

Called To Freedom

Sermon by the Rev. J. Edwin, Bacon, Jr., at All Saints Church, September 23, 2007

We have sent messages to all the members of this church, including our new solidarity members, to join us today for a report on recent developments related to the Internal Revenue Service's investigation of our tax-exempt status. Welcome to all of you and thank you for being here.

The context in which I want to make this report is that of the crucial importance of God's precious gift of freedom. Dr. King once said, "There is nothing in all the world greater than freedom. It is worth paying for; it is worth losing a job; it is worth going to jail for. I would rather be a free pauper than a rich slave. I would rather die in abject poverty with my convictions than live in inordinate riches with the lack of self-respect." (King, Jr., Martin Luther, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," address before the First Annual Institute on Non-Violence and Social Change, Montgomery, Alabama, December 1956, in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 144) He later said, "Freedom is necessary for one's selfhood, for one's intrinsic worth." (MLK,jr. Speech, Durham, NC, February 16, 1959)

One of the favorite hymns of both Dr. King and of this faith community of All Saints, Pasadena, is the spiritual, "Oh, Freedom." It sings, "And before I'd be a slave I'd be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free." We will be singing that Spiritual during communion today.

Freedom pulses at the heart of our religion. The sacred meal we share at the center of our community's life, the Eucharist, was in actuality a Freedom Meal, the Passover Seder, which Jesus as an observant Jew shared with his closest friends on their last night together. Passover Seders continue to this day to celebrate the defining moment for Jewish life, for Jesus, and thus for Christians. The core testimony of Jesus as an observant Jew was the Exodus – that formative event in which God showed that God always is listening to human suffering, and will give freedom to those bound by any Pharaoh's oppression and slavery, as long as God can find a colleague like Moses and Jesus.

In the Exodus event, Jesus knew that God always works to reorder social power whenever it means freeing any members of the human family from bondage. Every act of Jesus's ministry was an Exodus event. Jesus was a walking Exodus factory – freeing the sick, the bound, the marginalized, the outcast by the power of God's love for each person to live to be the person God had made them to be.

Jesus consecrated his Last Supper as a Freedom Meal to indicate that God continues to give us freedom from bondage to fear, injustice, violence, oppression, intimidation, prejudice, and every other sin and false god to which the dominating powers would have us submit – even the politics of fear and the fear of death. Therefore since we are freed from fearing death, the only fear worth having is the fear of giving away our freedom or the fear of having our freedom taken from us.

St. Paul says, “For freedom, Christ has set you free so do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. ... For you were called to freedom, brothers, and sisters. (Galatians 5: 1, 13). It is this command we have tried to honor in our responses to the IRS – not to submit ourselves to a yoke of unfreedom even in the context of the politics of fear and intimidation in the ascendancy in the U.S. since 9.11.2001.

But it would be a gross misrepresentation of Judaism, the 8th century prophets, Jesus, and Christianity if you thought that healthy religion is only concerned with our freedom. On the first day of Jesus’s official, public ministry, he went to the synagogue in his hometown on the Sabbath, took the scroll which recorded the prophet Isaiah’s words, and read them. “The Spirit of our God is upon me; because the Most High has anointed me to bring Good News to those who are poor, freedom to those who are held captive, recovery of sight to those who are blind, and to let the oppressed go free – to proclaim the year of Our God’s favor.” Then Jesus preached his first sermon, “Today, this scripture passage is fulfilled.” (Luke 4:14-21). In other words, Jesus was saying, “These words are now embodied in our place and time. My life’s purpose is now to fulfill this scripture passage – to bring freedom to those who are bound and freedom to those who are oppressed. In other words, the heart of Jesus’ ministry was to be a walking living, breathing, embodied Exodus experience for everyone captive, bound, and oppressed. That was the great offense of Jesus to the Roman Empire and any religious authorities complicit with the Empire – that he not only talked about Freedom. He embodied it.

Therefore, the essence of the life of a Christian, and the essence of the life of every person of faith (to my way of thinking) is to be a walking, living, breathing Exodus factory for every brother and sister in the human family who is captive, bound, excluded, and oppressed. If you and I do not do that we are merely having an irrelevant tea party here this morning and we are falling short of our very reason for being – both the proclamation and the embodiment of freedom.

It is into this crucible of commitment to embodied freedom that for more than the past two years we have received attempts by the Internal Revenue Service to curb the freedom of the pulpit, the freedom of religion, the freedom of speech, and the freedom to advocate for embodied freedom for others – freedoms at the core of our faith and worship and freedoms articulated in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.

More than two years ago, the IRS informed us that the sermon of our Rector Emeritus, George Regas, on the Sunday before the 2004 presidential election, violated the IRS regulations against campaign intervention. After we refused to accept the IRS’s interpretation of that sermon and refused to apologize for it, which they advised us to do if we wanted the whole thing to go away, the IRS persisted, generating a chilling effect over the pulpits of America. We chose to fight the IRS’s position over the course of the past two years, but during that period of time when peace advocates have asked certain churches in Los Angeles to be the host venue for teach-ins and rallies, we have been told by them that either their pastors or their lay leaders were afraid of becoming “another All Saints case.”

This IRS intimidation has taken place simply by their saying that the sermon in question implied an endorsement of Senator Kerry, when the sermon explicitly said, “I don’t intend to tell you how to vote,” and acknowledged that “good people of profound faith will be for either George Bush or John Kerry for reasons deeply rooted in their faith.” The heart of the sermon was an indictment of preemptive war strategy and an insufficient policy commitment for those who are poor. The IRS has to date refused to clarify what precisely in that sermon went over the line from policy advocacy to partisan intervention.

So here is the latest development.

On September 10, we received a letter from the IRS that did two contradictory things. It simultaneously closed the examination—without challenge to the Church’s tax-exempt status and without ever conducting the kind of public examination we had requested. The letter also concluded, but without any explanation, that the sermon in question constituted intervention in the 2004 Presidential election. No reasons are given. Furthermore, no notice is given that the sermon, although deemed campaign intervention, will result in our having to pay an excise tax on the costs incurred to the Church while the sermon was being preached. There are no responses at all to a number of procedural and legal errors of the examination about which we have been calling for accountability.

Furthermore, All Saints has also learned through documents given to us through the Freedom of Information Act, that personnel in the IRS Chief Counsel’s office were closely coordinating with the Department of Justice personnel to solicit their “views on the All Saints case,” and even sharing drafts of a proposed Information Document Request as early as February 2006. At that time, there was no court proceeding even on the horizon, because the Summonses with which we later refused to comply had not yet been issued. Therefore, it appears that these discussions may have violated government rules intended to prevent inter-agency disclosure of a taxpayer’s identity, rules that were implemented in the wake of the Watergate scandal to insure taxpayers’ privacy. This information heightens our concern that the exam may have been influenced by partisan political considerations. We must raise the question whether political appointees at the Department of Justice may have been involved in approving and planning the examination of our Church.

Consequently, All Saints Church, has sent a lengthy letter to the Commissioner of the IRS recapitulating the history of the case, outlining our concerns, and demanding clarification, corrections, accountability, and an apology. We expect an explanation for the agency’s failure to comply with the statutorily-mandated procedures. A separate letter has been sent to the Inspector General for Tax administration asking for an investigation. I have also provided our Congressman, Adam Schiff, with all the pertinent documents for his study.

To be sure we are pleased that the IRS examination is over at this point. However, the main issue of protecting the freedom of this church and other religious communities in this country to worship according to the dictates of their conscience and core values is far from accomplished. The IRS has failed to explain its conclusion regarding the single sermon at issue. Therefore, synagogues, temples, mosques, and churches across America have no more guidance about the IRS rules now than when we started this process over two long years ago. The impact of this letter to us from the IRS leaves a chilling effect cast over the freedom of America's pulpits to preach core moral values.

Because of the IRS's inconsistency and vagueness it is still an open question for us and for our colleagues across the country whether we will be investigated again the next time any one of us is called to preach about the war, poverty, bigotry, or any other social and moral issues as they relate to current governmental policies. It therefore perpetuates the intimidation inherent in the threat of IRS investigations based on inferences rather than fact. We have no choice but to demand clarification on this matter with the IRS and this Church will do so with courage and tenacity. The very core of personhood, of American democracy, and the practice of religion is at stake – God's precious gift of freedom.

Dr. King said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause [people] everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of [hu]mankind and fire the souls of [people], imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace. [People] far and near will know the church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travelers at midnight." (King, Jr., Martin Luther, "A Knock at Midnight", *A Knock at Midnight; Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Peter Halloran, p. 73)

. "Emancipation, as black America has learned the hard way, requires more than proclamation." (Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Hendrik Hertzberg, "Requiem: The unexpected legacy of Betty Shabazz," *The New Yorker*, June ___, 1997, p. 5) Dr. King said, "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." William Sloane Coffin said about him, "Dr. King's message was that it is not enough to suffer with the poor; we must confront the people and systems that cause poverty. It was Martin's message that you cannot set the captive free if you are not willing to confront those who hold the keys. Without confrontation compassion becomes merely commiseration, fruitless and sentimental. (Coffin, William Sloane, *Credo*, p. 43)

“King understood the difference between defiance and freedom. Confrontation to him did not mean the ruin and humiliation of opponents. Nonviolence to him represented conquest without the humiliation of the conquered. Nonviolence to him represented an effort to give visibility not to our own poor powers but to God’s everlasting love. “Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name be the glory.” Nonviolence represented a chance for all parties to rise above their present condition. “

Coffin, William Sloane, *Credo*, p. 43

I want to emphasize this word about our adversaries in this argument. Nelson Mandela said, “Freedom is indivisible; the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all of my people were the chains on me.” (Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, pp. 616-617)

In order for the church and other religious communities to call for an end to this horrendous war of aggression and of choice built upon lies and deception, in order for the church and other religious communities to call for a reduction of spending on military defense, funneling those billions of dollars into health care and education and the rebuilding of bridges, levees, and the infrastructure of this land, in order for the church and other religious communities to reverse the suicidal destruction of our planet by carbon emissions and the maintenance and build up of nuclear arsenals, including our own, the church and other religious communities must be free – free to speak, to sing, to pray, to protest all that dehumanizes anyone – free to worship without fear of intimidation or censorship.

My wife and children and I became members of the Episcopal Church when it was known as the Republican party at prayer. It would be a regression for the Episcopal Church to be referred to as the Democratic Party at prayer. I want to have nothing to do with partisan politics because I want us to be free – free to critique our government, whoever is in power and free to critique ourselves – our own indifference and complicity in any form of oppression because oppression damages the oppressed as well as corrupts the soul of the oppressor.

A story about the All Saints Youth Group as walking Exodus factories in New Orleans. Jazz at Preservation Hall.

Let us at All Saints be a chorus of people who opens our lives to let something much bigger and more important than us flow through us. Let us allow God’s precious gift of freedom be our song – not only for ourselves and for every other religious community but in the interest of turning the human race into the human family.

Amen.

