

Jesus said to his Father: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.”

So we were having a meeting about Christian Education this week, and starting to talk about our offering, we realized how important it was to offer to our congregations tools to be able to live out the Christian faith into the world. For most Christians, I guess, everything is fine on Sunday, but the question is, when we go back to work on Monday, what to do with what we have received, what kind of “testimony” (in John’s words) are we supposed to offer, what kind of behavior should we adopt? And the problem is: How can we live out our Christian values when they do not seem in connection with what we experience in today’s world, when we see it filled with greed, thirst for profit, corruption, when it’s not plain violence and nihilism. We know that temptations are many around us here in DC, where love of power and personal ambition are alive and well. But even without going so far, living in such a wealthy area, we often hear the call to serve the gods of self indulgence. That’s what I tell myself when I realize I am myself deeply absorbed in the local news, fascinated by the opening of a new department store or pondering the best place to get brunch...

But this is it: We are in the world. And in the midst of that, we are Christians, and Jesus today invites his disciples not to conform to the way of this world. If we really believe we have been created by God and for God, certainly we do not and should not belong to the world. As Christians, we have other priorities than a lot of people. We have certain “values” and we want to follow the example of Christ and the tradition of the church. It can be a struggle, given the many temptations we may find on our way in this world, but at least it’s not confusing: we need to hear the teaching and we will stick to the teaching.

Until. Until something happens in our lives, or in the life of a close one, that makes it impossible to stick to the teaching anymore. Until what we feel deeply in our bones to be true and right conflicts to the point of rupture with what we hear on Sunday. Until we realize, the church cannot be a world on its own, making its own rules.

Among all my superficial readings about new stores and hot restaurants, my attention was drawn this week by an article about the Southern Baptist convention having what the journalist called its “feminist moment”. The journalist said that the Convention was witnessing, I quote, “a wave of anger over repeated comments by a prominent church leader as demeaning to women.” “In his sermons Paige Patterson has encouraged women who are abused by their husbands not to divorce, but to pray instead”. The preacher suggested that women who had a “problem” should not bring their case to the judge because it could get in the way of the judge to become Christian, and he advised them to: “Settle it with the church of God”.

And I guess, this is how some churches interpret Jesus’s commandment to not conform to the world. In certain places of the Christian landscape, for abusive husbands the rules of the world do not apply, they only have to respond to God – or more concretely, to their Senior pastor who seems quite ready to give them absolution. Now, maybe we start thinking: Well, this is the Southern Baptists. Well, the thing is first, that we are always blind to our blind spots, that’s why they are called blind spots, and if our sisters and brothers in Christ struggle with the temptation to make their own rules, surely we do too. Secondly, to tell you the truth, my attention was drawn to this article because I discovered recently that we still have room for growth in the Episcopal Church when a gentleman told me very kindly that: *It was nice to see me so shy because that’s really the way women are supposed to be.*

Church is a place of tradition. We can’t forget that. We’ve been keeping rites and Scriptures that are thousands years old and we long for our true home in heavens. The question for us is then: Does what happen in the world concern us – beyond going into the world to preach our own truth? Are we supposed to be recreating our own world in the church? Instead, could we be ready to receive something from the world, would it be something for some of us as explosive as gender equality? Could we even imagine turning to the world and think that maybe there are out there a bunch of prophets the Church should listen to: Politics, philosophers, scientists, maybe not led by their faith but led by their education, life experience and common sense?

Well, if we read more closely the Gospel today, we will see that Jesus actually never prays his Father to protect his disciples from the world, and never asks us to be some kind of sect. Jesus prays his Father that he would protect the disciples from what is evil. I guess it makes all the difference. Jesus actually reminds us that we are in the world. And that is probably the way Jesus wants it to be, otherwise he would have taken the disciples with him on Ascension Day. The risk in this world is not the world itself. As Jesus warns us, there is evil in the world, but his life among us showed also that he thought there was a lot of good in it as well. No, I think that the risk in this world is to forget that there is more than this world. I watched a beautiful movie recently, it was about a bunch of nuns transitioning from temporary to perpetual vows. And there is this scene during the service of their perpetual vows where each nun say aloud the reasons why she wants to take this engagement. One of them remains silent for a few uncomfortable minutes and then simply says: *I want more*. Meaning: I want more than what the world has to offer. Well, maybe that's what it is for all of us as Christians. We are in this world, we can love it or hate it, but we want more. We want God.

That's because they want more and better that Christians strive to lead an Ethic life, and yes, we have values, but our values are not, or should not be, ready made rules and ready made thinking. It should actually be the other way around. Church needs to provide the space to discuss what we experience in the world, and how we want to respond to it based on our faith. Values are not set in stones or written in the sky, values are what we value because it responds to the love of God. As Christians, our question should not be: *Do we do this because we have always done it*, but: *Should we do this if it does not serve the greatest love?* And so the church could be the place where we have real debates about deep questions that come from the world and go back to the world. Not trying to settle on general ideas, but wondering on what they mean for us in our everyday lives. We need to be in dialogue with the world, not in opposition. We give and we receive, and this is how we bring our testimony. That's why we need to open the space. Christian Education is not about telling people what they should think, but thinking together. Of course, it creates complications, it is much easier to have ready made rules.

Yet, we need to think for ourselves, and, even more, to think as a community. Church is a community, it's not in the hands of what the elders think is right or wrong. This is exactly the example Peter shows us today. We are at the very beginning of the book of Acts and what Peter is worried about is reconstituting the community. He is not anxious about taking the lead.

So what does Jesus mean when he asks us to not conform to the world? Well, Jesus is not preventing us from venturing on some kind of dangerous territory, I think that what he is telling us is to not be worldly. Jesus asks us to not be mundane (Mundane means: from the world). The church should not be a place where greed for power hides behind moral authority. Our relationships in the church should not be based on hierarchies, wealth and social appearances. You may have heard several times this comment that the church should not be a kind of social club...Well, I don't think there is any harm in doing social activities if it brings us joy and strengthen our relationships, as long as serving remains our priority. No, the problem is when we become mundane. A philosopher said that actually most evil comes not from a strong desire to do something bad or hurtful, but from our desire to fit in and to be accepted. Like when everybody laugh to something a little mean somebody else has said. And so he wrote: "If Satan really exists, he does not feed so much on our sinful desires than he does feed on our indifference, on our lack of reflection, on our desire for safety, on our desire to fit in and to be good members of our communities".

Evil does not come from this place called the world, evil comes from mundanity which is indifference, lack of reflection, desire for safety, desire to fit in. And although Christians, we can be worldly when we go to church to be in our bubble and to meet with our tribe, banning certain type of people from our activities, we can be worldly when the church is another place we go wearing a mask because we want to fit in...Jesus asks us not to be a world in the world, but to show a different type of community than a worldly community based on competition and exclusion. Look how Jesus today is trying to form a community that is based on love and acceptance. Church should be a place where we don't have to fight for acceptance because acceptance needs to be a given, as God's acceptance has been given to all. Amen.