

Sermon: “Is this a psalm of invitation?”

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Scripture: Psalm 37

Preacher: Rev. Robert Dean

The word of the week in our reading is “enculturation.” This word is used repeatedly in Bishop Scott Jones’ book “The Evangelistic Love of God & Neighbor. According to Merriam-Webster,¹ Enculturation is “ the process by which an individual learns the traditional content of a culture and assimilates its practices and values.” In other words, enculturation is the ways in which people learn and assimilate the practices and values that enable them to be a part of that culture. In the chapter our church focused on this week, Bishop Jones shares how Christianity took musical elements from cultures in which it lived and used those musical elements to express their faith.

The idea of enculturation expressed by Bishop Scott Jones is very closely related to another word. Acculturation² is defined by Merriam-Webster as “cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture,” although it also defines acculturation as “the process by which a human being acquires the culture of a particular society from infancy.” Another source, the less historically prestigious dictionary.com makes note of the fact that enculturation is learning your own culture while acculturation is learning from another culture besides your own.³

In other words, there are circles in which it could be said that Bishop Jones used the wrong word throughout this entire chapter. When Christianity adapted to the world around it by learning from other cultures, it was a process of acculturation. When Christians learned

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enculturation>

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/acculturation>

³ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/enculturation>

and adapted to their culture from previous generations, that was enculturation.

This seems like a minor point at first. Who cares if it is enculturation or acculturation? Well, I have to be honest with you. A good portion of my life both personally and professionally has been stuck in a place where an enculturated church has almost been in a verbal and sometimes legalistic sparring match with a church that seeks acculturation.

Now, I am a United Methodist. My father was a United Methodist. My grandmother was a United Methodist after the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Evangelical United Brethren joined together in the 1960s. I grew up singing the hymns of Charles Wesley, Isaac Watts, and other English hymn writers. Singing those songs was a part of my grandmother's culture, my father's culture, and I grew up with them being a part of my culture. I was enculturated into a church that was marked by Sunday School, hymns in church, and sitting in the same pew week after week.

As I grew up, the world around me shifted rapidly. I was exposed to a parachurch culture which was evangelical and generally more conservative than my liberal leaning United Methodist Church. Suddenly, singing to God meant singing as guitars played, learning about God took place at Bible studies in other students' living rooms, and prayer was something that was done with other people without a bulletin telling me what to say in bold letters. I was exposed to a different culture than my own and I began to go through the process of acculturation where pieces of other cultures began to become a part of my culture.

Worship and prayer left the church building and began to take place in living rooms and coffee shops. The time was exciting for me, until

something strange started to happen. People became concerned about my well being. My father, God bless him, was worried that I was getting into a cult. My Sunday School teacher was seemingly not amused at times that I suddenly had an NIV Bible instead of the RSV Bibles they gave out in the confirmation process, especially when the verses I shared did not match the ones she had memorized as a child. My minister had me in his office to talk about the weird crowd I was hanging around. All of these were quickly laid to rest, but people were worried that I was learning the wrong things from the wrong people.

In college, I noticed that other churches were struggling too! Some churches embraced things like projectors in worship and others were absolutely furious at the idea of ever having anything in worship other than the altar decorations made years and years ago by a church member or ordered through the official Cokesbury store. People were scandalized by the behaviors of people down the street with their drums and bass guitars in worship sometimes even as they stuck their tongues out at the people in more traditional churches that did not like their acoustic folk hymns. I hope that I'm being clear here: whether someone was enculturated into a traditional idea of their faith or had acculturated into a different style of faith, each group had moments where they were incredibly frustrated at the other.

As a person who was both enculturated into a traditional expression of Christianity and accepting of an acculturated style of Christianity, it was a difficult time. Everyone seemingly felt as if they had the one way of doing things and it took me several years to come to accept my own feelings on the matter.

I came to believe that it did not matter if you were singing a Charles Wesley hymn or dancing with Casting Crowns: it only mattered that you were a disciple of Jesus. It did not matter if the minister preached

from an altar above the heads of the people, on a stage far above people, or sitting on a stool at ground level: it only mattered that they were a follower of God's way. It did not matter if they preached out of the King James, the New International Version, the New Revised Standard, the Message, or the New Living Translation as long as they had the Holy Spirit in their hearts and their lives.

For me, the exterior did not matter, whether it was enculturated or acculturated. It is true that I can fellowship with people who have sat in the same fellowship hall for generations and share coffee with someone who used to be homeless. I can find Jesus in former drug addicts as well as Roman Catholics. I can worship with someone in a three piece suit and someone who wears blue jeans. What matters is a person's relationship with Jesus.

I point this out because of a simple truth that I claim. The truth comes out of my experience. I believe that when we engage in the activity of sharing the Good News with people we meet it is important to remember what truly matters to us. It is incredibly important to recognize what is at the heart of our faith, because something strange happens when we reach out to others.

The strange thing that happens both ways. We may reach out to someone who may have known nothing about the church their entire life. For them, coming to faith will mean coming into contact with things that are truly wild. People, we eat bread and juice and call it the body and blood of Christ. For some people, that's straight up bonkers. For them to come to faith, it means that they will come directly into contact with some weird stuff that may make them feel awkward, strange, and confused. Regardless of what we feel about our faith, for people on the outside becoming a part of the church means they'll have to accept the strange process of letting these weird people share their faith and

begin to welcome that weirdness into their lives. They are going through acculturation as this strange otherly way of being begins to invite them to change.

At the same time, when we spend time with others, we may notice something odd. We may think that tattoos are weird and against Levitical rules. Hey, eating bacon is delicious and many people will happily eat a ham sandwich, but when you ask them to think about tattoos it can suddenly seem that people are going too far. When we spend time with people that have tattoos we might begin to notice that one tattoo seems particularly lovely or that the meaning behind a tattoo must have really meant something important to have it painfully put on their skin. Maybe we start to think that we might never get a tattoo, but that person is not awful for having a tattoo. We may even come to appreciate their difference to the point where we accept them. Do you know what that process is called? At some level, that's also acculturation.

Now, I will note that there were several places in my research for this sermon where there's a muckiness that happens when two cultures interact and learn from each other. Yes, if it happens long enough, the two cultures become one through a process of amalgamation, but that's not what we are discussing here. We are discussing the simple fact that people sometimes engage in changing their own view of life and culture when they share the gospel with others who are different.

We should not be afraid of evangelism changing us, especially when it can be for the better. When I was a child, there was a prevalent culture in the church that had certain views of the world. My church culture was based on a very monolithic and Eurocentric understanding of the world. People would happily welcome people at coffee hour, but heaven forbid we think about spending time at another church on the

wrong side of Buffalo. People would happily send money overseas with the Heifer fund, but we better stay away from the nearby reservation.

Sometimes the very things we are afraid of hold the very things we desperately need to grow as people. Sometimes the very strange and very frightening things of the world are exactly what we need. Where would we be if the first humans never spent time with the wolves following them? We'd be dogless and that'd be a pity. What if we never tried those strange tubers people call potatoes? Would you like a side of fried parsnips with your burger? We have benefited time and time again from people who have risked trying and learning new things. As long as we remain connected to what lies at the very core of our faith, why should we be fearful? As long as we hold true to the essentials, why should we be concerned?

In our psalm this morning, there's very clearly a strange situation going on. The very title of this sermon is "Is this a psalm of invitation?" You might rightly wonder who is being invited to do what. Is this an invitation for God to smite the wicked? Verse 32 states that the wicked are watching and waiting to kill the righteous. Verse 14 says they have swords and bows that are ready to kill not only the upright, but also the poor and needy. Verse 21 tells us that they borrow and do not pay people back. Verse 12 tells us that they are not only plotting against the righteous, but that they are gnashing their teeth at good people.

By all accounts, these wicked people seem dreadful. I wouldn't go so far as to throw them out of coffee hour without good cause, but I wouldn't go out of my way to bring the best coffee out. Indeed, when God says they'll be cut off in verses 9, 22, and 38, I am a bit grateful that many have noticed that three is an important number in Biblical writing: when the wicked are cut off three times, they are completely

cut off. At some level, I am grateful that God is watching over such people and that the dread deeds of the wicked will only end poorly.

I am grateful that the wicked are pretty much taken care of in this psalm. God has seen that there are wicked people and God will take care of them. We may feel a need to act and bring vengeance, but the psalm is clear when it says God can handle the situation. Whether it is divine intervention or the culturally borrowed idea of karma, the wicked will be taken care of in time. We don't need to be Buddhist or Hindu to understand their idea that the world tends to repay people according to their actions. We may say that it is God rather than the universe, but in the end, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and many other religions share the idea that the wicked will not prosper. We do not need to obsess over the wicked! They are in good hands.

So, who could be facing an invitation in this psalm? Is it the righteous? Verses 39 and 40 tell us that they will receive salvation and rescue from God. Verses 30 and 31 say that the righteous will speak of truth and justice. Indeed, the law is in their hearts. Verse 21 says that the righteous are generous and verse 18 says that they will have plenty when the world is in famine. Verses 25 and 26 note that the psalmist has never seen the children of the righteous begging for bread or the righteous being forsaken, even to the point where the righteous are always able to lend a hand and that their children are blessings. Verse 37 says that the peaceful will be prosperous. To be honest, the righteous seem like they are in God's hands too! There is seemingly nothing to worry about with the righteous: they are in good hands as well.

So, where is the invitation? What if the invitation is to us as a people? We know the righteous are in God's hands and that verse 2 tells us that the wicked will fade away like the grass and the herb. So, who is

invited to respond? To put it frankly, we are the ones who receive the invitation. Hear these words from the New Revised Standard Version in verses 3-8 in Psalm 37:

- ³ Trust in the Lord, and do good;
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
- ⁴ Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
- ⁵ Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him, and he will act.
- ⁶ He will make your vindication shine like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the noonday.
- ⁷ Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him;
do not fret over those who prosper in their way,
over those who carry out evil devices.
- ⁸ Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.
Do not fret—it leads only to evil.

The invitation is to us! There are action words here. Trust! Take delight! Commit your way! Be still! Wait patiently! Do not fret! Refrain! Even “forsake!” When was the last time you were asked to forsake something? It says right here: “forsake wrath!” These words of invitation are not offered to the wicked: they’re already busy with God. The words of invitation are not made to the righteous: they are already doing them. The invitation is to us, a people that stand in the present. Will we be wicked? Will we be righteous? I do not know what path each of us will tread, but I do know this: we each are offered a chance to choose what we do at this moment in time.

Now perhaps, you are thinking to yourself: “That part of the sermon was great! The pastor analyzed the psalm really well. He let us know that the wicked are taken care of by God, that the righteous will be cared for as well, and that we have a choice to make today. I really liked that part, but how does it relate to the beginning? What does this have to do with evangelism, enculturation, acculturation, or any of the super-long overly complicated words we have used today?”

Here’s the answer for you if you are wondering something along those lines. We know that we have good news to share with other people. We know that the people out there can be different from us. We know that we might be changed by others and that sometimes it can be frightening to face something new and scary. We know all of this and our response to all of these facts and fears is right before us.

The psalm tells us not to worry about what happens to other people. If they are wicked, they will be in the hands of God. If they are righteous, they will be in the hands of God. The writer looks through the past and cannot find an example where God has not taken care of the righteous or brought down the wicked in time. God has a handle on other people, even if they are very strange and very different.

When people walk through the doors of our lives we may not know whether they are good or bad, liberal or conservative, tattooed or ham-sandwich eaters. We can no more tell exactly what kind of person someone is than we can judge a book by its cover. We cannot know what will happen if we reach out in love to people around us. It may change them, it may change us, and it may change everyone. Conversely, they might not change, we might change, and nobody may change. What happens tomorrow is out of our control.

What we do have control over is what we do today. We have a word of Good News to share and a whole bunch of action words. We can take the good news and trust God. We can take delight in what God has put before us. We can commit to our principles and God even as we reach out to others. We can be still and wait patiently when we do not understand. We can choose not to fret when things get hairy and we can refrain from our own fears. Yes, we can even forsake wrath when that new person thinks that they can make better potato salad than us at a potluck. We can do all of these things and we can do them on every day that ends with “y.”

Friends, the world is changing around us, but it still needs a word of good news. Friends, it is true that people just don't jam along to the organ on the radio like they might have when Charles Wesley was writing hymns. Friends, it is true that the radical overheads of my youth have long since been retired in favor of screens and that bulletins end up in recycling bins more often than they sit in people's Bibles for years on end. The world is changing today, changed yesterday, and will change again tomorrow.

We still have a calling. The principles at the root of our faith continue to hold still. We can hold onto our faith even as the little things change. I promise you that we can and I promise you that God will still be God, even when everything looks different. Let's pray...