

Countercultural Preaching

I am going to say out loud come advertising slogans. You will say out loud the name of the company to whom the slogan belongs. This is a participatory exercise. Are you ready?

“I’m Lovin it” by MacDonalds,
“Um, um, good” Campbell’s Soup,
“Just Do it” Nike
“Where’s the Beef” Wendy’s
“It Gives You Wings” by Red Bull,
“Eat Fresh” by subway,
“So Easy a Caveman Can Do It” GEICO insurance,
“What’s in Your Wallet”, Capitol One,
“Are You in Good Hands” Allstate,
“Every Kiss Begins with...” Kay Jewelers,
“Easy, Breezy, Beautiful...” Covergirl,
“the incredible, edible...” egg, .

Oh yes, they got you! They got all of us! We are proof that advertising works. The marketing teams of major companies spend billions of dollars. Thousands of hours a year creating slogans and ads in multiple media outlets (print media like magazines, television, radio, internet) to get us to buy their products. Tag lines such as these that we all know so well, are easy to remember and stay in our minds when we go out into the world to spend money. Though advertising can be fun to watch and entertaining in so many ways, successful advertising and marketing creates a sense of need where none exist. What happens when consumers buy into the images the companies project to such an extent, that they spend money they do not have to buy the products, accruing debt. How does this affect their families? How does this impact their self esteem or self worth? Each one of the companies we mentioned has employees. Are the employees paid a living wage? Or are the employees part of the working poor, while companies reap healthy profits? Each one of the companies either produces their own products and/or contracts with other companies to produce what they need to do business. Are the companies good environmental stewards? If not, who are the people most likely to be effected by poor environmental stewardship? Who are the people that are not targeted by advertisers and big business? How does being ignored by mainstream media effect these populations?

These and other questions are the concern of countercultural preaching. I want to define countercultural preaching, elaborate on some points I made in the sermon, and highlight one or two items that did not address in the sermon. I classify the type of preaching I did yesterday as countercultural. Countercultural preaching is my term for a form of prophetic preaching that critiques unique aspects of American capitalism such as consumerism and materialism, and irresponsible environmental practices. In addition, countercultural preaching highlights the devastating effects of consumer culture on personhood and relationships when preoccupation with consumption wrecks havoc on finances and erodes trust. The goal of countercultural preaching, like all prophetic preaching, is to highlight practices in our culture that violate Godly mandates of justice and concern for all poor, oppressed and marginalized people, and responsible stewardship of the environment while allowing the hearers to see their own roles in the perpetuation of some of these behaviors.

Yesterday I told a story of the financial indebtedness of the Bradley family I read about on Oprah Winfrey's website. The Bradley's are victims of a consumer society at least two different ways. They derive their self worth from material things. The family is obsessed with image, looking prosperous and projecting an image of success at all costs. The cars, home and designer clothes are all status symbols. They are living far above their means and are able to do that because of credit cards. They have \$170,000 in credit card debt. In addition, the children do not learn how to manage finances responsibly. This was their situation before they begin Oprah Winfrey's Debt Diet program. The goal of Debt Diet is for financial consultants to work with families to help them not only reduce their debt but to change their spending and savings habits. The Bradleys have made good progress. But the problem of credit card debt is pervasive.

I highlight this story because there are many people in our culture who derive their identity from material goods. For example, there is a website named "Bag, Borrow, or Steal." This website offers opportunities for members or guests to rent designer handbags and jewelry by the week, month, or even longer. This works well for people with limited budgets but who want to carry designer handbags for the sake of their images. Designers on these websites include Prada, Gucci, Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent. One Louis Vuitton bags sells for \$1200 retail. The bag can be rented on Bag, Borrow, or Steal for \$66 per week or \$195 per month. A major advantage of renting the bags is that a person is not locked into one bag. And can carry a variety without any large cash outlay. Testimonials on this website include: "You guys make me look so good. Everywhere I go, from places like the gym, the mall, and even work, I hear tons of compliments," "Bag Borrow or Steal is a great website. It gives girls a chance to feel good and carry a great looking purse."

Countercultural preaching critiques the tendency of people to derive identity from material possession versus from their relationship with God using texts such as Luke 12 when Jesus told the parable about the rich fool. In the parable Jesus told the crowd that "one's life does not consist in the abundance material possessions." This teaching is counter to the consumer culture in which we live. However, it is a message that people need to hear. For the Bradley's and the people who shop on Bag, Borrow or Steal, they do not actually acquire clothes for the sake of having clothes. They are looking for validation. Countercultural preaching seeks to validate all people for who they are, not what they own. Validation of all people can be made by selecting illustrations using people that represent the many levels of diversity at work in the world. This must be modeled not only in the sermon, but in the culture of the community of faith. All people, rich, poor and in between must be treated equally.

Countercultural preaching also critiques advertising and mainstream media for what it does not say or for populations not included in mainstream media. People who are visually, hearing, physically and mentally impaired are completely missing in all forms of public media and images including television and film. While we can advocate for more public, positive images of people with disabilities we must also be advocates for people with disabilities in our faith communities. We too must see those whom we have also rendered invisible in our faith communities. Countercultural preaching intentionally affirms the worth of all people by advising faith communities to consciously welcome people with disabilities into their communities while being willing to accommodate their needs and welcoming and embracing their perspectives into the community. For churches with limited financial resources, they can seek government financial assistance for some resources.

I opened the sermon and closed it yesterday with a quote from Wall Street. Gekko's "Greed is Good" speech is legendary among many in the financial/Wall Street culture. I liked and used the quote because it is in direct opposition to the teachings of Jesus. Gordon Gekko was a corporate financier whose only goal was to make money at any cost. Some say Gekko was an extreme example of corporate greed. That his concern for profit at any cost is an unrealistic depiction of Wall Street financiers. I am not so sure he is extreme. Corporations want to make money for their shareholders. If they need to lay people off, fire them, or send jobs offshore, they will do it just to make the types of profit margins they feel they need. Countercultural preaching critiques business practices that put people last at the expense of ever burgeoning profit margins.

Countercultural preaching critiques practices of corporations that are fueled by greed and adversely affect the poor, such as violation of emissions standards. For example, Susan Bird, a resident of Beaver County Pennsylvania said she blames air pollution from the nearby Bruce Mansfield Power Plant in Shippingport for her two younger sons' neurological disorders. She is part of a class action lawsuit being filed against FirstEnergy Generation Corp., which operates the 2,410-megawatt plant, the state's largest electrical generator. The lawsuit alleges chronic violations of the federal Clean Air Act and the state Air Pollution Control Act.

Countercultural preaching also critiques corporate greed that leads to trends such as mountain topping irresponsibility. Mountain-topping is a practice used by coal mining companies to blow the tops off of mountains and then extract coal. Traditional mining approached from underground or through strip mining. Mountain-topping saves the mining companies a lot of labor cost. Only a fraction of the labor is needed for mountain-topping versus traditional mining. Adverse effects include ecological destruction and devastation. When rocks and other debris are blown up in a mountain, the rocks and debris fall and often clog streams and ponds which in turn kill fish and other wildlife in the area. Explosions also damage nearby homes

Countercultural preaching does not contend that profit making is a sin or crime. However, when human rights are violated, when workers are physically exploited and tremendously underpaid, when people work eight to ten hours a day and are still unable to meet their basic human needs because of inadequate wages, when people with physical disabilities are denied employment opportunities because of their physical disabilities or because employers fail to accommodate their needs, this becomes a concern for countercultural preaching.

Tavis Smiley sponsors a segment entitled "Below the Line: The Changing Face of Poverty." On this show, Smiley highlights the lives of people who are working hard in this country, but whose income still falls below the poverty line. One woman works as a certified nursing assistant in Augusta, Georgia. She is a single mother with two children. Makes less than \$10,000 per year while working two jobs. Brings home \$800 per month with an addition \$250 per month in child support. Lives in a public housing facility. Georgia's minimum wage is \$5.15 an hour. Federal minimum wage is \$5.85 an hour. Because she works in health care her employers can pay her the state minimum wage. Rather than a minimum wage people need a living wage. Smiley also highlighted some people on his show that lived in homeless shelter because of mental illness. State and local governments often do not provide the support services that the mentally ill need. Countercultural preaching is concerned about the working poor and marginalized.

Countercultural preaching would advocate public support for an increase in the minimum wage and services such as childcare so working parents do not have to use limited funds for childcare.

The prophets of the Hebrew bible regularly warned people against oppression of the poor, widows and the orphans. However, countercultural preaching also encourages preachers to critique texts in which oppression has sometimes been overlooked. For example, in 1 Kings we

can read about the use of forced labor by Solomon to build not only his own home, but also the house of God. He enlisted tens of thousands of laborers to perform such tasks as cutting various types of stones. Was it God's will for people to be forced to work without pay to build the house of God?

In the sermon, I talked about the experience of shopping in the San Francisco Shopping Center in downtown San Francisco. When you walk through the doors you are greeted with marble floors and gold fixtures that accent the upscale products and restaurants. My purpose in including that was to contrast the opulence of the centre with the homelessness of people outside. I believe this illustration highlights the neglect of the poor in several different ways.

1. First of all you have the shoppers who are preoccupied with shopping. We as consumers are willing to spend money on items we do not need. But are often not willing to give to those who do not have.
2. Secondly, in 2006 developers spent \$460 million dollars to expand the shopping facilities which now include the nation's second largest Bloomindales and five floors dedicated to Nordstrom's. However, the city of San Francisco is not willing to spend the money necessary to address the needs of the homeless which include mental health services, physical health care, food, clothing, shelter, financial counseling, and budget management skills.

We have talked about what counter cultural preaching critiques, but what are concrete recommendations?

Financially Stable and Able

- *Live simply*
- *Live below our means*
- *Donate money to support the poor and oppressed*
- *Donate time when able*

Affirm the worth of all people

All people are beautiful and worthy of respect

Especially embrace disabled, rendered invisible in society

Welcome not just their bodies, but perspectives, opinions, gifts, and talents

Include images of disabled on church website and print materials

Develop countercultural interpretations of the biblical texts

Many texts in the bible critique oppression of any kind

Social Action, force legislators to do their jobs, write them

Donate to reputable charities to help poor, oppressed, marginalized people

Think creatively about ways to meet needs