



**Dr. James C. Howell**  
**2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14, Galatians 5:1, 13-25**  
**June 27, 2010**

Well, you've come (given the Sanctuary is closed for repairs). On Monday night of this week, I dreamed that no one came. But you came, and we are grateful, and as we gather in such a place, I think of many friends of mine in ministry who week-by-week meet for worship in a gym or in a storefront, places where people have to come early and set up chairs every week. I think about the founders of our congregation. We're about to celebrate an anniversary (85<sup>th</sup>) in the fall. Think about those founders of the Myers Park Church. If they could see this room when they were just scrambling and trying to figure out what to do and where to be, their jaw would drop and they would say "What a marvelous place to be able to be together and worship God."

We come on this Sunday and we think about freedom. Now it's still one week until July 4, but the readings for this morning are all about freedom. Paul talks about freedom and Elisha, the prophet, really embodies what freedom is about. He has for a long time attached himself to a great wise teacher named Elijah, but Elijah is at the end of his life. Elijah is going away. Elisha could exercise his freedom by saying, "Finally, I get to do what I want to do. I don't have to follow this guy around any longer. I am about to be free." But instead, he clings to Elijah. He does not want Elijah to go away. He wants to be as close to Elijah as possible, and when Elijah finally clarifies that he is on his way to be with God, Elisha says, "Please, before you go, would you give me a double share of your spirit?" A double share of your spirit – freedom.

I always get a little bit rankled around July 4, I get a little bit of a cranky mood with the way we celebrate July 4<sup>th</sup>. Last year, I read a study of beer sales throughout the year and they spike really high for July 4<sup>th</sup>. Now these are other people, not you guys, I'm sure, purchasing all of this beer. That's a great way to celebrate freedom, right? Let's drink a lot of beer. I saw an ad the other day for flag bikinis and I'm sure when you got ready to come to church this morning you hoped you would hear about flag bikinis. Celebrating July 4<sup>th</sup>. I get cranky every year when I announce to my extended family that the time has arrived for my reading of the Declaration of Independence out loud. They moan. The children moan, the grownups moan, they find things that they need to do. July 4<sup>th</sup>. When did it become this silly thing?

The founding fathers. Sometimes you hear people talk about the founding fathers and they seem to say, "If the founding fathers were here what they would wish would be for all of us just to be Christian. I think if the founding fathers were here, they would not wish for us to be Christian so much as they would wish for us to reassess how we understand freedom, how we have come to misunderstand freedom. I also, at this point in the sermon at 9:45 a.m., said that the founding fathers wouldn't want me to be uncomfortable preaching way up here, so I'm going to come down there (from the stage). I preach every week here in Jubilee Hall in Church In The Round, this is where I talk from, and it's closer, and it's good.

Freedom, we have confused freedom in our day. We think that freedom means "I can do whatever I want to do." Freedom is kind of a frenzy of me, me, me. It's all about self-indulgence. It's all about me. It's me doing just whatever I feel like doing. Sometimes I hear people say, "Soldiers have died so that we could be free" and I say, "If this is our understanding of freedom, then that's too high a cost." Soldiers give their lives so we can buy what we want to buy, so we can go do what we want to do, so we can gratify our desires. Is that what freedom is really supposed to be about?

Paul wrote a remarkable letter to his friends in faraway Galatia. I love the whole idea of letter-writing. Thinking of July 4<sup>th</sup> coming up, Jefferson and Adams, who helped author the Declaration of Independence together, they were political enemies, but as they grew older, they had this correspondence. They wrote letters back and forth. They shared wisdom. They came to understand one another. They came to a deep friendship with one another and then with amazing grace, they died on exactly the same day, and not just any day but on July 4<sup>th</sup> and not just any July 4<sup>th</sup> but the exact 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Paul writes his friends in Galatia and he talks about freedom. And what he says about freedom is not a very American sentiment. What he says is this: "You are not free." We like to think that we are free. I am free. I just am born free. Don't you shackle my freedom. I am a free person. But Paul says, "You are not a free person. You are in some kind of bondage. You are, as it were, addicted to the ways of the world and you can't really do anything to get yourself out of that." Paul says that the freedom that you think you experience is like being in jail. If you're in jail you can say, "I'm going to go over to this part of the jail cell for a minute. And then I'm going to exercise my freedom and go over to this part of the jail cell." You're making decisions about what you're going to do freely, but you're still in the jail cell. Paul says that you are not free until the miracle of God's spirit comes and sets you free.

I could illustrate this by speaking about a dog. Four of the five Howells think it's a good idea for us to get a dog. I am under intense pressure at my house. There's a lot of conversation about dogs, and in the course of this conversation, we got to talking about former dogs. I had a dog when I first was a grownup in the ministry. Her name was Abigail, and I lived in a parsonage that backed up to acres and acres of woods, and what Abigail loved to do was to go out in the afternoon and run through the woods and jump through the leaves. She would just have a ball, and at the end of the day I would call for her to come home and she would come home for dinner – Abigail. One afternoon, I went out and I called "Abby" and she didn't come, "Abby" – she didn't come. I began to worry and started to walk down deep into the woods. "Abby, Abby." No sound. Finally, very deep in the woods, I heard a high-pitched yelp, a little whine, a cry, and I followed that sound until I found Abigail. She had plunged into some leaves and what she couldn't see was that beneath those leaves was what I suppose was once the barbed wire fence of some farmer years ago, and she had gotten herself tangled in that barbed wire. As I saw her there, I began to brush the leaves and I saw that she was struggling to extricate herself from the barbed wire, but of course, the more she struggled, the more she hurt herself. When she would pull, the barbs would dig ever more deeply into her fur and into her skin and it was causing her evermore pain. She was struggling, and what I had to do to set her free is, I had to begin by saying "Shhh" and rubbed her head – Be still, be still, trust me, just relax, and just be still. Finally she became very, very still and I was able one by one to pull each barb out of her. So finally I had her free and picked her up in my arms and took her back to the house.

We live our lives so much like this. We're trying to do something but we find ourselves bound, and the more we struggle the harder it gets. Maybe we decide, "I'm going to be a Christian, I'm going to be faithful, and I'm going to be holy." But our struggle almost is our own undoing. What we need to learn to do is not to say, "I am free" but to say "I am bound – I am entrapped in something I can't get myself out of. Oh Lord, can you help me?" And the Lord comes to us and the Lord begins by saying "Shhh – be still, relax, trust me." And we are still and the Lord comes and sets us free. We weren't free until He came.

Freedom. Freedom, according to Paul, was commitment. If you want to see free people, you see committed people. Even when they make long, lifelong, lasting, deep commitments to causes that they will not give up on, those are the free people. Those are not the trapped people. Those are the free people. Freedom is exercising commitment, and freedom is not about doing the newest, latest thing that seems cool and hip, but freedom is really about what is old, what God's committed people have done over

a very long period of time. Elisha doesn't want to head out on his own and create a new way of being. Elisha wants to be like Elijah. He sees someone old who has served God faithfully, and he wants to cling to him. He wants a double share of his spirit. Paul comes along and he talks about the ancient scriptures of old. He talks about what he learned from Peter, Jesus' disciple, and what he learned from James, the brother of our Lord. There's something that's old, it's not something that is new. It is the giving of life.

We all have heroes, whether we think about it or not. We attach ourselves to someone or another. If we think about it, our lives are all mimicking somebody or another. When I was a little boy, I tried to be a baseball player and I decided that I would be a switch hitter. No coach ever said to me, "Hey, it's a good idea. We need a switch hitter on our team." I wanted to be a switch hitter because I idolized Mickey Mantle, and he was a switch hitter. I would get in front of a mirror with a bat – this made my mother nervous, you know – and I would practice my swing. I wanted to swing just the way Mickey Mantle did, the way he held his shoulders, the way he held his head. Now this was not entirely successful because I was one of two boys who got cut from their little league team – Sad, indeed. When I got a little bit older, I got a new hero. When I went off to study theology at Duke, there was a professor there named Roland Murphy. He was an absolutely simulating lecturer. People would come, and all of his classes were absolutely packed. He was fascinating; he was enthralling; he would talk and people just loved him. Everyone remembers his lectures with great fondness. I signed up for more than a course with him. I signed up for life with him. I discovered that if I went to his office, he could tell me about more than what happened in ancient Israel 3,000 years ago. He could tell me about life; he could tell me about God; he could tell me about my prayer, what God's will for me would be. I would share with him out of my mind and my heart, and he would talk back with me, and he didn't flatter me. He said what he thought God thought I needed to hear. Sometimes it was unwelcome; sometimes it was uncomfortable to hear. But here was a wise man who loved me. I never made an important decision without going to consult with him. Even after he retired and went to Washington, D.C., before I made a big decision, I would go and see Roland and I would say, "Here's what's going on. Talk to me." He would pray; we would share. He was my Elijah, if you will, and he actually, with amazing grace, as a Roman Catholic, he died on what they called the Feast Day of Elijah. The last day of his life he heard these words read not long before he died, the story of Elijah departing from Elisha, and Elisha asking, "Can I have a double share of your spirit?"

We need to find someone to attach ourselves to who will be wise, who will be helpful to us. This Fall we're going to look at the history of Myers Park Church. We have a big anniversary that's coming up and one of the things we're going to talk about are great heroes, great saints in the life of our church. We buried one the other day. Her name was Libba Herbert. Libba lived to be 102 years old. Her husband, Dr. Ches Herbert, was the senior minister of Myers Park United Methodist Church before I was born. This is like in the Iron Age or something; it's way back. He was a remarkable minister but Libba lived to be quite old, indeed, and everyone who remembers her knows that she was just wonderful. She was a very funny person. She was a very engaging person. It was like she never got old. She knew how to connect with young people. Many young people in our church were mentored by Libba over the years. I had the good grace of meeting her when I was in my 20s. I was nobody. She just befriended me. I don't know why. She would encourage me. She would say positive things to me that were so helpful. Many people had the same experience. The world is poorer because she is not in it any longer. We had the service for her and we invited Ron Hall, one of our former ministers here, to come back and give the eulogy. Ron knew more about Libba than anybody else because Ron had done a Ph.D on her life. This was amazing. And as the culmination of his doctoral project, he wrote a drama about her life.

Oh, by the way, I meant to tell you a funny story about Libba before I get to the drama. Libba loved to play pranks, especially on April Fool's Day. She was a newlywed. She had been married for about a month. Her husband is still getting to know her a bit. It's on April Fool's Day, which doesn't occur to him. They go to dinner at a parishioner's home. They come out and they get in the car, and as

they drive away, she says to Ches, "Did you enjoy the dinner?" And he said, "Yes." She said, "Did you like their house?" He said, "Yes." She said, "What did you think of the company, the conversation?" He said, "It was good." She said, "Did you like their silverware?" He said, "It was fine silverware." She opened up her pocketbook and pulls out forks, knives – April Fool's. I had heard that story before. The one I had not heard was this. Ron wrote this drama of Libba's life and some of you attended this when it was presented. I was here. It was a lovely moment. There were 21 characters in the story. Now think about this, one was Libba as a little girl, one was her daddy, one was her mother, one was her sister, one was a childhood friend, and one was a high school teacher, all of these characters. They had all practiced their parts and studied them very, very carefully, and finally the time came for the dress rehearsal and Ron decided it might be a lovely thing for Libba to meet these people who were about to dramatize her life. So they came in and one by one she met them and as they came in the door they would say, "I'm your father – I'm your sister – I'm your high school teacher – I'm your childhood friend." They came in and then Libba did what Ron could never have thought to ask her to. She had everybody stand in a circle. As they stood in that circle she said, "This is the communion of the saints." She went around the circle and spoke to each person and thanked them for what they had meant in her life. To her daddy, she said, "Daddy, thank you for all that you did for me, playing with me, laughing, raising me. When you died I was so sad I didn't know what to do, but your memory has lived on." To that childhood friend "Thank you for being a friend when I was just a child and we had so much fun together" – and on around the room.

You see, freedom isn't being in a room by yourself. Freedom is realizing we're part of the communion of the saints. There are a great host of characters in our life story and freedom comes and we realize we didn't do anything on our own but that each one of them did something for us. And we say to them "Thank you." Freedom isn't doing something new, innovative. Freedom is turning to what is old. It's tested by time. But the great saints of old, the characters, the great saints in our history, it is what they have known and treasured and have lived out. It falls to us to make commitments to them and to our Lord. We are not free. We are very much bound and injured on our own, but God says, "Be still. Let me set you free. Let me set you free to join this great communion of the saints. This freedom is defined by commitment to me and to each other and to my service." This is the work of God's spirit. This is God's plan for each of our lives. This is beauty itself.

Thanks be to God.