Back in 2009, I led a series of discussions of Torah and the Workplace with a group of businessmen I knew. It gave me a chance to think through some ideas about how worship shapes practices even in the marketplace and how Baalism is still alive and strong in our culture.

One week I opened with Barry McGuire’s song, “Eve of Destruction.” Everyone in the group agreed that it sounded as relevant to 2009 as to 1965 when it was recorded. Here is the third stanza, which songs like it was written in the last few weeks:

Yeah, my blood's so mad, feels like coagulatin',
I'm sittin' here, just contemplatin',
I can't twist the truth, it knows no regulation,
Handful of Senators don't pass legislation,
And marches alone can't bring integration,
When human respect is disintegratin',
This whole crazy world is just too frustratin',
And you tell me over and over and over again my friend,
Ah, you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction.¹

Last week David Brooks published a column where he suggests that Americans are facing culture shifting crisis at the same time.² These include the pandemic, the racial conflict, a political crisis, the emergence of a new and dangerous religion, and a looming economic crisis. I might suggest we have at least two new religions that operate on the fringes of culture on the right and the left but influence the center of culture. Both have some kind of roots in Christianity, but both have left orthodoxy and obsess over conspiracy theories and divisive words and actions.

While all many of these forces are often at work in the culture, they seem heightened and polarizing. It is causing some people to feel depressed, confused, and angry. It is tempting to try and ignore the problems or to respond in ways that move us beyond the cross and the center of our faith in Christ Jesus. If anything, we need wisdom so that we might truly be peacemakers. As peacemakers, we do not seek peace at all costs, but rather serve of the people of shalom we were created to be. We seek the well-being of our community, our city even as we seek the well-being of the nation and world. This kind of shalom operates within the generosity of God as we trust in the faithfulness of our Lord in the midst of our culture.

Anne M. Carpenter reflects on our current culture challenge through the philosophy of Bernard Lonergan. She writes, “We find ourselves in an evil situation. This situation is ours, indeed quite without us, because our history is ours whatever we might wish. The situation is ours, because we are now the ones who act. We are called to responsibility. Even still, a reply to evil with progress does not treat the evil, which remains. The surd remains a surd. For Lonergan, human power cannot, in fact, resolve the problem of evil.

But God can. According to Lonergan, what God can do that we cannot is bring goodness and justice out of an evil situation. This is what the Word of God does on the cross, and it is what the Christian does in Christ. To put it another way: in God’s response to the fragmentation of humanity, there is the radical solidarity of the Body of Christ.”

Our lesson from Romans today emphasizes that we have been delivered from the domain of sin. We are no longer slaves. Like the Hebrew slaves, we have been delivered from the power of Pharaoh. He has been cast into the sea. We have been incorporated into the family of God by the grace and goodness of God. As children of God, we live in His kingdom according to His pattern. Not because our hope of redemption is rooted in our faithfulness. We have already been redeemed in Christ. The future hope of justification is settled in our union with Christ. We live according to His righteous ways because we are free to. He has freed us to become the glorious sons and daughters of God we were destined to become.

We still at times face the old habits and patterns of Egypt: the resentments, the bitterness, the focus on self-perseveration at all costs. Instead of trying to list every possible sinful habit or action, we might think of habits and patterns that turn us from love to self. We turn from God and from others, failing to trust in God’s unfathomable love for us. Paul exhorts us that since we have been freed from the power of sin, we live as free people.

We live as lovers of God and one another. We grow into this way of living and loving. In Romans 6:13, Paul writes, “Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.”

In light of today’s readings, one way we move toward a life where our minds and bodies participate in the way of righteousness is by living with open hands. Open hands involves both letting go and receiving. We are letting go of pride and haughtiness. We are letting go of how we thought our lives would turn out. We are letting go relationships and things (even good things) that we think are essential for our happiness. We are letting go of old patterns of anger, self-justification, having the last word, and so on.

The posture of letting go is a posture of trust. Our Father is faithful. He is giving us good things. In fact, he often gives us the very things we let go of. We receive the loves in our lives, our friendships, our families as gifts from the Father. We receive our calling, our hopes, our dreams as gifts from the Father. Sometimes we discover he has dreams for us that we never even

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3 Carpenter, Anne M., “Lonergan on a World on Fire,” Church Life Journal, University of Notre Dame (June 25, 2020) <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/lonergan-on-a-world-on-fire/?fbclid=IwAR2ErKnRYYv4sLABjAWLiy6Fx1DxLGPyKTSmpERSYpnC8scUO3Xlas59bs>
realized were possible. We let go of our failures even as we receive His grace to walk in the way of life.

Sometimes I think of letting go and receiving as music. We learn music of the kingdom. We learn to receive and to give. We learn to hear music even in the darkest, most stressful places of life. I put a poem and a quote in the bulletin. Both speak of polyphony: medieval songs that used two or more simultaneous lines of independent of melody. This would be chaos if not for something that unites the musical composition. It is often a simple plainchant that undergirds and connects. This plainchant is often referred to as the cantus firmus.

For Christians, this cantus firmus is always the foundation of our faith in Jesus Christ. In Christ, we can still hear the hopeful strains of heaven in the middle of the darkest storm. Bonhoeffer wrote and thought about cantus firmus while in a Nazi prison. Even from that place of chaos, he could see cause for joy. I included a quote in today’s bulletin:

“When bombers come, they are nothing but fear itself; when there’s something good to eat, nothing but greed itself; when they fail to get what they want, they become desperate; if something succeeds, that’s all they see. They are missing out on the fullness of life and on the wholeness of their own existence. Everything, whether objective or subjective, disintegrates into fragments. Christianity, on the other hand, puts us into many different dimensions of life at the same time; in a way we accommodate God and the whole world within us. We weep with those who weep at the same time as we rejoice with those who rejoice. We fear—(I’ve just been interrupted again by the siren, so I’m sitting outdoors enjoying the sun)—for our lives, but at the same time we must think thoughts that are much more important to us than our lives. During an air raid, for example, as soon as we are turned in a direction other than worrying about our own safety, for example, by the task of spreading calm around us, the situation becomes completely different. Life isn’t pushed back into a single dimension, but is kept multidimensional, polyphonic.”

We can enter into the joy and sorrow of life simultaneously. We can create rhythms of shalom by our words and acts. In and through Christ Jesus, these simple rhythms of love can serve a world in need of healing. I also included the poem “Motet” this morning by Micheal O’Siadhail. He sees the chaos and problems that ripple through Europe, but he also sees a glimmer of grace that will ultimately reveal the love of God in Christ. He writes,

O my white-burden Europe, across so many maps greed zigzags. One voice: and the nightmares of a dominant chord: defences, self-mirroring, echoings, myriad overtones of shame. Never again one voice. Out of malaise, out of need our vision cries.

Turmoil of change, our slow renaissance. All things share one breath. We listen:

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clash and resolve, webs and layers of voices. 
And which voice dominates or is it chaos? 
My doubting earthling, tiny among the planets 
does a lover of one voice hear more or less?

Infinities of time and space. Melody fragments; 
a music of compassion, noise of enchantment. 
Among the inner parts something open, 
something wild, a long rumour of wisdom 
keeps winding into each tune: cantus firmus, 
fierce vigil of contingency, love’s congruence. ⁵

Let us keep our hearts and minds open for the wild glory of love’s congruence even as we move toward a world in need of grace-filled healing.

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⁵ From “Motet,” in Micheal O’Siadhail, Hail! Madam Jazz: New and Selected Poems (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1992), 123.