



Pastor Ken's Sermon

**SERMON – 6TH PENTECOST
EZEKIEL 2:1-6 AND MARK 6:1-6
JULY 4, 2021
“SAY TO THESE PEOPLE...!”**

In 1535, Sir Thomas More was executed by King Henry VIII. Saint Thomas, as he eventually became, had been quite the English citizen – having served as Speaker of the House of Commons before becoming Henry’s “Lord Chancellor.” More was an eloquent public speaker. Perhaps Thomas valued speech too much – believing passionately that it should be free even in a monarchy. Ironically it was something Thomas didn’t say that led to his demise - he refused, as a Catholic, to swear an oath, called the Act of Supremacy, that had made Henry, of all people the head of the Church of England.

Concerned about what Thomas might say about him before he died, King Henry is said to have sent word saying; *“the king’s pleasure is further that at your execution you shall not use too many words.”* Nice guy that Henry! Thomas complied, and aside from forgiving the man who carried out the king’s order, said only; *“I die the King’s good servant, and God’s first.”* If one wanted a Christian definition of “civic citizenship” we could do no better than those 9 words...they may express precisely what Paul had in mind when he said, in Philippians 3:20 *“our citizenship is in heaven, and from there we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

It’s useful to consider that More did more than defy the King – a splendid little tradition that this time of year we colonists like to pat ourselves on the back for having done too. Thomas More, and contemporaries of his like Martin Luther insisted that what you believe you also ought to be able to say, and this was certainly not the case in Luther’s Germany or More’s England. Luther tussled with the Pope and his political representatives, something that was neither easy or safe. More pitted himself against a king who had more or less “established himself” as the “pope in England” and of his own “Anglican Church.”

Which may very well be why some 256 years later, in 1791, the United States placed an “anti-establishment” clause regarding religion in our Constitution. With Luther, Thomas More and others like John Milton, although not entirely with the same motivation, the framers of our nation’s Constitution, which initially only mentioned religion once – adopted an amendment saying Congress *“shall pass no law respecting an establishment of religion.”* King Henry and his successors had other troubles with religion and speech even after he dispatched Thomas More – and they all tried earnestly to stamp out “non-conformist religious speech” from More’s Catholics and later those troublesome “Puritans.” So, America has an amendment that forbids congress from passing a law *“prohibiting the free exercise of religion.”*

But those blasted Puritans and Catholics in England wouldn’t let up, the nerve of them, so they were prosecuted for it, which is also why we have in our First Amendment words that say *“congress shall make no law abridging... freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the right to peaceably assemble* – a wonderful legacy of freedoms those English religious dissenters who wanted to preach in public, assemble in their churches, and print up tracts and pamphlets to hand out bequeathed us!

When we talk about “civic citizenship” it is helpful to remember that for much of our nation’s early history it was religion, not politics that served as the driving force for the right to speak about what you believe. That urge has not really gone away, and may be needed more than ever!

From the beginning all that God made was made when he spoke. Jews and we their Christian descendants have a high regard for speech. The Bible says in Romans 10:17 that *“faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard is the word (preaching) of Christ.”* In our Old Testament reading God sent to his nation Israel the prophet Ezekiel and said to him *“speak to these people, this is what the Sovereign Lord says...”* Jesus, far more than what he did, got in hot water for what he said – as our Gospel reading today portrays.

That our nation intended to “separate religion from government”- put a wall between it as Thomas Jefferson metaphorically stated, was a wise thing. God did that too. In the Old Testament God clearly set apart priests to do priestly stuff, and when Israel got kings, God forbade them from doing priestly stuff. Israel’s first king Saul got considerably more than a slap on the wrist from God for transgressing that boundary – it cost him his kingship and eventually his life. It’s understandable when Christian citizens want space in the public square to say the things we believe, and by and large, thankfully, I’d say we still have it. There are indeed ominous signs that suggest some would like the government to “jump that wall” and restrict or influence what we say. The irony may be that the thing that so often frustrates when we, for example, want to pray in schools, may well be the thing that affords Christian citizens protection. Time will tell.

No doubt that in other so called “public squares” faith in general and our faith in particular have fallen into disfavor. There is no doubt the founders of this nation believed, even if some of them were not at all “believers” that a nation is not only well served by the faith of its people but may not be able to ensure liberty and justice for all without it. George Washington said; *“true religion affords to government it’s surest support.”* But I for one don’t want the government to try to determine what “true” means, or “establish” a religion for me – even if we conclude that the government is becoming rather stingy about allowing citizens the “free exercise” of faith.

I would love city hall, the state legislature, the media, entertainment and sports industry, business, education and all those other public squares to be Christian – but, and this is a struggle perhaps you share with me, they were not designed to be – even if at least some of them fall under the realm of God’s “left-handed kingdom”, the rule of God through the political realm. On this Independence Day, even if disheartened by the moral erosion of our public squares, recall that while it was “we the people” who created this nation – sinners in other words, not God, we can yet, borrowing words from Psalm 46, still say God is “in the midst of her.”

God is, because God in Jesus is in you! And so “we the Christian people” of this land dare say what we believe – nothing so important as that we have a God who loves sinners. Jesus came, as our gospel lesson says, to his own people, “and they took offense at him.” Sounds to me, fellow Christian citizen, like we’re in pretty good company. Let this Celebration of our freedom as civic citizens find us all the more thankful to have a Savior like that, who makes a person truly free. AMEN