

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
John 17:6-26
July 10, 2022

Wrestling with Culture

Good morning everyone. It's good to be back with you today. We have just returned from a two week adventure in the United Kingdom where we visited England and Scotland. This was the second part of our planned sabbatical journey that we had to postpone from two years ago. I am grateful to the Lily Foundation who permitted us to divide up our travels over two summers instead of having to take it all at once.

I love traveling abroad, but I don't love the airplane rides. I do love learning about history, eating good food, and diving into foreign cultures. Now I have visited many places around the world, but one thing I have come to appreciate... like Dorothy of the Wizard of Oz...that "there is no place like home." We live in a great country of which I am so grateful.

One of the things that I was most anxious about prior to our trip to Scotland was the fact I was going to have to learn to drive from the right hand side of the car, but on the left hand side of the road. I was surprised at how quickly I adapted. If I didn't adapt to their driving culture, then there was surely going to be an accident. A collision of two cultures.

I experienced this collision during early days as a naval officer, living in Japan. I shared a house off base with several other officers. One of my first recollections of a clash with the Japanese culture took place on the first day that we placed our trash outside our doorstep for collection. No one had told us what we to do, so we simply did what our neighbors did.

Outside our door and across the street were several other trash bags piled up. So we figured that must have been the neighborhood trash pile. Sometime later, there was a knock at our door with a very angry, petite and older Japanese woman carrying both our heavy trash bags. She said a few things which fortunately we didn't understand, dropped our bags back on our doorstep, turned around in a huff, and immediately returned home never to be seen or heard from again. Clearly we had crossed some cultural boundaries about what not do with our trash.

This morning, we are continuing our conversation about wrestling with God and see how sometimes the culture clashes that we experience can lead us to question whether or not God is remotely involved with what is going in our world.

When one looks at the United States of America today, it is easy to see where these culture wars taking place.

Between liberals and conservatives.

Republicans and democrats.
Pro-lifers and those who are Pro-choice.
Pro COVID-19 vaccine and antivaxers.
Pro education and pro military.

Those who are willing to fight for the freedom to bare arms and those who desire more gun control.

Pro police and those who want to defund the police.

Those who hold that our election system is fair and effective and those who believe that the whole system is rigged.

With all these things considered, if the American motto is “In God We Trust” it is easy to ask, where is God in amidst this mess we call home? That's what we will wrestle with today. I think we will see that Jesus has some pretty clear admonishments for the Christian church which has been coopted by each of these culture wars.

The context of today's scripture took place on the night of Jesus' last supper with his disciples. After the meal, he prayed for himself, his disciples, and for all believers throughout the ages, and reminded them that they belonged to a different country than the one they pledged their allegiance to.

So turn with me as we read from the Gospel of John and we hear what Jesus has to say to us today.

Jesus prayed to our Heavenly Father.

6 “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. **7** Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. **8** For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. **9** I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. **10** All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. **11** I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. **12** While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

13 “I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. **14** I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. **15** My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. **16** They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. **17** Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. **18** As you

sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. **19** For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

20 “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, **21** that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. **22** I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— **23** I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

24 “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

25 “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. **26** I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

How did we as a country get to this extremely divided place. Opinion Editor for The New York Times, David Brooks, recently published an article titled, “Globalization is Over: The Culture Wars Have Begun.”¹ To summarize his point, it was thought that globalization should have brought the world closer together. In other words, since we now have the ability to connect with one another, trade with another, learn more about one another, and communicate with one another, the tolerant we should become of one another. But what has happened is just the opposite. It seems the closer we get to one another, the more we learn about different cultures, and beliefs, the more threatened we by them. The more we feel that we need to defend our turf and way of life.

The image that Brooks uses is that of the world being stretched so thin by two hands pulling in polar opposition that holes are beginning to show and the world is figuratively about to break apart.

Look at this diagram known as the The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map of 2020. The horizontal axis shows the Survival vs. Self-Expression. We can see that the African-Islamic Nations are on the far left with more survivalist values where as the Protestant European Nations are on the far right of that axis with more self-expression values. The vertical axis maps Traditional vs. Secular Values. We can see once again that African-Islamic Nations have more traditional values where as Protestant European Nations have more secular values.

¹ David Brooks, The New York Times, April 8, 2022 “Globalization is Over. The Culture Wars have Begun.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/08/opinion/globalization-global-culture-war.html>

The United States of America is right here on the map.
China is right here. And Russia is not far from China.

But what is happening is that the United States is moving more toward self-expression and secularization where as Russia is becoming more survivalist and traditional. This is causing even greater, irreconcilable differences between the two nations. The more we push our American values on Russia the more they feel threatened by western ideologies and the more they feel like they need to dig in and defend their home turf. Hence the war in the Ukraine. Vladimir Putin has described this war not as one against the Ukraine, but against western values.

The same cultural war is occurring within our borders. As our nation secularizes and moves further from a faith in God and values self expression more, the further it gets from our more traditional and survivalist roots. Survivalists depend more on God. Self expressed people depend more on themselves. The more divided the right becomes from the left, the conservative from the liberal, and the religious from the irreligious. So much so to the point that we dig in our heels and wage cultural wars against opposing camps in order to protect our home turf.

The same is happening in the American Church today as well.

I think this has been one of the most confusing aspects of my wrestling with God in this season of COVID by watching the negative impact that these cultural wars have had within the Church. Usually adversity like a global pandemic unifies people instead of drawing them further apart.

While it might have caught me off guard, I think Jesus warned us about happening in his prayers that we just heard. And so I want to focus on these words so that we can discern the difference between the enemy's ways and Jesus' ways for the church.

We have heard that the enemy comes to steal, kill, and destroy our joy. But we know that Jesus comes that we might have life and life to the full.

The enemy is always trying to divide us. But Jesus prays that his followers would be united in faith.

The enemy wants us to be so consumed with heaven that we disregard how we live on earth now. But Jesus prays that we would not be taken out of the world and would remain doing his work of bringing heaven to our divided world.

The enemy wants us to hate those who hate us. But Jesus commands us to pray for our enemy.

The enemy would want us to dehumanize each other by looking at what "THEY" are doing. But Jesus wants us to love others as he has loved us, even those who are very different than we are.

The enemy wants us to leave the world. But Jesus sends us into it.

The enemy would want us to defend the dominion of our faith by launching sound theological weapons. But Jesus calls us to lay those weapons down.

The enemy would want us to believe that our way of life, our way of thinking, our way of governance, are worth defending and dying for. But Jesus calls us sacrifice ourselves for other's sake.

Jesus said, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."²

Ronald Rolheiser in *Wrestling with God*, writes about wrestling with culture and mentions that one of the things that we are invited to do as Christians is to help "take away the sins of the world," as Jesus did.

Rolheiser said, "Jesus 'took away the sins of the world' not by some magic act but by holding, carrying, purifying, and transforming tension. He did this by taking in bitterness, anger, jealousy, hatred, slander, and every other kind of cancerous negativity within human community, and not giving it back in kind.

In essence, Jesus did this by acting like a purifier, a water filter of sorts: He took in hatred, held it, transformed it, and gave back love; he took in bitterness, held it, transformed it, and gave back graciousness; he took in curses, held them, transformed them, and gave back blessings; and he took in murder, held it, transformed it, and gave back forgiveness. Jesus resisted the instinct to give back in kind - hatred for hatred, curses for curses, jealousy for jealousy, murder for murder. He held and transformed these things rather than simply retransmit them."³

But how do we do this?

First and foremost, my friends, we remember who we are and whose we are. We are followers of Jesus Christ and sons and daughters of the living God.

We also remember that those who disagree with us are not our enemy and that maybe God is using them to get us see through different eyes.

We embrace the fact that things are changing around the world at speeds faster than any of us can comprehend. Along with that change comes new ideas about rights, identity, sexuality, religion, and freedoms. The world is not static. It is not the same as what we grew up in or what our children are growing up in.

We resist getting pulled into never ending, unwinnable cultural wars which may require us to step outside our comfort zones and consider fresh perspectives for a change. Can you imagine what would have happened if I simply refused to following the traffic laws in Scotland? It would have been disastrous!

We acknowledge that while we are called to live in this world, that we ourselves are not of this world. We belong to a different country. We are only resident aliens passing through this land.

² John 16:33

³ Ronald Rolheiser, *Wrestling with God, Finding Hope and Meaning in our Daily Struggle to be Human* (Image Books:New York, 2018), 182-183.

We display humility and know that we may not have the full truth on any one particular issue. There are many ways to look at different ideals. God seems them all. We do not.

And finally, we know that the rest of the world is watching to see how we as a Church will respond to many of these hotbed issues. People will either listen to us or discount us as irrelevant and out of touch. Remember no one has more to lose over the cultural wars in the Church than Jesus Christ himself.

So may we rise above the cultural wars of our day believing that God in Jesus Christ is indeed active in our world though it may not seem so. May we as followers of Jesus be a healing balm for those within Gilead. And may we show that we are Christians by the way we love others whether or not they are in our camp.

This is the word of the Lord. Amen!