

A Very Public God

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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There are many reasons why we tend to keep our faith a private matter. Perhaps one of the reasons is that it's safer that way; there is less risk involved. Our faith can be about our personal relationship with God (a 'me and Jesus' attitude) and our daily lives can be lived out in whatever way best suits our own interests. Instead of trying to integrate the two, we just keep them separate. After all, don't we live in a country that believes in the separation of Church and state?

Jim Wallis, founder of *Sojourners* magazine, while certainly not one to think the church should have power over the state or vice versa, does raise some concerns with this type of attitude. In his book *God's Politics*, cleverly subtitled, *Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, he writes, "God is personal, but never private. And the Bible reveals a very public God... in an age of private spiritualities, the voice of a public God can scarcely be heard. Private religion avoids the public consequences of faith." (*God's Politics*, 31) Keeping our faith private since it is safer that way is not in accordance with the Bible. In fact, the heroes in the Bible were the ones who were willing to take the risk of going public with their faith and accept full responsibility for the consequences. They tried to integrate their personal relationship with God with their public lives in society. Even if they failed many times, they kept trying.

Our Gospel passage from Matthew today says something similar. In it, Jesus says, "what I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops." In other words,

have a personal relationship with God, but don't stop there. Bring what is personal into the public, for as Jesus concludes, "everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father." Christianity is not a private spirituality nor is our God a private God.

Some of the most dangerous individuals are the ones who have a very private religion and a very private God. They like to whisper, gossip, and complain behind the scenes about everything that is wrong with the Church and the world, with no attempts to integrate it with their public lives. This was the experience of the prophet Jeremiah, who in our first reading was criticized and personally attacked for bringing God's message out into the open by the very people who were his friends. He wrote, "I hear the whisperings of many: 'Terror on every side! Denounce! let us denounce him!'" Yet, he took the risk of living in the light and proclaiming God from the housetops.

Having a relationship with God is not just a private matter. It is a personal matter that has public consequences.

Question: Do I try to integrate my personal relationship with God and my public life?

Instead of taking the safer way out by keeping our religion private, let us not be afraid of risking the public consequences of our faith. As Jesus said, "fear no one. Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be made known."