

Living Spiritually in the City
Romans 13:8-14

I think there is nostalgia in us for the “good, old days” which in reality we know were not as good in reality as they are in our memories. How many of you grew up on a farm or in a small town or village? There are advantages to rural or small town life. Quiet—much less than in downtown Edmonton, or in suburban Edmonton next to a highly travelled freeway.

In small towns people know each other, and if you are a new customer in a small town restaurant, you will have lots of eyes looking at you. Because people know each other they look out for each other. “I saw a strange car in your driveway last night and called to see if everything is okay?”

Our, across the hall neighbor, is an architect in his late 70's. The other day he invited me into his apartment and showed me an exquisite watercolor he is finishing showing 3 blocks of Whyte Ave. As we talked about Whyte Ave and downtown, he told me there were 2 billion people living on the planet when he was born and now there are more than 7 billion humans.

Today, most of those 7 billion live in cities. And, many of us with fond memories of past times that seemed at the time at least to be quieter, more stable, less frantic, are very aware of the challenges and problems confronting those of us living in cities.

More murders in 2011 than in any other Canadian city. People with little regard or awareness of other people. Yesterday, after officiating at a wedding here I walked across the parking lot and saw a young man who deliberately dropped a full paper coffee cup and then kicked it spreading a liquid mess. I hollered at the guy, “Why, did you discard that cup on the parking lot and then kick it?”

He replied, “What’s it to you?” I went over in what I hoped to be a calm, quiet voice, answered, “It’s important to me because I’m part of McDougall Church, and we are working hard to keep this corner of downtown neat and clean, and, I also live downtown and this is my neighborhood. So we appreciate people helping us to keep our streets and this property neat and tidy.”

He looked down and mumbled “Sorry” and then picked up the cup and took it to the trash can, and called out “thanks.”

There are positive and negative elements to living in a paved world. I was excited to run across an article giving an overview of the contents of a book, titled Triumph of the City, by Harvard economist Edward Glaeser.

Glaeser writes that most of the people today prefer to live in places that are paved. He claims that five million people a month in the developing world, move from rural areas to cities. He claims that cities are humanity's greatest invention.

--When people live near each other they become more inventive, they become better thinkers and they inspire each other.

--People also tend to be more productive and specialized when they are close together.

--And surprise, he claims that urban dwellers are good for the planet. City dwellers are more likely to travel by foot, bus or train than the car drivers of suburbia and rural areas.

Glaeser suggests that what creates urban success is their ability to attract people and enable them to collaborate and cooperate. Every city has its own identity. In The Economist, of Feb 12, 2011, we are reminded that Tokyo is a center of political and financial power, and Singapore has its own distinctive mixture of free-market activity and government led industrialization. That article states that dynamic cities always have well-educated populations and when the old ways of producing prosperity disappear they find new sources of prosperity. If a city is not flexible, it will die. (Likewise, churches need to be flexible or we too will disappear.)

The apostle Paul knew the problems of city life. Paul was a Roman citizen, and in the 1st century, the greatest paving projects in the world were performed by the engineering geniuses of the Roman Empire—and all roads led to Roman. I wonder what they would have done with the Whitemud Freeway and the Quesnell Bridge?

Paul in his letter to the Christians in Rome was speaking to people who lived in the most paved urban center in the world in that time. Paul knew of the urban problems: reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, and violence. But, Paul did NOT jump to the conclusion that city life leads to sinfulness. He sensed that urban life could make people more inventive and productive. His letter to the Romans is a masterpiece of inspiring theology and ethical instruction

Paul offered city dwellers guidelines that could help them live collaboratively, innovatively and with flexibility to make their city, their community works. He was teaching them, and us, how to live in a paved world.

1. **“Owe no one anything—but love.” (vs8)** He knows this will catch the Romans’ attention, because Rome was both a political and financial centre. Money was constantly changing hands and the citizens knew all about debits and credits. They knew exactly what they owed each other as they did business together.

“Owe no one anything but love, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” Paul reminds them and us about the Commandments: **“You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, and you shall not covet what your neighbor has”** and then Paul sums up all the laws in the simple but profound message, **“Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” (vs. 9)**

Paul has quickly moved from urban collaboration to innovative, a new and better way to live.

There are all kinds of stereotypes about the toughness of city dwellers, especially New Yorkers. Some New Yorkers, NOT all, are characterized by the following 5 characteristics:

1. They believe that being able to swear at people in their own language makes them multilingual.
2. The front door always has at least 3 locks.
3. The most frequently used part of the car is the horn.
4. They consider Central Park to be “nature.”
- 5/ For them, eye contact is an act of overt aggression.

Paul’s command to love your neighbor as yourself” is not an order to practice a soft, sweet and sentimental kind of love. No, this love is hard-nosed, that can bring some order out of the chaos of city life. Treat others as you would like to be treated. If you don’t want it done to you, don’t do it to anyone else.

Paul is not naïve about city life. Knows of the dangers, the chaos, the economic disparity and he offers us a way to defend against them. He tells us, **“put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” (v 14)**

Paul knows about the temptations and dangers and challenges facing those who choose to live in “fully human, fully alive” way. Some of the legalists of the 1st century, focused on the “Thou shall nots.” Don’t do this, don’t do that. Paul knew that “putting on the persona of Jesus Christ” provides a defense that is flexible and practical.

About 350 years after Paul wrote those words, a young man in the city of Milan was struggling in his own life with temptations including lust. One

day he heard a voice urging him to “Take up and read. He picked up a very early Bible and read the 1st verse his eyes fell upon., and he read vss. 13/14 of our text for today: “Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery, and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, (vss. 13-14)

Suddenly, this brilliant young person, who was deeply tearing himself apart, discovered that Jesus Christ could offer him a new and better way of living spiritually in a paved world. This young man was Augustine, later St. Augustine, and his wisdom and his voice of Christian wisdom influenced Europe for the next 1000 years.

Augustine later wrote about his experience. “No further would I read, nor would I need to read, for instantly at the end of the sentence, a serenity light a light was infused into my heart, and all the darkness of doubt vanished.” Augustine’s greatest work was entitled, The City of God. He wrote it to console the fall of the City of Rome. Augustine encouraged the citizens of Rome to the truths of Christian faith, and to focus their efforts on building a City built on the values of spirituality given by Jesus.

Augustine lifted their eyes from the pavement of the earthly toward the City of God whose foundation was spiritual.

A wise old man in Croatia met with a group of North American theologians. They asked him what it means to him to put on the persona of Jesus Christ. His response gives us light for our own spiritual journeys. He said, “Always choose a more difficult path.” And when they asked him what he meant here’s what he said, “It’s easier for us to be served than it is for us to give. Serving is the harder path. Giving is the harder path. Because we are selfish, the path of love is always more difficult.”

The old man in Croatia had truly put on the person of Jesus Christ. It is the best wardrobe for those who truly want to be “fully human and fully alive.” You don’t need a new wardrobe for the fall season, you need a wardrobe for every season. Amen