

"SAY IT AIN'T SO"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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New York, New York 10028
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INTRODUCTION

The year was 1919. The Chicago Black Sox baseball scandal was unfolding in the papers before the public eye of the American people. One afternoon out in Chicago as Shoeless Joe Jackson was leaving the field, a die-hard fan cried out, "Joe...say it ain't so...say it ain't so!"

The July 6th issue, 1990 of the Methodist Reporter reported on the findings of a poll conducted by the Board of Discipleship of our Church. It stated in large letters, "Study Says UMs Don't Live Out Their Faith". Rev. Joe Sells wrote,

"United Methodists are being influenced more by the values of American society than by the values of the Christian faith. Study results show that 'people are bringing cultural values into church for affirmation, not challenge...'"

"What we've found is that the values in the marketplace have more power to shape people's lives than the values of the Christian faith."

As I read it, I wanted to shout, "Say it ain't so"...but I knew it is. It was a disturbing indictment and I wondered, as I read the article, if it's true of Methodist people across the nation, could it be true of those who are a part of our congregation? Once again, inwardly I cried out..."Say it ain't so". However, deep down...you and I know there's truth in this.

DEVELOPMENT

Jesus was right...one of the prerequisites for being healed and transformed is to first acknowledge that we are sick and that we need a physician.... To me, it is still true that only a quality Christian education (Sunday School, that is) can enable you to live out your faith in the marketplace.

During my days as a teenager, I was introduced to the following lines:

"Sow an act - you reap a habit.
If you sow a habit - you reap a character.
If you sow a character - you reap a destiny"

My eye once caught a sign in a tree nursery that read:

"The best time to plant a tree was fifteen years ago". "The second best time is today!"

If you or your children are not presently active in our Sunday School, the best time is today to begin some training in this area. And so what I'd like to do this morning is to think about the importance of Sunday School training for our church, and our programs of adult Christian education for the entire journey of life. Four thoughts to lift up and invite for your consideration.

TEACH OUR CHILDREN BY EXAMPLE

First, we are called to teach young lives by example. Let me illustrate.

When little Sally was six years old, she was with her father when they were caught speeding. Her father handed the policeman a twenty-dollar bill along

with his Driver's license and the policeman did not give him a ticket. "It's all right, dear" said the father. "Everybody does it".

When the girl was eight, she was a part of the family gathering that discussed income taxes. Her uncle revealed how he had cheated the government out of a thousand dollars because he didn't report some of his earnings. He turned to Sally and said, "It's all right, Sally...everybody does it."

When Sally was twelve, she lost her contact lenses on the way to school. Her mother told her, "We'll just report to the Insurance Company that they were stolen. That way, they will pay for them". And she added, "It's all right, Sally....everybody does it."

When she was nineteen, a college classmate offered Sally the answers for her upcoming test for \$150. "It's all right" explained the upperclassman, "Everybody does it". The only trouble was that Sally was caught and was dismissed from the college. She was greeted at home by her father and mother who with great indignation said, "Where on earth did you ever learn to act like that?" "I learned it from you, mom and dad" said Sally. Oh, please..."say it ain't so". But knowing the sickness means we are on the way to being transformed.

Yes, an obvious concern of each parent within the sound of my voice this morning is the training of our children. It was Albert Schweitzer who said that there are three ways by which children learn responsibility. Remember them?

"First: by example. Second: By example. And third: by example."

Lead by example, but be careful the example you are leading is worthy of consideration!

THEY SHOULDN'T DECIDE FOR THEMSELVES

Secondly, be careful not to fall victim to the prevailing thought so commonplace in our society that children should be left to decide for themselves. I've heard it said many times....I'll let them decide for themselves when they're older. Gardens without any pruning produce a lot of weeds. We are to teach and train them from birth.

Shortly after baby ducks are hatched from their shells, they will become attached or imprinted to the first thing they see moving towards them. From that time on, they will follow that particular object when it moves in their vicinity. Ordinarily, they become imprinted to the mother goose who was on hand to hatch the new generation. However, if they are removed, the baby ducks will settle for any mobile substitute - whether alive or not!

Time is the critical factor in this process. The baby ducks are vulnerable to imprinting for only a few seconds after they hatch from the shells; if that opportunity is lost, it cannot be regained later. In other words, there is a critical and brief period in the life of the baby ducks when this "instinctual" learning is possible.

There is a critical period when certain kinds of instruction are possible in the life of a child. There is a brief period during childhood when young lives are deeply influenced by religious training. Their concepts of right and wrong are formulated during this and their view of God begins to solidify.

As in the case of that gosling, the opportunity of that period must be seized when it is available. Leaders of the Roman Catholic Church have been quoted as saying, "Give us a child until he is seven years old and we'll have him for life!" Their affirmation is usually correct because permanent attitudes can be instilled during those seven vulnerable years.

RELEARN AND REINFORCE THE BASICS OF LIFE

we must constantly re-learn and reinforce the basics of life.

Thirdly, never forget the fact that both as adults and as children

Perhaps the most successful professional football coach during the 1980s was Bill Walsh of the San Francisco Forty-Niners. He retired and became a TV commentator. He recently lectured at a couple of Football Clinics and realized how much he was missing coaching.

Bill Walsh has decided to return to coaching in a small way. He conducted a series of camps for NFL quarterbacks and quarterback coaches. He taught the basics - how to take a snap, drop back, set up, release, etc. Those are the most simple "basics" for a quarterback in football.

It's amazing to me that professional quarterbacks will attend a camp to do such simple procedures. Ten-year old kids in "Peewee Football" are taught the simple basics of taking snaps, dropping back, setting up. And high school and college quarterbacks drill on those things all the time. These pro quarterbacks are paying \$10,000 for the week-long sessions plus they get video tapes to study at home.

I read that the New York Jet Coach, Bruce Coslet, was the first to enroll his quarterbacks. Said Coslet,

"The number one premise when a quarterback gets to the pro-level is that he knows everything, but their technique can slip. They need drills to reinforce it over and over again and I can't think of anyone who is a better teacher and technician than Bill Walsh."

Yes, even professionals can get away from the basics and their techniques can slip.

Some of the basics of the Christian faith are humbling ourselves to receive God's daily grace....studying and applying His Word....praying...meeting the needs of people who are hurting and witnessing to our Faith. Even those people who have been in a church a long time and are "pros" need to go back to the basics from time to time. If it's worth \$10,000 for a pro quarterback, think how much more it is worth for you and for me who are God's quarterbacks on the most important team playing in the most important game in town!

Once during the Vince Lombardi years in Green Bay, the Packers were soundly "whipped" by an opponent. They did everything wrong. The next day at practice, Coach Vince Lombardi said,

"Gentlemen...I've seen enough. We must start at the very beginning. Now the object I am holding is a football."

Max McGee is reported to have said, "Coach...please...don't go too fast". Worship, Bible reading and study, praying, serving and giving are the basics for the building of a Christian life and witness. I hope I'm not going too fast.

TRAINING FOR THE TOTALITY OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Lastly, our faith must receive training for the

totality of the human experience and responsibility.

Dr. William Sloan Coffin once shared at Riverside Church - in the pulpit - a November 1983 Reader's Digest that featured the five following articles:

"How To Stay Slim Forever."
"Five Ways to Stop Feeling Tired"
"How To Get Your Way"
"What It Takes to be Successful"
"How Safe Are the New Contraceptives"

It would appear that the Editors have come to the conclusion that millions of Digest readers are - consecutively - fat, lazy, frustrated, unsuccessful, and lascivious. And the very thought that the editors might be right - that we are indeed a nation of "auto-erotic stumblebums" is enough to chill the heart. "Oh, say it ain't so, Joe...." but if you would review some of the selections in current magazines in this decade, you would see pretty much the same topics being addressed and explored.

Romans 12, verses one, two and three pulsate with the message that our minds are not to be squeezed or conformed to the pressure of this world's values, but be transformed by the renewal of our mind by the power and the spirit of God.

Remember that full page ad that our Jewish friends had in the Times a few years back? How did it go,

"Is your child growing up thinking that a 'shophar' is someone who drives you in a limousine to Bloomingdales? Enroll your child today in Hebrew classes at....."

And yes, the whole of our faith is to be public before our children and the world. That line from Deuteronomy comes to mind,

"Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates."

Ours is not to be a secret religion or a camouflaged faith. Somewhere and somehow we must help young lives see that faith belongs to our public life, and not just Sunday in the sanctuary. However, this will never take place if we, as Dr. Charles Stanley said in his "In Touch" television broadcast, spend only 37 seconds a day in training with our children. He went on to point out that the average American father spends more time watching Lite Beer commercials on TV than he does in giving religious training to his children. "Oh, please...say it isn't so".

This is the painful diagnosis, but - oh! what a remedy God gives in His Holy Word to reverse this upsetting condition.

I believe the church's greatest contribution to the world comes when it teaches and lives out it's commitment to Christ rather than conformity to the world. We then become salt. Light. Leaven.

CLOSING Christian education is, at its very essence, the process of teaching disciples of Christ - young and old - how to hear God's WORD in the midst of all the world's words. And His Word teaches us not only how to think but also where to walk. The Christian faith calls us to "put on the armor of God" for the battlefields of life. Have your Bible in one hand, said Karl Barth, and the daily newspaper in the other. And don't forget that Bible hand!

Some of you perhaps can remember, as I can, when we use to have RALLY DAY in our churches. The focus that day was on Sunday School. And I remember, as a teenager, hearing an adult Sunday School teacher say that the Church "is only one generation away from extinction". I had never thought of it that way before. The Church is "only one generation away from extinction". If one generation stops telling the Gospel story to its posterity, the church will be "no more". Extinct.

Stop teaching. Glose the Sunday School. That will spell doom for Christianity. You see Sunday School connects the present generation with the past. Our faithful teachers are "links in the chain"...stretching from this moment back to Wesley, Luther, Augustine, Paul and the Apostles. A connecting chain. Will we break that connection, sever the link. I think not. I pray not. "Say it ain't so..." But better than that. Let's demonstrate it...by being present in Sunday School...along with your kids and with your Bible in hand. Or, on Tuesday night at "Hounds" or Wednesday at Aldersgate. Or Sunday at 9:30.

"Sow an act and you reap a habit.
If you sow a habit, you reap a character.
If you sow a character, you reap a destiny."

For many of us, the very best time to have begun the process of training your mind for God was 15 years ago. But the second best time is today. For the least important fact is the score at half time. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. So...go for it.

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your "Word", O God...to your presence in these moments...Your nearness. Dismiss us with Your blessing and as we go, confirm within each one of us our good intentions and those resolutions and decisions forming in our hearts and our minds in these moments. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.

"From strength to strength go on...
Wrestle, and fight and pray.
Tread all the powers of darkness down and
Win the well-fought day.

Strong in the Lord of Hosts, and
In His mighty power.
Who in the strength of Jesus trusts,
Is more than conqueror."