

**“Gathered and Formed in Worship”**

Rev. Dr. Bill Ekhardt  
and Gary & Nancy Hartsock

This is the fourth Sunday of our Stewardship Campaign - Impact 2019 - and we have been considering how we as a congregation want to make an impact: how we are led by God to make an impact next year; and, how each of us might participate in that with our time and our talents, our prayers, with our financial pledges. We have been considering these four marks of our congregation that are here on our banners. This is the eighth time Scott or I have come and preached on these topics.

These four things that we find that we, as a congregation, were called to be, that we reach back into our history, continue to propel us forward to 2019: We desire to make an “impact” as we engage in mission. You might notice my gaze following the banners - the yellow banner behind some of you [banners for each of our four marks have been placed up on the walls in the Sanctuary] is that we engage in mission. And we are looking forward to the things that are already started: The seeds that are planted this fall as Pastor Scott and others have gone to meet with families at Monroe Elementary School, as we seek to make an impact in this refugee and immigrant community; as we send a mission team to Szeged, Hungary; as we seek to make an impact on the refugee community through our garden; as we continue the ministry we have been doing for years with the homeless shelter, and others. There are many ways that we wish to make an impact, that we feel moved by God to make an impact in mission.

We connect as a Church Family. We met the last week or two with several different groups as they were starting - as we are forming new relationships, knitting together. This congregation has a history of people joining and making life-long inter-generational relationships. We are seeking to build on that again.

We Raise 21<sup>st</sup> Century Disciples. I have seen more kids on Wednesday night than I have seen in many years here in our congregation, as we reach out to those in our congregation and in our community, to come and be raised as Disciples. To get to know one another, to get to know adults who seek to model the life following Jesus Christ. And we, as well as adults and those who are leading them, are being formed by our service, by our worship, by our study, we are becoming 21<sup>st</sup> Century Disciples.

And finally, We Worship with Tradition. One might ask how do we make an impact by worshipping with tradition. What impact do we seek to make? Worship is one of those things that might feel passive. It might feel like something we come to do for our own benefit, for our own enrichment. Why do we spend the resources, the focus, the time into our worship service? Why do we make this such an important part of what we do?

One of the reasons is echoed in these two passages. In Psalm 22, we hear a timeless message. The Psalmist describes how they are gathering to exalt the name of God. How those who have gone before them are also going to bow and exalt the name of God and how those who are coming after them, those who have not yet even been born, are going to exalt the name of God. This timeless message. And then, right in the middle of history, we see in

the New Testament, Jesus Christ continuing that. Jesus is going into the Synagogue on the Sabbath and he is reading the scroll of Isaiah and teaching, continuing this message. And, they are echoes of Revelation 4; where the people are gathered around God, and the angels are singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the one who is and was, and is to come."

We worship in the tradition of the Reformers, and the Reformers cared a lot about what things Jesus actually did. Some of you may come from another tradition, or at least have friends who come from the Catholic Church. You may notice that they have seven sacraments. I asked my confirmation class. (I will not quiz you right now. I don't want to embarrass anybody.) But, we have only two - two sacraments.

The Reformers whittled it down to two because there were two that Jesus both commanded and participated in. Jesus did not get married, or [do] many of the other sacraments that are recognized in the Catholic Church; so the reformers eschewed those. They were going back to what is Scripture and how this does lead us - and they recognized that Jesus was baptized, as Pastor Scott mentioned when we did our baptism today, and that he instituted and performed the Lord's Supper. We recognize two here that Jesus was worshiping. This Reformed faith - this Reformed tradition - comes to us, whittled down through the years, in our Directory for Worship and our Book of Common Worship, and there are beautiful statements in there about what worship is.

This is me getting to the point of why we care about worship, or how we make an impact with worship. At the beginning of the Directory for Worship, or the Book of Common Worship, it describes *all of our Christian life, all of our service is rooted in worship. Worship is the primary - the beginning - the first part of everything we do in our Christian life.* It continues to say that *God gathers us as a congregation - as God's people - in worship and forms us in worship.*

In worship we are changed and so we might passively - cynically - be concerned that we are paying to entertain ourselves. Don't get me wrong, Scott and I think we are very entertaining [laughter], but that's not the point of this. We don't pour these resources and this emphasis into this, because we desire to have an entertaining experience on Sunday morning, but because in worship we are formed together. We saw this in our surveys, as we had listening sessions and talked to great numbers in our congregation, the very most important - the most valued piece - to the broadest number of people in our congregation was our Sunday morning worship service.

This is the place we are most-gathered, the place where most of us participate, where we are pulled together as a whole - and in worship we are changed. Our theology describes that, as John 1 called Jesus "the word of God - the living word"; that as we come before Scripture it is opened to us and God kneads us, in Scripture's proclamation, through the beautiful music that the choir proclaims, in the human attempts to mediate the presence of God that Scott and I proclaim from this pulpit. And, in the sacraments of baptism and communion, we come into the presence of God, and we are prepared to go out into the world, to serve the broken world where there are pipe bombers and assassins; where there is brokenness and need; where there are marginalized and newcomers, struggling to understand how to assimilate; where we have an opportunity to bring the love of Jesus Christ. We go from this place. We are prepared here to go out into the world, where that same God is at work and join in God's work.

As we have the last three weeks, we have a couple who are going to come and share with us: Nancy and Gary Hartsock. I would invite them to come forward now. They are going to be sharing with us about their experience of worship here at Westminster.

[Gary and Nancy Hartsock come up to the pulpit.]

[Gary speaks:] Thank you, Bill. So, Nancy, how do you repair a broken jack-o-lantern?

[Nancy speaks:] Gary, you have the wrong script. That was last night's script. [Referring to the Hoot -n- Howl event held Saturday night in the Sanctuary.] [Laughter.]

[Gary:] Don't you think I should finish the joke?

[Nancy:] I think if they want to know, they can find you after the service.

[Gary:] I think we should tell the ending of the joke: With a pumpkin patch. [Laughter.]

[Gary:] Moving on. Pastor Scott asked Nancy and I if we would be willing to speak in church today, because of our various rolls in worship. In order to do this, we thought we should give you a little background about us. We both grew up in small towns - Nancy in northwest Iowa; I in Nebraska. Both of us attended small churches for most of our lives. We were married in a small church, with a congregation where we knew everyone and their family members by name. Nancy was better at that than I was.

As we continued to grow in our faith, we sought out churches in the places in which we lived. Even though the towns were small, the fit was not always right. At one church, after Nancy had spent 40 hours a week, sometimes more, plus nights and weekends teaching music in the public schools, one of the church members asked her how she could call herself a musician, because she chose to attend the 8:15 service rather than the 10:30 service, where the choir sang. Needless to say, we looked elsewhere after that. [Laughter.]

At that time, I was working at a radio station in Spencer, Iowa. My worship was listening to whatever local church was on the air from 8-9:00, in the morning. Nancy was driving 70 miles round trip to attend church back home with her parents and the Presbyterian congregation she grew to love in her high school days in Alta. This continued for several years.

We moved to the Des Moines area in the mid-1990s and we again sought out a friendly small church. We found one in Grimes, became quite active for several years, feeling very much part of a new church family. Eventually, though, I was looking for something different.

We came to visit Westminster and, in all honesty, at that time the church was a little overwhelming to me. I wasn't sure if I could convince Nancy to come back.

It was a cold, dreary day. We were a little intimidated with the large gothic structure of the church. It was also "Remember Your Baptism Sunday," which some of the rituals were a little bit beyond our small-town upbringing. Those kinds of things just didn't take place in our other churches – things like communion by intinction and everyone dipping their hands in baptismal waters. In all honesty, at that time we felt lost in the sea of people.

However, after trying a couple of other places, we decided to come back a few more times, Amy Miracle gave the M & M's children sermon on Stewardship Sunday. We had seen the same sermon idea in our two previous favorite churches and we felt we were in the right place.

For a while, it was nice to come and worship and just be invisible: Not involved - just in and out, doing what we called the Hartsock hustle. [Laughter.]

[Nancy:] And, Gary, I totally blame John Cook for what happened next. Oh! and Pastor Scott, who is nowhere to be found, we notice today. [Laughter.]

[Gary:] When Nancy and I decided to renew our wedding vows for our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, back in April of 2014, we sat down with Pastor Scott, so he could get to know us a little before performing the ceremony. It was during that time. that Pastor Scott found out that I was a previous on-air announcer and was currently working as an accountant. Nancy was a music teacher,

I could hear the wheels turning in his brain. [Laughter.] That summer John Cook, who was the choir director at the time, approached Nancy about helping with children's music, at what was then called 242 on Wednesday nights. He [John] also extended an invitation for her to join choir, at which time Nancy expressed to John that the choir felt a little intimidating to her - and the one thing we insisted on, as a family, since moving to Des Moines was that we would worship together - seated side by side - at which time John said, "Well, Gary could join the choir, too." [Laughter.]

Needless to say that is where the story took an interesting turn. Nancy got involved and dragged me along to 242, where she directed the Cherub Choir - who loved to perform with the Bitty Bells.

We were both in choir, which was a major undertaking, because I had never sung in an organized choir since junior high - and I think I have made some improvements. [Gary looks at the choir for affirmation - which he received - followed by laughter.]

I'm a pretty regular worship assistant on Sunday mornings. We serve communion, help with lighting of the Advent wreath. I was on Session as a treasurer for close to three years. Nancy participated in the Blessing of the Animals [worship service] this past year and loved it. We were part of the Hoot -n- Howl event last night. (I have some extra jokes in case anyone wants them.) [Laughter.]

And, of course, here we are today speaking about worship. It is through getting involved in the different aspects of worship that we have felt that Westminster has become a true church home to us. While we don't know everyone by name, we have made a lot of great and lasting friendships at Westminster Presbyterian. Through worship, our Midwestern small-town beliefs have been challenged and stretched to new limits. During a sermon we often look knowingly at each other and accuse Pastor Scott or Pastor Bill of speaking directly to us.

[Nancy:] I was just thinking this morning, watching the baptism and watching the new members, how much tradition that brings to us; and it is in that tradition that I feel like we are still connected. Even though we are in a large church, we are still connected to our small-town roots, and our small-town church, and knowing those very same people that I grew up with are worshiping the same way as we worship here this morning. And, Pastor Bill, talking about our worshiping with tradition in our hymns, within our choir, that we feel not only connected to those people, those Christians around us, but also to those

generations, and every time I sing a hymn, or certain hymns, I'm reminded of my parents who have passed on, and I have such a connectedness to them, through the music and through the tradition like communion, the baptism and having new members join the church.

[Gary:] Worship is important to both us. We may not make it here every Sunday, but chances are, if we are in town, Sunday morning we can be found in the choir or in the pew. Not everyone has to get as involved as we have, but we do guarantee that if you step outside your comfort zone as we have, maybe put your name on the worship assistant roster, or come join the choir - which is not intimidating at all. It is a great bunch of people who we love dearly. We guarantee, you will be rewarded with gifts and human connections you never thought possible.

We no longer do the Hartsock hustle. We have made friends through our various aspects of participation. Our weeks just get better when we can start them by worshiping together with people we care about and, just in case you are curious, I don't have any problems getting Nancy back to Westminster. It has truly become both of our church homes.

Also on a side note, if it wasn't for Westminster 242, we wouldn't have the most awesome tomato soup recipe ever given to us. Thank you, Avis! Once again, you never know what blessings are going to come your way once you get involved. Thank you. [Applause.]

[Pastor Bill returns to the pulpit.]

Thank you, Gary and Nancy. As we hear from their testimony, worship has become an intricate part of their life; their connection to our congregation.

As we gather in worship we are formed together, we are called together, we are knit together. And, as we participate in worship, we echo through the years, all of the way back to Jesus as he stood in the Synagogue and read the Torah, to the time before, back to the Psalmists.

As we gather in worship, we hear the tradition echoing in our minds back to our childhood. I will share an antidote about this. When I was 16 years old, I was ordained a Deacon in my home congregation and one of the things that I did as a Deacon was go out to the nursing homes to provide communion. I remember my father, who was a pastor and leading the service, talking to me about the folks that we were interacting with - some who had not spoken to him in years. As he shared communion with them, as we said the Lord's Prayer with them, they would tear up and cry, as they were connecting to something that echoed back through the decades in their lives.

I remember as well, as we raise our candles on Christmas Eve singing at the end of our service, we echo back to our prior years in our own life. We echo back to years far before us, connecting together with all of the people of God throughout time, back to the beginning of Abraham and Sarah, all the way forward to the Throne Room in Revelation. We connect with all people throughout our world as we worship this one God together. So as we consider the "Impact" we wish to make in 2019, we consider how we as a congregation can worship our living God - coming together in tradition, being opened to be knit together, to be formed individually and as a congregation, in worship. Amen.