

“Slouching Toward Gomorrah”

a sermon by

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Text: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8).

On March 13, 2006, an event occurred on the campus of Duke University, the ramifications of which are still being debated and discussed almost two months later. On that evening a twenty-seven-year-old student at North Carolina Central College charged three Duke Lacrosse players with rape and assault at a party that took place in an off-campus house.

Today, two students have been indicted as a result of these charges. Now, it is important that we not rush to judgment in this matter. The judicial system of this country rests on the principle that a person is innocent until proven guilty. It is one thing to be indicted by a grand jury. It is quite another to be proven guilty of these charges and it is not the intention of this sermon to jump to that conclusion.

There are, however, a number of issues in this matter that are certainly not limited to Duke University but they occur in almost all of the colleges in the country, which include such things as underage drinking, excessive use of alcohol, and parties where violence and abusive behavior have become the norm and not the exception.

One of the things that have occurred to me over the past few weeks is that the events at Duke in many ways are part of a larger problem in our society; namely, “the coarsening of

culture” that is evident in our nation in so many ways. It is demonstrated by “shock jocks” who dominate morning radio and in television shows that revel in sexual promiscuity, violence, and even polygamy. It is demonstrated in the way people drive, the way that they speak, and in the way that they dress. There is crudeness in our culture today that is undeniable.

I.

This “coarsening of culture” should not be a foreign concept to the Christian community. The New Testament is filled with illustrations in which the church found itself in conflict with the culture around it. This was certainly true in the city of Philippi, one of the major cities of Macedonia, and a common stopover on one of the major roads between the East and West in the Roman Empire. The Christian community at Philippi was the first church established by Paul on European soil (Acts 16:11-13). Paul seemed to have had a close contact with the people of this church in the years that followed (Philippians 4:15-16). Like Ephesus, Rome and Corinth, the city of Philippi had its share of problems. Paganism abounded. The violence of the Roman games, the disregard for human life that was a part of the Roman culture and the loose sexual practices of the city created a great problem for the church at Philippi.

Although Paul was in prison at the time of the writing of this letter, he demonstrated a great deal of empathy with his hearers in seeking to enable the Christian community to live faithfully in a pagan culture. For that reason the words of Paul take on a special meaning: “Whatever is pure, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is true, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8). Fred Craddock, in his commentary on Philippians, points out that the Apostle Paul drew this list of virtues not only from the heart of the Jewish and Christian tradition, but from the Greek moralists as well. The honorable, the just, the pure, the lovely, the praiseworthy—these were virtues extolled by the ethicists of the Greek culture. Paul used this list to make a point: Christians are called not to conform to the culture around them but to transform that culture in the name of Christ.

So, what can we do to bring a halt to this coarsening of culture that is all around us?

II.

For one thing, we are called to stand against those things in our culture that demean and degrade human life. To be sure, there are many things in our culture that are very worthwhile. There is great music, great literature, and noble living among us. When we see these things, we should support and applaud them.

But, there are some things in our culture that need to be opposed. In his book *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr explores the relationship between Christian faith and the culture around us. Niebuhr points out that for some religious traditions Christ is viewed as against culture. The Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, demonstrate a group of Jews who were known as the “Essenes.” They had withdrawn from Jerusalem to the small town of Qumran on the edge of the Dead Sea. They believed that society was corrupt and sought to purify themselves by

withdrawing from it. The monastic movement in the Middle Ages was an attempt by a group of Christians to separate themselves from what they viewed as a corrupt society. Other religious communities simply identified Christ with the culture in which they live. The Presbyterian or Reformed faith is an example of the “transformation” by which we believe that as Christians we are called not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Presbyterians have always believed that part of the mission of the church was the transformation of society to conform to the will of Christ.

Today, we live in a culture that is in radical need of transformation. Henry Fairlie, the British journalist, in his book *The Seven Deadly Sins*, identifies the sin of “sloth” as a “state of dejection that gives rise to the torpor of mind and feeling and spirit to a sluggishness... a poisoning of the will; to despair, and faintheartedness, and a hatred for the good. Sloth,” he writes, “is a deadly sin.”

Two of the most obvious evidences of this are language and dress. The use of four letter curse words is so common in our society today that many of us are indifferent to them. Whether we are at a sporting event, a movie, or even walking down the street, we often hear language used without any regard to those who may be listening.

The same is true with our dress. When I was a seminary student, my professor of preaching was Dr. Ben Lacy Rose. When I preached my senior sermon, he chided me for wearing a striped tie with a black suit. He believed that a minister should wear a dark suit, white shirt, and solid tie. Art Ross, who was a student minister at this church some years ago and is now the Senior Minister of the White Memorial Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, once told me that Dr. Lee Stoffel, the minister of this church, once sent him home on Sunday morning to change from a blue shirt to a white shirt before he could be present in the 11:00 o’clock worship service.

Well, thank goodness styles do change! But, there are some things that do not change. Once, when I asked Jim Wright, the Director of Opera Carolina, why people dressed so formally to attend the opera, often wearing tuxedos and formal dresses, he replied by saying that it was out of respect for the music. It occurred to me that when we come to worship we ought to show the same respect to God that music lovers demonstrate to opera.

III.

A second key to preventing the coarsening of our culture is found in recovering a key aspect of the mission of the church. Part of the ministry of the church is to strengthen the lives of its members and children by demonstrating alternative lifestyles to the crudeness of the culture. Early on in the history of the church there were those who maintained, “*Extra Ecclesiam nulla Salus*”—outside the church there was no salvation. Both Luther and Calvin took that position, as did the Westminster Confession of Faith. Most of us today would find this somewhat and restrictive.

However, the statement “Outside the church there is no salvation” is a negative formulation of a positive conviction. It arose in the early church, not as a doctrine, but as an experience. Women and men who lived in the violent and often inhumane world of the Roman Empire found in the church something they desperately sought: meaning, purpose, forgiveness, hope, health, and wholeness. For them they could not imagine salvation outside the fellowship of the church.

Arnold Toynbee, in his massive work, *A Study of History*, contends that one clear sign of a civilization’s decline is when the elite people, whom Toynbee labels as “the Dominant Majority” begin to mimic the vulgarity and promiscuity exhibited by society’s “bottom dwellers”. This is precisely what so many of our political leaders and celebrities have done. The result is that the whole culture is vulgarized.

Some years ago, Raymond Kelly, the New York City Police Commissioner, testified to an amazing change within American culture. Kelly noted that a number of cars in New York City began to place signs on the window of the car, marked, “No Radio.” Rather than express outrage, or even annoyance, at the possibility of a car break in, people began to communicate with the thief in conciliatory terms. The translation of “No Radio” is: “Please break into someone else’s car, there is nothing in mine.” These “No Radio” signs are flags of urban surrender. They are handwritten capitulations. Instead of “No Radio” signs, we need signs that say, “No Surrender.”

IV.

A third key to preventing the “coarsening of culture” is the production of individuals, who by the faith and example provide a great model for the Christian community. The Apostle Paul makes this point to the Christian community at Philippi, when he says, “Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:9).

One of the most important tasks of the church is the nurture of illustrative personal examples of Christian faith and life. That is to say the church should develop individuals who serve as models and examples as to what faith can and should be.

In the Nineteenth Century there was a Presbyterian Minister in Missouri by the name of Elijah Lovejoy. He was very opposed to the institution of slavery. In fact, he established an abolitionist newspaper to try to prevent the spread of this dreadful practice of slavery. One night a mob surrounded the building where his newspaper was published. The building was destroyed and Elijah Lovejoy was killed. But his life made a difference. He died for something that he believed.

In his 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner declared, “I decline to accept the end of man. Man will not merely endure but prevail,” Faulkner observed, “but he alone among the creatures has a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.”

In his powerful poem "For the Time Being," W. B. Yeats speaks of the beast that is slouching toward Bethlehem. Today that beast is slouching toward Gomorrah.

Today we must refuse the coarsening of our culture. We must push back against an age that is pushing hard against us.

We must redeem the times.

Amen!