

We are Making a Difference through. . . Christian Education

Or:

April 27, 2008

Year A: Sixth Sunday of Easter

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

A young lad was doing well in school, doing very well in every subject but Math. He continued to have problems in the subject in spite of help, positive reinforcement, and tutors. In the end it was decided to move him to a Catholic private school.

The change was remarkable. Every night with barely a word he went to his room and studied until he was sent to bed. At the end of the semester he had an A+ but continued to study. His parents asked him if he knew what had made the difference. Was it the curriculum, or the teachers, or maybe his peers? "Oh No," he said. "I knew they meant business from the first day when I saw that fellow nailed to the plus sign!"¹

Today, I continue with my sermon series on our Core Values. But now we change emphasis. Our first three weeks we concentrated on who we are, on what we want to become. We are a Church Family through . . . Christian Fellowship / A Sense of Belonging / The Building up of Community. Now, for the next three weeks we focus on what we do, on what we want to do. We are Making a Difference through . . . Christian Education.

Our scripture for this Core Value is found in the book of Acts. Now this book is interesting for it provides us a great lens into the early Christian movement. Chapter two begins with the ushering in of the Holy Spirit, a day the church calls Pentecost. This is a time when all Christians could understand each other despite their language barriers. This was an incredible time for the church, a birthing of something truly incredible. The church was not defined by barriers of language, of differences, etc. The church was united under one banner – Jesus Christ. Then Peter goes to work. He gathers everyone together after this moment and delivers his first sermon. He quotes from the Prophets and tells the people that this day was destined to happen. He interprets the Resurrection by telling these new converts that Jesus is indeed their Lord and their Messiah. After the sermon, these new Christians are hungry. They are ready to act. They want something to do to go with their new found conversion experience. Peter tells them that they must make a decision and the scriptures tell us that 3000 people decided to be baptized on the spot and then we have this passage for today.

[Acts 2:42 \(NRSV\)](#)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

From the very beginning of the church teaching and education was just as important as fellowship, just as important as gathering around the table – we call this communion, just as important as prayer. You can not be a part of A Church

¹ "Nailed to plus sign." *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part I.* 10.

Family that Makes a Difference without doing all four pieces. Today, we focus on why Christian Education not only makes a difference, but why it is our Core Value.

I know living this close to South Dakota you get your fair share of Sven and Ole jokes. Here's one of my favorites:

Ole dies and arrives at the pearly gates. He finds himself standing in a long line. As he gets closer he notices Saint Peter standing at the gates with a clipboard asking people a question, and then waving them into heaven. Coming closer still, he hears Saint Peter asking the people in front of him, "How do you spell God?" Everyone answers G-O-D and goes on in.

Finally, it's Ole's turn and Saint Peter asks him the question. "G-O-D" says Ole. Just then Saint Peter's cell phone rings. After a moment on the phone Saint Peter tells him that he has to go to a staff meeting and to please ask the question for awhile. So Ole takes the clipboard.

In a short while Ole's ex-wife Lena arrives. She says, "Ole what are you doing here?" Ole explains that Saint Peter had to go to a meeting and left him to ask the question. "What's the question?" said Lena.

Ole responded, "How do you spell Albuquerque?"²

Sorry – I'm always looking for a way to tell that joke. I'm definitely not implying that certain knowledge will get you into heaven . . . like spelling Albuquerque (although it wouldn't hurt!). However, knowledge – what we gain from the apostles, what we learn from their teachings, how we take their understanding and infuse that into our own faith walk – does make a difference. We make a difference through Christian Education.

A sobbing little girl stood near a small church from which she had been turned away because it 'was too crowded'. "I can't go to Sunday School" she sobbed to the pastor as he walked by. Seeing her shabby, unkempt appearance, the pastor guessed the reason and, taking her by the hand, took her inside and found a place for her in the Sunday School class. The child was so touched that she went to bed that night thinking of the children who have no place to worship Jesus.

Some two years later, this child lay dead in one of the poor tenement buildings and the parents called for the kind-hearted pastor, who had befriended their daughter, to handle the final arrangements. As her poor little body was being moved, a worn and crumpled purse was found which seemed to have been rummaged from some trash dump. Inside was found 57 cents and a note scribbled in childish handwriting which read, "This is to help build the little church bigger so more children can go to Sunday School."

For two years she had saved for this offering of love. When the pastor tearfully read that note, he knew instantly what he would do.

Carrying this note and the cracked, red pocketbook to the pulpit, he told the story of her unselfish love and devotion. He challenged his deacons to get busy and raise enough money for the larger building.

² "Spell Albuquerque." *Ibid.*, 29.

A newspaper learned of the story and published it. It was read by a realtor who offered them a parcel of land worth many thousands. When told that the church could not pay so much, he offered it for a 57 cent payment.

Church members made large subscriptions. Checks came from far and wide. Within five years the little girl's gift had increased to \$250,000.00 - a huge sum for the turn of the 20th Century. Her unselfish love had paid large dividends.

If you are ever the city of Philadelphia, I suggest you look up Temple Baptist Church, with a seating capacity of 3300, and Temple University, where hundreds of students are trained. Have a look, too, at the Good Samaritan Hospital and at a Sunday School building which houses hundreds of Sunday scholars, so that no child in the area will ever need to be left outside at Sunday school time. And in one of those rooms you will see the picture of a sweet face of the little girl whose 57 cents, so sacrificially saved, made such remarkable history. All because Sunday School made a difference in her life.³

How important is a Christian Education program to the life of the church. My father was the Nebraska Conference Treasurer some 15 years ago. One day he was looking at those statistical charts that every church has to fill out at the end of the year. They list the number of members, average attendance, total utility cost, etc. They also list information about the ministries of the church: number of children in Sunday School, number of adult leaders, etc. Well, my father predicted 15 years ago which churches would be closing their doors today. You see, those who lacked a Sunday School, especially children, 15 years ago, now find themselves closed or on the brink of extinction. Look into the future 15 years and you see a generational shift. 15 years can make a difference in leadership. 15 years is long enough for children to grow up, go to college, and in many rural communities not return home.

How vital is a Christian Education program to the life of the church? I still remember my first conversation with Jan Cressy, our church's secretary. Before I arrived as your pastor we emailed back and forth but never had a direct conversation until one night when she called me on my cell phone. I remember standing on my patio in Aurora and Jan was wanting to order material for Sunday School. But in the conversation I began to realize why she called. The prospects for the fall were not good. Attendance at Sunday School was down, families were moving out of town, the energy level of the program was just low, and Jan was looking for some guidance, some word of hope from her new pastor.

I don't know if I reassured her or not but I remember saying something about how when I arrive in Chadron we'll address the issue. I tried to reassure that I was concerned as well about our Christian Education program and that we'd take care of it that summer. I don't know if Jan heard it in my voice, but I was scared to death at that point. We hadn't moved yet, I wasn't even your pastor, yet, but the weight of the Sunday School program was beginning to weigh on my shoulders.

Well, we moved, and things were busy. I was busy trying to learn the community and do as much as I could to help the church and the countdown to

³ "57 cents." *Ibid., Part III.* 33.

the first Sunday after Labor Day kept looming. In early August we gathered as many interested teachers and educators as we could and we all agreed that this program was important. We threw everything we had into our fall Sunday School kickoff. We sent out postcards to interested children. We decorated the church with balloons. We put little footprints from the door to our upstairs Sunday School rooms, we had greeters waiting by the door for children and their families. We made a statement that this is important. We didn't know it yet, but we were saying that Christian Education, was our Core Value. We are here to make a difference in our children – we are here to make a difference in peoples lives.

Look where we have come in just 2 ½ years. Because of this Core Value we have noise in the church – I'm talking good noise, the noise of life, of energy, of a future. Because of this Core Value we are training our leaders to take over when we get old. Because of this Core Value we continue to the tradition of the early church that focused on fellowship, communion, prayer, and the apostles' teaching.

How important is a Christian Education program for the life of the people? How many of our lives have been sustained by the stories learned in Sunday School? How many friends have been gained in Bible Study where prayer, and fellowship, and learning are paramount? How many times has one gotten out of a bind due to the wisdom gleamed in a Christian Education program? And Christian Education does not stop when we graduate. Because of this Core Value we offer adult education through *Financial Peace University* and *The Purpose Driven Life*. We continue to use our Wednesday night Family events for further education, and we will always seek ways to make Christian Education a way to make a difference in our lives and in the lives of those we touch.

In *Six Hours One Friday*, Max Lucado writes of a friend named Lisa who taught a Sunday school class in an underprivileged area. Lisa had in her class a timid, nine-year-old girl named Barbara. Max writes:

[Barbara's] difficult home life had left her afraid and insecure. For the weeks that my friend was teaching the class, Barbara never spoke. Never. While the other children talked, she sat. While the others sang, she was silent. While the others giggled, she was quiet.

Always present. Always listening. Always speechless.

Until the day Lisa gave a class on heaven. Lisa talked about seeing God. She talked about tearless eyes and deathless lives.

Barbara was fascinated. She wouldn't release Lisa from her stare.

She listened with hunger. Then she raised her hand. "Mrs. Lisa?"

Lisa was stunned. Barbara had never asked a question. "Yes, Barbara?" "Is heaven for girls like me?"⁴

Lisa knew she was making a difference in one person's life.

This is why Christian Education is important. This is why Christian Education is our Core Value. Christian Education is how we are A Church Family that Makes a Difference. Amen.

⁴ *Contemporary Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, & Writers*. Craig Brian Larson, ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: BakerBooks. 1996.) 93.