

GUILTY OF CHRISTIANIZATION!

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Wilkes-Barre, PA
Acts 7:54-60
I Peter 4:12-19
II Timothy 3:10-11**

The 62 page indictment includes among all the other spurious charges against American Pastor Andrew Brunson has supposedly committed: CHRISTIANIZATION! this charge, understood as being an act of Terrorism! Today's Turkey, under the rule of Recep Erdogan, has held Pastor Brunson in prison for the last 21 months. Pastor Andrew is a Presbyterian minister who has served a small evangelical church in Turkey for more than 20 years. He has been labeled a "spy" and a "terrorist supporter", of which there is no evidence.

He is apparently being used as a pawn to force the US to extradite a hated enemy of Erdogan, Mr. Gülen (a political and religious leader) living in the US, in the Poconos. As I was reading about this great injustice, I recalled 15 years ago traveling with other religious leaders to the Poconos to attend a dinner at Mr. Gulen's estate. The guest speaker was Representative Paul Kanjorski. This event was an effort to increase our knowledge of Islam, keeping in mind of the time. (PS. I have no plans to visit Turkey anytime soon!).

Due to increased pressure from our country, Pastor Andrew has recently been moved to house arrest, but this is not enough! As Secretary of State Mr. Pompeo recently declared to the powers that be in Turkey, "The clock had run out!"- free Pastor Brunson!

I begin this morning with this specific story to put a personal name on an ever increasing terror around the world. There are millions of Christians suffering multiple persecutions throughout our world. They are not being persecuted because they have harmed someone, stolen anything. No, they are suffering persecution because they are "Christians". And of course this being a Christian means having a view of life. We look to Jesus Christ to develop our morals and ways to live in community and the world. And all too often this has in certain centuries, certain times, been at odds with the powers that be!

WE THE PEOPLE... have been tremendously blessed in living in a culture/society/nation that has codified in a document that, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof". No doubt, WE THE PEOPLE are struggling with keeping faith with this declaration, nevertheless it remains in print, and imprinted in most of our hearts and minds.

But what we have taken for granted- Religious Freedom, continues around the world to be denied, and deemed dangerous to the reigning powers. Well they should be fearful of religions that see "all" as created in the image of God; thus with an individual dignity and worth. That we humans as individuals and communities, are responsible, endowed with the power of choice- to do good or to do evil.

AND THE VERDICT FOR MANY OF THE POWERS AROUND THE WORLD TODAY IS-
“GUILTY, OF EVIL AGAINST CHRISTIANS! (As I’ve noted in earlier times, this persecution is not limited to Christians, but permit me this morning to focus on our Faith).

Yes- CHRISTIANS ARE GUILTY OF BEING CHRISTIANS! How could it not be otherwise? But the likes of Mr. Erdogan, sees the very existence of Christianity as a danger and a threat. And he is not alone! Again, WE THE PEOPLE- have become so accustom to our way of living, secure in our comfort zone, we ignore or scoff at the magnitude of instability at work around the world when considering CHRISTIANITY!

Let me briefly map out the present religious, worldwide Christian situation: (This Material is taken from the organization called: OPEN DOORS. They have been in existence for 25 years, and are highly respected for their research).

“For the third year in a row, the modern persecution of Christians worldwide has hit another high”. (Christianity Today 1/20/18). In addition to Islamic extremism, ethnic nationalism joins this despicable list of aggression. Therefore, Asia, added to the foul list alongside the Middle East- the geographic focus of most of the persecution.

Open Doors lists the Top 50 Countries where “Christians face the most persecution”. (Here is but a sampling of the horror).

Hear this!

Approximately 115 million Christians experience high, very high, or extreme persecution!

- North Korea remains the most dangerous place to be a Christian (for 14 straight years).
- Islamic extremism remains the global dominant driver of persecution, responsible for initiating oppression and conflict in 35 out of the 50 countries on the 2017 list.
- Ethnic nationalism is fast becoming a major driver of persecution. “While this took an anti-establishment form in the West, in Asia it took an anti-minorities form, fueled by dramatic religious nationalism and government insecurity. It is common—and easy—for tottering governments to gain quick support by scapegoating Christians.”
- The total number of persecution incidents in the top 50 most dangerous countries increased, revealing the persecution of Christians worldwide as a rising trend.
- The most violent: Pakistan, which rose to No. 4 on the list for a level of violence “exceeding even northern Nigeria.”
- The killings of Christians in Nigeria saw an increase of more than 62 percent.

*. Open Doors noted that India rose to its highest rank ever, No. 15, amid the continued rise of Hindu nationalism. “An average of 40 incidents were reported per month, including pastors beaten, churches burned and Christians harassed,” stated Open Doors. “Of the 64 million Christians in India, approximately 39 million experience direct persecution.” (Christianity Today).

The top 5 nations where it is most dangerous and difficult to practice the Christian faith are:

1. North Korea
2. Somalia
3. Afghanistan
4. Pakistan

5. Sudan

The top 10 nations over the 25-year span are:

1. North Korea
2. Saudi Arabia
3. Iran
4. Somalia
5. Afghanistan
6. Maldives
7. Yemen
8. Sudan
9. Vietnam
10. China

Let's journey back to our beginnings. The year 35. The place Jerusalem. Stephen, a recently approved Deacon in the developing Christian church, was well respected, and quite a public speaker. A Hellenistic Jew, converted to the new "Way" - Christianity. Stephen is lied about, and taken before the religious court. Un-intimidated, Stephen looks at his accusers and rather than defend himself, he proclaims the truth he has found and experienced in Jesus Christ! He pulls no punches. Stephen concludes, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit!" And he indicts all of them in how historically they have killed their own prophets. They are livid! They drag Stephen out of the city, and then rushing upon him – they stone him to death. Stephen cries out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And then, "he fell asleep." Stephen is the first martyr of the Christian faith. Blasphemy was his crime.

Let's move to 64, the city of Rome. The city had been ravaged by a great fire. Ten of the 14 districts had been reduced to ashes. The rumor was, Nero wanted to rebuild the city in his own image, so he set the fire (had it set). Nero needed a scapegoat. Christianity was young. Most were ignorant of it, and what they thought they knew, was mostly wrong – from cannibalism, to atheism (re: Lord's Supper and only believing in one God).

Roman historian Tacitus, basing his writings on eyewitness reports regarding the persecution of Christians chronicled:

Consequently to scotch the rumor [that is, the rumor that Nero had set the fire] Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures upon a group hated for their abominations whom the populous call Christians. First then those who confessed membership were arrested. Then on their information, great numbers were convicted not so much of guilt for the conflagration as of hatred of the human race. Mockery was added to their deaths. They were covered with skins of wild beasts and torn to death by dogs or they were nailed to crosses and when the day failed, were set afire and burned to provide light at night.

Understand, the early followers of Christ were "persona non grata", to the early centuries of the POWERS THAT WERE. There WAS something subversive in their thinking, these "Christians". (By the way, this term was originally an appellation of insult- but it stuck- just like the movement itself!

There are a plethora of New Testament verses that I had to choose from for this morning's reading. Persecution was in many instances for the early Christians, the "order of the day". And yet, they persevered! Paul, the great Apostle, the one born out of due time, the writer of all those epistles (letters), consistently proclaimed this Good News (Gospel), telling the followers that "suffering" was part of a Christian's life, for as Christ suffered, so too will his disciples. Again, they "were" suffering for the sake of the Gospel!

For the Christians that Peter wrote to, social tensions were high, as well as persecution. Paul to Timothy related the many persecutions and sufferings he had endured, and reminds Timothy and his church, that all who live as Christians will be persecuted!

Thank God, over the centuries, this Gospel took root in many lands, and the ethos of Jesus, and the Judeo/Christian spread out like a grain of mustard seed, and the leavening in the bread! We live in a land, permeated by this ethos, and Freedom Rings! Including Religious Freedom, which must be sacrosanct and inviolable! More than most realize!

We may be a majority in the world, and those of us fortunate enough to live in the West – may worship freely, but in many nations Christians are minorities and suffering persecution! We, have a responsibility to know about his, and to endeavor to act, to help our brothers and sisters in Christ. This morning I only offer information, knowledge of this grave concern. (Keep in mind, the freedom of religion you [we] experience, is a direct result of Christian teaching. No small consideration, for us and the world.)

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YES INDEED! If that means providing and proclaiming an ethos, a way of life that recognizes the value and dignity of all people!

YES INDEED! If that means perusing justice for all, regardless of station in life!

YES INDEED! If that means holding individuals accountable for their actions, and judiciously bestowing mercy!

YES INDEED! If that means holding those who govern responsible to the Rule of Law that is encased in the Judeo/Christian corpus and developed tradition, encompassing both Love and Justice!

Pray for our Brothers and Sisters that are suffering persecution throughout the world, speak out, and take action through the capacity that exists within your power!

Amen.