

The Way of Jesus: A Journey Through Luke
Part 5: The Life Machine

Countryside Community Church
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Scripture: Luke 6:31-35

*"When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it -- always."
- Gandhi*

1. More Than A Mixtape

Last week we covered Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount," or "Sermon on the Plain" in Luke's version, and I suggested that this "sermon" is more like a compilation of sermons, with every line or two representing an entire sermon subject that Jesus regularly preached during his ministry. It's Jesus' "mixtape." This week, while I was preparing to move on to Luke 7, the grisly attacks in Paris rocked the world – and took my sermon with it. It made me realize that a single week on Jesus' "mixtape" is inadequate. We need several decades – or at least one more reflection on Sunday morning. So here goes:

In the wake of Friday's atrocities in Paris, many of us reacted to our feelings of despair and helplessness by reaching out to the world on Facebook, changing our profile pictures to reflect both our agony and empathy for the victims. Others openly wondered why Paris received so much attention when other great tragedies, such as the bombing in Beirut last week, or the massacre at a Kenyan university last April (killing even more than in Paris) slipped by with comparatively little attention.

I understand why some people get upset when profile pictures are changed in the wake of certain atrocities and not others, especially since, collectively, they suggest greater sympathy toward victims who are white and Western. But I'm not convinced we are going to change this dynamic of selective-outcry before other, more urgent changes need to take place.

In a world that seems to be marching steadily toward what Pope Francis has called a “piecemeal Third World War,” the most pressing change that needs to take place is that we need move in a direction that is far more in alignment with the vision of life that Jesus advocated for in his Sermon on the Mount/Plain than we are now.

I suffer no illusions that our government or any other is going to shift gears and follow Jesus’ program, meeting the dangers we face by devoting more attention and resources to loving our enemies than bombing them, or to doing good to those who hate us than crushing them. But why aren’t more *Christians* doing so? Is protesting innocuous Starbucks cups all we get excited about?

While Jesus tended to ask more questions of his followers than provide answers, the one place in the gospels where Jesus comes out and states clearly what it means to follow him – even commands it – is in his Sermon on the Mount. Other faiths have their own way of articulating some of the core principles in Jesus’ sermon – especially when it comes to doing unto others what one would have done unto oneself – so I don’t mean to imply that Christians are the only ones who need to start living more radically by the principles they themselves espouse. But since I’m a Christian, I’ll leave criticism of other faiths to their practitioners.

When it comes to Christian faith, we must admit that Jesus doesn’t pull punches, nor does he leave wiggle-room in what he calls us to do. And we’re clearly not doing it. Says Jesus, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend money, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” (Luke 6:32-35)

If more of us don’t make meaningful efforts, on a massive scale, to put these words into practice, just how can we hope to avoid stumbling into a “piecemeal Third World War” – one that promises to shake the very foundations of human civilization?

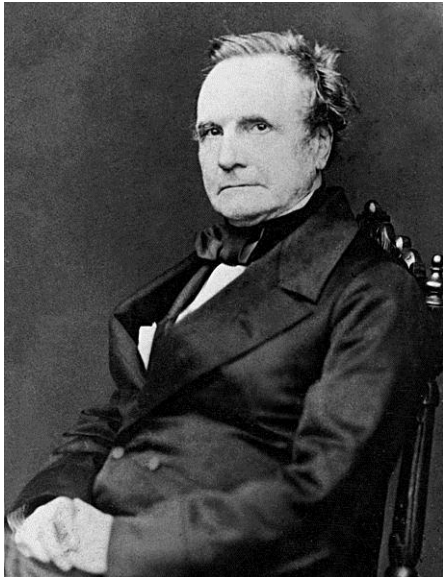
11. The Difference Engine

You may object that if Jesus’ most basic commands have effectively been ignored for two thousand years, there is little hope we can change now. But if this is your

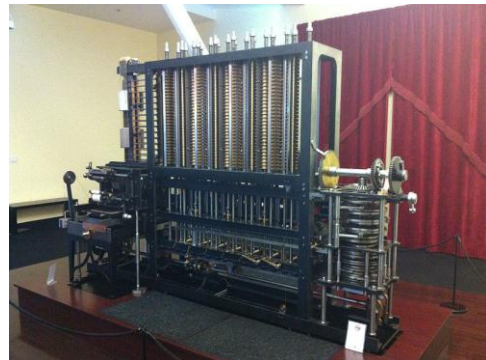
objection, consider how much has changed in the last century or two that could not have been remotely predicted just a few years beforehand – from the abolition of slavery, to women’s suffrage, to legal same-sex marriage, to legalized marijuana. Regardless of your opinions on these or other changes, what everyone can agree on is that they happened, and happened comparatively fast *once public opinion changed*.

Taking a long view of history, it becomes clear that the most profound innovations do not take place when someone comes up with a new idea. Often, the ideas were around long beforehand. No, society tends to avoid sharp shifts one way or another, making the turn only when we cannot *not* make a major change.

The programmable computer is a case in point. The programmable computer has



revolutionized the world, making life as we know it nearly impossible without it. Yet, as we’ve observed before at Countryside, the first programmable computer may have been built in the 1930s, but it was first invented in 1860 by a mechanical engineer named Charles Babbage. Babbage’s computer, which he called the



“Difference Engine,” was so sophisticated that, when it was finally built by the London Science Museum in 1991, its math calculations returned results to the 31st digit!

You may wonder why a machine as revolutionary as the programmable computer wasn’t built in Babbage’s lifetime. Its massive weight and size were not the issue (weighing in at 15 tons, with 25,000 moveable parts!). The main reason his Difference Engine wasn’t built was that it was *too revolutionary* for its time. People didn’t understand it. More importantly, *there was no pressing or obvious need for a Difference Engine*. Manufacturing tolerances weren’t anywhere close to what it could design. Talk about the right idea for the wrong time!

The right time came in WWII when the Nazis designed a cipher machine, called the Enigma Machine, that could create code for transmitting military messages that the allied forces had no ability to crack. In response, the Government Code and Cypher School of Great Britain launched a massive effort to invent a machine that could break the code and turn the war. After months of work and drawing inspiration from Babbage's Difference Engine, computer scientist Alan Turing did just that. His "Turing Machine" became the first programmable computer that was ever built. It cracked the "unsolvable" Nazi code, saving millions of lives and eventually helping win the war.

Now that human civilization is teetering on the edge of another world-wide outbreak of violence, we need a new Turing Machine – but not one that cracks Nazi military code. We need a Life Machine capable of breaking the ancient code of hatred, fear, and violence itself. Or at least we need one that reduces the effects of these ancient codes dramatically enough to ensure that human civilization survives and thrives in the coming centuries.

III. The Life Machine

I believe that for the first time in human history we are actually capable of creating this very Life Machine. All the world's great religions and philosophies will need to play a part, coming up with their own models. In the Christian community, we can build our version of the Life Machine not by coming up with a new vision for life on earth, but making use of an old one that has sat in mothballs for two millennia.

The good news is that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount may be for us what Babbage's "Difference Engine" was for the Alan Turing and the Government Code and Cypher School. And the better news is that we don't need to wait for our government, or any other, to garner the political will or spiritual conviction to create one. All it takes is the will of those who call themselves followers of Jesus, who consider his Sermon on the Mount to be authoritative for their lives and are willing to live for his vision no matter how politically incorrect or inexpedient it may be. Admittedly, we Christians have rarely committed ourselves collectively to Jesus' vision. Like Babbage's Difference Machine, it has taken a long time – and a pressing threat to human civilization – for us to finally realize the gift we've been given. But now it is clearer than ever that Jesus' gift is capable of *saving our world*. It's time to *act!*

In response to the massacre in Paris last week, one of my Facebook friends did more than change her profile picture. She bore witness to what a Life Machine would be capable of producing, should one be built. She wrote:

“Attention terrorists, in response to your attacks on the cultural life of cities around the globe, we will immediately embrace your fleeing brothers into the welcome arms of open and free society, seduce your sisters with democratic power and real voice, and recruit and train your children as critical thinkers and creative citizens. Your menace will not be met with continued violence but will be recorded only as a reminder of what cannot endure the strength of true freedom.” – Anne L’Ecuyer

Here in “little ol’ Omaha, Nebraska,” we’re actively working on a Life Machine that holds the potential of doing all that Anne envisions and more. And we have already gotten a good start on it. We’ve built a congregation that has transcended the old divisions that have divided Christians on either side of the Great Theological Divide, one that embraces the openness and intellectual honesty of the Mainline Church, as well as its social justice, and embraces the centeredness in Jesus and the Holy Spirit of the Evangelical Church. We’ve created a Church of the Great Convergence.

We have also learned how to transcend differences within our congregation, learning how to disagree – and disagree sharply at times – yet continue holding hands and walking together as sisters and brothers in God’s love and grace. While our squabbles have been hard at times, what they have done is help us learn the technology of grace – how deal head-on with issues that threaten to divide us and use conversation, prayer, and no small dose of humility to turn them in ways that have made us far stronger, not weaker.

All this has created the vital context for creating the kind of Life Machine that is not only capable of waging peace among fellow Christians, but waging peace between Muslims and Jews through the Tri-Faith Initiative. Through the Tri-Faith, we will learn how to truly love people whom we do not consider enemies, but much of the world does. And surely, we’ll have our own share of squabbles to contend with between the Abrahamic faiths as we move forward. At least I hope so. I hope so because it is through our differences that we will truly become the Alan Turings of the world, learning bit by bit, piece by piece, how to assemble a Life Machine that human civilization needs more than ever. As we do so, we will be joined by others. Already a similar initiative is in the works in Berlin, Germany, inspired by Omaha’s Tri-Faith. And just last week we learned of a new one in the early stages of development in Bentonville, Arkansas!

Will we change the world through what we are doing in Omaha, inspiring others to build their own Life Machines following Jesus’ ancient model? That’s not for us to decide. Years ago, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., who himself provided some of the vital components of our own Life Machine wrote, *“Young ladies and gentlemen, the*

lord does not ask you to solve the great problems of the world. He does not ask you to unravel the enigmatic mysteries of life. Brothers and sisters, this is all you have to do. You have to let your light shine. Don't be a part of the darkness. Let your light shine."

Whether or not the light we emit changes the world, of one thing we can be certain: the light that shines here is changing us and our community, and will continue to do so for generations to come. This, I trust, is all that truly matters to you, to me, and to Jesus.