live this way may well carouse with one another at night to make up for having lied, cheated, stolen from one another during the day, or for having found they had to rely on each other for a time against common

¹ Sources for the preceding paragraphs: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Me_and_Bobby_McGee. Foster, Fred and Kristofferson, Kris, "Me and Bobby McGee" (1969). *Vocal Popular Sheet Music Collection*. Score 5521. <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mmb-vp-copyright/5521>. Dylan, Bob. “Tangled Up in Blue.” Copyright © 1974 by Ram's Horn Music; renewed 2002 by Ram's Horn Music.

² Herbert, Frank. *Dune*. Philadelphia; New York: Chilton Books, a division of Chilton Company, [1965] ©1965.

enemies and their better judgment. I have seen it in bars, taphouses, pubs, blues clubs, and gin joints everywhere I've been, but even the wildest nights end in the cold, bracing clarity of tomorrow morning, and one cannot be at peace with one's life in this world if not in peace with every part of it, which few of us are, I suspect.

All this can make the world seem like, and that it can only be like, the state of nature as described by Thomas Hobbes: "a war of all against all," with lives that are "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."³ It seems natural to live this way, but it is not good. It is natural to let a disease run its course, but it is not good. It were far better to let medicines and surgeries arrest them as they run, that life may continue and be well.

That is: it were better to live according to what Paul calls the Spirit. Who would not rather live where love and grace abound, and not hate and meanness? Who would not rather live where people are gentle and self-controlled, generous and faithful, than where they are harsh and self-indulgent, mean-spirited and believing in nothing? Who would not rather live where people are patient with each other and at peace, instead of where they quarrel, lie, foment discord, and in all things seek their pleasure or to dominate others with their power games and mendacity?

As we have seen of late on stark display, from the war in Ukraine to the hearings of the January 6th Committee, most people would rather live in the Spirit, with love and generosity and kindness at the heart of things, but not all. Those who would live in lies and violence, self-service and fear will stop at nothing, we can now see, not only to achieve their aims, but to ruin things for everybody else, making sure everybody else live as they have chosen to.

I think that's what world domination really means: not merely to control other people, but to make them live in fear, without hope, and making them kowtow to whatever falsehoods one might spout today, often as not refuting the ones one

³ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan* I.xiii.9. Public Domain.

spouted yesterday. Those who behave this way delight in breaking down other people's senses of self and of integrity. They love to watch them undermine their honor out of loyalty or fear, or a sense that they will get some advantage if they do. They believe that people will break any oath or defy any law if they think they can benefit by doing so, that anyone who thinks otherwise is a fool, and that truth, democracy, freedom and the rule of just and moral laws count for nothing.

One must make oneself free of such people, and do what one can to free others from them. The struggle is perennial, but good people engage in it more often than we might realize. To wit: it has been sobering and to some degree reassuring these last weeks to hear people testify before the US Congress that they voted for a certain person to retain the presidency, but would not help do his dirty work for him when that person sought to retain power after the people of These United gave him his walking papers. They informed us that person and his minions betrayed them and leaned on them, repeatedly and mendaciously, to betray their country and themselves in his service, and to their harm. It is praiseworthy that they did this, resisted the pressure upon them to do wrong, and still have the courage and ability to speak of how they did so and why. It is a blessing, indeed, that their faith gives them the strength to do these things, along with the will to want to. That's what we hope for and pray for: the God will help all of us do what is right, no matter the cost – and, if possible, keep that cost to a minimum. For freedom these people acted – freedom from tyranny, freedom from lies, and freedom from being ruled by a regime whose leaders and enablers, in my opinion and judgment, value neither truth nor freedom, and never will.

Yet, for all that, Jesus says, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Talk about freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose. By that metric the Son of Man is free, indeed – freer than foxes, birds, and anything else that has a home in the world that is. Indeed, he has

nothing left to lose, and those who would follow him would follow best if they had nothing left to lose, either. Nothing to lose, nothing to gain, nothing to cling to. “What profits it one who gains the whole world but forfeits their soul?” Jesus asks elsewhere, and tells his followers to “Store up treasures not on earth, but in heaven.”

Stick with me, he might as well add, and you will have nowhere that you belong, nowhere you are welcome, but you won’t mind and it won’t matter. You will proclaim the kingdom of God and, in time, live there. You might find yourself tempted by those who put their hand to the plough but look back, whether from weakness or from fear that this is all folly. You might find yourself wanting to bury your dead before you serve the living. Jesus in Luke 9 would have us not do these things, not because caution is wrong or doubt unusual, or piety and honor wrong. He goes out of his way to give insult on these points to remind us not to be too attached to what might have been, or what has been, or to what we want or need or long for or can’t forget. The dead are free from all that, Jesus wants to say. The living should be as well.

By the way: any pastor who spoke as Jesus did to the grieving would be out of a job by nightfall. Jesus I suspect would not have us be impious, though he does sound impatient, and the only time we see him attending a funeral is to undo it. He would remind us that the dead no longer hope nor fear. Be like that, he wants to say. Live free – and to all that make you unfree, die.

Have nothing – not even longing for a lost love or an old car you were once happy in, ragtop down, the radio on, and your momma happy, too – left to lose. *Amen.*