

Free to Be

by Jon Appleton

The sermon emphasizes the importance of living an open-ended life, being free to weep unashamedly, and prioritizing love as the motivation for our freedom.

Duration: 34:46

Scripture: Exodus 21:7, Matthew 6:33, John 1:7, John 11:35, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 6:14, Galatians 5:1

Topics: "Freedom"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on their role as a structured affiliate of a state bad disconvention, attending meetings and engaging in superficial interactions. They share a personal experience of rushing to a speaking engagement, but finding freedom and authenticity when they allowed themselves to be interrupted and deviate from their planned schedule. The speaker emphasizes the importance of not being confined by systems and structures, but rather being open to the needs and rhythms of those around us. They reference a story from the Old Testament about a woman in desperate need, highlighting the significance of responding to the cries for help around us.

Transcript

Free to be. Someone suggested that I would do very well by saying we're free to leave, but I do have, sit down Pete, I do have some things that I do want to say, and most of these were written earlier this morning. It's hard to keep on talking about freedom, because you see we've not really touched the surface.

Goethe's Faust expresses faith in man when he said, he only earns his freedom and existence who daily conquers them anew. And although this is a 20th century proof text for humanism, I think there is something for the student Christian of the 70s to learn from this brief little statement. The more we arrive as free men, the more you and I will strive to be freer, for we never really ever arrive.

Rod McEwen spells it out when he yearns for the touching and seeing in his daily struggle to find himself. And he's brazen and honest enough to admit that he cannot do it by himself. He needs the companionship of love.

He said, bend down and touch me with your eyes. Did you hear that? Bend down and touch me with your eyes. Make every morning hold a new surprise, so that when I stumble out of sleep, yours is the first face that I'll see.

And as I amble through the day, be there to guide me all along the way. If I should falter and fail, your shoulder's near enough to touch. Follow me from darkness into light, then we'll go back again through every midnight.

Bend down and touch me with your eyes. Let every morning hold a new surprise, so when I tumble into sleep, yours is the last face that I'll see. As we stumble out and amble on and tumble back in, to be free, I must have companionship and love.

For you see, in the all-sufficiency of doing it my way, I have to cry out, I need help. Jesus said, John said of him in his fellowship, if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another. One with another.

But is this possible? For you see, because we fear, we exploit. Because we are proud, we accumulate. Because we have structures, we cheat to achieve.

Because we have peers, we conform. Because we have idols, we worship. Because we are free, we seek to enslave or to be enslaved.

Why do we disenfranchise our freedom and exchange it for a yoke of bondage? Why do we allow the comfort of security to plagiarize the openness of liberty? There is a story in the Old Testament that leaps out of the pages. Have you ever had flies after you? There ain't no flies on Jesus, somebody said. That puts me in my place.

There is a story in the Old Testament of a woman who had a tremendous need in her life. Her husband had died. She had children left, she had a debt left, and the creditors came, as was the custom in those days upon the death of the male of the family, to receive in full payments for all outstanding debts.

And when they came, there was nothing there to pay with. You remember the story. So they looked at an option and they saw two sons.

And they said, we will take them and sell them as bond servants and the debt will be put aside. With this need, the loss of her husband, the threat lost of her male son, her male children, she went to God through Elisha the prophet. And she came to Elisha and she told him her fate and he knew it because her husband had been one of his associates.

And the first thing he said to her was, what do you think I can do for you? What do you want me to do for you? Which is a wonderful lesson for all of us who have the joy and the burden of counseling. The first person that must be removed from the scene is the counselor. And then he said, what do you have at home that's valuable? Nothing.

Nothing. Oh, come on. There's something that is valuable.

Probably live in one little room in the living area, nothing in the sleeping area, nothing in the dining area, nothing in the kitchen area, nothing. I have nothing, Elisha. I am nothing.

I am nothing. There's bound to be something there. Well, I've got a pot of oil and a pot of oil.

Oil is valuable. Go home. Send your boys out into the neighborhood and tell them to collect everything they can find that'll hold oil.

Bring it back into the house, shut the shutters, close the doors, and pour. Stupid. You know the miracle of this miracle? It's not that all the vessels became filled with oil.

The miracle of this miracle is that the woman had faith to believe that it could happen. And that's freedom. The boys went out in the neighborhood.

They collected everything they could find. They brought it in. They filled up the room.

They closed the doors. And even though she was a woman of faith, I think perhaps she was also a very practical person. And I can almost see her as she began to make her attack to faith.

She got her pot of oil and she started. And if I see it right, I think she started with the smallest thing she could see in sight. But she filled up every vessel in that room.

And she asked her son, did I miss one? They had a good thing going. No, they're all filled. And the story says she burst out of her house.

She ran to the God of man, the man of God, excuse me. And he said to her, go, sell the oil, pay your debt and live. Thou and thy children are the rest.

In the total lostness, in her tremendous need, she found out that in her own possession, there was a treasure which freely given and ordained of God brought life and freedom. You and I too are prone to overlook the potentialities that are in our own household, in our own lives and in our own bodies. We speak of freedom, but we are shocked to realize that we can be free.

Robert Wilder, the novelist, tells the most fascinating story of a man who became obsessed with newspapers, with accumulating newspapers, because his idea was that someday somebody is going to want to know something that was in a newspaper and I'll be able to tell them what it is. And he started on this experience early in life and he began to stack these papers in a closet and in another closet. He filled up all the closets.

He filled up the living room, the dining area, the bedrooms, the den, the kitchen. He did this for 30 years. And then finally he had built within his house stacks and stacks of newspapers that only allowed brief tunnels so that he, like a mole, could move in and out.

Always with this obsession in mind, someday somebody is going to want to know something and I'll be able to tell them what it is. His neighbors were quite concerned about him. Being so eccentric, he was not able to visualize their concern as real and he shut them out and turned them off until finally it became evident that something had to happen for this man.

And the police came and a doctor came and a neighbor came and they prized him from his house and they took him to a hospital and he was stone blind. In our freedom to make our choices, God give us the wisdom not to be obsessed with that which is meaningless and to live an open-ended life. Too much we find that we are trapped in the silos of our own mind.

And we whirl and twirl and then we're stone blind. Out of the 19th century, there are many things that have come that are worth remembering and reciting. One of these to me is Ibsen's writings of Peer Gynt.

This man believed that he was acting for his very best interest by giving himself completely all of his energies and all of his strength to make money so that he might become successful. But the closing

refrains were a shock to him as well as they are to us because at life's end he found out that by all of his exploitation and egotism that he had robbed himself of freedom. And I want to share with you four stanzas.

And I would like for you to think with me. First of all, the haunting chorus came and said, We are thoughts, thoughts, you should have thought us. Little feet to life, you should have brought us.

We should have risen with glorious sound. But here like thread balls, we are earthbound. We, like this man of old, enjoy being in a part of a group that says we have arrived.

We make a B-minus in philosophy of religion and we begin to talk like little tillocks. A friend of mine said, You can no more speak something you don't know than you can come back from someplace you haven't been. God give us the courage not to build a roof over our minds, but that we'll always be open-ended and that we will never be able to say of ourselves, I know it all.

When I was your age and going out from the college campus to do things, we'd go to the nursing home and we would sing and we would think in our minds, Oh, I'm glad I'm not like they are. We would go to the crippled children's clinic and we would talk with them and play games with them and in our minds we were saying, Oh, I'm glad I'm not like them. We'd go to see a group of blind students and we would touch them and caress them and say in our minds, Oh, I'm glad we're not like them.

We would go through the ghettos. We were sophisticated then. We didn't go to the ghettos.

We went through it and we would look to the right and we'd look to the left and we would say, Oh, I'm glad I'm not them. We built a roof over our minds, but you're not that way. You go to the nursing home and you stay there all day.

You go to the crippled children's clinic and you go in with a therapist and she shows you exactly what to do to create motion in this lad's arm and you stay there for an hour. You congregate a group of blind students and you learn how to read from Braille and you put a blindfold over your eyes and you're thinking thoughts that go out of the top of your mind and you go into the ghetto and somehow or other you don't smell what's there or see what's there because you're there yourself. Don't put a lid on your mind.

Think beyond what you have hold of at this moment. The second stanza. We are songs.

You hear that? We are songs. These voices came back to this fellow and said, We are songs. You should have sung us.

In the depths of your heart, despair has wrung us. We lay and waited. You called us not.

May your throat and voice with poison rot. For many people, music is a tourniquet to escape from life and they put it on and they go out into netherland. But the real song modulates the themes of life into the commitments of personhood.

Here is my life is a song that has swept our nation because it prizes life out into the open, not with statistics or cliches or five-year programs, but it prizes life out into the open realizing there is a need out there and there's a person in here and we can meet. I remember the first time I heard it. I was between somewhere and another place in my automobile driving to those places of service and they started singing.

Now, I can't sing, but here's what they were. Jesus loves the little children, all the children, I said my soul and body, of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight.

Jesus loves the little children of the world. Everything is beautiful. I don't know that there's been a song that's blown the mind of the establishment exactly like that one.

What if that song hadn't have been sung? We sung it all the way through. We talked you from cherub choir up. That was where you started.

But we put a period. Somebody had the guts to come along and put the real message on the end. There's songs that must be sung because here is our soul.

Here is where we open out and bloom and we get our thoughts into creative communication. There's songs to be sung and all the stanzas must be heard. And the stanzas are not verses, they're needs.

The third thing he said was said to him by the chorus, we are tears. Yeah, we are tears which were never shed. The cutting ice which all hearts dread, we could have melted.

But now it's dark, it's frozen into a stubborn heart. The wound is closed. Our power is lost.

All of us have cried, but how many of us have ever wept? In 1965, I had the privilege of being in Trinity College at the University of Glasgow. I studied with William Barclay. I went there because I knew his mind and I knew his soul.

But I found out something I didn't know. And it happened the very first lecture. He said, I want to read to you from John Bailey in prayer.

And he started reading a prayer of John Bailey. But he didn't say amen. And then he started praying.

And out of the shock of my bowed head, I looked up and he was crying. No. In his prayer, he was weeping.

Have you ever wept? In your thoughts of Jesus, have you ever saw Jesus as a crying man? No, we never think of Jesus as a crying man. We think of Christ as a weeping man. Jesus wept.

He didn't cry. He wept. We cry because of what we see.

We weep because of what we cannot see. We cry because of what we hear. We weep because of what we cannot hear.

We cry because of what we feel. We weep because of what we cannot feel. We cry because a door is closed in our faces.

But we weep when someone has the audacity to say, if you don't believe like we believe, get out. We cry when our brother goes off to war. We weep when he comes back in a pine box.

We cry when we drop our lollipop on the street. We weep when humanity dumps its waste into the crystal clear streams. We cry because we are human.

But we weep because in Christ we are more than human. To be free is to be able to weep unashamedly. Another chorus came to him and said, we are deeds you should have done, strangled by doubt, spoiled,

e'er begun.

At judgment day we shall be there to tell our tale. How will you fare? Ours is the age of doing. Most of our doing, however, is polarized.

On one side, we do what we do because we do it for ourselves. On the other side, we do what we do because we are supposed to do what we do by the group that we are affiliated with. I don't need to go into the first side.

There's been enough written and said about our self-gratification. You don't need a documentary here. But I think on the other pole, there's a voice that's crying out, how about it? Well, I want to tell you how about it from my perspective.

I am a structured affiliate of a state Baptist convention. And much of my activity is a pied piper pantomime of going to meetings and shaking hands and commenting on the weather and all those other ostentatious charades for the almighty cooperative program. And my 30,000 miles on my automobile last year is a testimony to the fact that I'm committed.

I have been, I have shook, I have talked about the weather, I have played charades. I really have. Three weeks ago this Saturday, I was on one of my trips to portray a role.

I had really meant to leave Friday night. But we had some company and I had to leave early in the morning. I got up at five o'clock.

I got in my automobile. Well, it was a 400-mile trek, 200 miles there and 200 miles back. And I had to speak about 10 o'clock.

I needed to get there. And I started down the interstate lickety, lickety split. I was moving on.

Not very much traffic. I was all by myself. I was making fantastic time.

And all of a sudden I heard a ping and my power steering, no power. And then I heard ping, ping. Well, you see the fan belt of one had snapped and had thrown itself into the other two fan belts on my car.

And it's just hard to go without a fanning belt. I pulled over to the side and I steamed and I fumed. You know, the first thing I did, the very first thing I did when I realized this was it, guess.

I looked at my structure piece and I knew that I was in trouble. For I was as far away from the back exit as I was close to the far exit. I got out and I did what everyone else would have done.

I raised the hood. And I looked and I said, yes, it's the fan belt. I know it's the fan belt.

There I was. I stepped out to the front side of my car and looked pathetic and a number of people in time came by and they did a very scriptural thing. They passed by on the other side.

And then all of a sudden, in a red Volkswagen, there's a nurse and I wasn't even bleeding. And she said, I'll take it to the next exit. I said, wait just a minute.

And I did a very logical thing. You leave your car out on the highway. You don't have anything in it, but you ought to lock it up, right? After all the three fan belts gone, somebody might want it.

I locked my car up with a key in it. I'm structured right down to the core. We drove to the first exit.

And we went to the service station. And of course, it was too early for them to be open. She was going to the next town where she worked in a nursing home.

And she said, I'll take you on there. And while we were going there, I said, why did you pick me up? She said, well, I was topping the hill when I saw your smoke, steam. I saw you and I knew you were in need.

And so I was in a car and I could meet your need. Driving into town to the next exit, we got off and there were no service stations on the exit. We drove on into the little town.

And while we were driving into town, I said, just take me to the Buick place and I'll wait till they open. I said, by the way, where do you live? She said, I live in Georgiana. Just about six months before this time, I had preached at a little bitty place called East Chapman.

And it's a little bitty place. Well, while I was there, I had dinner with a mechanic. And this mechanic was talking about moving to Evergreen.

And I said, listen, you, I can't remember a fellow's name. He lived out at East Chapman, but he was talking about moving to Evergreen. Do you know somebody? Oh yeah, that's Jimmy Conway.

We were at a stoplight and I said, let me out. Here's a phone. I'll call Jimmy right now.

Because one of the last things he said to me when I left his house was, if you ever need a mechanic, call me. So I called him. I said, Jimmy, you up? He said, I am now.

I said, I've got trouble and I need your help. He said, John, I've got trouble too. I can't help you today.

Our little boy, you remember, since you were here, we found out that he has a disease. And there's a chance that he'll be able to come around. But just the day before yesterday, we've had to put him into a cast.

And he won't be able to get up for three years. And you know, Millie was expecting and the baby was born last week. And the baby's not going to live.

He said, but I have a friend and I'll call him. Give me the number there and I'll call you back. I waited.

And in a minute, Jimmy drove up. He said, I couldn't find him, but I think I can take you to somebody else who will take care of you. I said, Jimmy, you know, I'm sort of in a hurry, but I'd like to go out to your house.

I don't think anything will happen to my car. And I went out to Jimmy's house for about an hour. I was the freest person I'd been in a long time.

I missed my first speaking engagement. And I was not myself at the second one. But man, I was free.

I'm not saying to hell with this structure, but I am saying I was not made for a system, nor was a system made for me. And the glory of any system is that it allows me to become me. I pray to God that you might be interrupted on some very busy errands.

For you see, we are free in our bodies, but we must coordinate it to the rhythm of the needs that shout out around us. Help! I'm over here! This motivation, or the motivation for this freedom is love. Love is the circumference that feeds into the mind that thinks, that feeds into the soul that has a song to sing, that feeds into the heart that will weep openly and unashamedly, and that feeds into the strengthened life that's willing to serve.

Jesus announced that we are free to be when he said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, with all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself.

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