

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010  
U.S. Independence Day

### **The Free and the Humble**

2 Kings 5:1-14; Galatians 6:7-16

I took the kids to see the Pirates play the Phillies last night.  
We got to see a lot of great baseball, played mostly by the Phillies,  
although our guys managed a couple of home runs.

The game began with a very moving salute and moment of silence  
for soldiers from Western PA who have recently lost their lives in  
Iraq and Afghanistan,  
including a long standing ovation for one of their fellow soldiers  
who made it out of the same attack alive.

The National Anthem ended with a fly-over of 4 military jets.  
It was a powerful moment,  
and for me a reminder of the military honors, including a 21 gun salute,  
recently given for our former custodian, Dave Jenkins,  
at his funeral.

On this Fourth of July,  
we celebrate all the great blessings that have come to us in America  
because of the winning of our Independence as a nation;  
and we celebrate the courage and strength  
of all who have fought to win and to preserve our Independence.

We celebrate that we are, in the famous last line of our National Anthem,  
“the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

The first place I remember hearing the National Anthem sung as child  
was at an Atlanta Braves baseball games.

In my early years as a child I assumed this was the  
Atlanta Braves' National Anthem,  
“...the land of the free, and the home of the Braves!”

After all, according to Turner Broadcasting, the Braves were “America’s Team.”  
Remember that?

One day when I was 6 or 7, I was playing at home,  
pretending to be a Revolutionary War soldier,  
and I was singing the National Anthem as I marched into battle.

So I told my mom I was pretending that the song meant  
“brave soldiers” instead of Braves' baseball.

She then explained to me that the song *does indeed*  
refer to brave men and women  
who put their lives on the line to secure our freedom as a nation.

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Last week and this week,  
our scripture readings speak of freedom, both directly and indirectly.

When the Bible talks about freedom  
there are several different levels of meaning in play.

Certainly in the Exodus

Moses was leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt  
into the political freedom of the promised land.

But Jesus means something else, something broader and deeper,  
when he says,

*You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*

And Paul has yet a different angle when he says

*For freedom Christ has set us free.*

*Stand firm, therefore,*

*and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery,*

by which he means slavery to sin.

But the thing about freedom in the Bible

is that the freedom Christ offers is not so much achieved  
as it is received.

We receive the freedom Christ offers

less by bravery,

and more by humility...

...although we may find in the end

that it takes a great deal of bravery,

a great deal of courage,

to be humble.

Certainly, the humility Christ took on for us by going to the cross,  
took as much bravery as any human can muster.

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Now consider Naaman, the great commander of the army of the King of Aram,  
who learns a little something about both humility and freedom.

Naaman has achieved great victories for Aram.

But Naaman, says the text, *though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.*

And once again we are given an unlikely hero.

Who do you think comes to Naaman's rescue?

If you've been paying attention to the sermons this summer

you will have noticed a recurring theme in the scripture readings.

We have had a series of nameless women walk onto the stage and steal the show.

Once again,  
like the nameless widow who takes feeds of Elijah,  
and the nameless woman who anoints Jesus,  
here we have a nameless girl from the land of Israel,  
taken captive by the armies of Aram.

This servant girl says to Naaman's wife,  
*If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria!  
He would cure him of his leprosy.*

So, hearing this, Naaman sets out for the city of Samaria in Israel,  
but he does not go to the prophet, as his servant-girl suggests  
(what could she know, right?).

Naaman is a great man, and great men deal with kings.

So Naaman secures a letter of introduction from the King of Aram.  
Then he assembles wagonloads of cash and fine clothes,  
horses and chariots,  
and he goes with his letter to the *King* of Israel,  
not the *Prophet* of Israel.

He goes where he thinks the power is,  
he goes to the one who he thinks will have the power to set him free.

At least the King of Israel has it straight, or at least half-straight.  
*Am I God, he asks,  
to give death or life, that this man sends word to me  
to cure a man of his leprosy?  
Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."*

You see, we know that Naaman just wants to be set free of his disease.  
But when he goes in all his grandeur to the king,  
the very power and glory he thinks will gain his freedom,  
are proven useless, and only frustrates his hopes.

So Naaman is a little miffed when he is sent away from the royal palace,  
and to the humble house of Elisha the prophet.  
And he is even more incensed when he hears what Elisha wants him to do.  
Wash in the Jordan river? The dirty, Israelite river?  
Naaman is fit to be tied.

Surely for a great man such as I,  
this prophet of Israel would perform a respectable miracle.  
*I thought that for me he would surely come out,  
and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God,  
and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!*  
And this brave man turns and goes away in a rage.

But once again,

as happens so often in God's mischievous ways,  
it is a servant, a nameless servant, who comes to the great military leader,  
and suggests that perhaps he's a little wrapped up in the wrong things:

*Um, sir? Excuse me, sir.*

*If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult,  
would you not have done it?*

*How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?"*

Translation: this situation doesn't call for bravery;  
only the simple acceptance of a gift.

Translation: learning to be humble before God and others  
is the only path to freedom.

We might even go so far as to say,  
humility before God is the truest form of bravery.  
To put aside every other human security and protection,  
and bow before God.

It takes courage to be humble  
in a world that puts its trust in princes and their power,  
be they princes of the government,  
princes of the military,  
princes of business and finance,  
princes of sport,  
or princes of entertainment.

*Put not your trust in princes, says the Psalmist,  
in mortals, in whom there is no help.  
When their breath departs, they return to the earth;  
on that very day their plans perish.*

*Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the Lord their God,  
who made heaven and earth,*

*The Lord sets the prisoners free;  
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.  
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;  
the Lord loves the righteous.  
The Lord watches over the strangers;  
he upholds the orphan and the widow,  
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

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The Apostle Paul writes to the Galatians, saying

*For freedom Christ has set us free.*

*Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*

*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;*

*only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,  
but through love become slaves to one another.*

That was last week's reading.

This week Paul continues, saying

*For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.*

*All must test their own work;*

*then that work, rather than their neighbor's work,  
will become a cause for pride.*

To be free, in Christ,

is to be free from a sense of self-importance.

To be free, in Christ,

is to be free of from a spirit of self-indulgence.

To be free, in Christ,

is to be free to give of yourself, in appropriate ways,  
for the sake of others.

As I think about the freedom of humility

my mind keeps returning to Dave Jenkins,  
who served in Vietnam.

Dave's friend from Vietnam, Bob,

told a brief story at Dave's committal service.

It was the perfect picture of Dave's character, his humble service.

His battalion was under attack, and one of their fellow soldier's was suddenly on fire.

Dave, at risk of his own life, grabbed his comrade, dragged him to a mud hole  
and threw him in to extinguish the fire.

Bob broke down telling this story. He wept out the words, "He saved his life."

This is such a different picture than that of Naaman the General.

It was not an act of self-importance, but of self-sacrifice,  
of risking the self for the sake of another,  
a sacrifice born of love.

And this sort of humble, self-giving character was known by all of Dave's friends  
throughout his life.

A guy who would be willing to lay down his life for a friend.

A guy who *does not use his freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,  
but through love becomes a slave to others.*

As always in the gospel, love is the final measure of all things.

Are you free to love?

Are you free to act in the best interest of another

without needing to defend your own skin,  
or your own stuff, or your own status?

This is true humility before God and others.  
To be humble in this way,  
is to know the truth  
that will set us all free.