

The St. John's Pulpit

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JESUS WOULDN'T DEVALUE SUNDAY SCHOOL MINISTRY

Lenten Series: Imitating the Spirituality of Jesus: What Jesus Wouldn't Do

John 7:10-18

First Sunday during Lent, February 14, 2016
The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister



Several of you are familiar with the story of the seven year old explaining what he learned in Sunday School that Sunday morning. He explained, “Today, we learned about Moses leading a bunch of people out of slavery. This guy named Pharaoh was chasing them with a big army. And Moses’ people came upon a big body of water and were trapped. Then, God sent in some big helicopters to blow back the water and dry up the ground so they walked across to the other side just fine. Then Pharaoh’s army showed up with their tanks and big armed vehicles but just when they got into the water place, God took away the helicopters and all those tanks and that big army were swallowed up by the water.” When his mother looked at him with a frown and asked, “Is that the way your teacher told that story?” “No,” he spouted. “But if I told it the way she told it, you would never believe it.” We are thankful for our Sunday School teachers – and all of the creative ways they tell the stories of our faith.

One autumn, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. As a Jew, Jesus observed the festivals of his spiritual tradition. Each autumn, the nation of Israel gathered in Jerusalem for spiritual renewal at the Festival of Booths, a celebration of the harvest to remember that God was their Lord.

This story in John 7 reports a variety of views people had formed about Jesus; some people plotted to kill him, some said he was a deceiver and some said, “*He is a good man.*” Many agreed that Jesus was an excellent teacher. Jesus told them, “*My teaching is not mine but his who sent me.*” It is important for us to remember that Jesus did not come to point to himself; Jesus came to point beyond himself to The Living God. **When you learn of Jesus, you are learning the will of God for you.**

Jesus challenges his followers to learn of him so we can be transformational servants in the Kingdom of God. As you learn of Jesus, you learn how to incarnate the mission of God. As you learn of Jesus, you learn how to make a difference in the life of someone else. As you learn about Jesus, you learn how you can serve others, alleviate pain, diminish suffering and help other people experience the Kingdom of God.

Let me tell you about some people who learned about Jesus. These people continue to influence your lives. Although they are no longer with us, they continue to light our way.

The first story begins 636 years ago along the Rhine River in Kempen, Germany. In the year, 1380, Thomas à Kempis was born. He grew up to be a follower of Jesus and a writer. His most important book was *The Imitation of Christ*. Except for The Bible, *The Imitation of Christ* has sold more copies than any other book. It was published in more than 50 languages before the United States constitution was adopted. If you have never read *The Imitation of Christ*, I encourage you to do so. If you have read it, I encourage you to read it again between now and Easter Sunday. Thomas à Kempis focuses on the spiritual life of Jesus. My sermons between now and Easter will focus on “*Imitating the Spiritual Life of Jesus.*”

The second story emerges 120 years ago, in 1896. Charles Sheldon, pastor of Central Congregational Church, in Topeka, Kansas, announced he would be “*throwing the doors of the church wide open to reveal a Christ for all people.*” He said the spiritual life of Jesus calls the common people to connect their lives to the social implications of Jesus’ message in uncommon ways. So, he wrote stories and each Sunday night he read a new chapter of a story as his sermon. He wrote many stories through the years. But no story had more effect than “*In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?*” His idea was similar to that of Thomas à Kempis’ in *Imitation of Christ*. Sheldon’s story has now sold more than 30 million copies. You may remember this book became popular again a few years ago when *WWJD* bracelets were common. *WWJD* refers to ‘*What Would Jesus Do?*’ Some of you will remember that many people wearing those *WWJD* bracelets were doing things Jesus would never do. So, my sermons between now and Easter will focus on, “*Imitating the Spiritual Life of Jesus: What Jesus Would Not Do.*”

The third story begins in Gloucester, England, in the year 1780. The Industrial Revolution increased the need for small hands to do detail work. So, children were employed in factories and as chimney sweeps six days a week for up to 14 hours per day. England had a tremendous problem. Children and their parents worked Monday through Saturday. But, on Sundays, the parents were tired and children ran wild causing destruction.

Children could neither read nor write. So, Robert Raikes, publisher of the Gloucester Journal, looked at the need and was motivated by the teachings of Jesus to make a difference. He wanted to improve their lives. Some historians suggest that his efforts created the middle class and brought about other substantive social change such as public education.

In 1780, Robert Raikes enlisted some women to open their kitchens and invite a few children from their neighborhoods to learn stories of The Bible, reading and writing. People criticized their efforts, of course. The critics of the Sunday School Ministry claimed it weakened home-based religious education and desecrated the Sabbath since Christians should not be doing any work on the Sabbath. Fifty years later, more than 1,250,000 scholars were involved in Sunday Schools in Great Britain, the United States and Canada. I find it important to note that the first ministry started by St. John's Baptist Church, in 1922, was the Sunday School Ministry and each person enrolled was called a 'Sunday School Scholar.'

These three people made a difference and continue to have influence in our lives. Although they are no longer with us, they continue to light our way. They provide light along our path because they opened their lives to Jesus as the Lord of their living.

Friends, Jesus would do many things today. But, I offer to you that if we are to 'Imitate Christ,' if we are asked 'What Would Jesus Do?' or 'What Would Jesus NOT Do?' we would reach this firm conclusion: Jesus Would NOT Devalue Sunday School Ministry. For God has been using the Sunday School Ministry for 236 years teaching people how to imitate Christ, how to walk in the steps of Jesus and how to be transformational servants in the Kingdom of God.

On that Autumn day in Jerusalem, Jesus said, “My teaching is not mine but his who sent me.” **When you learn of Jesus, you are learning the will of God for you.** God uses the Sunday School Ministry of St. John’s to create community of faith, to teach people how to love one another, to teach people how to be servants, to welcome people into the life of Christ’s Church and to help us make a difference so we will have influence in the lives of others for years to come.

Those first Sunday School Ministry scholars of St. John’s are no longer with us. Yet, they continue to light our way. Through the past 94 years, thousands of people have learned and taught in the Sunday School Ministry of St. John’s. The Sunday School Ministry scholars have not taught or studied whatever they wanted to learn; they have focused on how Jesus’ life and teachings reveal the Truths within The Bible. The Sunday School Ministry teachers of St. John’s have not taught their own ideas. They have taught the ideas and teachings of Jesus. Our Sunday School Ministry is founded on Jesus who said, “My teaching is not mine but his who sent me.” **Jesus did not come to point to himself; he came to point beyond himself to The Living God. When you learn of Jesus, you are learning the will of God for you.**

Amen and AMEN!