

Community-Wide Education Celebration
Webster Groves Presbyterian Church, Missouri
August 29, 2004

Sermon

by

Dr. Thomas F. George
Chancellor
University of Missouri–St. Louis

Jesus As A Teacher

I want to thank Dr. Donald Cochran and church member Marion Cairns, who also serves as Curator of the University of Missouri, for inviting me to join you in this celebration of education. I am honored to follow to this podium Dr. Gerald Early, the writer and scholar from Washington University, who, as I was told, gave an excellent presentation last year based on scripture found in Deuteronomy. I am especially honored since many others in my family are far more qualified than I to be standing in this pulpit: my brother, three uncles and a grandfather have been ordained as Presbyterian ministers, and my brother-in-law is an ordained United Church of Christ minister. Earlier this year my brother was a guest at Covenant Seminary in St. Louis, and a current associate pastor in his church outside Sacramento was hired from the staff at Central Presbyterian Church in Clayton.

While last year Professor Early took his scripture from the Old Testament, today I would like to turn to a scripture passage in the New Testament – Matthew 9: 9-13 – which I’ll be reading from the New King James Version of the Bible.

⁹*As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, “Follow Me.” So he arose and followed Him.*

¹⁰*Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples.*

¹¹*And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, “Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”*

¹²*When Jesus heard that, He said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.*

¹³*But go and learn what this means: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”*

An interesting aspect of this passage is that it tells of the calling to discipleship of Matthew, also known (in other gospels) as Levi. And since it is an autobiographical account, given that Matthew is the writer of the gospel, this account has kind of a firsthand flavor and immediacy to it, because Matthew was there.

Matthew was probably a publican, or collector of public revenues – most likely, in the form of sitting in a toll-booth, either by a bridge or at the sea where ships made port. We notice also that Christ's call is compelling and instantly effective – Matthew takes immediate action, and embarks on a new life direction and path of action.

This passage is also part of a recurring pattern that we find throughout the gospels – Jesus reaching out to people of widely-varying economic and social classes. Time after time, Jesus reaches out – to the Samaritan woman at the well and to another accused of adultery, to the poor and to the physically-afflicted – and in this story, Jesus reaches out to the despised class of tax-collectors for the Roman empire.

We heard in the reading how the Pharisees were basically against this. The Pharisees considered themselves separated from other people (indeed, the Aramaic root of *Pharisee* means separated or divided) – and they lived lives of elaborate piety and abstention. They considered others unclean, particularly the sinners mentioned here.

A useful comparison here, in a different cultural context and almost two thousand years later, are the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi who similarly reached out to those of every class, even those considered untouchable, such as the cleaners of latrines.

It is this reaching out to everyone, this spirit of essential inclusion, that drew me to this particular passage. It is a powerful message, and it has a particular meaning for all of us here celebrating education today.

This gospel lesson reminds us of the long connection between the church and education. It also reminds us that Jesus was a teacher, and that as a teacher, his mission was to instruct not only those of wealth and high standing, but also the tax collectors and sinners who sought to learn.

The modern academy (i.e, university) owes much of its early existence to the church, primarily the Catholic Church which was a main conduit of knowledge after the fall of Rome. Around the year 1200, scholars began forming universities with Papal and governmental approval.

To put this in perspective: the Church and the Academy are two of Western Civilization's longest existing institutions. According to the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in *Three Thousand Futures: The Next Twenty Years for Higher Education* (Josey-Bass, San Francisco, 1980), at the time of the Reformation in the early 16th century, there was the Catholic Church, the parliaments of Iceland and the Isle of Man, and 62 universities that still exist today. This gives us an idea for the kind of enduring tradition a university can represent.

There have been changes since that time, of course, with the appearance of many new churches and denominations and new universities with and without religious affiliations.

Nowhere are those changes more evident than here in the United States. Freedom of religion was a primary reason Europeans began migrating to America. And various religions and churches

have flourished here, including Webster Groves Presbyterian Church.

Education has flourished here as well as new arrivals to this country moved quickly to form schools and universities.

The most prominent example of early education in this country is Harvard University – the oldest institution of higher learning in the United States. Founded 16 years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, Harvard was named for its first benefactor, John Harvard, a minister who, upon his death in 1638 left his library and half his estate to the young institution. Interestingly, many early Harvard graduates became ministers, even though the institution never formally affiliated with a special religious denomination and years later further affirmed its intellectual independence by broadening its curriculum. Another early university includes my doctoral alma mater, Yale University, which has its roots in the Congregational Church.

Efforts to establish public education also were prominent in New England prior to the 1700s and became most pronounced nationally when Thomas Jefferson advocated for a system of public education in the late 1700s.

The public elementary and secondary schools that we enjoy today owe their existence to Jefferson and other like-minded leaders. For generations, public schools have been educating and improving the lives of the masses.

Public universities also emerged in the Jeffersonian principle – making higher education more accessible. The Morrill Act of 1862 enhanced efforts to establish universities.

By the 1860s, higher education was becoming more accessible, and many politicians and educators wanted to make it possible for all young Americans to receive some sort of advanced education.

Sponsored by Congressman Justin Morrill of Vermont, who had been pressing for it since 1857, the act gave to every state that had remained in the Union a grant of 30,000 acres of public land for every member of its congressional delegation. Since under the Constitution every state had at least two senators and one representative, even the smallest state received 90,000 acres. The states were to sell this land and use the proceeds to establish colleges in engineering, agriculture and military science. Over seventy "land-grant" colleges, as they came to be known, were

established under the original Morrill Act. Successive acts over the next 50 years refined and extended the responsibilities of the land-grant colleges and universities.

The importance of the land-grant colleges cannot be exaggerated. Although originally started as agricultural and technical schools, many of them grew, with additional state aid, into large public universities that over the years have educated millions of American citizens who otherwise might not have been able to afford college. The University of Missouri is one such university.

While the Morrill Act was a significant piece of legislation for decades college still remained a distant dream of many Americans. It was the GI Bill of Rights, signed in 1944, that shattered once and for all the idea that higher education was the privilege of the well-born elite.

By 1951, more than 8 million veterans received education benefits from the federal government. The result was a dramatic expansion of our higher educational system – an expansion that continues today, though perhaps to a lesser degree.

The University of Missouri–St. Louis itself is the result of the expanded demand for higher education by veterans and their offspring – particularly those living in metropolitan areas where public higher education institutions did not exist.

UMSL was created from a golf course in 1963 with less than 700 students. Today, it enrolls more than 15,500 students, who tend to be older, more diverse and in some circumstances less ready for college than those who matriculate to what we call traditional residential campuses located in rural areas. In addition, 85,000 people are served annually by our division of Continuing Education and Outreach. As such, our students often have different if not added needs. And I feel we've responded extremely well – helping to change and improve the lives of our 65,000 alumni. I should also add that our private institutions in the St. Louis are doing an outstanding job in serving the educational needs across a broad cross section of citizens. And let me praise as well our colleagues in the K-12 schools, both public and private, who are providing a tremendous service to all of us.

The outreach of our educational institutions to as many people as possible is what drew me to this passage in Matthew 9. Jesus sought out the tax collectors and sinners to teach, because they

needed it the most. Our schools, colleges and universities in the St. Louis region act in much the same way. We do not cater only to the elite, but instead open our doors to everyone willing to learn. In many cases, we offer opportunities to those who are the first in their families to attend college, or we offer classes for people who are already out in the workforce, but are seeking to improve their lives through education.

In closing, I'd like to quote the Psalmist David, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord." This verse, from Psalm 122, expresses the joy of inclusion that characterizes both the church and the university, the vital reaching out to others – all others – who need essential instruction.