The Gospel of Inconvenience in
_Agora_ and _Ecclesia_

Torey Lightcap*

When the gospel of familiar comfort meets the gospel of inconvenience, what happens to us? How do we respond?

Say an urbanized clergyperson and his or her urbanized family fall head-over-heels in love with a congregation in a place that’s outside their usual range. They pack up and go. Sooner or later, reality settles in, and they begin to long for something known. Small moments of familiarity, especially in the beginning, often prove to be helpful as they navigate their new world. Where is the Target? *(Is there a Target?)* Do they carry the brands we like? Do they have a Sonic Drive-in, or is that a regional thing? Will we have to trade in our car for something that can be locally serviced?

On the professional side, seasoned clergy know they must meet the people of an area, and the cultural pool in which they swim, with generosity and within the parameters of the given context: folks may not care about the _Review of Books_ article they mention if they aren’t at least aware of the existence of the _Farm Report_. So clergy have a reasonable expectation placed upon them to be stretched by learning about a place through its people, and what is more, to learn about a people by being among them, in their place, in their way.

While that stretching process is occurring, getting to know a place—even in the superficiality of the consumer experience—helps overcome other, less surmountable forms of estrangement. That is, by momentarily immersing ourselves in what we do know and buying the products with which we are familiar, we receive encouragement to face the unfamiliar. But there’s a bargain, a negotiation in the balance: concessions given and concessions received. A larger price, perhaps, for every momentary convenience.

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Having served now in three different parishes in three communities ranging in population from around ten thousand to about one hundred thousand in Texas, Colorado, and Iowa, I know what I look for when I want convenience and comfort: Discount Tires for customer service; SportClips for a consistent haircut; Panera Bread for coffee on one side of town, Starbucks for coffee on the other side of town; Old Navy for cheap clothing that isn’t completely out of style; and Target for almost everything else.

Such creature comforts might form the substance of a confession rather than a list of advantages. They bear the patina of indictment: that moving from one consumer familiarity to another is really not much of a risk, and that where there is not much at risk, there might not be much of a gospel being lived out. How does one even begin to live into the spirit of laying down one’s life for one’s friends and loving the stranger when the dominant ethic is personal expedience and individual comfort?

We know that everything produced and consumed comes at a human and environmental cost—that my and my family’s comfort and convenience can be inconveniently and uncomfortably borne on others’ backs. In 2002, having spent a week in Ciudad Juárez, I stood on the privileged side of a fenced hill—the El Paso, Texas side—and looked out over the maquilas, the factories where goods are manufactured for export and consumption north of the border. Then I got in the van, and someone who had programmed the day played this song on a CD:

I wear garments touched by hands from all over the world
35% cotton, 65% polyester, the journey begins in Central America
In the cotton fields of El Salvador
In a province soaked in blood,
Pesticide-sprayed workers toil in a broiling sun
Pulling cotton for two dollars a day.

Then we move on up to another rung—Cargill
A top-forty trading conglomerate, takes the cotton through the Panama Canal
Up the Eastern seaboard, coming to the US of A for the first time
In South Carolina
At the Burlington mills
Joins a shipment of polyester filament courtesy of the New Jersey petro-chemical mills of Dupont. . . \(^1\)

It goes on like that. The filament (and the oil that made it) and the cotton become the fabric for Sears, in whose hands it eventually is made into a shirt. The songwriter traces a long route of mass environmental and human exploitation across continents and oceans—a route that’s traversed in order to produce a blouse that eventually sells at what is purported to be a 20 percent discount. My brief convenience is bought at a terrible price. The song then ends with its sucker punch—“Are my hands clean?”—and the responsibility is transferred.

The writer’s implication is that people who are just trying to get by and who do not have access to extraordinary means—inconvenient means in a society built upon convenience—still cannot have clean hands, and that no one (at least not in developed nations) escapes responsibility. Even with our apparent ability to exercise choice, we can only vote with our dollars, can only point in a general direction that would be better for us, can only choose between perceptions of what might be judged “the least evil,” can only hope that our dollar-voting will be caught up in something bigger than itself.

For those with eyes to see, this hope can be a burdensome thing to bear. Why dig up such questions unless we’re prepared to answer them? Is raising questions about inconvenience just another form of inconvenience for its own sake? Aren’t we talking about issues we’re not able to tackle? The dissonance is nauseating.

It isn’t just that the narrative of consumerism runs counter to occasional sparks of conscience. It’s that much of the Christian narrative runs wildly counter to the entire concept of convenience in any time or place. If I take Jesus at his word, I’m meant to walk extra miles with people I don’t know, and I’m meant to give them my cloak in the process. I’m supposed to put potentially deleterious strangers in my car and drive them to the hospital when they’ve fallen among thieves, and then pay their motel bills. I have to listen deeply to a Spirit I can’t see to discern opportunities for helping to heal ancient wounds. I’m told to pray for the same folks who want to destroy me and poison

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the things I think I stand for, and I’m not allowed to return any form of violence with any form of violence. I’m told to redefine my understanding of my family in light of who does the will of God. I’m expected to help set prisoners free, feed the poor, and show mercy to widows and orphans (and if I do it for people who are like me, what credit is that?). I’m told to expect hardships, calamities, and sleepless nights for the sake of something called good news. The only comfort I’m told I can reasonably expect is from the gathered community of fellow Christ-followers where Jesus himself promises to be present.

To follow Jesus is to be led out of what is necessarily convenient to me, to a place of compassion, where, as the root of the word implies, I am meant “to suffer with.”

But what has that to do with how and where I spend my money, or even where I send my résumé? How can I expect to be able to get along if I’m in a place where there’s no choice but to vote with my dollars for the poisoning of the planet and the exploitation of people? How do I live ethically and tread lightly on the earth when my choices are limited and are dictated by largely faceless mechanisms? What forms of resistance are really available to us in a daily way?

A friend of mine, Roger Joslin, is an Episcopal priest in Bentonville, Arkansas, corporate headquarters of Walmart. According to Roger, those who live in Bentonville do not have a practical choice about where to shop; those who need food or other household goods have to go to Walmart. When Roger checks out at Walmart, he looks the cashier in the eye, smiles, and asks how he or she is doing, carefully listening to any answer and kindly responding. He genuinely asks whether Walmart is treating the employee according to how he or she deserves to be treated, and if the person is able to live from paycheck to paycheck.

Roger believes that at some point corporate security printed his photo and pinned it up in the employee break room, probably with a notation like *Do Not Speak to This Man / No Hable con este Hombre.* At some discernible moment, the conversational well went dry; deliberately and politely, people stopped talking to him, even the especially friendly worker in the parking lot who brings in the carts. Or people, remembering his face and hearing his question in English, would suddenly switch to Spanish, and Roger would, too; again, they would return to silence.²

² Roger has assured me that while I’ve taken a few liberties in sketching out his tale, I do seem to have gotten the main points. For more on triangulation, see “Sell-
Roger’s is the story of someone who regularly steps out of his comfort zone for the sake of inquiring after people’s general well-being. His is the story of someone who inquires at the specific level to learn about specific people, as well as to have inferences from which to create a bigger picture. A byproduct is that he also runs up against something monolithic against which he would never fare well if it came to a more overt power struggle. He has seen and weighed the risks, and decided to exercise the church’s moral agency through his own ministry and belief that all people deserve fair treatment. Roger sees this form of inquiry as a necessary if unsettling aspect of his work; however, for the employee, there could be an even harder conundrum at work: the worker who responds to genuine human concern may also risk exposure and job loss in a brutal economy with high levels of unemployment.

Even and especially in its home environment (Walmart in Bentonville, McDonald’s in Oak Brook, Hallmark in Kansas City), the corporation resists an abundance of local programming or indeed just about any flexibility. “Corporate” sets the tone, where methods of inspection and employee oversight are put in the lab and tried out, where standards are at their strictest. Jesus wouldn’t have lasted a week in Rome, and he didn’t go over too well with the party faithful in Jerusalem for that matter, but in insignificant Galilee he got the word out, feeding and healing and teaching.

The corporation, then, creates expected convenience that flattens specific experience because it eschews it. (After all, consistency over time and place in a mobile society is now a measurement of the quality of consumer experience and sets consumer expectations.) In the abstract we are talking about a system or network of conveniences built in an interdependent fashion (shopping malls being only the most obvious instance) that, taken together, further obliterate the local, the specific, the geographically or regionally distinct in the name of universal familiarity and convenience. This, then, is a network that not only frames and dictates the consumer experience, but resists the interferences of moral agents who bump up against whatever is usual and expected. Taken from this perspective, Roger’s experience is utterly predictable.

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From a certain point of view, it’s hard not to see the church acting in roughly the same way. We resist outliers, appeal to policy, and look to hierarchy and hierarchical structures (and sometimes attorneys) to provide answers. We have a monetary basis and a mechanism for marketing ourselves. We too create desire, offer a product, and reward the concept of repeat business.

Yet our parts are at war with themselves. At times we preach the gospel of inconvenience meant to open people up to the “something more” that lies beyond the superficial realities of mere membership—a comprehensive worldview supported by the long narrative of Scripture, tradition, and reason so often at odds with the dominant perspective.

Trapped in our own system, we in the church find that the underlying values we are supposed to propagate are flattened in the telling. The church of supposed inconvenience looks too much like the world of convenience that surrounds it, and the lines are blurred. Nauseating dissonance, indeed.

For example, in the first congregation I served out of seminary, there were three services a Sunday. In a piece written to explain what those services were about, each one was described not in terms of its liturgical integrity or how one might expect to meet God in it, but in the strictest terms of consumer ease. The first service of the day, at 7:45 a.m., was described as being “for early risers,” a well-turned phrase that has always struck me as the product of too much exposure to contemporary marketing strategies. (It would be fascinating if the advertising firm depicted on AMCTV’s “Mad Men” were ever offered a chance to land a Christian denomination as a client.) The first time I read that copy, I imagined parishioners at a buffet, choosing whatever parts of the liturgy they wanted and leaving the rest in the serving line, then paying accordingly, eating, and leaving. This may seem smallish and nitpicky; yet it is microcosmic. It reifies the intrusion of the culture of convenience into a gospel life purposely built for inconvenience.

How, then, might we begin to live?

First, let’s be unafraid to engage in the conversations that are taking place in the agora: to speak in, about, and to people’s natural concerns arising from living in the here-and-now, in the mall, on Facebook and Twitter and other social media, and by whatever other means exist at the pastoral and ecclesial levels. This is a conversation desperately needed for a million reasons, not the least of which is our call to articulate how God might be moving among us and acting right now.
Second, as agents of the gospel that has been entrusted to us and that includes a call to compassion, let’s be bolder about making genuine, caring inquiry of the ones most acutely caught in the trap of consumer convenience: the ones we see (or don’t see) each day who bring goods and services that create a culture of amenity and pleasure by their labor. I have grafted some of Roger’s ethic onto my own work and have found people willing to be honest about their situations, even if at first it is only in a slight or shy way here in the midwestern United States. The key is to bear in mind that we genuinely seek to learn more, not to burnish our own credentials. Let’s ask questions that do not endanger others’ livelihoods, and let’s respond to what we hear with sincerity and depth. When the occasion calls for it, let’s find constructive ways to seek justice.

Third, let’s thoroughly evaluate our lives (a “fearless and searching moral inventory,” the Twelve Step community calls it) to find those places where convenience may be blocking an opportunity to incarnate the radical, healing hospitality of Christ.

Fourth, let’s find ways to discover the real truth of the places in which we live, that the light of local circumstance, local reality, may be allowed to outshine the dominating and flattening narrative of the corporation.

Fifth, let’s work harder to better understand the various narratives of convenience and expedience pitched by the companies in the places where we live, that we might see them for whatever they really are, even when they are multivalent or ambiguous. We can then try to articulate them and help others to do the same, and at the same time suggest coping/changing strategies.

Finally, but not unimportantly, let’s move from agora to ecclesia, learning how to call to account those structures within the given framework of the church (including those in which we find ourselves) where expedience and convenience too regularly trump something that may resemble an inconvenient but actual and living gospel.