

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | NOVEMBER 15, 2020

ZEPHANIAH 1:7, 12-18 | PSALM 90:1-12 | 1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11 | MATTHEW 25:14-

30

It's been estimated that Americans see about five thousand advertisements a day. I don't know if that number is accurate, but it certainly feels that way.

As anyone who's taken Introduction to Advertising or just watched season one *Mad Men* can tell you, advertisers sell experiences as much as they do products. Land Rover doesn't make ads about how their cars will get you from Point A to Point B. They sell you excitement, an escape from the drudgery of your nine to five. Will you drive it through the Sahara, over the Alps, and across the Amazon? No. But it's nice to you know could.

I've recently become increasingly intrigued by one type of advertisement in particular: advertisements for financial planning and investment services. (I promise this is related to the readings.) These ads are interesting because the immediate experience of buying a financial product isn't so attractive. The primary way I experience my life insurance policy is panicking when I open my checking account until I remember, *Oh, yea. They must have taken the life insurance premium out.* So what experience are these ads trying to sell you?

In one of the most common ads, this hip (but not in a threatening way) financial advisor talks to people on a couch. (The therapy image isn't super subtle.) And these people inevitably say that they don't know anything about investing or retirement, and they're so scared about doing the wrong thing that they never did anything until they turned sixty-four and can they this financial advisor fix that. The financial advisor kind of laughs and says, "We can help." And you can see client's whole body just unclench. That's what you see what they're selling you. They're selling you freedom. And freedom is what today's reading from 1 Thessalonians is all about.

When you read this letter you get the sense that St. Paul really likes these people. They're admirable and praiseworthy. The church in Thessalonica was devout and faithful and devoted to service and prayer. But they didn't have freedom. A little bit of context here. One of the interesting things about 1 Thessalonians is that it's the oldest book in the New Testament. It's written about two decades after the death and resurrection of Christ. This community of people were among the first to hear the message that Jesus had lived, died, been raised, and would return. And so they devote themselves intensely to their common life. When Jesus comes back, they'll be ready. They're in the right place, they're doing the right thing, they're saying the right prayers.

But then what happens? Time goes by. And Jesus doesn't come back. It gets a little harder to keep up all that momentum and enthusiasm. The sugar high of the Holy Spirit wears off. More time goes by. Pretty soon people in the community start dying of old age. And Jesus still isn't back.

And so the people become anxious. They're anxious that they have missed out. They start to think that if you died before Jesus came back, that means God can't do anything for you. That if you were sleeping, God wouldn't wake you up. That if you happened to be out running errands when the moment came, there was nothing God could do for you. It's a community of people who are devout and faithful, sure. But it's also a group of people who are incredibly anxious. They are constrained by worry and afraid that they will be unacceptable to God when the time comes. They don't feel free.

Look at how St. Paul responds. "God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation," he writes, so that "whether we are awake or asleep we may live with [Jesus]." This means there is no situation where you are beyond the grasp of a loving, saving, and redeeming God. There is nothing you can do, nothing about who you are, that cuts off your relationship with God. Even if you are dead, St. Paul tells us,

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481

(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

you are still held in the embrace of a loving God. In other words, you are free. You are free from your anxiety about trying to make yourself worthy of the love of others and the grace of God.

This kind of freedom is different from the way we usually talk about freedom in our American context. When think of freedom, we tend to think of being able to do what you want. Our Constitution guarantees freedom of speech. You can criticize the government without fear of retaliation. We have free markets. If you like the falafel from the Israeli places in Fair Lawn better than the Palestinian falafel place in Paterson or vice-versa, that's up to you. We have freedom of travel. If you want to travel to a different state, you're free to do that. Freedom means not being constrained or coerced.

But if that's the only way you think about freedom, freedom as independence from things outside of you, there are some obvious problems. It's easy to think that being free means you don't have to care about anything or anyone else. But there's another side to freedom, too. And that's what St. Paul wants the Thessalonians and us to know.

For the past few weeks, I've been participating in a continuing education study with our synod's companion church in Namibia on an essay by Luther called "The Freedom of a Christian." "The Freedom of a Christian" was written in 1520, and it's a pretty good summary of Lutheran theology. The famous quote in it is that "a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." In other words, freedom has two meanings. We are freed *from* and freed *for*. We're freed *from* death and freed *for* life. We're freed *from* seeking to prove our worth and freed *for* serving our neighbors. We're freed *from* the narratives that constrain us and freed *for* finding a new identity in Christ. The freedom we receive in Christ isn't just permission to let the world go to hell since you're going to go to a cocktail party in the sky someday no matter what happens. It's freedom for serving others without concern for what we get out of it.

St. Paul even makes this explicit at the end. Freedom has a direction to it. If you're freed from having to worry about whether you're worthy of love, what should you do? What are you going to fill your time with? Paul's answer? "Encourage one another and build up each other." Take some of that nervous energy, take some of that time, and invest it in building up the body of Christ around you. You are freed *from* justifying yourself. You are freed *for* serving others.

See, those financial planning ads are kind of weird sometimes. But they actually get this right. That freedom changes how we live today. That when we feel a sense of trust and security in the future, it doesn't just give us something nice to look forward to. It actually changes how we live and what we consider to be possible. In most of those ads this means buying a luxury condo. (Not exactly what St. Paul had in mind.) But it's the same dynamic. What would you do in your life if you were freed from trying to prove your worth to God and other people? If we're freed from trying to make ourselves deserving of love, we can focus on loving others the way God loves us.

And I would guess that if we had that experience of freedom, most of us wouldn't just sit on our hands and watch the world burn. We'd give things a shot. We'd try to make a difference. We'd get involved with the world and our neighbors. We would be, well, free.

Because "whether you are awake or whether you are asleep," Paul tells us, we are loved, held, and cared for by God. There's nothing you can do to weaken that bond, and there is no amount of worrying you can do to strengthen it. The only death you have to fear is behind you and the only life you have to make has already been given to you. You're freed in Christ. So what do you want to do now?

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH
777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG