

Culture Matters

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[0 : 00] Well, 2020 has been quite a year. I think most of us are probably feeling pretty disoriented still as we come into the fall. And I think most churches feel pretty disoriented right now.

We have not been able to meet in person since March, and it's now September. And I think many churches, including ours, feel like we've been more or less just in survival mode.

But the truth is that God has put us here for a reason. And I think as we look around in our society and we see all the things that are going on right now, now more than ever, our society needs the church to be the church.

And so now is a very good time for us to take some time to remember why we are here, to remember our mission and our vision, who we are and why we're here in D.C.

and what we hope to see as a result of our long-term presence in this city. And as we look at Church of the Advent, our life basically revolves around three core activities.

[1 : 02] Worship, discipleship, and mission. Praising God's name, being God's people, and living for God's purposes. That really comprises all that we do in the life of our church.

And by doing those things, worship, discipleship, and mission, by doing those things, our aim as a church is to seek the renewal of Washington, D.C.

And because we live in Washington, D.C., and this is a global crossroads, our aim is to see renewal not only in this city, but through this city to the whole world. And when we talk about renewal, we're talking about things like personal renewal, or spiritual renewal, or social renewal, or as our focus will be this morning, cultural renewal.

Today, we're going to sort of do an introduction to a series that we're going to be doing for the next few weeks, looking specifically at cultural renewal. What hope does the gospel bring to our culture and cultures around the world?

And I think that this is going to be particularly relevant. I hope that you will find this particularly relevant for the challenges that we're facing right now in our society. So this morning, we're just going to ask three broad questions to introduce this series.

[2 : 21] We're going to ask, why does culture matter? What is wrong with our culture? And then what can we do about it? Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for calling us to be your church in this place.

We know you love this city. We know you love us. And we know that it's your great delight and our great honor that you choose to work through your people.

And we desire nothing more than to be used by you to fulfill your purposes here. And so we pray that you would use your word to clarify what that looks like for us. And we pray that not only for our good, but for the good of this city and for your glory.

In your son's name, amen. So first of all, why does culture matter? When we talk about culture, what we're talking about is basically everything that makes up our day-to-day lives.

So our beliefs, our values, our customs, our language, our behavior, our intellectual achievements, our art, our institutions, various religions, basically our entire way of life.

[3 : 29] And culture is not just a secondary byproduct of human life. It's not just a kind of side effect of humans living in the world. Rather, if we look at scripture, we recognize that culture and the creation of culture is actually one of the main reasons that God put us here to begin with.

If you look at Genesis chapter 1, very first page of the Bible, verses 27 to 29, we see what theologians refer to as the cultural mandate. And God here creates human beings.

He creates them male and female, and He creates them to be His image bearers. Unlike any other creature in creation, human beings bear God's image. They resemble God in His world.

And then He gives them a specific job. In verse 28, it says, And God blessed them, and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and exercise dominion over it.

Now, we hear these words like subdue and dominion, and we think conquest. But in this context, that's not what it means at all. Essentially, these words mean that human beings are called to care for God's world the way God would care for His world.

[4 : 41] So God has created a world that is full of possibilities. It's full of unrealized potential. But it's incomplete. It needs someone to bring it to its full potential.

And so God created human beings to take the raw material of creation and to help creation achieve its full potential. So let me give you some examples.

The world is full of grain. The world has grain in it. But it takes human beings to turn that grain into bread or beer. The world has sound in it.

But human beings cultivate that sound, and it becomes language or music. The world has underlying processes that make things work.

And human beings develop ways of discovering what those processes are. And so we have science. The world is full of information, but it's disorganized information.

[5 : 39] And so it takes human beings to organize that information into a scope and sequence. And therefore we have education. The world is full of experiences.

But it takes human beings to arrange those experiences into narratives and systems of meaning. And so we have philosophy and even various religions of the world.

The world has many problems that need solving. And so human beings organize ourselves so that we can best solve those problems.

That's essentially what we have in politics. The world has many natural resources, but it takes human beings to harness those resources to produce energy and medicine and technology.

So right away on the first page of the Bible, we see that God never intended his people to stay in the Garden of Eden. He never intended human beings to stay there.

[6 : 35] He always intended for people to spread out across the earth and to become sub-creators in his image, taking the raw material of this world and cultivating it so that it reaches its full potential.

That's why God put us here. But as you know, something went terribly wrong. Best case scenario, what I just described, that's what culture creation looks like.

But as we look at our culture or other cultures around the world, we recognize that that is not our daily lived experience. We are currently facing an economic crisis.

We have a pandemic that is still ravaging the world. We are facing a presidential election, and so many people are so wrapped up in their political identity that this election may very well tear our country apart, regardless of the outcome.

We have people rioting in the streets over racial trauma and injustice. In some places around the world, the abortion rate is actually higher than the birth rate.

[7 : 39] Human trafficking is a \$150 billion global industry that exists for the sole purpose of exploiting people for profit.

Something has gone terribly wrong. So the next question we ask is, what is wrong with culture? What is wrong with our culture? What is the problem?

If you look at Romans 1, verses 21 through 23, Paul says this, So here's the problem in a nutshell. Instead of living for God's glory, instead of creating culture that reflects God's glory, instead of building our society around the central person of God himself, humans decided that they wanted to be like God.

They wanted to live for their own glory. They wanted to exchange the worship of God for the worship of themselves and other things that God made in the world.

[9 : 00] And this is essentially what we call idolatry. It's worshiping other things as though they were God. Taking anything, and we can do this with almost anything, and often we do it with good things, and we allow those good things to become ultimate things.

Paul says this is the core problem in the world. And as a result, we now contend with three realities that have traditionally in the church been referred to as the flesh, the world, and the devil.

So let me just break those down really quickly. First of all, the flesh. By that, I don't just mean our skin and bones. It's a biblical term that means our fallen, sinful nature.

So Paul says that our thinking has become futile. And he says our hearts have become darkened. In other words, we no longer have the capacity to be what God created us to be on our own.

We bear God's image still, and every human being bears God's image, but that image is marred. It's blurred. It's like a cracked mirror.

[10:06] Our hearts no longer naturally love God. The best way to know whether or not this is true in your own heart is how are you naturally predisposed to feel toward God and his law.

And no human being has a heart that is naturally inclined to love God and to desire to do his will.

What we are most naturally inclined to do is to love ourselves and to do our own will.

And so we're most naturally inclined to reject God and to worship other things, to worship anything other than God. And that often looks like sex or money or power or success or influence or approval or any of the other things that we can worship.

Some of us, it's just comfort or non-confrontation or family or our kids or our political party, our country. It could be any of those things.

So that's the flesh, this futility and darkness in the heart and mind. But then we also have to contend with the world. So let me ask you this.

[11:10] What happens when human beings who are by design culture makers reject God and fall into futility and darkness? Well, what happens is that everything that we create from that point on is tainted by that futility and that darkness.

It gets woven into everything that we build. And so Christians not only have a category for individual sin, but we also have a category for systemic sin.

We recognize that because we are futile and dark in our hearts and minds, that whatever we make, whatever we build, whatever systems we institute, even if we do it with the best of intentions, sin is hardwired in.

Futility and darkness are hardwired in. So no matter what political or economic system we devise, some people will inevitably benefit more than others.

Some people will learn how to game the system. Other people will be marginalized by that system.

No matter how much education or technology we have, we will never escape the corruption of sin.

[12:26] So that's the world, the flesh, the world. And then thirdly, the devil. And this often gets left off the list, even in a lot of churches. As Paul says in places like Ephesians 6, verse 12, we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil.

What he's saying is the brokenness in this world, the brokenness in society, is not just psychological or political or economic or social.

Those problems are real, but what he's saying is there is a spiritual evil behind these things. There's a malevolent spiritual being that hates God.

But because it has no chance of defeating God, it goes after that which God most loves, that which resembles God in creation. In other words, he goes after human beings.

And this is very important to understand. And I think especially for a congregation like ours, we need to recognize that we are contending against the flesh, our own sinful desires, the world's systemic brokenness, and then the devil, this spiritual evil that exists behind these things.

[13:46] This is one of the things that makes Christian activism distinct and unique from secular progressive activism. It's easy to think when we want to see something like justice done in our society that we should all just, what really matters is the outcome, and what really matters is, and certainly there's a place to work together and to serve together and to find common ground and common causes, absolutely.

But one of the things that Christians need to remember is there's a vast difference between our view of human nature in society and the view that somebody might take who's not a follower of Jesus.

One of the biggest blind spots of secular progressive activism is the denial of sin and evil. This is a view that theologians call Pelagianism.

And so the secular progressive belief is that they believe in the kind of perfectibility of people and society, and they strive toward that utopian ideal, and they believe that it's actually achievable.

Where Christians would differ, and even if we're working together and serving together, where we would differ is while we strive for justice, while we seek to alleviate suffering wherever we find it, we also know that we can never achieve these things on our own.

[15:05] So we have a more realistic understanding of our own limitations, of the limitations that human beings labor under. In other words, we know that our ultimate hope has to be found outside of us.

Human beings on our own do not have what it takes to completely fix and restore this world, and remembering that is incredibly important. We know that our true hope rests outside of us. So that brings us to the third point. So we talked about why culture matters. We're here to create culture. What's wrong with culture? Human beings rebelled. And as a result, our cultures reflect our idolatry, rather than the glory of the Lord.

And so what can we do about all of this? Well, we know we need help from outside of ourselves. Human beings are not capable of solving our deepest problems on our own. And this is exactly why God sent Jesus Christ into the world.

Why do we need Jesus? Paul says in Colossians 1, beginning in verse 15, He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

[16:14] For by Him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. Whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through Him and for Him.

And He is before all things. And in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

In the words of Paul Marshall, everything was made by and for Jesus Christ. Everything holds together in Jesus Christ. Everything will be reconciled by Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the key. So what this tells us is that Jesus is the one who will ultimately reconcile all things in the universe to Himself.

[17:20] And He does this through His death and resurrection. On the cross, Jesus became the vicarious sacrifice for our sin in order to set us free.

And then through His death and resurrection, Jesus was victorious over sin, over death, over the powers and the principalities that Paul talks about in Ephesians chapter 6.

Jesus sets us free from their hold. And so then we ask, well, what does this mean for us as human beings? Well, Jesus gives His disciples the Great Commission.

He says, now that I have died for sin, now that I have rose, even as I am ascending to the throne of heaven, you have a job to do in this world. And He sends them out to go and to make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And we see when we look at our baptismal liturgy that when we are baptized, our liturgy says that we renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil.

[18:29] And what this is saying is, I'm renouncing that entire way of life that was lived in rebellion to God, and I'm embracing an entirely new way of being human in the world.

A recovery of what human beings were put here to be before we fell. But then we need to recognize that it doesn't just end there. It's not just about getting saved.

We have to ask, what is my salvation for? It's not just about joining the church. We have to ask, what is the church for? What are we called to do now that we have come to gain a new identity in Jesus Christ?

The last part of the Great Commission says, then, after we baptize people, teach them to observe all that Jesus has commanded. An entirely new way of living that touches every aspect of our lives. The way we use technology, the way we think about justice, the way we raise our children, the way we define success, the way we engage politically and think about our political leaders, the way we spend our money, the way we balance work and rest, the way we care for creation and our motivation for that.

[19:46] It touches every corner of life. Don't you see what's happening here? Jesus is reconciling everything to himself. Everything in the universe is aligning with Jesus in his death and resurrection and ascension.

And that includes culture. It includes our culture. It includes all cultures. Jesus is reconciling all things to himself. And so disciples are called not only to fulfill the Great Commission, but to take up the cultural mandate once again.

Take up your role as human beings who were put here to create culture, to help cultivate this world and help it to reach its full potential.

And so as we follow Jesus, we're building a new culture. Part of how we exercise dominion is simply by preaching the gospel and inviting people to come and to become part of the kingdom that Jesus is building.

But then the kingdom work extends beyond that. It's about building an entirely new culture, a kingdom culture in the world. In Matthew chapter 13, Jesus says the kingdom is like leaven that a woman puts in a measure of flour, and the leaven eventually leavens all of the flour.

[21 : 06] Another image that you might use that would be a little more current would be the image of tea, and you have hot water, and you put the tea leaves into the water. And over time, those tea leaves infuse all of that water with a beautiful aroma and flavor and color.

And that's what Jesus says the kingdom of God is like. And this is a picture of how Christians are meant to be in the world. We're meant to go out and infuse every corner of creation with the presence and the power of Jesus Christ.

And because we follow Jesus, our lives look different. We're salty in the world. We're light in the world. And in a few weeks, we're going to talk about that image in much more detail.

But because we follow Jesus, the way we think about things like sex or money or power is radically different from the surrounding culture. The way we treat our neighbors and coworkers is radically different.

It's countercultural. The way we're able to get involved in politics without demonizing our opponents, without our entire identity being taken up by that.

[22 : 14] It's counterculture. It looks radically different. Our willingness to exercise forbearance and to extend grace and to forgive rather than stoking the outrage culture.

These are things that make Christians distinct or rather should make Christians distinct. And so in all of these ways, as we go out into the world, into every sphere of culture, our lives continually provoke questions.

Our lives continually provoke questions that can only be answered by the gospel. Our lives provoke questions only the gospel can answer. One question that I occasionally get asked is somebody will come up to me and they say, well, here's an issue that I really care about.

This is an issue that really matters a lot to me. My heart is really for this cause. What is the church doing about this issue? And typically, I think what people mean by that is, is there a program that you have or an initiative that I can become a part of?

And I want to make it clear, you know, I think programs definitely have their place in the church. And churches need certain strategic priorities. But you want to know what the real answer to that question is? The real answer is this, that if God has put a specific issue in our culture on your heart, if God has put that issue on your heart, chances are very good that he is actually calling you to serve him specifically in that particular way.

[23 : 44] And what I want to be clear on is this, the main job of the church is not to create programs, right? We could create a whole bunch of programs and initiatives, and we could put them all out there and get all of you to sign up for all these programs, but that's not really the main job of the church.

The main job of the church is to form you and to equip you so that you can fulfill God's calling in your life. That's why we focus on worship and discipleship and mission, right?

As we worship, we are formed as disciples. Worship forms us as disciples. And as disciples, then, we go out on mission. We give our lives fully to what God is doing in the world.

And then through that mission, more people come and become worshipers of God. And so it goes around and around and around. So our role as the church is to form one another to fulfill God's calling in our lives.

So instead of asking, what is the church doing about this or that issue that I care about? You need to realize you are the church. If you're baptized, if you're a follower of Jesus, if you're a part of a church community, you are the church.

[24 : 53] So the question should not be, what is the church doing? The question should be, what can I do? What is God calling me to do? Maybe God is desiring to do something in this church, and he's putting it on my heart because he wants me to spearhead it or initiate it.

So how can I be the church in this particular area that God is calling me to serve? Our vision only succeeds if the people in our community have a clear sense of what God's call is in their life.

And they're willing to pursue that calling. And then we as the church get to support and equip and form you to do what God is calling you to do. So our aim is formation for the sake of mission so that you can go out and infuse every corner of society, and we can build this kingdom culture together.

So we can do this in our household. We can do this on the block that we live on. You know, COVID means that a lot of people are working from home. A lot of people are home right now. And if you're anything like us, you have found this to be an extraordinary opportunity to begin to get to know your neighbors because everybody's home all the time. And so it's an amazing opportunity to get to know people who live right around us.

[26 : 09] You can do this through your vocation. Probably for most of us, one of the main ways that we'll fulfill God's calling in our life is through our vocation. So you are on the front lines.

You are the missionaries. You are the ambassadors of God's kingdom. And as we think about cultural renewal, it begins with this recognition that in the power of the Holy Spirit, God can and will use you.

He will use you to accomplish his purposes in this world for his glory. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for your vision of this world that is dark or hopeless or full of despair, as it may seem from our perspective, that you have the long view and that you see this world as it will one day be, Lord.

And I pray that you would align our hearts toward that hope. Give us a vision for the ways that you're calling us to be a part of the work of renewal in this city, Lord, where we are right now.

And I pray that you would strengthen our church and empower us with the Holy Spirit to fulfill that calling. Lord, that your name might be glorified. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen.