

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“The Fruits of Freedom”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 13—June 30, 2019

Lessons: 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Galatians 5:1, 13-25

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Some years ago, Robert Coles wrote in *The New Yorker* magazine about an old Spanish couple, each in their eighties, living on their simple farm in New Mexico.¹ He quotes her: “Domingo and I have been having this same breakfast for over fifty years...I used to serve the children eggs in the morning, but Domingo and I have stayed with hot bread and coffee. My fingers would die if they didn’t have the dough to work over. I will never give up my old oven for a new one. It has been here forty years and is an old friend. I would stop baking bread if she gave out. My sons once offered to buy me an electric range--they called it--and I broke down. It was a terrible thing to do. The boys felt bad...Later, my husband said they all agreed I was in the right: the stove has been so good to us, and there is nothing wrong--the bread is as tasty as ever, I believe. It is a sickness, you know--being always dissatisfied with what you have, and eager for a change.”

Robert Coles continues: “She stops there and looks lovingly around the room. She says she is attached to every piece of furniture. Her husband made it all: a round table, eight chairs, with four more in their bedroom, the beds there, the bureau there. She begins to tell how good Domingo is at carving wood. “That is what I would like to say about Domingo: he plants, builds, and harvests; he tries to keep us alive and comfortable with his hands. We sit on what he has made, eat what he has grown, sleep on what he has put together. We have never had a spring on our bed, but, I have to admit, we bought our mattress. Buying--that is the sickness. I have gone to the city and watched people. They are hungry, but nothing satisfies their hunger. They come to the stores like flies to flypaper: they are caught. I often wonder who is better off. The fly dies. The people have to pay to get out of the store, but soon they are back again, the same look in their eyes. I don’t ask people to live on farms and make chairs and tables, but when I see them buying things that they do not need, or even want--except to make a purchase, to get something--then I say there is a sickness...I watch my son Domingo and his son Domingo. They both have plans: next year, we buy this; the year after, that. Such plans are sad to hear. I try to tell them, but they do not listen. Those are the moments when I feel old--the only time I do. I turn to the priest. He says I am sinning--my pride makes me think I can disagree with the way the whole country works. I reply, “No, Father, just what I hear my son and grandson saying.” Hasn’t a mother got the right to tell her own flesh and blood that they are becoming slaves--that is it, slaves of habits and desires that have nothing to do with living a good life.” For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

More than two hundred years ago, our forbears risked life and limb to begin an adventure in democracy, creating what are surely among the most inspired documents ever written: a Constitution and Bill of Rights that establish religious freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and of assembly and a Declaration of Independence celebrating the God-given rights of all people to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. They are rights given within the context of community, so that the pursuit of happiness is not a selfish pursuit, but one that seeks the well-being of everyone, of the whole community. We live in a land graced with founding documents that show us clearly how God would have us live.

¹ Robert Coles, Profiles, “Una Anciana,” *The New Yorker*, November 5, 1973, p. 54.

And yet, like the Galatians to whom Paul wrote, like people ever since, we know and celebrate freedom, a freedom that comes from God, and still we submit ourselves to new forms of slavery. Part of our sickness is related to our need to have stuff, our insatiable thirst for more and more things and our continuing failure to recognize that God already gives us all we need. Probably this has always been present to some degree, but it seems especially alive today. Like the children of the New Mexican couple, we know about being “slaves of habits and desires that have nothing to do with living a good life.”

If we would be the people and the nation God has called us to be, we would use who we are and what we have to build Life and Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness for all of God’s children—children here and children far away. That is the way to real freedom. Paul proclaims that real freedom does not lead to idolatry, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy and yet we see an awful lot of those characteristics in the public square today. In contrast to what we know too well, Paul suggests that real freedom celebrates the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Can you imagine what might happen to us as a people, in the church and as a nation if we all believed in these? Dream of what we would look like if we used our freedom, not as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but rather through love became servants or slaves to one another.

Part of our problem may be a continuing theology of scarcity. When we were in Connecticut, I served as one of three co-pastors of the church in Hartford and one of the first things we did was to say that we would practice a theology of abundance. We believed that God had already given us everything we need to be the church in that time and place. Amazing things began to happen. A small struggling church that had focused on what they lacked started standing taller. People began wandering in. The spirit was alive. They began practicing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Samuel Wells, who is the Vicar of St. Martin in the Fields in London, suggests that we might practice a different kind of politics in our world²: “The vocation of the church,” he writes, “is to celebrate the politics of love...”

“Most people think of politics as a regrettable but necessary business. Necessary, because we live in a world of scarce resources, there are many of us, and our needs, interests and desires conflict. We need agreements as to the fair distribution of these limited goods, and an established authority to ensure the policing of those agreements. It is regrettable, because in the fight over these scarce resources, each of us fears being revealed as greedy, insecure, envious and deceitful.

“Now imagine a different kind of politics. First, consider the things that really matter in this world. St. Paul lists them: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There is no need for an unseemly scrap over the distribution of these things, because they are not in short supply. Yet I can have enormous sums of money, as many clothes, houses, cars and university degrees as I like, but if I don’t have the things St. Paul is talking about, the other things are no good to me. And if I have love, joy, peace and the like, it doesn’t matter how much I have of the other things. St. Paul’s world still involves politics—but politics of a different kind. Instead of carving up a limited cake, politics becomes the shared discernment of the best use of God’s gifts. It is no longer a zero-sum game. My good no longer requires your loss, because the things we want are things that everyone can have.”

Today, as we do on fifth Sundays, we will celebrate a service of wholeness and healing. I pray that we might become the starting point of a whole new way of being in our community and country. As the loving and caring people you are, you can show the world the power of love, joy, peace, patience,

² Samuel Wells, *More Than Enough: Galatians 5:1, 13-25* in *The Christian Century*, Vol 121, No. 12, June 15, 2004. © 2004

kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There is more than enough of these to go around for everyone. Dream with me of how we all might be different if we truly believed in the Spirit's power to bring these about. How might we practice a whole new kind of politics, the politics of love?

So finally, hear again Paul's words to the church, this time in Gene Peterson's translation³: "Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you...Use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows. For everything we know about God's word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself." By the grace of God and the power of the Spirit, we can live that way.

Let us pray: O God, who has taught us to pray for the coming of your kingdom on this earth, give us the grace to build our communities after the fashion of your kingdom, to set no boundaries about them which you would not set, to quiet the tumult and strife within them by brotherly and sisterly love, and to work the more diligently for concord within them because our final hope is in the city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God. Through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. NAV Press © 2002