

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 23, 2011 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

What's Going On Here?

During this past month of January I've been struck by the amount of media coverage there has been concerning what's been happening—what's been changing—during the past decade. The years between 2000 and 2011 have been held up to examination and analysis almost endlessly. Lots of folks believe that most of the changes have been for the worse—that our country was a better, safer, more stable, more positive place to live in 2000 than it is in 2011. Others claim to see progress and improvement because today's United States is a much more culturally diverse and stimulating place, even with all our uncertainties and challenges. I guess it all comes down to whether you're a glass-half-full or a glass-half-empty sort of person.

At any rate, although most of the reflections on the past decade that I read or heard were fairly predictable, there was one that really caught my attention. It was an article in the New York Times written by Andy Crouch. His title was "The Ten Most Significant Cultural Trends of the Last Decade." Mr. Crouch's list challenged me to think and it also provided a helpful alternative to a whole lot of the simplistic, often overheated, rhetoric that has become very popular these days. It seems almost to be a new national pastime to bash those that we disagree with. Opposing political parties routinely dismiss and demean one another. Union members flog ownership and management. Athletes trash talk and mock their opponents. Bankers hate regulators. New college graduates despise those "old geezers" who hang on to the very jobs they had expected to fill. Right to Lifers shout at Women's Health advocates. Church protestors of Gay ordination and marriage disrupt even the solemnity of military funerals. The list goes on and on. The problem, of course, is that such escalated polarization creates only enmity, destroys any possibility of communication, and will never lead to unity or reconciliation. It requires a conscious stepping back from that kind of confrontation if we are to find the emotional distance to understand what's going on and WHY these walls, gaps, divisions, and differences so easily stand between ourselves and our neighbor.

So, let me take you back to the newspaper article that I mentioned earlier. Mr. Crouch went into some detail in his insightful analysis but we have neither time nor the need to do that. Instead, just let me briefly sketch for you the basic observations he had to offer.

Here are his candidates for the ten most significant cultural dynamics currently rocking our national boat:

One: **Connection technology.** In June 2000, 97 million mobile phones were in use. Ten years later that number rose to 283 million. The Facebook website in 2000 had ZERO subscribers; in 2010 there were 116 million. But, interestingly, polls show that, in spite of all that connection, many people report feeling more "detached, lonely, and isolated."

Two: **Mobility.** Changing address declined in the U.S. for the first time since 1950, reaching an all-time Post War low in 2010 when less than 10% of households relocated.

Three: **Cities.** Urban living had a remarkable young adult population renaissance. Lots of young families are choosing an apartment over the former dream of a picket fence, a big dog, and a Volvo wagon. The really radical place to raise a family appears rapidly becoming the suburbs.

Four: **The End of White Majority.** In the 2000 to 2010 decade cultural, religious, and political diversity in the United States has grown exponentially. There has never been on the face of this earth a more diverse population—except, perhaps, in the Roman Empire.

Five: **Polarization.** With cultural pluralism accelerating, it has been increasingly difficult for any social, religious, or political leader to convince any large number of Americans that they have anything crucial in common. Racial and ethnic scapegoating is on the rise.

Six: **The Cult of the SELF.** The preoccupation with one's own agenda and presentation widens daily into something approaching national narcissism. Public consumption of very personal information, what was once thought to be a "private" matter, is voracious.

Seven: **Pornography.** In an effort to be a more open and less judgmental society, media is now saturated with profanity and nudity. The internet makes images of sexual promiscuousness and child abuse seem routine and ordinary. Ironically, with all that "openness," relational incompatibility and sexual dysfunction have increased.

Eight: **Informality.** In dress, behavior, language, manners, respect, and institutions the United States appears bent on rejecting any standards or norms. Traditional ideas of 'propriety' in regard to attire and behavior—even in business, government, and church settings—are rapidly disappearing.

Nine: **Asset Liquidity:** The idea of saving, building, gradually acquiring has been increasingly rejected in favor of immediate, instant gratification. People seek unregulated cash capital—the financial freedom to "wheel and deal" without oversight or restriction.

Ten: **Grassroots Assertiveness:** Traditional, reliable shapers and levers of control such as bestseller book lists, the Federal Reserve, the Nobel Prize, Fashion Week Magazine no longer are respected as the last word, the accepted final arbiter of taste and truth. Fractious minorities and even individual voices simply drown out the former central planners and authorities.

What I appreciate about that list is its candor and its comprehensiveness. We could spend a lot of time sharing ideas, both pro and con, under any one of those ten items on the list.

But, whatever, if any, conclusions or agreements might come out of that discussion, I think one thing is certainly apparent—things have definitely changed. You may see such change as prom-

ising or you may see it as depressing. Nonetheless, what I think we have here is a snapshot of what's happening in our everyday lives that cannot help but have an enormous impact of every one of us here today.

Now, the whole point of sharing all this with you today is to consider this single question: **What, if anything does our religious heritage have to say about all this cultural confusion?** Is the Christian Faith doomed to take a seat on the sidelines—silent and irrelevant? Or do we have an important say in how this all shakes out? Let's turn our attention to that question for a moment.

Whatever else the Christian religion is all about, at the very heart of the matter is love—not the ridiculous Hollywood notion of romance, but the determination **as an act of will** that we will care just as much about one another as we do about ourselves. Until we can look at the world through the eyes of God—fully aware of all our absurdities as well as our possibilities—and see it as a wonderful gift to be treasured and protected, we will continue to drift as a society into further separation, isolation, and division. We cannot hope for some magical return to the “good old days” (a time, incidentally, that never was!) nor can we hope that by some other magic all our problems will dissipate like the morning dew as we march triumphantly into a golden sunset of future utopia.

The only way that this society's challenges will be addressed and its strengths can be built upon is that we take an honest look at ourselves, thoroughly understand what's going on, and then make a practical, personal commitment of ourselves to engage fully in lives of loving action. We're not dealing here with some vast, impersonal, irresistible tsunami. The future will be shaped, ultimately, by individual choices. That's a one-to-one everyday process. Each of us, by living out daily those values that we understand to be constructive, positive, and life-giving, can shape the world.

This is God's creation—this society in which we find ourselves. God's not done yet; it's still “in the works.” You and I are called each and every day to become **Co-Creators**, to work within the spheres of our own families, jobs, and relationships to break down those barriers that divide us from one another and to build up the bonds of respect and peace that lead to human harmony and unity.

I don't know how you feel about the direction things seem to be headed in 2011. Maybe you're ready to toss in your hand and just give up. Maybe you're determined to fight for the values you really care about. What I know for sure is that the future will be what we either make it or allow it to become.

So, the message and the challenge that I bring to you this morning is that you take hope and that you gather strength to be a part of fulfilling the age-old promise of Holy Scripture, that “the Kingdoms of this world might become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.” A whole lot of the answer as to whether that will ever happen rests solidly in YOUR OWN hearts and minds. As a citizen of a truly blessed nation with all our resources and potential, you've been dealt a marvelous hand. Now, **Let's see how you choose to play it.**