

1 Timothy 2:1-15 – September 18, 2022

There's always a bit of culture shock when you travel abroad. It doesn't really matter where you go. With the exception of maybe some places in Canada, if you leave the United States you're going to have to deal with a foreign culture. Foreign laws, foreign language, foreign customs. I've been outside the U.S. a couple of times, and some of my most vivid memories are the culture shock of the places where I went.

There was the trip to the Mediterranean that I've mentioned in the past. And I can still remember stopping in Turkey, with all those street merchants rushing toward us in a massive wave, eagerly haggling for a sale. I can still smell the carts of freshly caught fish lined up in the streets and the towering minarets peaking out over the rooftops, like a scene out of Aladdin.

There was the mission trip I took to Guatemala City. An absolutely beautiful country, but at that time only barely free of decades of civil war. And I still remember the surprise of finding fresh pineapples sold to us for only a few pennies through our van window in the middle of a busy street. And the men armed with Uzi's, Mac-10's, and AK-47's guarding every gas pump and grocery store that we visited.

These experiences were shocking at the time, even frightening. But I wouldn't trade them for anything now. They opened my eyes to another world living just a few thousand miles away. They conditioned me to expect the unexpected from other cultures. And they taught me to appreciate everything that it means to be an American. Good, bad, or ugly, this is my country. This is my culture. And I wouldn't be truly at home anywhere else.

And yet, at the same time, I'm not truly "home" here either, am I? None of us who call Jesus Christ our Lord are truly "home" anywhere in this world. We respect the authority of our President and Congress and the Supreme Court because we are instructed to do so, but they are not our highest authority. We put value in things like cars and houses and money, but they are not where our real treasure lies. We walk and talk in the language and customs of sinful humanity, but the language of our hearts and the footsteps of our lives follow the mold of someone much more than a frail human.

As Christians we live in a culture all our own. And I don't just mean the culture of Lutheranism or the culture of Immanuel Lutheran Church. I mean the culture that the Bible calls us to live in.

Jesus in our Gospel lesson tells us that the things of this world are detestable in God's eyes. You cannot seek after both heavenly treasure and worldly treasure. You cannot serve both God and money.

Paul tells us in Romans 12 that we are not to conform to the ways of this world but be transformed by God's Word. 1 Peter tells us that we should live as strangers in this world, our eyes turned away from gold and silver and set on the imperishable blood of Jesus Christ. John writes in his first epistle that we should love nothing in this world, neither things we lust after with our eyes nor the pride of our own accomplishments, but that we should love only the will of our Father.

Christianity is not simply a system of beliefs or a collection of human traditions. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to live your life in a way that is different than any other way the world tells you to live. It is to live your life in a way that is different than your own human nature tells you to live.

In the same way that seeing those crazy merchants in Turkey or those heavily armed guards in Guatemala looks absolutely absurd to the average middle class American like myself, Christianity looks crazy or even shocking to the world around us. And, at times, it forces us to realize that we are not at home. Neither in this sinful world, nor in this sinful body.

We may want to look at scripture and say, "Well, that's a different culture than ours." But really we should be asking ourselves, "What is our culture?" Because, truthfully, the Bible itself should define our culture far more than anything else in our lives.

There might be no better illustration of this than our Epistle lesson before us today. 1 Timothy 2 is one of those passages that Christians like to conveniently forget about. Flip past in their Bibles as quickly as possible, lest they actually stop and dwell upon Paul's words. But they need to be read.

So we read, *"I desire... that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works."*

And we say, "OK, women should dress modestly, decently, and appropriately. They should live their lives in such a way that both their words and their actions profess to their worship of the Lord." Easy enough.

Sure, it runs counter to what the world tells us about how women should display their bodies. And yes, there are plenty of radical feminists out there who would scream their heads off over a statement like Paul's. But I think, overall, most men and women in here accept this and apply it.

We get a little more perturbed by the next verses, though. *"Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet."* What do we do with this? Ask a Christian woman to hide her skin and she's generally OK with it. Ask a Christian woman to hide her opinion and... well... you get a much stronger reaction.

Now many have tried to solve this little conundrum. And there's almost as many lines drawn on this issue as there are denominations in the U.S. Those who still try to call themselves Lutheran in the ELCA have decided to simply toss this passage out entirely. "Of course women are able preach and teach and have authority," they say.

Other, rather conservative church bodies follow Paul's instructions to the letter. Women are not allowed to speak in church, teach Bible classes, hold offices, or even vote in assemblies. In fact, up until not too many years ago, many LCMS churches did exactly that.

But the reality is that neither position is really dealing with the spirit of Paul's exhortation here. The theology behind it. Because Paul's instructions are about the culture of the Christian church. And how that culture flows directly from God's Word.

And so he tells us here that just as Adam was created first to tend the garden of Eden and Eve was created second to be his helper, so the culture of the Christian church should be that men are called to tend God's flock and women are called to assist them in that task. This isn't a statement on the abilities of women. Nor is it intended to be a burdensome law to the church. Paul is laying the framework for a culture to the church that mirrors the way that God originally intended the world to function.

And that really should be a blessing to us. When I see woman preaching in an ELCA church, I don't look at her and say, "Ugh, she shouldn't be doing that. She's not capable of it. It's not really God's Word if it's coming from a woman." No! She's obviously capable of it. Highly trained at it, most likely. And depending on what she's saying, it may still very much be God's Word.

No, I look at her and think, "We're really far from Eden, aren't we?" Because Eve preaching to Adam was simply not the way that God designed the world. Eve preaching to Adam about how good the fruit was and about how convincing the serpent had been was exactly how we got into the sinful mess we're in.

God has an order to things. We may not like it. We may not agree with it. But the Bible teaches us time and time again that when we ignore that order, when we let our sinful nature define our culture, God's people will only suffer. God's church will only fall apart.

We are really far from Eden. But thanks be to God, we'll return to Eden one day. We have a savior who is the mediator between God and man. Who has ransomed himself for us. Who wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

We have a kingdom of God, which is right here and which we will see in its fullness one day. And every time that we conform ourselves and our church to the pattern of God's will and the culture that he wants for us, we receive the blessing of seeing a glimpse of that future kingdom in its fullest.

Every time a man steps forward to lift holy hands in prayer, we see God's kingdom. Every time he sets aside his personal anger to resolve a dispute in his home or the church, we see God's kingdom. Every time a woman chooses modesty and quietness over brashness and authority, we see God's kingdom. Every time we see a mother raising her children in faith, love, and holiness, we see God's kingdom.

That is the slice of Eden that we are blessed to witness. That is the culture we are called to create. That is the kingdom that Jesus Christ has purchased for us. It is definitely not the culture of the United States that we are accustomed to. It may feel as foreign to us as Turkey or Guatemala did to me. But that indeed is our home. A little glimpse of paradise. Until that day, when Jesus comes to make all things new. Amen.