

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Abbey Our Lady of Dallas
August 9, 2015
Jn 6:41-51

It has been something of a marvel, both farcical and tragic, for me to see how much activity has been going on at the national level in our society during the sultry dog days of summer – which in Texas last about four months. We make it to the celebration of 4th of July and the recollection of the patriotic ideas of American independence, freedom, and liberty – and then we just fade away to the mountains, the beach, or the shade of an old oak tree. So, it is doubly curious for me that those somewhat sun-bleached thoughts of independence, freedom, and liberty have come roaring back into sharp focus due to the Supreme Court's decision on June 26th in *Obergefell v. Hodges* which struck down the remaining state laws, such as the one in Texas, which prohibited what are euphemistically called same-sex marriages. This ruling itself shouldn't have really been a surprise as it was pretty much a consequence of the Supreme Court's decision in *Lawrence vs. Texas* in 2003 which overturned any legal barriers to intimacy between consenting adults of either gender.

Many Christian and Catholic commentators have rightly observed, as have the bishops of this country, that we are rapidly approaching the time where the freedom to practice our faith in an open and public manner will be severely tested. Indeed, we seem to be approaching a time where merely living our lives as Catholics in the Public Square – whether that be in business or public speech or education -- will be met with legal sanctions, fines, the possibility of imprisonment and other coercive actions of the government. Indeed, the dangers posed to our freedom of conscience, the free exercise of our religion, and, the moral integrity of our Catholic schools, hospitals, and other charitable institutions is no

longer a possibility, but an ever-growing menace. We have already seen some of them shut down by judicial fiat or legislative act.

And yet, in speaking to many people over the past few months, I often got the feeling that we American Catholics have, to a greater or lesser degree, bought into the cultural narrative which has brought us to this lamentable situation. Far too many Catholics, particularly our Catholic politicians, wish to keep religious practice of any sort as a purely private thing: they seem to be advocating, tacitly or not, that it's OK to believe, but just don't do it in the Public Square.

Clearly, the first reading from the Book of Kings where the prophet Elijah must flee for his life proves that we are NOT the first ones in the history of God's Chosen People to be forced to take upon ourselves the difficult and even dangerous task of being a prophet. It is a lonely enterprise as Elijah demonstrates, but it is absolutely necessary if we as Catholics are to call our country back to the respect for the freedom of religious conscience which we have enjoyed since the founding of Our Republic.

As Americans we should know that we have a complex and frequently troubled history wherein our beloved nation has struggled and many times failed to balance the claims of these two realms. Perhaps we would do well today to recall that we must be willing to step into that rushing tide of history where disobedience to man's law becomes obedience to God's Law.

Rather than being apologetic about "raising a ruckus" in public about our freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, we should rather see ourselves as continuing a great tradition which both Protestant and Catholic thinkers have developed in our nation's 400-year history.

In the past several weeks, as I have thought about this problem, I went back to re-examine some of the key texts which define the Noble Rebelliousness of our 400-year history. The first and the oldest quotation addressing this problem of the duties of the good Christian can be found in this short text:

*“For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. **So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work** [which] we have undertaken . . . We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God... We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us til we be consumed out of the good land where we are going”*

The text is from the Puritan preacher John Winthrop's 1630 sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" which he wrote while still sailing to America aboard the ship *Arbella*. Winthrop admonished the future colonists that their new Christian community would be a "city upon a hill," watched by the world. With a starkness and boldness that we probably find either refreshing or intimidating, he demands of these newly-arriving “Americans” that their exercise of Christian faith IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE will directly determine the success of their moral lives in this new land!

Almost 200 years after Winthrop’s sermon, a foreigner who came to the US as a visitor gave us a very different perspective on the relationship between Americans as a people of faith and Americans as a people with a political destiny. He wrote,

The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one. Their strictly Puritanical origin, their exclusively commercial habits, which seems to divert their minds from the

pursuit of science, literature, and the arts, [has fixed] the mind of the American upon purely practical objects. Everything about him seems to unite in drawing [him] earthward; his religion alone bids him turn, from time to time, a transient and distracted glance to heaven.

The words, as many of you will recognize, come from that most gifted Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, who in 1831 wrote *Democracy in America*. In listening to his words written almost exactly half way between Winthrop in the 17th century and us in the 21st we hear the same profound questions restated and reformulated. We can both smile and yet feel uncomfortable about what he writes, especially about his observation that we Americans have only “*a transient and distracted glance to heaven.*”

It would be nice to simply conclude that today we can be Christians like de Tocqueville writes about, and then, simply TRY a little harder to “be better people!” But, this will not work – and we have seen the bitter fruit of this lazy attitude running from *Griswold v. Connecticut in the 1960’s*, to *Roe v. Wade* in the 1970’s, to *Lawrence v. Texas* in 2003, and now to *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015.

From the 17th century to the 20th century and on into our own day, we Americans see that God has both blessed us as a people, and set out for us a very particular pathway to follow as men and women of faith. And, the perils and challenges which currently confront the Church in America are part and parcel of what history teaches us to be a continual struggle. However, unless we are motivated to fight – as our forefathers in faith did – we stand on the precipice of losing the free exercise of our religion in our schools, our hospitals, and countless other charitable institutions. EXAMPLE: 100-YRS. OF CATHOLIC ADOPTION SERVICES ARE BEING LOST; WE HAVE SEEN CLOSURES

ALREADY IN CALIFORNIA, ILLINOIS, MASSACHUSETTS, AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

The choice, dear friends in Christ, is the choice which the readings for today's liturgy present us: either we can be like Elijah who is forced by hostile circumstances to take on the challenge and mantle of actually being a prophet in our homes, our businesses, and our places of entertainment – or we can be like the *'murmuring Jews' from this week's Gospel* who would NOT put their faith in Him because He was simply a nobody from nowhere whom they all thought they knew – and He won't give us our daily bread the way we like it!

Have no doubt: the decision for all of us is a stark one! Go back and look at the Gospel readings *for the past several weeks:* in one way or another, they demand that we take sides, that we stand up and be counted, that we be willing to declare what price we will pay for our faith? Will we be those who, *like it or not*, will pay the price of 30 pieces of silver to live quietly and comfortably in this world, OR, will we pay what the world will angrily demand from us so that we might live in that Bright, Shining City set perfectly on the top of the Hill whose only Light, both day and night, is the Lamb of God slain for our the sake of our sins and our salvation? SILVER -----OR-----SALVATION!

Amen!