

“Slouching Toward Gomorrah”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

May 23, 2010

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)

Several years ago Robert H. Bork wrote a book entitled *Slouching Toward Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline*. The title of Bork’s book is a play on words on the last couplet of what may have been the most famous poem of the 20th Century, W. B. Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming” which ends with this powerful image:

“And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?”

Bork contends that “The rough beast of which Yeats speaks is the ‘rough beast of decadence’ ... now sends us slouching toward our new home, not Bethlehem but Gomorrah.”

For a number of years theologians, social scientists, and social critics have lamented what some have called “the coarsening of society.” By that, we mean that in many ways our society has become more violent, more profane, and less civil.

Examples are not hard to cite. It is found in the use of profanity which has invaded almost every of our life. It is evidence on the highways where “road rage” and discourtesy seem to be the order of the day.

It is certainly present in urban America today. Viewing the news on television or the internet one is certainly aware of the violence and coarseness of urban life. Ernest Campbell, who was for a number of years the minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, was once asked what it was like to live and work in New York. He replied in jest by saying that if God didn’t destroy New York City and Los Angeles, God was going to have to apologize to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Young people are certainly exposed to this kind of disintegration of culture. The high school that my granddaughter attends recently had a day of celebration. The students were all allowed to start classes thirty minutes late one morning as a reward for good behavior. When I asked what they were being rewarded for, I was told that the school had gone for ten days without any violence and apparently that was a cause of celebration.

I.

There is, however, nothing really new about this kind of “coarsening of culture.” In fact, it is a point of contact between our times and those of the New Testament. The world to which the Apostle Paul addressed his letters was the world of the Roman Empire and it was a violent and vulgar world.

Several years ago I had the opportunity to visit some of the cities of the New Testament: Corinth and Ephesus and Philippi. One of impressions that I had was how really rough these cities were. There were major ports of the Roman Empire and people from all over the world came to them bringing every kind of religion, philosophy, and behavior imaginable. All of these cities were “port cities” and they struggled with prostitution, drunkenness, violence, and crime.

That is why when Paul comes to the conclusion of this letter to the church at Philippi, he addresses himself to one of the most important themes of the entire letter:

“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)

So, how do we offer an alternative to the coarsening of culture that seems 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 worthwhile. There is great music, great literature, and noble living all around us. Recently, I had the opportunity to visit the new Bechtler Museum in Charlotte. It is a beautiful facility – a jewel in the midst of a busy downtown. Soon the Mint Museum will open in Uptown Charlotte, bringing a wonderful new facility to our community.

Historically, the church has fostered the arts as a way of giving expression to God who has created the world good. Many of the great painters including Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and Da Vinci devoted a great deal of their talents to religious art. The same is true in music. Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, and Handel contributed works of music that enhance our understanding of faith.

Today our community is facing an enormous challenge as we seek to fund our libraries, public schools, symphony and other institutions which are essential to the life and health of our community and the church has a special responsibility to support these endeavors.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, he listed a group of virtues that he held before the church: things that were true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable. Scholars have noted that it is very likely that Paul had access to this list of virtues that would have been found among many of the Greek ethicists and philosophers.

He saw them as things to be imitated. He believed that whenever we see things that have beauty, truth, and excellence, they should be supported.

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 the Christian faith and the culture around us. In some religious traditions Christ is viewed as over against culture. The monastic movement in the middle ages, for example, was an attempt by some Christians to abandon the culture in which they lived. Other religious traditions have simply identified Christ with the culture in which they lived. We see many evidences of this in churches where religion and culture are so intertwined that it is virtually impossible to separate the two.

In the Presbyterian or Reformed faith we have emphasized an ethic of transformation. By that we believe that following Christ means that we are called to transform our culture in order to allow it to conform to the will of Christ.

Today, we live in a culture that is in radical need of transformation. Henry Fairlie, a British journalist, in his book, *The Seven Deadly Sins* identifies the sin of sloth as “a state of dejection that give 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 of the good. Sloth”, he writes,” is a deadly sin.”

Two of the most obvious evidences of this are language and dress. The appearance of four letter curse words is so common in our society that most of us are indifferent to them. Whether we are at a sporting event, a movie, or even in a restaurant, often we 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, our teacher of preaching was Dr. Ben Lacy Rose. When I preached my senior sermon, he marked my grade down because I was wearing a striped tie with a black suit. He insisted that ministers should wear a dark suit, white shirt and a solid tie. Art Ross, who was a student minister at this church some years ago, and who served most recently at the White Memorial Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, told me once that Dr. Lee Stoffel, the minister of this church, once sent him home on Sunday morning to change from a light blue shirt to a white shirt before he could be present in the 11 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, who was the director of Opera Carolina, why people dressed so formally to attend the opera – often wearing tuxedos and formal gowns – he replied by saying that it was out of respect for the music. Do we not think that when it comes to worship, we should show the same respect that music lovers demonstrate to opera?

You see, it is not about what we wear. It is a matter of showing a sense of reverence, respect, and honor to the importance of our encounter with God.

III.

There is a second dimension to preventing his coarsening of our culture and it is found in recovering a key mission of the church. Part of the ministry of the church is to strengthen the lives of our members and their children by offering an alternative lifestyle to the crudeness of our culture.

Early on there were those in the history of the church who maintained the notion “*Extra Ecclesiam nulla Salus*” – “Outside the church there is no salvation.” Both Luther and Calvin took this position, as did the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Most of us, I suspect, would find ourselves somewhat uncomfortable with such a narrow statement.

However, the statement “outside the church there is no salvation,” is a negative formulation of 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 something in the church that was essential in their lives: meaning, purpose, forgiveness, hope, friendship and fellowship. For them there was no real salvation or health outside 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 elites – 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, a former 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 cars marked “No Radio.” Rather than express outrage, or even annoyance, and the possibility of a car break-in, people began to communicate with the potential thief in conciliatory terms. The translation of “No Radio” is this: “Please break into someone else’s car, there is nothing in mine.” These “No Radio” signs are flags of urban surrender. They are a handwritten capitulation. Instead of “No Radio” signs, we need signs that say “No Surrender.”

IV.

Another key to preventing this “coarsening of our culture” is the production of individuals who, by their 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 mission activities 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 example to others of what the faith can be.

When I think of people who demonstrate this kind of faith and example I think of a great Japanese Christian, Toyohiko Kagawa, who though born to poverty, lived his life in the slums of

Tokyo and after World War II, helped a defeated nation rebuild itself after the terrible devastation of the war.

I think of Nelson Mandela, who when he was released from prison after 27 years, came out not with bitterness, hatred, or the desire for revenge but who demonstrated with his life the power of forgiveness.

I think of Mother Theresa of Calcutta, who lived and moved among the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India, giving with her life one of the greatest examples of discipleship in the past century.

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 because, as Faulkner observed, man alone among the creatures "has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

Today, we must in the same way refuse to accept the coarsening of our culture. We must carry on the struggle for all our children and grandchildren. We must push back against an age that is pushing hard against us.

We must, to paraphrase the Apostle Paul, redeem our time.

Amen!