

The Culture of Discipleship (or The Culture of the Kingdom)

Luke 14:25-33

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Well, let's get right to the heart of the matter: Not all who say to Jesus "Lord, Lord," will enter the Kingdom of heaven. Even in Jesus' own day, there were some people out there who were just tagging along, hanging out at the edges, waiting to see if this new movement was going to stick before they committed, if they ever would really commit. Tonight's passage begins with the description that "large crowds were traveling with him," at first glance something to celebrate. Our hero is winning converts. Yet from what follows, we learn that Jesus knows that not all who followed him were there for enduring reasons. So, to weed out those who weren't serious contenders for the title disciple, which is to say, those who would go the distance with him to Jerusalem and beyond, Jesus breaks out some of his toughest language yet to describe what is required of those who would follow. Hate mother and father, give up all your possessions, or you cannot be my disciples. There is no equivocating here; either you're all-in, or you're out. On the surface, Jesus is describing some of the ways his would-be disciples must make a break with their current lifestyle. But that is just the tip of the iceberg. What he is really saying is that they must change their way of being, down to their cultural DNA, if they are to be called his disciples. We don't hear the result, but I have to believe the crowd quickly became a lot smaller. Changing culture is a very difficult

thing to do. It is hard enough to learn how to live within another culture, but to exchange your culture for another borders on the impossible. Thanks be to God that with God, all things are possible.

Suggesting that someone abandon their culture for the sake of the Gospel is, of course, a dangerous course to chart, considering the ways in which imperial Christianity has always tried to combine culture and religion. Almost without exception, and at the cost of countless lives and ancient cultures, the introduction of Christianity was accompanied by, or provided cover for, the introduction of imperial culture, whether it was in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Indeed, Christianity has been used almost like a tranquilizer dart, lowering the inhibitions of the soon-to-be conquered, who woke up to find themselves on the wrong end of a colonial arrangement. Nevertheless, inasmuch as every one of us is part of a culture – no matter which culture it is, no matter what its virtues or faults might be – inasmuch as each of us is part of an undeniably human culture which does not perfectly mirror the divine culture, no matter how much we might like to believe that it does, we are called to reflect on the intersection of those two cultures and see where that conversation takes us.

This is not to say that we will be required to give up our native tongues and begin speaking Hebrew and Greek, the languages in which the Bible was written, or, for that matter, to speak in tongues as described in the New Testament. Nor will we be required to revamp our eating habits to include locusts and wild honey, or to

keep kosher rules, or to enjoy the benefits of a Mediterranean diet. We won't have to give up Labor Day or Boxing Day or St. Valentine's Day in favor of a Jesus Day. It will, however, mean changing some of our ways of relating to God, one another, and our planet that are so deeply ingrained in us that they might as well be part of our DNA.

Well, if culture is not defined solely as language and food and customs, the most clearly identifiable aspects of any specific culture, what are we talking about? Well, some scholars have defined culture in terms of an iceberg, only a portion of which is visible from the ship about to plow into it. Perhaps we, as expatriates, know a little bit more about the less visible aspects of a culture, the ones you experience after living abroad for a time. For example, we learn about the differences in the perception of time, here famously called Tico time, and we have adopted it here at ECF, it seems, if you remember what time we actually started! But you might be surprised to learn just how many aspects of culture can be identified that are layered beneath our perceptions, things you don't see while on vacation, things like Conception of Cleanliness, Patterns of Group Decision-Making, Attitudes Toward the Dependent, Approaches to Problem Solving, Eye Behavior, Conception of Status Mobility and Conception of Past and Future, just to name a few. These are the ones that those who enter another culture frequently bump up against, mistakenly believing that these other, more hidden characteristics must somehow be the same in every culture. Of course, food will vary; they don't

grow mangos in Minnesota, silly! But everyone solves their problems according to good, solid logic that favors the common good, right? No one would ever tell you they were in agreement, hug you, and then go and do the opposite!

But it is not enough to be able to recognize how another culture is different than ours. Rather, we are called to be very clear about what shape our own culture imparts to us. It is much easier and a lot more fun to peer into another culture and note its differences than it is to examine the most deeply held and cherished parts of our own cultures, and especially the parts that we personally have adopted as our more defining personal characteristics. But those are exactly the ones we need to examine to see how well they coincide with the values of the kingdom to which we are called.

Jesus lifts up four areas of culture for our consideration, and I'll mention them not necessarily in the order our passage presents tonight. First is the organization of family life: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." Let's understand right away that the word "hate" is understood differently in English and Greek. The original word used had to do with separating oneself from one's family, an action which perhaps looked like hate to those left behind, given the strong family bonds of the time, but also a word without the loaded emotional content of hatred. You must be willing, Jesus says, to leave behind your family, if necessary, to follow me.

The second aspect of culture to which Jesus refers are notions of honor:

“Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ” A similar notion is implied in Jesus second admonition to plan, when the impetuous king who has not counted his soldiers must sue for peace with his enemy. How foolish that king would look sending his men out to the slaughter? In Jesus’ time, honor was one of the virtues most highly esteemed, and who in their right mind would risk sacrificing his social standing to be ridiculed? Only someone who loved Jesus enough.

The third aspect is economic: “So, therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Perhaps this one sounds different to our ears than those surrounding Jesus, since most of us have more stuff to get rid of, but imagine having scratched out for yourself a few meager possessions only to be told to leave them behind. How hard it is in any culture to deny the acquisitiveness that possessions provoke in us, whether they be teddy bears or color TVs.

Finally, there is the one which is perhaps the most challenging and needs the most unpacking: “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” In one sense, this challenge by Jesus sums up quite a bit of culture in one

fell swoop, opposing as it were, the kingdom way of doing everything, and the human ways we do things. Certainly in Jesus' time, neither the culture of the oppressors, nor the culture of the oppressed was inclined toward the kind of radical self-sacrifice and service implied in Jesus' challenge. This language of carrying the cross is the part of the divine cultural iceberg that is below the surface, the characteristics which bump up against the unchallenged human cultural assumptions about who we are, and what we do, the ones we sometimes confuse with the Gospel that we read with ears already conditioned by our own unchallenged assumptions! If Jesus is challenging those around him to take a look at the cultural characteristics which impede their participation in the kingdom, can we do any less?

I would like to invite you to form groups of three to five people and have a look at the iceberg diagram I am going to hand out (*see final page*). You'll see listed some of the aspects of culture you may never have thought about before, or even thought were part of one's culture. Pick two or three aspects of culture and examine the similarities and the differences among the people in your group, and once you have done that, take a look at those areas in terms of the Gospel, and the kingdom values which we like to think we not only live by, but encourage others to live by as well. Ask yourselves what you need to change about those particular aspects of culture so that you might conform more to the culture of discipleship.

Then, we'll join together at the Lord's Supper and give thanks that even when we don't do all this perfectly, that Jesus Christ still invites us to dine together with him, and with one another, now and in the kingdom of heaven. Amen.

## Iceberg Theory of Culture

**Just as nine-tenths of the iceberg is out of sight and below the water line, so is nine-tenths of culture out of conscious awareness. The out-of-awareness part of culture has been termed deep-culture.**

Fine Arts  
Literature  
Drama Music  
Folk Dancing  
Cooking Games  
Notions of Modesty  
Conceptions of Beauty

Ideals of Governing Child Raising  
Rules of Descent Cosmology  
Relationship to Animals

Patterns of Superior/Subordinate Behavior  
Definitions of Sin Courtship Practices  
Conception of Justice Incentives to Work  
Notions of Leadership Tempo of Work

Conception of Cleanliness Patterns of Group Decision-Making  
Attitudes Toward the Dependent Approaches to Problem Solving  
Eye Behavior Conception of Status Mobility Ordering of Time  
Conception of Past and Future Definition of Insanity Nature of Friendship

Roles in Relation to Age, Sex, Class, Occupation, Kinship, and So Forth

Theory of Disease Conversational Patterns in Various Social Contexts

Preference for Competition or Cooperation Body Language Social Interaction Rate

Notions of Adolescence Notions about Logic and Validity Facial Expressions

Patterns of Handling Emotions Arrangements of Physical Space AND MUCH MORE...