

Sermon: Social media and the world our young people inhabit

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Dramatic reading: Matthew 18:21-35

Bible Reading: Romans 14:1-12

In my sermon last week I got talking about the importance of community. Humans are naturally and fundamentally communal creatures. Here at Cashmere we are committed to a particular type of community, which values each person, which seeks to express love and forgiveness.

But there are very different forms of human community, and many different sets of values that shape their life. Not all communities are good for us.

We're thinking about young people today, and next weekend. We are very concerned about the struggles of young people, and we work and pray for their wellbeing. The whole issue of youth suicide has become this year such a hot topic. David and I wish to point out that we did choose this topic late last year when hardly anyone was talking about it.

Several people have asked me why young people these days are so stressed and so miserable. The brain researchers tell us about the impact of chronic stress, and how the earthquakes affected children and hard-wired them for anxiety. Social researchers tell us about the effects of broken families, divorce and kids moving in and out of homes or living between 2 or 3 homes. Policy researchers tell us about the increasing inequality in our country, and how poverty affects children worst of all. Economics researchers describe a changing world where technology is everything, where there'll be fewer jobs and even fewer long-term careers. Environmental researchers tell us about the damage to our planet and ecosystems, and warn of serious and unpleasant changes to our weather and our world.

Put all these together and we can perhaps begin to understand why young people can feel hopeless, fearful and depressed when they look at the world they are stepping into.

But there is one thing I particularly want to talk about this morning: social media. I remember learning how to use a cell phone around the turn of the century. I remember the days before laptops and email, when you had to post an actual letter to someone. Young people are known as digital natives. They never knew a world before the internet and instant online communication. So let's talk for a minute about what kind of world this is that they live in, and how this affects them.

The world of social media is a constant battle for attention. And the more attention the better. In social media the more friends or followers you have the better. It doesn't matter whether you actually have anything to say, the fact that people are listening is all that matters.

Commentator Jeremy Schlosberg puts it this way: Social media creates

“a relentless focus on the surface and the exterior of things rather than the depth or interior of things. The social media milieu is information overload—there are endless streams to follow, interests to “pin,” pictures to look at, videos to watch; to operate in this setting effectively one must avoid the depth that might exist in people, places, and/or ideas. There just isn't time. It is best, in fact, not even to recognize that there is any depth to be had. Just “like” it, share it, move on.”

He asks the question: *“is this a human value? Is this how we want to live together? Racing breathlessly along the surface? Considering a near-infinite parade of exteriors, ignoring interiors?”*

Can you for a moment imagine being constantly bombarded, constantly distracted, constantly entertained? Can you think yourself into a place where you are being constantly evaluated, where what we present on the outside is all that matters and where something new is demanded every couple of minutes?

The complex emotions of adolescence and issues facing our world just do not fit into 10-second videos or one-liner memes.

The world of social media is a community where mistakes are unforgivable and punishment is instantaneous.

Commentator David Taylor writes: “Everyone is now just one stupid Facebook post, one poorly thought out Tweet, one racist, sexist, ageist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-LGBT remark away from potential ruin.

Social media is “a stage for constant artificial high drama.” Everyone has opinions about everyone else, and the more insulting the better. How different from Paul’s challenge to the church in our reading today from Romans, which calls us to not judge others on our surface differences.

Forgiveness is so last millenia. Our young people live in a world in which second chances are rare, let alone 7th chances! If you stuff up, no one forgives. The internet never forgets: a bad photo or online hate-mail will always exist out there in cyber space. If forgiveness is not possible, then ending your life starts to look like a rational option.

I have every admiration for young people today, as they navigate their way through this utterly complex global space that the internet has created for them. I’m not anti-Facebook; but I do think we need to understand how our children and grandchildren’s lives are awash in this culture. It makes me even more determined to be active in grounding young people in real space, in the real world environment, and in real-time friendships face to face. Only then will they be able to survive, thrive and lead in both the actual world and the virtual world.

It is our task to tell them the stories, like this one we heard today, so that they grasp the person and action of God, who is substance in a world of the superficial, and who is grace in a world of instant punishment. Our God, in Christ, is genuine community and friendship, more than a click or a like or a hashtag.