

WHAT WOULD JESUS DO? +

A sermon for Friday at Synod Assembly, 1 June 2018
Chattanooga Convention Center, Chattanooga, Tennessee
Acts 16:12c-15; Mark 2:13-22 or Matthew 9:9-13 - Julian Gordy

Remember these? It's a WWJD bracelet. I came across this while I was looking through a box of stuff from our family's move to Tennessee thirteen years ago. This one was given to me by a teenager in Ocean Springs, MS in 1997, I'm pretty sure. They were all the rage then on the 100th anniversary of the publication of a book called *In His Steps* by Charles Sheldon. It's a novel about a small town and what happens when people in the town, whenever they are faced with any decision, start to ask themselves "What would Jesus do?" In the novel, that question transforms the town.

What would Jesus do? To tell the truth, the question has always bothered me because, for one thing, people of good faith can disagree on what Jesus would do, after all.

That's why I never wore this bracelet, but used it to keep the church hex key on - you know, the gizmo that opens the panic bars on Sunday Morning? (Pr. Cuttino Alexander, you can have this back after worship. Somehow it moved to Tennessee with us.)

What would Jesus do? A bigger problem with answering that question is that I'm not sure that Jesus is who we have usually *thought* he is. In fact, I'm pretty sure he's not.

In Sheldon's book, people who ask the WWJD question do things like stop drinking and carousing. Jesus on the other hand regularly went to parties, even those thrown by notorious sinners. He was accused of partying too much, "the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Matthew 11:19)

That Jesus chose Matthew, a tax collector, to be one of the twelve - a part of his inner circle - his cabinet, as it were - is evidence enough that Jesus didn't care much about propriety and absolutely nothing for what people thought.

He couldn't have chosen anyone less well-thought-of than Matthew. You've been to church, so you know this: as a tax gatherer Matthew was a Jew who had sold out to become rich at the expense of his fellow Jews. He worked for pagan, occupying government in Rome. He made his money by squeezing as much as he could out of people because he got to keep whatever was above and beyond the taxes owed to Rome. And he had the iron fist of the hated Roman army to back them up.

To the good religious people, Matthew was a traitor, plain and simple, a collaborator with the empire, a carpetbagger. As such, he was not welcome in temple or synagogue.

According to the religious folk, as a rabbi, Jesus should not have even spoken to Matthew. But he did. And he went to Matthew's house and sat at the table with him and a whole lot of other tax collectors and sinners.

There went Jesus' credibility among the upright! "Why does you master eat with people like that?" they ask Jesus followers.

These religious folk, like a lot of religious folk today assume that the job of religious leaders is to protect and promote public morals and propriety. One of the pastors here in this very room was fired from his first parish in another denomination because he was regularly seen down at the corner store on Friday afternoons hanging out with the local "red neck" bikers drinking coca colas and eating peanuts.

He thought he was doing ministry. In fact, he's pretty sure he helped keep three marriages together and he proclaimed the gospel at two funerals among the extended families of the bikers.

But it was an unseemly crowd down there at the store for a preacher to be hanging around with, the people in the congregation thought. It gave him and the congregation a bad reputation. People might think they condoned the bikers' lifestyle if their pastor was hanging with them. So the pastor who ate and drank with the sinners had to go in the name of propriety.

But did you notice, the text says that Jesus ate with *many* of these bad characters and, in Mark's version of this story, we read that these tax collectors and sinners had become his followers! Keeping bad company was not an unusual thing for Jesus. He would sit at table with anyone would welcome anyone into the kingdom.

At your tables there is a sheet of paper with three questions on it. Not the WWJD question, but questions that grow out of that question and these texts and today's commemoration of Justin Martyr. What are we who are Jesus' body called to do if we could do like Jesus and welcome the world to our tables? You can talk together about all of them or choose one and spend you time on it. (10 minutes)

WRAP UP:

I am not dumping on the scribes and Pharisees in this story from Matthew's gospel.

They were good people, the good church people of the day.

But in all their rectitude, they had come to think that their *goodness* was their salvation. So you can imagine the reaction when Jesus pointed out that God was not *interested* in their goodness. That God didn't *care* about their sacrifices. That what

God really wants is *mercy*. Mercy for the tax gatherers and the sinners and and the bikers. Mercy for the whole lot of us.

Jesus didn't just give up his *life* for sinners, he gave up his *reputation* too. He was way, way more concerned with loving others than with making them obey the rules. And he seemed *especially* to love those who were the least lovable or considered the least important or the least to be bothered with.

What would Jesus do? The question makes me uneasy because I'm a long way from the mind of Christ. But I'm willing to say this much by way of an answer. He would do mercy. He would do welcome. He would do love. We don't have to speculate about that. We know this is what Jesus would do because it is what Jesus did.

QUESTIONS:

1. In today's first reading, Paul, Silas, and Timothy go to the river to pray – outside the synagogue where instead of meeting the man they had seen in the vision inviting them to Macedonia, they meet Lydia and a group of women. Jesus goes to dinner in the home of Matthew, someone outside the boundaries of the respectability in his day. What structures or boundaries does the 21st century church need to cross for the sake of the good news being heard?
2. In his day, for Jesus, eating in the home of Matthew was a very political act. In these days of such political and cultural divisiveness, what does the church need to learn in order that it may go out into the community to serve as a table of welcome around which all people may gather and live together in community?
3. Today the church remembers Justin Martyr, known principally for describing - way back nearly 2000 years ago - the shape of the liturgy most of the world's Christians still follow on Sunday morning and that we will follow here this Friday afternoon. You can read a description of it on the song sheet. Justin is also remembered for managing to bring together Old Testament theology and Greek philosophy and with them to bring Jews and Gentiles to the same table to eat and drink and remember Jesus together. How could our proclamation of the gospel and our worship invite people from different cultures and traditions into community together?