

SERMON
 First Lutheran Church
 Aitkin, Minnesota
 July 13, 2014

FREEDOM OF RELIGION
 John 18:33-37
 John 19:12-16
 Matthew 22:15-22
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen

KIDS' MESSAGE

Kids, what holiday did we Americans celebrate last week? **4th of July!** The Fourth of July is America's "**freedom day.**" Here's a saying for you to think about. "**Freedom comes with responsibility.**" Woe, what does that mean? It means something like this. The older you get as kids, the more things your parents let you do. These might include being old enough to help set the table, to play outside by yourself, to ride a two-wheeled bike, to walk across the street by yourself or maybe to stay overnight at a friend's house. As you get older, your parents are giving you more and more "**freedom**" to make your own decisions and to do special things. However, if you don't do these things safely and nicely, they may not let you do them again. If they see you crossing the street without looking both ways, they might say, "No more crossing the street by yourself for you."

When I say "**freedom comes with responsibility,**" it means that when we are given freedom to do things by ourselves, we need to do them in the best way that we can so that we don't waste or lose our freedom. Freedom is a good thing and we need to take good care of it.

I'm glad that you were all able to be **here for worship today.** In some countries, people are not allowed to go to church, to read the Bible or to pray. Here in the United States of America, we are **free to be Christian** in our own homes and wherever we go. But, freedom doesn't help if we don't use it. Many people choose not to worship God, to pray or to read God's Word. They are free to do that too, but choose not to. I'm glad that we are all here worshipping God today. We have the freedom to worship God and when we come here, we are using that wonderful freedom. To use that freedom more fully, we also can worship God at home. I'd like to teach you a little song that you can use at home to worship God, maybe at meal time, maybe with your parents. Please learn the words and sing along with me. Thanks be to God for giving us this free country to worship in. Amen.

Song – "**For health and strength and daily food, we praise your name O God.**" (Song is in take-home Prayer Folders.)

ADULT MESSAGE

Our **celebration of the Fourth of July** is past for another year. But we still have freedom of religion to celebrate. Let's focus on that great gift today. I speak not as some college history professor or as a doctor of theology in some seminary. I speak rather as a north woods pastor who sees himself as blessed to be a Christian and blessed to be a citizen of the United States of America. And I pose this question: **"Here in the USA, do we have the freedom to practice our faith as we choose, or as someone else requires us to practice it?"**

As we begin, I have some brief quotes to share with you. They come from "**The Golden Book HISTORY of the UNITED STATES**," published over 50 years ago and purchased by my parents for \$.35/volume, one book at a time from our local Super Value grocery store. Under "**Important Dates and Events to Remember, 986-1701**," we are told that in 986, **Bjarni Heriulfsson** was blown off course en route to Greenland and became the first white man to view North America. I suspect that Lena had sent him out for milk and he got distracted... By 1000, **Leif the Lucky** came here from Norway, via Greenland and spent 3 years exploring from northern Maine to southern Massachusetts. Somewhere along the line, he probably sent out a search party to Kensington, Minnesota. 492 years later, **Christopher Columbus** showed up and claimed that **he discovered America**... I don't get that...

A little more seriously now, please note a few highlights from the early colonial days of this nation.

- 1620 – The Pilgrims arrive (Mayflower) seeking "religious freedom..."
- 1630 – Puritans found Boston...
- 1633 – Dissatisfied with Puritan codes, many leave Massachusetts...
- 1634 – Catholics and Protestants settle together in Maryland, realizing Lord Baltimore's dream of a colony with religious freedom...
- 1636 – Roger Williams is banished from Massachusetts for "religious liberalism" and forms a new colony at Providence, Rhode Island...
- 1640 – The Bay Psalm Book becomes the first book printed in America.
- 1649 – "Act Concerning Religion" granting religious freedom is passed in Maryland...
- 1658 – New England Confederation denies Quakers the right to worship in its colonies...

The Pilgrims, Puritans and Quakers all came here hoping to have freedom of religion, but it took time, commitment and struggle to achieve it – for themselves and then to allow others to enjoy it as well.

Today, in this great United States, we hear a lot about the separation between church and state. Two thousand years ago, Jesus was on trial for his life before Pontius Pilate. Pilate asked Jesus if he was king of the Jews. Jesus answered, **“My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”** (John 18:36) Are there two different kingdoms?

When challenged as to whether it was right to pay taxes to Caesar, the emperor of the occupying Roman nation, Jesus responded, **“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s”** (Matthew 22:21) Jesus forced them to think for themselves about what belongs to God versus what belongs to earthly rulers/governments. How do God and government work in your life?

Again, when Jesus stood before Pilate, the Jewish leaders and the people, that Roman governor said, **“Shall I crucify your king?’ The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but the emperor.’ Then Pilate handed Jesus over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus...”** (John 19:14)

In these texts, the “religious people/leaders” used political/governmental authority to eliminate their opponent Jesus, the Son of God. The Jewish leaders set Jesus up. Pilate sold him out and the crowds mindlessly followed. Religion and the state walked hand in hand even though they were themselves enemies of each other... And Jesus went to the criminal’s cross.

After Jesus’ resurrection and the start of the early Christian church, the Jews used Roman authority to arrest and stone to death early Christians. The Apostle Paul actually was in charge of the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Paul was a very religious Jew who thought that he was doing God’s will at the time. He changed. This was the time where Christians were fed to the lions, where Christian worship was held secretly in the catacombs/grave yards beneath the city of Rome. In 312 A.D., Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian, made Christianity legal and even declared it the official religion of the empire. What followed from

that were powerful Christian bishops, popes and kings who were seen as divine representatives of God in the world. Thousands were killed, century after century, for not seeing eye-to-eye with some religious leader/position.

By Martin Luther's day, in the 1500s, most everyone in Europe was Roman Catholic. Emperor Charles V ruled over hundreds of tiny feudal states with their individual princes. When Luther was kicked out of the Roman Catholic Church, the German princes rescued him, promoted his teachings and used them to start a revolution to get out from under Charles V. Later when the peasants revolted against their own princes, Luther, with his high respect for authority, given by God, said the princes should slaughter the peasants and they did, by the thousands... Too late Luther saw the error in his judgment. He also spoke against the Jews, and Hitler, centuries later, used Luther's words to help justify the Nazi extermination of the Jews. Should church and state be joined? Should one tell the other what to do?

Luther taught that there are two kingdoms in which we as Christians live. **"There is a secular, worldly realm or kingdom that uses government and laws to keep order. There is also a spiritual realm, directed by God and the gospel. Christians live in both kingdoms, but our first allegiance/commitment is always to the kingdom of God."** (On Mark 12:13-17, Lutheran Study Bible notes, pg. 1683.) We are citizens in the world of states and nations needing law and order. We are also citizens in the kingdom of God where faith, hope and love rule supremely. **God rules Christian lives and the entire creation!**

Thomas Jefferson's words, etched into the wall of his memorial in Washington, D.C. put it this way, **"We hold these truths to be self-evident. That all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights governments are instituted among men. We solemnly publish and declare that these colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states---and for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, we mutually pledge our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honour."**

Also etched into those walls are these words of Jefferson, **"Almighty God hath created the mind free - all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burthens---are a departure from the plan of the Holy**

Author of our religion---No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship or ministry or shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief...

Eventually the leaders of this nation wrote the Constitution and the Bill of Rights followed. You may recall the First Amendment, **“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”** The Supreme Court has ruled on the meaning of these words again and again. If this simple north woods pastor understands their ruling correctly, **the state/government can’t INTERFERE in anyone’s religious beliefs or practices.** If I understand things correctly, **we live in a country where the MAJORITY RULES through elected representatives, but the MINORITY IS ALWAYS PROTECTED, even down to one individual.**

Students can still pray at school. They just can’t be led in organized prayer by some teacher. I am glad that my kids weren’t taught about prayer by some Jehovah’s Witness. There can still be religious displays, just not on public property. It seems current displays can remain if they have taken on a cultural significance. My taxes won’t pay to put up a Buddha shrine at the court house. There can be Christian chaplains in the military, as long as chaplains can be provided by other religions as well. There can be Christian music in our schools as long as it can be shown to be classical examples of quality art. It still says, “In God we trust” on our coins. But it doesn’t say which God. Tax exempt religious groups can’t campaign for or against the government or for certain candidates, but Christian **individuals can and should.** And in this free country, we can **safely debate** all of this!

FOR CENTURIES PEOPLE HAVE BEEN TRYING TO LEGISLATE CHRISTIANITY THROUGH GOVERNMENT ACTION. In Luther’s day, when a German prince decided to convert from Roman Catholic to Lutheran, his whole state had to become Lutheran. In Hitler’s day, he took over the state church and pastors who preached against what he was doing lost their jobs and maybe their lives. In the Scandinavian countries, every person had to be baptized in order to be a citizen. They all had to pay taxes to support the church and pay the pastor’s salaries. Now the Scandinavian churches, even though everyone is officially a member, sit empty on Sundays. **Jesus is looking for hearts given in faith, not for names listed in some official registry.** Jesus Christ has powerful good

news that gives hope and change lives. We Christians need to share Jesus with our world. It's not our government's business to do that.

We live in a free country. **FREEDOM COMES WITH RESPONSIBILITY!** We **can't count upon the state** to do our Kingdom of God work, our faith work for us. The **government** has the responsibility to preserve life and to maintain law and order. The **Christian Church**, we, have the **responsibility to share God's Word** for our world.

- In our churches – faithful worship, education, fellowship and service.
- In our homes – faithful prayer, devotions and faith conversations.
- In our community and world – faithful living, witness and caring.

We have earth and neighbor care to do in the worldly kingdom. We have God and spiritual care to do in the Godly kingdom.

- When we baptize our children – to keep our promises to raise them in the faith.
- When we get married, bound together by God – to claim God's blessing and to seek God's will and support for our lives together.
- When we pray for ourselves – to pray for others.
- When we pray for our nation – to pray for the nations of the world.
- When understanding, compassion or forgiveness is needed – to give it.
- When God calls us to be Christ's hands and feet in the world – to do it.

Luther said, "**A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all...**" He went on, "**Behold, from faith thus flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a joyful, willing and free mind that serves one's neighbor willingly and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss.**" (Martin Luther, 1520) **Christ** gives us freedom. **Faith in Christ** calls us to love and serve the neighbor in both kingdoms.

Lutherans live under worldly authority, honor the government and do worldly work and duty. It is okay for us to disagree and to work for change in our nation if needed. Lutherans worship God above all earthly authority. We live out our Christian faith. We serve. We do kingdom work and offer thanks to God. It is okay to disagree and to work for change in churches if needed as well. **Each of us is responsible directly to God in Christ.** On

the Fourth of July and every day, we citizens of the USA give thanks to God for this free land. Today we citizens of the Kingdom of God live our lives to the fullest in the grace and love of God and look forward to the day when every head shall bow in adoration and thanksgiving before the Lord of all creation. Amen.