

Of sonnets and discipleship

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November 6, 2012

Our assignment last week in my [poetry class](#) was to write a sonnet—[English](#) or [Italian](#), our choice. But when it comes to sonnets, that, in many ways, is where the freedom seems to end. You can't write as many lines as you want (has to be 14, of course). You can't make it rhyme—or not—however you might like (must be *abab, cdcd, efef, gg* for the English kind). Line length is non-negotiable, too: [five “feet” of “iambes”](#) (unstressed syllables followed by stressed ones). Sonnets and the poets who write them take their metrics very, very seriously.

My classmates and I were a little freaked out. Writing *formal* poetry—poetry that adheres to form (sonnet, sestina, villanelle, tanka, ode)—seems the exclusive purview of the professionals. Plus, isn't formal poetry too often, well, *formal*, in the other sense of that word: stuffy and standoffish?

Who wants to write a formal poem? Not us, we all said. How can we say what we want to say when we're so *restricted*? What is the point of writing a poem if you feel all hedged in—if the form itself seems intent on cramping your style, stifling your self-expression, limiting your freedom?

Yet here's the thing:

Freedom, genuine freedom, (in any context) can be exercised only within limits. This seems counterintuitive, especially in a culture founded on and grounded in the idea of breaking free from all constraints (*the sky's the limit! no rules! live free or die!*). America's revolutionary war sloganism has had its inevitable end in modern advertising jingles that signal the slavery of the self to the forces of consumer-capitalism. The free individual finds it harder and harder to feel truly free. As theologian Philip Kenneson [has put it](#):

How many people feel free not to buy a new car every three or four years? (Or not to buy one at all?) How many people feel free not to dress in the latest styles or fashions? How many people feel free not to look like, talk

like, walk like and think like everyone else? In short, how many people feel free not to desire what everyone else desires?

As I often ask my brightest students: How many of you felt free *not* to come to college right after high school?

Unlimited freedom, so-called, it turns out, can be pretty limiting. Without a *telos*—an ultimate end or aim—and without a community of some kind in which such a purpose is given shape and substance, freedom can feel a little like tyranny.

But *within* community and *determined by* a telos having to do with the well-being and flourishing of all (and not merely the wish fulfillment of the unencumbered individual), genuine freedom is rooted in relationship and reciprocity. Etymologically related to “friend,” the word “free” carries the sense of “dear” or beloved,” and, as [Wendell Berry](#) notes,

We set our friends free by our love for them, with the implied restraints of faithfulness or loyalty. And this suggests that our ‘identity’ is located not in the impulse of selfhood but in deliberately maintained connections.

In Christian discourse, freedom is bound up (now *there’s* a theological oxymoron) in the freedom to love, to serve, to know and be known. We exercise our freedom *for* the sake of a life directed toward love of God and neighbor, not merely (or not really at all) as freedom *from* hindrance or constraint. Formulaic speech like the Nicene Creed or the Lord’s Prayer (often thought to be limiting or restricting), actually make possible very rich theologies of who God is (and isn’t), who we as beloved creatures of God are (and aren’t). Astonishing complexity flows from the forms we adhere to.

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But what about poetry and freedom? It turns out that writing a sonnet wasn’t easy but it was surprisingly freeing. The constraints of the form were not, after all, limitations to creativity but their necessary precondition. Once the “boundaries” were acknowledged not as confinements but as “inducements to elegance, to fullness of relationship and meaning,” it was possible even to strive for and discover *beauty*: in choosing this word and not that one, in making the rhyme scheme work, in finding a fitting image or metaphor.

The discovery of beauty in words, in life, in a life directed toward love of God and neighbor: What is our freedom for if not for that?

Originally posted at [Intersections](#)