

SERMON

Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Gustaf Wingren

Luke 14:1–11 · 1940

15 September 1940

Överum Church

Text: Luke 14:1–11

Hymns: 478:1–3; 402:3–7; 206:4; 347:1–5; 431:7–10

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us thank and praise.

Our paschal lamb, O Jesus Christ,

that you, without fault and lack,

offered us power and nourishment

in all our strife, in all our need.

Praise to you, who here from the power of death

bought me free, fleshly, sown under sin,

and taught the way to go

where I shall reach an eternal life. Amen.

(Swedish Hymnal 104:4, 7)

The slaves of what passes away, and the sons of freedom.

Freedom is one of the most misused words there are. We have lived in the century of freedom and seen the misuse before our eyes. All bonds one has tried to cast off. And one has also, on

the whole, succeeded. The modern human being stands there, freed from God's unpleasant reality, as he thinks, from commandments and laws and from many outward bonds which formerly lessened his freedom of movement. For the first time in the history of the world the unrestricted freedom, for peoples and for single persons, was to become reality. And the consequence has been that we stand before a modern human being who is ready to subject himself to the hardest tyrants, who rejoices at being led, without a will. But so it must go. For the freedom one worshiped was not a freedom to be allowed to do a service, but a freedom from all services. That is, it was a freedom for one's own I to be allowed to act after its own pleasure. And then one consequently becomes free from all lords except the very worst, namely the I. That is a fearful lord. The I drives and hunts the human being to look after his own advantages, without regard — and so all stand against all in one single confusion, each ruled by his I. The compulsion to obey one then comes as a gospel. And so one sells all freedom to this one strong man, even the freedom which one has no right to offer: the conscience. Those who now wanted to become the sons of freedom became instead the slaves of what passes away.

He who strives after freedom for his own I comes into slavery under his own I. One must seek "the best places" at the feast of life. The tyrant, the I, forces one. The end of the text, about the guests at the Pharisee's.

This I-ness is very common also among those who think themselves Christians. This, to watch over one's own worth, this absence of the heart's humility. When such unredeemed people become "Christians," as they think they do, they become slaves of the law. The heart is bound. They must see the good as something outward. And then there comes a fearful interplay between the slavery under the I and the slavery under the law. The I forces them to lay ever greater weight on the law, and the works of the law draw more and more attention to one's own I. The Pharisees at the beginning of the text, the silent, sullen slanderers of others, who with evil eyes look at him who in such freedom from the law does a good act. So it is also with many Christians who think themselves the sons of freedom, but are the slaves of what passes away.

It is no great difference, one perhaps thinks, between slavery and service. The difference is great. He who lives in slavery serves against his will. He who lives in service serves with his will, freely, because he has his pleasure in serving. The slave's heart is bound. The servant's heart is free, redeemed. Is there any such servant, who serves without being forced? "A servant

of servants came, the Lord of all lords,” we sang just now. There was one “who was in the form of God, but did not count equality with God a prize, but emptied himself and took the form of a servant when he came in human form.” It is him we see in today’s text serving a man with dropsy. So he served day by day, sinners and the sick and tax collectors. He also said of himself that he had come in order to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. The cross. The resurrection. His continued act of love toward us in word and sacrament.

His testament: “You brothers, serve one another so, as I served you all,” the hymn we just sang. That testament he gave at the washing of the feet. “I have now given you an example... He who among you wants to be the first, let him be the servant of the others.”

But you say: what has this to do with freedom? You may know: there is nothing other than service which can replace slavery. If you seek freedom for your own I, you land in slavery. If you seek freedom to be allowed to serve, you become free. That is the truth about freedom. Freedom must be grown together with love, otherwise freedom becomes slavery.

And yet it is the truth. For you cannot seek freedom to be allowed to serve unless you are already free. If you have love, then your heart is free. Free from your own I, and in the same moment free from the law. Then you are loosed from your sin. And only he, the great Servant, can carry out that work of freeing. Through the forgiveness of sins. He takes you out of your own sight. Now you are free. Now you love. “Now the Son has made you free, so that you really are free.” The heart we cannot ourselves free. Another must do that.

“The freedom of a Christian” stands over our text. A book title from the sixteenth century. “A Christian is in faith the freest lord of all things and subject to none. A Christian is in love the humblest servant of all and subject to everyone.”

The first is the forgiveness of sins, faith. “What do the world’s threat and scorn concern us? Our brother is God’s only Son. Who can now destroy us?” (Olaus Petri).

The second is the love of the neighbor, which bids us humility, to “take the lowest place at the table,” the end of the text. Those who in daily forgiveness of sins live in this love of God and give it on in the world, they have ceased to be the slaves of what passes away and have become the sons of freedom.

This consideration can be widened. We go today to the election as free citizens. In each of us the temptation lies near, in the life of society, to ask after advantages and rights, to see who

pays us most. Then we seek freedom for our own I. Then the class comes into the center, not the good of the whole. The end becomes slavery. The only rescue is that we freely and willingly take common burdens upon ourselves, that we have the desire to serve our brothers with all our work and all our deed. If we use our freedom for mutual service and not for selfish breeding, then our societal freedom is a living freedom, which shall stand, “whatever may impend in the times.”

But this view can be widened further. Our whole people has through a wonder of God had its freedom and independence preserved during a year of war which has laid one region after another under foreign lords. We may know that we have our freedom as a people only in order to use it in the service of the whole, the service of Europe and of humanity. Every parading of our remaining independence is folly, a seeking after selfish freedom, without the servant-mind. We have our freedom in order to help build up a shattered world. So far we have helped our eastern neighbor land, and in some measure also our western. The future must stand in the sign of continued service, otherwise we are not worthy of the gift which God has given our people.

But the consideration can be widened further. So long as we live on earth, we are in a way the slaves of what passes away. “We on earth live here captive under death,” as the man with dropsy. The Christian faithful do not fully become the sons of freedom until on the other side of the border of death. “He who here humbles himself shall then be exalted,” as our text sharpens in its last word. A common thought in the New Testament. But we must take care not to transform this heavenly hope in our hearts into a new selfishness. Heaven is continued service in perfect freedom. The seventh chapter of the book of Revelation shows us the picture of those “who have come out of the great tribulation, who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” But then it says — in gripping simplicity — “Therefore they stand before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple.”

And the man who in the cloister at Wittenberg had been a slave of what passes away, but through the word had become a son of freedom, he knew this also: that heaven’s perfect freedom is the same as unceasing serving. His song of praise to Christ moves between these two: freedom and service. “Jesus Christ, my Lord, has redeemed, purchased, and won me, a lost and condemned human being” — that is the freeing. But now comes the service — “in order that I shall be his own, live and be under him in his kingdom and serve him in eternal

righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns forever. This is most certainly true.” Amen.

Translator’s notes. He gave this sermon no title. “The freedom of a Christian” is the sixteenth-century book he names over the text, not a title of this sermon. The judgments of September 1940 are kept: the century of freedom, the sale of conscience, the class at the center, the eastern and western neighbors, and the parade of independence as folly. The modern person and the servant stay he. The hymn lines are for sense, not meter.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·