

“Theater / The Silver Screen: Mirror or Road Sign?”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for FUMC Grand Junction, Sunday, July 18, 2021

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Scripture Text: 1 John 4:1-4 [NRSV]

TO THE SCRIPTURES

I want to start out this morning by looking closely at the Scripture text for today. Because there’s an important teaching we’ll miss if we’re not aware of the religious issues going on behind the scenes in the Biblical world.

1. What’s going on with 1 John 4:2-3 and the emphasis on *Jesus-in-the-flesh*?
→ Well, this has to do with an early Christian heresy called “Docetism”.
“Docetism” goes back to the Greek word **δοκεῖν** (*dokein*), “to seem”. This teaching, which has its roots in Greek philosophy and Gnosticism, held – among other things – that matter was evil. Therefore, Jesus couldn’t be a “real” person composed of real matter; rather he was some kind of wispy spirit-being who only appeared, or seemed, to be a real person.
Of course, that meant his sufferings weren’t real, either, just apparent, as if he were play-acting. I’m quite sure Jesus would have something to say about just how real His crucifixion felt to Him.

2. So, “test the spirits” was an exhortation to the early Christian community that meant something like, “Pay attention to what people are saying about essential matters”, like what the real nature of Jesus is. “Don’t just be swept up into the latest trends.”
In that day, as now, it mattered greatly that Jesus was understood to be both fully divine *and fully human*, or else the nature of the atonement could be called into question. (*Make reference to the line in “The Nicene Creed”: “...became truly human.”*)
3. We’re going to come back to this point of “testing the spirits”, but I wanted to introduce this theme upfront.

OPENING

Shifting gears to the theme for today: The on-again off-again relationship between the church and theater grew out of a contest between how each saw the others’ role in society.

This speaks to the role of theater (and film) and religion in any culture, really, but this may be more applicable to Western culture – including Byzantine culture – since the church developed and interacted with theater in that time and setting and only centuries later branched out to the Far East and other places in the world.

The wrestling match that the church had with classical Greek theater involved the question of “entertainment” and “education”.

As long as theater kept its focus on entertainment, it didn’t threaten the church’s self-understood role as

“Teacher of Truth” at the time – any kind of truth: historical, scientific, geographical, etc. IN ADDITION to theological.

So, when in the Middle Ages, theater began to expand beyond classical comedy and tragedy, the church clamped down, effectively censoring theater and pushing its more serious messages “into the closet”, if you will, where they remained until after the 18th century Enlightenment. At that point, the church’s broad-sweeping authority over society began to crumble, and theater came screaming back out of the closet!

Getting back to this whole issue of the role of theater in society, I think the debate is pretty similar today. Only instead of putting it in terms of “entertainment” and “education”, I’m framing the issue this way: “Do theater and film *reflect* culture or *create* it?”

That is, “Is theater (or film) a *mirror* or a *road sign*?”



That is, does theater (or film) *reflect* cultural trends that are already realities in society? Or do they *drive* such trends?

The theology comes into the discussion today when we ask, “What is to be our response as persons of

Christian faith to what we perceive to be the answer to that question?”

In order to get there, however, we need to go back to 1 John 4:1 –

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

SERMON THOUGHTS

- It is incumbent upon us to “test the spirit” of the (current) age. The author of 1 John could not have envisioned the scope of things his (or her) admonition to test the spirits could have encompassed. As I said earlier, in his (or her) day, the issue had to do with the nature of Jesus:
 - Truly God *and* truly man?
 - Or simply a “spirit-being” that only *appeared* to be human, so he could interact with people on the earth?
- But if we allow ourselves what someone has called “a sanctified imagination” and broaden the application of the author, we can easily get to the subject matter today: Is everything we see and hear on the stage or on the silver screen to be received without a discerning eye and a critical ear?

We don’t call unembodied societal forces “spirits” as they did in the days of the Biblical authors. Nor do we tend to think of those who *reflect* or *drive* societal change as “prophets” – false or otherwise.

Nonetheless, such forces and persons do affect the spiritual health of society. And by that, I mean –

- ✓ our values and commitments,
- ✓ our ability to detect and stand by what is right and true,
- ✓ our willingness to call a lie a lie,
- ✓ our ability to trust others or to detect danger in their motivations
- ✓ our ability to defend against unhealthy societal trends and promote healthy ones,
- ✓ our willingness to stand for the principles and behaviors that make for good people, healthy relationships, and strong communities. In other words, godliness or “Kingdom of Heaven” kinds of realities.

We would be wise in our own time to heed the urgings of the Biblical author who exhorts us to test the forces and persons in our own time that would lead toward or away from godliness or “Kingdom of Heaven” kinds of realities.

- Critical to this “testing” is what we use for our *evaluative grid*. Everyone has such a grid, even if it’s simply “What works best for me.”

That kind of crass individualism usually boils down to “might makes right”. It works great for the individual, more so for the strong individual, but it doesn’t generally work well for society. And it’s not a grid that reflects a commitment to Christian principles and the Kingdom of God, but it certainly is a prominent evaluative grid, unfortunately, even among Christians.

Question is, “What is your evaluative grid? What is mine?”

This is where a robust Biblical theology and a rich relationship with God-in-Christ, based in vibrant prayer, come onto the scene. Note that I did not say a rigid, fundamentalist Biblical theology, but a robust Biblical theology. The difference has to do with whether or not we see the Bible as a pointer to a rich relationship with God-in-Christ or as a substitute for it.

A robust Biblical theology is a pointer to God-in-Christ, a “textual mentor”, if you will. A rigid, fundamentalist Biblical theology substitutes the Bible for a rich relationship with God-in-Christ.

The Biblical witness itself and its authors urge the former, not the latter.

CONCLUSION

So, what’s the point of all this? The point is that theater and film play a vital role in our society, as theater did in classical times.

My feeling is that theater and film function as both entertainment *and* education, mirror *and* road sign.

What keeps us from being either:

(1) over-reactive and, therefore, impoverished when it comes to cultural literacy and enjoying the creative arts, OR

(2) asleep at the wheel, ignoring clear warning signs that things are not as they should be in our society,

is the attention we pay to the grid we use to “test the spirits” in our own time. Let us pray...