

“Legacies of Learning”

Psalm 78:1-7; 2 Kings 2:1-3, 7-14 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – November 12, 2023

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might truly appreciate the gifts of clear thought and bold curiosity grounded in your wisdom. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Most of you know that I’m from a small town in Illinois called Eureka. And many of you probably also know that Eureka, Illinois, is home to Eureka College, one of the Disciples-founded institutions of higher learning that are supported by the Thanksgiving Offering we’re receiving today. You may not know that my grandfather, both my parents, and most of my aunts and uncles attended Eureka College. Often, when I would go to larger gatherings of Disciple and mention that I’m from Eureka, the next question would be, “Did you go to Eureka College?” And because I am, by nature, contrary, my answer is always a resounding “Heck no!” But as I’ve mellowed somewhat in my middle age, I’ve come to realize that the answer to that question really depends on what you mean by “go to”.

My relationship to Eureka College was definitely that of a townie, but a juvenile townie. My friends and I “went to” Eureka College all the time. We lived within a few blocks, and the campus was our playground. You can have an amazing after-dark game of hide-and-seek amongst a bunch of campus buildings that are mostly shut down for the summer. Whenever I see the College’s posts on Facebook, and they include the main sign for the College that’s front and center on campus, I remember

how it used to be backed up by thick bushes, creating a space broad enough and hidden enough between the back of the sign and the bushes, that my friend Jennie and I created a hide-out there one summer that nobody ever knew about. (Or maybe they did and that's why the bushes aren't there anymore!)

So while it's true that I definitely didn't "go there" in the sense that most people mean, I do have some sense of "ownership" in relation to Eureka College. Upon deeper reflection, I realized that this is not a simple townie, I-played-on-campus attachment though. We talked about the College at church. I knew from a young age that it was a Disciples school, and that such a thing was true because Disciples cared about learning. I had a sense of ownership of Eureka College because it was "one of ours." The entire institution was a statement of faith, a way for the Disciples to live out our commitment to a thinking faith, a religion that is not afraid of questions, a way of loving God with all our minds.

It wasn't just the experience of living near a college campus that reinforced this aspect of our tradition for me. I had the wonderful experience, when I was 16, of a small youth group trip to Bethany, West Virginia. Bethany is home to Bethany College, which was founded by our Disciples founder Alexander Campbell, and it's also home to his historic home. We were there for a few days on what was supposedly a "work trip." Our "work" was not particularly grueling, I will say. In fact, it was rather a privilege. They were in the process of documenting the local cemetery, so part of the week, we were doing rubbings of gravestones. We also spent

some time cleaning up the cast iron in the historic Campbell mansion. We had a birthday party for my friend Kendra in the attic of the president's house, which they had set aside as a place for students to hang out when they needed to get away from their dorm rooms. It was all quite delightful. But it also hammered home the idea that our Disciples tradition and learning are inextricably linked. Though there are probably still more people in Disciples churches that haven't gone to college than those that have, as is generally true, our churches continue to uphold the value of education of all sorts and the importance of being open to questions, even and especially as they relate to our faith.

It wasn't till I moved away and experienced Disciples churches in other places that I came to understand that not everyone got that message quite as clearly as I did. Chapman University is way more than a few blocks away from here. And yet, I do believe that VLM's commitment to a faith that asks questions is also strong. We value learning and teaching and critical thinking, wherever it is happening. Institutions like Disciples Seminary Foundation help us maintain high standards for educated clergy. But we are also so grateful for the schools that produce our health care workers and scientists and engineers and artists and mathematicians and sociologists and writers and teachers and gardeners and more.

One of the most beautiful things about education is that it pushes us into collaboration. Even someone who is learning supposedly on their own, by reading whatever they can find, is silently collaborating with the authors that produced those

works. Today, I am giving thanks for a double share of learning that I have received from Disciples Seminary Foundation. As a graduate of Pacific School of Religion, I was first connected to DSF in 1998, when I became a scholarship recipient. DSF's support for my theological education was invaluable. And it served me well for 16 years. And then I had the opportunity for another helping, when our congregation began welcoming seminary interns! I had been in solo ministry for a long time, and it suited me well. But the blessings I have received from mentoring interns are something I couldn't have gotten any other way. As the teachers among us have undoubtedly known for years, teaching forces us to up our game. It is not a one-way activity, but a collaboration, process of mutual learning. Having Rachel and RJ and Tesa as part of our congregation has made us a stronger and a more faithful church. Even though we say we love questions, sometimes we need someone to come into our midst whose job it is to ask questions, to push us out of our complacency and compel us to look at what we're doing from a different perspective.

I am feeling particularly reflective about this because, as you've probably heard, Tesa will be leaving her position as our Associate Pastor at the end of the year. She is worn out from working two jobs and needs a break. She has served us well. I can say, without a doubt, that we might not have survived the pandemic without her. And now it's time for her to shift her role, and I'm feeling a bit like Elisha when the prophets told him God was about to take Elijah away: "Yes, I know; keep silent." In just four short years, Tesa has become an integral part of our ministry, stepping up

when things needed doing, pushing us in new directions with a foresight none of the rest of us possess. And now she's being swept up into heaven. Well, okay, not quite, but I'm fully preparing to feel a bit bereft.

But here's the thing. Though perhaps the roles are reversed, this situation mirrors Elisha and Elijah's in other ways too. We are not being left without a blessing. All the ways that Tesa has impacted our congregation will still be present. And this shift is also opening us to an opportunity to receive a second helping of Tesa's spirit. She will no longer be on staff, but she will still be part of our community. It will take some time and a lot of grace and flexibility as she figures out her new role as a member of Vista La Mesa Christian Church. We will need form new expectations and understandings of who she is and how she fits in here (probably me, most of all!). But I fully believe there are blessings yet to come, in Tesa's post-staff era.

Elisha asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit. Even Elijah sounded a bit dubious that such a thing was possible. But once he was gone, Elisha took up his mantle and it still had the power to part the waters of the River Jordan, so I, for one, think he received that double share. He did what Elijah instructed and kept his eyes on what God was doing. He faced the thing he was unhappy about facing and came through it. And then he returned to discover the point of all the Elijah had taught him. Because that's an important thing to remember: education is not simply about mastering a subject or acquiring as much information as we can. Within our faith,

learning more is about equipping ourselves to love God and love our neighbors more effectively. Learning is about service, even as sometimes service is learning. That is why learning and worship must always go hand in hand. Learning gives us confidence; worship imbues us with the humility needed to keep us from abusing the power our knowledge bestows.

As Disciples, we approach our faith, our theology, even the scriptures, with a questioning spirit, always compelled to dig deeper. Psalm 78 tells us “dark sayings from of old.” Can you imagine how old those “dark sayings” must be if they were already ancient and obscured when the psalms were written? How on earth would we think we can turn to scripture and immediately find a clear answer, if even scripture itself acknowledges there are mysteries there that we must teach and pass down, even when we don’t fully understand them ourselves? And why would we want a faith so simple? A worldview or faith that cannot withstand inquiry isn’t worth pursuing. This thing we have instead, these mysteries we ground ourselves in, are an inheritance worth passing down to our children. This way of living that is always, always, always grounded in Love, that puts all knowledge and wisdom into the service of Love, that both fills us with Love and calls it forth from us – even though we don’t always fully comprehend it, is something worth living for, something worth learning more about, and something worth sharing. I, for one, give thanks that we are on this journey of discovery together. Hallelujah and Amen!