

Kerrisdale Presbyterian Church

“Christian Counterculture: Influence”

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16; 1 Peter 2:4-12; Isaiah 51:1-8 (use Psalm 27 refrain I or II for refrain)

Hymns: Joyful, joyful we are you 410; This little light of mine (insert); Lord, the light of your love is shining 376; Lord of light whose name and splendor 769

January 18, 2015

Rev. Steve Filyk

Time Magazine has an annual list

Of the artists, leaders, pioneers, titans and icons

Who, in its view, are changing the world.

Their 2014 list includes the likes of:

The singer and entrepreneur Beyoncé,

Jeff Bezos (CEO of Amazon)

The former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton,

actor Benedict Cumberbatch (Sherlock Holmes fame),

And Jack Ma, chairman of Alibaba.

You might not have heard of Jack Ma.

But he is described by the *TIME*'s Beijing correspondent

As the ‘king’ of Chinese e-commerce.

“In 1999, the former English teacher

and his co-founders launched Alibaba

in an apartment in Hangzhou.

Today, that startup has changed the way the Chinese shop.

Alibaba is China’s e-commerce behemoth...

Its main shopping sites, Taobao and Tmall,

handle more merchandise than Amazon...

Now Ma, Alibaba’s executive chairman,

is seeking to change China in a different way.

Last year he devoted himself

to cleaning up the nation’s infamous pollution

as chairman of the Nature Conservancy’s China program.”ⁱ

We would probably agree with TIME that Ma has influence.

Great influence.

More influence in his pinky finger

Than we have in our entire bodies, collectively.

But before we rush to this judgement,

We need to consider those words of Jesus

That were read by Glen this morning.

Today we are continuing on our journey

Through Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

Last week we heard the introduction to Jesus’ sermon.

Jesus declared God’s favor

Upon attitudes and behavior and character

That the world either dismisses or despises:

Being humble,

Pursuing justice,

Creating peace.

Last week we heard Jesus saying that God blesses

This sort of activity.

But this week instead of continuing to talk

about what God does

Jesus’ teaches about his disciples vocation, their calling.

Jesus says they are to be world influencers.

This comes as a bit of a surprise.

I mean those previous blessings

Described Jesus’ followers as humble and meek.

As one commentator questions:

What possible influence
could the people described in the beatitudes
exert in this hard, tough world?ⁱⁱ

And yet Jesus declares that these very people

Will have a subtle but substantial influence
Not just on their neighbourhoods
but on the entire world.

The impression left by his followers

Will be something akin to the difference
Noticed by the picnickers who try mom's potato salad
Both with and without a dash of salt.

Or the difference noticed by two campers

Who run to the outhouse before daybreak:
One with and one without a flashlight.

Jesus says his disciples will be world-influencers: salt & light.

But he adds a couple qualifications
To this declaration.

He notes that if we're going to add flavor

Then we're going to have to maintain our saltiness

Now on one level this doesn't make sense.

When was the last time (dorm life excluded)
When you tipped over the salt-shaker
And found that the salt wasn't salty?

With the benefit of refineries,

Our salt is consistently salty.

But back in Jesus' day

"what was then popularly called 'salt'
was in fact a white powder...
which, while containing sodium chloride,
also contained much else..."

Of this dust the sodium chloride

was probably the most soluble component
and so the most easily washed out.

The residue of white powder still looked like salt,

and was doubtless still called salt,
but it neither tasted nor acted like salt.
It was just road dust."ⁱⁱⁱ

In a similar way we can lose that distinctive element

That makes us so beneficial to others.

That distinctive salty character

previously described and blessed in the Beatitudes
(living humbly, pursuing justice, making peace)

Will be severely diminished

When we downplay our Christian commitment
To fit in with those around us.

That brackish behavior and those pungent attitudes

That Jesus declares to have God's favor

Will be washed out

When we neglect our ongoing formation in Christian community
When we discount our own need for instruction
And encouragement.

If we are going to have any real influence.

We will need to be upfront with our Christian identity
And be intentional about nurturing it.

As the Welsh preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones noted that:

"when the Church is... different from the world,
she invariably attracts it."^{iv}

That attractive difference of course is not

Found in ill-manners or eccentric behavior
But in Gospel-shaped lives.

Jesus says that if we're going to live up to our calling
To be world-influencers
We will need to retain our saltiness.

But that's not enough.
He also reminds us that we also need to
Let our light shine.

Jesus notes that the purpose of light is well,
to illumine.
It makes no sense to light a candle
And then cover it with a basket.

But if it makes no sense to cover a single candle,
Similarly it makes no sense to light additional candles
In a well-lit room.
Those additional candles
can light up other dark spaces.

All to say that while retaining our saltiness
Demands spending time with other Christians
Shining our light demands getting out
Among our non-Christian neighbors.

It means leaving the holy huddle,
And seeking to build relationships
Among those on the outside.

Mingling among those who have different dreams
and hold different values.
Befriending those whose sometime difficult behaviors
Give witness to the troubled lives they are living.

We know from the surrounding context of our lesson
That "Jesus was teaching somewhere near the Sea of Galilee.

Less than a hundred miles to the south
the River Jordan flows into another sea,
the Salt Sea, so salty that it is dead.

And on its western side there lived at that time a Dead Sea Community...
a monastic community of Essenes
who had withdrawn from the wicked world.

They called themselves 'the sons of light,'
but they took no steps to let their light shine...

Is it possible that Jesus was thinking of them?
[as he shared this teaching?
Is it possible that he was motioning
In their direction?]."^v

Jesus calls his disciples to be world-influencers
But if we're going to do join him in his mission
We need to take our witness
outside the weekly gatherings
That light up this sanctuary.

We will need to: "be willing to go where the darkness exists,
to engage and walk through it,
so that, in time, the light can overcome it."^{vi}

This past week our Clerk of Session, Patty Farris,
Handed me the fall/winter edition
Of Vancouver School of Theology's newsletter.

She wanted me to see a cameo,
An alumni profile,
Of a former student
That many of you know:
Deborah Stanbury Rapport.

During her time at VST Deborah
Was able to visit and serve in a number of suburban congregations.
But congregational ministry is not where she has landed.

She is now the Community Chaplain and Director
Of a new ministry tasked with working with sex workers
In Toronto's downtown core.

One of this ministry's programs
Provides an opportunity for these sex workers
(and I'm quoting from the article)
to "create both short and long term goals...
[along with] an accountability structure to obtain
those goals.

While not specifically designed to steer
Participants away from the street,
It does create the opportunity
For reflection and recognition
That street work and its accompanying risks...

Are hold the individual back from obtaining life goals."^{vii}

Not your conventional ministry.
Maybe a bit salty for your taste.
I'm sure Deb has concerns
about where this work might take her
when she walks her Thursday evening beats.

I'm sure her supporters had and continue to have
lots of questions about liability and insurance.

And while I have no way of quantifying the impact
Of this ministry, I have no doubt
That Deb is making a difference.

I mean what value can you ascribe
To someone who has been used and abused
And by most of the world forsaken,
Being given just a glimmer of a hope
That there might be another way.

What's that word they use
In those Mastercard commercials?
Priceless!

What you might find interesting
Is that this new ministry
Is a ministry of the Presbytery of Toronto,
And by extension a ministry of our church,
The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Deb is the front-line worker
But many people share in this project.
In a certain sense we are also partnering with her.

And yet I wonder...
How God is asking us
Both individually and collectively
To be bring savor to the lives of those in our city?

I wonder in what dark corners of Kerrisdale,
Would Jesus have us shine our lights?

May we join with Jesus in God's mission,
And may we be effective in our witness.

Amen.

ⁱ Michael Schuman "Jack Ma" *Time 10 Pioneers* April 23, 2014
<http://time.com/70866/jack-ma-2014-time-100/>

ⁱⁱ John R. W. Stott *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* 57

ⁱⁱⁱ John R. W. Stott *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* 60

^{iv} As quoted in John R. W. Stott *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* 60

^v John R. W. Stott *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* 65

^{vi} Charles James Cook "Matthew 5:13-20; Pastoral Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration*.

^{vii} Shannon Lythgoe "Walking the Streets with Deb Rapport" *Perspectives* fall/winter 2014 pp 12-13