

Jesus and His Cross-Cultural Shift

Matthew 17:1-9 | 2/26/2017

"I put a dollar in a change machine. Nothing changed." Comedian George Carlin's famous quip is rather prophetic. Change isn't easy, especially when it means assimilating into a new culture. Tourists and immigrants do it when they land in a foreign country and learn the language and customs of a new place. Kids have to do it when they start a new school. A newly married husband and wife have to make some changes when they begin life together. The changes we make might not be permanent, but change itself is a constant part of life. It would be great if it only cost a dollar!

Perhaps the hardest change, however, is moving or transforming an existing organizational culture toward a new one. An organization gets used to doing things a certain way over time, and then a crisis develops -- whether it's an unexpected circumstance, a shift in market conditions or even the arrival of a new leader.

Turning an old organization around to respond to the change can be like steering the Titanic with icebergs all around. But while shifting a culture isn't easy, it's often the best thing for everyone in the long run. The shift has to be done with great skill and care, however, in order to bring everyone into a new vision and future.

When Jesus broke onto the scene in first-century Palestine, he came with an agenda for shifting a culture that had already been around for more than 1,000 years. He came as a new leader, a Messiah, and pointed to the crisis that had been plaguing the existing culture (really, all of human culture) since the beginning. Even though he was God in the flesh, Jesus didn't simply snap his fingers or plunk a dollar in the change machine to make it happen.

Experts in culture change point to several key elements in helping people make the shift from old to new. In the passages surrounding and including the Transfiguration, we see Jesus using these elements to give his disciples a glimpse of the new culture he represents. They also foreshadow how they will help bring the good news of that culture to a world stuck in old paradigms and patterns of sin and death.

First, create a sense of urgency (16:13-23). People need to understand that the current culture is no longer working and that change is needed. An effective change agent identifies both the crises and the opportunities that require an urgent shift in the organization.

Just before the Transfiguration, Jesus takes his disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi, which was the location of the Cave of Pan, considered by many in the ancient world to be the gateway to Hades. His question to the disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" invites them to consider the kind of Messiah he truly is. Peter rightly confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, "the Son of the living God" (v. 16). There at the legendary entrance to the gates of hell itself, Jesus tells Peter that it's on the rock of his confession that the church will be built and the "gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (v. 18). The Messiah's mission is a crucial one and he enlists his disciples in the fight against evil.

But here's where the *urgent* part comes in -- a shift in culture rocked the old culture of Peter and the disciples. They knew that the Messiah was coming to take on evil, **but they expected it would be done in the way most humans do it -- through violent resistance and triumphant victory.** Jesus, however, tells his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem where he will be killed and, on the third day, be raised (v. 21).

This destroys Peter's paradigm. "God forbid it, Lord! This must not happen to you!" (v. 22). Peter thought of Jesus as a "presidential" Messiah who would destroy Israel's enemies, not be killed by them. Jesus, however, tells him that that old way of thinking is straight out of hell itself (v. 23). He is on his way to Jerusalem on an urgent mission to take on evil, but to do it in an unexpected way -- the way of suffering.

Which leads us to the second key element in changing culture: **Cast a compelling new vision (16:24-28).** The way that Jesus will defeat evil is the way of the cross. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Rather than visit death and vengeance on their enemies, the disciples of Jesus are to follow his example all the way to the cross, dying to their own desires and living a sacrificial life. Jesus will take the forces of sin and death head on when he goes to the cross, and he will defeat them with forgiveness, with love and with his own suffering on behalf of the sinners who nailed him there.

In a world where violence and vengeance are the cultural norms for nations and individuals, Jesus casts a vision of a very different sort of culture. The culture of the cross calls us to suffering love and nonviolent resistance to evil, trusting that God will ultimately set things right. In the meantime, his disciples are to take up the cross and follow his example.

This is a major culture shift that the church of Jesus Christ has trouble grasping, just like Peter. It's not about seeking power and dominance, but living as servants of the crucified Christ who loved his enemies. It's a countercultural way of living and it requires a constant focus on the vision of Jesus to begin living it out.

But while it's a new vision, it carries with it some of the best of the past. Jesus' vision didn't come from nowhere; rather, it is the product of a heritage that enabled him to bring it to reality at the right time. Indeed, this is one of the other keys to changing culture, that is, **honoring the strengths of the existing culture (vv. 1-8)**.

Matthew's gospel, written to a Jewish audience, constantly connects Jesus to Israel's past and to the towering figure of Moses in particular. From the birth narratives, which have close parallels to Moses' own birth, to giving his updated revision of the law in a sermon on a mountain, Matthew wants us to see Jesus as the new Moses.

The story of the Transfiguration continues that motif. Jesus is "transfigured" before the disciples, with his face shining "like the sun" -- much like Moses after his encounter with God on the mountain (Exodus 34:29). Then Moses himself appears beside Jesus, along with the prophet Elijah. In Jewish tradition, Moses and Elijah were transcendent figures who had not died but were taken directly to heaven. Their appearance with Jesus indicates that Jesus himself is part of that heavenly world and the disciples get a glimpse of the glory Jesus had promised they would see.

Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets. Jesus, the Messiah, represents the fulfillment of both. The parallels between the three figures there on the mountain are stunning. They were all rejected by their people; they were all advocates of the Torah; they all spoke the truth to kings; they spoke to God on behalf of their sinful people; and, perhaps most importantly, they all gave their lives for the sake of God and were vindicated by God. The Transfiguration reveals that Jesus has a deep connection to Israel's story as both lawgiver and prophet, but that he is even more. He is not merely equal to these towering figures of Israel's history; he is superior to them.

But the old culture dies hard and it takes time for people to see what has changed. Peter, witnessing Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah, wants to build three "dwelling places" and prolong this amazing vision. In response, the glory of God overshadows them in a cloud and God's own voice speaks the same words spoken at Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (v. 5). God confirms Peter's confession from a few days earlier and confirms that Jesus himself is Emmanuel, "God with us" (1:23).

The Transfiguration is a foretaste of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The disciples won't really understand it until that future event has taken place, so Jesus tells them to tell no one about it until after they discover the empty tomb. It will take time to assimilate this culture shift, and we can argue that the church has been wrestling with it to this day. People need constant reminding that the culture has changed, which brings us to the fourth principle:

Continue communicating and incorporating the vision. Change experts tell us that shifting a culture involves multiple modes of communication and the development of new habits in the organization. Poor communication and failure to assimilate cultural changes in everyday life and work, on the other hand, can lead the culture back to the familiar patterns of the past. Jesus held the cross up in front of his disciples, constantly reminding them that the way of the cross is the way to God's glorious future.

Most of our churches have the symbol of the cross put up everywhere, but it can become as unremarkable and familiar as the wallpaper if we're not incorporating it into our daily lives. We tend to focus on Jesus' own death and resurrection in glory, but often we forget that we've been called to *follow him* in a culture of sacrifice, service and suffering love.

The church is often resistant to that culture shift, preferring comfort and cultural accommodation to countercultural living. Sometimes we need to return to the mountain to be reminded that Jesus is Lord and that his lordship is a product of suffering on behalf of others, even those who are not like us or who may even be against us. We also recognize that we can't stay on the mountain. Eventually, we must follow him down into the valley and confront evil with the faith he gives us and with the way of the cross ever before us.

Shifting a culture isn't easy. It takes time and constant nurture. When we make the *cross*-cultural shift to follow the crucified, glorified Christ, however, we will see him -- and everything -- in a brand new way.

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