

Sermon Text: Mark 5:21-43

The story is told about a machinist with Ford Motor Company in Detroit, who had, you know, “borrowed” some parts and tools from the company over the years, and never returned them. Now, this happened a lot with a lot of employees, and this one machinist though experienced a Christian conversion, and he was baptized, and he took his faith seriously, so the very next day, Monday morning, he arrived at work loaded down with all the parts that he had “borrowed” and all the tools that he had “borrowed” over the years. He explained the situation to his foreman, and he asked to be forgiven. Well, the foreman was so astonished that he cabled Mr. Ford himself, who was visiting an assembly plant in Europe. He explained the entire event in detail. Henry Ford immediately cabled the foreman back. He said, “I want you to dam up the entire Detroit River, and baptize the whole city!”

Now, would that make Detroit Christian? No. Salvation, forgiveness, and hope come one soul at a time. Imagine the woman in the Gospel lesson today losing a little bit of her life force every day, day by day. She was considered unclean and untouchable because of the way that she was bleeding. Imagine that! She, out of all the crowd, reached out in faith, and touched Jesus. He asked, “Who touched me?” The disciples were a little confused, and said, “What do you mean who touched me? Look at all these people here! What do you mean?” He kept looking. Jesus had somehow felt power go out from Him, and the story gets very odd. She losing power, day by day, touched Him in faith, and you know the rest. She was healed, and by her faith. That’s what Jesus said, “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace.”

Power leaves us day by day. When we serve only ourselves, power leaves us day by day. When we believe in ourselves only, and make plans and think about ourselves and our needs and our desires only, power leaves us. The power to be what God intended for us to be. We become more self-centered, more closed off. A self-centered life is the definition of a life of sin. Self-worship, where we see nobody above us, and everybody below us, that is self-worship.

I’m going to switch gears for a little while from Preacher Jim to Professor Jim, and you may think this is a history lesson, but on Independence Sunday, I’m going to give it. I’ve spent 30 years studying the source documents of Colonial American religious history and of the debates of the Constitutional convention, and have read the state constitutions. I feel that I need to say some of these things because of where we are in our country today.

Self-worship does separate you from God and from your fellow citizens, or as Jesus would say, from your neighbors. Who is my neighbor? Anyone in need. Jesus told the Good Samaritan story to make clear that anyone in need is your neighbor – even your enemy. Samaritans and Jews were enemies. That was the point of Jesus’ story. Your neighbor is anyone in need.

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, July 2, 2006

Now, for the history. Our founders were not all Orthodox Christians. Some of them could not say the Apostles' Creed without crossing their fingers, however, they did all believe in God, and that belief in God led to compassion for others and truthfulness and honor, which made them and others, better citizens. Our Constitution says in the First Amendment that religion is no business of the federal government and it will make no laws about it, and it will not establish a national church, but the states were free to establish churches and to tax and build churches and to pay preachers with tax money if they wanted to, and they did for many decades after our Constitution was ratified. This may be news to some of you. We know what they meant because we know what was practiced and written into the state constitutions with no complaints from the Federal level. The story that we hear over and over about our Constitution making us a secular society with a wall of separation that's insurmountable is not true! Neither does a belief in God in general make us Christian.

This place called America was once commonly called in the Colonial days, the New Israel, in fact, Ben Franklin recommended for our national seal, in his own handwriting, “A picture of Moses standing on the shore extending his hand over the sea, causing the sea to overwhelm Pharaoh, who is sitting in an open chariot with a crown on his head and a sword in his hand, and rays from a pillar of fire in the clouds reaching to Moses to express that he act by the command of the deity.” Ben Franklin wrote that himself, that our shield should be that picture. The motto he recommended was, “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.” Atheist? I am not seeing that.

Jefferson also recommended on one side of the seal children of Israel in the wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He of all the founders has been called perhaps an atheist, but I do not think so.

Folks, early America was a God-intoxicated place where theological debate raged from pulpits, some state-supported pulpits and some free church. They argued if this new nation would follow the old European model of state churches or general collation of religious beliefs. There were and had been established churches, intimately connected to each colony, but there was no one church dominant enough to be the national church. So we have no national church, but it was debated, and if it had passed, the leading votes were leaning towards the Episcopal Church. It might have made it.

We are not, as some have described, a secular or atheistic nation in our founding. We never were. Yes, I know full well after 30 years of study of source documents that Jefferson was a deist and some were deist and Unitarians and other branches of Christendom, and some denied the Divinity of Christ. Some waffled a bit here and there, and their church membership is uncertain, but one thing is certain. There were no atheists and no committed secularists, who intended to ban God from public debate! For God was a part of the public debate. This is the truth. As the founders might require me, if I were a witness in court, then so help me God!

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Sunday, July 2, 2006

The First Amendment says two simple things about religion. One, no national church will be established. Two, no national laws will be made to interfere with the free practice of religion in the several states. What is no longer commonly known is that this 1,000-watt spotlight on the founders' intentions, state tax-supported churches continued to exist in several states after the revolution, after the Constitution, and were never ever challenged as violating the National Establishment Clause. That just didn't happen. The state churches continued to exist and to collect taxes and to build church, Christian churches, and to pay ministers with tax money after the fabulously debated First Amendment was passed. That alone, I believe, is evidence enough for anyone. At that time, the clear sense of the intent was freedom of religion and no national church, but the states were free to do as they wished, and they did without legal challenge.

The First Amendment has now somehow been twisted and reframed to make illegal public mention of faith or even in some areas, the carrying of Bibles to school for personal use or public prayer in public places. The phrase we have heard over and over, 'wall of separation', is simply not there. If it had been, then the state tax-supported churches would have been closed down immediately, but they were not.

With all the room to grow in this new nation, new religions and new faiths and denominations sprang up, and most of them were more or less versions of the Christian faith, and it was because of that growth that within the first 50 years after passing the Constitution, all the states did eliminate their official religious establishments, but without the prodding of the Supreme Court and without any lawsuits and without any mention of a wall of separation.

It may be more than chance that just a few years after state-established churches disappeared; "In God We Trust" began to appear on our coins. It was 1864. No, we are not a secular republic, but neither are we Christian just because we are born in America. That defines Christian in way too dilute a way. Somehow, we now live in America, in an America where the freedom of religion has transmuted into a wall of separation that has casting God out of public life, and this concerns me. How odd that a plain effort to protect free exercise has been turned into something that instead limits mention of God in more ways each year. This is not what was intended. Freedom was intended. Freedom is what we celebrate here today and in the next few days at this time of year, freedom of religion. No one was ever guaranteed freedom from religion or from hearing a prayer or seeing a Cross in public or another citizen's Bible on their desk, and yet in some areas, these have been declared to be illegal.

Representative Charles Cotesworth Pinckney at the South Carolina Constitutional ratifying convention said this. He said that Congress had "no power at all to interfere in religion," and see that is the idea which prevailed. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." That was Amendment #1. Have you ever asked yourself why? It was because each state had its own religious flavor and many established churches of their own. The states would not have signed the National Constitution if they had not been guaranteed a hands-off, hands-

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, July 2, 2006

off our religious beliefs from the federal government. How odd that we now live in an America where instead of celebrating tolerance and freedom of religion and public debate, we read stories where valedictory speeches by high school graduates are edited because of the personal use in their personal speech of Jesus' name.

In my public high school, I took my turn reading prayers and morning devotions over the P.A. system, and I do not believe that anyone was injured. No religion was thereby established. I simply as citizen Jim at age 17 read very badly and nervously a devotion over the P.A. for 30 seconds, and some people listened, and some people did not listen, and I do not believe that anyone was injured. That was religious tolerance. That I did it in a public school would not be shocking to the framers of our South Carolina Constitution of 1778. You may be shocked to hear this, but it says in Article 38, “The Christian Protestant religion shall be deemed and is hereby constituted and declared to be the established religion of this state, South Carolina.” Now, by that standard, my devotional prayer might be required, but today, it is illegal. What happened to freedom of religion and freedom of speech, which is also a guarantee in that First Amendment?

By the way, that same article, which spoke of establishment of a church, said the following, it actually defined what kind of church could be established in South Carolina and tax-supported. First, that there is one eternal God in a future state of rewards and punishments. Second, that God is publicly to be worshiped. Third, that the Christian religion is the true religion. Fourth, that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are of divine inspiration and are the rules of faith and practice. Fifth, it is lawful in the duty of every man being called by those who govern to bear witness to that truth. That was in the actual Constitution. A church defined!

Are you getting the picture? In other constitutions, Pennsylvania's and others as well, are you getting the picture? The states spelled out in their own constitutions what they thought freedom of religion meant. The states had state churches just as the European nations had state churches, and the European nations still do. The states had freedom to establish and define bare minimums of what a church was, and they all agreed then that the National Constitution had no right whatsoever over matters of religion in a state.

Now, the remnants of that freedom still exist in our current Constitution. Some of you will be shocked that the current state Constitution, Article 4, Section 2 speaks of the qualifications of the governor, and it says in one sentence, “No person shall be eligible to the office of governor who denies the existence of the Supreme Being.” That's in there today! Also in Arkansas and also in Maryland and also in Pennsylvania and also in North Carolina and also in Tennessee and also in Texas saying historical remnants in their constitutions currently of the state's understanding that they did have the right to define what freedom of religion was in their state. The remnants of at least a belief in God in general as a requirement for state office remained from the time when the Constitution was read, I think, plainly. They illustrate beyond contradiction that separation of church and state as spoken of today is at least a misrepresentation.

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, July 2, 2006

Now, we have always been religious in general and encouraged and expected to seek after truth and God, but you have to become Christian, you as individual have to become Christian on your own. We cannot legislate that any more than we can dam up a river and baptize a city. Many today will carefully quote from John Locke to push the idea that the founders meant to form a completely secular society, but that will not do because, if you read all of John Locke, he said this, “Lastly, those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of a God.” His reasoning goes like this, “Promises and covenants and oaths which are the bonds of human society can have no hold upon an atheist.”

We were founded as a nation along the lines of the European nations from which we sprang with a belief in God in general, but is that enough to make us a Christian nation? You may not be aware that even in the European Union, in 2004, 14 out of the 15 member states then have some sort of state church or established religion or connection with the Vatican, even today. They don’t fully understand what we’re arguing about. Yes, they have established state-supported churches, but I need to tell you, and I have been over there, those churches are pretty much empty! So you may think I’m arguing one way for establishment today. I am not! Those established churches are pretty much empty! They’ve got high membership, but abysmal attendance. A state church is not the way to go. Jesus Himself made a distinction between what we owe Caesar and what we owe God. We owe God our whole hearts and minds and beings and talents and tithes and service and witness. We owe God a public faith that reaches out into the crowd and shines in the darkness and offers help and hope even to our enemies! So just as we have two flags in this sanctuary, one for the government, or in Jesus’ words, “for Caesar” and one for God’s kingdom. We also have two allegiances. That is the truth of the thing. Those allegiances are often intention. We can’t legislate Christian faith. That has already been tried. I hope I have proven that to you. Faith happens one person at a time. Some in this crowd called America harkening back to the Gospel lesson, some in this crowd called America are reaching out for Jesus and some are not. Some hear the story of Jesus offering healing and hope, and they believe, and others react against the very idea that there is such a thing as sin and that they need a Savior or a God at all.

Who touched me, asked Jesus. One outcast who knew there was hope in Him. So it is in America today. We are free, and some reach out for His healing touch, and some have given up hope and wail, and others, I hope this congregation is among them, know their own weakness and know where to find the power to heal and to save and to make what is broken whole again, our souls, ourselves. That power is in Jesus Christ.

Now, I am not ashamed of our history of positive preference of faith in God over atheism, and it does exist. I am not convinced that a whole crowd can get it at once just because of a belief in God in general. Many are called. Few are chosen. Many are offered salvation and hope. Some wail in grief. Some reach out and grab hold. To those, one at a time, Jesus says, “Your faith has made you well.” Amen.