

Sermon: “Freedom of Religion”

Scripture: Daniel 6:10-13

Introduction

The First Amendment of the Constitution grants Freedom of Religion. James Madison was the primary proponent for the First Amendment being the Freedom of Religion. Because the revolution primarily started in the churches of New England, it was agreed that the freedom of the pulpit and freedom of religion be protected in order for there to be opportunity for a grievance of government to be presented.

Last week we shared the works of Rev. John Wise, the Congregational Church of Ipswich, who wrote “A Vindication of the Government of the New England Churches” which was written in 1717. It stated that the people had God given rights for which a King who acted as a tyrant could be held accountable. The framers of the Constitution feared that a democracy was a fragile form of government. Thomas Jefferson expressed that democracy has a life span of 19 years because it must be passed freely from one generation to another. Roger Williams stated that all democracies eventually die out. They understood that a constitution could easily be undone. But what they agreed could not be undone was the First Amendment, which they viewed as sacred because it gave the people the freedom of religion, the freedom of speech, the freedom to peacefully assemble, and the freedom to petition the government for grievances. This was a God given right to a free society.

PART I.

When the colonies were under the rule of the King of England, only clergy who held a license to preach were allowed to have access to the pulpit. A clergy person could be fined and imprisoned for preaching a message that the crown found to be an unfavorable message. That is what happened to Rev. John Wise in Ipswich. When he preached no taxation without representation, his ministerial license was revoked, he was heavily fined and even imprisoned. The town paid his bail and his fine. He continued to preach without a license.

When the British troops sailed for the Americas, they were given a list of radical pastors and churches with the instructions to arrest members of the clergy and if necessary, burn the churches to the ground. Separatist pastors and churches were a threat to the authority of the crown. The King of England, who was the head of the Church of England, ordered the removal of clergy from the pulpit and the burning of churches. The British troops believed they were doing God’s will by arresting certain members of the clergy and burning certain churches.

PART II.

In the House of Representative Chambers at the State House here in Massachusetts there is a mural painting of a colonial legislative body arguing about the signing of the Constitution. Some felt that it was not polished enough or included enough for consensus to be signed by the delegates. The moderator of the meeting is holding a bible in his right hand. The story behind the painting is that John Hancock was not happy with the draft being presented. He wanted more included in it. The moderator, who is holding the Bible, presented the argument that the Constitution would always be a work in progress. He said that the Constitution would never be complete as Jefferson had suggested, but if the people who would amend the Constitution had the Bible, they would know how to amend it appropriately. The story behind the painting suggests it convinced Hancock to sign it with the big signature of John Hancock on the Constitution.

The framers of the Constitution knew that it was not complete and would need to be amended. But if the First Amendment guaranteed the Freedom of Religion, with the help of God it could be amended appropriately. This is why the First Amendment was so important to the framers of the Constitution.

PART III.

Only recently has the conversation in society about the First Amendment morphed into a conversation about the establishment clause. The most recent court cases seem to always focus on separation of church and state regarding the establishment clause of the First Amendment. Because churches generally believe submitting to the authority of Government is the right and respectable thing to do, there have been fewer court cases about restriction of religion in the free exercise clause. What religious organizations and churches can and cannot do is becoming more and more restricted every day. Fines imposed on churches is one of the primary reasons the Declaration of Independence was signed in the first place. There are many violations of the free exercise of religion clause in the First Amendment that go unchecked every day.

Conclusion

From the Book of Daniel, we can see laws that prohibit the Free Exercise of Religion are not good laws. Daniel was fed to the lions for worshiping God against the King's law. But at the end of the story, it was the people who created such a foolish law that prohibited the Free Exercise of Religion who were fed to the lions. Freedom of Religion is a sacred right, and one that we should cherish in a free society. Let us this day celebrate the sacredness of what we have as a nation.