

Title: Christ and Culture

Text: Acts 17: 16, 22 – 28a

Date: December 10, 2017

In some respects my reflection today is an extension of last week's message. We are using non-traditional texts for a non-traditional perspective on Advent as we explore the larger significance of Christ coming into the world. Last week we introduced this Thai spirit house, and I explained how we will be using it as an object lesson to show how the Christ is "at home" in more contexts than we might imagine. As we begin today you'll be wondering where the heck this is heading, but I trust it will come together for you by the end.

Last week I told you that I majored in Religion in college. It was in *that* context that I took a course where I studied Buddhism in depth. With that background, then, I felt like I had a pretty good head start on understanding things when I moved to Thailand years ago. But more and more I was encountering things that left me scratching my head. I kept encountering aspects of this Thai Buddhist culture that just didn't conform at all with what I learned when I studied Buddhism in college.

I explained last week that the idea behind a spirit house was so the spirits you disturbed when you built your own house had a place to move into so you could then live harmoniously with the spirits. Really? I don't remember anything like that being discussed in my Buddhism class.

Living in Thailand I started becoming conscious of the significance that many people place on amulets. There are an estimated 10,000 stalls and shops across the country that trade in amulets, either to ward off harm – or to win riches, luck or ladies. No living monk had dispensed more charms than the venerable Luang Phor Khoon of Wat Baan Rai who sold amulets with sayings such as "I hope you get rich" written on them. Really? I thought we were to let go of desire.

Then I learned about the sub-culture of religious tattoos that can likewise provide protection or good fortune in business. There is a particular temple called Wat Bang Phra that has an annual Tattoo Festival. People there enter wild trance states and can only be calmed by the abbot, who sprays water on them. Really? I never learned about this in class.

Then I learned about the evolution of religious holidays. One of my favorite is Songkran, when the Thai celebrate their New Year. Generations ago it might have been limited to a respectful cleansing of Buddha images, or a time when young people showed respect for their elders by sprinkling them with a little water. Now the festival has evolved into a riotous public water fight.

Then your heart breaks when you read newspaper articles about monks who have embezzled money, or who have sought out prostitutes. It is like an end to an age of innocence.

On my last trip to Chiang Mai I spoke to a high ranking monk who had retired after over 35 years of service. Did you know monks could retire? Did you know they had degrees/ranks? He now teaches in a school that trains young monks on a university level. Among other things, I remember asking him what were the common motivators for a young man to become a monk. Since I am interested in meditation, I asked why that was not on his list of motivators. He said, **"Oh, most of our young monks don't come with a natural interest in meditation at all. We have to work hard at encouraging that."** Not the answer I was hoping for!

One of my closer friends in Thailand is a devout Buddhist who has a Ph.D. in horticultural. In moments of honesty, *he* would bemoan the fact that is harder and harder to find temples that teach pure Buddhism. He would say too many other things are mixed in with Buddhism these days. In their sermons some monks would go on and on saying not much of anything, or resort

to telling jokes. Faithful attendance at local temples was on the decline, and people would drift from temple to temple as they saw fit. Your average temple was having a harder time getting the financial resources to maintain the building. Any of this sound familiar?

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So where am I going with this? Here is what I am thinking: Sometimes we just need to get outside of our own culture to see things more clearly. Since I had in my mind some rarified concept of what “pure Buddhism” was, I was shocked and dismayed that it was so very hard to find deep examples of that in a so-called Buddhist country.

Likewise – *and you have to know this is true!* – if you were to teach an average Thai person “pure Christianity,” they too would be shocked and dismayed at what they would find in America – a so-called Christian country.

- Our hypothetical religious foreign exchange student would go to our malls – all decked out for Christmas – and say, “What does this have to do with following Jesus?”
- They would hear the president of the nation’s largest Christian university encouraging students to carry concealed weapons and think, “Is this what Jesus would teach?”
- They would see people sleeping on the streets in every major US city and say, “Where are the followers of Jesus?”
- They would read newspaper stories about pastors of large churches seeking comfort in the arms of prostitutes, and be very disheartened.
- They would listen to sermons at many churches and find the most memorable moments to be some good jokes.
- If they could spy on your average Christian family on Christmas morning they would see laughter and good cheer as gleeful consumers opened presents, but they might think, “What does this have to do with following Jesus?”
- They might hear about those seeking political office in the Bible belt being excused of pedophilia.
- They might hear of politicians securing the fortunes of the rich at the expense of the poor and middle-class, or limiting access to healthcare.
- They might read of refugees being turned away and think, “*Is this what Jesus would encourage?*”

Our hypothetical religious foreign exchange student would rightfully be *very confused*, and would rightfully be *very dismayed*

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So allow me to pull this together with something I said last week. I said I did not believe that Jesus came with the intent of starting a new religion. I tried to show that Jesus strove to elevate the discourse beyond *religious* questions to *transformational* questions.

To that I would add that I don’t join the ranks of those wringing their hands at the diminishment of our Christian culture. It seems that our love affair with “Christian culture” has not served us well. Last week I was reminded of this wonderful quote from William

Stringfellow: **"The trouble with some of us is that we have been inoculated with small doses of Christianity which keep us from catching the real thing."**

Sadly, it seems that once *any* path of faith becomes part of the dominant culture, that leads to problems. Remember: the deepest call of any faith is *transformational*, and once any faith works its way into the dominant culture you start encouraging *conformity*... not transformation. Whether you call yourself Buddhist or Christian or Muslim, the risk is that you settle for tradition, conformity, and belief systems... not transformation.

So this Advent, when we reflect on the Good News of Jesus the Christ coming into the world, remember that the news is bigger than you thought. However it is *not* big news in the sense of hoping for a dominant Christian culture that will in time take over the world. So rather than "big news," we might be better off thinking of it as "potent news."

In Matthew 13 Jesus uses a *potent* image when he says that the kingdom of heaven is like yeast that leavens bread. (13:33). By contrast, in Matthew 16 he says that we are to beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees... the religious professionals who want to secure their position in the culture (16:11). Making America "Christian" again is a fool's errand. God wants to use us in much more subversive, counter-cultural ways.

Thinking of our reading from Acts this morning, Paul said, **"I see how extremely religious you are in every way."** Heck, you might even have a manger scene in your front yard! He goes on to say, **"As I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, this Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is this God served by human hands, as though needing anything, since it is this God who gives to all mortals life and breath and all things."** (Acts 17:25)

This Advent I am guessing many of you are religious in many ways, yet there might also be an ache in your heart for something more, something that heretofore has been **unknown** to you. Something more than a shrine made with human hands, something more than cultural Christianity, something more than a Christian nation, *and* something more than one more clever religious answer. This Advent may you **"grope for" this God,** for **"indeed this God is not far from each one of us. For 'In this God we live and move and have our being.'"** (Acts 17: 27-28)

Don't settle for a cultural faith!

Amen.

Acts 17: 16, 22 – 28a

¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, this God is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is this God served by human hands, as though needing anything, since the Creator gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for God—though indeed the Spirit is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’