

CULTURE CLASH

Sermon for Transfiguration – Lk9:28-36

LPC, 8/6/17

(Sermon preached differed significantly from this version)

We all know what culture clash is, don't we? Culture clash occurs when people from different cultures unwittingly annoy each other by doing something that is normal and acceptable in their own culture when that same behavior is considered incomprehensible unacceptable in the other person's culture. Have you ever experienced this?

Sometimes you are the insider: part of the prevailing culture that is offended by behavior that is not conventional by your standards. This would be the case if you were staying at a resort hotel where a large extended family group of an ethnicity different from yours has also convened, and you've been put out by their noise and their monopolization of public areas.

However, when you are the outsider you are probably not even aware that your behavior is potentially offensive. In France for example, it is considered rude to enter a shop and not greet the proprietor. If you don't know that, and enter a shop quietly not wanting to disturb the person behind the counter, you may be thought rude. If then you don't get the friendly service you expect, you may come away thinking French people are aloof, while the French person thinks you have no manners.

A lot of misunderstandings arise because of culture clash. On the other hand, obviously, cordial relations are fairly easy to establish between people of different cultures, provided the common practice of one culture is not antithetical to the other, as for example child sacrifice would be in our culture. In the absence of this sort of irreconcilable difference between cultures, cordial relations between cultures are possible in an atmosphere of mutual respect, where people acknowledge that certain aspects of their native culture may not be universally held.

Of course, one solution to culture clash is where one party unilateral dictating the norms of behavior, overriding the preferences of the other party. In some cases this may be necessary. This is definitely the case where laws that protect the safety and freedom of all people are in question.

People can obviously decide to act independently of each other in instances where culture practices differ. People agree to disagree. This is generally true in the case of religious observance. In other cases, people decide to work together. Common ground is sought and compromises are made to make this happen.

People who take this approach sometimes find their lives are enriched by trying out an unfamiliar cultural practice. Two friends or spouses from different cultures may take turns in their observances. One person says, "While in my house, we will do things my way, while in yours do them your way." Or both parties try a third way that offends neither. These examples of fair solutions, where out of mutual respect, neither party assumes the entire burden of deciding what to do.

A final approach, and this one is the rarest, is for one party to cede authority in the matter to the other party. A person might say, “Well because I love you and this is so important to you, I will do things your way.” Like I said, this doesn’t happen very often.

Which of these approaches to culture clash do we take in our relationship with God?

Do you not think there is a culture clash between God and human beings? The Bible would seem to support the notion that there is! Throughout the Bible there are multitudinous examples of human beings behaving in ways foreign to God’s ways. In Isaiah 55 we read, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

The teachings of Jesus represent a culture foreign to the one that most human beings assume to be normative. Jesus culture teaches that we need to forgive seventy times seven. Human culture says that a second chance is more than enough. Jesus culture teaches that we love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. Human culture retaliates, lest we be taken for fools. Jesus culture teaches self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Human culture looks out for number one. I could go on, but you get the idea. When it comes to human culture and Jesus culture, there is indeed a culture clash.

The story of the Transfiguration is story of culture clash. The disciples see Jesus glorified and assume this means glorification by human standards. But Jesus is glorified by heavenly standards, which means that he must undergo humiliation, pain and death for the sake of love, and in that is his glory.

The disciples want to build a shrine to the glorious. That’s what you do according to human culture. They don’t understand that Christ’s glory lies in love that defies earthly power and challenges the human culture of self-promotion. Glory lies in laying aside the safety of others’ adoration and the willingness to sacrifice for others even when they don’t appreciate it.

How much, in our culture clash with this heavenly culture, do we expect God to compromise? To take turns? “OK God, you can have Sundays, but Monday let me do things according to my culture, acting competitively, withholding forgiveness from those who have wronged me, pleasing myself at others’ expense.” How often do we expect God to play by our rules? “God, I’ve played by your rules, but this person has not. Reward me, but punish him. We should both get what we deserve.” Is that really consistent with Jesus culture?

The American who realizes that French shopkeepers expect to be greeted with a “Bonjour” is taking the first steps to a cordial rather than an antagonistic relationship. Awareness of cultural differences is often what is needed to avoid unnecessary conflict. All I am suggesting is that, as Christians, we avoid the assumption that God’s ways are our ways. But in God’s way lies glory.