

Sermon of July 3, 2016 by Rev. Trexler at Trinity Lutheran Church

Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty we're free at last!

Tomorrow we celebrate the 4th of July—Independence Day—Freedom from the rule of England! Out of this freedom came our constitution and the bill of rights formed in 1789.

I thought it might be interesting—at least to me—and different, if we take a brief look at how this freedom from England affects our lives today, especially in regards to the church. I bet you never thought you would hear part of the constitution read from the pulpit, but the first amendment of the constitution reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Yet it wasn't until 1947 that the modern separation of Church and State was created by the Supreme Court. This ruling prohibits any federal, state or local government preference or support for religion. It basically eliminates religion from the public square.

How did we get to this point, and again what does it mean for us today as so-called Christians?

Sure in earthly terms we are supposedly an independent people, but in heavenly terms we are dependent upon a different type of government.

Today in the Scriptures we also celebrate Independence Day—Freedom from the rule of sin—However, we now become dependent upon God.

Two types of freedom. Two types of Kingdoms (Earthly and Heavenly). Yet both are acquired through commitment, sacrifice and blood.

Do the two have anything in common? As a Christian, what do I do with the emotions and feelings that I have for some of the most touching and crucial issues that exist in our world today?

What do I say and do as a Christian when it comes to the war in Middle East and the associated terrorism? What do I say and do as a Christian when it comes to abortion, assisted suicide, the death penalty, gay marriages and immigration? Are we to separate these two kingdoms or put them together?

Today I thought it might be interesting—at least to me—if we took a look at how Christianity has evolved in viewing its role in relating to the secular world, and especially how Lutherans have come to understand their relationship between the church and the real world, between the church and state, between the kingdom of earth and the kingdom of God.

The earliest Christians, due to the writings of some of the first Christian Fathers, some of whom you may never have heard of, such as Origen and Polycarp of the 2nd century, claimed that Christians should not hold any public office. Remember this is a new religion according to the state and the earliest Christians were dying for their faith. Therefore they claimed that followers of Jesus should and must simply withdraw from public service, offering up their prayers instead of their bodies.

Once we come to the time Saint Augustine (400CE), Christianity is in full bloom. It is now a national religion ordered by the emperor Constantine in 313AD. So now if one thought the role of a Christian was to withdraw from the world, guess what, if we withdrew there would be no one to run and maintain the cities.

So it is understandable that at this point Christians began to think of themselves as members of two kingdoms - the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Earth. Augustine goes on to say that we obey the government if, and only if, the government is one that honors God.

Interesting, huh? In the first 400 years of Christianity we have two extremes of how the followers of Christ are supposed to relate the world around them. One—withdraw. Two—make the state the church.

Throughout history what seems to happen is we try to make Jesus fit into the world, instead of the other way around. After all Jesus came into the world, and he came into this world “to let the oppressed go free.”

Well, about 1000 years later, Martin Luther, who was a big fan of Augustine, realizes that the effects of sin are too great and one will never have an earthly government that worships the one true God. Still he defends the need for government in the same manner as Paul. The government, Luther claims, as well as the church, is of divine origin and that Christians have both the right and the duty to hold office under the state, even, he says, to the extent of serving as executioner if the need arises.

Luther divides humankind into two categories. We all belong to the kingdom of the world. Some of us also belong to the kingdom of God. (Do you?)

Again the people in the kingdom of God do not need the law or government, and if the whole world were composed of real Christians, true believers, Luther says there would be no need for princes, kings, or lords. There would be no need for any lawsuits, courts, judges, laws, or sword.

They would serve no purpose, since Christians would have in their hearts the Holy Spirit, who makes them do injustice to no one, to love everyone, to suffer injustice and even death willingly at the hands of anyone.

Here is where I get a kick out of Luther, always saying what a thing really is. He says, however, there are no true Christians, therefore, all people still need the law and government. If this were not so, people would devour one another.

For this reason God has ordained two governments—the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and the temporal or earthly, which restrains the wicked and keeps an outward peace.

Does this statement maintain a separation between the two kingdoms? I don't believe so, but it does make a clear distinction between the two, and the world would not exist without the other.

Luther goes on to claim that if anyone attempted to rule the world by pure gospel it would be like releasing a wild beast upon the earth. He claims our obligation as the church should at least try to fill the world with real Christians before attempting to govern in a Christian manner, even though in the earthly kingdom, this will never happen.

Luther has a good grasp on the human condition. He goes on to say, therefore, since both kingdoms are instituted by God, the Christian submits willingly to the government, pays taxes, and honors those in power, although the true Christian has no need of these things for oneself, but solely for the sake of others, so that others may be protected and the wicked may not become worse.

You see, the true Christian doesn't need one's enemy to be punished, but it is only beneficial and essential for the whole world and for your neighbor.

Listen to this, Saint Augustine and Luther agree that no Christian would ever serve the government on one's own behalf, but only for the sake of others.

How would you like to have politicians with this attitude?

Likewise Luther writes, the government's laws should extend no further than to life and affairs on earth. When the government presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God's kingdom and only misleads souls and destroys them. He again returns to Augustine and quotes, "No one can or ought to be forced to believe."

Let the government do what the government does best and protect the people and stay out of the way of the church. In the same manner, allow the church to do what the church does best and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Separate Yes! But working together for the same cause—our neighbor!

So let's go back to the beginning and ask the question again. What do I say and do as a Christian when it comes to the war in the Middle East, abortion, assisted suicide, the death penalty, gay marriages, and immigration?

Everyday issues that divide even the so-called Christians—because the answers don't seem to be clearly found in the Bible—both sides can and will argue their point from Scripture, usually from one-liners.

Never said it would be easy. Yet the answers **are** known in the Kingdom of God.

Before we ever get it right here in this earthly kingdom, we must put aside the works of the flesh and concentrate on following the only one that has the right answers—Jesus Christ. And not halfway either.

Paul writes, “For the **whole law** is summed up in one single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now when it comes to war, to abortion, to homosexuality, and immigration, we must dig deep within ourselves through prayer and ask “is what we believe due to our prejudices and fear”, or “is what we believe totally for the benefit of others”?

Here is where our freedom as a nation and our freedom as a Christian must come together as one. If I believe a certain way due to the concerns of others only, and not for myself, my decisions will be correct.

Can I really call myself a Christian if I do not become involved in serving and assisting the church and the government by whatever means I can to help protect the poor, the sick, the oppressed, and the innocent?

You see, Jesus brought God's kingdom to earth—A kingdom that means acceptance of all people and all creation as something meaningful—A kingdom that brings the poor dignity, the oppressed hope. A kingdom where the sick are healed and the lost are found. A kingdom where people who are despised are accepted.

Being a Christian does not exist only in the mind. It exists in the world. The freedom of a Christian also does not mean we do whatever we desire. Jesus never once said that to follow him would be an easy matter. On the contrary, earthly and heavenly freedom always means commitment, sacrifice and blood.

For me to pledge allegiance ‘to the United States of America’; for me to claim to be a Christian (a follower of Christ) and not do what is commanded of me - to help lead the most powerful nation in the history of the world, at least in the direction of God's kingdom, then I need to listen very carefully again to the words of Paul, “If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed.”

Sure in earthly terms we are supposedly an independent people, but in heavenly terms we are free because of Jesus and now become dependent upon God.

Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we're free at Last!

Happy 4th of July. Amen.