

“Freedom, Part 2”

Galatians 5:1, Amos 5:24 & 9:7, & 1 Corinthians 12:25-27

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PRAYER FOR UNDERSTANDING

Ever present Lord, we thank you for your word, which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Holy Spirit open our eyes to the signs of your presence, open our ears to your voice and open our minds to your wisdom. Amen.

The Apostle Paul wrote: **Galatians 5:1 NRSV** “**For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.**”

All people are to be free and united by God’s grace. This is illustrated in a metaphor, each person is a part of one body, all connected, all free to do their unique part, all related. The Apostle Paul concludes: **1 Corinthians 12:25-27** “**all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad. All of you together are Christ’s body, and each of you is a part of it.**” Martin Luther King Junior wrote: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

We are called to lovingly provide freedom for everyone. If anyone is not free, then all of us suffer a lack of freedom. Amos declares: **Amos 5:24 MSG and NRSV** “**God wants justice—oceans of it. God wants fairness—rivers of it. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.**”

On July 2, we explored freedom part one. God gives us free will to choose from a vast array of good choices. Gratitude is a marvelous way to celebrate freedom and remain free. Historically, God’s name was not said, or written, to keep God’s name free of any restrictions, free from the claims of any religion or group.

Over time, the Israelites described God in ever narrowing terms and came to believe that God’s love was limited to just themselves. Walter Brueggeman is a renowned biblical scholar, historian, expert on ancient religious texts and fluent in Old Testament Hebrew. This is a direct quote from an article Walter wrote on March 19th of this year: “Ancient Israel came to believe that it was God’s chosen people who had a monopoly on God’s love and God’s goodness. In the eighth century the prophet Amos took as his work to help his contemporaries in Israel to see that Israel in its chosenness had no monopoly on God’s goodness.” Amos proclaims: **Amos 9:7** “**Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the lord. Did I not bring Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?**” Walter writes: “Israel remembered its emancipation from slavery in Egypt under Pharaoh and imagined that God’s Exodus deliverance of Israel was a singular act without parallel in the history of the world. But Amos, to the contrary, insisted otherwise. Amos asks of Israel two rhetorical questions. The first question requires a “yes” from Israel. Yes, Israel is like the Ethiopians. That must have been a surprise and a shock to Israel, to hear itself compared to Ethiopia, a nation of “people of color.” Amos challenges the exclusionary self-understanding of Israel. In his second rhetorical question Amos probes the meaning of the Exodus deliverance with the verb, “bring up from,” that is, “set free from.” Yes, God did bring up Israel from Egypt; without a doubt! Everyone knows that. But then two other claims: Yes, YHWH did bring up the Philistines from Caphtor. Yes, YHWH did bring up the Arameans (Syrians) from Kir. Amos names two foreign peoples that were at different times Israel’s most threatening enemies, the Philistines and later the Syrians. Amos dares to say that God enacts “Exoduses” for Israel’s enemies. Amos affirms that God’ emancipatory power extends to other peoples who are not commonly taken to be “chosen.” Amos debunks Israel’s claim to the exclusionary love and justice of God and insists that in universal scope YHWH’s emancipatory reach extends everywhere, at many times, and in many places, bringing emancipation for those not yet liberated. Indeed, Amos suggests that the wide sweep of history under YHWH is a sequence of Exoduses, so that there is nothing exclusionary about Israel’s emancipatory memory or claim. Thus, we may consider an inventory of the chosen and the unchosen whom God emancipates: a) Israel has no doubt it was “the chosen people” and now Amos says, to the contrary, even Israel’s enemies are subject to YHWH’s emancipatory intention.” Walter continues: “b) Some white people, in our modern world, take themselves to be God’s chosen people. They consider white European culture as “the most advanced” with its colonial exploitation. And now Amos, to the contrary, dares to say that “people of color” (represented by the Ethiopians) are also subject to God’s emancipatory love. God’s love is not exclusively for white people, even though Europeans who came to America took their whiteness as a privileged status and had few qualms about imitating Pharaoh in enslaving people of color. c) For much too long a time some have viewed males as God’s chosen people. They have been given power which has been used to shape history and accumulate wealth. They are the ones for whom the verbs, “exploit, conquer, occupy, possess” most readily apply. And then the prophetic tradition, extended and enacted through the testimony and

ministry of Jesus, showed that God's emancipatory love reached effectively toward females. Thus, Mary Magdalene was among the earliest disciples of Jesus. And Paul can declare that in Christ there is neither "male nor female." The gender revolution continues as women are increasingly welcomed into the public life of the world, and even, belatedly, into the ministry of the church. d) Straight persons have often been viewed as the chosen of God who have been able to define social power and social acceptability. Anyone who "deviated" from the straight world has been excluded from social acceptance, has been deemed a danger and a threat to social wellbeing, and thus subject to harsh treatment. And now, belatedly, we are able to see that the reach of God's emancipatory love extends beyond readily approved straight people to include LGBTQ persons who have been much too long held in the bondage of social censorship and social disapproval. The passion of God's emancipatory embrace goes well beyond straight people! We can see, historically, that these several emancipatory concerns have come to fruition very slowly and to some extent in sequence: First, Gentiles beyond chosen Israel; Then, people of color beyond whites; Later, females beyond males, and very belatedly LGBTQ persons beyond straight. But it has happened and continues to happen in all of these traditions! God's truth is marching on! We are discerning that God's love, justice, freedom, mercy, and faithfulness cannot be contained in our self-imagined categories of chosenness and privilege. Our several orthodoxies of nationalism, racism, sexism, and gender exclusion all have imagined a God who could be safely kept in our preferred boundaries. But the God of the covenant who is the God the Gospel will not be so contained. Indeed, it is evident that God's peculiar attentiveness is especially drawn toward those who are regularly denied legitimacy in our social arrangements. We can knowingly speak of "God's preferential option" not only for the poor but toward all those who are otherwise discounted. It seems clear enough that all such efforts to box in the God of freedom are grounded in fear. We imagine that the others—the ones unlike us—are a threat, and so we fashion exclusionary practices and rules. It turns out, however, that such fear is not the last word. Faith, hope and love are stronger than fear and will prevail. And so the other need not be a threat but can be welcomed as a neighbor. Because the reach of emancipation toward LGBTQ persons is the latest such move toward liberation, we may pay special attention to the way in which it sounds through the lines of Amos: Are you not like the LGBTQ persons to me, O straights? Yes! Did I not bring up straight people to be emancipated agents in the world? Yes! And did I not bring up LGBTQ persons to first class citizenship in the world? Yes! And did I not bring up LGBTQ persons to be free for a life of joy and freedom and wellbeing in the world? Yes! Like the earlier questions posed by Amos, these world-shattering questions of Amos require a vigorous "yes" in response. It is a "yes" of gospel emancipation. It is a "yes" of limitless love. It is a "yes" of wellbeing that counters all our fearful exclusions. Amos could not have been popular among the "chosen" for such utterance. That, however, is not much against his bold truth-telling. The good news summons us to a vigorous, unafraid "yes" toward all those whom the Pharaohs of the world continue to keep in bondage. As the apostle Paul concludes: **"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."** End Quote from Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman.

In the sermon, *Freedom, Part*, we explored sins that have been committed by Christians who believed they knew all the answers, so they took freedoms away from others by spreading false news to create fear. They portrayed others as deserving of blame and contempt, turning fear into hate, which was used to ban books, to limit teachings, to pass laws that take away rights destroying freedom, to use courts to control people, to judge people, falsely claiming it as God's will. This allowed them to promote their way as superior, that others were not God's beloved, not chosen, that others were a little less than human. All this eroded the freedom of certain groups which led to the justification of all sorts of atrocities against them. We explored the guidance of the 1934 Theological Declaration of Barmen which states: "The church's commission, upon which its freedom is founded, consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people."

God is continually setting all people free. Jesus set everyone free, the blind, lame, deaf, persons with leprosy, depressed, possessed, women, children, soldiers, foreigners. Jesus set free everyone that was outcast, everyone that was judged an "other", everyone who's identity was deemed by some to be less desirable. Jesus set free people from other religions and people with no religion. Jesus is setting everyone free and restoring their status as an equal beloved, chosen, child of God. Jesus set the judgmental religious leaders free. It seems that the narrow-minded, restrictive religious leaders were the hardest to set free based on Jesus extensive debates with them. They thought they were doing God's will, that they knew God's law, that they were in the right and others wrong. They were binary thinkers either or, good better or best, that there was only right and wrong instead of infinite shades of grey. Their desire to control others made them anxious, causing them to blame others, to fear and to hate. Over time, they declared certain people unclean, excluded them from community and banished them from worship. And Jesus did not give up on any of these judgmental people, for all are chosen. Jesus challenged their judgements and set them free to enjoy community as an equal with those they once looked down upon. For one to remain free, they need to always

advocate for the freedom of all people, to join God in being for the other, to serve until all are free enabling everyone to be completely free.

This sermon was prayerfully formed after reflection on scripture, church confessions, and a biblical scholar and it is mere words. You are free to think and believe what you want. An effective sermon gets one wrestling with the Holy Spirit and scripture, leaves one with more questions than answers and fuels a passion to freely love everyone, love self, love the cosmos and love God.

I am hoping we are living Spacious Christianity that here you will meet people at many different places theologically, spiritually, and politically. I hope our diversity is bringing us together and our conversations are taking us all deeper in our understanding of God. We do not ask anyone to sign creeds, or statements of belief, or agree with our denomination's statements, or any sermon. We hope each person will wrestle with God to grow in wisdom and love. We are free to accept God's grace. Free to ask God to change us so we can live into a future that is more than we can ask or imagine, living lives of hope, healing and purpose. I hope we are an evolving, equality-seeking, fiercely caring community practicing Spacious Christianity. Questions and doubts are welcome. We celebrate our differences and see them as strengths. We journey with curiosity about God's story and our place in it. We yearn and work for the flourishing of all Creation. I hope we are living the spacious and radical love of Jesus so that all might flourish.

Our denomination declares: People of deep faith and honest intelligence can and do differ on how they understand Scripture and hear the vibrant voice of the Holy Spirit on a variety of issues. Decisions made by the denomination have sought to find ways to make space for members of the Presbyterian Church USA together to live out those differing views with integrity.

All were free and equal in God's initial good creation. As soon as sin entered the world, suddenly women were oppressed, next a farmer viewed his sibling gatherer as inferior and vice a versa, soon people thought their worship of God was superior. Freedom unraveled, tribes formed, divisions hardened, people separated, walls built, fear spread, followed by hate. God has always created every person with a unique identity, every person created on a different spot on the gender spectrum, people with a variety of sexual orientations.

There are numerous groups today that are often not free. Since the beginning of time, God desires for all people to be free, for each person that God created uniquely to be true to their created self, free to be as they are created, free to receive and share love. We are commanded to love, which means we are called to advocate for human rights for all people, for inclusion, wholeness and completeness, advocating for the right for everyone to be who and how one wants to be, free to make decisions for their own body.

Thomas Merton said: "The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them."

You may have strong opinions on issues, lifestyles, and identities and you are free to have those opinions. You do not have the right to impose your opinions on another, or do anything that diminishes the freedom of another. Be curious, not judgmental.

Is this political? Yes, like Amos confronting the nationalism of Israel and declaring all are chosen. Yes, like Jesus confronting the narrow political agenda of the religious leaders.

I have been told that this congregation is a pioneer in the quest for freedom. That around fifty years ago this congregation supported David Sindt who grew up in North St. Paul, worshipped here, and came out as an openly gay pastor in the 1970s to organize the initial struggle to fully include and ordain LGBTQ Presbyterians in the ministry of the church.

Our Presbyterian Church USA denomination in 2018 made the following declarations: To affirm that faith and religious liberty cannot be used to discriminate against anyone simply because of who they are such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, physical limitations, gender expression. To fight for the human rights of all people for all are created in the image of God. To affirm and celebrate the full dignity and humanity of people of all gender identities. To celebrate Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning, diverse sexual orientation and diverse gender identities. To affirm and officiate marriage between two people including same gender marriages. To affirm the ability of individuals guided by Scripture and the Holy Spirit in the context of their communities of faith to make choices regarding their body.

You are free to have a variety of thoughts and perspectives and I hope all of us can agree that we, North Presbyterian Church, will strive to be a safe, welcoming, loving space for all. *Seasons* worship will begin on September 17 with the purpose to provide a safe, caring space where all are loved and accepted in the hope of having everyone experience God's grace and everyone growing in love of God and love of all people. It proclaims that we are partnering with God, relentless in our quest to love all people, to celebrate the identity of all people, to set all people free. Amen