

“Release”
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November 1st, 2020
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Rehoboth Beach, Delaware

This morning we enter into our 2nd week of our Fall Stewardship Series, entitled “Our Money Story.” Our key word for today is RELEASE. Release is a verb that means “to relieve from something that confines, burdens, or oppresses.” What does **release** mean to you? What do you associate the word with? I think of a much-anticipated album, movie or book being released. Children might think of early release days—oh the joy! Maybe around someone’s death, we might say that we release a person into the loving embrace of God. If we’re really attuned to scriptural allusions, we might recall Jesus’ inaugural words in Luke 4, when he reads from Isaiah and proclaims himself to be the one whom God has sent to proclaim release to the captives. **Release: to relieve from something that confines, burdens, or oppresses.** While last week’s key word, Remember, is quite familiar to many of us in the context of our Christian discipleship, how many of us think about the concept of release in relationship to following Jesus today? As we continue to explore our own and our church’s money story, the invitation is to consider the way that releasing is a spiritual practice that frees us from ourselves and liberates others.

Our passage from Deuteronomy invites us into the practice of release. The Year of Jubilee signals a year of release from indebtedness and all types of bondage. If ever we were tempted to disconnect social justice from our sacred texts, this passage, in its classic articulation of the principle of social justice in Mosaic law, disabuses us of such a misguided notion. Here are clear as day instructions about the habits and attitudes that should be practiced toward neighbors in need. It is easy to get overwhelmed by the admonition to care for our neighbors, here broadly defined as “anyone in need among you,” including any member of the community in any towns in the land, and thus dismiss the passage. Please don’t.

I know very few of us are prepared for the realities of such radical social behavior. Most churches, our included, sees its work in the world in terms of charitable giving and sock drives, and other one-offs that only put Band-Aids on deeply broken economic systems and further nurture inequitable relationships with our neighbors. Can we admit this while also affirming our support of the Lewes and Rehoboth Area Church ministries, like the Community Resource Center, West Rehoboth Community Land Trust, Code Purple, the Food Basket, and the New Life Thrift Shop, among others, as well as the generous giving to assist in forgiving a sizeable amount of Delawareans medical debt, are still attempts at faithfulness and generosity?

If we really pause over this text, we find it to be jarring in its expansive vision of a just community, especially in comparison to our current culture, where we live with narratives, individually and communally, that bear the weight of student debt, predatory lending, and generational poverty. We are so accustomed to human lives monetized by their productivity and human worth determined by activity and business. In contrast, this passage shows us that

God's design is for us to live into an alternative ethic of compassion and solidarity with our neighbors, such that justice and righteousness are fulfilled as people share joyfully out of their own abundance. The Year of Jubilee, or release, thus has a twofold benefit. From the abundance we have, we and our financially secure church are offered release from the temptation to consolidate power by disempowering and dehumanizing others. At the same time, for those who are in need of liberation from the unjust structures that prevent their full social and economic flourishing, the gift of a clean slate releases them to experience the joy and dignity of being reincorporated as mutual caregivers within the community. With the provision of sabbath rest and cancelled debts, they can be enfolded back into a true belonging with others—one not hampered by the disconnect that comes through unequal relationships of power and possessions, of plenty and not enough. Of course, friends, we are a long way from the full realization of God's vision. But again, the invitation is to rediscover release as a spiritual practice that not only frees us from ourselves but also liberates others.

Now, our Gospel text is a zinger if there ever was one. I was not at all surprised to look it up and discover that this passage has never made it into rotation as a Sunday lectionary passage. As a pastor new to this church community, I feel a fair amount of apprehension in preaching it today. But I do so because I know this is an area where I have so much room for growth. I suspect many of you do, too. And here's the thing: I trust that Jesus knows what is best for us. After all, Jesus came that we might have life and Jesus is always here for us to offer us all the love and hope and healing that we need. With that assurance in our minds, let's take some deep breaths and invite God's Spirit to do the work of afflicting us in our comfort, as God sees fit.

Here is the nub of the challenge for me in this passage: the wealthy young man carried great privilege in his day: social, economic, and political power. And the great abundance of his privilege and wealth meant that his accumulation came at the direct expense of his neighbor. So in fact, he has not loved his neighbor as himself but directly and/or indirectly contributed to his neighbor's impoverishment. Friends, we do not need to be self-flagellating here. But we do need to be honest. The very structure of our society and economy is built on the advancement and privileges of some to the detriment and oppression of others. At the bare minimum, we are complicit in the status quo just as this man was. We are all implicated as beneficiaries of an unjust economic system. And the reality is that human nature tends toward stasis, such that many of us are content to accept the "devil that we know" rather than to take the risk necessary to challenge injustice through changing our own habits of accumulating wealth and possessions.

But hear this good, good news: Jesus is ready to release this man and us from our continual entanglement and reliance on wealth accumulation and complicity in an unjust system. Literally, Jesus offers four steps to release the young man and us from traditional expectations of fairness—of who and what is deserving, of systems in place that reinforce oppressive financial systems—and to create a new money story.

1. The first step is to "go" —in other words, go and do what Jesus says and so be healed of the disease of acquiring more and more wealth and possessions.

2. The second step is to release ourselves from our accumulated privilege and wealth by selling our possessions and liquidating our assets. Gulp. Swallow, swallow. Breathe.
3. The third step is to undertake an act of repentance and restitution by giving to the poor and thus taking steps to transform unjust social structures by equitable redistribution.
4. The fourth step is to follow Jesus as he leads us into God's way—that we might find ourselves newly released into the joy of participating in God's ongoing work to bring God's shalom—God's kingdom—on earth as it is in heaven.

Church: let us not leave today grieving, but instead let us together recommit to release as a spiritual practice. God's vision of just social relationships and Jesus' instructions about how we participate in a new economy are challenging in the extreme. They remind us that there is no way to be in right relationship with God if our neighbors are being oppressed. So as we prepare to come to the Lord's table today, let us do so as an act of letting go and releasing our shame, guilt, fear, privilege, accumulated wealth and possessions, all of which we try to use to define ourselves, so that we can instead allow God to help us experience both the thrill and terror of the freedom for which Christ has set us free through his life, death, and resurrection. Amen.