

“Influencer” GPPC 2-9-20
Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20

Some of you, especially those of you who are younger than I, may be familiar with a term that, I suppose, has become well-known in the business world. Influencer. Any of you familiar with that term?

An influencer uses his or her “influence” to promote various products or services. Use the word in a sentence. “Thad and Tiffany left their jobs working at Apple so that they could become influencers. They are active on Instagram, have a website, and a blog and everything, and they’re pulling down six figures a year. It’s really cool, dude.”

Of course, according to the always reliable Urban Dictionary, an influencer is “A makeup, hairstyle, or fashion blogger who is instafamous only on Instagram or buys ‘followers’ and ‘likes’ and gets free products from companies who fall in their trap of fake fame.”

Good to know.

Oddly enough, Jesus describes the church as an “influencer,” though his definition differs from the Urban Dictionary and from our friends, Thad and Tiffany. In particular, Jesus speaks of the influence of

Jeff Paschal

his followers who are reviled and persecuted because of their Christian faithfulness. As we heard Jesus say in the final verses of The Beatitudes last Sunday (Matthew 5:11-12), “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account...” It is to these people especially that Jesus speaks this morning.

He begins with the influencer image of salt. “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It’s no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.”

So what do we know about salt? We need a certain amount of it in our diets in order to live. Salt is also a preservative for food, especially in Jesus’ day. But especially we tend to think of salt as a substance that adds flavor to a meal. Salt is not the main ingredient of a meal, but without it the meal may be bland.

Jesus also focuses on an absurd image—salt losing its taste. We know that chemically salt does not actually stop being salt. But salt can

Jeff Paschal

become so diluted that it is useless. When that happens, you might as well toss it out.

Now think of the followers of Jesus, the church, as salt. What are we meant to do? We are not the main course. We are seasoning. We exist not for ourselves but to provide flavor, an extra taste of God's love in the world with a distinctive way of thinking, speaking, and living that comes from following Jesus and being empowered by the Holy Spirit. Nobody does it perfectly. (We're all sinners, you know.) Yet we are still salt, an influence on the world, or we might as well be set out on the curb for pick-up.

As one seminary professor puts it, "The danger for disciples is that they may lose that capacity [for eliciting goodness] by forgetting that they are to disorder the status quo by valuing those who are dispossessed, caring for those who suffer loss, seeking to do justice, showing mercy, having integrity, being peacemakers, and courageously standing for what they believe. Disciples who do not engage in such practices that humanize life on earth will be like salt that has lost its taste." (Marcia Y. Riggs in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*, 332.)

Jeff Paschal

But when we remember and act upon who we truly are, amazing things can happen.

Some of you may know Professor Max Carter, who, among other things prior to his retirement, was Director of the Friends Center and Quaker Studies at Guilford College. If you're from this area, you probably know that Quakers are also known as Friends. Dr. Carter says, "In December 1938, three Friends led by Rufus Jones embarked on an American Friends Service Committee—sponsored trip to Germany to present a plan, worked out in conjunction with the American Jewish community, to help Jews emigrate. The trip was widely disparaged on both sides of the Atlantic. Hermann Goering was reported to have said, 'In olden days at this time of the year, three wise men came from the East bearing gifts. Now, they come from the West!' Editorial comments in American newspapers spoke of the folly of the mission. But meeting with the Gestapo in Berlin, the 'three wise men' convinced the Nazis of their honesty and sincerity (in part by sitting in silent worship while [their] plans were taken to superior officers!). Their plan was approved and in the ensuing months until the war broke out in the fall of 1939,

Jeff Paschal

Quaker efforts resulted in thousands making their way to safety.” (M.

Gertrude Beal and Max L. Carter, *Tales from the New Garden Friends Graveyard*, 33-34.)

A seemingly laughable mission led by “three wise men,” saved the lives of thousands of Jews who would have faced the Nazis and the Holocaust. Just a pinch of salt that had not lost its saltiness.

Then Jesus switches to the influencer image of light. “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

And what do we know about light? We could talk about this for a long time, right? But one thing we know is that in a dark area, even a tiny light, even a pinprick of light can be seen for miles. Like many of you, Beth and I have been thrilled to visit the beautiful lighthouses along the North Carolina coast. But beyond their beauty, these beacons have saved countless lives as they’ve notified ship captains of where the land

Jeff Paschal

lies. Just so the light of Christian witness has saved many lives not merely for heaven one day but for daily lives of holy purpose and power.

Jesus also focuses on an absurd image with light. He says nobody would light a lamp and then cover it with a basket. That's just silly. You don't do that. You put the lamp on the lampstand and it lights the whole house.

But like the image of salt that has lost its saltiness, light can also be squandered. As a New Testament scholar said, "...if persecution causes you to hide or to put your witness [your light] under a bushel, you become an absurd denial of your purpose. Or, by your good works the persecutors may be silenced and caused to glorify God." (Fred B. Craddock in *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year A, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*, 157.)

Jesus knows those who seek to follow him will be reviled and face persecution because of their faithfulness. And the temptation will be for followers to lose their saltiness and to hide their light. Some followers will fall away. Salt and light are minority, not majority images.

So again and again throughout the gospels, Jesus encourages Christians to remember who they are, what they are to say and do, and

Jeff Paschal

what it will cost them. “Take up your cross and follow me,” he says. “Servants are not greater than their master,” he declares. “Count the cost,” he warns.

But if we choose the hard way of following Jesus, instead of simply pretending to follow, he also promises we will not be alone in our following.

Say, for example, that we were to speak an unpopular word, but a *true* word, or we were to cast an unpopular, but a *true* solitary vote, there is an old saying that applies, “One with God constitutes a majority.”

(Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation Series, 43.)

“One with God constitutes a majority.”

If we truly seek to live out who we are, influencers, salt and light, we will not do it alone. We will do it with God, and that, my friends, is all the majority we need. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal