

“What Would Jesus Do?”

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ephesians 4:11-6; 5:15-20

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

Prayer for Illumination: Open the hearts and minds now before you, O God, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May these words fall on the hungry and hurting, on the lost and the lonely and on the hopeful now before you. Amen.

Congregationalist minister and novelist Charles M. Sheldon challenged his congregation to organize their lives by this question each year, “What Would Jesus Do?” This was one of the driving questions of the Social Gospel long before the WWJD woven wrist bands were popular in the 1990s. The aim of the Social Gospel Movement was to see itself as an agent of reform.

At the turn of the 20th century many voices came together across denominational affiliations to respond to the dire situation facing many Americans, the harshness of industrialization. The issues of wage inequalities, labor disputes, corporate and governmental scandals led those who were serious about social justice to move the churches forward with a proclamation, a Social Creed.

One hundred years later, in 2008, clergy and theologians with the National Council of Churches gathered to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the Social Creed with a Social Creed for the 21st Century, believing that the Churches of the United States have a message of hope for a fearful time.[1] Many

voices unify again for a common voice and a shared vision of a society that shares more and consumes less, seeks compassion over suspicion and equality over domination, and finds security in joined hands rather than massed arms.

It reads, We, as individuals Christians and churches—commit ourselves to a culture of peace and freedom that embraces non-violence, nurtures character, treasures the environment, and builds community, rooted in a spirituality of inner growth with outward action.

This new Social Creed for the 21st century raises our consciousness the need for collaboration among our brothers and sisters, who strive for justice around the globe. It helps us prioritize our deepest values for growth and living our life together.

Today, we hear from the writer of Ephesians, “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of your time...” (Ephesians 5: 15). This calls us to live a life that reflects our deepest values. Not being distracted by things less important, but being thoughtful about the decisions we make.

To help us make those decisions, we look to Jesus. For one, he makes the most of his time. He is not distracted. He knows his purpose. Jesus is fully present. He doesn't need to figure out the logistics—he is in the moment. (He must drive some of

those disciples just crazy.) He is born into a world that is hurting and broken. Born into a dangerous time under an oppressive regime.

Jesus maintains his focus of the most important things--- feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, eating with tax collectors and sinners, letting the oppressed go free. Jesus knows he offers new life to the broken people and places of the world.

Just a chapter earlier in Ephesians, we hear that we each have work to do “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (v.13).

That, indeed, sounds like the most aspirational goal. How could we ever live into the full stature of Christ? The charge for us is to grow. To grow in knowing ourselves. To grow in knowing others. To grow knowing more about Jesus along the way. It means opening our hearts and minds to different voices around the table and in our ministries. To grow up means knowing our story, but also being open to others' stories as well.

All of us are tasked here today with something---to grow up! When we grow up (when our faith grows up) we are ready for what God calls us to do as we follow Jesus. When we grow up we recognize that it takes more people utilizing their gifts to engage in the meaningful ministry and mission.

Recently, a colleague asked me to check out a TED talk. I heard this story a few years earlier. When I listened to it I remember its power. The speaker is a Nigerian writer of novels and short stories named Chimamanda Adichie[2].

She begins, "I'm a storyteller. And I would like to tell you a few personal stories about "the danger of the single story." I grew up on a university campus in eastern Nigeria. I was an early reader and I read British and American children's books. I was also an early writer. And when I began to write, at age seven, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading. All my characters were white and blue eyed. They played in the snow and ate apples. They talked about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow. We ate mangoes. And we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to.

My characters also drank a lot of ginger beer because the characters in the British books I read drank ginger beer. Never mind that I had no idea what ginger beer was.

This demonstrates how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children.

Now, I loved those American and British books. They stirred my imagination. They opened new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature.

Later, Adichie discovered books by African authors. There weren't many of them available at the time. But once she was able to get a hold of some of them, she went through a mental shift in her perception of literature. Adichie soon discovered that all of us are vulnerable to seeing people and places through the lens of a single story.

Adichie says: I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized.... So, what the discovery of African writers did was save me from having a single story of what books are.

I come from a conventional, middle class Nigerian family. So we had live-in domestic help who often came from nearby rural villages. The year I turned eight we got a new house boy named Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. So I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.

Then we went to his village to visit. His mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them is how poor they were. Their poverty was my single story of them.

According to Adichie, all of us are susceptible to defining people and places by a single story.

All of this got me thinking about the stories in the Bible. The Bible tells us a single story, right? The story of God's people, a story that culminated in the life death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It's a single story – told from a single perspective, right?

Not exactly. The truth is that the Bible is complex literature. It is comfortable having different stories, sometimes competing stories about a given person or event. There are, for example, two creation stories. Think of the story of the birth of Jesus. The Bible gives us not one, not two but three

different stories of how Jesus came into the world. The most important event in the Bible – the resurrection – is told by four different authors and each story is unique. The Biblical writers evidently believed that to know the truth of something you need to hear multiple stories.

The Bible contains these multiple stories, at times competing stories. Readers of the Bible haven't always been comfortable with that and, over the centuries believers have tried to smooth out the inconsistencies and turn the Bible into something more coherent and uniform.

It's very tempting to turn multiple stories into a single story. It can be very hard to avoid relying on a single story.

Let's return to Adichie's talk.

When I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States, I was 19. My American roommate asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said Nigeria has English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed I did not know how to use a stove. What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa. A single story of catastrophe. In this single

story there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her. No possibility of a connection as human equals.

Adichie is so articulate in describing how a single story creates stereotypes. How a single story can actually decrease the possibility of connection between two human beings. She points out that a single story is not untrue, but incomplete.

When I think of the New Social Gospel, I think we need to reframe the question. It's no longer the hypothetical What Would Jesus Do? Instead the question is, "What is Jesus Doing?" We worship a living God. Jesus is God's living word. So in these times, in our churches, in our nation, how do we as people of faith live the current and pressing question, What is Jesus Doing? How do we see our story as not untrue, but incomplete?

One thing is for sure, we need to be open to the stories Jesus tells. Each of us, like the disciples, may hear the stories differently. Just when we think we manage to pin Jesus down, nail him to a particular position, maybe even the one on the cross. Jesus finds another story. God opens another chapter in the story of new life. We'll need to broaden the communion table and bring in more chairs for all of God's people to fit around it. New people around the table, different voices in

positions of influence and in our pulpits and in our classrooms and in civic leadership. This challenges us to grow.

As we grow into the unity of the faith and the knowledge of God, into maturity, to we must see the danger of a single story. And as we grow together in God's love, we must continue to share more of our stories with one another, more of our stories with the world as our lives unfold.

Amen.

[1] "A 21st Century Social Creed" The National Council of Churches. (2008) www.ncc.org Commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Social Creed of 1908.

<https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/christian-unity/a-21st-century-social-creed/>

[2] <http://www.ted.com/talks>

[3] Sojourner's Magazine. www.sojo.net

[4] Ibid.

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