

P5C 07 – **THE COMPANY OF (FREE) PROPHETS** – July, 1 2007

This week, US citizens traditionally celebrate things that are good about our nation – its love of liberty, its unifying of races, its bountiful barbecues.

And it seems fitting 'round about now that we consider the nature and purpose of freedom. The Galatians text Christy read for us says it quite well; it's a passage worthy of detailed study – it says that freedom is for and about a Spirit-led life. Freedom's not for and about selfish and petty whims.

Freedom for us is rooted in a Biblical faith inheritance that goes back many centuries – it's far older and much deeper than that of any nation state. And what's most essential about it gets passed on from one generation to another. We're each a link in that long chain; we're each an example to other. Whether we know it or not, we're all, as the last hymn put it, "the prophet's heirs". Like Elisha, who kept watching, kept caring about, stayed attentive to the wisdom of the dying prophet, Elijah, we also can be in the awesome company of great and profound prophets. We just have to watch for them, stay attentive to them. We have to keep listening to, reading about, and learning from great prophets in our day, for all our days.

Prophets, by definition, are persons who are both courageous and free. The newly-knighted writer Salmon Rushdie, who had to go into hiding for years because of the death threats against him, puts it succinctly: "The answer to terrorism is to not be terrorized." The appropriate response to those who are a threat to freedom is to practice freedom all the more.

Prophets are persons both courageous and free. Do you feel that way? Do you feel free to speak your mind, to have gumption, to go forth and do as you sense God leads you, no matter what? Do you sense that you have something you can and need to freely give, to hand down to those who come along next?

I hope you do. I hope this church does collectively. Because freedom can't just be an abstract ideal. Free inquiry, participatory democracy, curiosity itself, truth seeking, a Spirit-centered life: these are historical necessities that may or may not get adequately handed down. They get handed down best within and around the edges of strong faith communities. UCC President John Thomas says that the church was, for him, the place where the big questions in life were being addressed. This has been very much the case in my own experience as well. In the church, I found people who read the paper and were interested in the news, who were curious about the world, who discussed things they learned by reading books. I worry sometimes that we're not keeping such traditions sufficiently alive. Are we, am I, up to the task of kindling a spirit of curiosity about and compassion for God's world? What are we doing, what can we do to more adequately show and hand over these precious gifts to the next generation?

We may be doing more than we know. Tony Robinson's column in the Saturday PI was entitled "Summer Reading is Good for Body and Soul". "Reading," he argues, "Is a kind of spiritual practice. It fixes our attention. We pause over the words we read and the thoughts they suggest, we compare them with our own experience. And sometimes, as can happen in quiet, contemplative prayer, we're taken completely out of ourselves, and then return to ourselves, refreshed." Just reading books nowadays, and talking about them to others: even if we do nothing else, we are setting an example. When we participate in our Broadview study and discussion groups, we are engaging in an increasingly rare kind of free spiritual inquiry. Who would have thought that simply reading and talking about good books would

be a radical act, an unusual indicator of what it means to be free? We are so fortunate to have such freedom; it mustn't be taken for granted. We use it or we lose it.

When we continue to listen and learn and watch, as did Elisha in the company of Elijah, we are in very good company too. When we read and discuss good books, we're in the company of courageous, free prophets – prophets like the writer Chris Hedges, author of *Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America*. If you get to know Chris Hedges, you get to know someone who's rather fearless and free. The inheritance of the prophets, what Elijah handed over to Elisha, is the practiced capacity to be fearless and free. Free to express our own God-given perspectives out in the open; free to put grassroots democracy into practice in our own communities and churches; freely conscious of our own faith history, of those great movements for social change that precede us: those struggles for an 8-hour workday, for peace, for the rights of women and minorities to vote and go to school together, and so much more. These freedoms were hard-earned by courageous prophets that came before. They also get newly exercised among courageous prophets of another generation, in whole new free zones – via high-speed internet connections, for instance, go to ucc.org and listen to modern prophet Bill Moyers tell us how it's a lie that the UCC is dying, listen to how he inspires the UCC to continue to be the prophetic minority church God is still calling us to be! Because we are the prophet's heirs! And so too are those who come after us.

Our own nation, at its best, stands for freedom of speech, the press and religion, and none of these can survive without the other. Our nation's governing system, so carefully designed to put checks and balances on the abuses of power, needs to be bravely defended to preserve the wealth of possibilities for progressive social change that only arise in the fresh air of a functioning participatory democracy. We have to resist the taking of unfettered executive privilege, the endless classifying of so-called 'state secrets', the wholesale commercialization of politics, the suspension of basic human and civil rights in the name of security. "The answer to terrorism is to not be terrorized."

The truly free are a part of the company of (free) prophets. The finest of Biblical prophets were truly free people. They loved their homelands, but never in a blind nor in an uncritical manner. They loved enough to critique their own time and place and leaders, to hold them accountable to the highest standards. This is what truly free people do.

Jesus, the Apostle Paul and the earliest Christians were truly free people. Because their citizenship in the kingdom of God trumped their citizenship in the Roman Empire, they were often thrown into prison, persecuted, even tortured. They were labeled Jewish agitators disturbing the peace and subverting Roman law and order. Why? Because they pledged their allegiance to something bigger, holier, more important than empire. They were fully committed to that holier way, that higher citizenship; so much so, that the depressing way things seemed to always be on the surface could not sway them.

The prophets were both brave and free. We are the prophets' heirs. Part of a larger guild, a fuller body, a church, a company, of the truly free. Help us, God, to take up the mantle, to pass on the story.