

Text: Philippians 3: 17- 4:1

Title: Christianity is Counterculture

Date: February 28, 2010

You Tube video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ofE7p8xwJY&feature=related>  
Godspell Beautiful city

I grew up in California- and the word counterculture has a particular meaning. It brought to mind images of young people (usually students at Berkeley) dressed in colorful clothes who had turned their backs on what they perceived as a soul deadening culture, one dedicated to material success and conformity above all else. This clip from the 1973 movie Godspell captures the hopes that the counterculture types wanted to achieve. Of course, the irony was that as the hippie movement gathered steam- drugs became the focus and as far as conformity? Everyone looked the same in a long hair sort of way.

Last week we said that Christians always have been tempted in one of 2 extremes when it comes to relating to the larger culture around us. Either we want to build tall walls around us to keep everyone out or we want to break them down and adopt the values of the culture as our own. Both of these misunderstandings are rooted on our assumptions regarding the basis of our relationship with God. We tend to be either rigid or complacent.

As we already know, Paul was taught that we could maintain our relationship with God by the dint of our own efforts. God gave the Law, we are to live up to the Law, not exactly rocket science right? Problem is, we can't live up to God's ethical demands, our sinful nature gets in the way. In fact, the law was given to us, NOT for us to live up to it and get rid of our sinful nature- but to convince of our sinful nature and our need to rely on God's grace. In fact, Paul has been taking up quite a bit of chapter 3 talking about just that- and how free he felt when he finally realized that he could stop beating himself up because he had embraced the grace offered by Jesus Christ and what he calls the "surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as my Lord." Paul had dedicated his life to live up to the Law and to keep the culture away lest he becomes contaminated – and that has gotten him nowhere.

But right before our passage, he realized that he has opened the door to complacency. If God's laws are out the window, then that means anything goes, right? I don't have to discipline myself- for God loves me just the way that I am. (Actually our mothers would say, "God loves you too much to let you stay that way!" Guess what, Mom was right)

So what to do- How is Paul going to teach the Philippians and us to do what he does- how to thread the needle between rigidity and complacency? I know- do what I do. At first glance it comes off as, "Gee, since I am just such a spiritual giant if you do what I do then you too will experience spiritual enlightenment..." What is this, treating Christianity as a turnkey franchise? No, not at all. We get a better sense of what Paul meant if we look over at 1 Corinthians 11:1 "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." This is the time honored learn my example bit. And since Paul is no longer hanging out in Philippi- follow the examples of those who are living according to Paul's teachings and example.

This is not as intuitive as you might think, for there are always those who want to abandon grace and return to what they know, equating spirituality with obedience to an arbitrary set of laws- call them whatever you like, Kosher, Sharia of Holiness, they have at their core the assumption that the ways of the general culture are irrevocably opposed to the ways of God.

Now let's be honest with ourselves. The culture we live in has its issues and many of them are centered on from what we derive our sense of identity and purpose. . We live in a hyper sexualized culture, one that implicitly states that in order to be fully human, one must be sexually active. So we push our kids and earlier to identify what category they fit in: gay, straight, bisexual, transsexual, whatever, the list goes on and on and no one seems to question the wisdom of deriving one's identity from who one is attracted to. What if there is no gay, what if there is no straight? I am not who I am attracted to- I am Paul. Can you imagine what public discourse would look like if we threw out the arbitrary labels and simply treated people as God would have us treat them- as those worthy of Christ's blood on the cross? We already know that we live in a materialistic culture- one that says you are a better person if you have a 58" Hi Definition TV, certainly better than the schmoe that has the old Sony Trinitron- that's nothing new. But have you considered how much we are pushed to identify ourselves by the causes we support? Beyond being Democrat, Republican or Independent, there are groups like PETA, the NRA, PEOs, ARRP, various racial/ethnic affinity groups, the Presbyterian Coalition, and Covenant Network just to name a few. Groups in which we find like minded people, people with similar interests are a good thing. But when we derive our sense of identity from them, the next step is to look at the people who do not agree with us as personal enemies, out to destroy all that I hold dear. And we are surprised by the level of hostility we find in public debate? I could go on and on, but Paul sums all of these identity issues with one broad category- their god, from which they derive their sense of **identity**, is all about the belly. I love it- the common denominator in all of these is the assumption that what matters is ME oriented, My appetites, My obsessions. In other words- earthly things.

But our identity, our citizenship in Paul's words, is not to be based on these things. Our identity and purpose, our citizenship is to be in heaven. We are to focus on God's purpose and priorities and it is those purposes and priorities that inform our understanding of where we fit in the world. This heavenly citizenship leads us to focus on Jesus. Not as an escape clause- the ultimate get out of jail free card- but as Savior. Paul found himself transformed- and if we follow his lead we will experience transformation as well.

When Paul is talking about "transform the body of our humiliation" (its sounds even weirder in Greek...) he is not talking about our physical bodies or speculation on what our heavenly bodies might be like. Paul's understanding of salvation is not pie in the sky by and by- it is RIGHT NOW! We already have salvation; we are already transformed; we are no longer bound to the purposes and priorities of our culture, we can live as God wants us to live RIGHT NOW! And because we are already transformed- we can be agents of transformation in our culture- to help transition it to be the way that it should be.

That is what counterculture is supposed to be. Not building an alternate Christian world in which one can go from cradle to the grave without ever risking contamination from a culture that we condemn. And we are not going to turn a blind eye to the excesses and dysfunctions of our culture either. This is not an US vs Them situation- this is an US together proposition. Let us share what we have experienced, freedom from rigidity and purpose beyond complacency. That is why Paul ends our passage by urging us to stand firm in the Lord, not to get sucked into those familiar patterns.

Let us together, this Lent, concentrate on the Good News, that God frees us to be who we were always meant to be: Transformed by the Spirit and sharing the the experience of Christ with all that we meet. That's what building the Kingdom is all about.

Hymn # 441 I Love Thy Kingdom Lord