

Old Town Road



In a recent special, stand up comedian John Mulaney, who is a little younger

than me but way more successful than I will ever hope to be, summarizes a point in life I feel like I have reached perfectly. He says, “Every new song is about how ‘Tonight is the night’ and how ‘We only have tonight.’ That is such 19-year-old nonsense. I want to write songs for people in their thirties called ‘Tonight’s No Good, How About Wednesday? Oh, You’re in Dallas on Wednesday? Okay. Well, Let’s Just Not See Each Other for Eight Months And It Doesn’t Matter at All.’ Even going through this message series, I looked at the music I selected from what was suggested and noticed a trend. The oldest song would have definitely been “Come Thou Fount;” the newest song would have been Oceans from 2013. So I was looking at this last message, and asked myself, “What’s missing?” And it became obvious: the front-runner for the summer anthem for summer 2019.

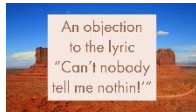


So, our song today is the hit “Old Town Road” from Lil Nas X featuring Billy

Ray Cyrus, a nineteen year old rapper who exploded onto the music scene with this song, characterized as a “country trap” (which by the way is not my word; it’s the actual word for the genre this song falls into). As we heard, the tune melds country and hip-hop, creating “country trap,” a sound that has the music industry and fans alike arguing what, exactly, qualifies as “country.” The track even made it to Billboard's "Hot Country Songs" list, but a week later, Billboard removed it from the country chart and has since defended their choice. To beef up its “country” credibility, Billy Ray Cyrus approached Lil Nas X about adding his voice to the track

And the basic message of the song is wrapped up in its chorus and most repeated phrase: “Can’t nobody tell me nothin.” In interviews about the song Lil Nas X has revealed that the inspiration for the song came from his recent decision to drop out of college and how his parents disapproved. In an interview with Time magazine, X said, “‘Old Town Road’ came after a period of feeling like I was out of options. I was living with my sister. She was pretty much fed up with me being there. That’s where the chorus lyric came from. It was me saying, ‘I want to leave

everything behind...' The 'can't nobody tell me nothing' part is referring to my parents: wanting me to go back to school, not thinking it's that likely for [me] to make it." X also explained this period of life that motivated the writing of this song to The New York Times. "I felt like a loner cowboy," he said. "I wanted to take my horse to the Old Town Road and run away. The horse is like a car. The Old Town Road, it's like a path to success."

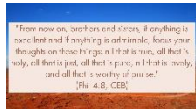


I can get behind that, I guess. But maybe my objection to the lyric "can't nobody

tell me nothin'" has less to do with grammar (because this makes me feel

physical pain to say) or age. Perhaps my problem is more theological because I know exactly who can tell me something and I know that I should listen. Paul the Apostle reminds the church in Philippi of this exact fact in our scripture this morning. All through the letter to the Philippians, Paul has been praising the Philippians for their faithfulness while challenging them to be united in Christ. In chapter two, Paul quotes what is probably an ancient hymn of the church that we now call the Christ Hymn: "Have the same mind in you that was in Jesus: who was in the form of God but forsook it so that he could take on our human form and become obedient to the point of death even death on the cross." Basically, Paul is telling the church to allow Jesus to speak into their lives and affect how they see the world around them, how they treat each other, and how they view their relationship with God.

Now at the end of the letter, Paul returns to the theme inviting the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord (and again I say rejoice!). Then he says to make prayers and supplications to the Lord known in prayer and to not be anxious about anything because God is near.

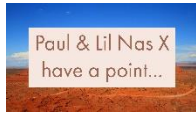


Then he invites the church to think about very specific things: anything is

excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all

that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. And this is important because the human mind always sets itself on something; it is always active. And the human brain also forms patterns and connections. We can think things into existence that we'll just insist are true even though they are figments of our imagination. If

we think about something for long enough it will become all we can think of, which starts to highlight the problem.



The problem that we face this morning is that Paul the Apostle and Lil Nas X

have a point. Paul knows that the Philippians need the reminder. He knew the church better than almost anyone else, since he planted the church and maintained his relationship with the church. He knows from the relationship he has with a man named Epaphroditus, whom we meet in the second half of Philippians 2, who had been used and abused by the church and sent to Paul probably just to get rid of him for a while. He knew that they needed to be reminded that Jesus should be their guidepost for their thoughts and actions. They needed to be reminded that indeed, yes, somebody can tell them something.

But things haven't changed much, my friends. There's a reason that Lil Nas X's song has caught on the way that it has. It's catchy, yes; it's a little bit of a shot to the establishment with such an aggressive crossover. But it's even bigger than that. Can we be honest for a second, church? It can feel GOOD to say, "Forget it. We're going to go down to the Old Town Road and get out of here and can't nobody tell me nothing." We all have a little bit of that, "Can't nobody tell me nothin'" vibe. We. All. Have. It. No one is immune to it. I remember when I was playing high school football, my senior year we played a stack defense where the linemen and the linebackers would play a tap game to decide who was going where. Basically, the linebacker would walk up, tap my hip, and I'd know what was going on. So, my linebacker said, "I'll tap you the direction that I want you to go." And I said, "No way; you don't tell me where to go. You tell me where you're going, and I'll go the other way." Can't. nobody. tell. Me. Nothing. (I have many more examples of this in my life.) But what comes to mind when you hear that? When has been a time when you were insistent that you needed to do things your own way?



And the question becomes for you and me this morning this: who has the right

to speak into our lives? Is it the Lil Nas X's of the world? What shapes our values? What forms our worldview? How do we define and who ultimately defines what is true,

lovely, honorable, just, kind, and the other things that Paul says in our scripture for today? Is it our faith and our walk with Christ? Is it our denominational identity? Is it our brothers and sisters in Christ? Is it our political affiliations or regional location? Or do we just rely upon ourselves? Do we take our horse down to Old Town Road and ride 'til we can't no more and stick our fingers in our ears and say, "Can't nobody tell us nothin'?"

Or will we pursue the alternative and allow Christ to define our lives? Can we allow Jesus to speak into our lives and really tell us something? As the son of God and the son of man, he is the one who should be able to speak into our lives. He's the one that Paul tells for us to turn to when we feel anxious or have needs. He's the one in whom we should rejoice. He's the one whom we should follow with every ounce of our being and nothing else. Amen.