

From the Pastor's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, August 20, 2023

“Christmas is a pagan holiday.”

If you have any angry atheists or agnostics in your social network, then you’ve probably seen or heard something like this said during the month of December. Relieving ourselves of the burden of all the pathos behind why someone would post something like this, for example, on Facebook, we can take a serious, rational look at Christmas – as we celebrate and experience it today – and see that there is something to this claim.

To begin, the date – falling as it does just four days after the winter solstice – is suspect. There are plenty of other religious and cultural traditions that favor celebrations around the solstice because it marks the beginning of the lengthening of days. Did Christianity, in all its proclivity toward symbolism, see the time of growing light as a good time to celebrate Jesus, the light of God, coming into the world? Possibly. Probably even. Indeed, astronomers and anthropologists alike have speculated – using the details of the nativity story – that Jesus’ birth was more likely a summer or fall event. So, are we presently 127 days *before* Christmas or should we have celebrated it last week?

We begin here as our easiest entry point into today’s “What About...?” sermon in which we ask, “What About... incorporating other religious traditions into Christianity?” Because, clearly, if Jesus is born on August 5 or something like that, but we celebrate His birthday around the same time that the pagans in Rome celebrated Saturnalia, then there’s a very good chance that Roman Christians – probably around the time that Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of Rome – just adopted a different religion’s traditions into our own. Was that right to do? If we could definitively prove we did this historically, do we have an obligation to rectify the matter? Will Target still sell me a 75-inch TV for under \$500 in December if we move Christmas? These are all very important questions!

“Syncretism.” Syncretism is the word we use to describe the process of merging different religious or cultural traditions together, typically with the more socially powerful religion appropriating the customs and practices of a less

powerful religion or cultural practice. Indeed, our opening Christmas example is a good one for this point because the first recorded practice of celebrating Christmas occurred in Rome in 336, which is 23 years *after* Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of Rome. It is arguable that without that backing of political power, Christmas wouldn’t exist – or, at the very least, wouldn’t exist as we experience it today.

I suspect that syncretism isn’t an inherently bad thing – that is to say, we could just as easily use the word “sharing” to describe this phenomenon of different cultures influencing one another – but once power relations are inserted into the whole thing, it gets suspect. After all, dominate cultures should not exercise domination over smaller, less-populated, less powerful cultures. For example, democracy may be all well and good here in the United States, but it isn’t good to put a sword to the throat of Guatemala or Honduras or El Salvador and demand they be like us.... Or else! Indeed, that was pretty much our international policy during the 70s and today’s immigration crisis can trace a straight throughline to those wayward efforts. That is to say, “syncretism” might just as easily be called “sin-cretism”... and rightly so!

Add to these observable difficulties the words of scripture we just heard read – words that tell us that we are not part of this world, words that define us as separate from lawlessness, disbelief, and idols – and it would appear that any and all syncretism really is just “sin-cretism.” And that might be all well and good except that we’re still going to celebrate Christmas this December 25 and, I’m assuming for most us, do so with a clear conscience. How, then, do we reconcile these inconsistencies?

I suspect the release of these pressures are found in Jesus’ words that point us toward sanctification. Sanctification is one of those old-school, big, churchy words. I read a decent amount of theology and I rarely see it used any longer. Probably it died a death of a thousand theological papercuts as uppity scholars started thin-slicing justification and sanctification, causing most reasonable Christians to zone out as their eyes glaze over. As such, we’re going to have to go back and

*From the Pastor's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, August 20, 2023*

retrieve this old word, dust it off, and see if it still has any battery life in it. And just to be up front about it all, I'm guessing the rest of this sermon lives and dies on our ability to successfully rescue this word from the doldrums of history.

Let's begin here: A few weeks ago, the youth led us during Camp Sunday in a song called "Sanctuary." It's lyrics, which I'll spare you a sung solo from me, go like this: "Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary. Pure and holy. Tried and true. And with thanksgiving, I'll be a living, sanctuary for you." "Sanctuary" shares a root with "sanctification." And where the latter sound old and dusty, "Sanctuary" – both the word and the song – are full of meaning and life. That song hits our souls hard precisely to the degree that we want to be people whose lives are transformed into the sort of presence where others can find respite, relief, and purpose. After all, "sanctuary" describes not just the room we're presently in, but also a place where burdens can be laid down and lives can be tended to graciously.

Well, inspired by this linguistic connection between "sanctification" and "sanctuary," I want us to understand our dusty old word in such vibrant colors. "Sanctification," then, is the process by which our lives are changed by the power and presence of God into something larger than they could ever be on their own. "Sanctification" should have as synonyms words like "flourishing," "growth," and "expansion." "Sanctification" means growth in holiness, but not in some snooty, uppity, exclusionary way, but rather in a way where our growth in holiness means there's more room in our hearts and lives for needs of others. If you're here today, I'm guessing you want ever-increasing sanctification, even if that isn't the word you would've necessarily chosen to use.

Well, let's assume I've made like Chip and Dale and Rescue Ranged "sanctification" from the church attic where we've stored it for the last 50 years and let's bring sanctification into conversation with syncretism. Again, syncretism would appear to be mostly bad – with the exception of how much we're apparently doing it throughout our Christian calendar and history! So, what relief does sanctification give us? It gives us the relief of appraising any and all syncretism through the lens

of sanctification. More specifically, if utilizing other cultural traditions helps us grab hold of God more closely – if it is part of God's answer to our prayer of "Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary" – then we probably need not fret over the syncretism.

Now, this may just sound like begging the question. What of, for example, those cultures whose traditions we've usurped? The devil's in the details. If our act of syncretism truly harms another culture or people, then it – by definition – cannot participate in our own sanctification. Our on-going sanctification does not need the sacrifice of other peoples and cultures because our sanctification is ultimately rooted in the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *However*, not all syncretism is violence.

Again, "syncretism" can also be understood as sharing. In fact, the opposite of syncretism – anthropologically speaking – is tribalism. Tribalism describes the practice of keeping to one's self and away from any other, outside influence. Syncretism is the inevitable outcome of people and cultures coming into contact with one another. Syncretism, when done rightly, is beautiful; it's what gives us the ability to interact and appreciate different people and, in general, difference. Our objective of being an inclusive community of faith is not possible without syncretism. Syncretism is why we have Tex-Mex cuisine, which is probably my favorite example of sanctified syncretism because Tex-Mex is delicious!

But let's return to those scripture readings because they would appear to be *very* anti-syncretism. Paul, as only he can do, lays it on thick: "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?" It is clear that not *all* syncretism is as sanctified as Tex-Mex.

There is an irony to today's "What About...?" question. While I'm sure it was asked honestly and innocently enough, the real concern isn't about Christianity becoming syncretic with other religions, but rather becoming syncretic with

*From the Pastor's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, August 20, 2023*

other, more insidious cultural influences. I'll name two uniquely American influences that Christians are wise to avoid: Militarism and Capitalism.

Militarism is a hallmark of these United States. We are born of violent revolution and reborn after a Civil War. More years of my life have been spent with America in some international conflict than years without such conflict. Even now we are watching with bated breath as a land war takes place in Europe. At least I hope your breath is bated because the 20th century proved twice over that no European land war ends without American participation. After all, this Wednesday seniors at Bowling Green School District will begin their last year of secondary education and if the land war in Europe erodes as history would indicate, some of them will be on the front lines one year from today. And no one who worships the God who goes by the moniker of "Prince of Peace" should be comfortable with the idea that today's senior will be tomorrow's sacrifice to the god of war.

And yet, American Christianity has been particularly abysmal at calling out military conflict and demanding peace from our elected leaders. Indeed, practical political wisdom would say that Presidents are rarely voted out of office during times of international conflict, which means there is a political incentive to make war. Militaristic syncretism may be why we keep an American flag in our sanctuary, even when our warring means anything but sanctuary for those whose lives languish under bombardment. It's why every person here would be unenthused – even frightened – to be labeled "unpatriotic."

We, in the church, have even gone so far as to adopt militaristic rhetoric as part of our sanctification. Some Christians proudly label themselves "soldiers of God" and take after the process of saving souls with militaristic fervor. We even produce camouflaged Bibles with labels like "A Soldier's Bible" because we've become so "syncretic" with militarism that even our Bibles blend in with war.

Capitalism is no better and probably a lot worse since it has a perduring influence in times of both war and peace. Capitalism is a cultural practice of redistributing goods and resources along arbitrary

lines that keep some without while others have too much. Poverty in America – the sort of poverty we, as a church, generously try to resist by giving food, personal needs items, school supplies, and money – is *not* a design flaw of capitalism, but rather a design feature. Capitalism was born of the assumption that our inherent greed should be utilized in our economic system rather than resisted, which is sort of like trying to make a birthday cake out of flour, eggs, and cow dung.

Worst of all, Capitalism assumes a zero-sum game in which for one person to have more, another person (or people) have to have less. It's why so many resist politicians who want to increase our taxes in order to strengthen the cords of our social safety nets. And this zero-sum mentality has a pernicious way of seeping into our faith. We could be a people who read stories about God giving manna to God's people and being at peace, trusting that surely God will provide. Instead, we revert back to our capitalism-inspired zero-sum thinking and worry about money – both personally and as a church. It's why even church consultants sound like little more than brand managers when trying to inspire church growth.

Our challenge, as the church of Jesus in this world, is to be the sort of people who can discern the good syncretism from the bad. It's to be people who can do syncretism as a joyous experience of cultural sharing rather than do syncretism as a power grab. It's why Christmas should be safe on December 25, but everyone here should be more introspective about the role of war and money on their moral imaginations.

Syncretism is inevitable; sanctification is not. So, let's make sure our syncretism stays in service to our sanctification.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.