

INDEPENDENCE DAY/V TRINITY 2015

SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH

FATHER CRAIG LOONEY

DEUT. 10.17 St. MATT. 5.43

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Religious freedom is something we take for granted. It is Constitutionally guaranteed by the First Amendment:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

The freedom of religion we so readily take for granted is not free...it is costly. The freedom we have to come and go as we please here at Saint Joseph Parish, to attend Mass, enjoy coffee and fellowship together, to assemble for discussion group, and to hold vestry meetings without government interference, comes with a price.

The Collect for Independence Day sets the stage for what we should be thinking about today: God is the source of our religious freedom; he guided our forefathers to make wise decisions about religion and civil liberties; and we ask his help to maintain those liberties by doing what is good and right and just and work toward peace.

We have a long-standing Parish tradition of not bringing partisan politics into the pulpit, discussion group, or other Parish venue. I stand by that tradition without reservation. The use of any Parish venue to expound one's personal political agenda would only be divisive and self-serving.

We do pray for our government leaders...but we must be about the business of being Church...of showing compassion and love toward others, of taking care of widows and orphans, of feeding the hungry, of housing the homeless, and of praying for peace everywhere, just as the Lesson from Deuteronomy tells us we always should be doing.

Bishop William White, the first Anglican Bishop of Pennsylvania, courageously addressed the matter of how Anglicans were to go about being Church in the new United States of America. Bishop White had quietly supported the American Revolution. He was known to be a compassionate priest and

diligent shepherd and was rector of Christ Church Parish, Philadelphia, for 57 years.

Bishop White opposed the inclusion of prayers in the proposed *American Book of Common Prayer* of 1786 celebrating “Religious and Civil Liberty”...“to be read in every church forever...” because he thought the language was harsh and vilified those clergy who had remained loyal to the Crown but chose to remain in the United States after the war ended.

In his *Memoirs* Bishop White writes with understated humor:

*“The members of the convention seem to have thought themselves so established in their station of ecclesiastical legislators that they might expect of the many clergy who had been averse to the American Revolution the adoption of this service; although, by the use of it, they must make an implied acknowledgement of their error, in an address to Almighty God...” ****

Bishop White did not want to see the *American Book of Common Prayer* become a political tool or Anglicanism in the United States become a Department of State. The first *American Book of Common Prayer* of 1789 contained no liturgical observance for Independence Day. Such an observance first appeared in the *Book of Common Prayer* of 1928.

The Constitution may mandate separation of Church and State...our Liturgy does not...quite the opposite. At every Mass we pray for “all Christian rulers and magistrates”...that includes our own government leaders. We may not like their politics...but we cannot opt out of praying for the Governor, President and all other civil authorities. And we ask God for peace throughout the World...to turn the hearts of evildoers away from doing evil things and toward doing good things.

Our religious freedom...is costly. It is a gift from God that comes with the price of responsibility...and we should not take it for granted. When we use our religious freedom wisely we are trying to do what Jesus asks us to do in the Gospel...we are trying to be perfect like God our Father in heaven is perfect. And heaven is where our true citizenship lies.

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*** *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary, Fr. Massey H. Shepherd, c 1950*