

“To Be a Christian and a Citizen in the Twenty-First Century”

Matthew 28:16-20

Rev. Bill Pinches

Ecumenical Worship Service

Ingham County Courthouse Lawn

Mason, Michigan

July 6, 2008

Introduction

Friday night, my three oldest boys and I walked over to the county fairgrounds for the Fourth of July festivities. We wandered around some while the sun was setting, trying to figure out where to position ourselves to get the best view. We have only been in Mason for about seven weeks, so this was all new to us. We ended up with ringside seats; we were so close to the action that one of my sons asked if we could move back some, so the fireworks weren't right over our heads. But boy, what fireworks! What a dazzling display of pyrotechnics that practically filled our whole range of vision and kept going on and on and on – with one spectacular *boom* after *boom* after *boom*!

A few years ago, my family was in Washington, DC, for a conference that extended over the Fourth of July weekend. On the night of the Fourth, my wife and younger sons stayed at the conference hotel to watch the fireworks on television, but my eldest son and I decided to venture forth right into the heart of the city. We walked through the security gates that had been set up encircling the National Mall, and watched dozens of people play Frisbee under the shadow of the Washington Monument while we ate a picnic dinner. My son and I had arrived early enough that we had plenty of time to explore all the major historic monuments around the Mall and have a leisurely conversation about some of the defining moments in our country's history as we walked. Finally, as dusk approached, we settled ourselves down on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial. From our vantage point, the Washington Monument was straight in front of us, and the White House sat in the distance beyond it. A bit to the left of the Washington Monument, we could see the new World War II Memorial, standing at the east end of the Reflecting Pool. Beyond the Reflecting Pool, hidden by a grove of trees, stood the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Further to the left, across the Tidal Basin, past the FDR Memorial and the Korean War Memorial, we could see the bright glow of the Lincoln Memorial, flanking the west end of the Reflecting Pool. From that vantage point, sitting on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial, with a number of those monuments in our view, we were treated to a wonderful display of fireworks over the Reflecting Pool. It was a spectacular display.

But you know, I gotta say, when it comes to the sheer intensity and duration of the fireworks display, I think Mason may have Washington beat!

The Question

We have gathered ourselves here today to give glory to God. This is a service of Christian worship, yet we are not gathered in a church building but rather on this beautiful lawn in front of this magnificent courthouse. We gather not on private property, but on public property, property that jointly belongs to all of us who live here in Ingham County. On this public property, we are having a service of Christian worship, in the year 2008. In today's world, that's a little remarkable, because as we all know, we are living in a time in which there is quite a bit of concern about how, exactly, we should define the "wall of separation between church and state," to use a phrase coined by Thomas Jefferson over two centuries ago. There are those who feel that church and state should have absolutely nothing to do with each other. There are also those who feel that the views of the church should influence public policy, at all levels – local government, county government, state government, and national government. We live in a turbulent time, a time of significant, polarized conflict in both the political arena and the religious arena. We all may have enjoyed watching the fireworks on Friday night, but if we're honest, we know that there are fireworks that go off routinely in council chambers and meeting rooms and town halls on a regular basis, throughout the year. Watching the fireworks at the county fairgrounds is a lot of fun. Watching the fireworks in a boardroom – well, that's not so much fun.

I would like to offer today, in this service of Christian worship held on public property, some reflections on how we can be *Christians* and how we can be *citizens* simultaneously, in this turbulent world in which we live. I speak as a dedicated Christian, as one who seeks to diligently and faithfully serve Jesus Christ in both word and deed; and I speak as a dedicated citizen, as one who is tremendously thankful for the rights and the privileges we have here in this country and who seeks to embody the ideals upon which our country was founded. I speak with the devoted passion of a preacher of the Christian gospel, and I speak with the zeal of an ardent defender of our nation's founding principles. I speak with some passages from scripture heavy on my mind this morning – passages that include such phrases as "go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) and "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and all your strength" (Mark 12:30 and parallels) and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31 and parallels) and "you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3 and Deuteronomy 5:7) and "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). I also speak with some passages from our nation's heritage heavy on my mind this morning as well – passages that include such phrases as "we hold these truths to be self-evident"¹ and "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof"² and "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth"³ and "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free"⁴ and "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"⁵ This is a sermon, intended to bear witness to Jesus Christ through reflection on a particular passage in scripture, but it's also something more than a sermon, as it is also intended to bear witness to our nation's ideals as expressed in our foundational documents, and to put those ideals in conversation with a particular biblical text - specifically, the mission that Christ gives us to "make disciples of all nations." I speak as a *Christian*, and I speak as a *citizen*, with a great love of both aspects of my dual heritage. Here's the question that drives my

reflections this morning: in this turbulent world in which we live today, how do we faithfully honor *both* our allegiance to Jesus Christ *and* our fidelity to our nation's founding principles, *simultaneously*? How do we be both *faithful Christians* and *faithful citizens* in the 21st century?

To Be a Faithful Christian

Let's start with the first question: how to be a faithful Christian. It seems to me that the answer to this is really quite simple. To be a faithful Christian is to pledge our fidelity to Jesus Christ, and then to live our lives like we *mean* it. In my Presbyterian tradition, when teenagers or adults officially join the church, they are asked a few simple questions that go something like this: Question #1: "Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?" Answer: "I do." Question #2: "Who is your Lord and Savior?" Answer: "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior." Question #3: "Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?" Answer: "I will, with God's help." The three questions are based on a comprehensive understanding of what it is that Jesus Christ asks us to do, grounded in the study of our Christian scriptures and with a well-rounded theological perspective. The questions are, as you may have noticed, pretty demanding. They are sort of like marriage vows. A person joining the church would publicly answer the questions in the affirmative, in front of a whole bunch of witnesses. The questions point to the simple reality that Jesus Christ invites us to pledge our wholehearted, heartfelt commitment to his ways and to the building up of the kingdom of God in the world. It's easy to just say "yes" to questions like these without thinking through the implications of what they mean for the way in which we live our lives. Just like in marriage, it is easy to forget or to neglect the vows that we have made. We are human; we have this natural tendency to stray from the paths of righteousness. We are in constant need of "course correction," to keep steering ourselves back onto the path that we know we ought to follow.

So being a faithful Christian has to do, I believe, with being faithful to the promises that we have publicly made about our fidelity to Jesus Christ. Those promises are worth re-visiting from time to time as we go through the course of our lives. It's worth asking ourselves periodically whether we still intend to live our lives as if those promises matter to us, and what we might do with our time and our talents and our financial resources to live more fully into those promises. I believe that, for every single one of us, there is always *more* that we could do, as individuals and as whole communities, to grow in our faithful devotion to Jesus Christ. To be a faithful Christian, I believe, is to keep that question constantly before us: "What can I do *today* to be even *more* faithful to Jesus Christ than I was *yesterday*?"

So the answer to the question, "how do we faithfully honor our allegiance to Jesus Christ, today?" is, it seems to me, really pretty simple. Are we living up to the promises we have made? If not, what do we need to do about it? With that understanding, we turn now to the second question: "how do we faithfully honor our fidelity to our nation's founding principles, today"?

To Be a Faithful Citizen

As I remember the story of our nation's founding, I notice that our nation was forged in the midst of a revolution in human thinking. A revolution suggesting, among other things, that perhaps there were ways to organize a government other than a monarchy, that perhaps there were rights to which *all* people were entitled, that perhaps it was one of the duties of government to guarantee the people those rights, and that perhaps it was possible to create a nation in which people were free to worship God according to their own beliefs and practices, and not the beliefs and practices of those who happened to be in power. All of these were revolutionary concepts. Our war of independence was a physical battle – a war fought with muskets and cannons – but it was also an ideological battle – a war fought with quills and parchment. One lasting, enduring result of that war of independence was the creation of three remarkable written documents. I am speaking of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. We didn't just break loose from English rule 232 years ago so that we could govern ourselves in the same way. No, we created a *new* country, and a *different* country. We created a nation that was founded not on *power* and *might*, but rather a nation that was founded on *principles* and on *rights*. This building behind me stands as a monument to the fact that we deliberately sought to create a country based on principles of justice for *all*; indeed, when this building was built back in 1904, it was referred to as a "temple of justice." Our nation is founded on *principles* and on *rights*, and time and time again over the course of these past two and a third centuries those principles and rights have been put to the test. Did black slaves count as *people*, or were they merely *property*? Were women entitled to the same rights as men? Those are two of the obvious examples in which we have grappled with enduring implications of the revolutionary statements we made over two centuries ago. There are countless others, and I'm sure you can come up with a few that are being debated right now, in this election year. From age to age the specific questions change, but the fundamental, overarching issue remains: how do we, in the words of the Constitution, "form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity"?⁶

To be a faithful *citizen*, it seems to me, has to do with keeping these foundational principles constantly before us. Just as being a faithful *Christian* has to do with remaining steadfast in our allegiance to Jesus Christ, so does being a faithful *citizen* have to do with remaining steadfast in our fidelity to our nation's founding principles. It is easy to *say* that we serve Jesus Christ, and it is easy to *say* that we honor our nation's founding principles, but in my experience, I'd say that following through on those convictions with our *words* and our *deeds* is not always easy. Things happen in the course of our lives that put challenges in front of us, challenges that test our allegiance to Jesus Christ, challenges that test our fidelity to our nation's founding principles. In this turbulent time in which we live today, it seems to me that we are being greatly challenged on *both* fronts. Here in the early years of the 21st century, how do we remain *steadfastly loyal* to Jesus Christ, and how do we remain *steadfastly loyal* to our nation's founding principles, *simultaneously*?

In the 21st Century

To answer that question, I'd like to take us back in time, back to the 17th and 18th centuries, back to a day when there was a different kind of religious diversity present in this country. Let's step back in time to the era when those thirteen independent colonies had been established on our Atlantic shoreline. The Province of New Hampshire. The Province of Massachusetts Bay. The Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations. Connecticut Colony. The Province of New York. The Province of New Jersey. The Province of Pennsylvania. Delaware Colony. The Province of Maryland. The Colony and Dominion of Virginia. The Province of North Carolina. The Province of South Carolina. The Province of Georgia. Thirteen different colonies with strikingly different religious perspectives. To put it in simple terms, there were Puritans in Massachusetts Bay, Baptists in Rhode Island, Presbyterians in New Jersey and Delaware, Quakers in Pennsylvania, Catholics in Maryland, and Episcopalians in Virginia. Even some Jews in New York City. In that era, there was a *remarkable* degree of diversity in faith perspectives. Most countries, in that time, had an official, established religion. How would it ever work to create one country out of these thirteen colonies where there were such strikingly different religious views? Remember the Salem Witch Trials? Remember that, once upon a time, it was illegal to be a Quaker in the city of Boston? Remember that Roger Williams and Anne Hutchison had been banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony because of their religious views? As we look at the early religious history of America, there was, in certain places, a striking lack of tolerance for people of other faith perspectives. Yet the leaders of the colonies came to learn that, if we were going to survive, we would have to develop a greater degree of tolerance for one another. If those eighteenth-century colonists couldn't learn how to work cooperatively with one another, despite their religious differences, then this country would have been doomed from the start. We would have suffered from the same protracted religious conflicts, persecutions, and even, sometimes, wars that had plagued Europe. If this country of ours was going to make it through its infancy, the people here had to learn how to tolerate and work cooperatively with people whose religious views differed from their own. The fact that they were able to do that – the fact that they were able to rise above their differences – the fact that they were able to work together cooperatively - Puritans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Quakers, Catholics, Episcopalians, and Jews – that fact was one of the major factors that enabled this country to get through its birth pangs and become the diverse place it is today. We must always remember: when the thirteen colonies became one country in the late 1700s, one of the factors that made that possible was the fact that people had learned how to be tolerant and respectful of people whose religious opinions differed from their own.

So if we are going to remain steadfastly loyal to our nation's founding principles in the 21st century, we are going to have to learn how to be tolerant and respectful of people whose religious opinions differ from our own. That can be difficult indeed. Today, the religious landscape of this country seems radically different than it was two and a third centuries ago. Today, the dividing lines between some branches of the Christian faith have diminished tremendously from what they once were, but at the same time, we have a proliferation of other religions – and people of *no* religion – claiming this country as their home. Buddhists. Hindus. Muslims. Bahá'í. And many more. For some among us, the presence of these people with such different views strikes fear in our hearts, the same way that the presence of Quakers once struck fear into the hearts of the Puritans. For others among us,

their presence is really not threatening at all, and adds a bit of interesting spice and flavor to our lives. It's important for us to remember that none of the three foundational documents upon which our country was established – the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights – *none* of them explicitly mentions the word “Jesus”, the word “Christ”, or the word “Christian”. The word “God” is there, and the word “Creator” is there, both of them in the Declaration of Independence, but there are no words in any of those documents that specifically lift up Jesus Christ. Our nation's founders envisioned a “big tent” in which people of different religious perspectives could live together. Maybe they didn't envision Buddhists or Hindus or Muslims, but then, maybe they weren't ready to embrace slaves or women, either. Circumstances change, and we have to figure out how to apply Constitutional principles fairly, in each new generation, in each new set of circumstances.

But what, then, of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Christ bid his disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations,” and many of us who call ourselves Christians would say that that mandate still stands. We are *still* invited to “go and make disciples of all nations.” How do we do that, and do it in ways that honor our nation's founding principles?

You know, I think the answer is really simple.

With our lives.

When we walk the talk, people notice.

Long ago – long, *long* ago, long before this nation was founded, or even dreamed of – in a distant era, on a different continent, in a completely different part of the world, a man named Jesus invited some people to follow him. To leave their ordinary lives behind them and to sit at the foot of a certain spiritual Master. To learn his ways, to absorb his teachings, to let their lives be transformed from the inside out, so that their lives might shine with the light of Jesus Christ, spreading his love in both word and deed to all the world. He never encouraged these people to become crusaders. He never organized them to create legislation that would try to force people to live by his ideals. No, on the contrary, he sent them out on a grass-roots mission to touch the hearts and minds of the people around them. They gathered for worship, and for fellowship, and for teaching, and they were sent out for mission. They learned how to walk the talk.

People noticed.

In the first three centuries of Christianity, when Christianity was a minority religion, feared and mistrusted and sometimes persecuted by many people in power, it grew by leaps and bounds. It wasn't easy to be a Christian in those first few centuries. It demanded a tremendous amount of courage and integrity. It wasn't the “in” thing to do, or to be. It wasn't “popular”. It wasn't “socially acceptable.” Yet those Christians, by and large, knew how to walk the talk, and the gospel spread like wildfire.

“Go therefore,” says Jesus. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” How do we do that, in a nation that values freedom of religious expression?

I think the answer is pretty simple.

With our lives.

When we walk the talk, people notice.

Let's walk the talk, my friends. Let's walk the talk of our Christian faith. Let's be *doers* of the Word, and not merely *hearers*. Let's leave our ordinary lives behind us and sit at the foot of a certain Master. Let's learn his ways, let's absorb his teachings, let's allow our lives to be transformed from the inside out, so that we might shine with the light of Jesus Christ, spreading his love in both word and deed to all the world. Let's walk the talk. Let's *be* disciples of Jesus Christ. In this country, we have the freedom to do that . . . thanks be to God.

¹ From the *Declaration of Independence* (July 4, 1776).

² From the First Amendment to the *Constitution of the United States* (ratified in 1791).

³ From the *Gettysburg Address*, by Abraham Lincoln (November 19, 1863).

⁴ From "The New Colossus," by Emma Lazarus (engraved on a plaque inside the Statue of Liberty in 1903).

⁵ From a Negro spiritual, and quoted by Martin Luther King, Jr., in his "I Have a Dream" speech (August 28, 1963).

⁶ From the Preamble to the *Constitution of the United States* (ratified in 1791).