

Pastor Jon's Sermon from August 25, 2024 based on Joshua 24 and John 6:56-69

"Jesus says, 'I got you!'"

How many of you were really good this week? How many of you feel like you just keep messing things up and can't get out of your own way? Even on my best day, I don't ever feel like, "I really nailed life today." There is always something I could have done better. I can relate to the Apostle Paul who says in Romans 7:15 "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

In our confession at the beginning of church, we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against You in thought, word and deed by what we have done and left undone. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. But, For the sake of your son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us...

So today, I want to talk about choices and free will.

In our first lesson, Joshua, the one who won the battle of Jericho, asks the question to the people he was in charge of, whom will you choose to serve this day? Will it be the gods of the Egyptians or the Amorites, who influenced us and our families when we were in slavery... which would be considered idols... or will you choose the one true Lord? Joshua says, "But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." And through his leadership, many others said, we will too. That sounds like a choice right? But even Joshua questioned their ability to follow through. He said in 24:19. "You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a Holy God. He is a jealous God."

In our Gospel, Jesus' own followers, are struggling with his teaching that we need to eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood in order to have eternal life. They walked away from Jesus deciding that his teaching is too difficult. In this case, Jesus lets them go. He didn't pursue them to convince them otherwise. He knew that faith or belief in him was a gift of the Holy Spirit. Today we understand eating Jesus' flesh

and blood through our post-resurrection lenses. We take the idea of eating Jesus' flesh and blood as ruminating on his word and receiving Holy Communion. Then, as Christians, we hope to become what we eat, bread of Jesus for others as we try to live out the Christian life. Try is the operative word.

So, "Do we have free will?" Can we choose good in life, including having faith in God? Most of us would say "yes", without question. But Luther argued in his 1525 in his treatise, "The Bondage of the Will" that our will, like we say in our confession, that we are in bondage to sin. No-one can achieve salvation or redemption through our own willpower or choices. People cannot choose between good or evil, because we are naturally bent toward evil or sinning. That is our human condition. Only God can change our hearts through God's grace. Think about it, If we could choose good or God all the time, then we wouldn't need Jesus, the cross, or Easter. We could earn salvation on our own. But that would completely go against the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If it was up to me, I would be an utter mess.

On the website, 1517.org, dedicated to the Reformation and Lutheran teaching, here are some things they said about Bondage of the Will.

"Luther argued that the human will is bound, that there is no free will—at least not in things above, that is, in things pertaining to salvation. While people recoil at this, because we want to be free and play some role in our salvation, there is real freedom in recognizing our bondage and in receiving our salvation entirely as gift.

In other words ... "We can't mess it up. We can't undo the cross. Our salvation doesn't depend on us. It is a gift of God received in faith. We don't live under a yoke of law anymore—anxious, busy, and fearful of measuring up to God, but are set free to live as those loved, redeemed, and given life as gift, to be enjoyed and shared with our neighbors."

This is very freeing to me. To live knowing that I already am loved by God, I am already redeemed by God, and I have been given gifts to be enjoyed and shared with my neighbors in love.

Now Luther does grant we have free will in things from below. We can choose to buy a Ford or Toyota, a Big Mac or a Whopper, go to Dairy Queen or Tom's, buy an Apple or Samsung, or eat bananas or oranges. But when it comes to our salvation, though, our freedom comes from Christ's free gift, from the fact that He freely chose to become Man, to suffer, die, and rise for us. As a result, we receive grace, joy and peace, even in suffering.

To try to work our way into salvation is an insult to Christ's love for us, which is already ours. To seek God's love in ourselves is to fail to understand the true freedom we were given when Christ was bound, beaten, nailed to a tree, and died to give us.

The good news is, we will never fully arrive. We will never be good enough. No one is good but God alone. We won't get it right. But Jesus got it 100% right for us on the cross. On the cross, Jesus says, "I got you." We will still contend with sin and evil daily. But as Patty said, we have put on the whole armor of God. Our baptism and faith protects us from death and the devil and all his empty promises, and gives us life and salvation. We do have the truth in the word of God. We have been put in a right relationship with God through Jesus. Therefore, can try to live our lives in response to this good news of God's love for us. We will mess it up, but by the grace of God we will keep trying... knowing that God's got us. Amen

