

**FREEDOM (Gal. 5:1, 13-25)**  
Ethel Hornbeck  
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Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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*Christ has set us free to live a free life—not an excuse to do whatever you want and destroy your freedom but to use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows.*

*Everything we know about God’s Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That’s an act of true freedom.*

*Live freely, animated and motivated by God’s Spirit. Then you won’t feed the compulsions of selfishness. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These two ways of life are antithetical*

*Here’s the kind of life that develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: loveless sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community.*

*When we live God’s way, we receive gifts like fruit appears in an orchard—affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity, a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people.*

*Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives. (Galatians 5, select passages, adapted from The Message)*

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Freedom: we Americans just love our freedom. It is, after all, at the center of our national experience--freedom from foreign rule, freedom from the countless forms of oppression that brought our ancestors to these shores. Freedom is at the core of our national identity. Just listen to this: “**We** hold these Truths to be self evident, that all **Men** are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, **Liberty** and the Pursuit of Happiness”—these familiar words of course introduce our nation’s founding document, The Declaration of Independence, whose birthday we will celebrate in just a week.

This is freedom’s season, and I know this because down where I live, the drunken parties have already begun, and the nightly firework displays that shatter the evening’s peace, every night, every summer, for sometimes a month or so—I know *this* because my neurotic Australian Shepherd spends most of freedom’s season wedged under one piece of furniture or another. But too bad about that, it’s a free country, after all; ever notice how often these noble words are used to justify one kind of selfishness or another?

We love our freedom so much that we work zealously to protect the rights of others to behave selfishly, even hatefully...people like Fred Phelps, self styled ‘pastor’ (and former lawyer) who for decades now has been haunting funerals with his homophobic circus. He first gained national attention in 1998 at the funeral of Matthew Shepherd, the young man brutally murdered because of his sexual orientation. Phelps picketed this tragic event with his now

signature hate-full and blasphemous “God hates fags” placards. More recently, Phelps has moved on to the funerals of service men...? In 2006, he showed up at the funeral of Matthew Snyder, a marine killed in Iraq; as Snyder’s family and friends gathered to mourn their devastating loss, Phelps and his family stood just a few feet away chanting “God hates you, you are in hell.” Sued by the Snyders, Phelps countersued and won, and the victim’s family has been ordered to pay him some \$16,000 in legal fees.

At times it seems to me that we are so preoccupied with freedom as *thing* to be protected and possessed, as an *ideal*, that it may just become an idol. And yet, freedom continues to unfold among us, often in spite of us. After all, when our founding *fathers* said all men are created equal, they meant **men**; white men; in fact, white men of a certain social status. But freedom, it turns out, is way bigger than their 18<sup>th</sup> century imaginations, and God willing, its way bigger than ours.

Today, the freedom to marry, freedom for all, is expanding as we speak, slowly and fitfully, but steadily. Earlier this year, the District of Columbia joined Connecticut, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts and Iowa, along with a host of other countries in the world, in allowing same-sex couples to marry. Some of you may not approve, many of you are delighted, but the fact remains, its coming; how will we as a people respond? The PCUSA General Assembly, the governing body of the Presbyterian church, will wrestle this very question when they gather next week: how will the church deal with covenanted same gender partnerships? Stay tuned.

Still, individual liberties, as important as they are for human flourishing do not define the human capacity for freedom. In the movie *Invictus*, which offers a small but memorable glimpse of the larger story of how Nelson Mandela held an entire people together, when the oppressed—brutally, violently oppressed black majority in South Africa—gained political freedom. In the film, Mandela tries to explain how *he* could emerge from 27 years of captivity with such a powerful vision of unity, and heart for reconciliation and peace; quite simply, he says, he practiced forgiveness for his captors, a kind of forgiveness that overcomes fear, and leaves in its place the power to love, a power greater than any other on the planet. It’s a vision he put into action on a national scale, and the nonviolent transformation of South Africa remains one of the great miracles of Spirit in human history.

The Apostle Paul in his letters talks about freedom almost as much as an American patriot on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, but in a context entirely different from our own. Paul’s first century imagination could never have conceived of a world without slavery, much less *with* many of the other freedoms that we hold so dear. Paul’s specific concern in Galatians seems to be a kind of sectarian fundamentalism, one that emphasized external religious observance in order to define who was in and who was out. Our lectionary selection sanitizes the fullness of Paul’s anger about this, by omitting his declaration that all those reactionary circumscizers should just go castrate themselves. (I am not kidding, verse 12.) And while we are no longer arguing about circumcision, the struggle against the oppression of religious fundamentalism and the terrible damage it can do, is alive and well all around us, and sometimes within us too. Still, as Paul promises in his second letter to the Corinthians (3:17) “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

He’s is not talking about civil rights, but rather describing an entire *way of life and being* empowered by the Spirit of Love, a *way* as essential and elusive for us today as it was for those first century Galatians. True freedom is more about interdependence than independence—as Mandela once said, “To be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” True freedom has nothing to do with license, my

right to do whatever I want, and everything to do with a capacity for self giving love. “Serve one another in love,” writes Paul, “that’s how freedom grows.”

He doesn’t say much, at least in this letter, about how we get there, but he does provide an iconic description of what it looks like when we do...and don’t. We are not free, Paul says, when we live out of (to offer just a few of the more familiar NRSV words) licentiousness, idolatry, strife, jealousy, anger, drunkenness, envy....but freedom is ours whenever we can claim and embody the gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. And as Paul unwittingly demonstrates—“you’ all go castrate yourselves now”—we are all always a mix of the Spirit and the world. The invitation is to notice, and to choose. Choose life. Choose love. In each and every circumstance, each and every moment. And when you fail, notice that too, forgive yourself as gently as you would forgive another, and choose life once again.

That freedom to choose is at the heart of *human* identity; God created each and every human person with the capacity for love and the freedom to choose it or not. Its a freedom way bigger individual liberty and way more powerful than all the forms of slavery we humans can devise. Indeed in lives like Mandela, Ghandi, King, Jesus and countless others—we see that power grow right in the midst of oppression.

So how do we get there? In Paul’s more cheerful letter to the Phillippians, he offers this prescription: rejoice; trust that the Spirit is with you; pray in all things; in all things give thanks. So, this season, as we celebrate our *freedom from* all kinds of oppression, let us also rejoice in the *freedom for* love offered us, and all people, in the Spirit of Christ. Let us cultivate trust, as we discover and deepen our relationship with and surrender to that Spirit of Love. While we’re at it, let’s be on the lookout for those unfreedoms in our lives, all the things that bind us, that keep our hearts wedged under the furniture and hamper our relationship with the Spirit and each other. And lets pray. Pray for release. Pray for freedom. Pray for and with Love. Pray for all those who would oppress you. Pray, if you can, for Fred Phelps, for surely hatred is the unkindest unfreedom of all, and if you can’t do that, pray that one day you might be free enough to do so. And give thanks, rejoicing and trusting, that one day, indeed, all will be free at last.