

“Being Counter-Cultural”

As the culture of our society continues to drift away from the Christian foundation it once had, we find ourselves as the church needing to recognize anew that foundation: that we have a culture that is different and needs to carry on. In a society that more and more says “each of us gets to choose our values, our beliefs, our norms of behavior” we find ourselves as the church needing to recognize that we believe differently: that there is a core set of right values, beliefs and norms of behavior that are to govern our lives. Tell the truth. Love your enemies. Honour and help the widow, the sick and the poor. Be peacemakers. Forgive those who hurt you. Indeed, seek forgiveness from those you have hurt. Be radically open to “the other” because every person bears the image of God. Build up treasures in heaven, not here on earth. Provide hospitality for strangers. Keep your promises. Put yourself second...or last. Seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. The standard of life is not success but faithfulness. The theologian Stanley Hauerwas suggests that the more and more we grow into these qualities for living life...the more and more that we continue on the journey of discipleship following after Jesus, the less and less we will feel at ease in the world.

It can seem daunting to try to imagine a church that can foster and sustain these kinds of lived qualities in the hearts and lives of its congregants. But what is more daunting is that we are called to encourage others to become followers of Jesus with us, to come and join us to learn how to live this way.

And that notion, brothers and sisters in Christ, seems so odd to a growing number of people in our society. And as we grow in living in these ways, people may well consider us odd. But that’s OK, because we will be God’s odd.

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Text: Mark 2:13-17, Mark 2: 23 – 28

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As we embark on the 51st year of our congregation’s life, we are entering into a period of reflection and discernment regarding our congregation’s future direction. As part of our introductory work in this regard, over the next few weeks we will be exploring the nature and mission we are called to have as the church. The question we will be wrestling with is this: “what is to be the nature and mission of the church, and how can Varsity Church live it out given our uniqueness and given the time and place we find ourselves in?”

I think the hardest church quality for us to appreciate is that the church is to be a counter-cultural people. For 1,700 years this quality seemed almost inconsequential because churches existed within a wider Christian society, but the growing secularization of society is helping us re-discover this core character trait of the church.

To many of the people observing Jesus in his ministry it could seem like he was very counter-cultural. The two stories we read from Mark today are good examples of it. In the one story the religious authorities observed Jesus sharing a meal with tax collectors (political outsiders, shunned because they were complicit with Roman rule) and sinners (religious outsiders, shunned because of the dictates of the Jewish law). When questioned why he would share table with *such people* Jesus answered, “but this is exactly the people I’ve come here to help.” For these religious leaders their sense of religious practice led to alienating others. For Jesus, rooted in the same religion, his sense of religious practice led to empathy, comradeship and care.

In another food story Jesus and his followers were passing through a grain field on the Sabbath, picking the seeds off the stocks and eating them. They were hungry. Again we hear religious authorities criticizing Jesus. They caught Jesus and his followers “working” on the Sabbath: harvesting grain. “You can’t do that” they said to Jesus. In response Jesus essentially said, “Come on, these people are hungry.” He reminded them of a story of how King David had broken religious laws in taking a bread only priests were to eat, and shared it with his hungry companions. For the religious leaders the Law was paramount and faithfulness was expressed by following the Law. For Jesus the needs of people were

paramount, meeting those needs was central to his religious expression and the Law provided guidance for meeting those needs. Indeed, Jesus said that even the Sabbath—a labour free day to focus on God and family—that even the purpose of the Sabbath was to meet the needs of people.

Jesus was always running head long into the cultural norms of his day. He talked with women he wasn't related to and even travelled with them. Scandalous! He talked to a Roman Centurion. That was scandalous because the Centurion was a Gentile (thus unclean and not to be associated with at all) and an agent of the Roman oppression. In fact he affirmed and lauded the Centurion's trust in the God of the Hebrew people. He said things about religion and society that got him run out of town a few times. He had compassion for lepers and touched them. He called religious leaders hypocrites.

Clearly Jesus did not read Dale Carnegie's book about winning friends and influencing people. What he said and did so often challenged the status quo of his day. But Jesus wasn't doing it to simply be disruptive, to be counter-cultural. Jesus' ministry wasn't to be "against" the practices of his day. Rather he was "for" something. He was for the reign of God in a new way. He was for a reconciliation between God and people, so much so he was willing to die to make it happen. He was for people having a new heart for God that would lead them to live life differently for the sake of others. What Jesus was for simultaneously made him look familiar and peculiar, and at times even outrageous. And he was clear with people that if they became his followers the people of their society would look oddly upon them as well. "My way is a narrow way" he told them—it is not easy. He said, following me may disrupt the relationship you have with your family. You will not be accepted every place you go. You may even be reviled because you follow me.

As we hear about these tensions we can find ourselves saying, "We are fortunate to live in Canada where we have religious freedom. It is easy to be a Christian here." But if we find ourselves saying this I think we are overlooking a couple of things. The first is that there is a real and (likely) growing tension between the attitudes of Christians and that of secular society. For example, in recent years there has been the debate in Quebec about the wearing of religious symbols. That debate has found its sharpest focus around Muslim women wearing the niqab. But among some people the anti-religious sentiment is a broader issue. Some people insist that Christians who wear a jewelry cross are imposing their religious beliefs on others. So Christians shouldn't wear crosses.

Just this week in the Calgary Herald there was an article about changes in the application for the Canada Jobs Grant that provides funds to charitable organizations for hiring summer students. In order to be eligible for funding now an organization must certify that it affirms the reproductive rights of women (that the organization supports abortion). The CEO of the Mustard Seed (a Christian organization) is highlighted in the article. He makes the point that the Mustard Seed does not have a position on abortion. Their focus is the charitable Christian care of the homeless, the poor and the addicted. For the Mustard Seed to affirm this government-imposed value could well disrupt their relationship with many donor congregations. So the Seed will no longer apply for grants, which last year enabled 17 students to experience serving the poor.

Following in the narrow way of Jesus can also present personal challenges. Over the years I have seen congregants in my office who were struggling with what their employer wanted them to do that ran contrary to their Christian ethics. A Few years ago a congregant who worked in retail was being asked, all of a sudden, to work Sunday morning when she would normally be at church. What do you do when your sense of Christian integrity bumps up hard against the norms of our society, norms that are drifting more and more away from the moorings they used to have in our Christian society? What kind of church do we need so congregants feel equipped and empowered to live their faith in a society that increasingly challenges the kind of life Jesus calls us to live?

Again, we can find ourselves saying ""We are fortunate to live in Canada where we have religious freedom. It is easy to be a Christian here." In fact the culture of our society is making it harder and harder to sustain a Christian faith, and we see the evidence for this in church decline. The #2 reason the church is in decline is because for a growing number of people in the pews church involvement is becoming less and less meaningful for them. Faith is becoming less and less meaningful for them. We live in a society that is substantially indifferent to notion of God, that believes Christianity will, by definition, restrict one's sense of freedom...freedom that is desired and cherished above all. A society that sees all religions as comparable...and no longer necessary for a "modern" humanity. Society is increasingly saying, "we've outgrown religion." These attitudes are pervasive. It is like the air we breathe—so taken for granted that we hardly notice its existence. Yet its on-going corrosive effect is turning a growing number of Christians in to non-Christians. What kind of church do we need to help people develop a faith that is resilient?