

We Need You Now

Deut. 10:1-22, Heb. 11:8-16, Mt.5:43-48, U.S. CONST. amend. I
July 3, 2011

I.

Happy Fourth of July! This weekend we celebrate our nation's independence and our heritage of freedom. Flags wave, bands play, and we gather with picnics, fireworks, and fellowship. Here at St. Thomas we will have our annual Red, White, and Blue Brunch in Johnson Hall after the service.

We also are called to remember the men and women in our armed forces who serve now, and who have served since that first Independence Day, to preserve our freedoms. The nation's history confirms that we are the land of the free because we also are the home of the brave.

And our Eucharist today, always dedicated to the presence and glory of our Lord and Savior, also will be celebrated with special intention for those patriotic Americans and their families, both here at home and in distant lands, who serve and protect our country in difficult times.

And we do live in difficult times, don't we? But hasn't that always been true for God's children? Remember how our traditions and heritage began in the Old Testament.

The first two readings today carry us back to when God chose Abraham as the father of a nation, and called him to set out in faith for an unknown land. Four centuries later Moses went up the mountain, and received God's laws that would govern the Hebrew people God had chosen.

Then the Gospel offered Jesus' teachings from his Sermon on the Mount as he began his ministry; a ministry that eventually would extend to all people the blessings that God first gave to Abraham and Moses, and would offer all people the Christian hope of living with God forever.

I believe that over those last two thousand years evil and injustice have been tempered by the godly precepts of Jesus' teachings. The world has become less barbaric and more civilized even though we still see violence. But things are getting better as God's kingdom comes nearer.

There are, however, two troubling aspects of that progress. One is the secular world's growing resistance to the things of God, advocated by means of the freedom and equality we celebrate today. The other is the erosion of Biblical authority, advanced by the idea that the Bible can be revised to accommodate contemporary agendas rather than being the unchanging Word of God.

II.

Today is a good day to raise these matters. We're sitting here in church on the Fourth of July weekend. The church's role in society is a natural topic to be considered. If not now, when?

And perhaps you will indulge me because for Susan and me this is our fifth anniversary with you. We both believed St. Thomas would be a special place when we came in 2006, and that certainly has proven to be the case. So, having already mentioned today's readings, I would like to do something different and venture into contemporary issues of church and state.

We can begin with the somber reality that many people say the church should stay out of public affairs, and the Bible should not be part of the secular world. They advocate a strict separation of church and state that, in my view, never was intended by the founders of our nation.

Let's reflect upon that for a moment. You have an insert in your service bulletin, distributed by the Episcopal News Service for the Fourth of July last year, that recounts the history of prayer in Congress, and establishment of the Office of the Chaplains for the U.S. House and Senate.

And it begins with a quote from Benjamin Franklin, who was principally noted for his devotion to science and logic rather than spiritual things. Yet, Franklin affirmed the overarching role of God in human affairs and the need for Congress to honor God in prayer before each daily session.

Some people overlook that, don't they? They quote the U.S. constitution for the proposition that church and state are entirely separate, and that religion should be excluded from public life.

But there is a slight problem with that. The words "separation of church and state" are not in the Constitution or Bill of Rights. A lot of people think otherwise. In a survey that was part of the 1991 Bicentennial of the Bill of Rights, sixty-nine percent of those surveyed thought the words "separation of church and state" actually were written in the law.

That is not the case. The First Amendment religion clause says only that "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Two simple parts. Sixteen words. Congress shall not establish religion. Congress shall not prohibit it.

So why is this an issue today? There are two reasons. One is the claim that strict separation of church and state was intended from the beginning of our nation. The other is the belief that the intent of our nation's founders is no longer relevant, and the constitution, as well as the Bible, should be flexibly interpreted to reflect changes in contemporary thinking.

Let's look at the first point. Those who say strict separation always was intended usually point to a casual statement by Thomas Jefferson, who we know was a patriot. He was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence we celebrate today.

But we also should remember something else about Jefferson. He did not write the Constitution or Bill of Rights. He was America's Ambassador to France at the time, and did not participate in drafting or debate. He was not even in the country when those historic documents were formed.

Nevertheless, several years after the Bill of Rights debate was over, Jefferson responded to a letter from a religious group in Connecticut. They thought the religion clause should not even be in the Bill of Rights because it implied that individual rights to exercise religious beliefs are based on government permission, which also could mean that such permission could be withdrawn.

Jefferson replied and said they should not worry because the "wall of separation between church and state" would prevent the government from interfering with the free exercise of religion.

But we should note that Jefferson never used that phrase before in his writings and never used it again. If he had, historians would have found it. Jefferson's voluminous papers have been thoroughly studied for over two hundred years, and are on the University of Virginia website.

And while his papers are clear that he supported religious freedom, he used the term "separation of church and state" only on that one occasion, in a private letter to a group seeking reassurance. He never publicly used it in a speech or any other forum where policy might be expressed.

In fact, history shows that neither Jefferson nor the other nation's founders intended a literal separation of church and state at all. Instead, they wanted to ensure that government could not create a state religion, or impose religious requirements upon public service or in private life.

But nothing suggests the First Amendment was intended to restrict religious expression. The phrase "separation of church and state" related to government power not to private rights.

III.

Think about this, for example. Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia, which is a state institution. What if the commencement speaker had offered a prayer at the first graduation

ceremony? Would Jefferson have said it was unconstitutional? What if someone wanted to put a manger scene on university grounds at Christmas? Would he have said it was not lawful?

I believe Jefferson would not have opposed either activity, and certainly would not have thought they had constitutional implications. In fact, history shows that both Jefferson and James Madison supported a plan for students at the university to attend religious services each morning.

And as evidence that church and state were intended to work together, that's the way it actually continued for over one hundred fifty years. God and government coexisted. That would not have happened if Jefferson, Franklin, and others had planned it to be otherwise.

But that's not the way it is now, is it? The Supreme Court took Thomas Jefferson's words out of context and rapidly changed everything within the lifetimes of many people here today. The far-reaching effects of Supreme Court decisions during the last half of the twentieth century, especially early in that period, cannot be reconciled with the principles of our national origins.

Even so, some people believe that our founders' original intent no longer is important. They say the constitution should be interpreted to reflect changing societal values. The problem with that is that as values become vague, or relative, or permissive, then the constitution itself would be understood in those ways. But the purpose of a constitution is to establish enduring standards.

So, in either event, we see the church being marginalized within society. We acknowledge that the Bible cannot take precedence over the Constitution, but the Constitution frequently is used to suppress the voluntary expression of religious ideas. The street no longer runs both ways.

I said earlier the world has become more civilized, which is good. But progress has come at the expense of faith that sustained our ancestors in more dangerous times. It seems as people feel safer they move God out of public life and relegate him to certain buildings on Sunday mornings.

And we could come up many examples consumer Christianity and tour bus spirituality. But the more examples we hear, the more discouraged we might become. And so I will not dampen our enthusiasm for the celebrations that are part of this day with a litany of troubling realities.

IV.

Rather, I would ask that you imagine yourself in front of a TV set, perhaps surfing the channels, and you see the President making a speech, or a Senator, or Member of Congress, either Democrat or Republican, and you stop and watch because the speaker is discussing religion.

And you hear that person say, "America was born to exemplify that devotion to the elements of righteousness, which are derived from the revelations of Holy Scriptures. Part of the destiny of Americans lies in their daily perusal of this great book of revelations. If they would see America free and pure they will make their own spirits free and pure by this baptism of the Holy Spirit."

That was not one of the nation's founders, but rather President Woodrow Wilson. My parents were alive when he said that. Would any public official dare to say it now? But it is the truth.

And here is another truth from the words of Patrick Henry, a brave American who helped inspire the Declaration of Independence. He said, "This great nation was founded, not by religionists, but by Christians; not on religions, but on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For this very reason peoples of other faiths have been afforded asylum, prosperity, and freedom of worship."

And so Lord, today and in the days to come, we turn to you. If we ever have needed you, it's now. We pray that you give us, and our nation, strength for the journey ahead. We reach out to you Lord. Renew us and revive us, in our own hearts and in the hearts of our leaders. Give us your hand and show us your way. *Amen.*