

OUR CHILDREN OUR CITY AUGUST 15 2010  
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
M. KENT MILLARD

Summer is coming to a close and children and youth are starting back to school.

St. Luke's vision is that God would transform us here in worship and then use us to transform the world around us into a compassionate, just, inclusive and Christ-like community.

One of the great needs in our community is to transform and improve the education of our children and youth in Marion County and indeed throughout the state of Indiana.

The book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible is a collection of wise sayings that are intended to help us develop into people who live meaningful and fruitful lives.

Proverbs 22:6 has this wise saying about teaching children. The New Revised Version puts it this way:  
TRAIN CHILDREN IN THE RIGHT WAY AND WHEN OLD, THEY WILL NOT STRAY.

Many of us learned this verse in the Revised Standard Version which says: TRAIN UP A CHILD IN THE WAY HE SHOULD GO AND WHEN HE IS OLD HE WILL NOT DEPART FROM IT.

Whatever version you like I hope we will remember the point that how we train or educate children today will impact the kind of persons they become in the future.

In the New Testament Jesus used exaggeration or hyperbole or overstatement to help his followers understand how important it is to lead children and youth in ways that lead to life.

Here is how he said it in Luke 17:1-2

IT WOULD BE BETTER FOR YOU IF A MILLSTONE WERE HUNG AROUND YOUR NECK AND YOU WERE THROWN INTO THE SEA THAN FOR YOU TO CAUSE ONE OF THESE LITTLE ONES TO STUMBLE.

I would like to invite DENNIS RYERSON to join me here. Dennis is the editor of the *Indianapolis Star* and has led an effort to enroll everyone in our community in helping to improve the education of our students through a series of articles in the *Indianapolis Star* under the theme *OUR CHILDREN, OUR CITY*.

Dennis, welcome to St. Luke's. Thank you for your time and wisdom today. Tell us about your family and how long you have been editor of the *Indianapolis Star*.

Why did you start a series of articles on the challenges we face in educating our children and youth in Marion County?

What have you learned about the needs in our school systems?

What are your goals for the series *OUR CHILDREN OUR CITY*? How many tutors and mentors have been enrolled so far?

How can we help?

There are some tables in the narthex where volunteers can sign up to become tutors and mentors at Fox Hill School or on the *Indianapolis Star's* project to enroll mentors and tutors in the Indianapolis Public School System.

I would like to point out that last Monday at a large gathering of Washington Township teachers and staff, Superintendent JAMES MERVILDE presented this award to the people of St. Luke's for the 70 volunteers who gave their time each week to tutor or mentor students at Fox Hill School last year and we hope for a similar number of volunteers this school year as well.

Thank you Dennis and *The Indianapolis Star* for this great community minded series of articles and we hope we can all work together for the education of the children and youth in our community.

Let us pray.

Last week Minnietta and I took two of our grandchildren, Jalen and Taylor Hall, to our family reunions in South Dakota. We first went to Minnietta's family reunion in Redfield, S. D. where Minnietta saw some distant relatives she had not seen in a long time and spent time looking through family scrapbooks with pictures of long passed relatives. While Minnietta was looking at pictures our grandchildren and I went swimming, boating and played volleyball and croquet with some of the other relatives and had a great time.

Then we went to Faith, South Dakota, a little town of 500 people on the prairie where I grew up and graduated from high school which was celebrating their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a town and an all school reunion.

The big news in Faith was that three months ago, city workers were drilling a new well for water at the edge of town. When they had drilled down about 2,200 feet they didn't discover water; they discovered oil.

Headlines in newspapers all over the state said that oil had been discovered under this small town on the prairie. Oil drilling experts from other states came and they suspect that there may be a significant reservoir of oil under Faith, S. D. The city has now hired an oil drilling firm to drill other wells around the town to see how big or small this pool of oil is.

City leaders hope that it may become a significant source of income so that they can build a new K-12 school to replace their condemned school building that had to be torn down a few years ago.

As I thought about the possibility of this valuable resource underneath the town I grew up in, I realized that there is a parable here. For 100 years since the town was settled, there was a valuable resource beneath the surface that no one knew was there. Our family lived in that town for about 15 years and we never knew there was a precious and valuable resource so close by. That precious and valuable resource was there all the time, but we didn't know it or recognize it.

It occurred to me that the same thing is true here in Indianapolis. There is a precious and valuable resource all around us right now, but we often don't recognize, value and cherish that resource.

The valuable and precious resource which is around us right now is all the children and youth in our community. All the children and youth who live in this community around us are the most valuable and precious treasure we have.

The Colts and Pacers and the Fever teams are a great resource and asset in our community but the children and youth around us are an even more valuable treasure.

The Lilly Pharmaceutical Company and all the other major corporations in our community are a great and valuable resource in our community but our children and youth are an even more precious and valuable treasure.

The most precious gift that God creates and gives to any family, community or nation are the children and youth whom God chooses to create, give to us and ask us to love, nurture and educate.

Children and youth are the most valuable and precious resource around us and yet we are a society and nation that fails to treasure and educate all of them and allow them to develop their full potential.

Thirty years ago the United States led the world in education. We had the highest percentage of high school and college graduates in the world and were the world leaders in math and science.

Today, the students in the United States are 12<sup>th</sup> on the list of nations according to their knowledge and ability in the core subjects of math and science. There are 11 other nations in this world doing a far better job than we are in educating young people in these core subjects.

If this trend continues, in the future our nation will fall further and further behind economically and our values of freedom of speech, religion, press and individual initiative may become less and less widespread.

Jesus often spoke about the importance and value of children. He once took a small child up in his arms, looked at his disciples and said: "Whoever accepts one of these little children accepts me and whoever rejects one of these little children rejects me."

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus puts his concern for children even more forcefully. Now, I need to explain that Jesus, like other Jewish teachers in his time, often made exaggerated statements in order to make a teaching more forceful and pronounced.

I am so glad that Jesus did that because my family often tells me that I tend to exaggerate a little myself in telling stories. I learned this from my mother who often said that all the facts of a situation spoil a good story.

It is a good Jewish teaching practice to overstate a situation in order to make an important point.

In the text I just read from Luke, Jesus wanted to make a strong point about not leading children and youth astray, so he told his disciples that it would be better for a person to have a heavy millstone rock tied around his neck and to be thrown into the sea, rather than to lead one of the children and youth around them astray or cause them to stumble.

Jesus was not advocating capital punishment by drowning, but he was making an unforgettable point about the importance of adults taking responsibility for the well-being of the children and youth around them and not leading them astray or to stumble in their journey through life.

Luke literally says that we should not lead the younger ones around us to sin. Now, the word sin in the Greek literally means “missing the mark.” It is a term which was used in archery; when an archer shot at a target and missed, it was called a “sin” because you missed the mark towards which you were intending.

The implication is that God created us all to hit the target of our lives. It is as if we are all on a journey to hit the target of becoming persons who are characterized by love, joy, peace, compassion, kindness, gentleness and faith.

If we don't become loving, joyful, peaceful, compassionate, kind, gentle and faithful, then we have sinned; we have missed the mark or target of our lives.

Furthermore, if we don't enable the children and youth around us to become well educated and grow and become all that God created them to be then we have failed, “sinned”, or missed the target and caused the young around us to stumble and fall.

I'm sure that when Jesus sees the way that so many young people in our community are stumbling and falling because they don't get the love, nurturing and education they need, Christ weeps and wonders why we are so neglectful.

The author of Proverbs 22 gives us the positive guidance we need to provide children and youth around us what they need to become all God created them to become.

**TRAIN UP A CHILD IN THE WAY THEY SHOULD GO AND WHEN THEY ARE OLD THEY WILL NOT DEPART FROM IT.**

In his commentary on this verse, John Wesley pointed out that sometimes parents may love and nurture their children very well and when they grow up they depart from the values with which they were raised, so that we should say that they will not usually depart from it.

The truth is that the way we are raised and the values we learn as children generally have a long term affect on our lives.

There is an old African saying which says that it takes a village to raise a child well. This means that it takes more than just good parents; it takes good and caring relatives, teachers, pastors, friends and neighbors to help children and youth learn and retain values of love, compassion, faith, and generosity.

Think about yourself. Think about the village of people it took to raise you. That includes your parents, relatives, teachers, friends and neighbors and all the other adults who had a positive influence on your life.

Last week I was in a circle with about half a dozen of my high school classmates and we started talking about the teachers and other adults who had a profound impact on our lives 50 years ago.

We remembered Bea Fowler, our English and Speech teacher and how she was the one who helped all of us get up in front of the class for the first time and give a speech. Each of us thought that she liked us best because we could tell stories about how she spent time with us in helping us to gain courage and confidence to speak in front of people.

We also told how she enrolled us in being in the school play when none of us ever thought we wanted to act in a play.

We also remembered that she was the pianist and choir director at the local Methodist Church and how she enrolled us in singing in the church choir whether we had the ability to sing or not. We reflected on how compassionate and encouraging she was to all of us.

I also saw my high school football, basketball and track coach Jack Doyle and I got to thank him for his coaching, encouragement and support in all of our sporting endeavors. I remember him saying once after a particularly painful loss in a homecoming football game that this was preparation for life. He said that sometimes in life you will achieve your goals and sometimes you won't, but what is important is learning from the experience, whether you win or lose, and improving so that you can do better the next time.

I vaguely remember any particular football or basketball game we played but I have never forgotten the lesson that Coach Doyle taught us about learning from every experience in life whether you win or lose. That one lesson has made a huge impact on my life.

I realize that it wasn't just my parents and teachers who had a positive impact on me.

We had a Boy Scout leader who took us on camping trips and taught us how to put up a tent and tie knots, bandage a cut, and how to swim.

We remembered that he once took us on a winter survival camping trip to the Black Hills which was done in conjunction with the survival instructor at Ellsworth Air Force Base. We went to Boy Scout camp in the Black Hills where we were to imagine that we had bailed out of an airplane and all we had was our parachute, sleeping bag and knife and some matches to survive on.

We learned how to make a tent out of the parachute and make a fire in the center of the tent to keep warm. Overnight there was blizzard and we were completely shut off from the outside world for two days. Our leaders told us that this was a reality survival experience and that we would have to figure out how to catch and cook some of the rabbits in the woods around us if we wanted something to eat.

We all got out our Boy Scout handbooks and tried to figure out to build a trap to catch a rabbit. However, we had so many traps set around our campground that all we ever caught were other Boy Scouts.

After about a day of nothing to eat, our leaders brought out some of the survival kits which airmen use when they are shot down in the forests until they are rescued. Looking back on it I am amazed at how much time our scout leader devoted to us and I am thankful for the way he taught us resourcefulness in every situation.

Who are the people in your village who helped to raise you and enabled you to become the person you are today?

When I was growing up I worked in the summers on my uncle Larry's ranch breaking horses, rounding up and branding cattle, cutting, bailing and stacking hay, milking cows and whatever else needed doing. Sometimes the work was tedious and difficult but I always liked working with Uncle Larry because he would always tell jokes to me and my cousins. He could make us laugh no matter what the situation was.

When we had dinner at his home last week with his wife and family, Larry entertained us with his jokes many of which can be told in public.

Here is one of the jokes he told us last week. A man was feeling terrible so he went to the doctor to see what was wrong. The doctor took some x-rays and tests and then came and told the man that he had a very critical illness. The man responded: I WANT A SECOND OPINION. So the doctor walked out of the room, checked his tests and came back and said to the man: MY SECOND OPINION IS THAT YOU ARE MUCH WORSE OFF THAN I THOUGHT AT FIRST!

When I look back on my life and I suspect that when you look back on your life, you can think of many adults who made a great and positive impact on your life. It did take a village of people to raise us!

Now the question I ask myself and that you might ask yourself is this: Am I giving as much of my time, love and energy to help raise the next generation of children and youth as people in the past gave to raise me?

Often we say it is the parent's responsibility or the teacher's responsibility to love and educate the young among us. But the truth is that it has never been just the parents or the teachers. It has always been the responsibility of all of us because they are all our children whether they live in the same house with us or not.

Jim and Jayne Thorne are active members in our congregation and Jayne is our Director of Outreach Ministries.

Six years ago, Jim and Jayne decided that they would like to be mentors to a boy through the Big Brothers /Big Sisters organization and work one on one with a particular boy. They have four grown daughters and no sons so they thought it would be great to become a big couple for a boy seeking a mentor.

They were assigned to a 10 year-old boy named Damon who had been held back twice in school and was struggling in learning his lessons. They started meeting with Damon at least once each week and taking him out for a meal, or to a movie, or to basketball games, or fishing or whatever else he might like to explore.

They have become caring adult friends in his life and Damon talks to them about his life, his challenges, his joys and what excites him in life. Damon is now 16 years-old and a freshman in high school and now he wants to go to college to be a pharmacologist.

Damon and his twin brother Jarmon are both part of the Big Brother Big Sister program and were featured in the Indianapolis Star last Monday as 1,000 people gathered to celebrate the 26<sup>th</sup> Summerfest of the Big Brother/ Big Sister program at Military Park.

Damon and Jarmon's mother Shannon says that her boys have thrived because of the friendship of their adult friends and the boys say that they might not be in school now and would probably be in trouble if it had not been for their big brother and big sister.

Think about this. Jim and Jayne have been Damon's caring adult friends for 6 years and have spent quality time with him every week. I am sure it was not always easy or convenient and there were probably some disappointing and challenging times but they were consistent and caring adults in his life and it is obviously making a difference.

Ten years from now, when Damon is out of college and a productive member of our community, I suspect that he will look back and thank God for Jim and Jayne Thorne and all the love and support they gave him during his formative years in life. And Jim and Jayne will look back and say: "We are the ones who benefited the most from this wonderful experience with a wonderful young man."

Train up a child, befriend a child, love a child and when he or she is older they will look back and recognize the positive difference you have made in their lives.

There is a Chinese proverb that says: If you are thinking about the next year, plant rice; if you are thinking about the next decade, plant a tree; if you are thinking about the next generation, work with a child today.

Minnietta and I just spent 10 days with a 13 year-old grandson and a 10 year-old granddaughter and I know it is one of the best experiences of our lives.

Spend time with your children, grandchildren, or someone else's children or grandchildren and you will be blessed and you will remember that Jesus said: "As you have done it unto one of the least of these, my children, you have done it unto me."

Let us pray.

