

“Religious Liberty Abroad”

Independence Day Weekend, Boise, 2020

The Sunday lectionary pays no attention to national holidays. Yet three of our Scriptures today are about some form of liberty. In the Gospel we just heard, Jesus says that, if we come to Him, He will grant us rest — freedom from the hard labor that sin imposes on the soul, the wages of which, St Paul wrote, are death [Rom 6: 23]. In the prophecy of Zechariah, a repeat from Palm Sunday, God promises His people that, when His Anointed One arrives, He “will liberate . . . prisoners,” or those still in exile, “from the waterless pit” [Zech 9: 11b]. In today’s Epistle, St Paul asks who will deliver him from “this body of death” and “the law of sin that dwells in [its] members” [Rom 7: 23-24]. All three texts speak of the liberty promised in the Gospel, the freedom that the Saviour provides.

But on this day following our most important civil holiday, I choose to speak of lesser freedoms, those that you might say are means to that greater freedom that one finds only in Christ. Freedom of speech, which includes the freedom to preach the Gospel and testify to Christ in a public space; freedom of assembly, which includes the freedom to do what we are here doing today; and the free exercise of religion itself are all political freedoms guaranteed the citizens and other residents of this country in the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. We give thanks for them this weekend, along with our independence as a nation. Because our life as Christians and our mission as a church are much eased by those lesser, mundane freedoms, this is the one Sunday in the year that you will hear me talk about politics in the pulpit.

And I’ll say something first about that to avoid misunderstanding. Unlike the typical downtown congregation in a large denomination, Grace Anglican Church does not engage, or encourage its members to engage, in social activism. For one, I don’t know how a church can do that without involving itself partisan

politics. Second and more important, no matter how good the cause might be, it's just not the Church's mission. You charter members here did not organize this parish, and then join with others to form the Diocese of Western Anglicans, to better the world through social reform, which requires lobbying for legislation or administrative policies, or bringing suits in the courts. You may participate in such activities as citizens, acting on what you understand to be Christian principles, but they are not things we do as a church. Here the agenda were set 2,000 years ago — to bring people to the worship of Almighty God through the preaching of the Gospel, and to show the world what the love of Christ looks like in acts of charity. To add to that list is to diminish our efforts to achieve what is already on it. Mission creep almost always results in mission failure.

Yet one exception must be made to that general rule that we will not as a church concern ourselves with the world's politics. Like other organizations, we will do what is necessary to defend our institutional interests, so that we will be able to perform our mission in the world. We must, as a church, guard our freedom, and sometimes engage with governments to extend it, in order to do what the Church does. Our institutional interest is to have an unhindered freedom to worship, to preach, to witness in public, to give assistance to those in need as the Spirit directs us, and, yes, even to proselytize. Hence, even churches who do not consider social reform to be part of their mission must sometimes lobby governments, write letters to newspapers, speak at city council meetings, or go to court to maintain or expand what we Americans understand to be our religious liberty.

Well, I am happy to report to you today that the recent news on religious liberty at the national level is good. There are two developments we can celebrate on this holiday weekend. The most recent is a Supreme Court decision last Tuesday that struck down all legal barriers that various states have erected over the years to prevent public money going to religious schools, merely

because they are religious. If a state offers a public benefit such as tuition tax credits to private schools, which was the case in Montana, then it must offer it also to such schools that meet all the same standards which have religion as part of their program. In some states, such non-discrimination will make the difference between a family's being able to afford a religious school for the children, or not being able to afford one. A few days before that five-to-four High Court decision, Governor Ron De Santis of Florida signed into his state's law "the biggest voucher expansion in American history," according to The Wall Street Journal [July 1, 2020, staff editorial]. As I stated in my sermon last week, we may some day as a church want to help the parents of youth in our congregation defray the cost of sending them to a Christian school.

The other development I want us to celebrate today is an executive order signed on June 2 by our president to make the promotion of religious freedom abroad a "priority" in the nation's foreign policy [WSJ, House of Worship, 6/12/20]. In 1998 President Clinton signed the International Religious Freedom Act, which created a new commission and a post of ambassador-at-large to advance the freedom of religion throughout the world. That previous effort did yield a few good results, but bureaucratic inertia in the State Department rendered the goals that were established by it largely aspirational. The recent executive order, the fruit of an initiative taken by Vice President Mike Pence, requires the Secretary of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, and American embassies around the world to formulate specific plans to advance religious liberty. It also mandates training of those in the Foreign Service and other agencies working on international matters to make them knowledgeable of other countries' policies on religious freedom.

Is this a concern of churchgoers in this country? We need look no further

than the Great Commission, given by Our Lord at the end of St Matthew's Gospel, to see that such liberty pertains directly to the Church's institutional interest. Persecution of any kind impedes our work of making disciples of the nations. It impedes the work of our brothers and sisters in other countries to carry out their mission to share the Gospel and baptize those who accept its message. And the barriers that foreign governments erect to prevent Christians from promoting their religion is also a matter of simple justice. In no country today where Christianity is the religion of the majority do those who practice it lobby their government to penalize those who choose not to. In Israel, a country that extends to its residents modern freedoms, secular Jews and Arabs suffer no disabilities whatever for not attending synagogue on the Sabbath, and messianic Jews can go to church and proclaim that Jesus is Lord. In every Western state larger than the size of a city, Muslims are free to purchase land and put a mosque on it. It is therefore right that we should expect our government to advocate that Christians in Asian and African countries be allowed to practice their religion without any special burdens placed on them. It is only fair that the privileges offered to non-Christians here be given also to Christians there. The advocacy of such should be an integral part of our foreign policy, and now it is.

And we should hope and pray that this new policy will be continued by the next presidential administration, whether such should begin in January of next year or four years after that. A foreign policy is successful only when it is bipartisan, and is thus pursued for the long term over several administrations. Hence, we do not want religious liberty to be seen as merely a Republican or conservative project. If Americans support what is in their national Constitution, they should all regard the freedom to believe or not to believe, to practice or not practice any religion that does not endanger others as a fundamental right. We should join secularists on the left in their efforts to prevent any establishment of religion (as that phrase has been historically understood), and they in turn should

join us in defending the free exercise of the religion that any person chooses. That is the bargain the citizenry has accepted, and the one we should all endeavor to continue.

It is also the one we should promote abroad. Resident aliens have a complete freedom here, not only to practice a religion they have brought from their country of origin, but also to propagate it by setting up schools that will teach it to their children, and to try to gain converts among the native and naturalized citizens of the land. The relations we have with other nations should differ according to whether they reciprocate and offer the same. Because of the costly wars we have recently waged, wars that did not obtain for us the results that we wanted, the promotion of democracy abroad is less popular now than it was a generation ago. Across the political spectrum, there seems to be a growing consensus that Americans should tend more to their national interests and lessen their efforts to expand or even maintain the post-World War II order that some have called *Pax Americana*. Well, I'm not here to talk about tariffs or trade, the IMF or World Bank, or whether to keep American troops in this country or that one. You can have those debates on your own if you wish. But I hope that, with this growing sentiment that we can no longer afford what we have been doing and now need a less ambitious foreign policy, the American Republic will not cease to be the beacon of freedom that has given hope to persons all over the world since its founding. The liberties guaranteed by the First Amendment of our national Constitution cannot be separated from one another. The free exercise of religion requires freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and a free press, and if those other freedoms are fully practiced, then religion is not excluded. We should defend them at home, and we should work to obtain them for peoples abroad wherever we see an opening.

Here is where the ideals set forth in our founding documents, The Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, coincide

perfectly with the interests of the Holy Catholic Church in the modern world. Civil liberty is not Gospel liberty. It is not the freedom of spirit that we find in Jesus Christ Our Lord. But the lesser freedom is certainly a great aide to the Church's mission of offering the greater one to every single person in the world, regardless of culture or heritage, the goal of the Great Commission.

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