

I want to read a selection from the book, "Shame of the Nation." This book takes a look inside many of the worst public schools in America and why they are that way. But as I read this excerpt, I invite you to think about your own life and to ask if this story is similar to what you feel as though you are being conditioned to be in our society. After reading from the book and reflecting on how I think this morning's two Scriptures challenge us to be different than this, I am going to ask for your reflections to what this author says and how I interpret his words through the Scriptures.

My hunch is that there will be some who will disagree with my conclusions while others will say, "that's it!" And I think there will be some differences in how folks in different generations respond to what I say. Should be interesting so here we go.

"Three years ago, in Columbus, Ohio, I was visiting a school in which the stimulus-response curriculum had been in place for several years. There was also a program of explicit training of young children for the modern marketplace. Starting in kindergarten, children in the school were being asked to think about the jobs that they might choose when they grew up. The posters that surrounded them made clear what kinds of jobs they were expected to select.

"Do you want a manager's job?" the first line of a kindergarten poster asked. "What job do you want?" a second question asked in an apparent effort to expand the range of choices that these five year olds might wish to make.

But the momentary window that this second question seemed to open into other possible careers was closed by the next question on the wall. "How will you do the manager's job?" the final question asked.

The tiny hint of choice afforded by the second question was eradicated by the third, which presupposed that all the kids had said yes to the first. No written questions asked the children: "Do you want a lawyer's job? A nurse's job? A doctor's job? A poet's job? A preacher's job? An engineer's job? A programmer's job? Or an artist's job? Sadly enough, the teacher had not even thought to ask if anybody in the class might someday like to be a teacher.

In another kindergarten class, there was a poster that displayed the names of several retail stores: JC Penny, Wal-Mart, Kmart, Sears, and a few others. "It's like working in a store," a classroom aide explained. "The children are learning to pretend that they're cashiers."

Work related themes and managerial ideas were carried over into almost every classroom of the school. In a first grade class, for instance, children had been given classroom tasks for which they were responsible. The names of children and their tasks were posted on the wall, an ordinary thing to see in classrooms everywhere. But in this case there was a novel twist: All the jobs the kids were given were described as management positions!

There was a "Coat Room Manager" and a "Door Manager," a Pencil Sharpener Manager" and a "Soap Manager," an "Eraser, Board, and Marker Manager," and there was also a "Line Manager"? What on earth is a "Line Manager"? My question was answered when a group of children filing in the hallway grew a bit unruly and a grown-up's voice barked out, "Who is your line manager?"

In the upper grades, the management positions became more sophisticated and demanding. In a fourth grade, for example, I was introduced to a "Time Manager" who was assigned to hold the timer to be sure the teacher didn't wander from her schedule and that everyone adhered to the prescribed number of minutes that had been assigned to every classroom task.

Turning a corner, I encountered a "Help Wanted" sign. Several of these signs, I found, were posted on the walls at various locations in the school. They were not advertisements for school employees, but for children who would be selected to fill various positions as class managers. "Children in the higher grades are taught to file applications for a job," the principal explained- then "go for interviews," she said, before they can be hired. According to a summary of school wide practices she gave me, interviews "for management positions" were intended to teach values of "responsibility for jobs."

From where I sit, I think the educational practices in this classroom are what many of us experience in our lives today. Our society is based on the following assumption: Our world is an orderly and planned out society. To maintain this orderly and planned out society, we set up certain jobs and responsibilities. To keep the machine functioning, we create workers to fit inside predetermined categories. We are taught that we are to fill in one of these places.

It is like there is this giant grid. Some of us are taught that we can get an education and take a place in the top part of the grid. Others are taught that they are to be middle managers. Others are taught that they are to be lower managers. We are also taught that we are to fulfill certain roles in the home and in the church. Everything is static and everything is controlled.

And for the longest time this structured type of society seemed to work well for many of us. Life was predictable. And many folks here benefitted from this predictable and ordered society. But now we live in a time of great change. Think about all of the changes you have witnessed in a very short time in the areas of technology, communication, energy use, family structures. Our society is no longer predictable.

In an ordered society, we define God as the ultimate manager. God is the one who has set all of this up and if we human beings would just follow the plan then the world would be organized and work well.

Just look at the texts that we read today. God says in the Old Testament book of Exodus, “work for 6 days and then take a Sabbath on the seventh.” Do not work on the Sabbath. It is clear and it is orderly. If everyone would just work for 6 days and take off on the Sabbath then the society would function well and structures would be maintained.

But then Jesus encounters a problem with this rule. He is teaching on the Sabbath when he notices a sick woman nearby. He calls out to her and says to her, "You are set free from your ailment." The religious leaders are incredulous. What are you doing healing on the Sabbath?" they ask Jesus. The religious leader shouts out to the crowd, "there are six days to work, come on those days and be cured, but not on the Sabbath." That is the rule. We cannot bend rules.

But Jesus himself answers back and says, "Should not this woman who has been stricken with a demon for 18 years be healed on the Sabbath?"

And then Jesus compares the kingdom of God to things that grow but that cannot be controlled. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows into a tree. The kingdom of God is like yeast that is mixed with flour until all of it is leavened." The kingdom of God expands. The kingdom of God is limitless. It cannot be controlled.

Some of us have been very happy and content being managers. God bless you. But there are others here who are tired and frustrated with just being a manager for someone else? Do you feel as though your talents are going to waste? Do you feel as though you are being held back from who God has created you to be? Have you lost that spark that used to be in you that said to be something other than someone's manager?

Have you lost your imagination and creativity. Managers believe in a static and controllable God. It keeps things nice and predictable. But you know what, after awhile, for some of us predictable can also become boring.

But what if, instead of believing in a static God that never changes and hasn't done much new stuff since Jesus left the earth, what if we instead believed in a God who created something new every day? And what if we believed that instead of being managers of institutions and families and homes and well ordered lives, we are to be people who enter into each day with God and say, "I am a seed, help me to grow. I am yeast; help me produce something that doesn't currently exist today."

What if we believed in a dynamic and life changing God who desired for us to be dynamic and life changers as well? What if we believed in a God who teaches us to look beyond what is in front of us to what is beyond us that doesn't even exist yet?

The very popular movie Avatar which is the highest grossing movie ever in North America was created in James Cameron's mind in 1994 before the technology existed to create it. Even though the technology did not exist to do what he envisioned, he still dreamed it and wrote the movie. Fifteen years later, his impossible manuscript became a movie making changing epic.

I am going to stop talking now. I've managed enough. I am going to sit down quietly. If anyone wants to share at this time you are invited to do so. You are invited to share if you feel if what I have said is on target or way off target. Either kind of comment is OK. You can share if you have witnessed anything similar to what I have raised or not. Or you can sit quietly and ponder.

Or sit quietly and squirm because nobody is going to be in charge and manage the next few moments. Also, if you are the type that feels uncomfortable speaking in front of a crowd and you want to reflect in a smaller group, I invite any Senior high youth and adults to join me in the youth room during our Christian Education time where we will also reflect on the Scripture and our managed lives.

In worship today, there is space for the unplanned and uncontrolled and unmanaged.

AMEN.

-Kozol, Jonathan, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, Three Rivers Press, NY, 2005, p. 89-91.

-Texts: Exodus 20: 8-11; Luke 13:6-21

-Given: March 7, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)