

Dust On Your Feet



Mark 6.10: "(Jesus) ordered (the twelve apostles) to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. (And) He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.'"

As we Americans celebrated our Independence Day this week, I was reminded of a story about the death of Mohamed Morsi, who in 2012 was the democratically elected President of Egypt, but

who within a year of his election was forced from office by a military coup led by the current President, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Morsi, you may remember was a member of the Moslem Brotherhood, which the United States declared was a terrorist organization, though it gathered the most popular votes in the election. So, Morsi won a fair and free democratic election in the Islamic country of Egypt. Al Nour is the Islamic political party in Egypt that got the second most votes in the presidential election after the Muslim Brotherhood. Their leader, Adel Azazi was a Salafist, a conservative Muslim whose party supported the overthrow of President Morsi because the Salafists, he said, "don't really believe in democracy; that is a Western idea, a foreign influence that is simply not part of our ideology or our religion," he said. He labeled democracy as a 'heresy' to Islam.

This statement was really not as surprising as you may think though. For after the American Revolution, there were many in Christendom that declared that our new constitutional democracy was anti-Christian, that democracy was a thing unheard of in the long history of the Christian Tradition; democracy was not part of our ideology or our religion either, they said. Monarchs like King George in England, whom we had just overthrown, these opponents noted, these (monarchs, kings) are mentioned everywhere in the Bible; they are the recognized

agents of God in the political realm, and they rule by divine right according to our Scriptures. There is no record of democracy in the Bible. The Roman Catholic Church went so far as to label our new American political experiment as a 'heresy'. They called it "Americanism."

Nonetheless after 248 years as a nation, and 75 years as a world power, and nearly 400 years as a beacon of religious freedom, the United States of America has thrived, even without a king ruling us by divine right. We Americans have largely avoided the excesses of religious extremism that crippled Europe with religious wars in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries and now cripples many parts of the world of Islam, like Egypt and Iran and Syria, to name just a few. Religious extremism in our day still violently divides other nations and other peoples across the globe, in Iraq and Afghanistan, in Nigeria, in Yemen, in Myanmar, in India, and in the Uyghur dominated provinces of China. America's contribution to religious and political freedom is thus remarkable. On July 4th, we Americans celebrated our democracy, which despite our great diversity as a people is holding together, even after disputed presidential elections. I believe in America's form of government. I believe in the American people. I trust the voters and the integrity of our institutions, despite various pressures upon our freedoms.

We are, though, probably less free than we think, thanks to predatory lenders, gerrymandered politics, and laws favoring corporations over people. But still, we are free to speak our minds and to form whatever religious or political associations we want, and we are free to vote as we wish. We are still free to hope and dream, to take risks in science and in business, to travel about wherever we want to go, and to seek after God and worship in whatever way we choose.

Our real enemy here, as always, is brute power, and the impatience of those who wield it, or those who want it. Jesus told the disciples how to handle rejection by the powers that be: he said if any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, simply shake off the dust on your feet and move on. Those twelve disciples were not to draw a sword against those who spoke out against them, were not to resort to violence, but were advised rather to turn the other cheek. They were instructed to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them; they were not to rain down fire from heaven upon those who did not welcome them, as the Apostles James and John wanted to do to a town in Samaria that would not receive them; the disciples were not to enslave their enemies or take away their freedom, but to love our neighbors as ourselves.

By the standards of the powerful, the response of Jesus' disciples would be deemed simply weak and pointless at best.

What does the shaking of dust off our feet actually accomplish? The more typical response to not being recognized or not being heard or not being acknowledged, religiously or politically, is the use of force and violence to get what we want. But that shall not be the way of those who follow Jesus, we are taught.

Some of the most powerful people in our own land resent actual freedom and conspire to restrain it from those who oppose them, if not eliminate them altogether. Our new "surveillance state" isn't watching us to protect us, so much I fear as to make sure we don't stray too far, to reveal too much, as the Pentagon Papers did in my youth and Julian Assange did more recently. Those who are now denying voting privileges in so many States aren't really protecting free and fair elections but are manipulating the rules in order to protect their own place in the system, and their own power and prestige. Those who terrorize their neighbors openly carrying around weapons in public places aren't defending the Second Amendment of the Constitution, but are bullying those they perceive as weak, or threatening to them. So, we certainly have our problems and our challenges. We are, after all, a nation whose first two centuries were marred by slavery, cultural intolerance, and a pretentious aristocracy. Even today, the rich in this country conspire to seize even more wealth at the expense of the poor,

and our national leaders in Congress seem profoundly incapable or unwilling to do anything about it.

So, what are we to do? As I mentioned last week, we must not lose hope. Hope, as you may remember, was defined as the belief that our future can be brighter and better than our past, and that we actually have a role to play in making that so. So, I am determined in my own small way, to further the American Dream, that all men (sic.) are created equally, and that all of us are endowed with certain inalienable rights, like the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I believe in the American people, I believe in the American voters, as imperfect as we or they may be. I will live and speak out as freely as I can in this great nation of ours, to inform myself and others on what is what, and to vote, and encourage all others to do so as well. Indeed, I hope that all of us will not retreat from the challenges ahead but will continue to step up and step into the public square and speak our minds, with compassion and understanding, especially in an election year. We have the right to speak up and be heard. And if we are not heard or recognized by the powers that be, if the election does not go the way we want it to, if the American system breaks down, then we will start to rebuild it, and not abandon it, nor give up hope, but strive with our better angels for a more perfect union, always conscious, as Jesus has taught us, of the weakness of power, and

the power of weakness. So if we are not welcomed, and others refuse to hear us, then I hope that we will simply shake off the dust that is on our feet and move on, move on to caring for the orphans and the widows, the refugees and immigrants, the sick, the hungry, the imprisoned, the poor and infirmed, the least of those amongst us, where sadly the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Yet the world must know this; that the Kingdom of God has come near.