

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

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Sue Sawers Installation Service
1st Presbyterian Church, Virden, IL

Making Disciples

Matthew 28:19

There is a hospital in New Jersey which has a special program to train nurses who care for the elderly. The nurses take to the beds where they experience what it feels like to be fed. They receive the crackers that crumble on your chest, the juice that dribbles down your chin, and the orange Jell-o which has no taste. Within the space of a few hours they experience what it means to be a dependent adult. At first it seems like a silly game, but after a while it becomes confining and demeaning. They begin to feel the fear that comes with being completely dependent on others. Then they explore what they have experienced through lectures and discussion groups. They come to see how their own fear of aging influences the way they interact with elderly patients.

In one of the discussion groups, a nurse shared an accidental discovery that she had made while caring for a patient. A newspaper writer recorded her story in these words:

Like all nurses, she always has too much to do—pills, temperatures, bedpans, reports, incessant phones, and worrying relatives. One day she was talking, really talking with an elderly patient. Without thinking, the nurse reached out and took the frightened patient's hand. It was as if she had just discovered the panacea for patient loneliness and job dissatisfaction. Amid all that complicated technology, the most potent medicine at that moment was the un-prescribed power of two humans simply touching (Andrew H. Malcolm, *The New York Times*, October 22, 1992).

It is this power that Matthew wanted his church to experience. He invited his people to remember a gathering of disciples who encounter the resurrected Christ on a mountain in Galilee. Matthew describes these followers of Christ as people who are filled with fear and ambivalence. They know they have failed Jesus and they are afraid that he will reject them for it. They are afraid that Jesus will have no more use for them. But they are even more afraid that he will have further plans for them. He may lead them in a direction they do not want to go. Matthew sums up their ambivalence by pointing out that when Jesus appears they worship him at the same time that they doubt him.

It is to such a group that Jesus says, "Go therefore and make disciples... (Matthew 28:19)." Matthew wants his church to understand that discipleship is always grounded in our weakness. Matthew does not see a disciple as one who has it all together or has all the answers. The disciple is not powered by skill or ability or self-confidence. The disciple is one who learns the discipline of being attentive to one's personal weakness and is willing to be shaped by the word of God.

Charles Brown tells of an experience which enabled him to understand the meaning of discipleship. The church treasurer in his congregation was a young man in his late thirties named David. David was an accountant who never said much. In fact, over a period of four years, the pastor had not heard him say more than three sentences. Early one morning David called his pastor with a special request. He was on his way to visit the mother of one of his friends. The friend had just killed

himself and the family did not belong to a church. David wanted his pastor to join him in making this visit. When the pastor arrived, David was already there holding the hand of the stricken mother.

Weeping softly she said, "David, I loved Jimmy so." David replied, "I know you did and Jimmy knew that, too." The mother continued, "How will I ever go on without Jimmy?" David sighed and declared, "You will not have to go on alone. Your family is here. I am here. I've even asked Reverend Brown to come by." Turning to the pastor she cried, "Why did God take my boy?" Before the pastor could respond David replied, "This is not God's doing. God suffered with Jimmy through his depression. And God is with you now. The God I worship knows what it is like to lose a son." (Charles Brown, *Evangelism in the Reformed Tradition*, page 123).

The next week the grieving mother and her daughter were in church. Several months later they were both baptized and received into the membership of the church. They had been touched by the message of God's love because an unwitting disciple was present with them in their pain. David discovered through this experience a capacity to be a disciple and to make disciples that he never knew he had. He had done nothing more than respond out of his own weakness to a family that was in pain. There was no intention to preach to anyone. There was no strategy to convert anyone. All he did was act on the strength of the love of God that had touched his life.

Today marks a new beginning for this church. In Sue Sawers you have called a Commissioned Lay Pastor who is very competent and very dedicated. She will be a blessing to this congregation.

This installation service is a time to remember that making disciples is central to our mission. One of the best things Sue will do is be your partner in discipleship. God is already using the power of your touch to reach those who are in pain. As we respond out of our weakness doors of faith are opened and we are transformed. "Go therefore and make disciples... (Matthew 28:19)."