

“IMPACT 2019: Making 21st Century Disciples”

Rev. Dr. Bill Ekhardt
and Jim VandeBerg

On the front cover of our bulletin is a picture of an adult working with a child, teaching him how to use a tool. As I considered Jesus raising Disciples and I looked back on the history of this congregation, I was struck by this metaphor - the way that we as adults bring our children to faith.

I think back on my own childhood. I remember loving watching the things that my father did. I remember he had a camera, a 35-millimeter camera, and as a 4-year-old, I wanted to shoot all of the pictures of film on this camera. He occasionally let me take a picture, but if I found it on the table, I would try and find some way to sneak off and take a picture with it. I think they were always just totally black. [Laughter.] I was eager to learn what he was doing. I remember him teaching me a little bit about tools, but that wasn't a passion of his, like photography was.

In Scouts, he taught me how to use a screw driver and other tools to earn my merit badges. But, where I really saw my opportunity to learn from my father was in the kitchen. He loved to cook. He had learned to cook at a young age. He had gone through college cooking. He had studied it and he loved it. I saw his passion for cooking and he would invite me in to it.

At a young age he taught me to use a chef's knife - at an age that I think scared other adults [laughter] - and he showed me. He would do things and I asked him questions, and he would explain it and then show me how to do it. He would supervise me doing it and then he would let me do it on my own. So he made me a sous chef. I would be the one cutting things on the side: dicing onions or cutting up chicken to get ready for the meal. He invited me into this. He showed me, he taught me, he did it with me, and finally he sent me to do it on my own.

That is what Jesus did. Jesus called the Disciples. He came into our world. He saw the brokenness of our world. In other parts of Scripture, Jesus is described as saying, *“Look at Jerusalem. Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I wish I could gather you as a hen gathers her chicks.”*

He saw the brokenness of our world and he came to bring the love and the reconciliation, the power and the reign of the Kingdom of God in his very midst. By his own person, in the ministry he was doing, he was reaching out, offering healing to those who were broken, to those who were oppressed, to those who were sad, to those who had been assaulted, to those who had no recourse, to those who were forgotten. He brought Good News of the Kingdom of God and he invited Disciples to come with him. He called them and they worked beside him. They were drawn to what he was doing and they wanted to be part of it. He called them and he taught them, and he showed them. Then he asked them to do it with him. They asked questions and were confused, and he answered them, and here in this passage he sent the 12 out.

We sometimes use the terms Apostles and Disciples interchangeably - the 12 Apostles. But the word "Apostle" means something different than "Disciple." It [Apostle] is a Greek word that means "sent ones." The Apostles were those who were *sent* out. Jesus *sent* them on their own in this passage. It describes that he gave them authority to do what he was doing, and he sent them forward to go off into the towns: to Jerusalem, or to the lost people of the Judeans, rather than the Samaritans. We saw later in the New Testament, in Paul's understanding, that God's call went first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. So, these first who were sent, were sent out to the Jews, to hear the message of the Kingdom of God made near.

He sent them out to heal. Now, I have not been sent to heal. I have prayed for healing. I have offered people to God. My wife has been called to heal. She is an intensive care doctor and she has been called and sent out into a vocation of healing.

I have a different call. Each of us has a different call, but all of us have been sent - all of us have been offered to the world. You know we, as a congregation (I shared a month ago), as we began looking at the four traditions of our congregation: Worshiping with Tradition, Raising 21st Century Disciples, Connecting as a Church Family and Engaging in Mission; I shared a month ago, the first Sunday we looked at this - As Raising Disciples - and we looked back at Rev. Orr, and the exciting passion that he had to raise up Disciples and send them out into the world.

We looked at the miraculous ministry that he founded in the after-school Youth Club program and that through that they sent - in 17 years following the beginning of this - they sent 27 people into full-time Christian ministry, out of this congregation. That was what we recorded in 1958. But that didn't stop there. We didn't stop sending people. We didn't stop being called to make an impact in our world.

We have someone here who is a product of this congregation. My expectation is that you know him, but you may not know much about him. He is someone I have had the pleasure of working with over this last year. He is a humble person. You might go a long time before you hear all of the ways God has used him in his life. But, we have invited him here today to share with you his story, of how this congregation raised him as a Disciple and then sent him out. I invite our business manager, Jim VandeBerg, to come forward. He has agreed to share with you his story of how this congregation raised him and what happened because of that:

[Jim VandeBerg comes to the pulpit to share his story.]

Good morning, everyone! I have two, short stories to share with you this morning. The first story is about Westminster's children and the second story is about Westminster's adults.

My experience growing up here at Westminster was wonderful and life-changing. I attended Sunday school and all the Westminster Wednesday evening programs. I had many great Sunday school teachers, like Chuck and Janet Betts. Chuck and Janet were two young adults then, helping to shape the lives of young people like me. All the kids had a wonderful time learning about the Bible, in the old Boy Scout Cabin in the church basement.

I know there are many of you here, in the congregation today, who began your spiritual journey here at Westminster, just like me.

At the end of high school, Westminster sent me to Punjab, India, to help work in a hospital that Westminster sponsored in India. At that time, Westminster supported Doctor Sy and Yvonne Sato, who managed the hospital in Ferozepur, India. I worked for a month or so in the hospital pharmacy and was humbled by my experience in that remote, Indian village. The experience at that hospital, and plus my spiritual education at Westminster, convinced me that a life of service was what I wanted to pursue.

After college, I began working at a hospital here, and after 18 years was the administrator of Cardio Pulmonary and Neurovascular Services.

When the business administrator position opened at Westminster, I felt called here and was grateful and humbled to be selected. That was almost 28 years ago. I like to think that, because of Westminster training me, I have served over 45 years in direct service to others.

The point of this story is that Westminster can and does change the lives of our young people. The children at Westminster today want to change the world and we need to equip them properly.

Young people are Westminster's future and also the future for our community. They are exuberant, excited and ready to go. As we clarify who we are as a church, Raising 21st Century Disciples is one of our traditions and renewed initiatives for 2019.

Beginning at baptism, we all make a commitment to shape the trajectory of our young people, by teaching them the Good News of Jesus Christ. Making God a part of our children's lives might be the most important thing we do in this world.

I invite you to please give generously to our young people's ministry; they are the future of this wonderful church and our community. You will never know the tremendous impact you may have on young people's lives. Westminster changed my life for the last 45 years.

My second, short story is about how we might all be able to join together to make this renewed initiative of Raising 21st Century Disciples a reality.

Early in their married life, my parents were called by a church elder and asked if they could have coffee together. The elder said he had some exciting news to share with my folks. The elder's name was Lou Glenn and he was an FBI agent, by occupation. [Laughter.]

During coffee, he asked my parents if they wanted to do something that would forever change their lives for the better. Of course, my parents said yes. Plus, it's was hard to say no to an FBI agent! [Laughter.]

Lou said to them, "I want you to start tithing (giving 10 percent) to the church. It will be one of best things you ever do in your entire life." My parents laughed at the idea. "We can barely make ends meet now," they said, "let alone give away 10 percent of our income."

But Lou was completely undaunted, and he would not take no for an answer. He said, “Tithing is not living on 10% less. Tithing is a blessing from God’s promise of overflowing abundance.”

Well, at the end of coffee, my folks agreed to take the challenge, *for at least one year*. My mom learned to be a great money manager during that time, and my parents learned that 90 percent of their total income was actually plenty to live on.

Mom said that they were able to buy a house sooner, as a result of tithing, because they stopped living paycheck to paycheck and actually, intentionally planned how they used money. Financial planning became an important family activity, not an afterthought. They continued to tithe ... and in their early 90s said, “Tithing to God has brought more joy, more satisfaction, more happiness into our lives than almost anything else.”

My parents were never financially wealthy, but their lives were *filled* with over-flowing abundance and blessings.

Because of their example, I began tithing, too, and I can tell you from personal experience, that God’s promise of overflowing blessings is absolutely, unswervingly true. The book of Proverbs tells us that when we honor God with our first and best fruits, we will receive everything we need in life and more.

I challenge you to begin tithing now and join me and many other Westminster members in experiencing God’s blessings that issue from generosity. As the New Testament said today said: “Freely you have received, freely give.”

Back to Westminster’s children. Sooner than you think, the children of this church will become leaders in our community. You’ve seen some leaders here this morning participate in worship. Together we can make an impact in their lives, by commissioning our kids in a life of work, that is guided by Jesus Christ.

Tithing can help make this happen ... both a gift to our children and overflowing abundance to ourselves. This is the time for us to knit together our trust in God and His call for us to make an Impact in 2019. Raising 21st Century Disciples is worthy, and we need to do this job well.

I don’t pretend to be an expert in any of these things I’ve talked about today, and public speaking is not my forte, but I hope that these two stories resonate with you, and I hope that you respond to this important work at Westminster with enthusiasm and generosity.

Thank you very much. [applause]

[Bill thanked Jim VandeBerg for sharing his stories.]
Thank you so much for sharing that, Jim.

Jim is an example of the way our congregation has continued to develop and send people. It didn’t stop in 1958. It didn’t stop in his childhood when Chuck Betts and others were pouring into his life. It didn’t stop when they sent him to India. It didn’t stop - ever. We

continue to raise children. We continue to be called to be Disciples of Jesus Christ in this 21st century and we continue to be sent out.

As we consider these four core actions - these traditions - that we have clarified, that the Session has discerned, that God has called us to as a congregation, we have an opportunity to make an impact. We stand on the shoulders of giants. We stand on the shoulders of those who have been faithful stewards through the decades, here at Westminster. Those who paid off a mortgage in eight years, in Rev. Orr's day; who built this amazing building; who raised Disciples before us. Those who have blessed us with everything that comes before us; and, we have an opportunity to follow God into our world, and to heal the world around us.

We are called, in 2019, to make an Impact. As we baptize our children and welcome them into the covenant community, we are called, in 2019, to make an impact. As we smile at the children who run around our feet in The Commons after worship, we are called to make an Impact in 2019. As the children play in Sunday school, and learn through art and drama, as they sing and as they lead us in worship, we are called to make an Impact, in 2019. As they play and get to know Scripture on Wednesday evenings, as they have opportunities for service we are called to make an Impact in 2019. As they come to confirmation and wrestle with questions of faith and make their own public profession of faith; as they become members with us; as they enter junior high and high school, and go out onto missions and work side by side with advisors like Jon Latch, who got down on the ground with pry bars and dug bricks out of the ground, as they tried to make a garden in downtown Chicago, we are called to make an Impact in 2019.

We are those who have been sent. We are God's gathered people. God has called us together. God has invited us into this covenant community to be Disciples, and also to be Apostles - those who have been sent - to make a difference in our world that desperately needs it. We have no shortage of pain and sorrow and injustice around us. As God has met us in our brokenness, God sends us into the world, to be a source of love and healing, truth and grace. Amen.