

Faith Mennonite Church
March 22, 2015 – Fifth Sunday of Lent
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Nothing Left to Lose
John 12:20-25

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

That's one way to interpret this provocative pronouncement from Jesus. First he proclaims his impending death, then he suggests that his friends and followers will suffer – maybe even die – as well. This would not have been the disciples' favorite moment with Jesus, and if we really listen, we can be daunted by this speech today.

This provocative pronouncement, that we must lose our lives to save them, has vital political implications. Some of you were raised with the Martyr's Mirror and tales of Mennonites and others who have risked – even lost – their lives for peace, justice, integrity and building a better world. Christian Peacemaker Teams was founded by Mennonites, Brethren and Quakers on this very notion, that saving lives is worth risking our own lives, and that we save our own lives by living with integrity, even if we die for it. This is freedom, to audaciously express our values rather than sit at home worrying about all we have to lose.

There's another way I read this paradoxical passage that is personal and vulnerable. Justice, peace and martyrdom are perhaps *external* ways to express Jesus' command that we lose our lives to save them. If we follow this teaching *internally*, we find confession.

Losing our lives to save them can be like hitting rock bottom. Janis Joplin sang “freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose,” and she lived and died that reality. She hit rock bottom, but it came too late and she died of a drug overdose.

If we're lucky, we hit rock bottom with someone around to witness it and support us. Hitting rock bottom means we've got nothing left to protect, we've lost our security, our stability, our secrets. Hitting rock bottom is terrifying and dangerous, and if we survive it, it's an essential opportunity. Once we've hit rock bottom and can't pretend things are okay, when we can't keep our own secrets anymore, we can finally confess. And it saves our lives.

Confession is good for the soul, we say, and all kinds of religions practice it.

From Yom Kippur to Catholic Confession, from Buddhist repentance within the sangha to AA stories within the meeting, baring ourselves before the Divine and our trusted comrades is central to spiritual wellbeing. Confession is on the rise within the church, and it's also showing up in movies like *Flight*, where Denzel Washington flies a jet upside down, or the international sensation *PostSecret*, which has inspired millions of people to write anonymous confessions on a postcard and mail them to a man named Frank. However we do it, confession acknowledges that we'll never be perfect, that perfection is impossible, but that we're still striving to be the best we can be.

Jesus teaches us about confession throughout the gospels. Remember the Samaritan woman at the well in John - chapter 4 if you want to look it up. Jesus asks her for a drink and they start a theological conversation. Then it gets personal – turns out she's had 5 husbands, and the man she's with now isn't her husband. Riské in 2015, let alone year 30! Jesus doesn't bat an eye. He just dwells with her at the well, discussing living water. He doesn't judge her, he doesn't ask her to change, he shows her that, at least in that moment, she has the freedom of having nothing left to lose—her secret is out, and he does not reject her.

And we can trust he did dwell with true respect and compassion, because she goes running back to her town to proclaim the good news that she met someone who “told her about her whole life,” and she would only do this if she had been blessed by the encounter. Jesus is present with this woman in the face of her shame, he sees her completely and does not turn away, he faces her, her secrets bared, and does not flinch.

Today is the 5th Sunday of Lent. We begin Lent with ashes on our foreheads, saying “from dust we come, to dust we will return.” Lent is a time to strip down to the essence of ourselves and our world. People often give something up for Lent, in order to get in touch with something deeper in themselves and listen to God.

Lent is a time to see ourselves bare. Confession is good for our souls all through the year, but Lent is a natural time to practice it. We might bare ourselves first in a room of our own, with the lights off. That’s scary already, but the risk and reward really show up when, in the light of day, we bare ourselves before a witness—a stranger, a beloved, the Divine, or to our church family during joys and concerns.

It’s hard to bare ourselves in church. Most of the prayers I’ve most desperately needed were prayers I was embarrassed to ask for: help with an addiction, guidance in a messy romantic relationship, forgiveness for cruelty or deception. It’s so much easier to ask for prayers for my aunt’s cancer struggle than my own challenge to lose weight. It’s easier to pray together for reconciliation in Nigeria than for reconciliation in my own family. And all of these prayers matter! I don’t mean to suggest we should stop praying for other people. But we can stretch ourselves to bare our personal pain and longing – and our joys too! It’s easier to share prayers of joy for our kids going to an all-state championship than tell our church family that we’re thrilled with an accomplishment of our own, since we don’t want to seem boastful.

It’s hard for most people in the world, across cultures and religions, to tell the deepest truth about themselves. But I think we Anabaptists have a particularly hard time because we’re supposed to be humble, and also because we’re supposed to live our faith in all of our daily actions, which gives us so many chances to be disappointed in ourselves. Not recycling is as sinful as gossiping – and recycling is totally important, but so is relaxing around each other.

There are so many young families in this church – I wonder how it feels to parent in front of each other. Parenting is an outrageously complicated task, but our culture has made it impossible and isolating by overwhelming parents with tips and options and you’re either a good or bad person based on your parenting choices, and of course each thing you do or don’t do will determine if your kids will end up good or bad. And this parenting expert disagrees with that parenting expert, so it truly is impossible!

Brave parents learn to confess their fears and failures and break through the isolation, and become better parents for it. Like the dad who wrote the faux-kids book, “Go the *explicative* to sleep.” His daughter routinely took two hours to fall asleep and the book started because he finally told the truth about how frustrated and exhausted he was. He says, for parents, these feelings, “are not permissible to talk about. We’re not completely honest because we don’t want to be bad parents.” His book became a bestseller because telling the truth is cathartic and contagious. When we tell the truth, in our prayer requests or around the dinner table or in writing, the people around us are blessed and inspired to tell the truth as well. We create energy and possibility when we tell the truth and choose the freedom of having no secrets left to lose.

The Samaritan woman at the well and Jesus bless one another with intimate conversation and wide open faces, trusting one another well beyond what their world would expect or allow. Jesus doesn’t go find the disciples and say “can you believe that scandalous woman?” gossiping the way so many of us do when we’re uncomfortable with ourselves and the people around us. Jesus must have told someone, since the story ended up in scripture, but the unnamed Samaritan woman is described with respect and reverence.

This Lent may we learn from the woman at the well, who lets all of her secrets hang out with Jesus. And may we be like Jesus to one another – eager to gaze at each other with not just acceptance, but with adoration, seeing each other’s beautiful imperfection. When we can hold, simultaneously, our flaws and our utter belovedness, we realize we have the freedom of nothing left to lose. And that saves us, again and again.

Other ideas:

We say our “flaws” are working too hard, or not being able to say no

What does the freedom of having nothing left to lose mean for the “dying” church?