

WWJE (What would Jesus exclude?)

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Friday morning, I said to Ardelle, "I can't find that Neil Postman book I just read. I'm going down to Calvary to see if it's in my office." And she said, "Didn't you just mail that book to James?"

She used her most guileless and helpful voice, but it still sounded like an accusation. Or worse: pity. But I had indeed been scouring the house for a book I'd recently wrapped in a cut up paper bag and sent to a friend. Here's why. James lives in Little Rock, but our friend Kyle, who lives in Connecticut, suggested the three of us form a low tech book club. Kyle would mail a book he'd read to me, and I would mail it to James after I'd read it. Does this process make any more sense if I tell you that Kyle used to cut his lawn with a scythe, and that James makes quilts out of materials reclaimed from evictions?

Anyway, the irony of my forgetfulness is twofold. James and I text each other maybe every other month. I think he still uses a flip phone. Texting isn't one of his favorite hobbies. But he had actually texted me about coming to Memphis maybe five minutes before I went looking for the book. And I *still* didn't remember that I'd just mailed it to him.

The second irony is that the book was titled *Technopoly*. And it opens with a story from Plato's *Phaedrus*. The god Theuth was the inventor of many things, including numbers, calculation, geometry, astronomy, and writing. And he brought his inventions to the Egyptian King Thalmus, offering them for use in his kingdom. So, King Thalmus questioned the god about the nature of each invention, and then expressed his approval or disapproval. When he came to writing, Theuth said, "Here is an accomplishment, my lord the King, which will improve both the wisdom and the memory of the Egyptians." To which Thalmus replied, "Theuth, my paragon of inventors, the discoverer of an art is not the best judge of the good or harm which will accrue to those who practise it... Those who acquire [writing] will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of their own internal resources. What you have discovered is a receipt for recollection, not for memory. And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality: they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant. And because they are filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom they will be a burden to society."

Yeah. The book I'd forgotten also begins with a story about how books make us forgetful.

Forgetfulness was not the main thesis of Neil Postman's book, however. His concern is that we, as a culture, have pretty much given up on King Thalmus's project of discerning what the impact of a technology or of the information it provides will be on our lives before we let it into them.

The subtitle of his book is "The Surrender of Culture to Technology," and I wouldn't have thought an 18-year-old book about technology could possibly still be relevant. It was written when lots of us didn't have emails yet and mobile phones were tiny suitcases only a few of us carried to our cars and plugged into the cigarette lighter. Remember those?

That's a long time ago, technologically speaking. Until we realize that 350 years before Jesus lived, Plato was warning us that the things we let into our lives change us. And it is not just the right, but the *responsibility* of culture to ask what is good and beautiful and true, and sometimes to refuse admission into our common life tools, technologies, and information that might do too much damage.

I'm telling you all this, first, because *Technopoly* was the last book I'd finished when I started pondering today's reading from Matthew. And, of course, I can't remember anything from the next to last book I read, so you bring what you've got, right?

But Neil Postman named that we live in a time that is radically inclusive when it comes to information. It's infinitely harder in 2020 to comprehend a way of discerning what information or technologies should be allowed

into or excluded from our common life, other than censorship. But is it truly an entirely settled question whether America would be a better place or we would be better people if we'd never let Twitter in?

I actually think all this is very relevant to how we read Jesus's teaching about how the community he was forming should settle disputes. Because we bring our culture with us when we read the Bible, and quite often we unwittingly conform the Bible to the culture rather than the other way around.

Which is why when I read Matthew 18, as a 21st century Episcopalian, I'm ok with the first part, although I'd really rather sulk and nurse my resentments rather than actually talk to the member of the church who has wronged me. And the part about bringing in two or three witnesses sounds...well...awkward. And the image of someone standing up during announcements and saying they'd been swindled by dear Mrs. Smithers when they bought her used Corolla while she's sitting right there in the pew she's sat in for decades, well, I'm breaking out in a cold sweat at just the hypothetical possibility.

But it's when Jesus says, "If all that doesn't work, then they're no longer one of us. Treat him as a tax collector or a Gentile" that all my exclusivity alarm bells start ringing. Come on, Jesus. We love everybody. We've got the "All are welcome" signs to prove it. Aren't you a...you know...Christian?

But this is where my well intentioned embrace of inclusivity at all costs may run us into the ditch. Jesus wasn't saying to keep certain kinds of people out. He was saying we have to live together in very particular ways if we're to be a community of refuge and redemption in a violent and unjust world. He was building his church by building a culture. And every culture needs a King Thalmus. A way of naming what is good and beautiful and true, and sometimes refusing entrance to things that would destroy it.

Because if we grant the ways of an unjust and violent world easy entrance into the culture of the church, well, then the powerful remain free to exert their power over the weak. The vulnerable keep on living at the mercy of the strong. Wealth and privilege keep on setting the agenda and defining who matters most and what passes for goodness and truth, even in Jesus's church. And the survival of the strong is just the sad old status quo of all the kingdoms in the world we've ever known. Not the kingdom of God. Not the kingdom of grace.

What the way of Jesus requires of his community is not unqualified inclusion of everything, but a radical, unconditional love for every human being, especially the least and the last. And then he calls us to a way of forgiveness that extends all the way out to our enemies. These are not ways of being that humans simply fall into when given the freedom to do so. They require us to consciously build a different kind of culture together as his church, and to be uncompromising about the demands that a truthful way of love makes on our lives.

In the end, there is a redeeming irony hidden in plain view in this difficult teaching. One that turns it beautifully in on itself and opens it up, even to us. Read the rest of Jesus's story, friends. Tax collectors and Gentiles show up elsewhere. Remember? These were categories of people beyond a well accepted pale in Jesus's day. Which is why they were also the very people the defining culture railed against him for treating like whole human beings. Eating with them. Speaking to them. Listening to them. Even including them in his innermost circle.

That didn't mean a tax collector's extortionist ways got to define the culture of the community of Jesus. It just meant they didn't define the tax collector entirely either. There was mercy available for even these, and a seat at the table, too. Because the community that Jesus was forming was doing the difficult work of excluding the ways of an unjust and violent world, and building a church on his redeeming way of love.

I don't know that King Thalmus was right about writing, leaky as my memory can be. But the things we let into our lives do change us. That doesn't mean we need to seal ourselves off from the world. Quite the opposite. The world may need communities faithful to the way of Jesus now more than ever. Not exclusive communities that scold the rest of the world about what's wrong with it. But communities of culture with clear vision of what they hold to be good and beautiful and true. And that then show the world what it looks like to build a common life around such things.

I'll leave you with a vision of the demanding, liberating way to which we are called, in the words of an old saint whom it's popular for high minded modern people like me to exclude and dismiss as a narrow minded crank: St. Paul.

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

What world might come into being if Jesus’s church refused admission into our common life anything counter to all of this?