

Seeing Gray: Faith, Morality and Politics in a Black and White World "Christ, Christians and the Culture Wars"

Please take out of your bulletin your sermon notes and your study guide. The sermon notes are a chance for you to follow along and write down things you might like to remember from today's sermon. The study guide on the back side of that is an invitation for you to read the Bible on your own. This week you will read 1 Peter which is a very short letter in the New Testament written to Christians in Rome who are surrounded by a non-Christian culture. It offers words of encouragement about how they might live in an environment that is hostile towards being a Christian. You might find that these words from 1 Peter speak to your life and life situation today.

Today we continue in our series of sermons entitled, "Seeing Gray: Faith, Morality and Politics in a Black-and-White World." Last week we looked at black-and-white as a metaphor in terms of how we see. We noticed that most things are not truly black-and-white. Simple line art is black-and-white. If something is very simple then it is black-and-white.

But when you start to look at the complexities of life in any images, and any photographs you might take or even the old black-and-white televisions, you notice they are not really black-and-white but they are grayscale. When you try to look at things that are more complex images in just black-and-white then it gets all distorted. You have to see the gray tones in order to see accurately the image that is before you.

This week, seeing gray in a black-and-white world, we are going to focus on the culture wars and conflicts. In this case Black and White is a metaphor for opposites, or ends of the spectrum that seemed to be in conflict with one another.

You can name many of them. In the political realm we think of the Republicans and the Democrats, liberals and conservatives. We think of the right and the left.

These all seem to be opposing forces. Certainly in the culture wars we find this conflict between the extremes which spreads into the world and into the church. That's what I want to begin to talk about today and see if there is not a better way that we as Christians might engage our culture.

The first person that I know of who used this term of a "culture war" was Pat Buchanan. It was 1992 and he ran for the Republican nomination of President. He did not receive that nomination but he did go ahead and give a speech at the national convention that year. This is what he said.

"There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as the Cold War itself."

The war Buchanan was talking about had been a political reality for more than 14 years and a social reality even longer. What I would like to do it this morning is try to understand the sources of that war and what motivated it, and then finally how Christians today might move beyond the black and white of the culture war.

Every generation is always in reaction to the previous generation. But the generation of the 60's was not just in reaction, it was in revolution. We were coming out of the 50's and the 50's looked like a Christian Culture. Most people went to church, in fact it was socially unacceptable in most places not to go. The social mores were predominantly in line with Christian social values, for example the blue laws. It was a fairly conservative time with a lingering perception that looks more like Leave It To Beaver than anything else. That's an oversimplification, obviously, but you get my point.

In the 60's and early 70's the pendulum swings way to the left into a time of social revolution and upheaval. It was an energizing and exciting an amazing time. I was born in 1963 so I can't remember much about the sixties. I remember several things from the early seventies, like the break up of the Beatles. But then again, I was a Monkey's fan. Shows you how into the movement I was. I followed the knock-off band.

Someone once said, "If you remember the 1960s then you were not really there." But this morning, I'd like for you to try and remember. There were many great things we owe to the

high idealism of the 60's, recognizable in Kennedy's inauguration, King's "I have a dream" speech, the Women's Liberation movement and of course the dawning of the age of aquarius.

At the same time as these soaring, liberating movements, we experienced social upheaval and pain and it seemed like the world was being torn apart at the seams. There were 3 major assassinations of American leaders, plunging into war in Vietnam, and the war protest at home which led to civil unrest and violence, and of course Watergate confirmed suspicions of corruption in government.

Strong reaction to the cultural upheaval of the 60's formally happened in the late 70's and early 80's as the Religious Right took aim at "free love" and the 1973 landmark case of Roe V Wade – regarding abortion. Just to give you an idea of the scope of change that brought movements like the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition into the political scene, between the years of 1970 and 1975 the divorce rate rose 40%. The marriage rate declined 30% during that same five-year period. These Christian action/legislation groups were effective, and we can see the pendulum of morals and politics swing back to the right through the 80's.

Now why is this important? Because the extremes between The Religious Right and liberalism of the 60's is the framework we use for all our moral issues. It's black and white. Pro-Choice or Pro-Life; for gay marriage or against gay marriage. The wars in our culture and politics pull us into these extremes. The problem is that when we go to black or white, we tend to be judgmental, we tend to make the moral cause our mission. And when we do that, we forget our real mission. If we engage our culture in the black and white of the cultural wars over morality, then we have let the culture wars distract us from our true mission. We let political/social agendas become more important than people.

Here's a story of what can happen when we deal with people in black and white (right/wrong) ways. Years ago, Jennifer and I became very excited that someone in her family would get connected to Jesus through some church. Neither the husband nor the wife had been involved with faith for a very, very long time. They were invited by some friends to attend a local church and they went. They started getting excited about it, and growing in their faith. In their excitement, this couple invited another couple to go to church with them, and they told their friend who had originally invited them that they had invited someone else and it looked like they were going to come the next Sunday.

That's when their friend said to them, "you can't be inviting people to church yet, you still drink beer."

They never went to church again.

This is what happens when we think in black and white on these issues. The moral issue of drinking became more important than sharing the good news of Jesus. Jesus certainly had moral fiber – he knew where he stood on right and wrong. But moral issues were not Jesus' mission. Jesus didn't go to the cross for a moral issue.

Moving Beyond the Culture Wars

"Maybe it is time for us to move beyond the culture wars." Maybe it's time for Christians to focus less on moral/political agendas and get back to doing what Jesus asks us to do...Love God and Love your Neighbor.

When I talk to unchurched people and I ask them why they don't go to church, do you know what they say? They usually say something like this, "I like Jesus. I think Jesus is okay. It's just Christians I don't like. I don't like the church. I don't like Christians. I don't like organized Christianity."

Where do they get this idea?

They get this idea because sometimes we Christians see everything in those black-and-white terms. And instead of engaging our culture with grace, we attack it with judgment. And it seems like the Christians who like to be in the national media have this problem of making many things that they say sound accusatory or judgmental. But this is not just about people on the Religious Right. Liberal Christians can be just as judgmental. In fact, we all can be. It's very easy to be. Is this the best way for us to engage our culture?

Let's take a quick look at our options.

Here are some ways that Christians have chosen, or are choosing to engage the culture.

Some Christians choose not to engage the culture but instead withdraw from it. Maybe the first thing you think of are the **Amish**. When the Amish withdraw from culture, they are saying, "We don't even fit in this culture anymore. We are a part of the kingdom of God which is different." They hold onto practices that go back a hundred years or more. This becomes life and it is very simple. It is admirable and it is beautiful. It is monastic in a sense.

I admire it and I am grateful for their commitment, but this is not what Jesus did. Jesus got out there in the world with the people who were sinners in the world. He got involved and engaged in the culture. He did not withdraw from it. He told his followers to be in the world.

A second possible approach to how we deal with the culture is to accommodate it.

To accommodate the culture means that we just adopt all of the culture's practices. We begin to look very much like the culture. Whatever the culture is doing we do. Whatever the culture's values are those become our values.

Apart from perhaps the Amish, every church I have ever known from every denomination has accommodated the culture in one way or another. Some of those accommodations are probably okay. I think indoor plumbing is a good accommodation. Air conditioning is good. Back in the middle ages the pipe organ was an accommodation. Now I think electric guitars and drums are fine accommodations to the world.

But there are some places where we tend to accommodate and perhaps we shouldn't. This is particularly true when it comes to our values. We adopt the world's values and we try to make Christianity fit into them. All of us, myself included, have been guilty of accommodating. And this is where it is important to remember that Jesus once said to his followers, "Be in the world, but not of the world."

There is another way that Christians can approach the culture and that is **to wage war**. This is a militant approach to culture. That we are waging a war, as Pat Buchanan stated back in 1992. There is a radical extreme of this which looks like bombs going off at Abortion clinics and picketers the funeral of aids victims with signs that say "Aids is God's punishment on homosexuality." There are people who call themselves Christian who do those things. Hard for me to see Jesus in that kind of agenda.

The majority of the Religious Right is not a violent agenda, but it is true that they see themselves very much at odds with and even waging war against the culture. Even this, I think, doesn't look very much like Jesus.

Jesus got angry sometimes, but when he got angry he did not get angry with the sinners of the world. Have you ever noticed that when you read the Gospels? Jesus does not go around blasting away at the people who are doing the garden-variety kinds of sins that we think of. When Jesus got angry he was blasting at religious people.

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites!" He said this because they were pushing away lost and hurting people, not helping them become found. This is because the Pharisees were more interested in the black and white of the moral code than they were with people.

A different approach was modeled by Jesus and that was **courageous witness through sacrificial love**. That is part of what I want to advocate for you. This is how we move beyond the culture wars.

Here is where I find the words of first Peter instructive. This passage of Scripture at the top of your sermon notes points to how the early Christians were to live out their faith. They were Roman Christians surrounded by pagans and Peter says these words.

Dear friends, I warn you as "temporary residents and foreigners" to keep away from worldly desires that wage war against your very souls. Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God when he judges the world... For you are free, yet you are God's slaves, so don't use your freedom as an

excuse to do evil. Respect everyone, and love your Christian brothers and sisters.* Fear God, and respect the king. I Peter 2:11-12, 16-17 (NLT)

Peter is reminding them that their real home is the kingdom of God. Don't engage in all the things that the people of the empire around you are engaging in. Live your life in such a way that nonbelievers will look at you, and even though they want to say bad things about you, they can't because they see the good that you do. Honor everyone which includes those who don't believe. Honor the people around you in the culture and treat them with respect and care. The King they were to respect was Nero who was the most hedonist Emperor that Rome would ever know. Yet they were still to show respect to him.

This is not a militant Christianity, waging war against the Roman culture. This is about people who understood themselves to be alien and exiles in the world because they belong to the kingdom of God. They may be living in the same town that they have lived their entire life, but because their heart belongs to God it is now like they are living in a foreign land. And they were to live such good and holy and honorable lives in a foreign land that when people look at them they would be drawn to hear more about the gospel, and follow their way of life.

Jesus uses a powerful metaphor when he tells his followers that judgment will not win people for the Kingdom of God. Judgment points out faults...and while we're pointing out someone else's, they are noticing all of ours!

3 "And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? 4 How can you think of saying to your friend, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? 5 Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye.

The apostle Paul says, "In all things consider others better than yourselves." Walk with humility to practice love and to listen.

This is part of what I hope might happen in our congregation. I hope that we might be people who would model a different approach to the Christian faith for others. I hope that when people look at you they see your good deeds and they say, "There is something authentic in these people." I hope that you become salt and light and leaven in our society and you reflect Christ's love.

Conclusion: Jesus, the Pharisees, and a Woman Caught in Adultery

I want to wrap this up with a story that I think illustrates how Jesus went about addressing sin and engaging the culture. The story happens when Jesus comes down from the Mount of Olives in John chapter 8. He goes to the temple courts and he is teaching and the crowd has come to listen to him. The crowd is listening to him teach when the Pharisees show up.

Remember the Pharisees were holy. They were pious people and the religious leaders in their time. Most were focused on obeying the tenants of the law and living out in righteousness the commands of God. They show up dragging a woman with them.

They throw her down before Jesus and say, "Jesus, this woman was caught in the very act of adultery. What do you say Jesus? You know what the Bible says Jesus. The Bible says that if a woman is caught in the act of adultery she is to be stoned to death."

This is the Old Testament they are talking about in terms of the Bible because there is not yet a New Testament. "So what do you say Jesus?"

They have stones in their hands and they are ready.

Jesus bends down in front of them and he starts to write with his finger in the dust on the floor of the temple courts. He stands up, and he looks at the people who were so concerned with righteousness, who have denounced the sin of this woman and says, "The one of you who is without sin, you cast the first stone."

One by one you hear the stones drop to the ground, and they all walk away. And there she is sitting there now alone with Jesus.

Bear in mind that Jesus has already talked about adultery. Before this story takes place he has already preached the Sermon on the Mount and he has already told the people that if

you so much as look at a woman with lust in your heart then you have committed adultery against her and against God. He has already said that he is against adultery. He has even gone so far as to say that if your eye causes you to sin in this way you should pluck it out.

But here's the thing about Jesus. When you read his teachings which can seem rather harsh you have to interpret them in the light of how he lived them out. He has already made it clear that adultery is something that is not God's will for our lives. But how does he interpret that with this woman? How does he live that out?

He comes to her and he lifts her up out of the dirt and he says, "Woman, where are your accusers?"

She says, "They are not here."

Jesus says, "Yes, neither do I condemn thee, but go and sin no more."

What I love about this is that Jesus does not say that adultery is not a sin. He tells her to go and live differently. "In response to my grace towards you, go and live differently." He recognizes that this is a sin but it is not the dominant message of Jesus towards those who are broken or hurting or accused. The predominant message that you hear from Jesus is grace.

This to me paints a picture of how we are meant to live our lives. This is what our lives are meant to look like, and how we as the church are meant to wage war against the culture. We wage war with grace, mercy, humility and love, not with hard stands about the moral issues of our day.

I could tell you what I believe is right about abortion. I could have spent 30 minutes today defending my stance. But what would it gain. Maybe a few more of you might think as I do. Like that's a big win for the Kingdom of God!!!

I can tell you that picketing a clinic isn't going to change anyone's mind. I can tell you that meeting someone who is heading to the clinic with aggression is only going to confirm their suspicion that if we speak for God, then they don't want anything to do with him. I can tell you that whatever the issue, judgment is not going to bring them closer to the God who created them.

What are we going to be known for as a church? My hope is that when people think of Saint Paul's and every other church, they think, "That's the place where people go out to serve. That's the church where the people come out and they are different and they act humbly and they listen to people and they treat us with respect, even though we are not Christians yet. That's the church that doesn't judge me, but loves me."

The next time you catch yourself judging someone, whether that's over a moral issue or whatever, think about what Jesus gave us instead of judgment. Grace. And then find a way to be gracious and loving. And may we never put the cause of a moral/social issue above the mission of loving people into the Kingdom of God.

That is my hope for us and that is what I think it means in this context to see gray in a world of black and white. Would you bow with me in prayer?