**Context and Dimension** Rev. Dr. Julia A. Carlson
Trinity Sunday The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17 Saint Paul, Minnesota
May 26, 2024

On Monday morning I was re-reading an article by Terri Elton, one of my professors at Luther. The article is titled, “Cultivating a Consequential Faith in a Consumer Driven World.” She began by naming the difficulties of living in a high tech society as a parent. She used the phrase, “digital natives” to describe her children for having been born into the computer/cell phone era and she self-identified as a digital immigrant. Because she's the parent of teens she's very concerned by the waning of face-to-face interactions and about cyber bullying as are her children. Elton wrote, “In American capitalism, consumption is the orienting principle. And this core principle extends beyond goods and services into a lifestyle.”  “The sophisticated nature of consumerism … has developed the ability to turn relationships, beliefs, and even human experience into commodities.”

As Elton says, “It is very common for people to spend more time digitally recording an event than actually experiencing it in real time. It’s the image, photoshopped and edited, that they want or aspire to.” And this week, my head was full of images from the Met Ball.

According to Vogue magazine’s history of the Met Gala, back in 1931, the citizens of New York City opened the Whitney Museum of Art and a year later, the Museum of the City of New York. Theatre producer Irene Lewisohn and stage designer Aline Bernstein, together asked, if American art and local history had their own museums, where was “the cathedral for fashion?”

So in 1937 the Costume Institute created the Museum of Costume Art. Vogue magazine immediately stepped in to add lectures on the history of fashion. In 1946, the Museum of Costume Art merged with the Metropolitan Museum in and in that year the Met Gala was born as a fundraiser to sustain the costume collection.

In the late 1940s, Public Relations “guru” Eleanor Lambert, who also started New York Fashion Week, launched the Council of Fashion Designers of America, and the International Best Dressed List referred to the Gala as “The Party of the Year” solidifying its place on the social calendar.  Fast forward to the 1970s, Diana Vreeland is the editor of Vogue magazine; while Lambert focused on New York socialites, Vreeland shifted the event by inviting celebrities like Andy Warhol, Bianca Jagger, Diana Ross, Elton John, Liza Minelli, Cher, Jackie Onassis, Princess Diana, and Henry Kissinger.

Back in Vreeland's day, there was a $100 dessert ticket for students. Now, they report that there are 650 to 700 tickets available to the general public and in 2024 the tickets were $75,000 per person or $350,000 per table.

Vreeland also introduced the idea of themes. She believed that they would “spark dialogue … around creativity, politics and celebrity culture.” And I will highlight one of those themes. In 2018 the theme for Met Ball was “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination.” Vogue, now guided by Anna Wintour, is quick to state that the theme had Vatican approval and some pieces from the Vatican museum were included in the special art exhibit that opens with the Gala. The 2018 show is still the most successful art exhibit that they’ve had at The Met with 1,659,647 visitors, even beating out the treasures of King Tut.

According to Vogue, the garments that year were inspired by “Catholic iconography,” religious symbolism, and “the influence of Catholic fashion throughout history.”

Rihanna wore a miter and dressed in white like the Pope; Katy Perry came fully winged as an angel; Priyanka Chopra came as one of several Virgin Marys along with Cara Delevingne and Kate Bosworth. Gigi Haddad came as a stained glass window-pane and Madonna was modeling her namesake, the Queen of Heaven. And then I go back to Terri Elton’s words, “Culture has been turned into a collection of objects and capitalism has turned the tables on religion. The church must understand this aspect of capitalism if it wants to reclaim human experience from a different economy.”

So, on this Trinity Sunday I must first confess that our reading from Isaiah–like the Met Ball–is mostly for show. It’s in the lectionary for Trinity Sunday because of the second to the last line: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us’?” It’s the “us.” This is one of the few Old Testament passages in which God is in the plural.

As I’ve said before, the iconography of God has long been depicted as two men and a bird, however, at a recent conference sponsored by the University of Birmingham in the UK, the question was asked: What gender is God in the Hebrew Bible? Hebrew scholar Wil Gafney answered: “Well, at the start of Genesis God is *Elohim*: masculine, then immediately *Weruah*: feminine.” Gafney continued, by stating that the Hebrew scriptures are “a kaleidoscope of genders and beyond genders. The rabbis,” she said “recognized at least seven genders.” She is harkening back to the Midrash where the rabbis recognized God the rock, God the mother hen or mother bear, and other metaphors as separate genders. Others have said already but God is the original They.

When talking about the process of translation, Gafney said, “I do not need to work hard for these possibilities to shine out of scripture. They are already there, radiating possibilities. The text has its own power. I just don't resist it.” She’s following the text and not the old patterns of translation.

And as we start to lean into our New Testament reading, there is one more thing that Gafney shared, “the only [reproductive] organ attributed to God in the Hebrew Bible is a womb.” I have tended to find Nicodemus’ question about returning to the womb cringe worthy but perhaps our souls remain connected to the womb of God throughout our lives. Perhaps that is the place of rest in brief moments of centering prayer. In all of this we are trying to find words and images for a Divine Mystery. Jesus uses words from nature and describes the life of the Trinity as winds and crosswinds, things seen and unseen.

I again quote Elton words, “The sophisticated nature of consumerism … has developed the ability to turn relationships, beliefs, and even human experience into commodities.”  Jesus is much photoshopped and edited these days in a spectrum of holding an AK-47 to holding a rainbow sheep. It’s not quite so easy with the invisible God, or the Spirit’s winds and crosswinds. Trinity is not a written part of the Bible but an understanding found by living disciples of the text.

A while back, I referenced a woman who stopped by the church for conversation. I called her my Raggedy Woman. I didn't clarify then but want to clarify now that, I’m not referring to what she was wearing. It wasn't her clothing but her spirit that was raggedy. We live in a country where some can pay $75,000 to attend a party and others do not have enough food to eat or a safe place to live. Capitalism says a person must earn those things. It's not just that Jesus Christ offers us the Way, we also have a constant calling to serve God’s kin-dom and we hear that call through the Holy Spirit. It’s what John was writing about all those centuries ago.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.” This is an incredible horizon.

Loving and being loved is what gives us identity. Personhood is not a physical state, but a web of living relationships, it is not determined by our work, but by the fact that one is in relationship. We began with technology and consumerism and have traveled to the importance of relationship. Individual wholeness–the Bible calls this perfection–is only possible if we find a great measure of acceptance for our true self. Jesus demonstrates this over and over again in every encounter whether with women, or with men, or with children. This very much comes through relationship with the Triune God; at the core, Jesus lives in relationship with God and Spirit in a constant energy called *perechorisis*. The world very much needs a healthy and whole church! We all need communities of caring and acceptance, friends who go with us below the surface of appearances to accompany us through the messy, hurtful, and complicated times of life.

The Met Ball is a great example of diversity, acceptance, and individual expression. They wear what they want to preserve. But it’s also a visual for the sometimes minute separation between idols and idolatry. Guests and red-carpet participants are undoubtedly at the party of the year. Some are also there to play a role or be objects in the service of consumerism. (“Who are you wearing?”) the fund-raising has morphed into spectacle.

The original word used in the French fashion houses for a human model was mannequin which now means dummy or stand-in. The concern of course, is with all the technology and focus on objects/images is a loss of humanity. Even as I admit to consuming the photos from the Met Ball each year with appreciation for the artistry, design and creativity, I am wide-eyed with wonder at what some people almost wear in public.

This sermon took on a life of its own. I’m a bit startled by the path and some of the words. But that describes my faith journey as well. When we say, “Here I am, send me,” we do not know where it will take us. A consequential faith means living the consequences, the greatest and most serious being the promise of a salvific love which has no bounds! It’s the work of a lifetime to accept that love. If our faith is to be consequential, we recognize our God who is a sending God, is our context for living. This is not the only place of our ministries. It is everywhere we go. We learn openness, invitation, and hospitality from God’s dimension and are invited to pass it on.

The size and scale of God’s love is difficult to grasp–impossible even. But I don’t understand streaming and I do it anyway. So just start every day with Spirit: loved and loving. Amen.