

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: January 12, 2020  
Sermon Title: "Freedom: A Sermon in Two Parts"  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Galatians 3:28

## Galatians 3:28

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

### Part I – Freedom in Christ and Beyond

Lots of things swirling around my little sermon. I chose today's topic, "Freedom," back in October. I knew the autobiography of my friend Father Tomáš Halík was being published. I knew I'd be pushing it hard. And I knew that one big theme from the book would be "freedom." So we decided to make it our Church-wide "Book Chat" for January; and that we would do today's sermon in two parts: the preaching part, more about freedom in general; and the luncheon/discussion part, more about the lessons we can learn from Father Halík's book.

It seemed like a nice mid-January, upbeat Sunday. I mean, who doesn't like freedom and a really inspiring personal story of a young man rising up out of the ashes of his nation's calamity to become a Christian pastor and help his country chart its course to freedom?

Then, in December, Jews started getting bullied on the streets, attacked on the subway, macheted in their homes, murdered in their kosher deli, all by people with a perverted view of their own religion. And Christians were killed during Church in Texas two weeks ago. And then the long-simmering tensions between Iran and America exploded, literally, each threatening the other with war just short of Armageddon, or maybe including Armageddon. The Biblical promise of "wars and rumors of wars" seemed apt.

In all seriousness, if Tom Clancy submitted a book proposal that included recent America/Iran events, who would believe it? "Too contrived," the reviewers would say. Iran shoots down a U.S. drone. The U.S. sends battleships offshore to Iran. Iran proxies bomb an Iraqi base killing a U.S. contractor. The U.S. bombs Iran's top military strategist in Iraq. Iran shoots ballistic missiles at a U.S. military base in Iraq. That's the news we went to bed with Tuesday night. Plus there is the back

story: 70 years of indignities suffered at the hands of each other. CIA plots, the Shah, the Ayatollah, the Revolutionary Guards, U.S. Embassy hostages. The bombing of a U.S. naval ship by mistake. The bombing of an Iranian civilian airliner by mistake. The beat goes on.

When we woke up Wednesday morning, a Ukrainian airliner has crashed in Iran, killing everyone. *A Ukrainian airliner*. There are 195 nations in the world, and the one nation that has been at the center of American politics, Ukraine, has its civilian airline shot down by Iran. We have Christians killed in Church, Jews attacked almost daily, and America and Iran at each other's throats. There are tyrannical pressures squeezing down from above and popular uprisings springing up all over the world.

It's no wonder that I began my pastoral letter this week with "My head hurts." But if my head has to hurt, at least freedom is a worthy cause. The verse we just read together is a clarion call to freedom. An extraordinary promise of freedom. It tells us, through Christ, because of Christ, the ideal of Christ is that there is no longer any definition of "Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free." Ethnic bigotries, gender inequalities, society's sins, all the pettiness that we've allowed to define us and one another—that's gone. The Bible says that's freedom. One of the real historic blessings of Christlike faith is that we live free, despite the circumstances around us. All my life, I've known people who should have been constrained and restricted and imprisoned by their conditions, but thank God, by God, they lived free.

I've known dying people not constrained by death. I've known poor people not constrained by poverty. I've known paralyzed people not constrained by paralysis. I've known prisoners not constrained by jail cells. I've known people ostracized, prejudiced against, unjustly treated, rights denied, not constrained by bigotry or bigots. Each of those people found a liberation in their faith, a way to live free, despite every effort to squelch their freedom.

I once met another pastor in Prague, a Protestant pastor. For those who have been to Prague, the Protestant Church of St. Nicholas is right there on Old Town Square. After Church one Sunday, he invited me to lunch. He was an old man by then, but more determined than ever to carry on in order to make up for lost time. The Communists had taken away his freedom to be a pastor for 30 years. No preaching. No teaching. No weddings, baptisms, or funerals. Nothing. They forced him instead to be a woodworker, making carvings for the government. When he told me this, he began to really smile. "They took away my Church, but they couldn't take away God. The Communists couldn't take God out of my hand or my wood. I put God into everything I carved for 30 years. That's the freedom that sets us soaring above the limits that others would shackle you with. That's the freedom at the heart of Tomáš Halík's life.

That's why I've been pushing his book, using him in my sermons and writings for many years. His story is a universal story. In Judaism and Christianity it's called "Remnant Theology." The idea that as long as there are a few people, a remnant, that will choose to live faithfully and free no matter the forces aligned against them, there is hope. His book is practically a "freedom manifesto."

Growing up, my friend Tomáš experienced all the hallmarks of Communism, all the telltale signs of authoritarian, freedom-fearing megalomaniacs. Suppress the press. Set neighbor against neighbor. Co-opt the judiciary. Secret police. Show trials. Groupthink. Constant surveillance. Mocking religion. Limiting speech, assembly, dissent.

But he was determined to live free. His intellectual and spiritual curiosity drew him to religion. He became intrigued by Christ, attracted to Church, and called to live as a Christian. As an underground priest and a public dissident, he worked hard to prepare his world for when freedom would come. He wanted a fresh Christianity and a fresh nation, free from every shackle.

Alida and I went to Poland last summer, Kraków, so whenever we're around Polish people, we talk about Poland. One of my nurses is from Poland, and she was very blunt. "You Americans don't know what it's like to live under Communism. I grew up under it." And she went into great detail about the deprivations, the oppression, the daily fear, the daily struggle, and the daily yearning just to be free.

Freedom is tricky business. It doesn't come easy. It doesn't stay easy. I was one of those "Pollyanna" rose-colored-glasses people who thought the fall of the Berlin Wall would make everything lovely. We "beat swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks." "The lion and the lamb would lie down together." "The peaceable kingdom" would become a reality. I was a firm believer in the power of freedom, democracy, capitalism. Instead, the world that Tomáš Halík grew up under seems all too alive and well.

That's why the ushers handed a yarmulke to each of you as you came in to Church. Rabbi Schultz of Temple B'nai Israel gave them to us. I ask you to put it on your head, set it right on top of your head. Then imagine walking the streets, shopping in stores, riding mass transit, going to the mall, being out and about, in your nation, in your community, as an obvious Jew.

Imagine, as descendants of people forced to wear the "yellow star," imagine the sense of freedom to be able to wear your yarmulke wherever you want, whenever you want, proudly, safely. And then imagine the recent (and not-so-recent events), the torchlight parade around the synagogue in Charlottesville, the massacre at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, and the mundane attacks not

far from here in the months just past, that have led people, officials, leaders to say, "Perhaps you don't want to wear your yarmulke for a while."

As if freedom were a luxury, you take it out from time to time, show it off, then put it away. No. Freedom is an innate gift from God. I will treasure it. There are a lot of people who want to take it from you and too many who don't know how precious it is.

## **PART II**

The Bible says in Ecclesiastes, "there's nothing new under the sun." We look at Iran and Iraq and the Middle East, and we say, "Oh, my goodness! It's crazy out there!"

Interestingly, if you go through the Bible, the big four countries that are constantly mentioned are Israel, Egypt, Iran, and Iraq, and they're all in the Bible on the subject of freedom or lack thereof.

We first run into Egypt. When the Jews were slaves there for 400 years, until God sent Moses "to tell old Pharaoh 'let my people go.'" Bring the Israelites, the Jews, out of bondage into freedom. That experience of journeying from bondage to freedom has become central to Jewish faith ever since. That story, the Exodus, explains the heart of Judaism and is retold every year in the Passover story.

Iraq is in the Bible under different names: there's the city of Ur, where Abraham came from. Nineveh, where Jonah didn't want to go before the whale swallowed him. And Babylon, the empire that conquered Israel, destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, and carried off half the people as slaves to ancient Babylon, now modern Iraq. The whole Book of Daniel takes place in old Iraq: King Nebuchadnezzar, "the handwriting on the wall," Daniel's friends in the fiery furnace, and Daniel in the lions' den. All those stories are about freedom. Daniel and his friends wanted to be free. They were perfectly willing to be good Babylonians *IF* they could also be good Jews, true to themselves, true to their faith, and free from being singled out and isolated and targeted.

Eventually, ancient Babylon/Iraq is conquered by ancient Iran/Persia, and suddenly lots of excited Jews found themselves Persian. And that was O.K. until one evil man hatched a plan to kill all the Jews. That's why we have the Book of Esther in the Bible.

Esther was a secret Jew who won a dazzling beauty contest to become the Queen of Persia. She was the only one in a position to help the Jews. To do so, she had to risk everything: well, power, life itself, to reveal herself as a Jew to turn the heart and mind of the King, to change the laws of Iran, to bring freedom and

safety to her people. So if you think the geopolitics of 2020 are new or dangerous or the fault of this president or that president, "there's nothing new under the sun." God is probably as tired of it as we are.

After 3,000 years, we humans are still deciding if freedom is worth having, keeping, sharing, standing up for, sacrificing for. Is freedom even a "bottom-line" thing? We used to think so. That was the foundational cause of the Civil War. That was the birth of our nation. That was why a lot of ancestors left everything elsewhere to come here. But, I will warn you, the Bible's take on freedom will challenge you.

The Old Testament part of the Bible believes in theocracy. That means God runs the country. A noble idea. The first two-thirds of the Bible wanted it. The Pilgrims wanted it. The most conservative Jews in Israel today *and* the most conservative Christians in America today want it. But here's the problem: since God is a spirit and does not literally take the reins of leadership to run the country, it's left to not-so-noble humans to do it, with disastrous results all throughout history, all around the world.

St. Paul, the main architect and evangelist of early Christianity, a writer of maybe half the New Testament, only makes it harder. I don't want you to think I'm exaggerating, so let me just quote what Paul wrote: "Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except what God has established. Whoever rebels against governing authorities is rebelling against what God instituted. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right. The ruler is God's servant. Therefore submit." (Romans 13)

St. Peter doubles down on it. "Submit yourselves to every authority instituted among men." (1 Peter 2:13)

In effect, keep your head down and your mouth shut, and you'll be fine. What part of human history backs that up? Jesus is more down to earth. He's not interested in political gamesmanship, power politics. Jesus's idea of civic duty is to be the best person you can be. You contribute to the gross domestic product by using each day to love God fully and love your neighbor fairly. Your patriotism is your humanity. Jesus would agree with Father Halík, who determined, under oppression, that inner freedom, moral strength, civic courage, living faith, inner freedom, is the path to outer freedom.

Alida and I had an Iranian friend in Bridgeport, a pizza delivery guy and a Muslim. He always talked to us about God. And always ask for prayers, especially for others. He loved America, although he was not American. He loved Jesus Christ, although he was not Christian. Above all, he loved the freedom he found in America and the freedom he felt in Christianity.

One of his constant emphases with me—and it came up in almost every conversation—is how many Iranians love America. We Americans tend to see Iran through the prism of the ayatollahs, the embassy hostages, the “death to America” chants, the presidential politics of the day. But on the streets of Iran, in the markets, behind closed doors, in prison cells of Iraq are millions and millions who treasure the very freedom we cherish. And they are the ones who will pay the price for war. Look at the death tally already for just recent weeks: that terrorist bad guy and a few of his buddies on the Iran side, a U.S. contractor from our side; and 176 innocent people from seven countries, including a lot of Canadians, on the innocent collateral damage side. Caution in the face of war is not a sign of weakness. It’s actually one of our freedoms.

I read this poem to you about every 10 years when the rhetoric for war or the imminence, or even the need for war is strong. It became famous from “The Smothers Brothers Show,” at the height of the Vietnam War. It’s a gentle, almost sweet reminder of the value of caution:

*Once upon a time in the land of Hushabye  
Around about the wondrous days of yore  
I came across a sort of box  
Bound up with chains and locked with locks  
And labeled kindly do not touch; it's war  
Decree was issued 'round about  
All with a flourish and a shout  
And a gaily colored mascot tripping lightly on before  
Don't fiddle with this deadly box, or break the chains, or pick the locks  
And please, don't ever play about with war  
Well, the children understood  
Children happen to be good  
They were just as good around the time of yore  
They didn't try to pick the locks, or break into that deadly box  
They never tried to play about with war  
Mommies didn't either  
Sisters, aunts, grannies neither  
. . . .  
But someone did  
Someone battered in the lid  
And spilled the insides out across the floor  
A sort of bouncy, bumpy ball made up of guns and flags  
And all the tears, and horror, and the death that goes with war  
. . . .  
And what was sad and most unfair is that it didn't seem to care much  
Who it bumped  
Or why, or what, or for*

*It bumped the children mainly  
And I'll tell you this quite plainly  
It bumps them every day, and more and more,  
And leaves them dead and burned and dying  
Thousands of them sick and crying*

*. . . .  
Now, there's a way to stop the ball. It isn't difficult at all  
All it takes is wisdom; I'm absolutely sure  
That we could get it back into the box  
And bind the chains and lock the locks  
No one seems to want to save the children any more  
Well, that's the way it all appears  
Cause it's been bouncing 'round for years and years  
In spite of all the wisdom since those wondrous days of yore  
And the time they came across the box  
Bound up with chains and locked with locks  
And labeled "kindly do not touch, it's war"*

A couple of years ago, we had another friend of mine speak about Islam. Lamin Sanneh, a professor from Yale, who died this past year. He was supposed to give us a sort of "Islam 101," to help us understand that part of the world we seem in conflict with. Instead, he went way off script and gave us one of the most patriotic speeches I've ever heard, a full-throated endorsement of American values, most especially, you guessed it: freedom.

His point was simple, yet profound. Having traveled the Muslim world extensively, having been raised a Muslim in Africa, having chosen Christianity and America, having devoted his life to teaching about Islam, having a Muslim family, friends, and students the world over, he told us *not* to fear Islam or the future or even terrorists. Because the truth is they want what we sometimes forget to treasure. Instead, he said, hold dear to what makes our faith and our nation so dear: our roots, deep in the pursuit of freedom, so that one day we won't see others as "male or female" and make assumptions based on that or as "Jew or Greek" or Mexicans or American, or as "slave or free," up or down, in or out, or powerful or powerless. Instead, we see each other as Christ said he sees us: as friends.

Let's join together for our final hymn, No. 711 in your Hymnal, "O Day of Peace That Dimly Shines":

*O day of peace that dimly shines  
through all our hopes and prayers and dreams,  
guide us to justice, truth, and love,  
delivered from our selfish schemes.*

*May swords of hate fall from our hands,  
our hearts from envy find release,  
till by God's grace our warring world  
shall see Christ's promised reign of peace.*

*Then shall the wolf dwell with the lamb,  
nor shall the fierce devour the small;  
as beasts and cattle calmly graze,  
a little child shall lead them all.  
Then enemies shall learn to love,  
all creatures find their true accord;  
the hope of peace shall be fulfilled,  
for all the earth shall know the Lord.*