

Text: Mark 8:27-39

In the Name of the Father and the ✠ Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

By now most of you have heard about the so-called “Equality Act”, or HR 5, that was passed by the US House of Representatives last week. If you haven’t, here’s the gist of it: The bill, if passed by the Senate, would elevate gender-identity as a fundamental right and would protect public expression of this in schools, work and most other places. There is even the possibility that it could be applied to churches, as least as far as hiring practices are concerned. A similar bill was passed by the House a couple of years ago, but that was when the Republicans controlled the Senate. Now, with a 50-50 split, there is a real possibility it could pass. This is causing a lot of fear and hyperbole, so let’s set the record straight.

Jesus said to His disciples, **“If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.”** (v.34-35) Whoa, wait a minute, pastor! You’re supposed to beat up on the leftists that are taking over our country and threatening to tear down everything we have built. But I’m not going to do that. Yes, it is true. The leftists are taking over our country and have been for decades. You might not haven’t noticed or cared, but this has been going on for a long time. But the religion of Progressivism is not really the topic of concern in this pulpit, today or any day. We are only concerned with the religion of the Triune God, who has acted throughout history to bring mankind back from the wilderness, to reconcile us to Himself. He did not promise us an easy life. He did not promise us that earthly governments would be nice to us or that society as a whole wouldn’t be hostile. The first few centuries of the Church under the Roman Empire weren’t just unpleasant, they were filled with intimidation and violence toward the followers of Jesus. That was not just a fluke, a relic of the bad old days. It is to be expected by all Christians. Jesus said that you must deny yourself and take up your cross if you want to follow Him. Each person’s cross is different, but in a given time, they may look a lot alike. And the cross we Christians in America will bear in the coming years will look a lot like the cross the Christians in the Soviet Union bore, or the Christians in North Africa bore under the Imperial persecutions. It’s not a punishment from God. It’s not because you have somehow failed as a follower of Jesus. It is an integral part of our identity as those who bear His Name.

Our Gospel reading today is far from the only time Jesus taught His disciples to expect hatred for following Him. In Matthew 10 we read, **“When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father**

speaking through you. Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved." (Matt 10:19-22) The fact that so many church goers are suddenly surprised by this only proves that not many Christians actually read the Bible and have been fed a steady diet of from the false prosperity gospel, which teaches that God wants you to be healthy, wealthy and happy. But Jesus never taught that. He said He came to bring division. He said to take up your cross. The cold, hard reality is that our brothers and sisters in Christ have been enduring real persecution around the globe for centuries and we, by the grace of God, have been spared. In Kenya and Nigeria Islamic terrorists routinely attack Christian churches during worship, killing and kidnapping the people for ransom. In Iraq and Syria, Christian worship in secret because the governments are so weak the terrorist have free reign. Do they stop worshiping the Triune God? No, they don't. They still gather to worship Christ even though they know each Sunday could be the day that gunmen break down the door and execute them. That is bearing the cross of Jesus.

In this country we have advantages that most people in the world do not. We have the duty – the obligation – as citizens to communicate with our elected officials, and you should absolutely avail yourself of that privilege. Write a letter, send an e-mail, drive to their local office and speak your mind. But do not look to the government for salvation. We are not to put any human rulers in the place of God, looking to them for all good things. That is the definition of an idol. As the Psalmist wrote, **"Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation"** (Ps. 146:3) So whether the Senate actually passes this law or not, we will not despair. It is the Progressives who worship power and make politics their church. We do not. We know that no matter who is in the White House, or who controls Congress, or even if we are subjugated by alien invaders in flying saucers, we do not look to them for redemption. We look only to Jesus. The real Jesus, not the progressive, milquetoast, faux-Jesus.

The real Jesus spoke the Truth with a capital "T", even and especially to His followers. After Peter finally confessed Jesus as the Christ, Jesus told them all that He was going to be arrested, tortured and put to death and then rise again, and they didn't like that idea. They were looking to Jesus to change the politics of Israel, to overthrow their Roman oppressors and give them prosperity and power. But that isn't why Jesus came down from heaven. He came to save us not from higher taxes, not from government intrusion, not even from oppression or prison. He came to free us from Satan and our sinful nature. Peter pulled Jesus aside and corrected Him, telling the Son of God that He had it all wrong.

And Jesus told the truth, saying: **"Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."** (v.33) Peter needed to hear it, the disciples needed to hear and we need to hear it. Especially when we are doing the same thing. When we are thinking like the world and acting like the world and placing

our trust in things other than God. When we start to equate safety and security and comfort as being on God's side, we are sorely mistaken. And if we think compromising the truth to escape the mob is the smart thing to do, then we are thinking and acting just like the world. Giving in to fear is not the answer either. Jesus said, **“what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.”** (v.36-38)

So the Church will do what the Church has always done. Pick up our crosses and follow Jesus. Maybe that means going underground in the coming decade. Maybe that means moving to another country, as our forefathers did, seeking the freedom to worship God without fear. Maybe it just means speaking the truth at work, at school and in the public sphere and paying the consequences. None of that should worry you. None of that should frighten you. Our hope does not rest in princes nor in the status of our social media accounts. Our hope rests in the King of Glory. Jesus picked up His cross so that your sins would be forgiven, so that the sins of all mankind would be forgiven. He rose from the grave so that death would be destroyed and we know that on the last day, we too will be raised from the grave in bodies incorruptible, just like His. So whether this marks the beginning of a new phase of persecution or is just a lot of hype, you should not lose any sleep over it. We have a hope that the world doesn't have, a confidence that comes from being adopted by God and given new life, life eternal. Our eternal citizenship is in a better country, where the King is also our brother and our God.

In Jesus' holy name, Amen.

Rev. Schopp