

THREE CULTURES

There are three characters in this parable of Jesus (Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32). We can see them simply as three kinds of **personal** character -- and there is great value to be found in that kind of interpretation. But we can also see them on a larger scale as three kinds of **culture**. Every community of people has its own culture, and every culture has its own particular character or "ethos." So, this morning, I would like us to take a look at how this parable can offer us a portrayal of three cultures that can be found within the church, or within any community of people.

We begin with the **contrast** between the **culture of the elder brother** and the **culture of the prodigal**. Or, we might say, the contrast between a culture of **moralism** and a culture of **self-indulgence**. The parable draws this distinction in very broad, black & white strokes, which might tempt us to think that we are either "this" or we are "that." But think of these broad strokes as describing general cultural patterns. In our own specific experience, we can most likely see bits of both patterns in ourselves, in our church culture, and also in the society that surrounds us.

First, there is the **self-indulgent culture** of the Prodigal.

An example of a culture that leans toward this extreme might be our own consumer society that leads us away from the sanctuary of real relationships, by keeping us moving on the pleasure-seeking treadmill, desiring more & more of the latest products and experiences which, their manufacturers promise, will make us feel more alive and more loved. It is hard to deny that this dimension of our society promotes a way of life that turns human beings all over the planet, and the planet itself, into objects that we use to increase our pleasure, and then dispose of when they no longer serve that purpose.

Then, there is the **moralistic culture** of the Elder Brother.

An example of a culture that has leaned toward this extreme might be Victorian society. Between 1780 and 1850, our British ancestors went through major changes. They went from being what Historian Harold Perkins describes as "one of the most aggressive, brutal, rowdy, outspoken, riotous, cruel and bloodthirsty nations in the world" to being "one of the most inhibited, polite, orderly, tender-minded, prudish and hypocritical." He goes on to describe how this shift "diminished cruelty to animals, criminals, lunatics, and children (in that order); suppressed many cruel sports and games, such as bull-baiting and cock-fighting, as well as innocent amusements, including many fairs and wakes; [it] rid the penal code of about two hundred capital offences, abolished transportation [of criminals to Australia], cleaned up the prisons... [and] turned Sunday into a day of prayer for some and mortification for all." **But how deeply rooted was this transformation?** In hindsight, we have to ask if these great changes, as positive as many of them were, did not really **resolve** the violence in British culture, so much as inhibit it through its threats of social stigma and punishment. And so, Victorian society is now often described as a "moralistic" society, which "followed the rules" quite scrupulously, but had not experienced a real conversion of its deepest values and ways of seeing the world.

Moralistic cultures and Self-Indulgent cultures are in one sense opposites. They represent two extremes. We can see them as the two extreme end points on a continuum, where the center point is a well functioning moral compass. These extremes are, each in their own way, "looking for Love in all the wrong places." The extreme on the left, the self-indulgent culture of the prodigal, has abandoned the world of real relationships for a do-it-yourself approach of grasping as many pleasures as it can to make itself feel alive, to make itself feel loved. But the feeling is shallow, and it quickly evaporates. The extreme on the right, the moralistic culture of the elder brother, has abandoned the world of real relationships for a manipulative approach of pleasing people -- giving them what it thinks they want,

so they will, in exchange, give it the rewards it hopes will make it feel alive, make it feel loved. But, again, even when they receive the coveted rewards, the feeling is shallow, and it quickly evaporates.

But we also see a **third** culture in the parable. And this third culture is the one that Jesus envisions his spiritual community, the church, will grow to embody. It is the culture of the gentle father in the parable, the culture of forgiving love.

Christian love is **forgiving** love. ... Now, when we hear a sentence like that, some very common "inner static" that can arise in our minds is what I call "**the gotta's**". It often goes something like this -- "**I gotta** have Christian love in my heart, so **I gotta** forgive all those who trespass against me. **I gotta**, I know, but I don't **wanna!** I'm not up for this 'forgiving love' stuff. So I guess I'm just not a good Christian..." and so on... We can **gotta** ourselves into a real tailspin! Now maybe your inner vocabulary is more refined than mine. Maybe instead of saying, "I gotta" to yourself, you say "I should" or "I must" or even "it is my bounden duty" -- but the result is the same.

Just imagine how effectively that kind of "inner static" buzzing away in our minds can "short circuit" the power of The Liturgy in our lives. Before we know it, we're off in another world, either beating ourselves up, or telling ourselves that this "forgiving love" is all a crock of shinola. Not a helpful place to go.

We often think of Christian love as having a perpetual feeling of warm benevolence. And as you know if you've ever tried that, it is very hard to sustain. When we attempt to keep feeling that kind of feeling, it often leads to a "smile-though-your-heart-is-aching" kind of experience, or a "let-me-be-your-door-mat" kind of experience. It leads to frustration. It leads to resentment. It leads to condemning ourselves when we can't sustain it.

But Christian love is something very different than that. We see it very clearly in the portrait of the father in the parable. It is the nature of the love that we receive from God that we don't need to "deserve" it. It is not based on "our own merits." There are no conditions that we have to meet in order to receive it. And when we do receive it, and seek to abide in it, it transforms us from the inside out. It heals us and repairs and reorients our moral compass. It inspires how we love ourselves and how we love others. This kind of deep change is what self-indulgent cultures and moralistic cultures are seeking, but, sadly, failing to find.

So we can see that within these three cultures, there are very different assumptions about the nature of love, the nature of human worth, the nature of human happiness. Let's reflect on these three cultures and on how they may relate to the culture of our own parish. Is there room for us to grow in Christian love? Can we become more of a life-changing oasis for those who are trapped in the vicious cycles of self-indulgence and moralism -- for the prodigals, and the elder brothers -- in our midst and in our world?

May God inspire us as we reflect on these important questions. Amen

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