

## ***Can You Love People and Not Love Their Culture?***

Isaiah 5:1-7, Luke 12:49-53, Romans 12:2

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Two recent events got me thinking about loving cultures. The first was at my father's funeral. Several churches in Japan sent flowers and emails expressing appreciation for Dad's service there as a missionary—even though it officially ended in 1965. The Japan Baptist Convention sent a formal letter from the President and Executive Secretary. It said something like "Hollaway Sensei had a pure love for the Japanese people." I think they meant that he treated them with respect and kindness, and that he never had an agenda of imposing American culture on them. Growing up in Tokyo, I was raised as an American and went to the American school, but I never picked up a sense from my parents that the American way was superior to the Japanese way. Dad had a pure love for the Japanese people. I had to wonder: Do I have a pure love for the people of Block Island?

The day after I returned to the island after the funeral, we had a meeting of the Mental Health Task Force. We discussed a paper written for us by child psychologist Arietta Slade with her thoughts on providing mental health care on the island. One sentence struck me: "There is a culture here that need to be strongly considered and respected; building a viable mental health service here on Block Island is potentially as complex as – say – moving into a rural Native American community or an inner city African-American community." I had to ask myself: Do I have respect for the culture of Block Island? Of course there are things about the culture that I love and enjoy, but there are other things I have a hard time respecting. When we had a series of meetings in May gathering a range of people concerned about substance abuse and young adult deaths, most of the issues that people raised were cultural: the culture of denial, with the metaphor of the town as one big dysfunctional family; a tribalism that protects our own, even from the police; a culture of enabling alcohol abuse and treating intoxication as normal; the social isolation of young people; and the young adult population's denial of death. Everybody at those meetings would say they love Block Island, but most of them would also say that the culture of the island is sick.

The question this raised for me is "Can you love people (of Japan or of Block Island) and *not* love their culture? As Christians, we are called to love our neighbors. Does this mean we are to love their culture—or approve of it? There are good things in every culture, whether highly developed or traditional (what we might call primitive). Culture contains the wisdom of our ancestors, lessons learned over centuries—which may or may not work today. But culture also contains the sins of our fathers and mothers—for example, their attitudes long ago toward Native Americans and African slaves, their views of women and gays, their pathologies related to food or drink or sex—and their idolatries.

Maybe the question is easier to address if we talk about *American* culture. There are things about American culture most of us love: baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, freedom of religion, rock and roll or country music. But there are things that we as Christians hate as much as the Islamists who call us the Great Satan.

Christians agree that our culture is hyper-sexualized. There was a story on the *Today* show this week about teenagers texting sexual messages on their phones; a boy might, for example, text a girl he just met, "You're hot. Do you want to [blank]?" One expert said, "These kids are bombarded with sexual images from the time they are very young; they have access to pornography; they see sex on TV and in movies and hear it in song lyrics. What do you expect?" That is a very big part of American culture—one of the reasons terrorists hate us—and we don't love that aspect of our culture as Christians.

Christians also agree that our culture is materialistic. It seems to be all about money and possessions, big houses and fancy cars. Most Americans' lives appear to be driven by the love of money which, 1 Timothy tells us, is the root of all sorts of evil. We see a culture in which the rich seem to care less and less about the common good, as Jim Wallis said last week. Peter Buffett, the son of billionaire Warren Buffet, said recently that the problem with much philanthropy is that it keeps in place a system that makes a few people wealthy and keeps many people in poverty. He calls it "conscience laundering" to make the rich feel better about themselves [*NYT*, July 26]. It is not hard to imagine what the historical Jesus would have said to such materialism and greed. It is not hard to imagine what the Jesus who reigns and lives in us by his Spirit *is saying* to such materialism.

So perhaps it *is* possible to love America and *not* love its culture, to love the people of America and be critical of the culture. If that is true, maybe it is possible to love Block Island and not love the island culture.

Maybe our posture is something like Jesus in Luke 13:34, when he wept over Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the apple of God's eye. The city is precious to Jesus and to every Jew. But Jesus says with sorrow, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you! How often I have wanted to gather your people just as a hen gathers her children under her wings. But you didn't want that" [CEB].

I was already thinking about these questions when I came to the gospel text assigned by the lectionary for today. Jesus says (Luke 12:51) that he has not come to bring *peace* to the earth, but instead to bring *division*. His message will not have the effect of making everyone get along; it will have the effect of turning fathers against sons, mothers against daughters. Jesus came, he said, to set the world on fire.

Do we imagine that Jesus was a politician or therapist whose goal was to have everyone feeling good? I've often thought of the first time I heard the old radio preacher J. Vernon McGee, who had quite a country-sounding accent. I was driving through the hills of Tennessee when I found this guy on the radio talking about some of the hard demands of Jesus and what Jesus said about riches. The preacher paused and blurted out, "I'm not selling you some suntan lotion!" That's what some people expect of preachers, I guess—to be soothing and protective—but that is not what Jesus expects.

Do we imagine that Jesus came to *endorse* the culture of Jerusalem and the religion of his day? Was he calling for a return to the familiar old-time religion? Do we imagine that he spoke carefully so as not to ruffle feathers or that he spoke conservatively calling people back to their institutions? No, he came to bring fire and to bring division.

Did Jesus love people? Absolutely. Everyone: sinners and hypocrites, Romans and zealots, rich and poor. Did Jesus love their culture? He loved some of it, clearly: the Hebrew Scriptures, Passover, wine, fishermen. But much of the culture of Judea under Herod Jesus despised and spoke against.

That is the traditional role of the prophet in Israel. Jesus compares himself to the prophets which Jerusalem killed in the past. The Old Testament reading assigned by the lectionary today is Isaiah 5:1-7, usually called "The Song of the Vineyard." Actually it begins with a song, but it turns into a parable. Isaiah is singing a song for his friend the bridegroom about his vineyard; this may even have been a contemporary folk song. My friend had a vineyard on a fertile hill; he dug it and cleared it and planted it with the best grape vines. He built a watchtower and a winepress. He expected it to yield grapes but it only yielded wild grapes, bad fruit. That may have begun as a song about disappointed love that did not work out; the bad vineyard is the bride.

But then Isaiah turns into a lawyer arguing an indictment against the nation. He speaks for Yahweh, the Lord, asking us to "judge between me and my vineyard. What more could I have done for it?" I expected good and got only bad. So here's what I'm going to do to my vineyard: I will remove the

hedge and the wall which protect it. I will make it a wasteland, not pruned or hoed, and it will be overgrown with briars and thorns—just as the many farms on Block Island are now nothing but bayberry and brush.

Then in the last verse, Isaiah gives the interpretation of the parable, in case you haven't gotten it yet. The vineyard he's talking about is Israel and Judah. You are the ones he planted and took care of, but you have not produced the fruit he was looking for. It's like Jesus' parable of the fig tree which he cursed during his last week. The last sentence of Isaiah is devastating and includes a powerful play on words. The word for justice is *mishpat*, while the word for bloodshed is *mishpah*; the word for righteousness is *tsedaqa*, while the word for "a cry" is *tse'afa*. God looked for *mishpat* and he got *mishpah*; he looked for *tsedaqa* and he got *tse'afa*. God expects justice in his nation, but what he finds is violence; God is looking for righteousness, but instead he hears the cries of the oppressed.

What God is looking for in a people—and in a culture—is justice and righteousness. Justice in the prophets does not mean prosecuting criminals. Justice means justice for the poor—fair and equitable relationships within the society grounded in God's will [Gene M. Tucker, *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VII]. Righteousness means a right relationship with God, which cannot be separated from God's expectation of justice.

The fact that there is poverty in a rich nation means there is injustice.

The fact that one group of people are incarcerated for drug times at a rate many times the members of another group means there is injustice. African-Americans use drugs at about the same rate as white people, but they are arrested and put in prison seven times as often. In some cities, the majority of African-American men have been deprived of the vote by the so-called war on drugs, which turned out to be a war on the inner city.

The fact that some public schools are so much better than others means there is injustice.

The fact that the poor do not receive the same medical care as the rich means there is injustice. God is not pleased.

The fact that the rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer means that the economic system and tax laws are rigged. It's injustice.

This is not politics. This is God's critique of our culture. If we are going to be Jesus people, if we are going to be biblical, we have to stand apart from our culture and speak as critics. Can I talk that way and love the people of America? Of course. Can we critique Block Island culture and still love the people who live here? Of course.

I want to point out one verse that speaks powerfully to our relationship to culture. Romans 12:2 says "Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is" (CEB). Don't be conformed, but be transformed. I've loved for a long time the way J. B. Phillips translated that: "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold." Now I've discovered Eugene Peterson's paraphrase in *The Message*: "Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking."

As Christians, we have to resist the pressure that any culture puts on us to conform. In a place as small as Block Island, with so little privacy and no place to run, that pressure can be intense. In an economy like America's, with so much money dedicated to persuading you to want and buy, that pressure can be intense. The culture doesn't want you to live by Jesus' values. The culture, ultimately, does not really value justice or righteousness. Jesus saw that it was true even of the culture of the Temple and the culture of the Pharisees, nominally dedicated to righteousness. Isaiah saw that it was true of Judah and Israel in his day, even though they claimed to be God's people.

We are called by Jesus not to judge but to discern. We have to see things for what they are, not what they claim to be. And no matter that learning from Jesus turns us into critics and prophets, Jesus'

first call to us is to love and serve. We have no chance of changing the culture—being yeast and salt—if the people think we despise them. We have no chance of drawing people to the gospel that will transform them if they don't know we love them. That is a lesson I have to keep learning. Kindness, humility, mercy—those are Jesus values as much as justice. But we can't be Jesus people if our goal is to be loved ourselves—and even less if our goal is to be liked. It is the very nature of Jesus' truth that it produces conflict, and the conflict his word creates in our own minds and consciences is the only path to learning.

I want to sing a hymn that came out of a profound critique of American culture by those who saw slavery as injustice, and those who like Abraham Lincoln saw the Civil War as a judgment upon the whole nation. The spirit of this song is that in the midst of judgment God is working transformation. His truth is marching on. The call for justice and righteousness is never silenced. And in the end, we will be transfigured, and the culture will be transformed. Glory! Hallelujah! God's truth is marching on!