



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

A Portrait of Freedom
Second Corinthians 3:17

No one could help but notice that there was a royal wedding a few days ago. Actually, in my stubborn American patriotism, I would call it one of many royal weddings that took place. My favorite royal wedding took place on March 18, 1978, when I stood with my bride before my father who pronounced us man and wife.

I believe that since moving to Nacogdoches almost fifteen years ago, I have officiated at some 48 royal weddings. I hope I am not getting too close to controversy, especially for you who were drawn to the Harry – Meghan wedding, but I personally have great difficulty with the word “royal.” There is only one in the history of the world who was royal and that was our Lord and King Jesus Christ. The rest of us are simply subjects created equally by God.

You are all very familiar with the words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” That pretty much says it all. But the sentiment of our Declaration of Independence is referred to in our Constitution in the line, “No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States.”

Defending our freedom and the ideals of our founding principles, some 1.1 million Americans have lost their lives in war. Almost one half of those deaths took place during the Civil War, some 405,000 died in World War Two and almost 7,000 have died in what could be called the Global War on Terror.

Many in this congregation have fought in these wars. When I consider my freedoms as an American, I cringe to think that most of those who have died were youths in their late teens and young men and women who were not

yet 30. We celebrate Memorial Day in their honor, and may we always be grateful, beyond measure, for those who both willingly and unwillingly died. They are all heroes, and all deserving of the Congressional Medal of Honor.

We live in a great nation, yet we must admit that we have our national sins. Until it was corrected, our Constitution made provisions for slavery. We have exploited weaker nations, but we have also done a lot of good in the world. How many nations would have rebuilt an enemy like Japan or Germany after a war? A lot of good and some bad things can be said about the United States of America, but one thing is for certain, our nation is to be cherished, for in America we are free. America is a light for the world. America has led the way to help other nations understand the gift of freedom. But with our freedom comes responsibility, and being responsible citizens we must live within a certain set of parameters or laws, but the question is how much do we appreciate the freedom we have?

I must be reminded again and again of just how precious freedom is. I say this because, as I have admitted many times, I have never fought in a war. I have never seen men and women suffer on a battlefield, giving their lives for this thing we call freedom. For my generation, too young for Vietnam and too old for Iraqi Freedom, freedom can and often is taken for granted. Thus each Memorial Day I have to recall, give thanks for, and remember the lives of those who gave of themselves so others can be free.

Yes, I know we still have a long way to go, for there are those who are still enslaved by poverty. We have citizens who cannot afford health care. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, our Declaration of Independence is an ideal we have never achieved, but it is an ideal worth pursuing. With this said, our country stands for the pursuit of freedom and continues to stand because of the blood of Americans on battlefields all over the world.

Well, maybe it is time for a little Scripture. And in Second Corinthians 3:17 we read, **“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”** Isn't it interesting that this Memorial Day weekend

that we learn that freedom is intricately connected with the presence of God? **“For where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”**

There is another Scripture passage from Galatians 5 that reminds us that with this freedom, as well as with the gift of God’s presence comes responsibility. Hear the word as I read from Galatians 5:1: **“For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.”** Then in verse 13 we read: **“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.”** I understand the implications are obvious here, and that is that freedom does have its bounds, or no one can be free. Our freedom is a gift that allows us to serve others. Maybe that is why God’s presence is a part of our freedom. For when freedom boils down to selfish pursuits then no one is free; all you have is a society bound by greed.

This Memorial Day Weekend I want to tell you a story of freedom from the life of Maria Ann Hirschmann.

When Maria was a youth she never dreamed she would be an American citizen, that she would speak English, or pray that someone would see the Lord Jesus in her life.

Maria was born in Czechoslovakia in a German language group. What that means is that she was part of a minority that lived in poverty. She was the third daughter born in a family with no boys. Her father was so angry that another girl was born that he would have nothing to do with her, and when her mother died Maria and her sisters were abandoned by their father.

From the beginning she felt rejection. The reason she survived was due the compassion of a woman who became her foster mother. This woman took Maria in because she wanted to do something for Jesus, but she taught Maria a religion that God loves us when we are good and God punishes us when we are bad.

So picture this girl, living in Czechoslovakia before the Second World War, whose bed was a hayloft, who had no shoes in summer and inadequate shoes in winter. As an adult she could show you her crippled toes from the neglect. In today's language Maria would be called a creative child, but in her culture she was called a problem child, who felt rejected by both her family and by God. She wanted to ask why, but that question was not allowed. She was taught to be quiet and to obey. No one had the right to ask why.

As Maria entered her teen years, troops came into her village bearing a red flag, with a white circle, and in the circle was a black cross with hooks on each arm of the cross. Yes, it was the Nazi swastika. When the Nazis made Czechoslovakia part of the Third Reich, the people were promised food, work and hope. At first it seemed like this was going to be true, so the people believed Hitler and trusted something good was happening to them.

Maria took a test, and was picked by the Nazis to be trained as a Nazi youth leader. To Maria this was a fairy tale come true. As things were she would never get an education, but now the Nazis were going to give her one. She said she thought she had the rainbow in both hands. She was to go to school in Prague--such excitement and what an honor! Her foster mother did not want her to leave, but she did, so her foster mother told Maria, "Don't forget Jesus."

After a year in school, Maria was totally brainwashed. She had forgotten the God of her mother, and was totally convinced of the Nazi doctrines. Later she said, "That's what happens when you only hear one side of the story long enough." She was to be part of a superpower, a super race of people ordained by God to conquer the world. You tell a kid from the hayloft that, and they will follow with all their heart. She could not believe her new and great calling.

In Proverbs 14:12 we read: **"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death."** After World War Two, Maria understood that one can be sincere about what they believe to be the truth and be dead wrong. The Nazi doctrine seemed so right, but once Hitler fell, Maria, a Nazi youth leader, ended up in a Communist labor camp.

Maria did not say much about what life was like in the labor camp, other than to say it was horribly cruel where people were treated as animals, and she prayed this would truly become a thing of the past. At that point in her life she hated Russians, she hated Czech Communists, she hated Americans, she hated all who had anything to do with the defeat of Germany.

One day she was able to slip out of the labor camp and made her way to the German territory. There she was told that if she wanted to get away from the Communists she should try to make it to the American Military Zone. Though she hated Americans and trusted them as much as the Communists, word had it that the Americans would at least give her food and their soldiers were not as cruel as the Communists.

She decided to flee, though she did not really know why, because she was convinced by the Nazis that the Americans would be just as bad, but there was nowhere else to go. It was either the Communists or the Americans. She walked hundreds of miles through the countryside in the rain. She was cold, hungry, but she learned one of the positives of growing up in poverty, for she knew all the edible things in the wilderness, and though they all did not taste that great, they kept her alive during those grueling weeks.

She finally reached a village where she was told she could go no farther. Behind the village was a stretch of land several kilometers wide that was patrolled by Russian soldiers. Beyond were the Americans, but the Russians would shoot anyone who tried to cross.

She met a man there among all the women, for after the war all that was left were women, children and old men. This man said for a price he would lead people to the Americans. What he was really doing was taking their money and leading them to the Russians. That is what happened to Maria and the group that tried to escape with her.

She remembers the shouting, the screams and the shooting. There were guns pointed at where she hid in the bushes only a hundred meters away from the American Military Zone. Maria decided she had nothing to lose so she

made a run for it with a frightened friend. She remembers saying, “Run as fast as you can and zigzag as you go.”

As they prepared to run they came across a two year old child who had been separated from his mother in all the chaos of the shooting. They took a deep breath, stood up, held the child between them and ran for their lives. There were no shots. They ran to the river, swam across, and up a hill into the American zone and no shots were fired. Maybe the Russians did not see her, or maybe they did not want to shoot the child. Maybe it was God’s protection, Maria did not know, as she did not know what to do with the child now that they were across the river.

After crossing the river they saw a light in the distance and headed for it. Maybe a German farmer would take the child in before it died of pneumonia. Probably no one would answer the door. She should have known it was no farm house, a long low building in the middle of the woods, but she knocked on the door anyway and the door was answered immediately.

She was horrified when she saw the huge American soldier who answered. He filled the entire door frame and he had a gun at his side. He looked exactly like the Nazis said an American soldier would look. He was so big because as she was told, Americans eat too much.

She could not move. The American invited her in. “No,” she said, “Take the baby, but we have to go.” Actually they had to talk through an interpreter, for she only spoke German, Czech and Russian and the soldier only spoke English. She again begged, “Please take the child but let us go.”

But she was told to come in, and you do not argue with an American soldier with a gun. She was frightened. She knew what would happen when they locked the door behind her. At the time she was an attractive nineteen year old. She was ready to fight. No one would lay a hand on her without her fighting with all her might. But no one seemed to want to fight, but what happened was this. She was given food, more than she had seen in months. She was shown kindness. She was given a place to sleep, and of all places it was a bed in a private room. She could not remember sleeping on a bed. She

was still afraid, but she was cared for. She was greeted the next morning with warmth and smiles, but her Nazi training films reminded her to remain suspicious of the motives of any American.

Maria was told that the Russians had been called about the baby. Her mother and father were in prison and were not allowed to have the baby back. Imagine a mother only trying to get to a place where her baby could get some food and for this she was put in prison and never allowed to see her baby again. The baby was handed over to the International Red Cross, and Maria never heard what finally happened to the child.

When Maria was ready and able to move on she remained afraid. She still thought her treatment was a cruel trick and the Americans would come back after her and rape her then kill her. But when she left she was given food for the road and after she had traveled about fifty meters she looked around and no one was coming after her. What she saw when she turned was a group of American G.I.'s smiling and waving at her. She did not know why they were waving but she knew what she was saying, "Danka, danka, thank you, thank you!"

Maria said these American soldiers will never know what they did. They changed her life. It could not have been done with words. But something powerful happened in their caring. She entered the American camp a convinced Nazi, and she left a confused nineteen year old girl looking for a new reason to live, but she was no longer a Nazi.

She knew the Americans had something that was to be a mystery to her for many years to come, but it became the desire of her heart to come to America and find out what it was we Americans have.

It took her ten years, but she made it to America. It was God's timing, not hers, for she was simply not ready for America. She was a girl who had never seen a refrigerator or a washing machine. She had to learn English three times, or as Maria puts it she had to learn to speak it, then learn to read it, then learn to write it as she found out that one has absolutely nothing to do with the other.

In her search for truth, she also found out that truth is not a religion, it is not a philosophy, not a doctrine, but truth is a person – Jesus Christ.

With her new faith in Christ she was finally able to travel to America so she could figure out what Americans have that was different from the rest of the world. She noticed that most Americans would rather help than hurt, and she wondered what made the difference.

One day, living in Michigan, she went to her neighbor and had this conversation:

Maria said, “I want to move, and I want you to tell me what I must do to move. Which police station do I go to, to fill out the forms to get permission to move, and how long does it take to process the forms?”

“Where do you want to go?” her neighbor asked.

“California--I hear it does not snow in California and I am tired of snow.”

“Well, if you want to go to California, then load up your car and go.”

“Nobody cares if I go?”

“Of course not, just go!”

“Not even the police care if I go?”

Maria remembers that neighbor woman saying in a voice that would remind us of Ethel Merman, “They had better not, for it’s none of their business!”

The woman said it so loud that Maria was afraid the police would hear and come and arrest them. But at that moment she began to figure out what Americans have--they have freedom. She says, “You got it, you use it, you take it for granted, and you cannot explain it.”

She goes on to write, “Much of the world is brought up in obedience and bondage, and every decision is made for them. You are taught to obey. Fifty percent of life is forbidden, and fifty percent is required. This makes sense if

you do not know American freedom. It's the basis for law and order – total control of the people.”

In America she learned that little is forbidden, little is required, there is no dictator, no police state, we have a huge area which is free and you operate in that freedom. She could not understand this. How do you keep order? All her life she just waited for people to tell her what to do, then she did it. One day she asked her neighbor what to think and the neighbor responded, “Think for yourself!” It took her a while to learn how to be free.

Maria asked God to help her understand, and God gave her something from our history rather than from the Bible. It's a statement by William Penn, “We have a choice--either we can be governed by God or ruled by tyrants.”

It is true that freedom carries with it a great responsibility, for without responsibility freedom will not work. Without God and without making responsible choices in our lives freedom will end.

Much of the world will never be free. They will be told what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. Maria, said, “Freedom is scary at first, then you learn to live with it, then you fall in love with it.”

She fell in love with American freedom. She had a new life that most people would never know and never understand. She was thirty years old before she learned to think for herself. And she remembers one of her first free choices. She says she marched into a courtroom and there was an American flag. She looked at the judge and said, “Sir, may I have the privilege to become an American citizen?”

It took awhile because she had a bad political record; after all she once was a Nazi. But one day she stood under the flag and said, “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God.”

That is the key to freedom that Americans can never forget: that we are one nation under God, for it is God who gives us our freedom. **“For where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”**

Maria became a prolific writer and spent the remainder of her days giving speeches to our armed forces, which was her way of saying thank you to those soldiers who changed her life.

Brothers and Sisters, there are two lessons I have learned from this portrait of freedom. First, never take your freedom for granted. As far as our American freedom goes, we have it because men and women have died on battlefields. As far as our freedom from sin goes, it was won by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. But in every case freedom is costly.

The second is a lesson in evangelism, for what good is it to be free if you cannot share it with the world? But what is also important is how the good news is shared.

Remember those soldiers. It was not their words that changed Maria--it was their actions. Friends, we can be right. We can be obnoxiously right. But unless we share the love of Christ, unless we share the grace by the way we live and work, we will be talking to deaf ears.

What did Paul say in Galatians 5:13? **“You are called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants of one another.”**

Freedom is a call to serve, to serve God and to serve those God brings into our lives.

Freedom. It's precious. It cannot be taken for granted. It is a gift from Almighty God to be used. So friends, be free to grow in Christ. Share your freedom, and allow the Spirit of God to help you grow in freedom, freedom given in responsible service to God and others. Amen.