

“Slouching Toward Gomorrah”

First Presbyterian Church

Charlotte, North Carolina

May 15, 2016

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)

This past October I had the privilege of visiting the country of Italy, certainly one of the most beautiful in the world. We had the opportunity to spend five days in Rome and then travel to the beautiful Amalfi Coast and the village of Positano.

It had been almost forty years since I had visited in Rome and we had the chance to visit the beautiful Sistine Chapel and the Vatican. In addition we did a walking tour of the great Caravaggio paintings located in the different churches in Rome. On the third day we had the opportunity to see some of the ancient sites in Rome: the Coliseum, Pantheon, and other historic sites.

I remember standing there in the Coliseum, marveling at one of the great architectural wonders of the ancient world that is still standing. The Romans, of course, were masterful engineers that built an empire that lasted for five hundred years. The Roman Roads, the aqueducts, the marvelous system of communications made the Pax Romana (Roman peace) a possibility and enabled the early Christians to travel the whole known world spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Standing there in the Coliseum I could not help but marvel at the architectural wonder before me. But, to be honest, looking around also brought an uneasy feeling to me, for it was hard to look at that structure without sensing the terrible violence that went on there.

The Coliseum was originally built by the Emperor as a place for entertaining the people of Rome. Originally, there were plays held there and other artistic works. But along the way came another phenomenon: the Roman games.

At first, it seemed harmless enough. Wild animals were brought in from all over the world and the people watched as these beast fought one another. But gradually the violence escalated. Soon soldiers fought and killed the beasts. And then, gladiators fought and killed one another as the crowds roared in delight. Thousands of Christians were killed during the Roman persecution of the early Church and violence bred more violence as the crowds cried out for more.

Several years ago William Bennett published a remarkable book entitled *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*. In that book he addressed the great changes in this nation. Since 1960 the population of this country has grown immensely. The gross domestic product has more than tripled, and social spending by the federal government has increased enormously.

During that same period there was a 560 percent increase in violent crime, more than a 400 percent increase ‘illegitimate births’ a quadrupling of divorces, a tripling of children living in single parent homes. Teenage suicide rates also increased while there was a decline in the average SAT scores for high school seniors.

Bennett also noted a survey taken of high school teachers in this country. In 1940 teachers reported that the greatest problems they faced in the classroom were: students talking out of turn in class, chewing gum, cutting in line, dress code infractions and littering. Sixty years later, when asked the same question, teachers identified these: bullying, drug use, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery and assault.

Today, sociologists and moralists speak of what is sometimes referred to as the “coarsening of culture”. The recent primary races for the Republican and Democratic nominees are a witness to this. We have all been shocked by the crude language used by some of the candidates, the name calling, the insults to women, the apparent belittling of a disabled reporter, the ethnic hatred to Muslims, Mexicans, and other foreign groups, not to mention candidates making crude remarks about genitalia and other subjects once considered off subject in any election- certainly in a race for President of the United States.

The ‘coarsening of culture’ should not be a foreign concept to the Christian community. The New Testament is filled with illustrations that 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 stop on one of the major roads between East and West in the Roman Empire. The Christian community at Philippi was the first church established by the Apostle Paul on European soil (Acts 16: 11-13). Paul seemed to have maintained a close contact with the people in 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, as well as the Roman games and 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 people of the city of 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 this reason, the words of Paul to the church at Philippi 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)

So, what can we do to halt this coarsening of culture?

To be sure, there are many things in our culture that are worthwhile. There is great music, great art, great literature, and noble living among us. When I was in Rome and visited the Vatican with its Sistine Chapel, I was overwhelmed by the great treasures of Christendom there. Certainly, there are occasions of excess and abuse. But I was very grateful to the Roman Catholic Church for its stewardship of these great treasures: Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel and the Pieta, the great paintings of Caravaggio throughout the churches and Michelangelo’s wonderful statue of Moses in the church of St. Peter’s in Chain.

In our text today when the Apostle Paul speaks of these virtues, he is obviously drawing them from contemporary Greek ethicists. It is as if to say that while there are some things in the culture that should be shunned, but certainly there are others that should be applauded.

But, there are some things that in our culture that need to be opposed. In his book *Christ and Culture* H. Richard Niebuhr explores different ways that the church has responded to the culture around it. The monastic movement in the early church, for example, was an attempt by some Christians to abandon a culture in that was violent and secular. Some religious traditions today seek to emulate the culture in which we live. The churches that practice the ‘gospel of wealth’ are an example of this.

The Presbyterian or Reformed faith is an example of a transformational ethic in which Christ is seen as the one who transforms or changes culture.

Today, we live in a culture that is desperate 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 the mind and feeling and spirit to sluggishness... a poisoning of the will; to despair, 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 today 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 for children or others who may be listening.

The same is true with our dress. When I was a seminary student many years ago, 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 believed that a minister should wear a black suit, white shirt, and solid tie. No stripes!

Well, thank goodness styles do change! But there are some things that do not change. One of my friends in Charlotte a few years ago was Jim Wright, who was the director of Opera Carolina. Once I asked him why people seem so often to dress so formally to attend the opera- often men in tuxedos and women in long formal gowns. He replied that it was out of respect for the music. Do we not think that when we come to worship, we should not should the same respect to the Almighty God that music lovers demonstrate to opera?

A second key to holding back this coarsening of culture is found in recovering a key mission of the church today. Part of the mission of the church is to strengthen the lives of its members and children by demonstrating an alternative lifestyle to the crudeness of the present culture. Early on in the history of the church there were those that maintained the doctrine “*Extra Ecclesiam nulla Salus*”- outside the church there is no salvation. Both Luther and Calvin took this position, as did the authors of the Westminster Confession of the Church. Most of us today would probably find ourselves uncomfortable with such a narrow statement.

However, the expression “Outside the church there is no salvation” is really a negative formulation of a positive conviction. It rose 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, there was no salvation 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, the people who Toynbee labels as the 'dominant majority', begin to mimic the vulgarity and promiscuity exhibited by society's "bottom dwellers". This is precisely the kind of behavior we are witnessing today.

Some years ago, Raymond Kelly, the former New York City Police Commissioner, testified to an amazing change in our culture. Kelly noted that there were a number of people in New York City who began to put signs on the windows of their cars that read, "No Radio". Rather than express outrage or even annoyance at the possibility of a car break in, people began to communicate with the potential thieves in conciliatory terms. The translation of the sign "No Radio" is "Please break into someone else's car. There is nothing in mine." These "No Radio" signs are signs of urban surrender. They are hand written capitulations. Instead of "No Radio" signs, we need signs that say, "No Surrender".

One of the most important tasks of the church today is the task of insuring that the church understands the tradition on which it was built. Without authentic Christian education the church will have no real impact on the world in which we live. Two of the most important studies in recent years that have indicated how important the task of education is for the church are Edward Hirsch's book, *Cultural Literacy*, and Allen Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. Both of these works point out the absolute necessity of preserving religious traditions for the welfare and safety of our society.

A third 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, when he writes, "Keep on doing the things that you have received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." (Philippians 4:9)

I spoke a few minutes ago about the terrible violence that took place in the Roman Coliseum. Around the year 400 A.D. something remarkable happened. There was a Christian monk by the name of Telemachus, who had for many years lived in the desert, practicing his religion in solitude. Toward the end of his life he decided to visit Rome, which at that time was officially a Christian Empire. When he arrived in Rome, he was repulsed by the vulgarity and violence he witnessed. At one point he visited the Coliseum. When he saw the terrible violence and killing that was going on there, he did something that no one could imagine. He went over the barrier that separated the spectators from the gladiators and stood between two of the gladiators in a fight to the death. At first, one of the gladiators shoved him aside. But Telemachus placed himself for a second time between the gladiators. One of them looked to the captain of the guard, who gave the thumbs down sign. So the gladiator took his sword and killed this bearded, robed monk. Then, something extraordinary happened. As the people saw this martyred monk lying dead on the ground, they suddenly begin to rise and one by one leave their seats. In a matter of a few hours the Coliseum was empty. The crowd was apparently repulsed to see this holy man killed. From that day the games were never practiced in Rome. Within a few days the Emperor declared that they would never be held again- all of this on the account of one person willing to give his life for something he believed was wrong.

In his 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner declared, “I decline to accept the end of man. Humankind will not merely endure but prevail because,” as Faulkner said, “He alone has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion, sacrifice, and acceptance.”

Today, we must in the same way, decline to accept the end of moral men and women. We must carry on the struggle for our children and grandchildren. We must push back against an age that is pushing hard against us. We must, to use the words of the Apostle Paul, “redeem the times”

And when we do, we can sing again the words of that beautiful hymn:

“America, America! God shed his grace on Thee

And crown thy good with brotherhood

From Sea to Shining Sea.”

Amen!

Preached by the Reverend Dr. William P. Wood