



Matthew 25 Gathering 2017: Anglican Justice and Mercy Contending for Shalom

Maralee Gutierrez – September 28, 2017

Good evening! If this were a Latino church, I would send you greetings from my mother and my family, as she always tells me, “Wherever you go, tell everyone I say hello.” I think the most exuberant response I ever received was when I was speaking in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I said, “My mother greets you,” and a church full of two hundred people waved their hands as if my mom could see them and they said, “Bonjour, Mama.”

What a rich time of fellowship we’ve had together. It has been good to hear your stories, your struggles and joys, and I’m thankful for the opportunity to be here with you today. Thank you to the steering committee. Thank you to Archbishop Foley and the leadership who have made this possible.

This evening, the question before us is this: how does cultural competency catalyze racial healing? Although I would love to be able to give you the three-step response to this question, unfortunately I can’t. It’s just not that simple. Instead, I will start with a different question, and

then I'll tell you a story. The following three words will be our guideposts for the remainder of our time together: *macroculture*, *microculture*, and *theoculture*.

So here's question: What gift will you bring?

And here's the story:

There was a missionary couple who I'll call Scott and Mary Beth. Scott and Mary Beth, in obedience to God's call in their life, went to serve as missionaries in a country in Asia. They knew life in Asia would be different, yet they had started making friends and getting to know people. They were very happy to receive an invitation to a young couple's baby shower who I'll call Jung and Lulu.

Scott and Mary Beth knew that an invitation to a baby shower can be an invitation to the deepening of a relationship, an acceptance, a welcome to the community. As I recall, Mary Beth spent most of her day looking for a gift to give the child of this new father and mother-to-be. I don't recall the specifics of what that day looked like—the number of stores she went to, her possible frustration or angst at tackling the language barriers and transporting herself around in a new country, a new city—but I do recall Scott later mentioning that Mary Beth wanted to make sure that she found the perfect gift. Finally, after an entire day of shopping, Mary Beth came home with the perfect gift. She wrapped it in beautiful white wrapping paper and tied it with a matching ribbon. Even the gift bag was perfect.

Off Scott and Mary Beth went to the baby shower, Mary Beth feeling accomplished and Scott glad to have provided the moral support and encouragement that gift-buying requires of a spouse. With excitement, they both anticipated the opening of their gift. Then the moment came. The young couple took the gift bag, but when the mom-to-be peered into the bag, she let out a loud shriek and hurriedly, with tears streaming down her face, fled the room.

Scott and Mary Beth were perplexed. You see, to them they had done everything right. The wrapping paper was the color of purity, of innocence, of new beginnings. The little stork Mary Beth set right on the ribbon was a bird that everyone knows brings new life as it carries newborns. What went wrong?

That day, Mary Beth and Scott learned that in this new place they were to call home, this new community, the color white represented death. Thus, receiving a gift wrapped in white when you are expecting new life would obviously be disturbing. And that stork propped just on top of the white ribbon? Well, in this country, the stork was a bird that picks up carcasses.

That unforgettable day, every action and reaction was caught up in one word: *culture*.

As I mentioned earlier, my question for you today is this: what gift will you bring? It's a question I have asked myself often. My hope is that in these brief few minutes we have together I can start a broader and longer dialogue about culture, yours and mine.

Culture. Merriam-Webster tells me it's the development of intellectual and moral faculties. It's the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or a small subgroup. It's a set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize an institution or an organization. I find it interesting that even tissue cells are culture. That's in biology. We know it's the cultivation of bacteria.

Tissue cells in an artificial medium contain nutrients; cells proliferate readily in culture. I think, however, Andy Crouch says it nicely in his book *Culture Making* as he writes about your very own beginning:

You emerged wrinkled and wet, squinting against the light. You wailed in a thin and raspy voice, taking in gulps of unfamiliar air, until someone placed you near a heartbeat you knew even better than your own. . . . A human baby is the strangest and most wonderful creature this world can offer. No other mammal emerges so helpless from the womb, utterly unable to cope with the opportunity and adversity of nature. Yet no other creature holds such limitless possibility. [Everyone agrees that human beings were] primed for culture. Without culture—which begins, for the baby, with recognition of relationship, finding her mother and her father...the acquisition of language [and the such]—we simply do not become anything at all. ¹

Culture is what we are as a people—our customs, our traditions, our social norms. These are all wrapped and enveloped in culture. This is not only determined by our families. We also see it

¹ Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 18.

determined by our environment, including where we live, our neighbors, and our community.

That gets us to our first guidepost: *microculture*.

In hopes that this doesn't get terribly contentious, I'm just going to say a few words here that might tell us something about you and me. You may feel free to react or not to react, and I want to thank Brother Lizarraga for starting us off on this.

Vegetarian or carnivore; beef or tofu; Cardinals or Cowboys; Packers or Steelers; Red Sox, White Sox, or the Angels; messy or clean; fish and chips or burgers and fries; carry-on or check-in; bubble tea or iced tea; drip coffee or pour-over; Spanish or English; East Coast or West Coast—these pairings may be overly simplistic, but I suspect that some of these words may have resonated with you, some may have created slight emotional angst, and some didn't affect you at all.

These each gesture to different microcultures, which are created as a result of the affinities a group of individuals have. These affinities bring people together. They unite people, allowing us to join in agreement around one thing, one group, or many things. Microcultures often form around race, ethnicity, religion, food, and sports, and each of us is a member of some subgroup or another as part of our everyday life.

Being a part of these groups gives us the liberty to be who we want to be, to speak as we want to speak. People in microcultures are validated, and their behaviors and customs are accepted. For instance, Green Bay Packers fans can wear blocks of cheese on their hands without other Packers

fans looking at them askance; you can patiently stand in a line with other believers on a Sunday as you wait to receive the sacraments.

In most cases, microcultures also have a specialized language and an ethos. They have a way of being and particular expectations. Our race, ethnicity, and language establish which part of a microculture we belong to. Microcultures are alive and well in our country and our world.

Now let's move on to the *macroculture*. This is a discussion that I really wish we were having over two hours or, better yet, a day. But I'm reminding myself, as Christine and Cliff and others have said, this is just the beginning of a dialogue. We all know the meaning of *macro*. In contrast to *micro*, this prefix is used to enlarge the word it precedes; it tells us that something is occurring on a large scale, that we're looking at a bigger, broader picture.

Perform a quick online search, and you'll find that macroculture refers to the national or shared culture of a nation or a state. It is a shared core culture, which is synonymous with the term *majority* or *dominant culture*. A macroculture consists of a shared set of values, ideas, and symbols, and as North Americans, we are quite clear that some of our shared macroculture values are human rights, liberty, choice, and freedom. These shared values just are; there is no question about their importance. These shared values may also be shared by some of the microcultures within the larger state, though these shared features may be expressed differently depending on the specific microculture. Indeed, representatives of microcultures can claim distinctiveness, autonomy, and educational rights when compared to the macroculture.

Macrocultures tend to differ from country to country and from one region of the world to another. For the most part, people tend to fall into one of these macrocultures: hot-climate versus cold-climate (e.g., we may see hot-climate cultures as relationship-based and cold climate cultures as task-oriented), direct versus indirect communication, and individualism versus collectivism or group identity.

In her book *Foreign to Familiar*, Sarah Lanier gives an excellent example of individualists in group-oriented cultures. She talks about how, once, while preparing a team of American young people to go to a developing country a young man asked her, “But what do we do if we don’t like the food?”” She responded, “You eat it. It’s about relationship with your host. Eating the food is an acceptance of their hospitality, and this has a higher value than the taste of the food.”²

As first articulated by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall, macrocultures are often either *high* or *low context*. Hall has written a lot of good stuff, and he describes a low-context communication as a style that relies heavily on explicit and direct language. In contrast, high-context cultures are those that communicate in ways that are implicit and rely heavily on context.³

High-context cultures are collectivist. They value interpersonal relationships and they include members that form stable, close relationships. Now, let’s just agree that these categories vary in accordance with which region of the world we are living in, and although none of us are fans of generalizations, for the most part (especially coming from someone who tends to be a little bit more high-context culture in my family), if you were born in the United States, you function in a

² See Lanier, *Foreign to Familiar* (Geneva, IL: McDougal, 2000).

³ See Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1976).

low context. An easy way for me to explain this is by using the definition itself. A low-context person might say, “I don’t have enough context to make a decision or a determination; therefore, I need more instructions or I need an explanation.”

I recently started reading *The Idea of Justice* by Amartya Sen, an economist, philosopher, and Nobel laureate. I find it interesting to engage with this text and read how Sen approaches the idea of justice.⁴ He presents two competing traditions in thinking about justice: *transcendental institutionalism* and *realization-focused comparison*. On one hand, transcendental institutionalism is informed by the social-contract model in its establishment of principles of justice. As I understand it, institutions in this tradition seek to determine what perfect justice is, and then it is their responsibility to promote it. On the other hand, realization-focused comparison aims to give individuals practical tools to decipher between real situations. It focuses on the outcomes realized by actual social institutions and does not attempt to provide a definition for what a just institution should be. Realization-focused comparison seeks to eliminate injustice on a case-by-case basis; you eliminate injustice when you see it.

Sen tends to lean toward a transcendental institutionalism, which promotes justice by calling more upon the individual and the institution, upon the entities I’m calling *justice bearers*. He says that transcendental institutionalism works. To me, however, these ideas sounds quite romantic (though I have yet to finish reading this dense book), and I believe, instead, that justice is achieved when we have the ultimate bearer of justice on our side: *Theos, Deus*, the triune God. In other words, I believe that we who create, build, guide, and lead institutions, organizations,

⁴ See Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

nonprofits, private enterprises, and democracies must create a theoculture—and that’s our third guidepost.

I am not proposing a theology of culture nor a culture for our theology; I am proposing God culture. This is where we continue to miss the mark. Our *Theos* is not only the God of *my* culture, *my* race, *my* ethnicity, and *my* country but of many cultures, races, ethnicities, and countries.

Today, we are seeing a clash of cultures, the micro and the macro, that has resulted in microcosms of a macro problem across our country and our continent. In stepping toward a theoculture, I offer something different.

But in that theoculture, we must recognize our culture and where it has become fragmented, broken, and inaccessible; we must look for the sinfulness of it. We must understand the profound impact that our cultural view and the manifestations of our microculture and macroculture have on our society today. The modern-day United States is about consumption, efficiencies, and production. It is ethnocentric and I-centered. I want us to leave with the clear understanding that, for better or worse, the intersections of these cultures *will* undergird our work of justice.

Once we understand that, we must find a language that honors God and that honors the community we serve alongside, a language that is absent of paternalism and individualism, a language that dignifies the community and the nature and the gifting of the person we’re serving alongside. A theoculture also requires *proximity*. As Bryan Stevenson so well articulates in his

book *Just Mercy*, being proximate will look different for all of us, but focusing on proximity always places us in a space and gives us time to build relationships.⁵ Lastly, I submit to you that a theoculture requires *cultural humility*.

I first came across this term in my work to combat human trafficking; it was coined by health-care professionals who were trying to describe a way to include multiculturalism into their work. Cultural humility is a construct for understanding and developing a process-oriented approach to competency. An article from the American Psychological Association lists three factors that guide one toward cultural humility. The first aspect—and I think we’ve already covered it here today—is a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique. That is to say, knowing there’s room for growth and that we won’t always get things right, but desiring to always show up. Next, is a call to repentance and a desire to fix power imbalances where none ought to exist. We have to understand that when we serve along communities that may have less power than we do, we may unintentionally start to create dependencies, though the thing I most alarming is not necessarily the dependencies but the ways in which I come to minimize the God-given potential in a person and where the Lord wants to elevate that person to. Lastly, cultural humility includes aspiring to develop partnerships with people and groups who advocate for others. I believe that in this theoculture, cultural humility will be the catalyst for racial healing. Together, we should form an identity in the Christ we espouse. Together, we should strive for a theoculture.

I want you to know and hear—I *need* you to know and hear—that the cultural lens we’ve used to interpret the gospel has, in many cases, been so effective and true, but beloved brethren, like

⁵ See Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York, NY: Spiegel and Grau, 2014).

Mary Beth and Scott, we've sometimes spent days trying to find the perfect gift, feeling accomplished and confident that we've succeeded, and then we have walked into settings with our perfectly wrapped gift, and we've hurt people.

I need you to hear that the North American church is divided in its air of superiority, self-aggrandizement, and power. I need you to see that supremacy is saturating our churches, and our pride and our riches are dividing and enslaving us even further. So now I ask, *are we the church of North America or are we just North America?*

I fear we have allowed our culture to inform our theology rather than allowing *Theos* to inform our culture. Opulence, power, accolades, and achievements have become our deities. Our gospel is consumption. Know that I would not only speak these truths to you, but I would say it to a number of churches across North America. Thus, as we have an honest dialogue around culture and healing, the deeper discussion needs to be around our culture and our identity.

Who are we? Who do we want to be as individuals, as a community of believers, as the Anglican Church of North America? And what gift will we bring? Let us together seek to bring the ultimate gift to the communities we serve among and alongside, a message embedded in love, grace, and mercy. Let this be our ethos. Let this be our theoculture. Let it speak to the gift of salvation given to us by the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Muchas gracias*. Thank you for your time.