

“In but Not of the World”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

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Based upon Exodus 1:8-2:10; John 17:14-19

What does it mean to be “in the world, but not of the world?” In the prayer that John says Jesus prayed on behalf of his disciples shortly before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed for the safety of his disciples, noting that they were not “of the world,” just as he was not “of the world.” The New Revised Standard Version from which I just read, translates this as “they do not *belong* to the world, just as I do not *belong* to the world,” which tells us that the famous “of” in this verse is referring to more than one’s geographic location. Jesus was talking about what defines our identity, what captures our allegiance, what shapes our values. We are called to be in the world, but not to belong to the world. But although it is easy to say that, it is more than a little bit tricky to apply this standard concretely in daily life while living *in* the world. How much is too much belonging? What influences on our identity are spiritually benign and what are dangerous? It’s something Christians have been trying to figure out for millennia, and we still don’t agree.

Often when people consider this question the Amish come to mind because they have decided that less is more when it comes to belonging to the world. Shortly after I was ordained, my first call was in Wooster, Ohio, which is bung in the middle of Amish country. People tend to think of Amish people as a uniform group of believers who wear old fashioned clothes held together by straight pins, forgo using electricity, and drive around town in horse and buggies. Thanks to movies like the Harrison Ford movie *Witness*, we may even have a romanticized view of what it would be like to live so devoted to your faith that you reject the world in favor of embracing farming, family, and God. But when I lived in Wooster, which is a modern college town surrounded with dairy farms and Amish communities, I discovered that even within the Amish, there is a spectrum in terms of how much “of the world” one is allowed to incorporate into one’s life.

For example, there were some communities, called “Old Order” Amish, who truly lived separate from the world. We “English” didn’t see or interact with these people much at all. They didn’t vote or shop or intermingle with us. But around Wooster, there were many more communities of what I thought of as “Walmart Amish” because that’s where I always saw them. These were people who dressed in classic Amish plain and modest clothing, but made their clothes out of polyester because then they didn’t need to be ironed. (Ironing is a pain without electricity.) They wouldn’t drive or use electricity, but they would readily accept a ride to the Walmart to go shopping and store their wares in Rubbermaid tubs. They wore Nikes because they were more comfortable than stiff black shoes, and sold “homemade pies” made at home out of canned pie filling and whipped cream. They made their living interacting with tourists in restaurants, furniture shops, and more. These Amish went to the Cleveland Clinic when they were very sick, but didn’t want me to pray for them when I was a chaplain there. They were immensely practical people and deeply faithful, comfortable with the lines they drew, whether others could understand them or not.

We all draw lines somewhere, just not in the same places. About seventy years ago, the great Christian ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr wrote about those lines in a now classic book called Christ and Culture.¹ Noting that “Christ’s answer to the problem of human culture is one thing, [and] Christian answers are another,” Niebuhr identified five large categories of Christian responses to the “in but not of” problem: “Christ *against* culture,” “Christ *of* culture,” “Christ *above* culture,” “Christ *in paradox with* culture,” and “Christ *transforming* culture.” In his analysis, he defined “culture” very broadly. It was not simply American culture or even Western culture, but rather was all human culture worldwide throughout history, including language, technology, ideas, values, customs, social and political organizations, etc.² In effect “culture,” as he defined it, was basically synonymous with “world” as John uses it in today’s text. Jesus mentions the world eleven times in his prayer. Sometimes that word world, or *kosmos* in the Greek, refers to God’s Creation and is a positive term. But in the section of the prayer we heard today, “the world” is not what God designed, but what human beings have, and the connotation is negative.

The first two categories of response to the world Niebuhr identified were the most absolute. Christians who fall into the “Christ against culture” group see the world as entirely corrupt, and therefore withdraw from it in order to remain faithful. The Old Order Amish fall into this group, as did the early Christian ascetics who went to live in isolation in the desert. The “Christ of culture” Christians represent the opposite extreme. Christians in this category draw little or no distinction between the ways of Jesus and the ways of the world or their nation, because they believe that Christ’s highest aspirations and those of their surrounding culture are in agreement. Those who preach the prosperity gospel— you know, “have faith and God will bless you with material wealth and success”— fall into this group, as do the churches which merge faithfulness to God with patriotism toward nation.

The three remaining types are less distinct and fall in between these extremes. The “Christ above culture” types strive to use the good of Christ to build on the good of culture. The “Christ and culture in paradox” types advocate keeping a critical distance from culture, but are unwilling to reject all of the blessings of culture— the Walmart Amish might fall in this group. And the “Christ transforming culture” types effectively blend these last two perspectives by recognizing that we must be critical of the surrounding culture, but are also called to ally ourselves with the culture enough to help the kingdom of God grow on earth. Niebuhr himself, and John Calvin, the founding father of Presbyterianism, espoused this last view, as does our Reformed tradition.

If you’re still wondering what that might look like in practice, today’s Old Testament lesson gives us a good glimpse of what being in the world but working to transform the world looks like, even though the events it describes happened thousands of years before Christ lived or Christianity was born. The story begins by identifying the problem with the “world” in those days, which for those involved was basically limited to Egypt. Although for centuries Egypt had

¹ Niebuhr, H. Richard, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper & Row Pub., Inc., 1951), 2.

² *Ibid* at 32.

been a good home for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, thanks to Joseph's close alliance with the Pharaoh of his day, eventually Joseph and that Pharaoh died. The new man in charge was very different. He was ignorant of the history of his predecessors and their helpful alliances with the Hebrew people. Additionally, he was not very bright, as we soon see when he plans to kill off the very people he needs to be slaves, and was a paranoid, egomaniacal racist who had no qualms about hurting or killing his own subjects. Several times in the text it mentions that his whole campaign against the Hebrews began because he was scared of their numbers. "There are so many of them!" he worried. "I don't want them to rise up against me, so I'll have to squash and kill them before they do."

First, Pharaoh dealt with his fear by enslaving the Hebrews, making them crank out bricks in unreasonable numbers, as well as work in his fields. But that didn't assuage his fears. There were still too many of them. So, next he told the midwives who serve the Hebrews that they were to kill all the male babies born to the Hebrews. This plan is what prompts the heroes in today's story to act. Ironically, although Pharaoh was focused on the threat all the male babies posed, it is the women in today's story who subvert Pharaoh's plan.

The first women to do this were two midwives named Shiphrah and Puah. They were unwilling to kill the male Hebrew babies because according to the text, they "feared" or "revered" God more than Pharaoh. So, they saved the babies, risking their own lives doing so. Then when Pharaoh responded to his foiled plan by requiring the male babies to be drowned in the Nile, the next women to intervene are Moses' mother, whom tradition calls Jochebed, his sister Miriam, and even Pharaoh's own daughter. They step up, transforming the Nile into a means of life instead of death by protecting the baby Moses, who would one day rise up to challenge Pharaoh's oppression of his people. All of these women did more than take a stand against "the Empire" with their actions, they also contributed to its transformation. They actively worked to preserve what was right and good while still living in that world.

We are called by Christ to behave in a similar fashion, not to run away from the problems of our times, ignore them, or give up in despair, but to work to make things better. There are a lot of problems these days, more than many of us imagined we would ever see. But in recent weeks we have also seen people being instruments of transformation in record numbers in our nation—mothers linking arms both to protect and join with those peacefully protesting the need for racial justice in our country; a Marine passively allowing himself to be beaten and sprayed with tear gas so he could ask the question "why are you here?" of authorities behaving in unjust, violent ways.

These servants of justice are inspiring. But standing on the front lines of protests is not the only way to work for change. As today's text illustrates, the individual decisions we make every day can change history. Looking at what is really going on, listening to the voices of those silenced, speaking the truth publicly in the face of lies and propaganda, helping those who are the target of Pharaoh's wrath and injustice individually, if not as a whole. We don't know whether our actions will protect the next Moses, but neither do we need to know that to act. All we need to know is that there are fear and ego-driven Pharaohs in every age, and always empires which

benefit some while oppressing others. That is just the nature of our world. So, we must continuously ask ourselves, where does my greatest allegiance lie? Is it with God in Christ, and with the ways of love, mercy, justice, and peace he embodied? Or does world come first, and faith come second for me? To whom or what do my heart, mind, and spirit belong?

Since the text is about taking on the empire, I feel compelled to note that for good and for ill the United States is an empire. John Dominic Crossan observed in his book God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome Then and Now that one of the peculiarities of Americans is that they don't see America this way.³ Other nations do not have this problem. Crossan, who is Irish, grew up very aware of being a part of the British Empire, and I'm sure that those who grow up in Asian countries see their nations that way too. It's not an insult to our nation to say it's an empire. Crossan associates both positive and negative attributes with that term. But in some sense, every human empire stands over and against God's kingdom. So, knowing that we love both our nation and Christ, knowing that we have a foot in each realm so to speak, we as Christians need to consider our choice carefully to be sure that our allegiance is to Jesus above all.

As author/theologian Robert McAfee Brown noted in his book on liberation theology, we can't stop there, however, because if we think that Pharaohs and empires arise only at the national level then we're still deceiving ourselves. There are lesser Pharaohs and empires in our lives, which also ask us to consider where our greatest loyalties lie. "I have come to the uncomfortable conclusion," Brown writes, "that most of us... are servants in pharaoh's court; lower echelon folk who are nevertheless members of the establishment, with advancement possibilities if we play our cards right. This is true whether our pharaoh is the current resident in the White House, the CEO of the corporation that employs us, the chairperson of the university department in which we are trying to get tenure, or the head of the real estate agency where we are still working only on commission. How do we relate to the society around us?"⁴ This is the question Jesus demands that we ask ourselves again and again. Do we condone oppression, inequity, and injustice, or stand against it? Do we relate to others as God would have us do, or as someone else would?

Brown, much like Niebuhr before him, provides several options for how to handle being a servant in pharaoh's court, from sitting back and accepting the perks with gratitude, to leaving the court, to striving to stay in the court but be "loyal opposition" at the same time.⁵ I think the latter is what Jesus had in mind for his disciples. He didn't want to remove them from the world; after all he, himself, had come to be in the world to convey God's love. He came because "God *so loved* the world" as John put it. But Jesus didn't want them to forget him and his ways after he was crucified, and he knew both the distractions and the threats of the world could make them do that. He wanted his disciples to feel that they were always servants of the reign of God even while they were subjects of and beneficiaries of the pharaohs of the world.

³ Crossan, John Dominic, God & Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now (New York: HarperCollins Pub., 2007).

⁴ Brown, Robert McAfee, Liberation Theology: An Introductory Guide (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 120-21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, at 121-127,

This fall, as I mentioned, I am going to be offering a Bible study class on *Exodus* and *Matthew*. One of the reasons I wanted us to consider these two important books together is that Matthew intentionally wrote his gospel to cast Jesus as a second-Moses figure, who came into the world to liberate us from what oppresses and enslaves us. Unlike Moses, Jesus did not ask his followers to step out of the Roman Empire or to take it on with weapons and revolution. Instead, he invited them to step with God into a different kingdom available to them even within their world. The ways in the kingdom of God were different: better, more just, loving, peaceful, and true. This is where we are invited to dwell and serve as well. So, as you journey through this fall, keep your eyes and ears open, and your heart dedicated to Jesus, so that you will not confuse the ways of the world with the ways of his kingdom. For when we dwell with Christ, and revere God above all, we gain the ability to transform the world for the better, not just for ourselves, but for all of God's children. Thanks be to God. Amen.