

Make Us Disciples

A Sermon by *the Revs. Joseph David Stinson and Cynthia Reynolds*,
Preached at the Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,
On Consecration Sunday, (14 November), 2010.

Texts: Isaiah 65: 22b-23

“For like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work
of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children in calamity;
for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord, and their children with them.”

Matthew 28:19a “Now go therefore and make disciples of all nations....” ~Jesus

What’s giving got to do with being a disciple? Today we celebrate our stewardship of the faith and this church. Today’s worship is about our role as disciples of Jesus and what we do with his commission to make disciples of all nations, of our children and grandchildren, of the neighbor who sits on the train next to us every morning. It is about living as disciples, loving our neighbors, about hands-on Christianity. Implicit in this is *our need to be made disciples of Jesus*, not just church members responsible for the financial well-being of the institution. Of course, giving is at the heart of being a disciple, or at least that is what Cindy and I believe. First, we start with our testimonies. What are the most important lessons we learned on giving and how has it changed our discipleship?

David’s Testimony: It was my first year out of divinity school, just ordained. As we approached the fall campaign I asked my conference minister, the Rev. A. Karl Philippi about how to do stewardship. I had been pledging to a church I joined while in seminary. But now I was a minister and had to get people to open their hearts and pocket books for the year ahead. I was making a salary of a little over \$7000 a year and my wife was a graduate student at MIT. There was a parsonage, health insurance, and a pension. I had unbridled confidence in myself to make the church grow and thrive. The first step was to get members to give. Karl thought it would be good to get the treasurer of the City Missionary Society of Boston to preach a sermon and help me get my feet on the ground with stewardship. Karl told me this fellow had a very compelling testimony about his own life and faith. He was a former banker, like you Cindy, who got a call, left the bank and went to work to help administer the City Missionary Society. He brought his considerable business and management skills to bear on that old church social service agency. I called him and he said he’d be happy to come to help us at South Congo. I thought he’d just do a sermon on a fall Sunday. But he wanted me to arrange a meeting for him with my deacons and on the same day, he said he’d meet with me, too. When he arrived in my office, he was in a gray banker’s suit, nicely dressed. I am sure he was about the age I am today. I was twenty-five then.

He first told me his story, and it was compelling. For several weeks I had thought about an amount to pledge, probably as some of you did this morning before you came to church. But after he told me about his faith and life, he asked me point blank about what I was giving to the church and if I were tithing. I hemmed and hawed a bit, but then he looked straight at me and

said, “David, the tithe is the only way. It is what changed my life. I was doing well and giving as you did, a *respectable* amount, more in my mind than many were in my church. But then I became stewardship chair of my church and looked as a banker over the finances of my church. They were *pathetic*. The congregation had the means but everyone was just leaving a *respectable* amount of what they had left over to God. They only gave enough to think well of themselves, and they certainly weren’t tithing. The minister and I both had to speak on stewardship in the campaign, and it dawned on both of us that we had to lead the way. So he and I made a first step toward tithing—far more than either of us thought we could afford—and made the commitment to keep making steps until he and I were both tithing. I had been very nervous, as had he, talking about stewardship until we made that decision to give. Suddenly, we had no hesitancy to ask others to be a part of the exciting and life-changing Christianity we believed our church had the potential to offer. David, you have to tithe to free your voice to ask others for their gifts.”

Wow! Well, I had to discuss it with my wife, but I knew he was right. When my wife agreed, we did start tithing. It did change my life and my preaching. It’s one thing to give a pleasant lecture each Sunday on the faith. It is another if you really live it. Giving is at the heart of discipleship. Not just giving to the church but especially giving to the church. Each year I have a rueful feeling I cannot afford in a worldly sense to give what I promise. I always worry a little, when on this Sunday I put the card in with a number written in the blank or when I make a gift to an Operation Mustard Seed, or to the other good causes Cyndi and I help support. I am amazed when I do my taxes that I have been able to do it. But when you put your heart into giving as a disciple, it helps you reorder the rest of your life and finances to the cross, to God, to being a faithful steward. It sounds upside down, I know. It means you have to rely on Jesus but when I do, I have always found he is faithful. Cindy, what about you? What was the most important lesson you learned on giving and how did it change your discipleship?

Cindy’s testimony. Going to Sunday School, going to worship was something my family just did every week. And I learned at an early age that there was an expectation that we all shared in the ministry of the church by being generous with our time, talent, and treasure. I remember the progression to giving of our treasure in Sunday School – from the basket in our Sunday School classroom – when I was very young we all put in our offering, the teacher said a prayer blessing it and us in our giving. Then came the offering envelopes – but while they looked just like the envelopes the adults used, they were a different color – ours were yellow. And when we had worship together as a Sunday School before our classes, the oldest kids collected our envelopes in wooden offering plates. The rite of passage came at confirmation when we now used the white envelopes – that meant we were adult members of the church – and our offerings were now collected in the silver offering plates every week in “big church.”

It was through all these steps that giving of my treasure became part of my life – those envelopes sat on the windowsill in our house – we didn’t make much money in our family but I remember when my father got paid on Fridays, the first thing that happened was that their pledge went into their envelope and I was expected to do the same thing – put my money from my allowance in my yellow envelope, ready to go to church on Sunday mornings. Ten cents for every dollar – a tithe – it was what we did. And if for some reason, and it had to be a big reason, we weren’t going to church that week, we still filled the envelopes – and took them the next time. This was non-negotiable.

I was also blessed to understand from a very early age how important my offerings were to the ministry of the whole church – my mother worked at home, typing – yes, on an old typewriter with carbon paper even – dissertations for students at the Hartford Seminary Foundation – over the years I met people from all over the world who were doing God’s work in faraway lands. And while I somehow knew that I probably wouldn’t go to Africa or Japan or somewhere else exotic to share God’s love, I knew that I was doing my part by sharing my treasure so that others could. It was all so real to me – and helped me understand the image of the Body of Christ – we all have gifts to share and we’re called to do just that – however we can. We’re all disciples, no matter our age or station in life, and we’re all called to do God’s work, ministry, including sharing of our treasure. I learned from these missionaries about the cost of discipleship – some of them unable to return to their home countries because of their proclaiming God’s good news, some of them leaving family and friends behind for years at a time – but I also learned about the joy of discipleship as well. The joy that oozed out of them was something I’ll never forget – and that’s something I wanted to know in my own life and share – then as a child and now as an adult. Do I still tithe today? Not the biblical concept of 10% of my earnings I’m afraid – but I’m working on it. I think about the amount, the percentage of my giving every day – I want to give to the church until it feels good.

David: For a number of years you and I have struggled with an old pattern of stewardship drives here. Leaders always want us to develop a budget and ask people to support a budget. Having a budget only gives people something to argue about. So far I’ve failed to communicate what I believe about giving. But here it is, from the basis of my own experience. The reason I give arises more out my need to give so that I can become a better disciple of Jesus, not because the church needs more money. Yes, the church needs to pay bills. But the church always needs more money. What is more important to me is I’m trying to free myself from my spiritually debilitating dependence on money. Do you notice how there is never enough. Even if you get a promotion with a big raise, within a short time you think, ‘*Wow, I don’t have enough.*’ I learned this about money when I started tithing. I always had enough to live on but it never *felt* that way. There was always this gnawing feeling that I didn’t have enough. Why is that? When you give it away you disarm money’s power over you. That is why the one thing Jesus talked about to his disciples more than anything else was money. He said, “*Where your treasure is, there will your heart be.*”¹ If your heart is chasing after every new doodad and gizmo, you will never be at peace because there is always something new you’ll have to have. But what if your heart is not given over to possessions and things, but to God? This is what Jesus meant when he told his disciples:

Do not fret about what you will eat, drink or wear. Unbelievers eagerly seek all those things, and your Father knows what you need. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as you have need for them.²

This takes faith to let go of the frenzy for stuff. You have to believe in a God who knows you, who knows what you need and who will provide for you. Still, a lot of people say they believe this and yet don’t live like it. What’s the secret? *Give it away.* I told you about the man who taught me tithing and how giving away so much empowered him. As upside down as it sounds, if you give to people, institutions and causes that you value, the giving has a way of ordering the

¹ Matthew 6:21.

² Matthew 6:31-33. My translation.

rest of your life, finances and time. If you tithe, it will also inevitably affect the rest of your material world. That may scare you. But here it is. You give it away so you can take control of your life and finances and not let the money control you. If you really are going to be a disciple of Jesus, it has to be Jesus—not your money—who is in charge of your life. Okay, Cindy, this brings up another important question: *“Why is the church so important to discipleship?”*

Cindy: This week there was an article in one of the Glen Ridge papers applauding the spirit of volunteerism in our town. We know there are opportunities all around us to give – food and clothing drives, fund raisers – all to benefit those who are less fortunate than we are. And this is all good. What struck me, though, were the words “we want to give back” – and I wondered, give back to what? To whom?

There was a time when the church was the only institution that encouraged this kind of sharing – and our context was that of discipleship, somehow I had learned that I was called to give because Jesus told me to. We too are called to give back – but we’re clear it’s to give back to God a portion of what we have so abundantly received. As people of faith, we know that all we have is on loan from God – we know that all we have is a gift from God – that we are called to be generous with these gifts that the realm of God may come on earth as it is in heaven. We struggle with the “I did it myself” and “I work hard for what I have” mentality – we struggle with our fears for the future – we get caught up in our “stuff” and what’s important to us. I wonder if we forget, though, that what we achieve is due to the gifts God has given us and how we have nurtured them all our lives– our talent for business or other means of making a living – that’s a gift from God, not of our own making.

We come together as a community of faith to celebrate all that God has given us and then to turn outside of ourselves to “go therefore and make disciples”. We come together as a community of faith to hold each other up in good times and bad. We come together as a community of faith to learn about God and help each other discern what it is God calls us to do with our assets, our treasure, our time, our talents, indeed our very selves. We need each other, don’t we – we can’t be people of faith alone – we can’t be disciples in a vacuum for Christianity is a religion of relationships – our relationship with God and each other. The great commandment: love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength and love your neighbor as God has loved you. We can’t do that alone – we just can’t.

The church helps us remember that it is God who is in charge, that it is God who is the constant – that God’s forgiveness is always available to us, that God’s love constantly surrounds us, in good times and in bad. Think back to those terrible days after 9/11 – wasn’t it then that we flocked to our churches for support, for comfort, for words of promise, of hope – wasn’t it then that our perspective of what’s important in our lives was sharpened to the one thing that never changes: God’s presence, God’s love – wasn’t it then that we realized in a new way, you never know that God is all you need until God is all you have. When all we hold dear is shattered around us, when our sense of security is threatened to the core, it’s the church, the Body of Christ, that sustains us – it doesn’t change. God’s love doesn’t change. And we want to hold on to that – all the time. That’s the gift we’re all so freely given – and the gift we’re called to share, with great joy, with great abandon, unafraid of what tomorrow may bring.

The church is a lot like the soup the villagers made in that great old story, Stone Soup – all of us have something to offer to make a wonderful nutritious meal for our brothers and sisters in Christ. The question is, will we go back to our homes and bring the ingredients to share?

Andrew Waugh read us this morning a passage from Isaiah full of promise, giving us a vision of the kind of life God wants for us:

David: The vision of life in Isaiah 65 is a word picture of shalom.³ It was written at a time of anxiety, war, confusion and non-shalom. In the vision each person has a home and vineyard and is able to enjoy the wine from his or her grapes. This the great vision of God's kingdom in the Old Testament. It did not exist, but they prayed for it to come. Note the way the prophet phrased it: each builds a home, lives in it and 'long enjoys the work of their hands.'⁴ No one looks over the fence at his or her neighbor's home and covets it. Part of the secret of the vision is that we have to find a way of enjoying what we have: our families, homes, lives. Contentment with what God has given us, not anxiety about what we think we should have, is the key. Churches need to live this way, too. But *stuff* exercises a spiritual hold on us. How do we get free of that hold? How do we live this vision of shalom? We have to let go of our possessions and give them over to serve a higher purpose than our neediness. Cindy...

Cindy: Now, it's decision time for us - how will we support this church today and in the future by our pledge. It's a bit difficult to speak about this, though Jesus talks more about money than any other subject – but there is the reality that a large portion of our annual budget goes to pay salaries – mine and all the rest of the staff. It feels a bit self serving to stand here and ask you to be extravagantly generous in your pledge – but you know, it's not about me or the rest of the staff, but it's about the ministry of this church – the programs we offer, the worship experiences we share, the outreach we do, the educational opportunities, the pastoral care we offer.

You've heard testimonies from members of this church as to what this church means to them and their families. And you also heard Joan Hayes speak last week about the dire financial problems we face in our operating budget. Yes, we have a new roof, new lighting, these extraordinary stained glass windows have been repaired and restored – other improvements thanks to your generosity in Operation Mustard Seed. But the daily life, the daily ministry of this church is at risk. Yes – I do have a passion for feeding hungry people – but hunger goes deeper than pains in the stomach. There's a hunger in each of us to make meaning in our lives. There's a hunger in each of us to know we matter. There's a hunger in each of us to feel safe, to feel secure, to feel embraced by God's love, no matter what. There's a hunger in each of us to share our joys, share our sorrows – to live together in community. And Jesus tells us to feed his sheep, feed the deepest hungers we all have—in community.

What if – what if our doors are locked when a child comes here in the afternoon, afraid to go home because of an unsolved murder in her neighborhood? What if that safe place isn't open when she needs it?

What if we are not able to be blessed with the haunting music of the strings playing “O Sacred Head now wounded” at the Maundy Thursday Tenebrae worship?

³ Isaiah 65:17-22.

⁴ Isaiah 65:22.

What if – what if there’s no heat or the lights aren’t on when someone comes here to the church after receiving a cancer diagnosis and wants to talk to someone, go into the sanctuary to pray?

What if nobody answers the phone when a woman calls just after her husband has died at home and wants someone to come to offer prayers, to offer comfort, to offer God’s love at a devastating time in her life?

What if our children aren’t able to learn the Christian story in their Sunday School classes – at Star of Wonder – at Way to the Cross. Or at any number of special events for our families where they learn what it means to follow Jesus?

Most weeks we pray for our church to be a beacon of light in a hurting world – what if that light dims so much – what if our shared ministry is reduced so much just because of financial restraints – what if what means the most to you here at the Glen Ridge Congregational Church is compromised by a lack of resources – what if, indeed.

We have the power, the ability, the challenge, the God given call to keep this from happening – to expand our ministries in new and profound ways – not just maintain our ministry, but widen the circle to include ways of showing God’s love, of bringing God’s presence not just to each other, but to people who are looking for something to bring meaning to their lives – something that lasts. To people who are looking for hope, joy, peace – that peace that can only come through a strong faith.

Friends, we can do this. With God’s help, nothing is impossible – our ministry of the past can continue into today and into the future. But it will take all of us sharing what we have to make this ministry strong and meaningful, starting right now.

Sherry Taylor told a story yesterday at the Association Meeting about us here in Glen Ridge – each year I give the confirmands a final exam – one of the questions asks what OCWM stands for. Graham Johns gave the proper answer: Our Church’s Wider Mission but he added to it – he called it “Our Chance to work miracles.”

Indeed it is our chance to work miracles that will touch not only each of us in this place gathered this morning but our neighbors near and far. As God has blessed each of us in abundance, with an extravagant generosity, so may we share it with others. Working miracles has a financial aspect to it – that’s the reality. But with God’s help we can do this. We can do this together. Your pledge enables these miracles to happen every day – praise God for the opportunity to serve and be served.

David: I’ve too long listened to sermons attempting to guilt us into digging deeper to help the church pay its bills. I am tired of hearing how much we need to give so that the church can buy more gizmos. I only want to give because I want to be a better disciple of Jesus who works for him, not for more stuff I don’t need. To tell you the truth, I think many of us are tired of hearing what the church doesn’t have and how little we have. *It’s the great lie of the world.* I want to give it away so it no longer has power over me. I only want Jesus in charge. He is a far

better Lord over me than my money ever is. I invite you to give yourselves, too. Give yourself over to him and let your money go. Lord, make us your disciples. Lord, make this a church where we discover the faith to believe, that whatever we need, you will provide.

End.

Make Us Disciples. DOC