

Proper IV Year B 2024

In 1973 world-renowned cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote his groundbreaking book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. It is a collection of essays exploring the nature of humankind by looking at how different cultures behave collectively. How people behave as groups depends on a great number of factors, of course... not the least of which are the availability of food and water; climate and topography. Geertz's chief premise is that it is not some lofty ideal or philosophy, or code of conduct that affects the way people live together... but quite the opposite, rather that the way people live together... the practice of culture... affects our ideals and codes of behavior. In other words, culture is the matrix within which our morals, our social practice, our opinions, even our religious lives are shaped and informed and articulated. That would explain, for example, the behavior of so-called religious extremists whose articulated doctrine has little resemblance to the traditional beliefs and doctrines of their respective religions; but instead reflects a particular culture.... I'll give you two examples: The first is Islamic extremism: These aren't religious fanatics, per se... these are people who are committed to acts of terror lashing out at the colonialism and hegemony of the comparatively affluent West. Paradoxically, the highest virtue in the Koran is peacemaking, followed by welcome and hospitality. This is culture acting out of collective anger against another culture. Religion is mere subterfuge for a deeper, cultural agenda. And then there's the so-called Christian right: these are people who stand for the elitist exclusivity of Christianity; us against them, contrary to God's universalist project proclaimed in scripture, both Hebrew

scripture and New Testament; they espouse the prosperity gospel which holds that if one believes rightly God will offer financial reward. Scripture never promises wealth as an end to faith. The Christian right are anti-immigrant; in many cases racist; antisocial programs; pro death penalty... all contrary to scriptural ideals... and if one were to bother to read Christian scripture, one would see that the Christian right is anything but Christian. These are the people who have bought hook line and sinker the promise of the triumph of the self-made man; the promise of the so-called American dream. Religion is mere subterfuge for the self-interested yearning of capitalist America. We should be mindful of such seduction.

This has been true over the ages, of course, that religion with its emotional hook has taken up the cause of the particular culture in which it lives and moves. And this dynamic is true in the mainstream religious as well. The end of the nineteenth century, and the early twentieth century was called the age of Evangelism in the Church of England and in the American Episcopal Church. It just so happened that it was also the age of global colonization by western powers, not the least of which was the United States and the United Kingdom. The church happily complied with the occupation of empire. And centuries earlier, the discovery and conquest of the Americas by way of genocide was ordained by God according to the powers that be in the church. We called it Christianizing the heathens... but in truth it was a vast land grab and the destruction of an indigenous

culture. The writers of the gospel of John and the apostle Paul called the profound influence of culture... “the world. “Be in the world, but not of it,” they argue.

My point is: This isn't so much about the church or religion in general behaving badly. It is an example of how, in spite of its very own sacred doctrine, the church, as with other institutions, can be co-opted by the seductive demands of culture. Culture is powerful, profoundly influential... and it has inertia; it gets institutionalized as status quo. It is difficult to resist. It resists criticism; it will resist challenge and change. Our culture, xenophobic in its collective DNA, has sold us the ideas that we are over-run with immigrants who want to steal away our way of life; that poor black people shouldn't vote; that healthcare is a privilege not a right; that the sign of a great nation is its military might, not the quality of life of its people, and how we take care of our least; that self-interest is a virtue... and the church alas has been complicit: We hear things like, “the church should stay out of the controversial issues that affect our common life.” “Churches shouldn't be political.” That we are better seen and not heard; that we are a hospital for sinners; a place by which we may escape the world. That church is dying a long overdue death, good people.

So this is the thing: We can't control what the culture is saying to us. Its influence is a given. In fact, paradoxically, there are good things about culture as well: the arts and music and literature, and entrepreneurship, and creativity and ingenuity. The point is that we just have to be mindful about the influence of the culture in which we live; we have to pay attention; and we have to look upon culture with the critical but gracious eye of Love. Love

is the higher standard. It is our standard. Love is the vision we claim as people of God ...

And we, brothers and sisters, are, as the baptized, in the vocation of Love... and that means that we have to be more often than not, counter-cultural. I would say that faith is always counter-cultural. Perhaps our greatest ally as people of faith is our ability to think critically. Being a Christian requires intelligence. Unfortunately and insidiously, our culture, the world we live in, would pressure us to abdicate the responsibility to think and to be mindful.

From year to year in the church, every Sunday, we read from the four gospels. For us, members of the Jesus Movement, they are our imaginative standard, imaginative touchstones, even though they diverge widely in their points of view. But one thing they all have in common... and that is that they are all counter-cultural; that is, they stand as critique against the status quo. They call out the culture of their day and offer an alternative... an alternative for a way of life that God Godself might have in mind. The gospels are literary and thoughtful speculations as to how Love might stand in the midst of our paradoxical world; and the premise of the gospels is that Love has the power to restore us, restore us, and the culture to which we belong, to sanity... that it is the presence of Love that brings to sanity the prideful whims and digressions of the human enterprise. Perhaps I have implied it; but I'll say it again explicitly: Even the institutional church is victim to the culture, in its theology and its proclamations of belief; its self-interest. Hierarchy is a construct of culture, and yet the church, over the centuries has insisted on the paradigm of hierarchy in its organization, and its theology... whereas scripture speaks of mutuality and

equality as the way we are meant to live. God with us, not above us. We need our institutions, but not without critique.

Our gospel reading today from Mark is a case in point. The Pharisees represent the culture. They speak for it. They are the ones in power as they are in league with the occupying forces of Rome. Their interest is control and self-interest. Their role is to keep the peace; keep their people in line on behalf of the powerful. The Torah, the heart of religious belief and practice for the Jews, meant to be the liberating means of mutuality and justice among God's people, has become a set of rigid rules of behavior whereby the Jewish citizens of the empire are kept in line. Here, Jesus and his disciples blatantly break the rules... namely gathering grain and healing on the Sabbath Day.... This act of defiance and critique is serious enough for the powers that be to look for a way to kill Jesus we are told. The Pharisees, not unlike the culture, believe that humankind serves its religion; but Jesus makes the point that religion serves humankind. A counter-cultural corrective.... And there is more here in this passage; another example of how the institution can quite miss the point... Institutional thinking, perhaps distracted, perhaps apathetic.

The learned translators of the NRSV, the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, miss the theological point in our passage for today. Had the venerable scholars bothered to get the point of Mark's Gospel, they would have been more careful in their translation... In our reading today Jesus heals the man with the withered hand. And because of his disability the man would have been shamed, forced to live apart from his community. He

would be an outsider. Jesus and his disciples in the company of the Pharisees are in the Synagogue... Jesus sees the man with the deformed hand and... according to our translation... tells the man to “come forward” ... but the word translated ‘come forward’ is the same word for stand up/arise; that is the more precise translation.... And the word for stand up is the root word in the Greek for *resurrection*. The word for resurrection in the Gospels literally means... to stand with dignity... There is a preposition accompanying this word in this passage that means in or among... so the more accurate translation would be: “And Jesus said to the man who had the withered hand, “stand up among us.” This is nothing less than a resurrection appearance!... This same word, resurrection, stand up, appears six more times in this gospel. Six resurrection appearances. If someone tells you that there is no resurrection appearance in Mark’s Gospel, you can say, au contrair. So resurrection isn’t just about Jesus; it is about the community Jesus serves. Where there is resurrection there is Love; where there is Love there is resurrection. The church has taught resurrection as a singular magic act some two thousand years ago, but for Mark, resurrection is a present reality; a reality that happens in community with every act of Love; every act of welcome; every act of care for our neighbor.

This passage is a vision of Love’s work; that Love bids the ones on the outside, the poor and the disabled, the outcasts and least to stand up with dignity among us... Love always implies community. Love bids them stand with dignity as insiders... the culture would have us believe otherwise... the culture would have us believe that the poor, the

disabled, the sick, people of color, the immigrant, the gay, the transgendered... that they all belong outside the well-being and dignity of the community... But not so with God. Not so with Love... all are invited to the table... all are honored guests; all are called out of deathly existence into the abundant life God intends for all of us. The culture, sometimes even the church, would have us believe otherwise... but as followers of Jesus we are counter-cultural, and we need to own that. We are followers of the one who Loves without condition; who loves outside the lines of decorum; who loves the world and the particularities of culture into transformation. God calls the whole of things good. We Love the world to make it so.

The point is that Love knows no boundaries. Love can't be contained by order or convention. But Love is always true, and we can trust that Love is always meet and right. Our vocation, brothers and sisters is to bring Love to the paradoxical complexity of our world. To bring the ones on the outside into the dignity of community. That is our work... hard work. It requires that we cast a critical and compassionate eye. It requires enlightened engagement with our world. We must practice mindfulness, patience, kindness... and not least of all, courage... We must bring the lost home and bid them stand among us in the gracious light of Christ's resurrected life... There is nothing more noble, nothing more commendable, nothing so grand, nothing so true; despite what the culture says to the contrary.