

In the Cause of Liberty

sermon digest

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Acts 5:22-39
carolyn dipboye

Share with me, if you will, a prayer that comes to us from the troubled region of Sudan, Africa.

Lord Jesus, many of us are waiting for you: the war-torn are waiting for peace, the hungry are waiting for bread. the refugees are waiting for a homeland, the sick are waiting for healers. Have you forgotten us? O Lord, come quickly, we pray. Amen.

We held our breath in January as the people of southern Sudan acted with courage and went to the polls to vote. Knowing the risk of retributive violence, they nevertheless voted overwhelmingly for independence. We couldn't help but stand in awe of their courage in reaching out for a future with hope. After 22 years of civil war, they have almost no infrastructure left, and they are haunted by appalling health issues. Some 75 percent of them have no access to medical care. One in seven women dies in childbirth. Malnutrition and disease are constants. Even now, the renewal of violence has forced tens of thousands from their homes. And yet they wait and dare to hope—the war-torn, the hungry, the refugees, the sick.

Tomorrow on our Independence Day, Anita Henderlight, Executive Director of the Africa Education and Leadership Initiative, will board a plane to return to South Sudan in order to be present for its first Independence Day as the world's newest nation is birthed. Keep her and the Sudanese people in your prayers during these days fraught with hope, but also danger.

The church of Jesus Christ stands on the side of liberty. “Have you forgotten us, Lord?” How many peoples have prayed that prayer through the ages? Surely, Jews along with gays, gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, the physically and mentally disabled, political dissidents, the Confessing Church and others targeted under Hitler. Surely the millions who have suffered in other holocausts of the last century: the Armenians under the Turks; the Cambodians under the Khmer Rouge; the Kurds under Saddam Hussein; Muslims and ethnic Albanians under the Serbs; Tutsis in Rwanda; and more recently villages systematically targeted for extinction by the Janjaweed (literally, “devils on horseback”) in Darfur, north Sudan.

Dragged to jail for the third time since their brief preaching career had begun, Peter and the apostles prescribed for us the protocol for the way the church responds to the villains of any day: “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” Far from something new, it is the unanimous witness of scripture, both old and new. It is a reminder of Moses before Pharaoh, Elijah before Ahab and Jezebel, the legendary Daniel before Nebuchadnezzar, and John the Baptist before Herod. It is a reminder of the maxim of Jesus: “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's” [Mt. 22:21] and the converse of that: Do not give to Caesar, the things that are God's. Do not give to Caesar the loyalty that is God's alone.

“We gave you strict orders not to teach in [Jesus'] name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching,” the high priest angrily charged. “We must obey God rather than human authority,” Peter and the apostles answered. The council, Acts says, was “enraged”. Charged with the task of keeping peace under the gaze of Rome, these leaders had seen a smoldering flame about to break out. Moving expeditiously to contain a potentially dangerous situation, they had recognized the necessity of silencing Jesus, only to be faced with the outbreak of a raging flame at Pentecost that was now spreading through the streets of Jerusalem. Who could blame them for being concerned? Charged with keeping the peace, they now looked on as these upstarts threatened to upset everything, risking the wrath of Rome upon them all.

“It is easy,” Baptist historian Walter Shurden suggests, “to ‘holler’ freedom when you are the one who does not have it. It is a more principled position, however, to cry for freedom when you are in the majority but now lift your voice on behalf of new minorities” [Walter Shurden, *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: Religious Liberty*, 20]. Emerging minorities, you see, have a way of upsetting a very comfortable status quo. They must be contained.

If Peter and the apostles give us a principle undergirding the right and the responsibility of civil and religious disobedience in the name of the wider freedom of God, the revered Gamaliel gives us a principle undergirding the freedom of those who are different from us, those who are a part of the disrespected minority rather than the respected and empowered majority. Rabban (meaning “our Great One”) Gamaliel, reputedly the grandson of the famous teacher Hillel, is named at one other point in Christian scripture as the teacher of Paul. He was so widely respected that later Jewish tradition claimed that when Gamaliel died, “respect for the Torah ceased; and purity and abstinence died at the same time” (Sota 9.15).

Calling the council to remember other instances of would-be messiahs, Gamaliel pointed to the flash in the pan caused by a Theudas and then Judas the Galilean. Both had rounded up sizable followings, which had vanished from the face of the earth as each man died. “So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” (5:38-

39).

Jesus himself gave similar counsel. A householder had a field planted with wheat. An enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, weeds that were so like the wheat that they did not become obvious until the wheat began bearing grain. "What do you want us to do?" them man's servants asked. "Do you want us to go and pull the weeds up?" "No," the householder replied, "for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest." (Mt. 13:24-30).

The patient householder, the central figure in the parable, not unlike Gamaliel, recognized the difficulty of trusting our limited human capacity for distinguishing that which should be uprooted from that which should be left in place. "Let them grow together," Jesus counsels his disciples. Trust God and God alone with such an awesome responsibility.

Interestingly, Matthew is the only Gospel that tells the parable of the weeds sown among the wheat. Perhaps Matthew, that Gospel written with the church particularly in mind, knew too well the danger of the overzealous gardener, who in a weeding frenzy, dismembers the church itself. Church history has certainly demonstrated that truth for us. The apostles and early Christians, seeking a place to stand in the midst of persecution, would be replaced in the third century by a church that would increasingly move toward the posture of "error has no rights." Through the centuries nothing has stained the church's credibility and the witness of the Christian faith any more than the long string of heresy trials within the church and the tragic crusades against perceived enemies outside the church. The church is never in more danger than when it is amassing power to wipe out or place under strict house arrest those who would speak a new word.

Speaking from the steps of the U.S. Capitol May 16, 1920, Baptist pastor George W. Truett, spoke to call his denomination and his country back to their foundations rooted in religious liberty. Religious liberty, he pronounced, "is the natural and fundamental and indefeasible right of every human being to worship God or not, according to the dictates of his conscience, and, as long as he does not infringe upon the rights of others, he is to be held accountable alone to God for all religious beliefs and practices." Liberty, he went on to say, is more than mere toleration. "Toleration implies that somebody falsely claims the right to tolerate. Toleration is a concession, while liberty is a right. Toleration is a matter of expediency, while liberty is a matter of principle. Toleration is a gift from people, while liberty is a gift from God" [In Shurden, *Religious Liberty*, p. 63].

We tolerate a headache, a toothache, but we must do more than merely tolerate our neighbor who is different from us

"Religion must be forever voluntary and uncoerced . . . it is not the prerogative of any power, whether civil or ecclesiastical, to compel men to conform to any religious creed or form of worship, or to pay taxes for the support of a religious organization to which they do not believe. God wants free worshipers and no other kind" [Truett].

And in the words of our own Grace Covenant: "We support a free church in a free state, advocating religious liberty through the separation of church and state and meticulously seeking to avoid using or being used by government authorities."

The cause of liberty is a continuing struggle. Silence is not an option. Speaking to the parable of the weeds among the wheat, John Killenger notes something else. The parable is situated as one of three parables in Matthew, which, he suggests, speak to a common theme. Like the accompanying parables of the mustard and leaven, the parable of the weeds and wheat speaks of the Kingdom of God growing quietly, unobtrusively, and then one day becoming apparent to all [*Devotional Guide to the Gospels*, 50]. If the parable spoke against the destructive excesses of a militant church, it also speaks to the church that faithfully carries out its mission in the midst of seemingly overwhelming odds. It speaks to the church of every age that heroically and consistently stands against the tides of society and church in the name of liberty and justice.

It speaks to the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany issuing its Barmen Declaration in the face of the apparent capitulation of the German Church to the rule and purposes of Hitler. The church, the Confessing Christians insisted was answerable to one Lord and only one Lord: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death."

It speaks of 150 clergy leaders who in the midst of the deepening crisis of 1985 stepped forward to criticize a church too timid to throw its unequivocal support behind those being mowed down in the streets and obliterated in the black townships. The group's Kairos Document spoke a "KAIROS, the moment of grace and opportunity, the favorable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action."

It is a dangerous time because, if this opportunity is missed, and allowed to pass by, the loss for the Church, for the Gospel and for all the people of South Africa will be immeasurable. Jesus wept over

Jerusalem. He wept over the tragedy of the destruction of the city and the massacre of the people that was imminent, "and all because you did not recognize your opportunity (KAIROS) when God offered it" (Lk 19: 44).

It speaks, too, of the persistent, daily efforts of those within our own country who seek to stand against a tide of suspicion and fear to call us back to the founding principle of religious liberty which undergirds our nation. From our first year together as a congregation until this very moment, Grace Covenant Church has sought to uphold its commitment to "a free church in a free state" and "religious liberty through the separation of church and state" as we have spoken to issues locally and partnered with the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and The Interfaith Alliance. Following last summer's heated confrontations over how much freedom we can allow our Muslim neighbors, a rash of bills in state legislatures seeking to place restrictions on the Islamic faith and hearings convened in Congress to investigate mosques and Muslim community centers, BJC Executive Director J. Brent Walker and Welton Gaddy, President of The Interfaith Alliance joined other faith leaders in calling our citizens and our political leaders back to the "bedrock American principles" of pluralism and religious freedom, mutuality and respect. In a document entitled "Shoulder-to-Shoulder," they called upon "all communities of faith and people of good will throughout this country, to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in communities of growing awareness, trust and hope." "As faith leaders, we are committed to building a future in which extremism is an artifact of the past, and where religious identity is not the cause of hostility but of acceptance. This country's spiritual, religious and ethnic diversity serves to enrich our public discourse. When our public discourse is enriched, extremism is seldom given quarter."

In 1943, as the world was caught up in war, Randall Thompson released his "Testament of Freedom," built upon the words of Thomas Jefferson in celebration of the bicentennial of Jefferson's birth. It rapidly spread across a war-weary country and world. The central theme of the music is probably most memorable to those of us who have sung or heard it: "The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time; the hand of force may destroy but cannot disjoin them."

The cause of religious liberty persists in every generation. Let us be found vigilant in all times and in all places and on behalf of all people in its support.