

“What Did Jesus Believe?”

I Corinthians 12:12-20; Luke 4:14-21

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

May 27, 2018 – Trinity Sunday – Rev. Ronald W. Botts

Central to Jesus’ teaching are the Beatitudes, which we find in both Luke and Matthew. Seeing that there are two forms of the list already, I believe it gives the preacher just a little more leeway with this text. So, I would like to offer now “The Pastor’s Modern Beatitudes.”

Blessed are those who fill in wherever they’re needed on Sunday and even when it comes with a moment’s notice.

Blessed are those who drop a note or card to those listed in the weekly prayer concerns.

Blessed are those who hear everything that’s said in the church restrooms, but choose not to gossip.

Blessed are those who come to worship regularly and take it in stride when their customary place is already taken.

Blessed are those who support the church generously and always find just a little extra when challenged to give.

Blessed are those who reply “yes” whenever they receive a desperate call from the Nominating Committee.

Blessed are those who have strong opinions on issues, but choose to dialogue rather than to argue.

Blessed are those who bake double batches of brownies with walnuts for the fellowship period. (That’s one of my favorites!)

Now this new list of beatitudes may not be directly traceable to Jesus but they’re in keeping with things that Jesus believed. They lift up attitudes of acceptance and obligation, hospitality and helpfulness, cooperation and compassion. Surely, these kind of practices should be at the core of church life. They are examples of what it is to be followers of Jesus who are in community together.

For a few moments today I’d like you to go back a little in time. Search your memories. Do you remember all the jewelry and other items with the initials WWJD on them? They were everywhere back about twenty-five years ago. WWJD stands for “What would Jesus do?” This phrase caught on and became especially popular with church youth groups. From time to time you still see those initials today, but the question itself (“What would Jesus do?”) goes back much further yet to a novel written in 1896 entitled *In His Steps*.

This book is still around and remains second in total sales among all religious publications, with an estimated 50 million copies having been printed. In fact, only the Bible itself exceeds this popular novel by Charles Sheldon. You probably don't know anything about this bestselling author, but he was an interesting person.

The Rev. Charles Sheldon was pastor of Central Congregational Church in Topeka, Kansas, from 1889 to 1919. Strong in his own commitment to discipleship, Sheldon taught that if people would simply follow in Christ's example then the world could be changed for the better. This pastor from America's Heartland saw all people with equity and compassion because they were simply children of God.

Sheldon did an interesting thing. So that he might better understand how some people were forced to live, he would sometimes hire out briefly as a common workman. Through personal experience he came to understand the challenges that unskilled laborers and their families faced. At other times he lived anonymously among the homeless. Not surprisingly, then, many of his sermons advocated that Christians must address the pressing social problems around them.

Charles Sheldon and Central Congregational carried this commitment out in practical ways. For example, they started the first kindergarten for African-American children west of the Mississippi.

Later, when the U. S. Supreme Court heard *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education*, one of the attorneys who argued this landmark case challenging segregated education was descended from an early student in that kindergarten. The attorney's family name was Scott. His parents honored the memory of that forward-looking pastor by giving their son the full name of **Charles Sheldon** Scott.

In 1900, with Sheldon's book *In His Steps* now a top seller, the editor of the Topeka *Capital-Journal* offered him the opportunity to take the helm of the publication for a week and to let its articles and editorials reflect that central question, "What would Jesus do?" The newspaper had an average circulation of 11,000 but, for that week, it shot up to 360,000.

Down through the years Central Congregational has proven to be a leadership church and today they are similarly active with many partner ministries. They continue their commitment to diversity and inclusion because they try to look at all with the eyes of Christ and act accordingly.

Today I'd like to suggest that there is another question of faith and practice we might add to that of Sheldon's "What would Jesus do?" We also ought to ask "What did Jesus believe?" It's not only what Jesus did that should be of concern to us as his followers, but also what he affirmed. What he believed shaped his actions, and it should shape ours as well. What we believe gives motive and direction to whatever it is we do.

Our Gospel passage today recounts the words of Jesus, establishing the role which was his to fulfill and claiming the authority placed in him:

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and

found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Belief and action stand together as the two pillars of Christian faith. So you can't believe what Jesus believed and take vengeance against those who have wronged you. You can't believe what Jesus believed and tolerate oppression and discrimination against others. You can believe what Jesus believed and ignore the plight of a neighbor.

You can't believe what Jesus believed and support aggression and the conditions that make for war. You can't believe what Jesus believed and allow others to exploit the poor and powerless. You can't believe what Jesus believed and let people go hungry and sleep without shelter. You can't believe what Jesus believed and not share that good news with the world.

What Jesus believed is the standard by which our own beliefs are formed and measured. We start by hearing his words as found in scripture, but then we also have to open ourselves to his leading in our lives. "What did Jesus believe?" and "What would Jesus do?" are the key questions for faithful living right here and right now.

A rabbi and a soap maker went for a walk one day. The soap maker asked, "What good is religion? Look at all the trouble and misery in the world after thousands of years of teaching about goodness, truth and peace—after all the prayers, sermons, and lessons. If religion is good and true, why should this be?"

The rabbi said nothing but just kept walking along. After a while he noticed a child playing in the gutter and said to his friend, "Look at that child. You say that soap makes people clean, but just look at the dirt on that youngster. What good is soap? With all the soap in the world, the child is still filthy. Why is this the case?"

The man protested, "But, rabbi, soap can't do any good unless it is applied and used as intended."

"Exactly my point," replied the rabbi, "So it is with religion. You've first got to have it and then do something with it."

So, friends, here we are with WDJB and WWJD. They're not radio station call letters. They're not some kind of secret code. What they are is reminders of what we should be asking ourselves regularly. What did Jesus believe? What would Jesus do? These questions are basic to faith and practice. They will put us on the right course for our lives and keep us there but only if we choose to make use of them.

Charles Sheldon, a century ago, understood faith in action starting with a short four-word question. Today want to turn it into a simple three-point action plan: Trust in Jesus. Believe what he believed. Do what is required.

Trust in Jesus. Believe what he believed. Do what is required. Think of this a blueprint for faithful living as you go through the coming week. At its most basic discipleship is really as simple as that; but, as we know from life, discipleship is also as challenging as that.
T-Trust. B-Believe. D-Do

TBD – That's only three letters to remember, not four. Perhaps we can start a whole new movement right here at Highlands and starting with us!