

Chapter 7

Community and the World

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SABBATH

What is the World?

Throughout its history, Christianity has had an ambivalent relation to the world. The ambivalence lies in the fact that *the world* is a phrase with meanings that are multiple and relative to their times. Frequently, the term is understood as the created order, the totality of which is spoken of in Genesis 1 and 2. All things created by God make up this world—the sky above us, the earth beneath us; everything that is not fashioned or imagined by humans. Moreover, *the world* implies the power opposed to the kingdom of God, or the arena of spiritual conflict on this physical Earth which has been dominated by evil. In other words, for many Christians there is a world within the world, a spiritual battleground within the physical boundaries of planet Earth.

But another meaning for *the world* is *culture*, a word that connotes vast categories of human endeavor. Culture is the human environment that flourishes in the natural environment and is made

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up of language, customs, technology, history, social organizations, habits, ideas, beliefs, practices, music, the arts, and values. Culture is what people make and form—everything from mathematical formulas to computers, light bulbs, sermons, politics, and prayers. Furthermore, culture is always social. It is created, transmitted, received, and nurtured with others. We shape our culture and then it shapes us. Everything we think or do or say or make is inextricably linked to this social foundation, which we create and maintain and upon which we depend.

When people of faith look at the world, they see multiple images. There is the *natural* world that is given, not produced by us. There is the *cultural* world, the objects of which are imagined, thought, and built. And there is the *supernatural* world of powers, spirits, angels, and God.

The challenge is to understand what the world is for us, who belong to many different communities, including a community of faith. In this chapter, we will try to keep these multiple images in view in order to see more clearly the place that our community of faith might hold in relation to the world.

What thoughts do you have when you think of the world?

SUNDAY

Is the World a Problem?

We Christians are often confused about the world. On the one hand, there is an idea of the world as something we choose. On the other hand, there is the obvious fact that we are ultimately part of the world,

whether we choose it or not.

In the history of the Christian church, *the world* has frequently been identified with the sinful and the immoral, and thus something to be rejected. The church saw itself as a pilgrim, passing through history and the world and having to watch itself not to be tainted by the world. But to regard the world as merely a physical space filled with lost people “running to and fro” is to sidestep our calling. The world is also within us: we wear the clothes of the world, listen to the music of the world, read the books of the world, and participate in the economy of the world. We are an inextricable part of world relationships, humanitarian endeavors, cultural accomplishments, and altruistic aspirations. Thus, if we are in the world (an empirical fact) and the world is in us (a considered judgment), then, as Christians and human beings, we have a responsibility toward it (Jeremiah 29:7).

We are faced with a choice: will we reject the world because it is sinful or will we do what we are called by Christ to do—work to make the world better, more free, more loving, more humane? If we choose the latter, it must be with the recognition that we, like the world, are both glorious and fallen. It is not a matter of righteous people stooping to save a fallen world, but rather struggling people choosing to let God work through them for the sake of righteousness in the world.

Why should we work for the well-being of a world headed for destruction? If we do not identify with the world, how is it possible to do the work of

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Christ in the world?

MONDAY

Our Vocations in the World

As Christians, God has called us to work in this world—to teach, to preach, to care for, and to suffer with the world. But there are jobs and then there are callings. A calling is another name for a vocation (from the Latin *vocare*, “to call” or “to summon”). If we are called or summoned to do something for God, we can be assured that God will supply us with the ways and means to accomplish it.

Take Moses, for example. God called him to be the major player in setting His people free. However, it seems that Moses had a speech impediment; perhaps he was a stutterer or perhaps he was simply afraid of public speaking. He probably hoped, whatever the impediment, that it would be enough to get him off the hook, but God was having none of it. “I will give you the words to say,” God said. Objection overruled.

Or, take Amos or Jeremiah or Ezekiel, each called by God to speak a prophetic word to Israel. None of them wanted the job; all of them resisted the call. Think about Jonah skittering off on a ship headed in the opposite direction from Nineveh. In fact, it appeared that if one was angling for the role of a prophet, Jonah was not right for the job.

Whatever form our individual vocations in the world may take, fulfilling them will require courage and sacrifice. It will require courage because God sets the bar high for us and we won’t get the details in advance, if ever. So, we walk by faith, not by

sight. And doing so involves living sacrifice, because becoming who we are meant to be also means giving up everything that would come between us and God’s love.

How do we know if we have received a call? Is our call related only to what we feel we are good at and enjoy doing? Does every Christian have a calling to a particular vocation in the world?

TUESDAY

In the World, Not of the World

This phrase is familiar to us, although it doesn’t appear in Scripture as such. In John 17, Jesus’ prayer for unity among believers is not that his disciples be taken out of the world, but that they be protected from the evil one. He also claims that “They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world” (John 17:16; NRSV).

In the first section, we mentioned three meanings for *the world*: the physical creation, the spiritual world that is hidden but present, and the cultural world in which we are immersed. This text—and this famous phrase—reverberates through all three worlds. The challenge is to discern how we may move through these worlds and still follow our calling in Jesus.

To be in the world is to be constantly confronted with choices. It can become exhausting. Why couldn’t God have made us so that choosing the good was automatic? Instead, God seems to have set it up so that we need freedom to make our way in the world. Our freedom to choose means we can work in the world without fear—fear of the world and fear of

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failure. Because we are covered with God's grace, we can truly take chances, try new things, and step out in faith. In that sense, the big picture becomes rather simple. In fact, the tagline for Christians might be: "Good has gone bad. By the grace of God, shall we try again?"

We may be overwhelmed by the cruelty and the suffering of people in the world. We may be tempted to abandon the world to itself. But this is our world, the place where we find our calling. Playwright Christopher Fry writes, "In our plain defects we already know the brotherhood of man." There is much to dare and to try while we are here.

So, when Jesus prays that God will keep us in the world and protect us from the evil one, there is a lot at stake. We *are* in the world, the world God gave us, and we have the freedom to choose the good in this world. The purpose and the punchline is Jesus' prayer of hope about us: "[T]hat all of them may be one . . . so that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:21).

What would it mean for the Sligo community to be in the world, but not of the world? How can we build such a community?

WEDNESDAY

Salt and Light in the World

We are not entirely at home in this world. Yet, we are called to be the salt of the earth and to add savor to the world (Matthew 5:13). That is the paradox in which we live. Christians, people who see themselves as pilgrims just passing through,

are also citizens, parents, homeowners, students, patients, leaders, farmers, manufacturers, and politicians. Like everyone else, Christians are invested in this world. It is hard to anticipate the end to the world when you are trying to build a hospital or take out a loan for graduate school. How do you live with one foot on the throttle and the other on the brake?

How are we to *be*—to act and live—in the world as people of faith? Two metaphors, salt and light, help us perceive the vocations that Jesus has for us. The power of these metaphors is that they are instantly understandable. Just mentioning them brings images to mind, and we fill in the gaps.

Consider two things that make salt an apt metaphor for the way we can work in the world. First, salt is versatile and can be easily used in many situations. Likewise, we can be effective witnesses for Christ wherever we are, through what we say and do, and how we do it. We do not need heavy equipment, advertising, or advanced degrees. We speak as the Spirit leads us, right where we are. Second, and most importantly, salt is pervasive—a little goes a long way. It suggests we can add savor in the world quietly through compassion and humility. This is work that can be done by individuals within their communities, person to person, day after day.

The second metaphor, that of light, offers a contrast to salt. Imagine a city on a hill, says Jesus, its lights blazing at night for all to see. Imagine lighting a lamp in your house. You do not hide it, you lift it up so that it lights every dark corner (Matthew 5:14-16). There are times when we are called to stand up, stand out, and give light to the world. During times

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of despair and fear, we must be visible, calling out injustices where they occur, and offering an alternative to hopelessness.

In what ways are you salt and light in the world?

THURSDAY On the Boundary

Christians who are *in* the world, but not *of* the world, may find themselves on the boundary between the church and the world. They identify both with the suffering in the world and with the Christ who suffers for the world. They live and serve in the world and in the church. Straddling that boundary can be challenging and uncomfortable.

Jesus found Himself criticized for counting among his friends the tax collectors and prostitutes, the very people some of those in authority thought of as reprehensible and beyond salvation. It could not have been easy for Jesus to be constantly misunderstood for reaching out to those who needed Him most. After all, he came for those who were lamed and blinded by sin, not for those who viewed the world with untrammelled eyesight and had incorruptible will. The irony, of course—Jesus' inside joke—is that *everybody* is blind and lame and corrupted but He loves us anyway. He even asks us to speak in His name to our fellow patients, both inside the church and outside.

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Yet, when we, like Jesus, live and work on the boundary, we too may be misunderstood. The goal of living out Jesus' love in the world may be seen by others in the church as selling out to the world. We may be seen as the problem, when the real problem is the great need we all have of Jesus. But we do have choices.

We can ignore the problem, confront the problem, or transform the problem. The boundary-dwellers, those who are committed to following Jesus, will not be satisfied with the first option. There is too much at stake. Nor are they willing simply to confront the problem. Rather, they want to transform it. Their love for the community and its mission compels them to work it through. As light and salt they live in the church and in the world. They shine light on the problem and they work quietly and pervasively, like salt, to transform it. They stay because they believe that the wounded, broken body of Christ *in* the world is a constant healing *for* the world.

Do you feel that you are living on the boundary between the world and the church? If yes, how do you navigate the life on the boundary?

FRIDAY The Paradoxical Community

There are many paradoxes in Christian life and we cannot live without them. Teacher and author Parker Palmer writes of the place of paradox in the Christian life as "the promise that if we replace

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¹Parker Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), xxix.

either-or with both-and, our lives will become larger and more filled with light.”¹ In expanding the boundaries of our understanding through paradox, we give ourselves a new way to think in complex and confusing times. We need another way—the Christian life involves certainty and safety, but also faith and risk.

We are boundary-people here in the world that God gave us, deeply in love with this planet, yet not entirely at home in this culture, or any human culture really. We are people who need the Gospel and who learn it by living it; what we add to the mission comes through our uniqueness as individuals and our solidarity as a community.

Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen speaks of the worshipping community as one that prays together and waits together in patient expectation. What are we waiting for? We wait to see the fulfillment of God’s promise of a new heaven and a new earth, a city with God at the center. In the meantime, we live each day by the Word. It is remarkable that as Christians we are in constant need of what God has for us. Once is never enough, whether it be prayer, understanding, acceptance of grace, or the lifeblood of faith. Every day is another commitment, another day of saying *Yes!* to Jesus. We live, yet Christ lives in us. Another paradox.

We are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, yet we are not alone. Each of us stands alone before the throne of God—we’re told to come boldly!—yet we are part of a community that is there to support us. We are to be *in* the world. The paradox? To truly be *for* the world.

While reading this chapter, was your understanding of the world challenged? If yes, in what ways?

What are the communities in the world in which you participate? How can you invest your resources, time, and energies to transforming these communities for the sake of righteousness in the world?