

Of Liberty & Legacy

By James E. Lamkin

A sermon for Religious Liberty Day 2000

I... you shall make this response before the Lord your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt ... into this place and gave us this land" Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house. (Deuteronomy 26: 5-11, NRSV)

A funny thing happened on the way to a sermon (though it sure wasn't funny at the time). I was attempting to preach on Religious Liberty Day to an intimidatingly aware congregation: Ravensworth Baptist Church in Annandale, Va. As pastor, I knew several members were church-state relations scholars. The foremost was the Rev. Mallery Binns, a former executive staff member of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

The sermon was to emphasize the importance of the First Amendment as both boundary and platform for the practice of individual and congregational faith. However, just before the worship service, I reviewed my sermon notes and realized: At no point had I actually quoted the First Amendment. So, I quickly scribbled a marginal note: "Quote 1st Amendment here!" Good enough.

Well, the sermon introduction sounded fine. The first segue went well. And then I said: "... and we all know the First Amendment. It says: 'Congress shall'" But, then it left me. I paused. I tried again, then again. I stumbled over the awkward wording several times, never getting it right. The puzzled congregation looked on, wondering, seeing nothing but darkness on the face of the (alleged) deep.

Not knowing what else to do, I instinctively turned to the choir, where sat Mallery Binns. He would know, and I knew Mallery would not throw a drowning friend an anchor. So, I asked him ó mid-sermon ó "Mallery, I can't remember the wording of the First Amendment! Would you please quote it?"

He smiled, then with a scholar's voice, said: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

There it was. The sermon must go on; and then it could; and to the congregation's relief ó and mine ó it did.

As I've exegeted this embarrassing experience, I've learned more about sermon preparation ó but, I've learned something bigger. Having Mallery nearby was not only humbling, it was also human ó I say human, because learning is a relational event. OK, I know, I'm stretching here, but it's a stretch toward truth. The truth is: Education, particularly religious liberty education, is a generational event. We need one another, predecessors and successors, to make it happen.

Though the "tie that binds" us to ancestors is strong ó it is not automatic. Stories live by telling. "Pharaohs who know not Joseph" arise. And sometimes forgetfulness is a sin. Every generation has an educational responsibility.

I didn't always call on Mallery Binns every time my sermons cul-de-saced, but his life and love and lobbying on behalf of religious liberty influenced me. In fact, I could argue that it's not information that has most deeply shaped my beliefs about anything ó it's incarnation. Why do I feel passionately about some subjects? The answer is: not what, but who!

Can you think of one topic about which you feel passionately without naming a person from whom you "caught the vision"? God gifts us with folk who shape our beliefs and us.

Take religious liberty. This is one of those "line-in-the-sand, do-or die" issues. Though hard to believe, a glance back only one generation will find victims and victimizers of the Holocaust. Even a casual reading of U.S. history will find the longing for religious freedom among the prime movers. Wordsmiths, influenced by religiously persecuted colleagues, put pen to paper and wrote documents defining the landscape of the New World. From the get-go, through the Bill of Rights, they built a shared wall that connects, but divides. It connects religious freedom and opportunity; but it separates religion from governmental interference and influence. And, of course, vice versa.

This "wall of separation" is no small poetic phrase. Roger Williams, a Puritan minister and founder of the Providence Colony in the mid-1600s, birthed it out of his own experience with persecution. In a letter, years later, Thomas Jefferson referenced the impact of the First Amendment and used Williams' phrase describing it as a "wall of separation between Church and State."

These founders wrestled and wrangled words and images adequate for this nobly important task. And they succeeded.

However, centuries have past. Tyranny doesn't loom in recent memory as it did in the 18th century. Religious persecution on American soil is now a distant research project. But there is danger with this memory lapse. Amnesia may allow this "wall of separation" to be morphed into a "window of opportunity." Well-meaning new pharaohs, allegedly wanting what's best, thin the wall through accommodations. The wall's integrity becomes compromised in attempting to "manage the immediate." Bill Moyers has said that the digital clock is a metaphor for American life: We see nothing before or after the present moment. The present moment is one of high-profile violence, children committing crimes

and gunfire in schools ó all perpetuating the perception that the United States is in a moral free-fall. Anxiously, we think the problem may be "the wall." This is misdiagnosis. There are real problems, but "the wall of separation" isn't one of them!

We hear the admonition: "Put God back in the schools," as if God can be legislated in and out. Daily opening school prayers, graduation prayers, football game prayers, Bible curriculum, Ten Commandment wall-hangings and tax vouchers ó all well-intentioned notions ó can be anxiety driven. And with the tidal wave of anxiety on its side, the Religious Right's organization, finances and power seek to change the "wall of separation" into a sliding door.

I believe in the individual voice. And I think the task of maturity for an individual is to find her or his voice. But, individualization that does not give attention to community, eventually destroys itself. If I pollute "my" piece of the earth and do not respect my brother and "his" piece, pretty soon, "my" turf can't sustain me.

At first, very few folk notice the weakening of the wall. In fact, the insistence on public prayers, the Ten Commandments on the walls and tax-exempt vouchers to fund private education may look like good things. These may even seem reasonable ó especially to faith folk who live in homogeneous communities. Though few folk notice ó some do. Folk like the Baptist Joint Committee, the American Jewish Committee and Americans United ó these and other groups walk the wall and watch the perimeter. By keeping a finger on the floodlights, they serve us all.

But what can we do? If the wall of separation between church and state always is in danger of thinning, what do we do? How do we teach the somewhat nebulous, but always necessary value of religious liberty to Generation Xers, and the generations beyond?

Three ideas. First, let's tell stories. Let's tell the story of James Ireland, a 21-year-old Baptist preacher in a Culpeper, Virginia, jail, two hundred thirty years ago. He was jailed because, get this, he attempted to preach the gospel without a license! The bitter cold of the unheated prison from November to April nearly killed him and ruined his health.

I remember seeing the actual lock that had been on the cell door. And I remember the hole in my stomach as I thought of a young preacher with my first name. Others fought for what I take for granted. The lock changed me. It reminded me that none of us get anywhere alone.

Let's tell stories ó even the violent ones ó not for violence' sake, but for truth's. Stories of Felix Manz, an Anabaptist. As the Reformation spread, some groups offered "believer's baptism" to those who had been baptized as infants. Manz was one of these and was imprisoned and nearly starved in the Tower of Zurich in 1525. Finally, he was drowned ó bound and pushed from a boat into the Limmat River in Zurich. He was 29 years old.

These stories carry their own life, as does the Deuteronomic text, "A wandering Aramean was my father?" It was a recitation to be told and retold again and again. In a wonderful way it wed the ear to the heart of generations of Jews to come.

We keep telling the story, because neglectful amnesia may be a sin.

Second, let's read the Bible and know our neighbors. Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures have a running story of problems and persecutions that can result between the unholy union of government and faith. Each should be interpreted in context, but both speak of what happens when "might makes right," and when "Right gets might." Beware of the power that goes with the pride of the ruling class.

The Deuteronomy text encourages memory. It assumes a future of religious liberty made visible by the light of faith. But also, it encourages a faith that sees the future in light of the past's shadows. Freedom is appreciated when oppression is not forgotten.

Though the Bible doesn't appear to be a pluralistic book, it builds a place for tolerance and inclusivity. Again, the text: "A wandering Aramean was my father ... and lived as an alien" Go far enough down the family tree, and you'll find sharecropper roots. All residents were once transients.

Early Baptists transients argued for religious freedom ó John Smyth, Thomas Helwys, John Bunyan and John Milton. "New World" Baptists lobbied in behalf of the First Amendment. Roger Williams, Isaac Backus and John Leland were stewards of influence, insisting that America be endowed with a wealth of religious liberty, upon which Baptists and others heavily drew.

Now, other faith groups are drawing on this account. It is now our calling to keep it well-endowed. In this rich heritage we voice the needs of other sisters and brothers, who, though they walk different religious paths, have the right to make their own pilgrimage. Again the text: "Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and your house." Faith is a travel business. Welcoming sojourners is common courtesy.

And we must be careful about words, especially the words God and prayer. We assume we know their meaning ó but definition is in the mouth of the beholder. All prayers lobby God. And prayed publicly, they lobby the listeners. (Debate that if you want to; but, I think it's true.) I've wondered what the Religious Right would think of Wiccan student-led prayer? What's good for the student-initiated Baptist goose, is good for the pagan gander.

We do faith in well-intentioned, but provincial, cul-de-sacs. There are others in the faith neighborhood: Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Native American religions, just to name a few.

Third idea: Live free. That is, don't spend your kid's religious liberty inheritance. Leave the legacy for them. Tax vouchers may allegedly give some relief now, but in the long run, it compromises public education and church-state separation. Hanging the Ten Commandments on a public wall may make us feel like we've "done something to stop the moral free-fall," but we've also imposed religious statements ó covenant statements ó out of context. Required prayer in the public schools not only minimalizes prayer, but it imposes it on the non-praying. In other countries, imposed religion has not worked.

Live free. People influence people. Incarnation educates at a level deeper than information. Let us be people who take stands on the issue of religious liberty. Let us tell our children and our churches what we believe and why. And let us recall the community nature of faith. The community remembers. And the community helps one another remember ó like Mallary Binns helped me.

Who knows, one day in church, another struggling young preacher may need assistance in speaking a good word for religious liberty. If she were to need help, could she turn to you?

Amen.

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