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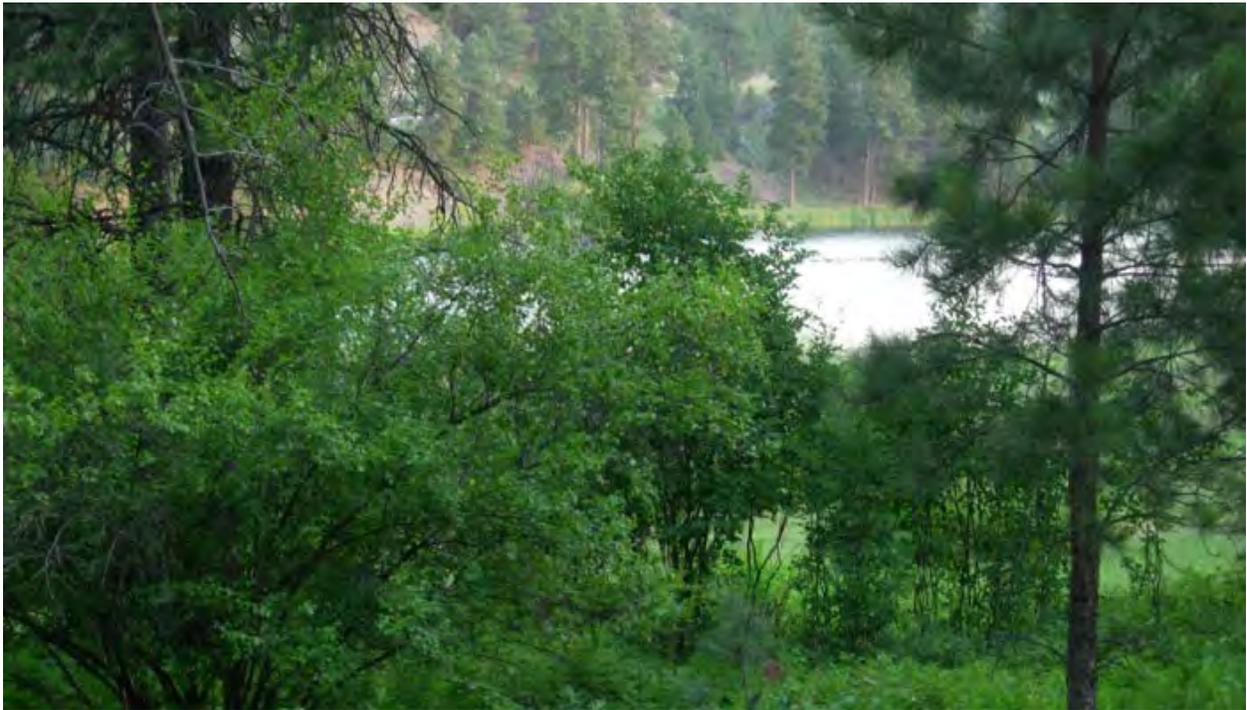
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July 16, 2007 – Lake



When the weather gets hot, one of the places we go is to the lake. Its cool waters and the many trees that grow around it make for a pleasant place to paddle, to fish, and to just enjoy the summer. The lake is the product of an earthen dam. There are no natural lakes in the Black Hills, only reservoirs that are the product of human design and engineering. The little lake where we go most often isn't however, radically different from what was happening naturally. Beavers constructed dams on clear creek and ponds formed. Sheridan Lake takes the concept to a massive scale and formed a much bigger pond.

But like the ponds the beavers make, the lake is filling with plants and silt is beginning to fill it up. From our human perspective it will take a long time for the lake to fill up with silt and become a marsh, but someday that will happen. It is evident when I paddle up the stream from the inlet into the lake. The stream now meanders through a dense marsh of cattails and other plants, and there are plenty of plants growing up in the stream itself. It is a wonderful place to paddle, filled with birds and their activities. And each year there is a bit more marsh than the previous year. This year there is a new beaver dam and pond upstream from the lake.

The natural pattern is for ponds to become marshes and marshes to become meadows and meadows to become forests. But that pattern rarely happened full cycle. Often, at the meadow stage a new generations of beavers would make a new dam and the flooding cycle would begin. The new trees that begin to form in a meadow are tasty to the beavers and attract them to return.

Humans, too, engage in engineering to change the cycles of lakes. After we make a dam, we work to keep the lake from silting in. Harvesting water plants, dredging channels, and removing silt from the lake all are used to slow the process. But we really don't know the full process. The dams and the lakes they form in the Black Hills are all in their first century of existence. They are a kind of on-going experiment. Although we can make reasoned guesses about the future, we really don't know all of the implications of our actions. The costs and benefits of dams have not always been the same as predicted and we have had to breach dams in some areas to restore fish spawning areas and address other negative consequences of the dam building.

Our stewardship of the land requires the ability to continue to learn and develop new ways of being in relationship with creation. Sometimes the best intentions and actions have unforeseen consequences. But this earth is a resilient planet and often the dire consequences predicted by prophets of doom do not come to pass. The earth's ability to recover and restore is far beyond our imagination. On the other hand, our impact is significant and human activity has dramatic effects on plants, animals and the earth itself.

Our lake is just one of the experiments in human stewardship. And our observation of the lake and its effects on the hills can be a way of learning about how to interact with the land. In the meantime, it is a good place to go to get relief from the summer heat. And if the heat is more intense as a result of human activity, the lake becomes even more important to us as we live through the consequences of our own behavior.

See you at the lake this summer.

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July 17, 2007 – Hauling Toys



A recent article in our local newspaper profiled a store that specializes in racks for carrying skis, bicycles and small boats on the roofs of cars. A quick drive around our neighborhood would reveal dozens of specialty trailers for carrying snowmobiles, four-wheelers, motorcycles and other recreational vehicles. It seems that part of our recreation is going to places away from home and that means having a way to transport the various devices we use to play. In the summer, I often have two or more boats on my pickup. When we travel with the camper, we still haul boats, just a little higher in the air. One of kayaks has been to the east and west coasts of Canada and the United States in the past year and it didn't do all of that traveling by being paddled. Most of its miles were made on the top of the camper.

It is a phenomenon that would amaze previous generations. Until recently boats were made of materials available alongside streams and rivers and were made near the water and used in waters close to home. There stories of amazing trips taken over long distances, but the boat was the means of travel, not an additional item transported. There are a few pictures of canoes loaded onto wagons and cars that date back about 100 years, but most of them involved relatively short distances. Canoes were hauled from one body of water to another or upstream on a river to be paddled down.

As access to automobiles for personal travel increased, however, so did the amount of things we wanted to haul. By the 1950's there were cross bars that could be mounted to the rain gutters of a car and items could be attached to the bars with ropes. That is the

way that the Old Town canoe that we use was transported for the first 25 years of its life. When I removed the old canvas to restore the canoe, there were distinct marks on the canvas and the gunwales that showed where the ropes that rubbed against the boat. There is a story from the first family that owned the canoe starting down the road and having to stop to tighten the ropes after driving a short way. Other families have stories of having boats fall (or fly) off the roof of their cars as they drove down the road. Racks like the one I have on my pickup make it easier and more secure to haul boats, but the principle is the same - our recreation involves travel to and from the places we play.

In our case, it is about ten miles to the nearest lake. It takes about fifteen minutes to drive up to the lake. The distance is, in a way, a blessing, because the time it takes to drive is a time that allows me to change my pace and attitude. Changing radio reception in the hills prompts me to turn off the radio. The increase in altitude and the slower speed limit prompts me to turn off the air conditioning and open the windows of the pickup. As I drive, I leave behind some of the pace and attitude of my work life and adopt a slower pace for recreation.

Long summer days allow time for both work and recreation. Sometimes the boats will be loaded on the truck when I drive to work for a quick paddle in the evening. Sometimes I head for the lake before I go to work in the morning. Having a convenient and secure way to haul a canoe and/or kayak means that I use the boats more.

It isn't a bad thing for people who meet me in the work setting to see a boat on my truck. It tells them a little bit about who I am and how I prefer to invest some of my time away from work. And it reminds us all that life is a necessary balance of work and play. Without recreation, our work suffers and our productivity drops. With a proper balance, we can bring energy and enthusiasm to our work.

So if you see me hauling toys, you might suspect that I'm headed for the lake. If I'm going the other way, I'm headed for work, knowing that recreation will be a part of my week.

July 18, 2007 – Ann



Today we will gather to celebrate the life of a woman who lived with grace and dignity. Ann was in her late seventies when we met, although it would take almost a decade before she freely spoke of her age. She was very proud of her British roots and would tell you that she had been born in England, but it wasn't her accent that one noticed at first. She had lived in the midwest for many decades by the time I met her. It was the precision with which she spoke. Decades as a speech and language teacher had enhanced her natural love of language and appreciation for its precise use.

Ann was definitely a character. Never married, she lived alone with a fierce independence that seemed to become even more pronounced as the years went by. She didn't have much family, she would mention a nephew or sometimes a niece, and she took several trips back to England to visit relatives there. But mostly we knew Ann as a woman who was perfectly capable of living alone.

She had a love of poetry, and we would exchange a line or two, from time to time, from Carl Sandburg, the American poet who began publishing poems the same year that Ann was born. His first book of poetry, *Chicago Poems*, contained some gems we both appreciated. We had both been students in Chicago and developed an appreciation for the city. Ann had studied at the same seminary as the one from which I graduated and that provided us with an instant bond and a ready topic of conversation.

But it would not be fair to say that we grew close. Ann had a formality and a dignity that established a wide space around her and suggested that a proper respect for her privacy and personal life were in order. Our relationship might best be described as professional, even collegial as we shared many academic and professional interests.

I was not invited to share her thoughts about death or what kind of memorial she might choose. I have heard others speak of some ideas that Ann shared with them, and I have been told that she left some written instructions. But I haven't seen the written instructions and it is obvious that the thoughts of a memorial service that she shared with others weren't always the same.

So what to say at her memorial service is a bit of a conundrum for me. I know that it needs to be written out ahead of time. I know that my words must be precise and clear. And I know that honesty is expected. And I know that she lived 90 years of dignity and grace and purposefulness. Hers is a life to be admired and respected.

In the final weeks of her life, I visited her more often than ever before. In the hospital, after she lost the ability to say many words, she would greet me warmly with a hug - something we had not previously exchanged. And she would write me a few short notes, usually about her desire to return to her home. And I read poetry. She laughed at "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter." "You come along . . . tearing your shirt . . . yelling about Jesus. Where do you get that stuff? What do you know about Jesus?" She seemed to like the sound of my voice. I read Psalms and Romans and parts of the Gospels and the passage from Corinthians about our having our treasure in clay jars. She opened her eyes and smiled at that one.

And then she simply died. We all will, one day.

What to say today still eludes me. But I think I have a sense of how she felt about death. She said it best. It is on page 20 of a little book of poems she published a couple of years ago:

Death, speak to me softly
 Knowingly, lovingly
Paving my way
 through the darkness of time.
Guiding me along the pathway
 To eternal bliss

You've traveled the pathway now, my friend. May your bliss be as genuine as the life you lived.

July 19, 2007 – Clamps



Traditional native boat builders used sinews and strips of animal hide to tie together the joints in the wood in their boats. Usually an awl was used to drill holes in the wood and the joints were lashed together. My current boat project, while imitating a traditional design, has departed from purely traditional materials. The decision was made before I began the project. I knew that I would not be using traditional covering materials (seal skin), and I decided that I would use the materials which were familiar to me. Hence, I am gluing the wood joints and then pinning them with dowels. This means that I need a reliable way to hold the pieces of wood in the right alignment until the glue dries.

I use clamps - bar clamps, c-clamps, spring clamps - lots of clamps. One night last week, I counted 48 clamps on the boat. I reported the count to my family and my father-in-law commented that I was the only one he knew who owned 48 clamps. I didn't tell him how many clamps were still in the buckets I use to hold them when I am not using them. A 2 1/2 inch c-clamp costs about the same amount as a medium latte at a coffee shop, so it is easy to accumulate a large number when you buy them one or two at a time. I don't know what my total investment in clamps is, but having spread it out over more than a dozen years it didn't feel like a large investment as I was making the purchase. I still buy a new clamp from time to time.

Clamps are not the stuff of which boats are built. They do not remain with the boat when it leaves the shop. They are a temporary assistant to hold things together until the real

adhesive has had time to do its work. Even though you never see a single clamp on a finished boat, most boat builders use a lot of clamps.

It is a good parallel for other things in life. You don't have to see parents to know that they have done a good job. Scaffolding is removed when a building is finished. The value of an education is often revealed when the student is not in school.

The institutional church is a sort of clamp in our society. It holds people together while community is formed. We are bound together in Christ, not in the institutional church, but often the church becomes the tool through which genuine community is formed. Habits and disciplines take time to form. Traditions and shared history need to be cared for and nurtured as they are passed from generation to generation.

I have no doubt that there are people of genuine faith who do not maintain much relationship to the institutional church. Faith is transmitted through family relationships, through encounters with the world that God created, and through many other pathways. You can build a good kayak without any clamps. But the institutional church is a creation of faithful people for the purpose of enhancing the life of faith. Although it has not always lived up to its full potential, it continues to serve faithful people and enable us to do more together than we could ever accomplish separately. And along the way we have the joy of being together.

It could be said that I have spent too much of my family's resources on clamps. It could also be said that I have invested too much energy in maintaining the institutional church. But I continue to build boats because I love paddling and exploring new places in boats. I continue to remain involved in the church because I love the life of the spirit and genuine community. I know that the buckets of clamps in my garage may not be valued by the next generation - I'm hoping that when I no longer need them, I'll find someone who is starting out as a builder. I don't know what the institutional church will look like in a few generations - I'm hoping that the things we've built together in this generation will have value to those who come after us.

In the meantime I need to keep my attention on the goal. I go paddling in the midst of boat building projects, so I won't forget that clamps are only a temporary step. I celebrate baptisms and marriages and funerals and community prayers in the midst of my administrative duties at the church so I won't forget our true purpose.

I can't get by without clamps yet.

I can't get by without the church yet.

July 20, 2007 – The Long and the Short



A scene in the neighborhood near the church brought a smile to my face yesterday. Parked next to each other were a very small car and a very large motorhome. Both fit into the category of vehicle. Both are licensed for driving on the streets of our community, and the highways of our country. I can think of a few roads that lead to places I love where neither could travel, but for the most part, roads are available to both vehicles. To a casual observer, however, it might appear as if they were designed to accommodate different sizes of people. The windshield on the motorhome is taller than the entire car. But I believe that they are owned and driven by the same persons. The car travels about in an enclosed trailer pulled by the motorhome. I wonder if the driver feels different, depending on which vehicle is being driven. In one the driver sits above much of the traffic and has a commanding view. In the other, the driver sits close to the road and must feel a bit small and intimidated when large vehicles pull up behind the little car. The car is small enough to turn around in the middle of the street. The motorhome is too long to turn into many driveways and too tall to pull into a parking garage.

It is amazing what human ingenuity has produced. A home that can be driven from place to place, and a private vehicle small enough to be carried about by the traveling home. And although these two represent a large contrast, they are neither the largest nor the smallest vehicles used on our highways. Specialized trailers to haul exceptionally heavy or long loads, modular homes that travel in two or more parts, motorcycles and countless other types of vehicles travel down the roads every day. We

are a people who are constantly in motion and who invest incredible energy and resources in moving things from one place to another.

We eat fresh fruit and vegetables all year around, thanks to air transport and the ability to bring our food from enormous distances. Much of our clothing is not produced on the same continent as our home. I can place an order over a computer that is processed in India, and have an item that was manufactured in China and warehoused in Tennessee delivered to me within 24 hours, all paid for by electronic transactions that do not involve paper money or the exchange of written documents. Although there are enormous environmental, social, and capital costs associated with our present mode of commerce, there is an economic structure that supports this great movement of goods and people. How sustainable this way of living is and how many people in the world will be able to access it remain to be seen, but for a few citizens in the world, networks of transporting good and services are almost taken for granted.

And it is possible to live in a home with private bedroom and bathroom spaces, modern kitchen and laundry facilities, central vacuum, air conditioning and heating, that can be driven down the road from one place to another. Not that mobile homes are new to this generation. Although the quarters were a bit more cramped and the facilities a bit less luxurious, people were living aboard sailing vessels on the world's oceans more than 300 years ago. Native Americans loaded up their tipis on dogs and carried their household goods on their own backs before they had access to horses.

The majority of the people in the world, however, do not have access to such wealth and luxury. Just having the living accommodations of the motorhome, without the ability to travel, would be almost unbelievable luxury for many of the world's people who live in cramped shelter without running water, indoor bathrooms or cooking facilities. If we were to develop an economic system that allowed equal access to such vehicles, the entire world would be in gridlock, with traffic too dense to move any of the vehicles.

As I looked at the little car and the big motorhome yesterday, I wondered what our ancestors would have thought of them. Just two or three generations ago, people traveled by horse. 20 miles per day was a reasonable pace for travel. A lot of people lived their entire lives inside of a 100-mile radius.

As interesting, perhaps, is speculation about what those who follow us will think. How will our great grandchildren respond to stories and pictures of our lifestyle? Will they think of us as ignorant and primitive? Will they laugh at our behaviors and practices?

The motorhome and the car belong to a particular phase of history in a particular part of the world. They are not the only way to live, and not the only way to travel. But you have to marvel at the human creativity and capacity that produced such amazing vehicles. All

of us make traveling and lifestyle choices that involve energy and thought whether or not we have vehicles similar to these.

Imagine what we could do if we applied similar ingenuity and energy to feeding hungry people and providing simple, decent homes for those who live in substandard housing.

The first step to accomplishing extraordinary feats is being able to imagine them.

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July 21, 2007 – Not Wet Yet



Last night, after work, in preparation for covering the kayak I'm building, I hauled it out onto the lawn, disassembled the forms, vacuumed the garage and brought in a couple of boat slings from under the deck. The kayak framework looked so comical sitting in the lawn that we decided to take a picture of an almost boat being almost paddled on a very dry lawn. It's clear that it isn't ready to get wet yet. A little sanding, covering and paint are the only steps left, but as a spare-time project, it is likely months before launching.

But I've been paddling that boat in my mind for months now. As I worked on the boat and as I thought of ways to solve different construction problems, I would imagine what it might feel to sit in the boat, how it would handle, and how I would use it. When I was selecting the design, and deciding on the measurements, my imagination led me to think of adventures in paddling and where I might take the boat. The human imagination is a powerful tool that gives us the ability to create and to accomplish work.

All construction projects begin with the ability to imagine what might be built. Whether it be a house or a bridge, a road or a dam, an automobile or the space station, the starting point is the imagination. "What if," are two of the most powerful words in the English language.

Conversely, when we suffer a failure of imagination, we lose our ability to accomplish tasks. Sometimes we discount dreamers, but the prophet's statement, "Where there is

no vision, the people parish,” is absolutely true. Human institutions as venerable as churches, service clubs, and fraternities have gone out of business because of a failure to imagine what they could do or become. My job is filled with many tasks, phone calls, letters, desk work, budgets, arrangements, and the like. But what I am hired to do is to listen to the dreams of our people and help them work on making their dreams come true. Our church has a long and meaningful history, but we all know that it will be lost if we fail to continue to create new futures and new possibilities. It is not what we have done that defines us as a people, but the new things we are doing.

Age and experience temper imagination. As a child, my fantasy life was rich and incredible. In my imagination I could do many things that I will never accomplish. There are realities of finite energy and finite resources that temper the attitude that everything is possible. We make choices about which projects to pursue and which to lay aside. This is true in our personal lives as well as our corporate lives. Not every idea is worthy of our time, energy and money. Not every dream is the right dream. In a church or another institution when there is a large gap between the vision of the leaders and that of the members, conflict is the result.

But there are some very large dreams that are worthy of our commitment - ones that we know won't be accomplished in our lifetime. The great visions of the church - justice, peace, compassion, care of all widows and orphans - these are things that we will not fully achieve in this life. But we continue to work toward those goals.

When it is finished, this kayak will be more than a hole in the water. It will be more than a way to paddle across a lake. It will be a way to connect with nature, a vehicle to pursue mental and spiritual stability, a part of the pursuit of peace and balance. Like other boats, it is more about freedom than it is about anything else.

Often the same is true with our shared projects. Rummage sales are less about raising funds than they are about pursuing balance in our lives. We have too many possessions, we need to get rid of them. But we don't want to be merely filling landfills with our garbage. We would like to benefit others in the process. A rummage sale wouldn't be worth the work if it were only about money - but it is more about building community than it is about anything else.

So I will continue to dream. And some of my dreams will come true.

I'll be paddling this boat in real water before the snow flies this year.

Peace and justice will take a little longer.

July 22, 2007 – Watch, Wait, Worry



I didn't need a reminder of yesterday as I awoke this morning. The smell of smoke was in the air outside our home. Even though we are far from the fire and in no danger, the smoke that was rising high into the air yesterday was low and spread out this morning. In the middle of the afternoon, we saw from town what we had all been dreading: a large smoke plume and the brush fire trucks heading for the hills. Before long, I spotted the aerial tankers heading toward the fire. It's been dry, too dry, tinder dry, for quite a while and as the temperatures soared over 100 degrees and the winds picked up, we knew that there was a big fire risk.

It took a while to determine exactly where the fire was located and to get any information. In the first few hours, emergency personnel are too busy to make reports and those of us who don't live in the immediate area and are not members of emergency crews do best to stay out of the way. I stayed in town and tried to get information from the Internet.

Within the first couple of hours after the first reports of the fire, it grew from 5 to 600 acres. The fire was crowning and spotting and burning in an area where there are hundreds of homes tucked in the trees. Evacuation orders were issued and then extended. Some of our friends who live in the area were not at home at the time and we had a few tense moments while they were located. They, like most others in the area, were prepared with evacuation items packed, fire gel ready to set out for fire fighters and a generator to keep their pump running when the electricity is cut off, Neighbors got

their cats and their emergency boxes. It took time and some negotiating with emergency officials for them to get permission to go to their home to pickup their trailer and a few other items. By early evening they were settling in a campground in town to wait for more news.

With over 100 homes evacuated, emergency shelters were set up, but most residents were staying with friends, in motels, or in area campgrounds. Cable television and the Internet were the best ways to get information and homeowners were anxiously awaiting any news they could get.

Several thunder showers passed through the area in the late afternoon and it looked as if one was dropping quite a bit of rain in the fire area. We couldn't tell if it was raining directly on the fire, but it was close and the lower temperatures and raised humidity would help the firefighters. We always want more rain, but we said our prayers of thanksgiving for this rain and hoped that the lightning strikes that we could see weren't sparking new fires.

So today will be a day to watch, wait, and worry. The forecast calls for the high to reach 107. There is no doubt about the skill and heroism of the fire fighters in our area. We have seen again and again how effective they can be. And there are a lot of new tools that can be used to save homes. Improved gel and foam systems clearly save homes when the crews can get to the homes. But firefighting is risky business. The danger is real and we pray for the safety of the fire crews. Early this morning and new incident commander arrived and additional trucks and hand crews are on the way. Dozers worked through the night and there are people out there on the fire who know the terrain and territory well. There are many signs of hope, but lots of cause for worry.

We will do what we always do on Sunday. We will gather in our church and we will offer our prayers to God. We will air our concerns and our worries. We will pray for the safety of the firefighters. We will remind ourselves that we are a community and we will get through this together. We will mobilize to provide whatever support and assistance we can to displaced families and busy fire crews. And we will remind ourselves that it is only the temporary that is at risk. God's gift of life triumphs even in times of danger and loss.

Whatever happens we belong to this community. And we belong to God.

July 23, 2007 – Angel



We got the announcement in the mail. If we acted quickly and were among the first fifty persons to subscribe to the magazine, we could own our very own angel! And it would be absolutely free! At first the offer sounded a little bit interesting. I mean, it would be handy at times to have an angel at our beck and call. “Hey angel! I’m kind of stressed out today, could you get me some peace?” “Dearest angel, would you mind running up to heaven and asking God for a little rain for our garden?” And I think that this would be the right thing to ask this particular angel, because from what I can tell from the advertisement, the angel specializes in two things. It is called a “guardian angel” and in the picture there are two little children at the feet of the angel. But the angel seems to also be a “garden angel,” because the ad says that it doubles as a garden fountain and there are a lot of potted plants in the picture with the angel and they look healthy and are blooming.

But then, I decided that I might be really uncomfortable owning an angel. I mean if slavery is wrong, if it is considered a sin to own another human being - wouldn’t it be somehow worse to own an angel? Despite the fact that my lawn and garden could use a little help right now, I don’t know about enlisting the help of an angel to take care of them. At least when I hire a friend to mow the lawn or water and weed the garden I pay a fair wage. And I wouldn’t begin to know what is fair scale for angels these days.

The advertisement we received in the mail did address a theological question. Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologiae*, speculated as to the nature of angels. Other theologians

have asked questions about the nature and appearance of angels, about their mode of travel, and other things. Although I don't know if the question about how many angels could dance on the point of a needle (or the head of a pin) was ever a serious theological discussion, it has made its way in to popular lore.

If you bought this angel, you'd know the exact dimensions of an angel. According to the advertisement, "It measures over 32 inches tall." Not many angels that size could dance anywhere on a needle or a pin. It does solve the question about how angels travel. This one arrives by UPS.

The advertisement was a serious attempt to sell magazine subscriptions. But it really gave me the giggles. I read it out loud to my wife and to our secretary. I had difficulty taking the advertisement or the magazine they were trying to sell seriously. The marketing of religion in our time, like the marketing of other things, is extreme and ridiculous in some of its forms.

Of course, we've been arguing over the marketing of religion for generations. One of the complaints that sparked the protestant reformation five centuries or so ago was the sale of indulgences. Can religious faith be exchanged for a price? Is it a commodity that can be bought and sold? The dominant opinion on both sides of the the split that resulted from the reformation was, "no." Religious faith is not a commodity and it cannot be purchased for currency.

What if the angel in the advertisement isn't really an angel at all? What if it is a cheap plastic figurine with a pump and some plumbing installed so water trickles down it? Could such an icon engender faith in a non believer? Would looking at it make the faith of a Christian stronger? What if someone at the magazine saw the plastic angels and thought, "We'll never sell these, we have to find a way to give them away for free."?

I've decided that I won't be among the first fifty people to respond to the magazine's advertisement. I think that the angels should be reserved for those who want them more than I do. But, having said that, I do think we need to be aware that we are all sometimes guilty of cheapening our faith and trying to sell it as something that is easy and simple. The cost and joy of discipleship are both deeper than the marketing folks would have us believe. And despite the advertisements for churches and for religious products, true faith is the result of covenant, commitment, and discipline. It is a free gift, but it won't arrive via UPS.

I guess instead of owning an angel, I'll pray directly to God and continue to grow in my ability and patience to listen for God's answers.

July 24, 2007 – Heat



We're wilting a bit under the heat. There is probably nothing especially strange about hot weather in July, but many of the folks who settle in the Black Hills didn't base their choice on the few weeks when the temperatures near 100 every day. The skies are still smoky, but the news from the fire is good. 70% containment and no buildings lost. It is possible that they may begin withdrawing some of the crews as the operation turns to mop up. We were lucky on this one. It could have been much worse.

We had a discussion, trying to remember our childhood summers yesterday. Which month is the hottest? July or August? Remembering wheat harvest, state fair and other August events, we know that August can be a warm month. But somehow it seemed to me that July was the month with the most sustained heat. In August, I speculated, the heat doesn't last as long and we get more breaks. A check with the statistics from the state climatologist shows that both months are hot. According to statistical average, the last week of July and the first week of August are the warmest weeks of the year.

The heat is starting to hang in, now, with less relief in the evenings and at night time. By 7 a.m. the temperature outside the house is rising above that inside. We're pretty good at knowing when to close up the house to keep it cool, but we long for chilly evenings with quilts on the bed. According to the short-term forecasts, that kind of relief is still weeks away.

And with the heat, the fire danger remains high. People are pretty careful around here, but the hills will soon be filling with additional tourists with the arrival of the annual motorcycle rally. And none of us can control or predict lightning strikes. So we're all a little bit on edge here. It is a good time to redouble our efforts to be courteous and kind to each other and to our guests.

The focus of much of my activity at work this week is getting ready for camp, which means that I will be wearing more casual clothing. That always helps on the hot days. We're not really suffering, we just like to complain from time to time.

The last week of July was terribly hot last year, too. There was a large fire, clearly visible from the Interstate, that was threatening homes. A member of our church suffered heat stroke while climbing Bear Butte and it took a long time to get him off of the hill because emergency crews were working the fire. All ended well, but not before some tense moments and worry. We were on sabbatical, ending a month in Canada and getting ready to depart for Australia. We escaped much of the heat of the summer of 2006. So perhaps we are less accustomed but more deserving of this summer's heat.

In Costa Rica, the people have learned to slow down for the heat. When we visit, it always takes me a day or more to realize that I'm walking faster and moving more than the locals. One way to deal with the heat is to slow down and adjust one's pace to the weather. Our cats seem to have adopted that philosophy. They seem to have upped their usual 18 hours of sleep a day to 19 or 20, waking to eat and drink. Their favorite place seems to be the garage floor, where they can stretch out on the cool concrete. Perhaps I should give it a try.

I am grateful, however, that we are affected by the weather. It is good to live in a place where we are forced to adjust our lives to forces that are much bigger than ourselves. It helps me to remember my place in the world and to stay in touch with the power of creation. And I marvel at the adaptability of creatures. We may complain, but we are able to function within a wide range of temperatures and conditions. And soon things will change. We'll find other distractions.

In the meantime, we'll be trying to keep cool.

July 25, 2007 – Working the Edges



The warm days have brought about changes in the schedules of some workers. To avoid the extremes of mid-day heat, they work early in the morning and into the evening, taking time off in the middle of the day. This schedule works for certain types of jobs, but increasingly our society demands services to be delivered according to the clock without making variations for the weather. Of course there are essential services that need to be delivered around the clock, and there are many workplaces that have air conditioning and a comfortable environment regardless of the outside temperatures.

One of our neighbors has a large landscaping job in progress. They have hired a landscape company to install underground sprinklers, build retaining walls, haul rock, move dirt, and install several plantings and other features. The landscape company seems to have a fleet of new vehicles, all with matching paint jobs and lettering, all clean and neat. They have hauled in trailers, bobcats, a small backhoe, a dump truck and other equipment. And their workers arrive at 8:30 a.m. and leave at 5 p.m. Much of the work is hand work with shovels, wheelbarrows and involves lifting heavy items. Yesterday I came home in the early afternoon to pick up a few items and saw four or five workers building a block retaining wall in the direct sunlight. They were working without shirts and you could tell that the work was hot and difficult. They are obviously accomplishing the task and I suspect that our neighbor is pleased with the company that doesn't disrupt his day by arriving too early or working too late.

But there is nothing in the nature of the landscape job that demands mid day work on the hottest days of the summer. The job could be accomplished in cooler weather. Workers could be allowed to come in earlier, take time off in the hottest part of the day and return in the evening. The workers would probably be more efficient, and accomplish more in an equal amount of time.

The landscape job is a symbol of the changes that are occurring in our neighborhood. Our area is called "Countryside," and it was developed with an eye for the natural and offered its original residents a bit of the feeling of living in the country with large lots, open areas and homes that were designed to fit their surroundings. Now, nearly 30 years later, the area is becoming increasingly suburban, with highly developed landscaping, plants that are not native, irrigation systems that defy the cycles of the weather, careful grooming, maintenance-free siding, and, work that is hired and done according to a schedule. It is probably inevitable, as the urban areas grow and our neighborhood is surrounded by more homes, more luxury, a golf course and more amenities. Countryside is no longer out of town, merely another suburban neighborhood. The features that attracted many of the original homeowners now are available only farther from the urban center.

And work is expected according to the clock instead of the weather. The workers themselves might prefer the schedule with time for recreation in the evenings and a predictable workday. Just as we are no longer beyond the edge of town, less and less of our work is done around the edges of the day, even the hot days.

For a while, we are out of step with those who are working for more development. We still do our own yard work. Whatever landscaping we have is the product of our own work and is done around the edges. But soon our home will stand out from the general character of the neighborhood and we will either install sprinklers and groom our lawn or sell our home to someone who does. Age and time pressures will one day bring us to a neighborhood where we hire services that we once used to do ourselves.

But for now, I treasure the edges of the day. Perhaps this treasuring is not as much for work as it is for play. It is cooler this morning than it will be for the rest of the day and I'm headed outside. Perhaps I'll pull a few weeds or just have a look around. I enjoy the edges of the day.

July 26, 2007 – Pinecones



The trees in the hills are stressed. Years of drought have made them even more susceptible to beetles and other threats. There are areas in the hills where large groups of dead and dying trees are clearly visible. Even in areas where there is less beetle infestation, the trees don't look as green or healthy as usual.

But there is no shortage of pine cones. Individual trees are producing hundreds this year. I haven't done a scientific study, but it seems like there are far more pine cones than usual. Pine cone production is influenced by many factors, including the amount and the timing of moisture. And of course the production of fertile seeds requires the right amount of wind at the right time to distribute the pollen when the male cones open up.

It is an amazing system. The forest continues to produce new trees in the midst of a wide variety of stresses. Despite the cycles of drought and fire, of storms and disease, the forest works for balance and long term growth. Events that seem to be catastrophic from our human perspective such as major fires and insect infestations may have a positive role in the overall health of the forest. The life span of an individual tree can easily exceed that of a human being and the grander cycles of the forest are such that humans have difficulty conceiving such large amounts of time. Human management of forests tends to take a much shorter view than the actual cycles of forest health. The political forces that influence the policies of the U S Department of Agriculture run on much shorter cycles than the forest. Forest managers are growing in knowledge of the

forest through academic study and through experience, but our knowledge and ability to manage the forest is still very limited.

The Black Hills are a small forest system when compared to the vast forests of Canada, Alaska and other areas of the world. This island of pine forest in the middle of the prairie lends itself to study and observation of the effects of human management and intervention in the life and health of the forest. With a little over a century of photographic record of various places within the hills, big changes can be observed. And the observations are not always what one might expect. Many areas of the hills are more heavily forested today than they were before commercial mining and logging operations were a part of the hills. Thick forests of trees that are nearly all the same species and relatively close in age are not necessarily healthy forests. The truth is that there is much about the entire system of forest health that we do not know.

What I do know is that in the area around the house where I mow, I have to pick up the pine cones. When we first moved to this home, I used to carry a 5-gallon bucket and empty it into a 30 gallon trash can. Now, I usually use a 30 gallon trash can and empty it into a pickup truck. Our yard produces about two pickup loads of pine cones per year. And even with regular mowing several new trees have survived. It looks as if the forest will be here long after our time has passed.

It will take a much broader perspective on time than we now possess to fully evaluate the impact, both positive and negative, of humans living in the hills. While the forest may be stressed by our actions and the pressures of over crowding, I suspect that the forest is more resilient and able to recover than we can imagine. Given the mistakes we make and the sometimes devastating effects of human development, it is good to know that there are things in this universe that operate on broader cycles and a grander scale than human history.

For now it is enough for me to know that there are trees in my yard that will still be here after the end of my life.

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July 27, 2007 – A Pile of Rubble



Two volunteers from our church worked yesterday with a Bobcat to tear down a house. It wasn't much of a building, really. It had fallen into disrepair and had become unlivable. During the time that it was abandoned, squatters had broken in and lived there, but it was not a healthy place to live. The house and the lot upon which it stood were transferred to Habitat for Humanity and plans were developed to tear down the old building and build a duplex on the lot, so that it could be home to two families. Habitat for Humanity builds simple, decent homes in partnership with those who need homes, and then sells them to the people who need them. The homes are built without profit and sold without interest. It is a very workable system that has been replicated worldwide and is working to eliminate poverty housing one home at a time.

The association of congregations to which our church belongs is partnering with Habitat for Humanity to raise funds and provide workers to construct the duplex. But before we could begin construction on the new homes, we needed to get rid of the old one. The home was checked for items of value that could be salvaged and a volunteer had worked at removing some of the roofing. But deadlines were approaching and the work needed to move more quickly.

Phone calls were made and volunteers emerged. This morning we met at the site and the volunteers were soon hard at work. Both volunteers were experienced equipment operators and by noon the exterior walls of the house had been tipped inward and the roof was collapsing. Within the next hour the interior walls were collapsed and the roof

was reduced to a pile of rubble. By the end of the day there were several piles of rubble, ready for the arrival of a giant dump truck on Monday to haul the rubble to the landfill.

Sometimes destruction has to precede construction. While we want to be careful to save the things that we can and we want to be efficient in recycling as many resources as possible, we find ourselves trying to maintain a balance between those goals and the need to provide simple, decent shelter for those in need. The pile of rubble has become, for me, a symbol of the start of a new project.

This is a big undertaking for our little association of churches. The cost is estimated at somewhere in the neighborhood of \$100 per member. We have resolved to work without incurring debt, so when we run out of money we will stop construction and turn our efforts to raising more money. We have resolved to live abundantly and joyfully with the money that we have and not complain about what we do not have, so we will be very creative in figuring out how to reduce costs and obtain in-kind donations. I have already learned that this project will proceed according to its own calendar, not my expectations.

But we have begun.

We have a pile of rubble.

Now we need to build homes.

I'll post additional pictures and reports as the project proceeds.

NOTE TO REGULAR READERS: Tomorrow I am going to go to church camp and I will be there for a week. While I will write a daily blog, I do not know about access to the Internet - unless I can figure out a way to access high speed Internet, I'll have to wait to upload the blogs until I return from camp. I am sorry if this causes any inconvenience.

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July 28, 2007 – Zucchini



I am not much of a gardener. I like the idea of a vegetable garden. The idea of growing our own vegetables makes sense from a variety of perspectives. Home grown produce costs less and tastes better than vegetables that have been shipped large distances. Growing vegetables is a good use of a small piece of land. It is good to understand the source of our food. A person who works at a desk most of the time needs to get a little dirt under the fingernails from time to time. There is a tremendous sense of accomplishment that comes from serving home-grown food to family and guests.

But I am not much of a gardener. My dreams and ideas about gardening always exceed the actual reality. I like to till the soil and plant the garden, but I'm not disciplined about weeding, and I am a bit random in my management of compost. I've never tested the soil in my garden. The things I do to enhance the soil are a bit random and less than scientific. We had home-grown tomato on our salad last night and we will be able to harvest more as the season progresses. Some years, I can serve sweet corn to family for a few meals.

Zucchini is another matter. The green summer squash seem to thrive on neglect. One year when we didn't even plant a garden, we harvested zucchini from our compost pile. It is fairly easy to overproduce zucchini. Towards the end of the summer, grocery bags of zucchini start to show up at the church - free for the taking. Zucchini seems to be an ideal crop for an amateur gardener.

Fortunately our family likes zucchini. Susan makes a wonderful bread with zucchini and our children think that one or two loaves is about the best care package the folks can send. We eat it in salads, as a delicious fall soup, and grill it with other vegetables. It is a versatile vegetable. I often say that the reason I garden in the first place is the taste of a home grown tomato, but the truth is that the only thing I'm any good at growing is a smooth skinned green summer squash that lots of other people can grow and is easy to obtain.

Fortunately my father-in-law gave me his rototiller when he quit gardening and the water is included in our household bill. Even though I don't consider those expenses, the price of our new deer fence this year makes the cost of home gardening a lot higher than purchasing food at the farmer's market or store. I can't really justify the garden in terms of the value of the harvest.

I think that the real reason I plant a garden most years is that I enjoy the connection that it gives me to farmers and ranchers. I have always admired the people who produce our food and I enjoy spending time with them. I have wonderful memories of summers on my cousin and uncle's ranch. Part of the attraction of farm and ranch folk is their hopefulness. When the weather is poor they'll say, "It usually isn't like this. It'll be better next year." When the price is down and circumstances force selling at a less than ideal price, you'll hear, "We'll do better next year." In farm country you'll often hear the joke about the farmer who won a million-dollar lottery. When asked what he was going to do with his windfall, he said, "Well . . . with that, I should be able to keep farming for a few more years." Farm and ranch folks don't do what they do for the money. They do it for the love of the land and the freedom of the lifestyle. And while they are at it, they feed the rest of us.

I'm not a farmer and I'll never be one. But I hope I never get very far away from the people who produce the food I eat.

July 29, 2007 – Changing Pace



Camp runs on a different schedule than my usual way of living. The meals are served at regular times and it isn't much of an adjustment for me to eat in the dining hall with others. Sleeping is pretty normal, too, although I tend to be among the last to go to bed and am usually the first to rise. One of the gifts of camp is that I walk almost everywhere and there is a lot less driving than my usual pace. I don't have to carry a wallet or a big wad of keys. The dress code is a little more casual than my usual. But things happen at a different pace.

Much of the work of a minister occurs in ways that people do not see. A worship service involves hours of preparation and the more preparation and practice, the easier it flows and the simpler it seems. Many of the programs of the church are based in planning and lots of preparation. So I am used to working behind the scenes. In order to appear calm and relaxed as people come to the church, I usually arrive 3 hours before they do. I work on the edges of the day to allow for a calm and relaxed time when I am with people.

Camp, at least our Music, Arts, Dance and Drama Camp, pushes this to the extreme. In order to produce a musical with full sets, lighting, memorization, staging, and other elements, a lot of work has to be done by adults to free the campers for musical rehearsals, drama coaching, and other activities. When the campers are awake and engaged in their program, my life is more quiet and relaxed. When they take a break or are sleeping, I have to go to work. It seems that the sets and lighting suddenly appear.

In reality the work has to be done early in the morning before the bugle sounds reveille I have lots of campers who volunteer for taps, I usually play reveille alone. There are adjustments to be made to worship services and bible studies that must be done during the hours when the campers are engaged elsewhere and I need to be on hand for many of the rehearsals to see what is needed to make the musical flow smoothly. Before camp even started, there were three loads of equipment and instruments to transport.

I love the pace of camp for a week at a time. I don't have the energy to do this full-time. But what I love most are the campers. And when I am too rushed or too harried or too occupied with tasks to accomplish, I am unable to be fully present for the campers. And they are what camp is all about. So I need to plan my work so that there is a certain sense of calm about me when I'm with the campers. It takes practice, and even after a lifetime of going to camp every summer, I have to discover that pace freshly each time I go to camp.

It is a world set apart. And we need worlds set apart. We need places where the campers come first, where sitting and looking at the creek run past is an essential activity, where sunrise and sunset are to be savored, where worship occurs every day, where we all get tired and silly together, where we leave the cell phones and keys, and intense schedules behind. We need camp.

After a little panic about numbers, we begin this week with 23 campers. Cabin counselors and clinicians are an additional nine. So we have 32 people in our community this week. Our focus will be the journeys and experiences of Paul as reported in the book of Acts. The early days of Christian community provide a good focus for the building of our community.

And today is a good day to begin. Actually with the way the markets behaved yesterday, the world would probably be better if a lot of stock traders took the week off for camp. Maybe the world would be better if everyone made room in their lives for a week at camp every year.

July 30, 2007 – Talent



Our Music, Arts, Dance and Drama camp focuses on the production of a musical that was written to communicate the Biblical story to contemporary audiences. This year's musical, Paul & Co., examines part of Paul's second missionary journey as reported in Acts. In order to have a complete production to present to families and friends in 6 1/2 days, a lot happens very quickly for the campers. They arrived yesterday afternoon. By the time they went to bed, they had settled into their cabins, shared a meal, practiced a dance sequence, read and sung their way through the musical, heard a bit of the history of the camp, auditioned for their parts in the musical and had a worship service. After they went to bed, our program staff met for a full casting meeting and assigned parts for every camper. Another volunteer took their t-shirts and dyed them purple so that the shirts would be available for campers to begin stenciling the camp logo later today.

I am always amazed at the parade of talent that arrives at our camp. The camp is designed for children from age 10 - 14, with an Intern program for youth ages 15-18. Occasionally we agree to allow a camper younger than 10 if she or he has a very strong desire to participate, and is recommended by one of our congregations. Campers sing a song or hymn and recite a poem or short reading during their audition. Some play their instruments as well. In order to keep the auditions from being too much pressure for campers, they are short, informal, and campers go in alone so they aren't performing in front of an audience. Some have not prepared at all and will recite the pledge of allegiance or a table grace. They might sing "Happy Birthday" or "Twinkle, twinkle, little

star. Other campers may have prepared something more elaborate, and we will hear them practicing before their audition.

Our camp is based on the assumption that every camper is talented and every camper will have a part in the production. And again and again we are not disappointed. This year our camp is small and we have fewer campers, but we had no trouble casting the play. And those who come to the production on Friday will not be disappointed.

While some of the campers were auditioning, I was helping others to settle in, make name tags, find their cabins, and say good bye to parents. This meant that I was walking around the camp and listening to the individuals and groups preparing for their auditions. Somewhere between amazement and regret that I hadn't practiced more as a student overwhelmed me. What delightful talent surrounded me!

To be honest, our camp has children who come from privileged backgrounds. Some of our campers have had music lessons for as long as they can remember. Their parents have paid for other music camps and they have valuable instruments that are properly matched to their size and abilities. But we also have campers whose families cannot afford the camp fee and we offer scholarships that go up to 100% of the cost of attending the camp. For some of our campers, this camp is their only opportunity to leave their home town this year. We have campers who have not had formal music lessons and for whom the discipline of daily choir and play rehearsals is a major adjustment.

Talent is a direct gift from God. Even those who claim they have none have unique gifts and abilities to offer. But talent needs nurture. One of our sayings at camp is, "even prodigies have to practice." Our adult accompanists and leaders show by example, practicing their parts for worship and camp in ways and places that show the campers their dedication and discipline.

It is a wonderful gift to be in the midst of all of this talent. That gift is enhanced by an environment that encourages the talent to be enhanced and shared. Perhaps the ability to recognize, nurture, and provide outlets for the talents of others is also one of God's gifts.

July 31, 2007 – Facing Fears



The business of church camp is building community. Camp committees often focus their attention on amenities or specialty programs, but the core of camp is building community. Campers return because they have experienced being a part of a community. They have formed significant friendships. They have practiced faith, hope and love.

But the amenities of a camp can assist in building community. Placerville has a new zip line this year. It is a cable stretched between two trees. There is a handle and harness system to attach a person to the cable and the person can “zip” between the two trees pulled along by gravity. The camp zip line suspends people about 10 feet off of the ground. Seeing the zip line, our campers wanted to give it a try. Because we are working on forming community, it seemed best to find a time in our schedule when everyone would have an opportunity. Most of the campers took the ride.

But riding on the line was difficult for some of our campers. It seemed a higher and scarier when they had on the harness and helmet and had climbed up to the starting ramp. Careful instructions and reassurance by camp staff helped fearful campers to face their fears and take the ride. There was a great sense of accomplishment when the ride was complete and the camper could say that she or he had done it.

A camp like ours has lots of fears in addition to the zip line. There are performance anxieties, and the fear of forgetting lines or singing the wrong note. There are fears that

come from being away from home and the familiar. There are fears about fitting in and being a part of the group. There are fears about reading or singing in public. Even counselors who have lots of experience with careful work with children can seem intimidating.

Camp provides a supportive setting to face fears. And we provide the safety nets to make sure that campers don't get hurt in the process. The visible features such as the safety harness and helmet on the zip line are matched by careful leaders and teachers who work to insure success in musical production.

Hopefully the "I did it," sensation of the zip line will not be the high point of camp for our campers. Because we are all about forming community. At the end of the musical performance, the sensation should be one of "we did it!" That is a far more satisfying and long-lasting experience.

Facing fears isn't just for campers. I rode the zip line but it didn't engender much fear in me. My fears seem to be quite different. I fear becoming too old for camp. I fear becoming irrelevant to the lives of campers. I fear not being able to keep up with the literature and changes in education. I fear not recruiting enough campers, not raising enough funds, not being there for the campers.

This week is about facing fears for me, too. It is a good thing I belong to a team that will provide the support and safety to get to the end of the week when we'll be able to say, "we did it!"

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August 1, 2007 – Making New Friends



Camp centers around friendship. Some of the campers arrive with friends and others know that they will meet old friends at camp. But some campers don't know what to expect, and they wonder if they can ever fit in or if they will ever make any friends at camp. Over the years of working with camps, I've learned to identify campers who might have difficulty with friendships. Sometimes they come from home or family situations where they haven't learned many skills for making friends. Words come out at inappropriate times and in inappropriate ways. Other campers have difficulty dealing with the emotions of adolescence. Others don't read the emotions of their peers accurately.

It is usually the "problem" campers who make the most lasting impression on me. Sometimes it is simply because they require more time and I end up getting to know them better than the other campers. Sometimes it is because they are the ones who change most dramatically during the week at camp.

The third day of camp is a day when we begin to see new friendships emerge. Sometimes the new friendships can come with a sense of rejection of old friends. Sometimes feelings get hurt. Usually the situations are well within the capability of the community to adjust and provide support for the new and growing relationships.

Parents often comment to me about how dramatically their youth change in the week of camp. The transformation seems dramatic to me, too. One of the joys of working with

the same camp for several years is the joy of meeting again a camper who I have observed for several camps. I can remember when the Interns at this camp were among the youngest campers. I can anticipate that the younger campers will one day be leaders. I can observe the similarities and differences of siblings. It is a dramatic and enticing introduction to human nature.

Among the new friends I hope to make this week are the campers that seem right now to be the biggest problems. And I've been coming to camp enough years to believe that it will happen.

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August 2, 2007 – Making Changes



Camp is sometimes an opportunity for youth to try out different aspects of their personalities. At home, they are known and the experiences of their past are known. Sometimes at home youth have trouble creating distance from parents or siblings to explore their own unique identity. Camp provides an environment with few threats and many opportunities to gently explore different ways of being. Usually those explorations are fairly mild - different friends, new experiences, a change in hairstyle or the manner of dress. Sometimes they are a bit more dramatic: A follower assumes a leadership role; or a normally bold youth becomes timid and shy. Separation from family of origin is one of the experiences of moving toward maturity. Each person develops a universe that is connected with their roots and reaches out to new horizons.

Often parents and friends at home are more aware of the changes than are the staff at camp. Sometimes we witness dramatic growth and the discovery of new skills. A drama camp is a unique opportunity for youth to safely experiment with identity as they assume their role and discover what it might feel like to be a different sort of person. At our camp, the plays are based on Biblical stories, so the youth explore contemporary situations in the roles of characters from our people's past.

Of course there are many things that don't change. The saying, "The more things change, the more they stay the same," is visible at camp. As youth explore character and moral decision-making they also connect with their family identity and their own roots. Finding the appropriate gesture or facial expression for the play often involves

looking inside and remembering personal experiences and events. The seeds of change come more from within the youth than from the work of adult counselors and program staff.

However it occurs, it is a genuine privilege to be able to witness some of the changes in the campers. Their parents have allowed them to be with us for a week and it is a precious and sacred gift. We do not take this trust lightly and each day begins with a prayer of thanksgiving for the youth and the families who have nurtured them to this place in their lives.

Robert Frost, well in his eighties, reflected on the course of his life with a brief couplet:
“It takes all kinds of in and outdoor schooling
To get adapted to my kind of fooling.”

May this week be one kind of outdoor schooling for the campers entrusted to our care.

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August 3, 2007 – Dress Rehearsal



Dress rehearsals, while common in theatre, are uncommon in life. Most of the important events in life happen with little rehearsal other than the experiences we gain along the way. Last night was dress rehearsal for the musical produced by our campers. There was the typical pre-performance jitters, even though there wasn't an audience for the performance. Campers were trying to sort out costumes, find props, figure out where to stand and remember lines. The lighting design was tested but in need of refinement. There were some forgotten lines and missed cues and not everything happened as planned.

It was a good rehearsal, and the performance tonight will go well. But we could not have gotten to tonight's performance without last night's rehearsal. And there are still a lot of changes and corrections that need to be made before the parents arrive this evening.

Camp is a kind of a dress rehearsal for life. It is a safe place to try out faith and action before the real tests of living. It is a safe community that exists in contrast to the pressures of everyday life. Campers often try out new roles, serving as leaders at camp before trusting themselves with such responsibilities at home, or exploring new ideas of which they are unsure. Campers test the waters with new beliefs long before they become passionate convictions.

There is plenty of adolescent testing of the waters of relationships as well. Part of the reason that campers develop friendships and explore boy-girl relationships is that they

know it is a safe environment. The limits are clearly established and the danger of making a permanent mistake are reduced. The safe environment creates a place to explore.

We are tired after the dress rehearsal, but there will be plenty of energy tonight. A good performance gives energy rather than consuming it. Before we know it, we will be saying good bye to our friends and starting new adventures. But for some of the campers, this is a week that will make all the difference in the world. It is a week of rehearsal for a new life of faith.

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August 4, 2007 – Hauling Gear



I'm so late writing my blog today that readers won't notice it until tomorrow. I decided to focus on the clean up of cam and returning gear and didn't pause for my usual routines. But most of the gear is in the right building, even if some of it needs to be put away. Having a grand piano to move was less work than I anticipated, because we had a trailer, ramps and a small winch, so there was no lifting involved. And the piano is safely back in its place. The tuner will come next week and it will be back to normal.

The production of the musical was delightful. Parents, grandparents and guests enjoyed the anthems and skits that were put on before the musical and then the musical was very well received. There was lots of laughter and applause. A big thunderclap seemed as if it was timed into the production, occurring just as a fortune teller was singing, "I can tell you when the rains will come!"

The campers were so excited that it took a long time for them to settle down. We walked down to the volleyball court and laid on our backs and looked at the stars. There were thundershowers in the area, but none overhead, so we could see occasional sheet lightning, but there were lots of stars overhead. It was a good ending to a good day.

I am tired, but being tired is a good and it is exactly how I should feel after a week like this.

Drama camp involves hauling lights and sets and tools and musical instruments. Lots and lots of hauling. And it is worth all of the work.

Some days my work is more eloquent than my words.

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August 5, 2007 – The Power of Music



There are many different ways to communicate. Many contemporary Christians place a great deal of authority in the Bible. It is an amazing collection of documents, and modern versions create a fairly accurate bridge from our language to the original languages. The Bible is worthy of daily study and an endless source of wisdom. But for most of the history of Christianity, the Bible was not the primary source for our faith. Prior to the invention of the printing press, books were not commonly available, and most people did not know how to read. And there was a suspicion about the accuracy of written documents. Hand-written documents are often the creation of individuals working in isolation and are prone to mistakes.

By contrast, there was a general trust in oral stories, especially those that had been honed through years of communal telling and re-telling. When the same story is told over and over to a group, the group can check for accuracy, remember details, and give immediate feedback to the storyteller. There are documented cases of stories carrying word-for-word accuracy over the span of several generations.

Music is another vehicle for communication that enables communication over a span longer than a single lifetime. Even before the advent of written music, songs were shared from generation to generation. The first attempts to write down songs was done with out any notation and often resulted in the words being separated from the melodies. Singing together, by contrast, resulted in all - young and old - sharing the entire experience. Music has a unique ability to span the generations. It is not

uncommon to find a multi-generational group working to produce music that was originally performed centuries before any of them were born.

Just as not all words are remembered, not all music is retained. Some songs are fleeting, expressing the mood or sensation of the moment. They are soon forgotten. But others continue to bring meaning and power for decades and even centuries.

It is not possible for us to accurately judge which of the songs of our generation will be treasured in the future. We can speculate that some music that has been enjoyed by people in different cultures across the centuries will continue beyond the span of our lives. Classical chamber, orchestra and vocal music are likely to be enjoyed by future generations. To that body of music, some of the works of contemporary composers will be added. But we do not yet know which ones. Perhaps the songs that will be most treasured in the future are the ones that we sing the most in this generation.

That songs that we hear as children stay with us for a lifetime. It makes sense that we use care in choosing the music we share with our children.

Music has a unique ability to bring us both meaning and delight. May we keep singing together for generations to come.

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August 6, 2007 – Coming Down the Hill



It is less than 20 miles from Placerville Camp to our home. The trees are similar, the climate is similar, the smells and wild animals are similar. Placerville has a bit steeper terrain and there is a lovely creek flowing through the camp, but in many ways it is not very different from our home. And yet they are worlds apart.

Camp has been over for almost 48 hours now, and yet I am still in transition. It takes a little while to shift gears from the intensity of a week of intentional community to the everyday life of building community in a larger context. My role is still that of community-builder and I do it in much the same way at home as I do at camp. There are people to visit and stories to hear, There are worship services to plan and group activities to schedule. In a way, my job and my everyday life is very much like camp.

In another, they are worlds apart. For generations, our people have recognized the power of times and places that are set apart for intentional focus on prayer, building community, and focusing our attention on our relationship with God. From the desert mothers and fathers to contemporary religious communities, faith has provided a powerful focus for small groups of persons who live separately from the rest of society. Different communities have different practices. Trappists spend large blocks of time in silence and solitude. Amish communities eschew many modern technological advances. Hutterites maintain communal dining facilities and strict divisions between genders. Benedictines focus attention on hospitality and the praying of scripture.

Our practice has been to live separately for short periods of time. A typical retreat is 48 hours, a camp a week. We separate ourselves from our everyday lives for a little while and then return to them. We hope that the times of separation will be times of insight, learning, and growth in community. We pray that the relationships we build at camp will be life long and that they will help to provide support in times of stress and tension in our lives. And we are often successful in our retreats and camps.

But it takes time to make the transition from our times set apart to our everyday lives. There is a part of us that wants to cling to the close feelings, the rhythm of our days, the sense of group accomplishment and the strong relationships of camp. There is a part of us that wants to get on with our everyday lives.

So it makes sense that we pay attention to the times of transition. There is grief in saying good bye, sadness that a good thing has come to its end. But there is also the knowledge that the limits of time and energy also contribute to the value of our time. We use our time together well precisely because we know that it is limited. Finitude forces us to make choices. We cannot do everything. We cannot experience everything. We have to make choices. And, in choosing, we develop priorities for our time.

Perhaps a short time, like a week at camp, offers the possibility of our recognizing the shortness of our lives on this earth and the preciousness of every moment - not just those we invest in intentional community. As I make this transition from camp to the things that come next, I pray that I will have the grace to treasure not only the moments that have passed, but also those I am presently experiencing.

August 7, 2007 – Bike Week



The annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally is underway. Bike week is a big deal around here. The annual event, begun in 1938 has brought as many as 600,000 people to the Black Hills. In an area where the largest city is about 60,000 we notice the motorcycles. Traffic increases, noise increases, and business picks up. Many local businesses see dramatic increases in business and, for the most part, locals like the excitement and extra income that the rally promises.

There are a few detractors. A friend, who lives on a normally quiet rural road doesn't appreciate that the preferred place to downshift touring Harleys is right near his home. He and his wife have put up signs urging motorcycles to take the main road - the signs have had no noticeable impact so far. I hear complains from others about traffic or parking or the increase in crime.

The friends of Bear Butte (Paha Mato) have been working to slow or stop the encroachment of the louder and wilder biker bars and concert venues, protesting the granting of liquor licenses and providing a visible presence during the rally. Several large outdoor concert stages have been erected near the sacred mountain in recent years and the general traffic and rowdiness are a concern to the defenders of the site.

Local churches have a variety of different approaches. Some offer free breakfasts or provide rest stops along the highway. Others hold special services designed to attract

motorcycle riders. Some run special advertising campaigns. Others simply carry on with business as usual, largely unaffected by the influx of guests.

For the most part, I simply enjoy watching it all. Bike week brings a wide variety of individuals to our community. Some are into flamboyant costumes. Others wear very little clothing. Some show off long hair and long beards. Others sport incredible tattoos. The variety of motorcycles is almost as incredible as the variety of humans. Everything from finely sculpted custom bikes to factory fresh new bikes to treasured antiques are present at the rally. It is worth an hour just to take a walk at the civic center to look at all of the incredible motorcycles - and I don't even ride.

I can see why the beautiful scenery and windy roads of the hills are attractive to the bikers. And I understand the excitement of being with others who share your hobbies and interests. And since I am a transplant and hardly a native to this area, I can hardly begrudge anyone the welcome that I have experienced. And motorcyclists were coming to the hills each August long before I arrived. So I accept the rally as part of the unique nature of our place and I enjoy bike week.

But I do pray for the safety of the riders. Motorcycles offer a slim margin of safety and each year there are more accidents than we wish. Drivers of other vehicles can be inattentive and at fault as well. I try to pay careful attention and to plan my trips so that I don't get in the way of the motorcycles and hope that others are taking special precautions as well. We always count the cyclists as they arrive, we should count them as they leave as well.

May bike week turn out to be safe for all.

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August 8, 2007 – Good Grief



For the third week in a row, I am working with a family to plan a funeral for a woman who was a significant leader in the church. Three powerful women in three weeks. Three different set of circumstances. Three different types of family. Three different types of services. But all involve loss and grief, and all require energy and focus both in working with the families and in leading the funeral service.

Grief is essentially a good process. We deal with loss through emotions and a rational process of saying good bye. When allowed run its course, grief has a healing effect. Its various stages become a journey from brokenness to wholeness. But grief takes time. And we rarely have the luxury of grieving one loss at a time. Rather losses mount and accumulate. The family with whom I am working this week has been on a month-long emotional roller coaster of hope and fear, of tiny losses and big losses, of good days and bad days. There is a sense of relief that the journey has reached its conclusion - none of the family knew how much longer they could take the hospital vigil. There is a sense of guilt that things might have been different. There is a sense of accomplishment that the family fought the good fight and stayed with her throughout the entire journey. There is a sense of profound loneliness - the focus of their lives is suddenly gone. There are so many emotions that they overlap with other emotions and become difficult to sort. There is a saying that God does not give more than we can bear, but in this case, events pushed the family right to the edge.

And I am not finished with processing the two earlier losses. Part of what is required of those of us who officiate in such circumstances is that we put our own emotions on hold while we assume a public face for the occasion. Our grief is often processed more slowly than the community in general. Sometimes I experience a sad day without initially being conscious of what is going on. Prayer becomes less of a luxury and more of a critical survival tool - no one can bear grief alone.

So today we will go through the motions of planning - calling the organist, arranging for ushers and soloist and refreshments following the service. We'll talk about hymns and share memories and stories. And we will remember that the community of grieving people is indeed a vast and varied community that is not confined to any single location. And Friday we'll lovingly place the remains of a wonderful human being into the earth and trust God with her care.

And we can trust God. We know our God is faithful. And if there should be more tears to shed or dark days ahead, we will continue to be able to trust God. And little by little, grief will begin its amazing process of healing our lives made heavy with sorrow and loss. And the day will come when we will remember and smile at the same time. Our memories will bring us laughter and we will experience the brightness of joy. And the day will come when we will sing, "It is well with my soul," and really mean it.

All in God's time.

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August 9, 2007 – Gearing Up



The church operates under several calendars. Our worship life revolves around the lectionary and the Christian calendar. Our worship year begins with Advent, which leads to Christmas, followed by Epiphany, Lent and Easter. Pentecost, the longest season of the year follows and leads to the Reign of Christ and the cycle begins again. There is a rhythm to the calendar that allows us to celebrate the entire life cycle each year. Birth and death and everything in-between as well as a glimpse at what lies beyond this life are all packed into each year's cycle. The disciplines of reading and worship create a rhythm to the year that is at once comfortable and continually surprising.

The business side of the church, however, follows the Roman calendar. We close our books on December 31 and budget for a January - December year. Our annual meeting is held in January and those of us who work at the church occasionally have the day off on a secular holiday.

Some of the program of the church follows yet another calendar - the school calendar. Summer is a time of vacations and reduced programs and fall is the beginning of a new program year for our educational programs and some of the fellowship groups in the church.

All of this sounds more confusing than it is in practice. The various calendars have their points on intersection and the three calendars provide a flow of activity and rest in the church that seems to work very well.

In the school calendar, classes begin in September. That makes August a month of getting ready for the launch of a new church school year, a time of planning for adult educational programs, and a time for the various boards and committees of the church that have taken a summer break to go back to their work. During the summer we have adjusted to a schedule with fewer meetings and a more informal style to our work. Now we begin to gear up with more meetings and more structure. The calendar begins to fill up with events and activities and programs. It is an exciting time of the year and a time to think about new things we can do together. Life in a program church is seldom dull and there are more ideas than time to put them all into play. This excitement is attractive to members and church staff as well and makes the church a fun place to be and work.

Much of life is a process of learning to change pace and respond to the circumstances surrounding us. There is always a bit of reluctance to make the changes, even though we are excited about the newness that is bursting forth. Since summer is a time to tackle big projects and adventures, it is rarely calm or quiet for us. The return to the fall's routine can actually seem like a slight slowing of the pace. Few of the winter programs demand the kind of focus of a mission trip or a summer camp. There is more time to accomplish the work and autumn can be a wonderful season in the life of the church.

So we look forward with joy, but are aware that once again we need to "change gears" for the new pace that lies ahead.

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August 10, 2007 – Varnish



One of the parts of owning wooden boats is that from time to time they need varnish. Varnish protects the wood from a variety of elements that threaten to cause it to deteriorate. A glossy varnish shows off the wood and enhances the appearance of a boat. But varnish is more than appearance. Without varnish, the wood would soon be destroyed by the elements.

But varnishing requires discipline. The wood must be sanded smooth and all of the dust from sanding needs to be removed. If the surface has previously been varnished, it needs to be sanded in order to get the new layer of varnish to adhere properly. Sawdust is the enemy of a bright varnish finish, so cleaning up the sawdust is a discipline in itself. If the sanding was done wet, the residual needs to be carefully cleaned up. If it was sanded dry, there are dust particles in the air as well as on the surface. Then the varnish must be applied carefully. Too much and it runs, too little and protection is lost. Several thin coats with light sanding between each coat seems to work the best. The brushes should be cleaned and stored carefully so that they don't transfer contaminants into the varnish. Most people who do much varnishing have brushes that are only used for varnish.

There are many formulas for varnish and some of the newer epoxy-based varnishes have to be carefully mixed and thinned to the correct consistency.

A great varnish job gives a lot of satisfaction. It looks good. Minor scratches or other imperfections can sometimes be corrected with a good varnish job. But, on the other hand, varnish can make some mistakes in construction more obvious. Varnish won't cover up poor workmanship.

Varnish is temporary and needs to be attended to often. Every couple of years will find something that needs to be varnished on a boat.

Varnish can be a metaphor for the work I do in the church. There are many jobs that need to be repeated or renewed from time to time and most take patience. Sometimes you need to rough up the surface a bit in order to get an idea to stick. Sometimes I need to add a bit of shine and polish to a suggestion made by someone else in order to get it taken seriously. There is usually some clean-up that has to be carefully done. But when the work is well done, it shows for the world to see.

And the work of the church is more than appearance. Community can sometimes be fragile and feelings can become exposed and individuals vulnerable. Protecting the community with care and attention is essential to the work of outreach. This has been true from the beginning of the church. Paul's letters are a form of community maintenance. In eloquent words he reminds all who read them of the care and attention that is needed in order to develop and maintain community.

Applying varnish is a series of steps that need to be taken with care, but it is not the most mentally challenging part of building a boat. That gives time for the mind to wander and to think of ways to approach the challenges of living and working in community. Some of my most creative ideas come to me when I am working in my garage. Achieving a balance of work and recreation is still a challenge for me, but I am learning.

And, every once in a while, we really do shine as a community.

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August 11, 2007 – Showers



I'm camped outside of Sisseton, in the Northeastern corner of South Dakota just a few miles from Minnesota and a few from North Dakota. I'm here to attend the mission conference of the Dakota Association and Dakota Presbytery and the meeting of the board of the Eagle Butte Learning Center. The Dakota congregations gather twice each summer for worship and fellowship and to make decisions about issues that are unique to the indigenous congregations of the Dakotas. This is the second meeting - the mission meeting, when UCC and Presbyterian church leaders meet to focus their attention on the mission and outreach ministries of their congregations.

It is a tradition with roots in the missionary movement. As the plains tribes were forced onto reservations, eastern congregations sent missionaries to bring Christianity to Native Americans. This was approved by the federal government who saw religion as a tool to suppress the indigenous culture. It was believed that acculturation into European ways needed to be forced upon the tribes. The history of the relationship between Christian churches and Dakota, Lakota and Nakota peoples is very mixed and the church was complicit and even an active partner in the destruction of the way of life of the plains tribes.

But the impact of Christian missionaries was not all negative. The missionaries brought health care and education. Many learned native languages and helped to preserve them. The Dakota Bible and the Dakota Odowan hymnal have become important in contemporary efforts to renew and preserve the native languages. And many people

embraced Christianity as their faith. Generations of Dakota Christians have come from those early missionary days.

Reservation congregations, like reservation communities, tend to be rural and isolated. Often they cannot afford full-time ministry. Ministry is a difficult calling on the reservations. The summer gatherings of the Dakota Association have become a way for congregations to support one another and for pastors to get together to share common concerns and needs.

Camping is a part of the tradition of these gatherings. Nowadays many of the participants stay in motels in nearby towns, but there is always a contingent that camps. More and more of those who choose to camp are sleeping in vans and hard-covered campers. There are fewer tents and tipis each year.

I was awakened several times last night as thundershowers moved through the area and we can still hear thunder in the distance and an occasional drop of rain on the roof. These weren't particularly violent thundershowers - no tornados - no hail, just a little wind and rain, flashes of lightning and the sound of thunder.

But it made me think of earlier gatherings of the Dakota Association. As the buffalo culture was destroyed, buffalo hide was no longer available to cover tipis. Canvas was a usable material, but it didn't have as much insulating value and it was less durable, especially in hail. When the people gathered to camp, it was always with an eye to the weather. Prairie thunderstorms can be violent and a tipi provides shelter from the wind and rain only when it is properly set up and staked to the ground.

I imagine that waking more than my usual to the sound of wind and rain was mild in comparison to some of the nights in the camps of earlier Dakota Association gatherings. And the place where I am camped is mercifully free of mud in spite of the rain. But an increased awareness of the weather is a good preface to a day of meetings with the Dakota Association. Living closer to the land and becoming more tuned to the rhythms of nature is part of the Dakota experience. Understanding Dakota values and culture is enhanced by starting my day with a healthy dose of respect for weather and the goodness of the land.

May this day be one of closeness to the earth and to the people with whom I share ministry on these plains.

August 12, 2007 – A Great Crowd of Witnesses



There are many expressions of Christian community. As I drove home last night, I was thinking of the many and varied experiences of the church I have had just this summer. Our own congregation, with its pipe organ and choir, stained glass and formal sanctuary is a place where I have come to feel at home. We have supported each other through many difficult times and this summer has been a season of several significant funerals. We are relatively good at handling grief together and provide meaningful services for families.

I recalled the baptisms in Costa Rica, where we gathered with our sister church at a public swimming pool to celebrate the Christian commitment of eleven young people who were making commitments of faith. The Spanish language, the different form of baptism, the songs and the way of celebrating were all very different than the way we practice faith at home, but we were so graciously received into that community and embraced in faith that we felt right at home.

General Synod was an entirely different expression of faith. Thousands of people worshipping in a sports arena, huge screens filled with video images, a laser light show, a chamber orchestra, a jazz band and more. The 50th Anniversary Celebration was a unique gathering of the church and one that was impressive to witness. And even with the great numbers of people, the inclusive atmosphere invited all to participate and experience worship as a place of welcome.

Worship in a mid-sized congregation in Maine, with its old and formal sanctuary, the bright robes of the senior pastor, soloists and the report of a mission team was very similar to worship at home, but there were many differences as well. The graciousness of our hosts made us feel included and welcome from the moment we entered the church.

The intimate gathering of family members in a hospital room in the midst of the vigil of the final illness of a loved one is another significant moment of worship that I have shared this summer. It is a place of quiet peacefulness and fervent prayer that is easily recognized as a holy gathering in a sacred place, even though the physical surroundings are more geared to the practice of modern medicine than of an ancient faith.

Yesterday's mission meeting in a tent in an open field, with hymns in Dakota, an informal spirit, jokes and preaching and an altar call was in some ways worlds away from all of the other worship experiences of the summer, and yet it was a place of great welcome, warm greeting and reunion. Our friends from Costa Rica and other places would immediately recognize the gathering as an expression of our faith and a church home for all believers.

The Book of Hebrews speaks of "a great cloud of witnesses," that surrounds us as we live our faith in this life. In part, this is a reference to all of the faithful people who have gone before us, who lived lives of faith, sometimes under harsh circumstances, and who are still present in our memory and practice even though they have died. This summer has been an experience of another great cloud of witnesses - the faithful people in many different places and many different cultures who gather to worship and whose prayers join with ours.

The passage of Hebrews states that "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." Indeed the witness of so many faithful persons in so many different times and places gives us strength to head down the path that lies ahead. And we journey with joy and with endurance because of the knowledge of the love and support of our sisters and brothers in faith.

Indeed, we belong to a faith that is much bigger than ourselves - much longer than the span of our lives - much greater than the problems and pressures of this day.

August 13, 2007 – Skipping Stones



There are a lot of people at my mother's summer place. That is the way it used to be. We were a large family and the place at the boulder was a place where guests and friends were always welcome. This summer my mother, my sister and her children, my brother and his family are all living at the place. There are plenty of cabins, so sleeping space is not a problem, but there are only two bathrooms and only one kitchen, so there are times that are crowded.

But it is easy to get away for a little quiet time or space. The river runs right by the property, and there are tangles of willows and cottonwood trees and river rocks that provide good places to play or just sit and think.

Yesterday my nephew and I walked down to the river. He has been growing quite a bit and now is only a couple of inches shorter than I. For most of his life, he has lived in the city and when his folks moved out into the countryside, it was to an executive home and his lifestyle has been urban. He hasn't had days to scramble across the rocks and play in the river and explore the countryside.

When we got to the river, I picked out a few rocks and skipped them across the water. He said that he had never learned to skip rocks, so I picked out a couple and demonstrated. He picked up the skill right away and we spent a few minutes skipping rocks, tossing sticks for the the dog to fetch and just enjoying the place.

There is a lot going on in his world this summer. His parents are in the middle of a divorce, their home is for sale, and decisions have not been made about where everyone is going to live. His folks are loving people and both committed to their children, so things will work out, but there are a lot of uncertainties in this last month before school starts.

I can't sort out all of the problems facing my siblings and their lives. I can't solve their problems for them. But yesterday, I could take one nephew for a walk along the river and skip a few rocks. We didn't talk about his worries about the future. We didn't talk about the problems between his parents, We just listened to the river and watched the swallows flying overhead. Generations of boys and uncles have skipped stones and watched their dogs play in that river. For a few moments, we had peace and a bit of joy.

I've never been good at choosing gifts for that part of my family. They have always had more financial resources than I and they seem to have everything that they want. Yesterday, I found that the gift of my time was enough.

Maybe today we'll go fishing.

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August 14, 2007 – Smoke



I left Montana early this morning, I had to make a 1 p.m. meeting back home. I watched the sunrise in the smoke. The west is full of smoke this summer. It reminds me of 1988 and 1989 when gigantic fires raced through Yellowstone National Park and the Frank Church Wilderness. I've written about fires too much in this blog already.

But the ash that was falling on my pickup this morning was literally the ash of trees I have hiked in and loved almost all of my life. The Hicks Park fire is now about 5 miles from the church camp that was one of the important places of my growing up. And it is burning up the mountainside we hiked on countless backpack trips to fish and explore the wilderness and lake flats region. I suspect the view from the switchback-filled horseshoe lake trail will be dramatic once the fire goes out, with all the trees gone. On the other hand, it will be a hot walk next August, with no shade on the 5 1/2-mile uphill trail. Experienced backpackers will probably avoid that trail and go in via the horseshoe lake trail - even if that too is over-burned, the grade is more gradual and there are several creek crossings in the first ten miles.

But all of that is speculation now. The fire is too hot and the canyon too narrow to allow any spectators to view it. The road is closed and everyone is evacuated at a point over twenty miles from the fire. Firefighting resources in Montana are scarce and there is another massive fire burning about 12 miles west on the eastern side of the Yellowstone drainage. The fire information officers didn't seem to have much new information yesterday. I drove away into the sunrise this morning with lots of smoke hanging in the

air and little information about what is going on. I can learn as much from the Internet from a distance as I would be able to learn if I had stayed in town.

If you stop into a coffee shop in my home town, you can overhear a lot of people talking about blame. "Decades of failed forest management policy," "Global warming," "The tendency of all people who work for the federal government to sit and watch instead of pitching in and getting something done," "Too many people from out of state flown in to manage the fires," and many other blames were being leveled as people sipped coffee and watched the parade of equipment streaming down main street and heading up the valley.

What we do know is that there were fires - big fires - in the mountains before people started managing them. And fire is part of the natural cycles of the forest. And we know that there were smoky summers in the years when only nomadic tribes moved in and around what is now Montana. And we also know that even with the sophisticated fire-fighting equipment including aerial tankers, helicopters, infrared photography, foam and gell-spraying trucks, and much more - even with millions and millions of dollars invested - some fires are put out by the weather. Some of these fires could burn until October in the backcountry. And one thing I learned from 1988 and 1989 is that things often aren't quite as bad as they look at the time. A blackened hillside can erupt into a maze of wildflowers in a few months, and opened meadow can become habitat for animals, the forest has an amazing ability to recover. At the same time, it can take longer than my life for the trees to come back.

Change is one of the things I love about the mountains - there is always something new to see. Some days, the change is more dramatic than others.

In the meantime, pray for the safety of the firefighters and for rain.

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August 15, 2007 – Inspiration



There is something inside of us that makes us strive to go beyond an everyday, mundane existence. In the past week, I have been reading essays that are a part of a scholarship application. “I strive for excellence,” “I give 110%,” “I want to always do my best,” and “I want to become outstanding,” are among the phrases that I have been reading. Similar phrases are used in the references, so it is not just an inflated attempt to gain a scholarship - there really are people who distinguish themselves from the crowd and who work very hard to rise above the ordinary. This particular stack of applications comes from candidates from their late teens through their mid fifties, so it is not just a burst of youthful enthusiasm. People of all ages are willing to work hard to distinguish themselves.

The ancients believed that this was evidence of God’s action in the lives of people. Our modern word “inspired” means “influenced by God.” It comes from a concept shared by Latin, Greek (Pneuma), and Hebrew (Ruah) that breathing is drawing God’s spirit into the human body. To inspire is to breathe, but it is more. It is gaining the energy, enthusiasm, and insight to do something extraordinary. We often use the term in relationship to the craft of writing. Writing that is inspired is writing that is somehow influenced by God. It is sacred.

This certainly reflects the way it feels when writing is going well - it is almost as if the source of the words is not entirely internal. A writer can be inspired by the beauty of

nature, the energy of other persons, the drama of specific events, and the powerful sweep of history. There are many sources of inspiration.

But just as inspired, it seems to me, is the parent who rises repeatedly in the middle of the night to tend a sick child, setting aside her exhaustion for the health of her baby, or the incredible energy of parents working multiple jobs so that their children can go to school and become more stable and successful than the previous generation. I have seen volunteers give more deeply of their time and energy and financial resources than I had thought possible - their service was indeed inspired.

Inspiration comes in many forms and it appears in many different arenas of life. Garrison Keillor, in his "Prairie Home Companion" monologue ending names inspiration as "the strength to get up and do what needs to be done." Some days that is exactly what is required - the strength to get through one more day - to do one more job - to keep moving forward.

There have been some incredible stories of the strength of the human spirit where part of the process was simply surviving. The person figured out how not to give up in incredible circumstances. Most of us, however, don't find ourselves in those incredible circumstances. We devote our energy and enthusiasm to weaving our way through this everyday life with its everyday challenges and everyday opportunities. We try to be loving and caring toward our families and seek that is meaningful and gives us a sense of contributing to our community. We may never be distinguished or famous or recognized. But we can be inspired. We can strive to be more helpful, more giving, more hopeful, more faithful, more loving.

Sometimes a motivational speaker will inspire us. Sometimes the beauty of creation will inspire us. Sometimes just taking a breath can inspire us.

May we be inspired in our work today.

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August 16, 2007 – Digging Down



The first step in building up is digging down. There are Biblical parables about securing a firm foundation for any building. So yesterday was a day of digging down to establish the footings for a new duplex that will be build by the Black Hills Association of the United Church of Christ and Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity in partnership with two families in need of simple, decent housing.

Digging down into the dirt is only part of the story. Members and friends of our churches will need to dig into their wallets in order to provide some of the funding. Volunteers will need to dig into their time in order to accomplish the construction. There are 50 to 60 work days ahead of us as we begin this project. Hopefully we can accomplish the work in six months or so.

It was exciting to see the backhoe working on the site. There have been delays due to approval of design, delays due to miscommunication, delays due to busy people with projects in other places. There was an existing structure on the property that had to be torn down, and that job was bigger than we had anticipated.

But finally we are underway. We should have concrete in the hole early next week and with any luck we can have our first volunteer workday a week from Saturday. We are ready to begin construction.

Of course there is a lot of work ahead. In addition to the physical demands of constructing the houses, there are financial demands of raising the money, organizational demands of getting the volunteers connected with meaningful work, and many other demands that must be met.

Right now it is enough to have the project in motion. Challenges do not turn us back. We will find ways to accomplish the work that lies ahead. Most of the things in this life that are worth doing involve significant challenges. If it weren't a big and daunting project, it wouldn't be the right project for our congregations at this time. Working together on the really big projects is how we build the relationships that endure through difficult times. The bonds that we create during this project are the cement that holds us together in the years to come.

I can't wait to start pounding nails!

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August 17, 2007 – Wildflowers



We live in a subdivision called “Countryside.” But the countryside has changed quite a bit in the years we’ve lived there. As neighboring pastureland was divided up for homes, a golf course developed, and city services including sewer and water extended to the border of our subdivision, many more people have moved into the immediate area. Along with larger and more luxurious homes has come landscaping and fancy lawns.

There are many homes that have much more than nice grass, trees and a few flower beds. Increasingly popular are fountains, ponds and other “features.” Pumps are used to create waterfalls. Plastic and fiberglass liners are installed to keep the water from soaking into the porous soil. Natural and artificial rocks are used to create stream beds and ponds. Plants are imported to give just the right appearance. The homes and the yards that surround them are beautiful, but they seem just a little bit out of place.

Before the arrival of settlers, the open fields around our home were places that Lakota people visited to harvest medicinal plants. Sweetgrass and sage were braided and bundled and later burned for smudging. Purple coneflowers were harvested as medicine for everything from sore throat to snakebite. The fluid from the prickly pear cactus was used as a salve for burns. Although more common in Eastern South Dakota, our state flower, the pasque flower, also known as prairie smoke, was a sure sign of spring and the flowers were used in spring ceremonies. Pine boughs were used for bedding and for ceremonies.

Not far from our home, spring creek wanders through a secluded canyon where the humidity is higher than the surrounding areas and the vegetation is lush and beautiful. It is on private land, but the landowners do not mind if we hike there. A short walk will take you to waterfalls that aren't dependent upon pumps, liners or landscape designers. The ferns and flowers are arranged without regard for the placement of underground sprinkler systems or accent lighting. It is a place that some of the more urban dwellers of our neighborhood will probably never see, as it requires a short hike to go there and those of us who love to hike in the area aren't eager to have too many people tramp through the cool, quiet place. The flow of the creek is very low this summer, but the area is rich with additional springs and little trickles of water. It provides a wonderful escape on hot days.

There is a kind of arrogance about our human homes. We go far beyond providing shelter from the elements. We convince ourselves that we can improve a piece of ground - make it better by our presence and hard work and investment of money. There is nothing new about this attitude. It was evident thousands of years ago in the massive building projects of Greeks, and Romans in Europe Egyptians in Northern Africa, Chinese in Asia, and Aztecs, Mayas and incas on our continent. But centuries of human improvements pale in the face of the natural beauty of our planet.

A few designers of church buildings have understood that the true glory of God is not inside the building, but in the creation outside. Simple chapels use windows to direct the attention of worshipers beyond the building to the natural beauty that lies beyond. The chapel at Placerville church camp is one such place. The beauty comes not from impressive architecture, but from the humility of pointing beyond the building to the hills.

We do not have the most impressive yard in our neighborhood. We enjoy the outside space and sitting on our deck in the evenings, but there are no fancy features or extensive landscaping. But we do know how to find places of unimaginable and indescribable beauty.

I think I like wildflowers best.

August 18, 2007 – Rain



In dry times, we always pray for rain. Last night we got it. A slow-moving summer thunderstorm parked over our area and rained between two and four inches in a short time last night. The storm was violent in some places, with large hail and flash flooding causing problems for some. Our secretary has damage to her home and car and most of her neighbors had damage as well.

We were at a large picnic and nearly 1,000 people were rushed inside, but there was plenty of room and the staff was prepared. The tornado sirens went off and caused a little concern, but we continued our picnic indoors and little was disrupted by the weather. Last night was the opening night for the Central States Fair, and things wrapped up a bit early, with fair goers heading home because of the weather. A few waited out the storm in some of the indoor exhibit areas, but vendors marked the day as a slow start.

Today begins with fog a rare treat for August in these parts. It is a nice change of mood from the recent hot and dry days. It is interesting how quickly we forget the mood and feel of weather when it is passed. When we are chilly in the winter, we can't remember the feeling of being too hot in the summer. On a sweltering summer day, we cannot recall the feeling of being cold. As much as people complain about the weather, one thing is certain about our area - the weather is rarely boring. We may get a hot spell or a cold streak that lasts for a couple of weeks, but each year, even in drought times, gives us a wide variety of days and moods.

We are getting to the time of the change of seasons. The nights are getting a bit cooler and there is a hint in the air that summer will not last forever. The calendar reminds us that September is coming and the newspaper is filled with back to school sales. The older I get the more quickly the seasons pass.

I feel grateful to live in a place with distinct seasons and a wide variety of weather. For the most part we are safe from really destructive weather. Away from the coasts, we do not have to worry about hurricanes, up on a hill we do not fear flooding. Tornadoes are very rare in the hills and our most destructive weather is probably hail. Hail can cause a lot of damage to cars and roofs, but it is usually possible to find enough shelter to avoid injury. We get some heavy winds and it can get cold in the winter, but for the most part our biggest threat of natural disaster is wild fire, and there are many things we can do to make our homes more easily protected from fire. All in all, it's not a bad place to live.

Modern times are vastly different from the days when people followed the buffalo herds on the prairie and came to the hills for summer cool, seeking medicines and visions. We have doppler radar to track storms, television, radio and sirens to warn people of danger. There are flow sensors on the creek to warn of flooding and people have quick and easy access to their homes which are, for the most part, places of shelter from even violent storms.

But storms can still catch us by surprise. The intensity of last night's storm wasn't predicted. and no one quite expected it to stall and move so slowly through our area. I'm glad the weather can still surprise us. We live in a world of amazing complexity and the awesome power and grandeur of the weather serves as a reminder that we are not the center of the universe. There are forces that are much stronger than we. We can dominate nature only to a certain degree.

There'll be some cleaning up to be done and the auto glass shops and auto body repair shops and mobile hail repair units will all do a little bit of extra business in the next few weeks. There will be a few roofing contractors with extra work this fall. And our lives will go on without too much disruption. But it will give us a few stories to tell and serve as a reminder for a little while that we live in a world that is beyond our control.

And we have this beautiful foggy morning to slow down and reflect for a few moments. It's a nice change of pace.

August 19, 2007 – Hope



Being a citizen of this world is not an easy task. Sometimes my prayer list can be a bit overwhelming. The victims of the earthquake in Peru are facing yet another day of tragedy and suffering. As the death toll mounts, the task of recovery becomes even more difficult. School starts today in Jordan where, for the first time, as many as 50,000 Iraqi refugee children will join the others. They are just the tip of the tragedy in Iraq, with millions of refugees, millions more who cannot leave, a deepening chaos and no end in sight. Hurricane Dean is bearing down on Jamaica and is expected to continue to be an extremely dangerous storm by the time it makes its way into the Caribbean. The hurricane season promises to be devastating for many coastal areas in the Caribbean even those that do not take a direct hit from a storm. Already the rains have brought mudslides and problems, more heavy rains will mean more tragedy.

Wild fires continue to ravage my home state. The Hicks Park Fire has now combined with the Wicked Creek Fire. Nearing 30,000 acres and only 8% contained, the fire still has the power to destroy at least 5 church camps and hundreds of summer cabins and residences. Because of the road closures and over-stretched fire officers, information is not readily available. And this is just one of many fires raging across the west threatening lives and property.

On the home front, our secretary is waiting for the insurance company to assess the damage from a disastrous hail storm that punched huge holes in the roof of her home followed by a torrential downpour. Her home is unlivable and her car is un-drivable. It is

possible that they will both be declared a total loss. Yesterday was a day of moving out and cleaning up, but there are weeks of uncertainty ahead. She is just one of hundreds who suffered damage from the hail and flash floods. I meet later today with a family to plan a funeral. While the death was not unexpected, it is another in a string of funerals that have been a part of our church all summer. It seems to be a season of the death of the matriarchs. Yesterday was the funeral of one of our Native American pastors at Eagle Butte, the second this year, and we do not know where we will find leadership for our struggling congregations on the Cheyenne River and Standing Rock reservations.

God, of course, doesn't need me to list these things in my prayers in order for God to be actively involved in this world. God doesn't wait for my requests to know of the triumphs and tragedies of this life. I don't pray in order to tell God what to do. I don't pray in order to tell God anything. I pray to remind myself of this world in which I live and to open myself to God's call and guidance about how to respond.

And I pray to re-connect with hope. Hope is easy when things are going my way and I can see what needs to be done and know what the next steps are. Hope is a bigger challenge when things appear, on the surface, to be hopeless. When the world is too overwhelming for me to know what to do first or how to direct my limited energies and resources, I need to be reminded that I don't have to fix everything myself.

We have a large outdoor cross on the edge of our church property. It is a sign to visitors that there is a church here, to neighbors of our business as a congregation, to our community as a symbol of our faith. I park near the cross and am able to see it in a wide variety of moods and weather. A cross is a symbol that always points beyond itself. Taken at face value, it could be the reminder of a particularly cruel form of execution employed by ancient Romans. But the empty cross is not a symbol of death for the faithful. It is, rather, a symbol that death is not the end.

The mood of this morning is not the final word on the condition of the human spirit. And there are plenty of signs that this is so. I simply need to open my eyes and look around at the signs of hope as cooler and more moist weather soothes our parched hills, as neighbors pitch in to help neighbors with the task of clean up and recovery, as the outpouring of generosity continues.

Sometimes I need to pray with my eyes open.

August 20, 2007 – Grace, Courage, and Wisdom



In 1943, with the world in the throes of the second world war, Reinhold Niebuhr preached a sermon that included a prayer. The prayer has become one of the world's favorite prayers, adopted by 12-step programs and adapted by many others. It appears on posters and plaques and has often been quoted without any reference to its source. It is truly a great prayer, one that has grown in meaning for me as the years have gone by.

“God give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

The prayer has been around all of my life, but I didn't discover it until I was in college. I think my first encounter with the prayer was when I was studying addiction and I heard it quoted in association with Alcoholics Anonymous. It was a slightly different version than the original, but it carried much of the power. In those days, I was most interested in the courage to change the things that should be changed. Young and idealistic, I had witnessed the power of great leaders and grassroots movements to make significant change. The Civil Rights movement was producing meaningful changes in law and attitude. As more and more institutions became integrated, our country began to envision the changes that needed to be made to live up to the vision of our founders and the pledge we had made that our country be a place “with liberty and justice for all.”

I believed that what was most needed was courage in the face of power and injustice. In fact, for many years, I believed that the correct version of the prayer began with the plea for courage to change.

Somewhere along this life's adventure, I discovered that there are things in this world that are beyond my ability to change. I can change my attitudes and behavior, and sometimes I can affect the thinking of another person, but I can't change or control the decisions and actions of another. Not everyone sees the world the way I do. Not everyone makes the decisions I would make in similar circumstances. Some of the most difficult lessons in this arena came from observing my brothers and sisters. Not only did they act as free individuals, making their own decisions, often my advice was not needed or wanted. I learned to suppress my urge to "convert" my siblings to my way of thinking, acting and believing. I discovered that my attitude was as crucial to peace in the family as was the thoughts, beliefs, and behavior of other family members.

Of course this kind of acceptance is not easy, and I was often less than gracious or graceful when I was learning to accept that there are things that I cannot change. The grace to accept with serenity is a gift that I am still learning, but one that I find to be increasingly important in many situations. We are a part of a large and complex universe. Not everything will or should go our way. Not every change will be accomplished in this generation. Graceful acceptance is as important as the courage to change.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge of life is the development of wisdom. The balance for which we strive that is reflected in the prayer comes from a process of discernment. Learning to distinguish the difference between things that should and could be accepted and things that should and could be changed is a difficult challenge. A degree of wisdom comes from experience. It is not so much that age alone grants wisdom. The passage of time is not the source. But there are experiences, when their meanings are learned, that grant a degree of wisdom. Wisdom, of course is never a possession fully gained, but rather a process of growing toward increased wisdom.

As I grow older and have more experiences, I have gained a modicum of grace in acceptance, but I pray that I have not lost my courage to make changes where changes are needed. I strive for a sense of balance, maintained by careful discernment. Perhaps I can be more effective in bringing about change precisely because I have taken the time to identify the things that cannot be changed and focus my energy on the areas where meaningful changes can be made.

It is clear that I have not yet mastered the grace, courage and wisdom for which I pray. Niebuhr's prayer continues to be a powerful one for me as I learn how much that grace, courage and wisdom come from far beyond my own abilities and talents.

May we all continue to grow in grace, courage and wisdom.

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August 21, 2007 – And More Smoke



I wrote about the smoke from wildfires a week ago, and perhaps I have exhausted the subject, but yesterday was a very smoky day in the hills and the smoke was from fires in states to the west. The smoke was the subject of conversation most places that I went, with people assuming that there must be a fire closer in order for there to be so much smoke. The hills have been the recipients of some major thunderstorms, and while the rain has been much needed, they remain dryer than normal and the lightning brings scare of more fire. So far we have been lucky.

But there is a lot of fire to the west and northwest. 17 major fires in Montana, dozens more in Wyoming, Idaho, Utah and Nevada. Homes are threatened, church camps evacuated, and firefighters are facing risk. One firefighter died in Utah last week. Compared to those whose homes are threatened, a little smoke doesn't seem like much of a discomfort.

There are stories of massive wildfires before the West was heavily settled. Early plains settlers reported days of smoke when fires raged in the rugged mountains of Montana and Wyoming. While some prairie fires were intentionally set as a buffalo hunting technique, the fires in the mountains were caused by lightning strikes. In the days before fire suppression, the fires would mosaic through the forests, burning more intensely on the uphill slopes, and more slowly in other areas. The only type of reseedling of trees was whatever occurred naturally. The result was a patterned forest, with different ages and species of trees growing in different areas.

The beginnings of modern fire suppression, following the Second World War, appeared initially to be very successful. Using airplanes and watch towers to spot smoke, fire fighters could be parachuted into fire areas and the fires brought under control before they spread. It took decades for forests managers to realize that this procedure of fighting every fire and fighting small fires before they became large was contributing to conditions that made for fires that were much more difficult to contain. As the fires were put out, the fuels began to build up in the forest. Trees began to age together and larger areas of the forest were consistent in the type and age of the trees. More ground cover and fallen timber provided more fuel and in the late 1980's fires raged throughout Idaho and Montana that were controlled only by winter weather.

There are probably more major fires ahead and now people have moved into the forests, building homes and cabins that are neatly tucked into the trees and very vulnerable in the event of fires. Areas such as the Boulder Canyon in Montana, where I grew up, often have only one access road and evacuating large areas is the only way to insure the safety of residents when fires threaten.

So we have a little smoke. It can be a health challenge for those with breathing difficulties and doctors recommend that those individuals limit their outdoor activities and seek air-conditioned spaces when possible. But for most of us the inconvenience is minor. The views and vistas are not as gorgeous as usual, the smell is not that of fresh pine, and we may sneeze a bit more often.

Given the size of western forests, this cycle of natural fire restoring some of the balance could take many years. Global warming and other changes in the climate may also affect this process. Some scientists predict many more years of drought before the forests receive the snowfall that was witnessed in the early part of the 20th century. Our planet is incredibly resilient and people are amazingly adaptive. Change comes and we learn to live with the changes.

But I doubt that I will learn to like the smoke.

Fortunately, it is temporary.

August 22, 2007 – Silver



Even though the kayak under construction in my garage is being built to an ancient design from Greenland, traditional covering is not practical for me. In the north country, they used seal skins to cover traditional boats. Not living in the neighborhood of seals, I had no access to them. Although there were some traditional bull boats covered with deer or buffalo hides along the Missouri River, these hides are very heavy and not practical for a kayak. In the late 19th century, canvas replaced animal skins and tree bark as the preferred covering for small boats. I have done restorations of canvas-covered canoes, and I considered covering the kayak with canvas. The first factory-made kayaks in the United States were canvas-covered.

My choice for this kayak, however, was dacron. Dacron is the material of choice for covering light airplanes. There are processes that involve shrinking the fabric chemically with specialty paints, but I chose a process in which heat is applied to the cloth with a calibrated iron and the material shrinks under the heat. There are a lot of steps in the process. The canvas is white and clear glue is used to attach it to the frame. After the canvas is attached, it is shrunk with the iron to fit. Next the weave of the fabric must be filled with paint that is part of a system where each layer of paint chemically bonds with the next layer. The paint to fill the weave of the fabric is tinted so that it is easy to see where it is applied. It takes three coats of this paint and when it is finished, the boat is pink. Next reinforcing tapes are glued over all of the fabric seams and more filler is applied.

After the filler, comes paint which provides protection from UV rays. This paint has aluminum suspended in it and is silver. The boat becomes silver and the fabric becomes opaque. This paint dries in about 15 minutes, so it has to be applied quickly and carefully. Three more coats and the boat has to be turned for each coat so that the top and bottom receive their paint evenly.

Now it is time for light sanding and preparation for the final coats of paint, which will have the color. Since I've chosen a two-color paint scheme for this boat, there are at least two coats of each color yet to be applied.

So at the present, the boat is silver, with the final cockpit coaming, rub rails and keel, all of which will be varnished, not attached to the boat. I still have three coats of varnish to apply to each of those pieces of wood. I can see the shape of the boat clearly and I can imagine how it will slice through the water. At nearly 18 feet in length and about 2 feet in beam, the boat is long and narrow and shouldn't disrupt the water too much in passing. At this phase of construction, I'm constantly touching the boat, running my hand along its lines, and imagining how it will handle in the water. I'm eager to be finished and to try out the boat, but this is no time to rush and there are many steps to completion that must be taken carefully.

It's close, you can tell that it is a boat, but much has to happen before it can be paddled.

Much in my life is like this boat. The vision is clear - people can tell what we're trying to accomplish, but there is a lot of work to be done before our goal is reached. The truly great tasks are those that cannot be accomplished easily. Patience is a virtue that takes a lot of experience to develop. Learning to appreciate the silver boat, knowing that someday it will be green and white, is a part of the process. In the work of the church, one needs to learn to appreciate projects that still need time for the ideas to come together - and still need work for the tasks to be accomplished. Like the boat, I need to learn to appreciate works in progress.

Last night, after a long day with a funeral and meetings into the evening, I paused to look at the silver boat. The garage is filled with the clutter of construction - there is a long list of tasks that need to be done. But for a moment, with my hand on the boat, I could imagine paddling in the ocean.

May I also be able to imagine the continuing growth in mission and ministry of our congregation as we work on the details of the next step.

August 23, 2007 – Youth



A thoughtful visit with a colleague yesterday focused some of my thinking about ministries with youth and children. It has become a huge challenge in the United Church of Christ to develop and maintain effective ministries with children and youth. I'm not sure why this is so. I made an important connection with the church in my teen years and my commitment to the ministry stems from the people I met in the church and the programs in which I participated in my teenage years. But much has changed in the decades since that time.

It seems as if the most effective youth groups are associated with the most exclusive forms of faith - in fact fundamentalist and violent youth groups seem to be far more effective than groups reflecting the theology and attitudes of our church. This isn't because youth are somehow more prone to violence or fanaticism than their elders. It may be in part because fundamentalist groups are willing to invest huge amounts of money in recruiting and indoctrinating youth. It might be said that the most effective youth group in the world today is al Quaida. Certainly their recruitment of 16 to 24 year-olds is dramatic.

Young people want to make their mark on the world. They want to be effective. They want to make a difference. And fundamentalist groups offer them the promise that they can change the world.

But this promise does not have to equate itself with violence. The American Civil Rights movement was in many ways a youth movement. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself was only 26 when the Montgomery Bus Boycott began. Thousands of youth were recruited into a non-violent movement that swept our nation. They were about creating change. They were about making a difference.

Perhaps it is the certainty of faith that appeals to youth. Fundamentalist movements tend to focus on conversion - and conversion is change embodied. They can see that lives are transformed when people abandon one form of faith for another. They can get caught up in the challenge of changing the beliefs of others. Our church, on the other hand, is not invested in changing the beliefs of others. We are committed to a multi-racial, multi-cultural church. We want to encounter and engage the beliefs of others, but we do not have a dogma or doctrine to impose on others. Freedom of conviction and belief is too deeply built into our tradition and history for us to give up on it now.

But our church has such a noble tradition of making a difference - of bringing about change in our society. It may well be that part of the decline of youth ministry in the United Church of Christ is that declining memberships have meant that we are somewhat less willing to take risks - somewhat less prophetic in our stands in society. This in turn, makes us somewhat less appealing to youth.

Of course, the situation is far more complex than this. One of the starting points of the transition in youth ministry in the United Church of Christ is sociology itself. Since the founding of the United Church of Christ, our church has had a declining birth rate. We now have a negative birth rate. There are less youth in our church than ever before. This has been true each year of our existence. More of the youth in our church are the only child in their household than youth from multi-child households. Our youth groups are smaller because we have less youth. One study indicated that the percentage of youth in the church who participate in its programs has actually gone up at the same time as the total number of youth involved has gone down.

And we have strong ethical commitments that keep us from trying to recruit youth away from other churches - a commitment that is not shared by all Christian communions.

But we have much to offer to youth aged 16 - 24 or so. A commitment to faith in action, a commitment to social justice, a heritage of reform and religious firsts.

So one of the priorities of this day, along with many others, will be spending some time creating a new web space aimed specifically at youth age 16 - 24. My proposal is that we have one work night per week at our Habitat for Humanity build that is focused on youth age 16 - 24. I further propose that we make sure that one of our pastors be present at every one of these work sessions so that we are available to engage in conversation while we offer to the youth the opportunity to engage in world-changing

work. It will be a place where they can make their mark - leave their footprint on this world.

We won't start out well-funded or powerfully-backed, but perhaps we will begin to re-connect with this wonderful and challenging group of people.

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August 24, 2007 – Partners



The foundation is complete and tomorrow we will start to build the floor system for the home that we are building in partnership with Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity. It looks like we will have a good crew and the work should go smoothly. We have rounded up enough tools and expertise to get going on the job. The entire construction process will probably take six months or so.

A solid foundation is essential to a stable building. People who are new to the process of building homes are often surprised how much of the total cost goes into site preparation, excavation, footings and foundation. Before there is much that can be seen, there is a lot of work that has to be done. This is true of more than just the physical building - it is also true of the relationships that enable construction to occur. Before we can get the building off of the ground, we need to establish and maintain partnerships.

Our project began long before any of us were born, with the founding of multiple Congregational churches in the Black Hills. The church did not come to the hills as a single institution. Joseph Pickett was involved in founding five congregations in the short time he served the region. From the beginning, the churches had opportunities and reasons to work together. Over the years, we have developed an Association, held regular meetings, formed bylaws and elected officers. We have established lines of communication that enable us to work together on projects that are too big for any single congregation.

Over the past fifteen years, Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity has been forming partnerships with contractors and vendors. The group has come a long way in learning how to purchase materials, obtain services, and accomplish work. The local affiliate has grown to have a full time executive director and a construction supervisor. They have developed plans and relationships with city officials that enable the permits to be issued and the work to be authorized.

We need to continue to develop and strengthen our partnerships with donors. This is an expensive construction, even with all of the in-kind and donated labor and services. We will need to continue to rely on the generosity of our people and we will need to give donors full reports of how their gifts are being invested.

Perhaps the most important partnership in this venture, however, is the relationship with the people who will become homeowners. Habitat for Humanity is founded on this partnership and relies on human relationships to help move people from those who dwell in substandard housing to home owners. The levels of skill, knowledge and home maintenance required of the home owners is entirely different than their current living situation. They will need not only to work hard and have skills, they will also need to know where to turn for help when projects are too big for an individual.

Our partnership with the home owner of one half of the duplex we are building has already begun. The homeowner participated in the demolition of an existing building on the property and after the forms were stripped from the foundation, he applied the black tar to the foundation that helps to seal the crawl space. This is messy work and had to be done before back filling could begin.

No single person will do the work on this house. It is an adventure of partnerships. We do well to be as attentive to the care and nurture of our relationships as we are to caring for our tools.

With gratitude for all of our partners, let the construction begin.

August 25, 2007 – Reunion



Regular readers of this blog (there may be six or eight of you now) will notice that I am almost 12 hours late in posting today. For the first time since February, I simply forgot about the blog when I got up this morning. Yesterday afternoon, after receiving an inch of rain and inspecting the muddy mess that was our building site, we decided to postpone our Habitat for Humanity build for a week to allow time for the ground to dry out. The result was a bonus day - a day off when I had planned a day of work. I made a list of things I wanted to do - run errands, shape and attach the rub rails to my kayak project, return some borrowed tools, get groceries, pack the camper for a trip to visit my family. I didn't put "write blog" on the list and I got up and went to the chores on the list without even thinking of the blog. And I had already chosen the subject for today's blog before I went to bed last night. So, although it is late, here it is:

We received another mailing this week for the "seventies" reunion at our college. This October at the usual homecoming time there is a reunion for all students who attended the college during the seventies. Since we graduated in 1974, we would know a lot of the people who might attend such a reunion. But it is interesting how unattractive the reunion seems to me. The events planned for the weekend, a football game, a no-host cocktail hour, a dance, a dinner and a concert, tours of classrooms and the like all seem like the social activities that I did not enjoy when I was a college student. The concert, played by former students who were friends of mine when I was in college sounds like the most fun, but hardly worth taking a weekend off of work and driving nearly 400 miles one way.

I wonder what it is about me that is so unexcited about the invitation to a reunion. I will probably use the same excuse I've been using for over 30 years now: "I work on weekends, a weekend out-of-town event doesn't fit into my schedule." It is not that there aren't some of my classmates I would love to see. I have some good friends from my college days - and the ones with whom I was the closest, are people that I make time to see from time to time and with whom I correspond and stay connected. It isn't that I don't have fond memories of college. I do. I enjoyed college very much and often say that I would return to college immediately if I could figure out how to take a break from my job without losing my pay.

No, there is something more fundamental going on. For all of my adult life, I have felt drawn by the future. I am excited about the things that are going on in my life right now and the things that will be happening in the next few years. I have all sorts of activities and events, hopes and dreams that command my attention and are very attractive to me. I don't spend much time looking back. When I graduated from college, I moved on with my life. There were so many things in my future that beckoned to me: graduate school, serving congregations, becoming a father, travel, writing, having more adventures. The future was calling to me and I was glad to be able to respond to that call.

I have a similar feeling about other groups in my life that hold reunions and invite me to attend. I don't find the reunion to be very attractive.

Which might not be a problem. Except one of the features of life after death that seems to be most appealing to many grieving families is the promise of reunion. The notion that we will be somehow be reunited with those who have died and whose loss we grieve is a great comfort to those who are gripped in the depths of grief. And this image of heaven as a place of reunion has inspired hope and faith in people for thousands of years.

Is my disinterest in reunions somehow a fundamental flaw in my faith? If I don't long for reunion, is there a part of me that is fleeing the afterlife?

Many of my friends have told me that they used to dread reunions, but once they attended one they discovered that it was a lot more fun than they had imagined. It may be that my disinterest is founded in a fundamental misperception of what a reunion is all about. This thought got me to thinking about what kind of reunion might seem appealing for me. I think that rather than sitting about and reminiscing about the past, I'd be interesting in hearing about the current lives and work of my classmates. Perhaps we could have a discussion of a pressing contemporary issue like we did when we were students together. Maybe we could talk about the future of the college and the challenges that it will face in the next decade. I would enjoy a lively debate about foreign

policy and the War in Iraq. I might enjoy an opportunity to work on a service project or contribute to the future of the school.

When I imagine the great reunion of heaven, I do not imagine a group of people gathered to reminisce about the good old days. I imagine generations of faithful people as invested in the future of the people as is God. Like the pillar of fire by night and smoke by day, God is always going out ahead of the people leading them away from slavery and into the land of promise. Imagine a community of people who are interested and engaged in the larger struggles of humanity for justice and peace.

Now if they offered me a chance to get together with the members of the class of 2008 to discuss their vision of the future, I might be planning to make the trip.

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August 26, 2007 – Pursuing Perfection



It seems like a simple matter: we should offer our highest and best to God. Worship ought to reflect the best qualities of humanity. It should be intelligent and well designed and filled with the best of our music, poetry, rhetoric, and drama. But it is often a very difficult matter to combine our best qualities in any single hour of our lives. Even if we were to combine the best qualities we could identify there is the question of which human qualities are the highest and best.

The renaissance and baroque periods saw a rapid expansion in the use of architecture as a mode of religious expression in Europe. Great cathedrals, often multi-generational construction projects, were erected. The church was a patron of other arts as well, commissioning dramatic and large paintings, hiring the best musicians, and constructing incredible pipe organs.

But who is to say the Mother Theresa, seldom worshiping in a cathedral, usually struggling with the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, was not offering the highest and best to God? Is the best we have to offer expressed only in art and architecture and fundraising? The question of what it means to offer our best to God is worthy of our contemplation.

On Friday we paid another visit to the organ builders who are crafting a modest expansion for the pipe organ in our church. They are down to the last twelve pipes - 16' trumpets for the great organ. Having crafted nearly 700 new pipes, they will soon be

turning to the building of the console for the instrument. Three keyboards, stop rails, a pedal board and the cabinetry to contain these elements. But the process is far from simple. The earliest organs had direct mechanical action connecting the keys to the mechanisms that released air into the pipes. With the advent of electronic organs, organ builders crafted keyboards with micro switches that activated magnets that released the air. The advent of microprocessors and printed circuit boards brought further advances in keyboard technology. Our organ builders are crafting keyboards with small light emitting diodes for each key. Emitting light that is beyond the visible spectrum, the design almost completely eliminates mechanical actions that can become corroded or worn in use. The promise is a keyboard that is virtually maintenance free.

But the design has taken a lot of refinement. Older and larger circuit boards are prominently displayed in the shop as a reminder of the mistakes that can be made. Research and development consume as much time as the actual building of organs. The result is a slow process. One of our organ builders is the same age as I am, and we have joked, though at times seriously, that we hope this project will be completed in our lifetimes.

The reality is that we will never reach perfection. The perfect design, the perfect act of service, the perfect moment of generosity are all beyond us. Life is a series of compromises. At some point, even though we pursue perfection, we have to say, "that is good enough for now." Were we to fail to do so, we would never complete any project. Our buildings would never be finished and we would never really worship God. We would spend our lives in planning and preparation, trial and error, and never get to any finished product.

Which, of course is really what this life is about. Practice and preparation for something that lies beyond - something that is even better - something that is beyond our present ability to imagine.

So we will continue to work with our organ builders, allowing them time to pursue perfection, but also setting deadlines to keep the work moving. And someday, when the new pipes and console are all installed and the organ is played, there will be a glorious sound and at least one person in the room will begin to imagine an even more glorious sound and think of how the organ might be modified and improved. It will always be a work in progress.

Our lives are works in progress, too. May we continue to quest for more and pursue that which lies beyond our grasp.

August 27, 2007 – Crazy Mountains



The Crazy Mountains, in south-central Montana, have lots of stories about how they got their name. One of the local stories is that a settler woman, driven mad by loneliness and isolation - or by grief in other versions of the story - wandered off into the mountains and somehow managed to survive for several years. Her appearance would, from time to time, startle those who ventured into the mountains. There are various local stories about people being chased by her wielding an axe, of campers being murdered in their sleep, and of strange sounds in the night. The stories have grown over the years and no one seems to have any direct knowledge of the original story.

Others claim that the mountains got their modern name from a translation of Absarokee stories. The Crow people saw the mountains as the Western edge of their buffalo territory. They knew that there was more land to the West and that even higher mountains rose beyond the Crazies, but the threat from the Blackfoot became more and more dangerous the closer one went to their traditional territory. With all of the buffalo that roamed to the east of the mountains, one would have to be crazy to risk hunting west of them.

Others say that the name is derived from the location of the mountains. They stand as a bit of a mountain island, apart and separate from the main body of the Rocky Mountains. As a teen, I couldn't really believe this version of the name because the Montana plains are dotted with lots of other small groups of mountains: the big and little belt mountains, the highwoods, the Judith mountains and the like.

What makes the Crazy mountains unique for me is that they are the mountains that mark the location of my home town. Traveling from the East or North, they rise dramatically from the surrounding territory and are a unique feature that makes navigation easy. From the South or West, the appearance is a bit less dramatic, but the shape of the mountains is distinctive. Growing up in a family of pilots, the sight of the Crazy mountains from the air always meant that we were almost home. Horizon Airlines has a flight from Billings, MT to Portland OR that passes just to the north of the mountains and gives that “we’re almost home” feeling to me each time I ride on that route.

Approaching by the Interstate from the East last night, the clouds were parted in just the right way to bathe the Crazies in light. I could see Crazy peak, the highest and sharpest rising, and remember the time I climbed to the top and other times when we would hike into the lakes and camp and fish. I had a strong sense of homecoming even though the place where I grew up is hardly home any more.

I’ve come for another in what will be a series of conversations with my brothers and sisters about how to manage the bit of property that our mother owns in our hometown. From the time I was eight or nine years old, it has been our summer place. Right along the Boulder river, the small cabins provided a wonderful camp for us to spend our summers. Close enough to town, access to stores, services, and our father’s business was convenient. Yet it was set apart enough to have a special feeling of isolation. It was the place where we built tree houses and played in the river and explored the meadow and watched the deer.

But times change and people change. We six children have become adults with very complex and busy lives. Three live in Montana and three in other states. Our children are different ages, mostly adults, now. Most of the families of my siblings have been reconfigured by at least one divorce and there are financial and health problems as well as old hurts and rivalries that we barely remember but often come up when we try to discuss the present.

Our mother can no longer live independently. She needs support with her medication and meals and this may be her last summer at the place. Prior to this summer, it had been five or six years since she last was able to come.

The time has come to sell the place and move on. But we do so reluctantly. Some siblings remain opposed to selling and believe that it can be managed as a jointly-held property into the next generation. Others have fond memories and will miss the place but know that they have already moved on with their lives. None of us is willing to risk family unity to get our own way, so we keep putting off the decision.

So each time we gather at the home place has a sense that it may be the last time we gather. And this trip will be a short one. We may not all make it to be together on the same day, and if we do, a few hours is all we will have. As has been the case for over a decade now, the real decisions will be made over the phone, by e-mail and letter. Our face-to-face visits rightly focus on our relationships and not business to be transacted.

But there is a bittersweet quality to this day, knowing that things will never be the same again. Of course this has always been true of our people. Since our father's people left Germany only to discover that although they had much in common with their neighbors they couldn't fit into the Amish lifestyle in Pennsylvania, two generations is the longest we've ever stayed in any place. My father was born in the same place as his father, but by the time he was in college, the entire family had left the ranch homesteaded by his grandfather. On our mother's side the people kept moving as well. Our grandmother was born in Dakota Territory, and even though the fourth generation is now on the family homestead, our side of the family left when our mother went to nursing school.

Native Americans call us "settlers," but we have rarely settled anywhere for long. We are, in a sense, as nomadic as were the plains tribes. And it seems unlikely that we will settle in for long in this generation.

But along the way there are landmarks that we can recognize. The place by the Boulder river in the shadow of the Crazy mountains is one of those places. Fortunately, for me, there is another island of hills rising from the prairie, off to the south and east, that I have also called home and when I leave with the Crazy mountains in my rear-view mirror, I can look forward to the time a few hours later, when I catch the first glimpse of the Black Hills and arrive at another place that I can call home. On this life's journey, the landmarks and meeting points frame our stories until we meet again.

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August 28, 2007 – Back to the Mountains



The forest service has lifted the fire closure on the main Boulder River valley. The folks at Hawley Mountain Guest ranch think they can salvage the last two weeks of their summer, so are gearing up to receive guests next week. That meant moving 37 horses back up the mountain yesterday. Since I was in town for family business and extra hands are usually helpful when moving stock, I took up the offer for a drive up the valley. I was curious about the fires of the past two years and wanted to re-visit a place that I've loved all my life.

There were four large horse trailers. It would take two trips. The horses were in a corral in town. These are horses that are used to spending the entire summer in the mountains and being loaded only a couple of times a year, so it took some time to coax the first 20 into the trailers. And as usual, the different volunteer hands had different levels of experience with animals and different styles of working with the critters. Fortunately these are dude horses and very tolerant and gentle with humans.

The day was beautiful and the drive was gorgeous. As we started up the valley, we drove by the scars from last year's Rico fire. There are some beautiful hillsides now covered with bare and burned tree trunks. And it was amazing to see how close the fire had some to some ranch homes that have been in the valley for all of my life. A familiar landmark, called the Lion and the Mouse now sports a "lion" with a singed mane. There were no visible signs of the this year's fires. They are much farther up the mountain and I had to have someone point out where the fire had burned. But you can see that the

forest is stressed. Trees killed by beetles are all around and it is still very dry in the high country.

The horses were glad to get out of the trailers - and glad to be back in their summer pasture. After a brief stop in the corral to unbridle the horses and check for any problems, they were turned out into the pasture.

The guest ranch sits at about 6700 feet - more than 2000 feet above town and a thousand or so feet below the divide. The air was clear and fresh, with just a hint that fall comes sooner in the high country - a good day to be alive and outside in such a beautiful place. There are a lot of trails that I've hiked and even more that I have not. Just driving up the valley brings back a flood of memories.

The Absarokee people went to the high country for ceremony and vision. There used to be an active archeological dig at the Hawley Mountain ranch. People have been coming to the high country for centuries. It is a good place to renew one's spirit and to gain some perspective on the every-day world. But the high country is a place to visit, not one to live. Even though a lot of money has been invested in some very big buildings up the valley, they are all summer places. Even the massive lodge of the guest ranch is closed up every winter. I was blessed with two summers of my life when I lived in the high country for the entire summer, but I know it is not home.

The reality is that that the places we call home are also temporary. Even for those who are born, live and die in the same community and even the same house, occupy it for only a little while. The summer is a few months - a lifetime is usually less than a hundred summers - and even for those who live longer the time is short compared to the timeline of the mountains. And from a cosmic perspective, even the mountains are temporary. But they are bigger than us - and their timeline is much longer than ours. So they seem permanent to us and bring us closer to an understanding of eternity than the usual effects of our throw-away society. I may not be much, but I live in a world of vast and unending beauty.

I speak of eternity often. I know very little of the reality of which I speak. But I trust that there is more to this world than the limits of my knowledge and my understanding. For now it is good to visit the high country from time to time and get a glimpse at the grandeur of this vast and wonderful world.

August 29, 2007 – Transition



The last week of August is a time of transition for many. Monday was the first day of school for one of my nieces, today is the first day for other nieces. Schools here start next week. Labor day is often seen as the last weekend of the regular tourist season. The “shoulder” season that follows is marked by fewer children and more retired persons. The weather is not yet cold, but there can be a bit of a chill in the morning or a cloudy day that reminds us that fall is coming. With all of the “back to school” sales and events at the stores and football practices, even the traffic patters have shifted. No frost yet. It isn’t fall, but we know that it is coming.

Seasons are important makers of time, even for those of us whose lives are more removed from the land and the rhythms of farming and ranching. We associate certain events and activities with certain seasons of the year. We talk about spring cleaning and tend to stock up on groceries and begin to fill our freezers in the fall. At our house, where building boats tends to dominate the garage, fall is the season for cleaning out the garage to make room for indoor parking through the winter. There are painting projects and lots of yard work that need to be completed before the snow flies.

At the church, programs begin to gear up in the fall. There are more meetings, more classes, and more activities once the school year is under way. This year will be especially full because we have a duplex that we are building in partnership with Habitat for Humanity that needs to be enclosed before bad weather sets in.

But winter is still a long ways away. There are lots of opportunities yet to sneak up to the lake with a canoe or kayak. Lots of great hikes remain, now that the days are a bit cooler. Many areas of the hills and badlands are more fun to explore in autumn, with fewer outsiders and more temperate weather.

In all of this, we are reassured by the changes in the weather and the schedule. One of the ways that we mark progress is by counting changes. The ancients counted the number of winters survived and saw a high number as an indicator of wisdom. The more winters survived, the wiser a person must be. There is some truth to this - at least the experience of having watched many seasons change gives perspective on any particular change in the weather.

Perhaps most interesting is the attitude we bring to the change of seasons. I can remember summers when I would dread the coming of fall. Fall meant long pants and sitting in school and having to spend more time indoors. I tried, in vain, to will the delay of fall. These days I greet the changes in season with joy and anticipation. Each season has its special recreation. Each has its special beauty. Each has its unique projects. And no two years are alike. I feel blessed to live in a place that has four distinct seasons and where the weather is still able to surprise us and occasionally re-order our priorities.

I could still see a bit of smoke in the sunrise today, but the land is really quite green and the morning feels fresh - another new day - another grand adventure.

May I share the joy and anticipation with everyone I meet today. And may I take delight in the school children I meet, trying to cram every bit of adventure and play into the next few days before they return to the school routine.

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August 30, 2007 – Sunset



It is my habit to write my blog entries in the morning. Usually the pictures have been taken in the past 24 hours, unless the subject needs an illustration that comes from another time or place. As I look back through the entries, there are several pictures of sunrises - many are views from our home or from the drive from home to the church. But last night's sunset was just too beautiful to pass up. Of course, you can't really tell by the picture, which has few discernible landmarks, whether it is sunrise or sunset. You'll have to take my word on this one.

The skies still have quite a bit of smoke from fires off to the west and the sun looks even more red when viewed through the smoke. It was a warm, clear evening last night and there were few clouds. Smoke reflects the light across a broader range than does clouds, so the colored sky stretched across the horizon as the earth turned, giving the impression that the sun was sinking behind the Black Hills. The picture serves as a reminder but the camera simply did not record the beauty of the sunset. A more skilled photographer might have captured the deep reds and bright oranges better than I.

Sunsets are incredible gifts. After the day's work there is often time for a somewhat slower pace. Taking time to breathe deeply and look out at the beauty of the world is an important part of the transition from work to sleep. There are times when the hectic pace of the day results in a rapid transition from work to sleep, but I find that I don't sleep as well when I don't take time to relax and wind down at the end of the day. Breathing in

beauty is a reminder that our lives are surrounded by beauty even when we witness great injustice and ugliness.

Sunset is another important reminder, as well. The end is as beautiful as the beginning. There are many reasons why we fear the end of our lives. Death seems, at times, to be the enemy that we try to thwart or prevent. But our best efforts can only delay and then for just a little while. Death is as much a part of this world as is birth. And it has its own beauty. It is interesting how we greet the mystery and unknown of birth with great anticipation and joy, and the similar sense of mystery and of the unknown that is a part of death is often the cause of fear and avoidance. But the sunset is every bit as glorious as the sunrise. And we have a daily reminder that our lives are surrounded by beauty.

The sunset, of course, is all a matter of perspective. The rotation of the earth leaves us in the shade during the night, but there is always a part of the earth that is in the direct sunshine. The sunrise and sunset travel round the earth each day and there is always some place on the earth where it is sunrise and someplace where the sun is setting. Life goes on, even when it seems to us that all is lost. The daily reminder that life has both beginnings and ending comes in the form of the sunrise and sunset. Life is full of changes. Beginnings and endings are inevitable and each has its own beauty when we take time to really look.

As I write, a new day is beginning and the sunrise is once again beautiful. May I live this day in the memory of the beauty with which it began and anticipation of the beauty that lies at the other end of the day.

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August 31, 2007 – A Jar of Honey



In my teen years, I had a fair amount of hay fever. I was always sneezing and blowing my nose. The fall of the year was the worst. When I worked harvest, I was unable to work on the combines for any amount of time without my eyes swelling and my head becoming completely plugged up. I could drive truck and looked forward to the run from the field to the bin when I could open the windows and drive a little faster. People who know me have heard the loud and enthusiastic sneezes that are a part of my life in dusty environments.

When I was in my twenties, I worked with an allergist, went through allergy testing and a series of desensitization shots. The discipline required three shots a week in the beginning with the number of shots decreasing as the treatment went on. It was time consuming, but it worked very well. My symptoms decreased greatly and I was able to manage my hay fever without the used of a lot of oral medications.

Near the end of the series of shots, the allergist spoke to me about precautions I could take to stay healthy. One thing that he suggested, I readily adopted. While at that time there were no studies about the use of local honey as a form of continuing desensitization, there was considerable anecdotal evidence that honey could help keep symptoms at bay. Since I love honey, it seemed like a good idea. I started using local honey in the bread I baked and often spread it on my toast, too. Over the years I have convinced myself that it works and I am careful to seek out local honey.

Since moving to the black hills, I have had a consistent source of honey from a friend who kept bees as a hobby. Bill died last February and I suspect that the honey we received from his widow this fall is the last of it. Finding another source of honey won't be difficult, but for now, the honey we have is a warm reminder of a wonderful friend.

Beekeeping has always been a precarious venture. Bees are vulnerable to pesticides, parasites and diseases. In recent years Colony Collapse Disorder, a condition that causes bees to wander away from hives, has had a devastating affect, causing some bee keepers to lose as much as 90% of their bees. The exact cause of this disorder is yet to be determined, but tiny mites that attack bees and/or the pesticide used to control the mites has been named as a possible cause. This, combined with a decrease in the number of commercial bee keepers in the nation, has created a shortage of honey. More significantly, it has created a shortage of bees to pollinate crops. This has already created a crisis in the almond industry in California, and other agricultural areas are beginning to experience problems as well.

Quite simply, bees are amazing creatures and they perform functions such as pollinating corps far better than any artificial methods developed to date. They produce wax and honey and provide an essential agricultural service. We need bees not just for the tasty honey that we enjoy, but for many of the other foods we eat. The alfalfa and sweet clover that we bale for cattle feed is dependent on bees to pollinate the crop. The Wall Street Journal estimated the financial impact of bees on the agricultural economy at \$14 billion.

As innovative and creative as we are, we humans cannot "go it alone" on this planet. We need insects, birds, animals, fish, and other creatures in order to survive and thrive in this planet. The diseases and problems that affect them affect us. We are all in this together.

So as I eat my honey and toast this morning, I am once again reminded of the incredible complexity of this creation and what a wonderful gift a jar of honey really is. In my prayers today, I thank God that I live in a world where there are also bees and I pray for their safety and continued health.

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September 1, 2007 – Harvest



In my teenage years, harvest was a big event. I worked summers at my cousin and uncle's farm and most of my job involved working summer fallow. I drove the tractor and pulled a duckfoot to till the fallow ground between the strips of wheat. But we all knew where the payoff came in wheat farming. As the wheat began to turn golden and become ready, we kept our eyes on the weather, knowing that wind, hail and even driving rain could seriously affect yield. Evenings were spent working on the combines and making sure the trucks were ready to go. We'd watch my uncle walking in the fields in the late evening. He'd stop to pick the head off a stalk of wheat, rub it vigorously between his palms and then toss the hard red winter wheat kernels into his mouth and chew them.

Harvest days were the longest work days on the farm. We'd head to the field at first light, eat our lunch and supper in the field and work into the evening until the moisture content began to rise. Sometimes we'd work under the lights for an hour or more after dark. There were extra hands, often school teachers, to help drive truck and help with the kitchen chores. As the combines made their way to finish the corners of the last field, someone would jump onto my uncle's combine, snatch the hat off of his head and toss it into the header for a trip through the combine. He always bought a new hat when we went to town for state fair. My uncle didn't wear cowboy hats, always an engineer's cap. With his bib overalls he looked more like a train engineer than a Montana rancher.

Our harvest is much more modest. We are hobby gardeners. Most of the food consumed in this house is purchased at the farmer's market or the grocery store. But it is fun to have enough garden for tomatoes and sweet corn. And zucchini is easy to grow, if a bit hard to remember to pluck off the vines before they get too big.

There is something satisfying about harvest. Any crop requires patience. One has to understand delayed gratification in order to plant seeds in the ground that yield their produce two or three months later. And there is just enough work to keep one from being tempted to make the garden too big. Weeding is never fully finished and in our country we have to water the garden with the hose in order to keep it from drying up in late June and through July and August.

But we have arrived at the sweet season. Most of the garden work is behind us. At this point it is mostly reward. All the tomatoes and sweet corn we want for a little while.

Most of the work I do has a much less visible harvest. Church work is about long term investing and sometimes the best work we do has results that we never witness. Young people grow up, move away, and serve in places that are far away. We receive letters and e-mail communication, but often never see the acts of kindness or unselfish service that are the result of their upbringing. Words that I say or write that have an impact on another often do their work in places that I will never go. And the true contribution of the church in this generation is for future generations to inherit and judge.

The harvest of souls is left to God alone.

But there are moments when we glimpse the joy. Special events such as weddings, baptisms and funerals can be occasions of reflecting on the power of love and the joy of faith. Starting new projects and ministries within the church can be times of incredible hope. And the incredible generosity of volunteers is both gratifying and inspiring.

Late summer and early fall are joyous times on the farm or in the garden. The joy is more spread out in the church. And yet both have those wonderful moments when one can pause for a moment and say, "indeed it was well worth the effort."

September 2, 2007 – Promise



Yesterday was our first real work day at our Habitat for Humanity site. The foundation was in and the center wall had been constructed and we were ready to install the flooring system. Work was set to begin at 8 a.m. At about 6 a.m., the sky turned dark in the west and it looked as if we were going to get a thundershower before work could begin. I had already loaded tools and other things into my pickup and was beginning to think of where I might park it to keep the things in the back out of the rain. As I turned on to the street that heads up to the church, I caught glimpse of a rainbow rising over our cross. It was not the right place to take a picture. There were houses and power lines in the way and the antennas on the hillside were distracting, but the mood was exquisite and I stopped and snapped a picture to capture the mood.

The rainbow is a powerful symbol in the Bible. At the end of the story of Noah and the great flood, God gives the rainbow as a sign that never again will God use a flood as the method to address the sinfulness and disobedience of humans. This does not mean that there will never again be floods. We don't have to look far to see examples of floods in contemporary times. And anyone who has witnessed or been a victim of a flood understand the destructive power of too much water in the wrong place. The promise, however, is different. In the ever-changing relationship between God and people, stories often arise of ways of relationship that are tried and do not work. The people wander into Egypt in search of food and end up as slaves. God intervenes to save them. They quickly forget and begin the fashion a golden calf. Later, the people want kings. God grants kings. Kings don't work for human freedom. The growing relationship has many

phases and stories of failure and success. These stories have been told and retold for generations and many of them were collected into our Bible. Early in the narrative is the story of the flood and God's promise that never again will God use the near destruction of all life as a way to bring about righteousness.

Every rainbow is a sign of that promise to those of us who claim the story as a part of our heritage. Yesterday's rainbow was a sign to me that our project is a small part of a bigger picture and that God's realm is far more than the work we do in this life. It is easy to delude ourselves and think that we are building God's realm, knowing full well that our projects, while worthy and worth while are not the whole story of God's work in the world.

So we took the gift of the rainbow at the beginning of the day and we gave a day of work to a project in which we believe. And as we worked, we were aware of God's promise. And surely God was with us in the work.

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September 3, 2007 – Labor Day



Today is a day set aside to honor the workers who are so critical to our society. The day has a lot of traditions such as picnics and outdoor activities. It is recognized as the end of the summer vacation season and used to be the kickoff of the political campaign season. It is also a day of recognition for labor unions and other organizations of workers.

One of my college jobs resulted in my becoming a member of the Bakery and Confectionary Workers Union. I appreciated the higher wages and the meetings were opportunities to express concerns about our workplace and gave me a feeling of being a part of a group who were sticking up for greater issues, such as health care and retirement benefits. But I knew that this was a temporary job - one of many jobs that were on the way to something different. Most days I was the only one in the break room reading books during lunch hour. I was younger than most of the other workers, and I was pretty sure that I was headed for graduate school when I finished college. But I had a sense of belonging and of contributing to the quality of life of all of the workers in the giant bakery.

One of the greatest gifts my parents gave me was that they did not pay for all of my education. They were supportive and they contributed generously, but I always had to work throughout my schooling. I had a wide variety of jobs, from the bakery to the library, from janitorial work to furniture repair. I did farm work and drove truck during the

summers. As my career progressed, I worked in churches with youth groups and in a counseling center.

Labor day is a day to take some time off and for workers to have a day of rest. But it can also be a day for all of us to appreciate and celebrate the value of work. Work produces income and provides for livelihood, but in a larger sense work provides meaning and structure for living. Not every job is rich in meaning or in a sense of contributing to society, but most work that is honest gives value beyond the wages earned. Work contributes to a sense of self-worth and meaning.

As one who does most of my income-producing work sitting at a desk and facing a computer or visiting people in homes and hospitals, I often do more physical labor on a day off than I do in my everyday life. I'm more likely to be lifting, building and getting dirty on a "day off" than on a day at the office. But I appreciate a day to celebrate the value of labor and to give recognition to workers.

Perhaps today is a day to rededicate ourselves to the vision of meaningful work and fair wages for every one who is able to work. May we make this a day to give thanks that we are able to work.

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September 4, 2007 – The Usual



I mowed my lawn yesterday. It isn't the first time I've mowed my lawn on Labor Day, but yesterday the lawn was lush and green and thick. I was more like spring mowing than fall. This has been an unusual year. Spring started out well, with quite a bit of rain and things turned green. Then in the middle of June things really dried out. Our lawn went dormant in July and looked like late fall. But in August the thundershowers came, sometimes as much as an inch of rain in an hour, and things perked up again. And so we start September with at least enough moisture on the surface to keep things green again.

Which begs the question, what is "normal" or "usual" weather for the Black Hills anyway. When we lived in North Dakota, people were quick to say that the weather was unusual, no matter what happened. If we had a cold winter, the locals would say that -30 degrees is unusual. If we had a wet spring, we'd hear that such was unusual. When the wind blew for weeks without stopping, we heard that it was unusual. It seemed to us that every weather phenomenon was unusual to the long time residents of that area.

Chris Mooney, in his recent book, *Storm World*, takes a look at weather patterns, especially hurricanes, in the light of recent scientific evidence and information. The reader expects him to draw a close connection between global warming and the increase in recent violent hurricanes, but he reaches a different conclusion. While he does not deny the existence of global warming and spends little time discussing how much global warming is human caused, he turns a scientific eye to what we know about

storm patterns and concludes that we simply do not have enough data to make firm conclusions. For example, there has only been one category 5 hurricane to make landfall on the Arabian peninsula and that was in recent years. Mooney rightly inquires, is that because there has only ever been one category 5 storm in the area, or is it because this is the first to be observed by humans who use the modern scale to measure it. If there had been a category 5 storm making landfall on the Arabian peninsula 350 years ago would anyone have recorded it as such?

Modern meteorological techniques and radar detection systems have greatly improved short term weather forecasts. Because there is a relatively high degree of accuracy in short term prediction, we think that scientists are beginning to understand weather. But the truth is that the larger patterns of the weather are little understood. Accurate weather data collection is only a century or so old and the weather patterns of this planet may run in cycles that are hundreds or even thousands of years long. Is the weather we are experiencing usual? The truth is that we really don't know for sure. Popular memory and anecdotal evidence may be as reliable as weather statistics in predicting major changes in the weather.

At every turn we discover that we are a part of something that is much larger than ourselves. The cycles of weather on earth may indeed be generations long and the memories that we collect in the span of a single lifetime may be too narrow a slice of the weather for us to fully understand it. Scientists are learning to read other evidence, including the rings of petrified trees and the layers of soil to understand more fully the patterns of weather. The mere existence of petrified cypress trees in the South Dakota Badlands indicates that there once was a time when this was a semi-tropical rainforest, a climate much different from what we experience today.

So I don't know if the weather we are experiencing is the usual. But it is nice, and I've got the energy to mow the lawn a few more times before fall weather takes over completely. It looks like there will be a few more mornings to paddle the lake before putting things away for the winter. I don't know whether or not it is usual, but I intend to enjoy it.

September 5, 2007 - Numbers



The State of South Dakota requires registration of all boats over 12 feet in length. And it requires that all boats have a hull identification number before they are registered. Even though the state does not issue titles on canoes and kayaks, owners of these boats must go through specific procedures before they can be used on the waters of our state. So, even though my current kayak project is only the fifth boat I have made from scratch, it now has a serial number plate with a 13-digit combination of letters and numerals that complies with the specifications of the state. The number of digits in the hull identification number does not seem to correspond in any way to the actual number of boats constructed in South Dakota. The final three digits contain a repeat of the same information. They are the last digit of the year the boat was constructed followed by the last two digits of the same year.

After the hull identification numbers are permanently affixed and inspected by a peace officer, the state issues a completely different number, the seven-digit bow number, which has to be displayed on the exterior of the boat. This number is not the same as the eight-digit registration number, which is on the registration sticker that is also issued by the state. Presumably, these numbers show that I have not stolen the boat and that I have paid the small annual fee for registering the boat. It takes a minimum of two trips to the courthouse and one to the police station or department of fish and game in order to complete the process.

Our society seems to be in love with numbers. Individual appliances and devices have serial numbers, our cars have vehicle identification numbers and license numbers and most of the individual parts have unique numbers. We have social security numbers which now are different from our driver's license numbers and not the same as our passport numbers and unique from our bank account numbers. We have personal identification numbers to operate automatic bank tellers, to protect Internet security and to operate alarm systems. There are codes for unlocking doors and different codes to check our bank balance over the telephone. Now most people have home phone numbers plus cell phone numbers and quite a few have distinct fax numbers. At least the ten digits of our telephone numbers have a correspondence to the actual number of telephones in the world.

Perhaps because we have so many numbers, we are relatively good at remembering the most important numbers. And we have all sorts of devices, including computers and telephones where we store numbers for easy recovery and use. And we are told to guard our numbers carefully because numbers in the hands of the wrong people can result in the theft of not only our money and possessions, but our identity. Who knows how many security rules I have violated by posting a picture of the hull identification number of a hand-built kayak in my blog?

The relationships that are really important in our lives can't be reduced to numbers. Our family and friends are known to us without the need to check their numbers. Life and death health and illness recovery and injury all occur without the need of specific numbers. (You do need your policy and group numbers to be admitted to the hospital, however.) Our fears and hopes are unique and cannot be reduced to mathematical formulas.

Perhaps the most important number of all is in the ancient "Shema," or commandment to faithful people. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one." There is one God. There is one primary relationship for our lives. And, unless I'm mistaken, God knows us for who we are and not as a number in some system of organization.

September 6, 2007 – Getting Dirty



Our current Habitat for Humanity project is a duplex home. Two homes for two families share a common wall. In order to meet all of the building codes, the wall is actually a double wall, with fire barrier sheetrock on both sides of each wall and a 1" space between the walls. The idea is not complex, but actual construction is a bit more difficult. The first wall can be constructed and sheetrocked in place as usual, but the second wall has to have one side sheetrocked before being raised into place. In order to keep the construction process flowing, a few of us gathered yesterday to put up a little sheetrock.

We're volunteers and not professionals, and we were perhaps a bit messy with the taping of the seams, and by the time we got finished it was time to head for the shower before continuing with my day, which included serving communion at a nursing home. Somehow it reminded me of a story a friend once told about a young pastor who had come from the East Coast to the midwest to serve a rural parish. When there was a problem with the toilet, he called the bishop who instructed him about the necessary repairs. Horrified that he would have to do the work himself, the young pastor declared, "With these consecrated hands?"

Perhaps the real way to consecrate hands is to get them dirty. Much of the ministry of Jesus Christ is carried out by folk who are willing to go to work and to do what is needed to get the job done. While the sacramental life of the church is important, life together in Christian community is more than baptism and communion. It is also the everyday work

that needs to be done. Working together is a way to form friendships and build community. And when work is freely offered for the good of others, it becomes holy work.

So I give thanks to God for the opportunity to get my hands dirty and to do some work from time to time. This does not mean that the work I do at my desk is somehow less important, but rather acknowledges that life is a balance of different activities. From time to time it is good to engage in physical work that contributes to the good of the community.

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September 7, 2007 – Road Time



Yesterday a couple of us drove from Rapid City to Yankton for a two-hour meeting and then drove back home in the evening. The trip is about 375 miles one-way and we probably spent about 11 hours driving for our meeting. And the meeting was a planning session for another meeting: next year's annual meeting of the South Dakota Conference. One might get the impression that we love meetings a whole lot to spend a day driving just to attend a two-hour meeting. Of course there is more to the story.

From the very beginnings of the Christian church in South Dakota, people have been willing to invest time in traveling to get together with other people of faith. In the pioneer days, when transportation was slow and perilous, people nonetheless got together on a regular basis for worship, fellowship and sharing ideas. Soon there were mission projects that were too big for a single church and congregations began to share mission as well as fellowship. The South Dakota Conference has a 140-year history of gathering together for projects that are too big for individual congregations.

There is much in contemporary culture that resists the notion of cooperation and gathering together. The independent church movement has produced sizable congregations who believe that they can make it on their own. These congregations often gather around a charismatic leader and feel no need for a connectional system. Individual congregations direct their own work, set their own standards, conduct their own searches for leadership and engage in their own mission and ministry. Individual congregations frequently become quite large in their quest to provide everything that

their members need. But they remain isolated. Even when individual congregations are enormous they lack the international presence of traditional denominations.

Individualism is highly valued in our society. Individual freedom is often a more highly held value than the good of the community. But there are times when community is essential to our survival and meaning. The gathering of the community becomes important enough for the investment of our time and energy. The annual meeting of the United Church of Christ congregations in South Dakota is one event that we continue to value and find worthy of our time and energy.

Of course driving across the western United States is different from driving in many other parts of the world. My friends in New England find it amazing that we are willing to do so much driving, but there is a lot more tension and work involved in driving in a place with a lot of traffic. Our drive time is an opportunity for pleasant conversation and collegial support. Yesterday there were scattered thundershowers across the state and the light show in the evening was entertaining for many miles. There is always something new to see. Perhaps it is in part the challenge of large somewhat empty spaces that invites us to overcome them in order to gather with friends and colleagues and other faithful workers in the church.

There are many more miles and many more meetings in the future as we continue to discover what it means to be the church in this time and place. May our travels be safe and our meetings meaningful.

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September 8, 2007 – Launching



Photo by Chuck Rounds

After nearly five months of construction, I took my first paddle in the new kayak yesterday. When I have launched other boats, I usually have just gone off to the lake by myself and paddled for a while to make sure that everything is OK before inviting friends to see the new boat in the water, but somehow, I wanted to have a little ceremony for this boat. We invited a few friends, took a picnic to the lake and drank a toast to the new boat before I put it into the water. It took a little adjusting to the boat. It is the longest kayak I've ever paddled and I had to learn how to lean properly and get some speed in order to get the boat to turn. It is quite fast and paddles easily and feels quite comfortable. I need to adjust the foot braces and add a little padding at my knees. There are always a few things to adjust after the first trip to the lake, but the work is mostly completed.

As I paddled out for the first trip across the lake, I whispered a little verse I had composed for the occasion:

Your name shall be called "Paha Sapa"
'tis a gift from the hills of your birth.
May your life be filled with adventure
as you paddle the waters of this earth.

It took me a few days to decide on a name for the boat. But Paha Sapa seemed appropriate. It is Lakota for black hills. Since the framework of the boat is Black Hills spruce and it was crafted in our home in the hills, the name seemed to be right.

There is a sense of accomplishment in having finished the boat and I am looking forward to paddling it in many different places in the years to come. I hope to have it on the West Coast next month when we go to visit our son and daughter-in-law and do a little paddling in the the Pacific. My father-in-law has rightly pointed out that I have to figure out where to store it before I could start another boat project. A love of boats and years of building them has resulted in four canoes hanging from the rafters in the garage, two kayaks stored under the deck and this new boat sitting on saw horses in the space where I work on boats. Although each boat is different in character from the others and I have unique memories of building and paddling each, I am beginning to come to the realization that it might be possible to have too many boats and I may need to think about finding a new home for one or more of the boats.

I'm thinking of taking the boats out one by one throughout the fall and doing a little write up on each with its specifications and creating a little builder's log of boat projects. But on the next day that I have some time, I'll take this new boat to the lake and spend a few hours paddling and getting to know her. Although she is new to me, the shape of this boat comes from lines that Howard Chappelle took off of southern greenland kayaks in the 1920's. The basic shape and technology of skin-covered boats was well developed before Europeans visited this continent. The modern-looking lines of this kayak have a direct connection to boats that were built hundreds of years ago.

Factory-built boats have improved materials that make for increased durability and lighter weight, but they do not have the distinctive look of a hand-built boat and their price is quite high when compared to the cost of the materials that went into this boat. And because I have built the boat, I know its strength and trust its integrity.

I am enjoying having the new boat and enjoy talking with others about how she was constructed. And I'm looking forward to paddling her in bigger waters in the years to come.

Now . . . for a winter project, perhaps a row boat . . .

But first I've got to figure out where to store this one.

September 9, 2007 – Getting Tired



I slept through my alarm this morning. It is something that I rarely do. I've always found it easy to get up in the morning and if I am going to have a time in the day when I am tired, it will probably be in the afternoon. Part of the reason I overslept was that I was simply tired. Yesterday we had a workday at our Habitat site and I put in a fairly full day building a wall and helping put decking on the floor. We carried sheets of sheetrock and particleboard and lifted and carried the wall into place. There was plenty of bending and toting of tools and other items. By the end of the day, I knew that I had put in a good day's work.

As one who spends most of my working time in an office or out visiting people, the physical work is very good for my mental and physical health. I feel fortunate to have the opportunity to participate in Habitat for Humanity. Like most other mission projects, it is about a relationship in which all parties are gaining. The project is far less about what we give than it is about what we gain through sharing.

I have never experienced major depression or chronic fatigue, so my perspective is different from someone who has had these or other illnesses. For the most part, for me, getting tired is a good thing. I sleep well and I am able to lay aside the long "to do" lists and worries that occupy my mind and attention during my waking hours. I wake refreshed because I have slept well and this, in turn, gives me energy for the new day.

And work on a Habitat for Humanity home is joyous work. There are usually plenty of hands to help with all of the tasks, and the project - working with a family to provide simple decent housing - is meaningful. There is good food and fellowship and a sense of accomplishment. Yesterday was a fun day because installing the floor system gives such a visual sign of progress. It was easy to see the difference between our starting point and the way the home looked as we left the building site in the afternoon.

Today is a busy day of hard work of another vein. I will lead four worship services with a variety of congregations. One with our home congregation in the morning, two at nursing homes and one in an assisted living facility. Leading worship doesn't have the same kind of visual feedback that building a home does. I will receive some verbal feedback, usually positive from the participants in the worship and sometimes I can see changes in the congregation that begin with the ideas we discuss in worship. I also have the feeling of having connected with people of all ages - from the youngest children in our "Sunday School Kickoff" program to a 106-year-old woman who never misses my worship services in her care center. Some of the participants in worship have difficulty with short term memory and may not remember the service at all, except that it is a part of a larger pattern of life-long participation in church.

I will also meet with a couple to discuss their wedding that is less than a week away, visit with church members about a variety of on-going congregational issues, try to catch up on paperwork and tackle some of the build-up of e-mail and regular mail in my office. Yesterday was a day of jeans and gloves and getting dirty. Today I'll be wearing the same white shirt and a tie I put on before breakfast when I head for home.

Whether I am working on a Habitat for Humanity home or leading worship in my robe and stole, the work of my life is a gift and the people with whom I share the work are a blessing. May I greet each evening with the good kind of tiredness that gives me deep and peaceful sleep.

And tomorrow I won't hear the alarm clock either - it is the one day in the next two weeks when I won't need to set it.

September 10, 2007 – Tweaking the Details



Like many boatbuilders, I made my first canoe because I wanted a canoe and I didn't have enough money to buy a factory canoe. The idea of building a boat intrigued me and it is a task that can be accomplished with relatively few tools. After I finished that first canoe, I paddled it for a couple of years and discovered many things that I would do differently if I had it to do over. I also began to look more closely at other canoes and observe details. My second canoe was a completely different kind of canoe and it came out better than the first. In fact, I liked the rail system on the second canoe so much that I removed the rails from the first canoe and replaced them with ones similar to the second boat. The second boat, of course, was not perfect and it led to a third and fourth. An experience swamping a canoe in the Puget Sound resulted in the exploration of kayaks and the making of my first kayak. Soon building boats was as much of a hobby as paddling them. Each boat gives ideas and leaves room for improvement.

There is a period of time after the completion of a boat when I have quite a bit of energy for making little changes. The boat that I launched on Friday is in the shop this morning for adjustments to the foot pedals, installation of a little foam to protect my knees from banging on the framework and a change in the way the seat is installed. There is also additional finish work and varnish that will be done after a few more trips to the lake to get it to feel and paddle the way I want.

Any project the size and scope of building a small boat requires the ability to make changes and pay attention to details. Little things make a big difference in the overall

enjoyment of the boat. And each project is a teacher that gives new ideas and new skills for the next project.

So part of today is a time for tweaking the details. I plan to make adjustments, go to the lake and try them out, and return to work on the boat a little more. In a sense a boat is never completely finished, but always a work in progress.

Building boats has been a good metaphor for other parts of life. In my vocation, I never get ministry perfect. I make mistakes. I handle situations in less than optimal ways. I address a passage of scripture without having done all of the research. I learn as I go. Each day is an opportunity to learn skills and gain ideas for the next day. Each problem grants the chance for innovation in problem solving. I don't think one ever gets it perfect. Perhaps experience can be the kind of teacher that makes part of the job easier and frees energy for other parts of the job. Maybe study is somewhat cumulative and one can remember previous research while pursuing new studies.

I think we live in a time when experience is undervalued. Because the transfer of power and authority from one generation to the next is a difficult process, there is always a bit of resentment of elders. And we live in a time when the creative brilliance of youth has produced remarkable contributions to society. Especially in the field of computers, young people have become wildly successful. It is not always the case that the best ideas come from those with the most experience. Different qualities have more or less social value depending on the circumstances of a particular moment of history and the needs of a particular culture. So, in my opinion, experience is a bit undervalued right now. The value we place on it will change as the members of the World War II generation die and the members of other generations age. Experience is a quality that one can build. Youth is one that everyone loses. There will be a time when experience increases in social value.

One of the roles of those who have experience is to tweak the details. Experience teaches that changes can be made and then getting things right is not only about innovation. Progress involves discerning which things to keep from the past and which to replace with new ideas and concepts.

It seems to me that my role in the community shifts as I age. The gifts that I have to offer also change. I am not as physically strong as I once was, and it sometimes takes me longer to form an idea and shape an argument. But I also have the benefit of memory and a core of knowledge upon which to build.

We will never get it perfect. But sometimes we come close to getting it right.

September 11, 2007 – Morning Mist



It was about 41 degrees when I slid my kayak into the lake yesterday. The mist was rising off of the lake in the brilliant sunshine. I've been putting boats into lakes for a lot of years, and I've been coming to this lake for a dozen years, and I still find it strikingly beautiful. I don't think I could ever become tired of how the lake looks.

It was six years ago this morning that I was headed for the high school for a meeting when the radio began the first reports of the terrorist attack on the twin towers in New York City. First reports were unclear as to the nature of the incident. An accident was suspected, but no one was sure. There was a television at the school where we watched with horror the unfolding events. Most people have stories of how they received and responded to the events of that day. And there will be plenty of retrospectives and additional stories as we observe the anniversary today.

There are some things that we know from our current perspective. 9/11 was not the end of the world. The most vicious attack that could be organized by that particular cell of terrorists was able to create deep tragedy and great loss, but it was not able to rise to the level of the impact of drunk drivers or home accidents in terms of casualties. As terrible as that day seemed to those of us who were distant witnesses, and as incredibly worse it was for the families of the victims, life goes on. And not just a slender thread of existence, but abundant life goes on.

At the graveside, when we lay to rest the bodies of loved ones, I often remind those gathered of the signs of God's gift of life that surround us at that very moment: flowers, grass and trees, the hills that surround us, and, most importantly, one another - drawn together in genuine concern and care. Even though we all will one day die from this life, God's gift of life has the final victory.

How can one compare the widely divergent experiences of this life? Is the view of the mist rising off of the lake as the sun filters through the trees a more lasting impression than a television picture of a sky scraper collapsing in a monstrous cloud of dust? Is the exquisite joy of love worth more than the intense pain of loss when a loved one dies? Is the assurance of hope more valuable than the deep mystery and real doubt that accompany true faith?

I know that these are questions without answer. And yet, there is something very deep within our being that urges us to place our bets on life. We are hard wired to fall in love regardless of the cost. And the beauty of this world becomes impossible to ignore despite the ugliness of injustice and terror. We develop a longing for tomorrow in spite of the lessons of yesterday. No matter how many times we've been around the block, or drive out to the lake, creation has new surprises unfolding every day.

I am noticing that with the change of seasons, the daylight comes later. It was mostly dark as I drove into the office this morning. Time passes and the seasons come and go. And in the midst of all of this I have a sense of anticipation and excitement. God still has surprises in store for us - today and tomorrow. And when, in the course of time, my life comes to an end and the things I have made with my hands have deteriorated and been forgotten, and the memory of who I am has faded - even then - someone will rise in the morning and watch the mist rising off a lake somewhere and know that their view is unique in all of time and place. And they will be overwhelmed with a sense of awe. And once again, someone will understand that God's gift of life has the final victory.

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September 12, 2007 – Cats



I don't think we set out intentionally to become the caregivers of cats. It is one of those things that happened gradually. Children are a different matter. There was a sense of intentionality about becoming parents, even though the details are quite different than we had dreamed. And kids and pets are a good combination. Pets teach compassion and responsibility and long term commitment. They provide companionship and comfort and no small amount of joy. And caring for living creatures teaches about the nature of life. And when the time comes for a pet to die, the pet teaches some of the hard lessons of grief and loss.

Our daughter has been the leader of the campaign for cats in our house. And she hasn't met much resistance from her parents. Not only did she fall in love with the cats, we developed our own attachments as well. When they need to go to the vet, I was the one who usually took them. When they need medicine,, I'm often the one to administer it.

When children grow into adulthood they move out of the home of their youth and get their own places. But, in our case, the pets didn't move with the kids. I don't know why that should have surprised me, but it did. My vision of "empty nest" was one of mom and me, footloose and fancy free, ready to travel at a moment's notice. The reality is a couple of old coots with a couple of old cats with no clear definition of who owns who. And none of us is getting any younger.

The cats seem to be happy. They have left their claw marks on the door frames and they have trained us to open and close doors whenever they want. They get into things they ought not, knock over items on the workbench in the garage, chew up house plants, leave their fur everywhere, and in general find ways to increase our work load. They may have an occasional mistake near the litter box, but they have a couple of trained attendants who clean up after them. They are well fed and have plenty to drink and visit the vet regularly. They can get a scratch or cuddle on demand and have learned to tolerate the humans in their home. Notice that I say “they.” I remember giving consent to the first cat. The steps from that to multiple cats aren’t clear in my memory.

But they live with us. And they deserve care and love and attention. They have needs to be met and we are able to meet them. And the commitment of adopting a pet is a commitment to provide care for the rest of the pet’s life. We accept that commitment. I am hoping to draw the line at these two cats and not invite any more to live with us, and I am expecting to outlive them both, but that remains to be seen.

In this life we both choose and are chosen. We have been given freedom to make choices. And throughout the history of our people God has continually acted to call us to that freedom. When we were slaves in Egypt, God brought us out of the land of slavery. When we were tempted by idols and lies, God showed us the way of free choice. Again and again, our right to choose has been defended by our forebears and by God’s action in human history. But our lives are more than a series of choices we make. For we are also chosen. Other people make choices that affect the path of our lives. We make connections and covenants with others. God calls us to the path of discipleship and service. We are not the sole shapers of our destiny.

We are chosen choosers. Our choices are affected by the choices of others. This does not rob us of our freedom, but rather invites us to consider the wider ramifications of our choices, and opens the path to deeper freedom. True freedom lies in the realization that our freedom affects others. None is truly free until all are free.

As we work for freedom and justice for all of God’s children, we pause to feed the cats and occasionally invite them into our laps and listen to their purr. We are not alone in this world. And that is a blessing.

September 13, 2007 – Rosh Hashanah



Yesterday was Rosh Hashanah, sometimes called the Jewish New Year. Like other Jewish holidays, it began with sundown, so we are still in the first day of the season of Jewish holy days that last until Yom Kippur, which this year begins at sundown on September 21. In the calendar of observant Jews, it is the beginning of the year 5768. According to one way of counting the years reported in the Bible, the world began 5768 years ago. There is probably a story about why this holiday is observed in the fall, but I do not know that story. It is a tradition. And the tradition places the holiday outside of the agricultural year. Thus it is seen as without connection to a natural or historic event, but rather a purely religious celebration.

Unlike some Christian fundamentalists, who attempt to read the Bible as a scientific text book, the Jews I know have no problem living with the difference between the theological way of measuring time and the scientific measure of time. In my small circle of Jewish friends, there are none who claim that 5768 calendar years ago marks the beginning of geological time or the way to count the history of the universe. It is a way that faith measures time and Rosh Hashanah is a time to look back and to make corrections and changes for the future. Observant Jews do not work on Rosh Hashanah and set aside a day (or sometimes two days) for introspection and personal correction. The entire ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are seen as holy, and sometimes set aside as days away from work.

In Leviticus, the holiday is named as the day of sounding the ram's horn or shofar. There are specific instructions for sounding the shofar and names for the different notes. The tradition is to call the people to prayer and reflection on their lives. The observance of the high holy days, begins with eating sweet foods on Rosh Hashanah and ends with fasting on Yom Kippur. Apples dipped in honey are a traditional food for Rosh Hashana and are eaten with the wish for a sweet year to come.

We Christians like to pick and choose which instructions from Leviticus we observe, and the observance of Rosh Hashanah has not been a part of our tradition since the third or fourth century in the Christian calendar. We've kept the instructions in our Bible, but the days which are considered most sacred to Jews are rarely even noted by Christians who share the same holy texts. There is a hint of the tradition in our New Year's resolutions, but few Christians link that custom to the instructions of Leviticus.

There is an essential hopefulness at the core of the observance. The conviction that we humans have the ability to make positive changes in our life can be a powerful force for good. It is a valuable practice to take time to look back, acknowledge our sins and failings and to consider what changes one can make in the year to come. The Christian tradition of confession and reconciliation are rooted in the same conviction.

So I intend to take the opportunity to reflect and confess in my prayers today and in the next ten days. And I wish you a sweet year ahead.

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September 14, 2007 – Frost



We got our first frost last night. There has already been more frost at higher elevations and our frost was light. The garden will survive without having been covered. The flowers on the porch are unaffected. But frost is a sign of things to come. It has been cooler during the day as well and I've begun to think of taking a jacket with me when I head out for my day. Just a few weeks ago we were wondering how to get out of the heat and now we feel that old familiar feeling of being chilly from time to time.

Autumn is a beautiful season around here and there are plenty of warm days ahead, but change is in the air and the change feels good.

Today marks another way of measuring change for Susan and me. It is our daughter's birthday. With our youngest now 24 years old, it is time to admit that we have come to a new season in our lives as well. In our particular case, there was no break between having children at home and having responsibility for care of parents, so the description "empty nest" doesn't quite apply, but we are very aware that our children's care no longer has the day-to-day immediacy that it once had. We are now a part of our children's support systems but we are no longer directly involved in their day-to-day decisions and activities.

Using the seasons of the year as a metaphor for the seasons of life doesn't quite work for me. I know that others have described aging years as the "autumn" of life, but the

year is a cycle and life is a one way trip. Autumn and spring come every year. Many of life's experiences are never repeated when they are completed.

As I write this morning, the twin fawns, that were born June 5, are nibbling the grass in our back yard. Their spots are no longer visible. They will never have spots again. They'll stick close to mom throughout this winter, but soon they will be on their own. We often get to observe the life cycles of animals because so many events happen more quickly in their lives than in ours.

So this morning's light frost is a reminder that things continue to change. Summer doesn't last forever. Neither do the seasons of our lives. Our days are a finite number, though fortunately we don't yet know what that number will be. Being mindful of change can help us be more appreciative of the precious moments of life. Knowing that the flowers and garden plants will soon be gone makes me appreciate them even more than before. Now that we are harvesting tomatoes by the dozen, I can't quite capture that early spring longing for the taste of a fresh tomato. I do, however, remember that I felt that way and I know that the abundance of fresh tomatoes is temporary. Knowing that things have an end increases their value to us.

The Biblical book of Ecclesiastes speaks of a time for everything. Although the book's circular view of history that repeats itself and the sense of there being nothing new do not match my experience or my way of thinking about time, there is much wisdom in the book. For us there is a time for everything. The beginning of autumn is a time to remember the joy of having been blessed with a daughter and anticipating the new experiences that will unfold in her life. Having the first frost land on her birthday this year reminds us that time continues to pass and we continue to age. Each day is a precious gift.

May we learn to live in gratitude for that gift.

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September 15, 2007 – Reading



One of my daily rituals is the newspaper. We live in an area where our newspaper arrives early, usually around 4 a.m., so it is usually available when I rise for my day. I scan the headlines and read front page articles. Next I check out the editorial page and the comics. Most days I have time to page through the entire newspaper and read the articles whose headlines catch my attention. I don't read the entire newspaper very often, but I spend different amounts of time on it depending on the pace of my day.

In our neighborhood, newspapers are delivered to boxes on posts set along the street next to driveways. Each year that we have lived here there have been a few of these boxes removed. Now about half of the homes receive the newspaper. The number of people who read the newspaper declines every year. Neither of our adult children receive a newspaper, and few of their generation do. The availability of news on the Internet and television means that there is little in a newspaper that they do not already know. They get their news from different sources.

Last month, the Associated Press conducted a survey of the reading habits of Americans. The poll revealed that one in four Americans read no books in the past year and that those who did read books read less than the previous year. I don't know if the AP poll checked for the age of readers, but that might be interesting information. It is my hunch that except for times when vision problems limit reading people tend to read more as they get older. That is true for me at this point. I am reading more than I did when I was in graduate school. And when I have free time, I read even more books.

The poll and the sale of newspapers may not be showing the entire picture, however. Reading is a big part of the Internet. Even though young people read fewer newspapers and perhaps fewer books than previous generations, much of Internet content is word-based. As more bandwidth becomes available for private use and access to technology becomes easier, there are more videos and audio clips on the Internet, but reading is still the primary way that people navigate and gain information from this source.

In the story of the church, it may be that reading the Bible is on the decline as well. I don't know the complete picture, but my experience is that while most people have some knowledge of Biblical content, most are not truly familiar with the scope and with detail that they would have had they read the Bible in its entirety or made a daily practice of Biblical reading.

Reading is, of course, a product of a particular period of history. For nearly three-quarters of the history of the church, the vast majority of Christians read very little or not at all. Prior to the invention of the printing press, reading was an activity reserved for scholars and institutional settings. Private ownership of a Bible was unknown. People learned Biblical content by hearing it from church leaders. It was almost always delivered with interpretation and most people made little distinction between the words of the Bible and the opinions of the priest. For many generations the Bible was read in Latin as opposed to the common language of the worshipers.

Protestantism, however, grew up with common access to the Bible. The freedom to read the words and to form individual opinions as to their meaning and application provided a context for a dramatic change in religion in general and particularly Christianity. Many freedoms, including freedom of religion have a direct relationship to common literacy.

One wonders whether this new technology of computers and Internet will bring about a similar, dramatic shift in the way information is shared. Will the shift from reading to computer literacy bring increased or decreased freedom? Does a decrease in Bible reading automatically translate to a decrease in faith? The answers to these questions is more complex than I thought upon initial reflection.

In the meantime, I try to keep connected to both worlds, learning enough to explore the Internet and use a computer, but continuing to read books and other printed materials as well. And some thoughts do pretty good in both arenas. I initially read about the AP poll in the newspaper, but used the Internet this morning to check the statistics before writing this blog. And just the other day, a reader of the blog suggested that I collect the best of my entries and have them printed in a book.

At any rate, the Internet has not yet succeeded in keeping people from reading. After all, you're reading this blog, aren't you? Keep reading!

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September 16, 2007 – Time Travel



I used to joke with my children saying I was capable of time travel. I'd have them look at the clock at our departure and again at our arrival, saying, "see, we're in the future now." Of course those who dream of time travel imagine being able to travel in a different manner. But there is a sense in which all travel leaves us with a little disorientation about time. Today I'm off to Cleveland for meetings with other educational consultants in the United Church of Christ. We'll have two full days of meetings during which we plan future events and review matters important to the support of Christian educators throughout the country.

Cleveland is the location of our church's national offices. Church House is the common name we use to refer to the headquarters building, where there is a wonderful chapel, administrative offices and a connected hotel. It is a great place for members of our church to visit and I often recommend the hotel to members of our congregation who might be traveling to Cleveland. I enjoy sharing in the worship and work of that place from time to time.

But it takes a lot of energy to travel and participate in these meetings. In the first place, life goes on at home and I have the same deadlines and obligations to meet as I would have were I at home. Although I try to arrange my work, there are certain things that must be done and carrying a computer means that I have access to much of my work on the road. Airports and hotels have Internet connections and cell phones keep us in touch with each other.

In another sense, there is a shift of time when I travel. Cleveland is in the Eastern time zone - two hours ahead of home. When I am at home, I rarely think of the difference. I arrive at my office at about the same time as do the workers in Cleveland. I simply remind myself that I can't get in touch with anyone there after 3 p.m. our time and sometimes catch myself thinking that they simply work shorter hours.

Being in Cleveland, however, means that meetings start and end at the same time for all of us. I usually am able to get in a couple of hours' work before the start of our meetings, as I don't shift my sleeping time much for a few days' meetings. But I have to change my watch and think about the time differences so that I arrive at meetings on time. I have to make a mental note of this change so calls home are made at appropriate times. For the most part, it doesn't help to translate between the time zones. I just set my watch to the place where I currently am and live in that time zone, so to speak. I usually go to bed and rise early, so travel to Eastern time zone puts me in approximate synchronization with my colleagues who tend to go to bed and rise later than I.

The way that we have divided our globe into time zones is a simple illustration that our human understanding of time does not reflect the entire reality. God, who is aware of all time, is equally present in each time zone. From God's perspective it can be today and tomorrow at the same time. Our measurements of time vary by our perspective. To a two-year-old, the next birthday is half a lifetime away. For someone my age, the distance between birthdays seems much shorter. Even a decade doesn't seem like too much time when I look back. The nights that seemed endless when our children were babies seem to have flown by from my current perspective on those times.

We make a mistake when we try too hard to make judgments about time. A life that seems all too short may, in fact, be the perfect span of time for one person. It is a topic worthy of our contemplation. Stephen Hawking's "A Brief History of Time" gives a scientific perspective on the phenomenon of time, but without much knowledge of the history of philosophy, some of his "new" ideas have been previously expressed.

But for today, worship is expected to start at a specific time (In Mountain time, thank you very much!) and it should end within a close approximation of the usual. So I'd best get to work.

September 17, 2007 – On the Move



Whenever I travel, I am a bit surprised at how many other people are traveling as well. The airplanes and airports were full of people. On one leg of my trip the airline company was offering big incentives for people who would voluntarily delay their travel to make room for others on the over-booked airplane. We are a nation of people who are used to being able to travel wherever we want whenever we want. Traveling on a Sunday it is more difficult to tell how many of my fellow travelers are business people. Casual dress is the rule for traveling these days and even people who will be wearing suits for important meetings today were wearing jeans and casual shirts yesterday. The business and premium class passengers are distinguished by early boarding privileges. Those who travel a lot more than others were dressed as casually as others. Having come directly from a meeting at church, I stood out in my jacket and tie.

It seems that we have all learned routines about travel. People stand in line to get their boarding passes and check luggage and then stand in line again for security screening. We all remove our shoes, jackets and belts and have our shampoo and toothpaste in little plastic bags. We know which items to remove from our carryon luggage and how to walk through the scanning machine. On the other side, there is a neat little row of people putting their shoes back on and putting various items back into our luggage. We have adjusted to arriving at the airport early and rushing for our connections. The amount of time I spent waiting yesterday was approximately equal to the amount of time I spent flying.

Once in Cleveland, my cab driver was speaking on a cell phone as he opened the door for me and drove me to the hotel. He was using a wireless headset so the telephone wasn't immediately visible. He spoke English to me and a language I did not identify when speaking on the phone. After I realized which bits of conversation were directed at me, we managed the exchange of a ride for the usual rate of \$2 per mile plus .30 per minute when the cab is waiting in traffic. There was little waiting late in the evening.

It is a bit surprising to me how easily I adjust to all of this. Compared to parents' generation I travel a lot. Compared to some of the other people in the airport, I don't travel much at all. But somehow this kid, who grew up in a small town and who rarely traveled by any form of public transportation in his growing-up years, has figured out how to navigate urban environments and travel to distant places with relative ease. In fact, traveling alone seems to be a relatively low-stress activity for me when compared to the times when I am responsible for a group of travelers.

The experience makes me want to ask my fellow travelers why they are traveling. Is all of this travel necessary? Do we have to go from place to place, or is a certain amount of our running about mindless activity like a gerbil running on a wheel in a cage? My seat mates on the first leg of the trip were a young woman returning to college after a weekend at home and a woman heading home after attending the wedding of a childhood friend. The people on the next leg didn't seem interested in talking to me. I overheard the conversation of a man who works in Cleveland and spend his weekends with his family in Minneapolis. My meetings, while important to the organization and future of the church, are far from essential. We think that they are important in part because we have worked so hard to justify the expense when budgets were formed.

I am looking forward to the initial meetings with my colleagues. It is good to catch up with people who have become friends as well as co-workers. Most of these colleagues are people that I saw at General Synod, so it hasn't yet been a year since we have spoken. There are a couple of new consultants joining our ranks this meeting, so there will be new stories to hear and catching up with others. Our meeting schedule looks very full and there is little time for independent activity in the next few days. The briefcase of work that I brought with me will still have many undone items when I return home on Wednesday.

The ease of travel in our time is truly amazing. Which is a good thing, because the trip home will seem much more important to me than the departure.

September 18, 2007 – In the Heart of the City



Church house is a nine story office building in the heart of downtown Cleveland. At one time, the building was the headquarters of Ohio Bell Telephone company. Much of the activity that takes place in church house is that of a typical office. There are copy and fax machines and plenty of cubicles with computers. Several features, however, mark the unique business of our church's national setting.

Amistad chapel takes up about half of the first floor of the building. It is a wonderful space for worship, with a large glass-topped communion table, a small tracker organ and an inviting baptismal font. There is a prominent cross and candlesticks. The arrangement of the seating is usually an oval around the communion table, but the chairs and table can be moved for other styles of seating. What makes Amistad chapel unique as a worship space is the wall of large windows that look out directly on the hustle and bustle of a busy city. People are constantly walking by, and there is plenty of traffic on the street. The parking garage across the street and the bus stop on the corner are always busy. Tall buildings prevent a view of the horizon. The windows on the other side of the room reveal a peaceful courtyard with trees and other plants that lies between Church House and the connected hotel. Depending on where one sits for worship, all of these diverse scenes are visible: worship center, city center, peace garden.

As important as the visual experience for worshippers is the openness of worship that allows those passing by to witness the business of the church. People will sometimes

pause as they walk by as they realize that this isn't just another office building. Instead of offering items for retail sale, these windows offer a view of a church at worship. The people who work at Church House gather for worship on Wednesday mornings, but the chapel has a busy schedule of other worship services for the many groups from around the world who use Church House as a meeting place.

Sitting in Amistad Chapel this morning, I was thinking of the contrast with the view from my office at 1st Church in Rapid City. I get to see a lot more sky, and the changes in the weather are often part of my thought as I look out of those windows. I have a good view of skyline drive and dinosaur park as well as a hillside with only a few houses that is often populated by deer as well as people. But I also have a view of downtown Rapid City. Like our city itself, the view is of a place where the business and crowds of people meet the open country with space between folk. It seems meaningful to me that my office view affords both scenes and the place that they come together.

There isn't much traffic outside of my windows. Occasionally a church member will be walking or working in the yard. Sometimes neighborhood or church children are playing in the volleyball court or basketball area. I am as likely to find a deer looking in my window as a person most days. In some ways, my office is tucked back on the quiet side of the church. And that is a good thing because the business of my office is quite different from public worship. Working with people in small groups is much more the pace of a pastor than worshiping in front of the city crowds. And I find that I am much more at home in the open country than I am in the midst of the city.

It is good for me to visit the city, however. I need to observe and understand how the people at Church House do their work. It is important to be reminded that the work of administering a denomination is worshipful and prayerful work. The crowded intensity of the city reveals the pace and lifestyle of many of our church's members. As the cliché goes, "it is a great place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live here."

I wish I could arrange an opportunity for ever member of our church to visit Church House and see the way our church works. It would be good for them to understand what happens to some of the money they place in the offering plate and to see the important work that our church does when we all contribute. But I also long for and work for opportunities for the people who work at Church House to come and visit the church in the open spaces of our part of the country. They need to see mission in action in the work of a local congregation that is engaged in service to its community and the surrounding area. They need to understand how connected we feel with brothers and sister in Christ in distant locations.

We are one church, with many different expressions and many different locations. And if I occasionally gasp at the press of crowds or the close calls of urban traffic, I know that

these city dwellers will gasp when I have the opportunity to show them the open country of Western South Dakota.

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September 19, 2007 – At the Warehouse



Sometimes when I visit Cleveland, I stop by the warehouse from which shipments of church resources are made. It is a fun place, filled with the resources that local congregations use and sometimes they have bargains on special sale tables. More than a stop for the purpose of making a purchase, a trip to the warehouse is an opportunity to see one aspect of our church at work. There is an office, where telephone and Internet orders are received and processed before being sent to the warehouse. In the main part of the warehouse, workers receive orders, fill boxes, and prepare them for pickup by parcel shipping services. There are shelves and shelves of curricula, books, clothing, specialty and gift items that are sold by our church to individual members and congregations. Both United Church Press and Pilgrim Press use the same central warehouse that also handles special items such as denominational identity items and resources produced by various groups within the church.

In many ways it is little different from the warehouse of any other bookstore. But it is always a bit of a surprise for me to visit the warehouse. I don't normally think of Sunday school teacher's manuals being handled in boxes stacked on pallets being moved around a warehouse by a forklift. The sheer volume of the operation gets my attention every time. I remember seeing an entire wall of curricula, of which I had written a small part, stacked floor to ceiling. The warehouse contains much of the inventory of the books that are published by our press, as the press moves away from marketing through bookstores to being primarily a direct seller of the books we publish.

There is something industrial about the place. It doesn't seem very worshipful. And yet it is truly a place of the church. The work that is being done there is as holy as the sacraments that are served in our grandest church sanctuaries. For in our warehouse are the resources for teaching our children, for studying God's word, and for passing the Gospel on to the next generation of faithful followers of Jesus. Across those bare concrete floors pass the wisdom of our elders and scholars and the inspiration for our members. Under the florescent lights in that windowless room with concrete block walls and huge overhead doors, there is sacred work being done by faithful servants of God.

God doesn't call all people to be preachers. Some are warehouse workers. And they do their work with a cheerfulness and a sense of fun that makes the warehouse a special place to visit.

I have often counseled church members to visit Church House and the Amistad Chapel when their journeys take them to Cleveland. Perhaps I ought to add to that recommendation a visit to a warehouse near the airport.

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September 20, 2007 – New Every Morning



Regular readers of this blog will find the picture for today to be familiar. I do not know how many pictures I have taken over the years of the view of the sun rising behind the outdoor cross at our church. It is the view through the windshield of my pickup as I pulled into my usual parking place this morning. The view seemed fresh to me because I have been traveling for several days and because the lighting changes rapidly at this time of the year. The days are getting shorter and I notice that change most at the beginning and the end of the day. Last night it was completely dark outside by the time we finished our regular youth group meeting.

My photographs may not reveal the subtleties of the view, but the view does seem to be new every morning. The patterns of clouds and light are never the same and the variations of color make the sky appear different with each passing minute. I enjoy the early morning. As the light begins to become more visible and the shadows begin to disappear there are a variety of sights and sounds. This morning here at the church the air is filled with the raucous calls of the crows. They've gathered on our hill for some reason and are raising quite a fuss as the sun comes up.

Each new morning gives new possibilities for how I will live my life as well. In the morning, when I am fresh, it seems as if I can accomplish more than I imagined the night before when I was tired. The possibilities for making changes and making real progress seem endless. The lists of tasks seem less intimidating. It seems most appropriate to start each new day with a mood of thanksgiving and dedication. How

incredible are the many gifts that we often take for granted. Life and health and family are gifts that not everyone is given in equal measure. I am indeed fortunate to have these gifts to share with others.

My day yesterday was one that my grandparents could not imagine and my mother finds amazing. I awoke in Cleveland, took a train to the airport, flew home through Minneapolis, drove from the airport to the church, put in five hours of work and went home to my own bed. I crossed two time zones, parts of two of the Great Lakes, five states, and still had time to walk a couple of miles, eat regular meals, get some work done in my office, meet with the youth group and have a conversation with my wife.

And today I am granted a new day for more adventures. There is a meeting of the UCC clergy of the Black Hills, a Habitat for Humanity work day, a meeting of the downtown clergy to work on an ecumenical Thanksgiving service, hospital visits, worship planning and catching up with correspondence. Prospects are good for regular meals, great fellowship and challenging colleagues. Not bad. Not bad at all.

So I thank God for this new day with all of its new possibilities. And I thank God that tonight I will be tired and that sleep will come easily - in part because I may not have the energy to stay awake for giving thanks at the end of this day. And I live in continual anticipation of tomorrow and the newness that comes with each day.

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September 21, 2007 – Showing Color



The trees are beginning to show their fall colors. Bright yellow is starting to show up all over the hills. From a distance, things look like one would expect them to look as the first day of fall approaches. But a closer look reveals thousands of tiny flowers on the hillsides and in the ditches. While the trees know that it is fall, the lower areas think it is spring.

The weather has been a bit strange this year. After the extreme dryness of July, August began with most of the field grasses dormant. Then, in August, the rains started to come, and the land started to recover. After the rain, came another time of extended warm weather. It was nearly 80 degrees an hour after sundown last night. The warm weather has combined with adequate levels of soil moisture to produce a second crop of wildflowers for the year. It may not be our usual, but it certainly makes for a beautiful view.

The same conditions that have brought out the flowers are producing a healthy crop of grasses which give the deer and elk excellent forage as they fatten up for the winter that lies ahead. It is turning out to be a bountiful year on many counts. And we humans who live in the hills are grateful for the moisture that has, at least temporarily, decreased the danger of wildfire in the forest.

The warm days can lull us into a sense of complacency about the winter weather that lies ahead. Recent winters have been relatively mild and it is easy to talk oneself into

putting off yard work and home repairs in search of one more weekend of summer recreation. Even with school back in session, it is hard to believe that autumn is nearly upon us.

Perhaps it is my age that makes me want to treasure each day and wants the progression of seasons to slow down a bit. Although I long for a good, hard winter, with lots and lots of snow, I'm in no hurry for the blizzards to begin. We have a Habitat house to get enclosed before the weather turns bad and we are just beginning to start framing the exterior walls. With two days a week of volunteer labor, the work progresses steadily, but slowly. And I have a long list of chores to complete at my own home in my spare time.

But we do not control the weather and we do not control the timing of the seasons of our lives. The advance of the seasons serves as another reminder that our time is limited. We do not go on forever. Energy and health and the ability to do work - life itself - these are all gifts that are temporarily ours. They are precious and are not to be wasted. Each day is an opportunity to experience something new and to grow in our understanding. Each day is an opportunity to invest in work that is bigger than ourselves and to participate in offering the gift of life and health to others.

May we treasure the days that are ours.

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September 22, 2007 – Autumn Begins



The first day of fall is upon us and it promises to be a beautiful day in the hills. Today we start framing on our Habitat for Humanity house. At one time, I had hoped we would be at this point in July. Now, as we near the end of September, we are aware that we are in a bit of a race against time. We probably have more than a month to get the house fully enclosed, but some of our volunteers have October obligations and the work crews may be smaller in weeks to come. But worry is not the stuff that builds houses. The basis of Habitat for Humanity is that we build on faith. We trust God to provide the resources that are needed and we work in good faith with partners. We know that no one person can build a home and that the responsibility for this project is shared among many different partners in our community.

I can say the words, but I am not quit able to shed all of the worry. I worry if we have tackled too big a project, if the timing is wrong for our congregation, if he money will come in, if we can continue to hold the enthusiasm and volunteers as the weeks go by. I worry about the support and commitment of the other churches. I could make a list of the worries. And none of those worries accomplishes anything. The gospels are filled with Jesus' advice not to worry, and the invitation to proceed with faith.

We know that we are doing the right thing. We know that this house needs to be built. We know that we have the experience and energy of Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity. Our part is to continue to engage the task of building this home. Board by board, nail by nail, day by day.

By the calendar and the ways that we mark the passing of seasons, today is the first day of fall. We have three months before the first official day of winter. Of course the weather does not always follow the calendar, but fall and early winter are often very mild around the hills. Today is a great day to simply go to work. And that will be sufficient for this day. And one of the great things about framing a house is that we will have much progress to show at the end of the day. Today is the day that the building begins to look like a house. Unlike the slow process of installing the floor system, we will literally be raising walls today.

The excitement is building.

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September 23, 2007 – Sabbath Rest



One of the things that is appealing about some jobs is that they have defined limits. Even when the hours are long, there is a clear distinction between work and rest. Many types of physical labor have little carryover into non-working hours. Other jobs, and ministry is one of these, tend to be easy to bring home and one is tempted to keep working, or at least thinking about work when the workday is over.

The construction of a Habitat House operates with a rhythm of work and breaks. The pace of volunteers at work is a bit slower than a professional construction crew, but there are times when the team is working together and we are able to accomplish quite a bit of work. We also take regular breaks. Taking care that everyone is getting enough to drink is critical in the warm weather. Temperatures were in the 90's at mid day yesterday. So we take a break every couple of hours, drink some water or coffee, and visit. Our churches are generous in providing meals and snacks for the workers.

The importance of the rhythm of work and rest has long been known by our people. It is written into our Scriptures. One of the ten commandments is the commandment to set aside one day each week for rest. The book of Leviticus has quite a series of rules regarding rest for employees, animals, and even the land. For many generations of faithful people, Sabbath was a sacred obligation.

In contemporary society, most work environments provide for time off and rest for employees. Regular days off and vacations are expected benefits of employment. With

the rise of consumer culture, most retail stores are now open on Saturday and Sunday and the concept of a common weekend is not as ingrained in our society as it once was. But workers who are on the job on the weekend have other days off during the week. And most employers arrange work schedules so that workers have either Saturday or Sunday off on a regular basis.

The concept of the day of rest being a day committed to religious activity seems to be fading in this time. People are more likely to engage in sports events, spend time shopping and pursue hobbies during their time off. Weekly participation in church is less common in the United States than it was a generation ago. And churches have to compete with a wide variety of other institutions and events for the time and attention of their members. For many families, church is one of several options for their time away from work.

A similar shift in the distribution of finances has taken place. Church is now seen as one of many options for giving, and giving to the church is not the first or highest priority for the generosity of many in our society.

As one who lives and works within the church, some of these changes are troubling. The intense competition for the time of our people does not afford the same sense of rest as the offering of a sabbath. The complex schedule juggling that is required for many church programs alters the nature of the programs themselves. Advertising, promotion, and continually measuring the value of programs in terms of the numbers detract from what the church does best and divert funds from our primary mission and ministry. But we do not exist outside of the wider society. We live inside of the pressures and realities of contemporary culture.

Sometimes, however, we do give our members the gift of peaceful rest. It may come in the form of a break during a busy workday or in the form of worship in the midst of a busy week. And when we think of the activities of the church less as events that compete with other demands for the time and attention of our members and more as gifts of God for the people of God, we become more faithful and feel less pressure.

May the gift of Sabbath rest be freely offered today and each week.

September 24, 2007 – How to Help



On a fairly regular basis, someone whom we have never before met calls or comes to the church in need of assistance. There are many types of crises that can leave an individual or family without enough money for food or other necessities. Sometimes the need is simply too large for the church. We don't have funds available to help with deposits, moving expenses, or rent assistance. Although we can sometimes help with fuel, we can't sustain a regular program of providing gasoline to everyone who asks. We try to focus on food, childcare items, and emergency shelter. We try to work in partnership with other agencies in our community to avoid duplication and to stretch the limited financial resources to provide the most assistance possible.

It is not unusual to encounter someone who is upset with the response they receive from the church. Some people, who are not familiar with a church or how it operates, view the church as a place that simply gives away things that have to be bought in other places. When we do not have the ability to fill their gas tank and purchase all the groceries they want, they feel that the institution has somehow failed them. A few days ago, a woman who had probably spent some time calling churches began her conversation with me by asking, "Isn't there any compassion in the world anymore?" It seemed a silly question from my point of view. I work daily with people who are devising systems to assist with housing, food, health care and other needs in our community. I am allowed to witness the deep compassion of volunteers who work in a wide variety of agencies and institutions. But from her point of view, it seemed to be immensely frustrating that no one would provide the solution she wanted to her problem. To her it

seemed simple, “I don’t have enough money. A compassionate person would give me money.”

Sometimes the most compassionate answer is “No.”

We don’t find a lot of guidance in the Bible on how to be most effective with the help we offer. The Gospel of Mark paints a picture of Jesus being hounded by the crowds. At one point, early in the gospel, Jesus is unable to go into the villages, but has to remain out in the countryside because of the pressure from the crowds of people seeking healing. Avoiding people in need hardly seems like the right thing to do. Nor is that what Jesus did. But the gospels most frequently tell stories of single encounters where Jesus provides the solution to the problem. A person healed doesn’t need to return for additional healing. Sometimes our attempts to help in the contemporary church don’t solve the problem, they merely deal with the most immediate request.

We try to keep our eyes on the big picture and to work with systems to provide the most assistance possible. And we acknowledge that sometimes we are inconsistent with our help, dealing with the most immediate or pressing problem while not helping with other needs that also exist. Some days all we can figure out to do is to buy someone a tank of gas and send them on to the next town. Buying an alcoholic lunch doesn’t address the addiction, but even alcoholics need to eat.

The bottom line is that even when compassion exists, we don’t always know the best way to help. We continue to try our best and to learn from our mistakes. We try to listen carefully to the people we serve so that we do not impose our solutions on their situations, but our assistance is always somewhat imperfect. And we have designed a system that allows for human beings to make exceptions to the rules so that those in need encounter a genuinely human interface and not a rigid set of rules and regulations. For example, in general, we don’t buy motel rooms for people. In a city where between 10 and 100 people sleep under the bridges every night, a motel for one individual or one family is a luxury we cannot afford. But we do make exceptions to the rule. Sometimes, when there is a person with a disability or another special need, a night in a motel seems to be the best solution.

Perhaps this results in an inconsistency in our response to need. But genuine compassion requires more than consistency. In an imperfect world, we often offer imperfect solutions to problems. But we try to make our compassion show and to make thoughtful and careful decisions in response to each person in need. We certainly don’t send everyone away happy, but we pray that we can treat each one with dignity and respect.

September 25, 2007 – Growing Up



The twin fawns, born June 5 in our neighbor's back yard have been visiting our yard most evenings these days. They aren't tame, but they show a remarkable tolerance for our presence. The lawn is green and lush and there are occasional treats in our compost pile that seem to attract them. Since their birth, they have learned to eat and to survive in a semi-urban environment. There are people and dogs to contend with and, so far, they have managed to cross the busy road without being hit. Their spots are gone and they don't spend as much time lying in the grass. Their mother is never far away, but we can observe a growing distance as the fawns head into their first winter.

The progression of seasons forces an early maturity on animals such as the deer. By early fall, they need to be grown enough and have learned to eat enough to start layering on the fat that will get them through the winter. There is a harshness to live outdoors that requires them to shed the vulnerability of being babies fairly quickly. There are a few mountain lions and other predators in the hills, but for these deer who live around subdivisions, the biggest killer of their young is the stream of automobiles on the road. We have noticed the deaths of several fawns in the neighborhood, and feel lucky that the twins are still alive and uninjured from their times of crossing the road. The world of deer accepts a higher mortality rate than we find acceptable for humans, and sometimes it seems to us to be rather cruel.

Brain scientists tell us that the complex emotional experiences of human beings do not affect the world of many other animals. Although birds and animals form long-term

relationships and exhibit signs of loss when another animal dies, higher primates and humans have developed a complexity of emotion that is not present in some other animals. When we look at other animals, we often think of them in terms of sharing our emotions and feelings when their experience of life is far different than ours and far different from the images we project onto them.

Still, there is an observable attachment between these twins. It may not be the same as with human twins, but they have developed a style of staying close to each other and there appears to be a form of joy in the way they chase each other and are aware of the other's presence as they graze and walk through the forest.

One of the blessings of this life is the vast diversity of creatures with whom we share life and space. Thank goodness that we are not all the same. Without fully understanding the nature of life for deer or any other creatures, it seems to be a position of privilege to have the ability to be aware not only of ourselves and the other creatures around us, but also to be aware of our differences and similarities. Our consciousness gives us a unique ability to observe the world around us and to share the insights from our observations with one another.

There are deer in the yard for most of the year. Sometimes they become a bit of a nuisance. I have had to learn to build strong fences to keep them from eating our garden and we've given up with trying to grow certain types of ornamental plants around the yard. Still, I feel blessed to live in a neighborhood that is also home to deer and I am grateful that I've been allowed to watch the twins and their mother this summer.

I wonder if I will be able to recognize them a year from now.

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September 26, 2007 – Big Box



The church always reflects the culture in which it is located. Even when it has been a starkly counter-cultural movement, there are elements in the church that reveal the culture of each location and time. Part of the Christian church in our time is a reflection of current trends of retail marketing in the United States. So-called “big box” stores are retail outlets that emphasize high volume and low cost. They cut overhead by constructing simple, warehouse-style buildings, and often do not make the distinction between warehouse and retail space. Customers walk through tall warehouse shelving and pick out their own items. Less money is invested in store displays and customer service and the savings is passed on to the customer. These stores have been widely successful.

Sometimes the big box stores are blamed for the decline of local small businesses. A “mom and pop” grocery store cannot match the low prices of Wal-mart. Small hardware stores, even those connected to larger franchise operations are often undercut by Home Depot. Although there is occasionally controversy about the location of a big box store, and there have been claims that their race to the lowest price includes a race to the lowest wages and least benefits as well, big box stores are successful and appeal to a wide range of customers.

Some churches, reflecting these marketing trends, have also adopted the big box model. The so-called mega-churches are often designed for more than two thousand members and can grow to over 20,000 members. Although “member” is not quite the

right term because they rarely ask participants to join. They focus on providing a worship experience that is entertaining and emotionally charged. Projection screens and theatre-style sound systems are common. A small band is usually on the stage and there are lots of dramatic elements in worship, including lighting and sometimes other effects as well. Their buildings reflect the big box style, with steel frame and pole buildings instead of traditional church architecture. Costs are cut in the “big box” churches by hiring a single charismatic senior pastor and having a staff of lower paid and usually much less educated associate pastors. Many big box churches do all of their own training of pastors in house, thus avoiding costly seminary education. Other costs are cut by increasing volume. These churches focus their attention on providing services to the people who attend their worship services and rarely engage in traditional church mission and outreach.

Like the big box retail outlets, big box churches are very successful. The major weakness of the big box churches seems to be that they have no systems for transition in leadership. Many are a single pastor phenomenon, never having changed pastors. When pastors do change, there can be dramatic collapses. It seems to work best to simply sell the church building as a warehouse or another industrial building and start a new church from scratch. Unlike big box retail outlets, the churches tend to work best as independent entities. The pentecostal Four Square Gospel Church is one of the few that has been successful in multiple locations.

Big Box churches also tend to be places where people participate for a while and then drop out. Because the churches do not ask for commitment, they rarely get it. People choose their church each week and attend the one that is most appealing at the moment. They often change churches because of a particular program, youth group, or schooling option.

Like big box retail, big box churches can have a negative effect on small local congregations. Traditional churches depend on the commitment of their members and treasure long-term members, often serving multiple generations of families. They tend to have more expensive buildings and do not share the efficiencies of scale. They have financial commitments to denominations and support long-standing mission in distant locations. They support pensions and health benefits for retired clergy. Many have traditions of educated clergy and their pastors come to them with significant educational debt. They have defined themselves in terms of faithfulness and do not have experience with marketing. While big box churches tend to have a long list of services for members, small congregations tend to think in terms of the service of members. Their members see the church as a place where they serve, not a place where they consume the services of others.

And many small churches are struggling to survive. Small membership congregations and neighborhood churches are closing at a rate of over 50 per day in the United

States. Whether or not this crisis in small membership churches is caused by the big box churches is open to debate, but there are many pressures on small membership churches to imitate the behaviors of the big box churches, a process that is rarely successful.

Despite the trends, it is possible for a small church to thrive in the United States today. In order to do so it must have a clear sense of its mission and ministry and how that mission and ministry is distinct from that of other churches. It needs a sense of purpose and clarity about its priorities. It needs a certain degree of efficiency in its budget. Sometimes small churches need to shed elements from their past that encumber them. Smaller churches can offer opportunities for participation in the leadership of the church and other channels of service that do not exist in big box churches. Rather than imitate big box churches, successful small churches understand why they are different and what unique opportunities for ministry they provide. Vital small congregations know themselves, know their community, and remain focused on their core ministries.

It is difficult to predict the trends in culture or in religion. Who knows what will happen to this trend? Some sociologists of religion believe that the big box phenomenon has already reached its peak and begun to decline. The buildings and equipment of big box churches are designed for immediate use and frequent replacement. Few of them inhabit buildings that will be around a century from now. This may be a passing trend.

It is clear that we live in a time of major transition in the life of the church. We may be experiencing a once-in-a-life time change. Some claim that it is a once-in 500-years change. Like the protestant reformation, the effects of this change are not always clear, but the church will change. Like all of the changes in the long history of the church, there will remain a place for small faithful communities. Size will never be an accurate measurement of faithfulness.

These are interesting times. May we live them with faith.

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September 27, 2007 – Dancing with Dinosaurs



One of the landmarks in our community is dinosaur park. It sits atop skyline drive and can be seen from many points in the city. It is home to several concrete sculptures made to look like dinosaurs - or at least like people thought they may have looked based on the fossils found in the area. The green and white coloring of the concrete creatures is probably not accurate, but the general shape approximates our image of how dinosaurs might have looked. It is a fun place to take children and the dinosaur on the horizon makes a good conversation point when showing our city to visitors.

We have a fascination with things of the past. One has to ask what it is that motivates scientists to raise funds to excavate fossilized bones and study them for clues about creatures that have been extinct for 65 million years. The answer, in part, comes from our conviction that studying this world helps us to better understand ourselves. The present is somehow a product of the past and understanding the past increases our understanding of the complex dynamics of contemporary life.

And we find great joy in discovery and learning new things. There is something in our nature that grants us great pleasure when a new insight or understanding becomes clear. With consciousness comes a desire to know and understand more. In human life, the universe has awareness, though always incomplete and limited, of the vast processes of space and time.

I like having the dinosaur on the hill above my office. It reminds me that our time is not the only time. Even the color of the concrete dinosaur is a reminder of the great amount of scientific knowledge and understanding that we have gained since the 1930's when the dinosaurs were erected. But it also reminds me that our unique ability to understand and be aware of the world is a privilege and a responsibility. More than any other creature that we have yet encountered, humans carry understanding and awareness not only of ourselves and our needs, but also of the great forces of this wondrous universe. And we are becoming aware of how our presence and activities affect other creatures and even the planet itself. With that awareness comes responsibility. We have an obligation to make decisions that are life-giving and that contribute to the overall good of our communities and of the world.

Of course our understanding is imperfect and our power to affect change is limited. We delude ourselves when we think that we might be somehow immune to the great forces of life and death in the universe. And we fall into a dangerous hubris when we claim more power and authority for change than we truly possess.

What we can do is to tell the story as we understand it. We can document our discoveries and share them with future generations. We can read the writings of previous generations and add our comments and insights. We can participate in this long human adventure of trying to understand this vast and wonderful universe.

And, on our better days, we can become open to the vast sweep of time. If we seek to understand and remember dinosaurs who roamed the planet over 65 million years ago, perhaps we might leave some mark that will be recognized by those who come after us. It is possible that creatures in the future will understand us better than we understand the creatures of the past.

And each new discovery of the range of time and the size of the universe holds the potential of expanding our understanding of God who is far more vast than we have the ability to imagine. Whether looking back into the distant past or imagining a distant future, we are led to marvel at the incredible nature of God who was present at the beginning of all what is and who will be present throughout all of the future that lies ahead. Perhaps our hunger for knowledge and understanding is in fact a hunger to know God and to enjoy God in the time that is ours.

September 28, 2007 – Harvest Moon



The moonrise was stunning last evening. The big orange harvest moon rose in the east at sunset and brought to mind other autumns and gorgeous views of the moon. I didn't have the skill to photograph it accurately, but we spent some time on the porch, talking and looking at the moon. The harvest moon is the full moon nearest to the autumnal equinox, I don't know much of the folklore about the names of the moons, but I always remember the harvest moon toward the end of September and the hunter's moon toward the end of October. There is something about the orbit of the moon that makes the moon rise more consistent in the fall than the spring, but I can't remember that detail.

In general, we do not pay as much attention to the moon as did previous generations. We live in urban areas with much light and the moon is less of a contrast in the night sky. And we spend less time outside than did previous generations, and are less aware of the cycles of the the moon and stars. Catching the evening news on the television interferes with consistent star gazing.

Three or four generations ago, the date of the first plowing and the timing of harvest of various crops was determined by the cycles of the moon. Usually the Farmer's Almanac was consulted as the authority on timing, but it based its recommendations on the seasons, average temperatures, and the cycles of the moon. The Almanac always had a fair dose of common wisdom that had been handed down by oral tradition for generations.

Many early calendars were based on lunar cycles. Because the orbit of the earth around the sun was not generally known in the ancient world, the cycles of the moon seemed more apparent, and the solar calendar only entered popular use in the Roman era. In fact our calendar is called the Julian calendar after Julius Caesar, whose name is also on the seventh month. That calendar is adapted from a lunar calendar with the months being stretched out to make the equinoxes land on consistent dates. A purely lunar calendar ends up with the months traveling around the year and occurring in different seasons as the years go by. The calendar was later tweaked with the addition of leap years to keep things working smoothly. These adjustments to the calendar resulted in errors in measuring time. Our counting of years back to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth reflects that inaccuracy. We are probably off by about three or four years when we say that this is year 2007 after birth of Jesus.

The stories of our people are not primarily focused on historical accuracy. Rather they are collections of reports about events and activities that helped our people to know the goodness of God and the expansiveness of God's power. Although it contains much of the history of our people, the Bible is not primarily a history text book - it is the story of the faith of our people. Using the Bible to determine exact dates of events in the past of our people usually ends in frustration and in mistakes caused by our inability to comprehend the subtle differences in the way we measure time and count days.

But last night, none of these numbers or ways of counting was important. What was important was the incredible beauty of God's universe, and our own unique vantage point for looking out at that universe. How blessed we are that this universe is not only functional and supportive of life - it is also incredibly beautiful. What a privilege to witness this great beauty.

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September 29, 2007 – The Crew



We are hoping for a relatively large crew to work on our Habitat House today. We will be raising the walls on the East half of the duplex home. The walls are covered with composite board before they are raised, so they are quite heavy and everything has to be held square and plumbed before being nailed into place. Like many other ventures in life, the best part about Habitat for Humanity is the people. Working together we get to know each other in different ways than we might by attending church meetings. Dressed in our work clothes, there is little distinction of income or community status. We can just be ourselves while we work together on a common project.

Lately we've had a wide range of ages participating in the project. Like many church projects, we get great help from retired folks. Their schedules often have more flexibility than the schedules of folk who are still working daily jobs. But our Saturdays have also attracted working people who donate their day off and even some older students. Because of insurance regulations we cannot allow persons under 16 on the site when construction is taking place. It is a delight to watch the relationships develop between people of different ages. We often work hard to form mentoring relationships with younger church members, but there are settings where mentoring takes place naturally and doesn't need a lot of thought and arranging.

Most work days give us the treat of a new volunteer. It may be someone from one of the area churches that we haven't before met, or it may be a member of our own congregation that we haven't yet had the opportunity to get to know by working

together. New volunteers form new connections within the church that open the possibilities of working together on different projects in the future.

We are a motley crew, with a wide variety of backgrounds and skills. Some have been involved in many construction projects. Others have never before worked on construction. There are sometimes conflicting opinions about the best way to accomplish a task, and the more novice workers may get one set of advice from one person and different advice from another. We probably talk a lot more and work a lot less than any professional construction crew. But we are building houses. And we continue to get the work done. The pace may not be the same as commercial builders, but the work we do is of high quality and the houses we build are solid homes.

The joy of working together is one of the great joys of this life. There are many projects in life that are simply too large to accomplish by oneself. In our culture that places such a huge emphasis on individual achievement and individual pleasure and individual gain, communal projects often stand in contrast to the cultural norm. I heard a political commentator bemoan the lack of national will yesterday. Remarking on the polarization that divides us politically, the commentator was recalling the race to the moon, that spanned multiple administrations and transcended political party. The claim was made that we no longer believe that government is capable of accomplishing big projects.

I have no unique insight into government and whether or not we believe that it can accomplish work. It does seem that Americans have always had a degree of skepticism and even mistrust in our government. And a little healthy skepticism can prevent blind obedience when government is wrong. But our national government is the symbol of all of us working together and there are certainly tasks that are worthy of the combination of our efforts and abilities.

In the meantime, it seems that a small crew of people working to build a house is a good place to engage community spirit. And if we engage our children in these tasks, they will learn the value of cooperation and shared work. Who knows, when we finish the house, we may be ready to tackle a bigger challenge.

September 30, 2007 – Both/and



Today we are celebrating a festival of music in the church. Our choirs will present special music during worship and there will be a reception following worship with opportunities for the congregation to explore musical instruments and learn more about the various music programs of the church. We had trouble scheduling the event. There are so many activities and events in the life of the church that it is difficult to find a Sunday when there isn't something special going on.

There is sometimes a sense among leaders of the church that they are competing for the time and resources of the congregation. We often hear phrases such as, "there is only so much time," or "there is only so much money." A few years ago, when we had a capital funds drive to raise money for the renovation and expansion of our pipe organ, there were people in the congregation who feared that the pipe organ project would slow down our mission efforts. As a congregation that is deeply committed to mission and outreach, we certainly do not want to have to scale back any of those efforts. The thought was that there would be less money with the large capital funds drive for our organ and there would be fewer volunteer hours with people engaged in the organ drive. Our fears were not realized. At the end of the year we had succeeded in a very successful capital funds drive for the organ and we had expanded our mission and outreach programs.

What appeared to be "either/or" ended up being "both/and." Over the years we have learned that churches don't behave like other businesses. Scarcity and fear can bring

programs and projects to their end. Abundance and faith can keep programs and projects growing and expanding. Churches that learn to live abundantly continue to grow in mission and ministry despite what may appear to be a lack of resources.

A phrase that we often hear when talking about the various fund drives in our congregation is: "you can only go to the well so many times." That would be true if we were drawing water from a well with a limited amount of water. But Jesus Christ promises living water and a well that will never run dry. This does not mean that we have unlimited resources or that we can fail to be careful and prudent in our use of the financial gifts of our members. While there is an unlimited source of the Spirit of God, financial resources are finite. Each of us has limits to our physical energies and ability to volunteer. But the capacity for giving in this, and most other congregations, is nowhere near exhausted.

The choice between music and mission is a false choice. We don't need to choose one above the other. We can be blessed with both. As is our usual, today will be a busy and hectic time following worship. There will be music displays and people playing instruments and singing. There will be sign up sheets for dinners for eight and volunteering at the Habitat build. There will be pictures of the work on the Habitat house and displays of hymnals and surveys of favorite hymns. There will be children participating in all of the activity and members of the Department of education trying to recruit additional teachers. We will be signing greetings to a member of our church who is soon to be married and eating a special cake commemorating the gifts of the music program.

It may even seem disorganized. A diet a bit too rich - a church that cannot seem to do things one at a time in a particular order. That is the way that we are. In a world that often forces narrow "either/or" choices, we are a "both/and" church.

Come and join the excitement!

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October 1, 2007 – End of the Season



We are leaving on a vacation today and we won't be around to cover our plants if the weather turns cold. Besides it is the first of October and each fall gardeners have to decide when to call an end to the gardening season. So yesterday, we pulled out the corn stalks, picked the remaining tomatoes and cleaned up the garden. Which gave us lots of green tomatoes. Even after giving a bucketful to a friend who loves fried green tomatoes, there were two large containers. We cleaned and sorted them. and put them in a place where most of them will ripen during our vacation. We'll be making sauce and drying tomatoes as well as giving away a few more when we return.

We're taking the ripe tomatoes with us, trusting that we will encounter enough friends and relatives to pair the surplus down to a manageable level. We have hopes of getting rid of some of the zucchini the same way, but it usually isn't as easy to give away as tomatoes late in the season.

As I pulled out the corn stocks, I discovered ears of corn that we had previously missed and collected about 3/4 of a five-gallon bucket. Those ears will dry and will be fed to squirrels and birds over the winter.

The bounty of a small garden is one of the treats of life. Many years the garden produces more than we can consume. Many gardeners do a lot of canning and preserving food for the winter. We don't do much of that, occasionally drying or freezing

some of our produce, but for the most part we try to give away our surplus. It is simply a matter of time and priorities. If we were trying to make the most of our garden in terms of lowering food costs, canning would be the obvious choice. But even when we are a bit wasteful, nature is not. Uneaten vegetables can become food for animals, or, in some cases become part of the compost that nourishes future crops. The nutrients in the plants are never wasted by nature. In nature everything is treasured and re-used to produce new life.

Our garden was more productive than some years this year. This was in part due to the fact that we did not garden last year when we were on sabbatical. The soil had a year off and we added extra nutrients by mixing in the compost and tilling the soil during the year that we did not garden. The weeds that were produced were tilled back into the soil as well.

The Bible speaks of sabbath for all of life, including fallow years for cropland. We all need a little time to rest and replenish. That is what our vacation is about: an opportunity to reconnect with family who live in other places, a time to disconnect from the day-to-day operation of the church and an opportunity to read a few books and restore our creative thinking abilities. We're looking forward to it. But we will also be happy to return to work after our time off. Like the seasons of the garden, our lives have cycles of rest and activity that keep us engaged.

So we're off on another adventure. The garden won't need our attention and the tomatoes ripen without our input. Our families and our spirits will be strengthened by this time and the church will continue to grow in faith and mission without us for a little while.

October 2, 2007 – The Wind



I grew up in windy country. The eastern slope of the Rockies form some natural channels for the wind and our town had a reputation for being a very windy place. Time after time trailer houses and mobile homes and sometimes semi tractor-trailer rigs are blown off of the highway. After college, we went to graduate school in Chicago, another place that has a reputation for wind. From there, we moved to western North Dakota where the wind continued to be our companion. It was only when I was in my mid-thirties and we had moved to Boise, Idaho, that I experienced a place that had little or not wind. I had not know that you can miss the wind. Trees don't make sounds by themselves. They need the wind to make their music. The air doesn't naturally refresh itself. It carries all of the smoke and other pollutants we put into it until the wind comes to move it about. And night just sounds different without the wind.

Yesterday was not a day for missing the wind. As we headed out, a strong wind was blowing out of the south. With two kayaks on the roof of the camper, the wind blowing at right-angles to our line of travel was a bit of a challenge. The huge blasts from passing trucks tried to shift the kayaks to the north side of the truck. I stopped at Colony, Wyoming, to adjust the lines. It was 81 degrees and the wind was blowing huge billows of dust from the bentonite plant. I thought to myself that it felt a lot more like August than October as I rushed to complete my task and return to the air-conditioned comfort of the cab. As we continued into Montana, the wind shifted around to the Northwest, its usual and straight on our nose. That's the best angle for decreasing gas mileage.

We were running a bit behind schedule at Billings, so I didn't take a break, but just continued on to my mother's place in Big Timber. I was so tired that she commented on it over dinner and we went to bed a bit early at the end of the evening. By 10:30, the lights were out in the camper and I was asleep.

I awoke a couple of times in the night to listen to the wind. By then it had died down a little, and my mother's place is sheltered, so I couldn't feel movement in the camper, but I could hear the wind in the trees. It was loud enough that I couldn't make out the sound of the nearby river until I awoke this morning.

When I was a teenager, we saw a weather balloon floating close to the ground near the airport. As it cleared the edge of the bluff it was probably 400 or 500 feet in the air. My father and I got into an airplane and followed it to where it got hung up on a fence about 20 miles from town. We landed and examined the balloon. The instruments had been dropped by an ingenious device that cut away the bands holding them when the balloon reached a certain altitude. With the instruments parachuted to ground, the balloon was left to drift wherever the wind blew. There was a placard on the instrument ring, written in French, instructing the finder to call a phone number. As luck had it, we had guests from France staying at our home and after figuring out the time zones, we called the number and found out that the balloon had been launched three days earlier in France and that it had drifted to the East after launching. The balloon had blown the long way around the world, crossing the airspace of the then Soviet Union and China before crossing the Pacific and entering US airspace. The sophisticated air defense systems of those and the other countries crossed did not detect its passage.

Despite the political boundaries humans create, we all share the same air. It moves freely and sometimes quickly around our planet. Air pollution in one part of the world is a problem for all of the world. The wind grants us the blessing of a continual reminder of our common humanity. We share the same needs for life. We all need to breathe. And the wind keeps refreshing our air.

I've had my share of frustrations with the wind, and sometimes, I get tired of it and temporarily wish it wouldn't blow, or at least that the direction or force of the wind would change. But wind is truly a blessing, not just for us, but for this entire planet. It brings our weather and provides the oxygen that we need to survive. It is the vehicle for the exchange of carbon dioxide with plants and occasionally it brings us a surprise such as the seeds of a plant we've not before known or a weather balloon from the other side of the planet.

Today we have fewer miles to cover and I doubt that I will; feel frustration with the wind. But if I do, I hope that I will be able to remember some of the benefits of living in a world with wind.

October 3, 2007 – Life in the Sandwich Generation



In many ways the invention of the term “sandwich generation” is simply a new name for a phenomenon that has existed for generations. Having responsibility for some of the care of your children at the same time as having responsibility for care of parents is not something unique to our moment in history. Multi-generational families have been a part of the human experience throughout all of history. There are certainly some responsibilities that go with being in a middle age group, with both elders and children, but there are also unique joys to this stage of life.

Our experience is different that we imagined when we were younger. I had thought that having our children become adults and move out of our home would mean more time and energy for other adventures. While it is true that there is less day-to-day responsibility as our children move into adulthood, they are still a very central part of our lives. It isn't because our children are particularly needy. They are not. It is because we have such an investment in their lives and such an interest in what is happening to them that we want to know what is going on. We find great delight in hearing about the trials and triumphs of their jobs and the world in which they live.

I had thought that there might be a few difficult decisions as your parents moved out of the homes in which we were raised and made transitions into places where they could obtain more care, but I don't think I understood how often these decisions would have to

be made and re-made. Arrangements for the care of our parents is less a series of decisions that are made than a process of continually deciding and continually adjusting to changing circumstances. And the lines of authority are never clear. We want our parents to have as much responsibility and freedom as possible, but we also don't want them to be burdened with too many problems and responsibilities. In many ways, choices about care for our parents has been more difficult than choices for the care of our children when they were younger. Our experience has been the ability and desires of our parents changes more quickly and certainly less predictably than with growing children.

Another thing that is very different than I imagined is the level of change and need among my siblings. I imagined middle age as a time when we would all be settled, have discovered our jobs, be paying off our mortgages, and able to share equally in our parents' care. Yesterday, when making arrangements involving two of my brothers and two of my sisters, I realized that I am the only one of my siblings who has not changed my phone number in the past two years. Only two of the six of our parents' living children have the same address today that we had two years ago. There have been divorces and changes of address, health crises and car accidents. There have been financial setbacks and other life changes.

But in the midst of all of this seeming chaos are moments of great joy. Last night we had dinner with our son and my mother. Being with our son makes me feel very energetic. He is so excited about his work and is always thinking of new challenges and new ideas and new projects. His wife is a student, filled with new learning and ready to share it in the marketplace of ideas. And it is fun to watch him with his grandma. She obviously takes as much delight in being with him as I. And they have a fun and playful relationship that brings out the best in both. And being the generation in the middle seems like the best place in the world to be.

So when the job of caregiving seems a bit intense and complex relationships of a large and diverse family seem to be overwhelming, it is good to count the blessings of our stage of life. And sometimes, when I get to feeling a bit sorry for myself, I need to remind myself of how it was for my mother at this stage of life, with seven children to educate and launch, a husband whose work was very demanding, in-laws that needed constant attention, and enough sisters and in-laws for a world-class soap opera.

One of the good things about life is that it isn't easy. The challenges and adventures preclude any possibility of boredom. And the moments of connection are a foretaste of heaven.

October 4, 2007 – Mountain Dreams



My sister lives in a relatively remote location in the mountains of Montana. They have three miles of road to plow when it snows before they get to the maintained Forest Service road. They are off the electrical grid and supply their needs with a propane stove and refrigerator and solar battery chargers for their lights. They have a gas-powered generator for emergencies, and a satellite system so they can watch TV, but they have no telephone and have to drive or ride their horse about five miles to get to cell phone service.

It seems that they live in a pretty far out of the way place, but they live in an era of modern technology. Their four-wheel-drive vehicles are capable in all kinds of weather. They have a large snow plow that can be connected to their truck in a couple of minutes. They have the solar system, satellite TV, and other amenities.

A short walk from their place, in a steep valley in the middle of the mountains is a small ghost town. The remains of about a dozen cabins are slowly rotting and returning to the meadow. As you walk around the ghost town, you can imagine the dreams of the families who came here to settle. They had found an incredibly beautiful place in the mountains, with abundant water close by and a host of natural resources. Deer, elk, moose and bear regularly visit the area and would provide a source of meat. The thing that brought all of the families together was the mine, which promised to provide an income source for all of them.

They came to this area before there were developed roads, before there were modern vehicles. They arrived on horseback or by walking. And, unlike my sister, who works in Helena, about 40 miles away, they never went to town in the winter. For almost half of each year their little community of a dozen or so buildings was their entire support system. Whatever ailments or injuries they had, they had to treat themselves. Whatever food they ate, they harvested and stored for themselves. I don't know much of the story of their community, but one might imagine that there were babies born and children educated in their tiny clearing in the immense forest of Western Montana.

Standing in the midst of the crumbling ruins of their cabins, one can imagine why they wanted to make a home in this place. On a warm October day, with the aspens turning brilliant yellow and creek babbling merrily and the incredible view of the majestic mountains one is drawn to the beauty of the place. Seeing the moose tracks in the soft mud and noticing elk droppings along the trail, one can imagine the bounty of this land.

I've never been captured by the lure of gold, but it was a powerful draw in this area. More likely than my imagined scenario of a small community with ten families or so, the area was a rough gold camp with perhaps a hundred or more miners, most living in tents, others crammed tightly into the small cabins with few amenities. There were days when they had to huddle up inside whatever shelter they had to survive the sixty degree below zero weather. And there were long nights when all they could do was shiver in bed waiting for morning light. In addition to the game animals, there were wolves and mountain lions and bobcats and the bears raided any food that was left outside. They went months without bathing and soothed their misery with whiskey. Few if any of them ever made any substantial wealth out of the gold. What was found was often lost in gambling, drinking and carousing in Helena. Disputes were settled with fights and sometimes with a gun, knowing that they were beyond the reach of law enforcement.

Chances are it was never an idyllic little community with families and faith and dreams of long term permanence. But when you visit a ghost town, you are free to imagine whatever scenarios you might. There is more left untold than is told by the logs, door frames and collapsed roofs of the cabins.

Over the years, my sister has found remnants of the lives of the early miners. Tin cups, old silverware, the site of their garbage dump, and one entrance to a mine. They settled in this location over a decade ago in search of peace and quiet and a slower pace of life. The realities of life in such a place were harsh at first, including long walks in sub-zero weather to feed the horse and get to town for a medical emergency. They live a modest life, without many luxuries other than their television. But their life here will always be dependent on the drive to the city. For now there is work - four ten-hour shifts each week. When they retire, the workload of survival will continue. They figure that they are at least one year ahead in firewood stored in the shed. They can't grow enough

hay for the horse on their property, so there are a couple of tons of hay to haul each year. And there is snow to plow and fences to mend and repairs to their small home. The work will never end.

One day they will sell this place and move to a small home in the city. They will do so reluctantly and hopefully won't have to do it for many years. They love the animals and recognize them. When we described the mother bear and two cubs we had seen on our drive in, they were familiar to my sister. But this corner of the mountains will be theirs for only a little while. And perhaps their home will become a "ghost town" in the future. I wonder what stories hikers will imagine when discovering the place years in the future. Will they understand the small outbuilding that stored the batteries and inverter for the solar system? Will they speculate on a woodshed that is larger than the house? Will the small outbuilding where the re-loading supplies are kept to keep the danger of powder away from the house make any sense to them? Will they imagine a scenario that is anything like the life of a couple of self-sufficient adventure seekers who love the animals?

Probably not. But they will understand the beauty of the place. And they will imagine what it might be like to be able to live in such a place.

For now, it is good to have a sister who lives here and who is so welcoming of guests.

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October 5, 2007 – Shoulder Season



When we went over Lookout Pass yesterday, there were a couple of inches of slushy snow on the ground and the visibility was very poor in driving snow. October snow is common in the high country. We didn't have to descend very far before the snow turned to rain and by the time we were a hundred miles from the pass it was 50 degrees and sunny. We stopped in a commercial campground near Spokane, Washington and the place is about three-quarters full. The majority of the rigs in the campground are serious RVers. There are a lot of large diesel motor-coaches and large fifth-wheel trailers with multiple slide-outs. One rig has a couple-decker trailer with a motorboat on the top level and a pickup on the bottom. It has a custom space for a motorcycle in front of the pickup, with its own ramp. After the pickup is unloaded, the boat can be lowered and launched from the trailer. They probably use the pickup to pull the trailer to the lake and launch the boat. It is interesting to walk around the campground and see how much various people take with them when they hit the road. All but one or two of the pull-through spaces are filled. There is one tent and our rig in the back-in places. The guy with the tent has an electrical hookup for his lights and space heater. We're not exactly traveling light with our camper and two kayaks on the roof.

We enjoy traveling in October. In August, this campground probably would have filled up by mid-afternoon and we would have had to pre-plan our day and make reservations in order to have a place to camp. Our camper is small and it is easy to have it nice and warm on the inside even when it is cold outside. Many of the people in who are out in their recreational vehicles at this time of the year have more leisure time and are not in

a big hurry to reach a specific destination on a specific timetable. They will stay put in a campground for several days, explore the area before moving on. We don't see as many rigs on the road at this time of the year. And many of the full-time RVers will be heading south before long to spend their winter exploring places that aren't as cold.

The shoulder season is a sign of the affluence of our society. Although not everyone in the campground is living extravagantly, there is a considerable amount of wealth on display here. People have earned and saved enough money to have large amounts of leisure time. And they have invested heavily in recreational vehicles. Most folk in our society are able to have a decade or more of retirement at the end of their working careers. Working people often have enough vacation time to take large trips. By dividing our vacation into two parts and combining vacation with a business trip, we are able to have visited both the East and West coasts in the same year.

You can tell by visiting the little store in the campground that this is not the peak of their season. The shelves are not full. There are basic grocery items, but not very many canned goods. The area where the water toys were in the middle of the season has only a few items for sale. The season is beginning to wind down. I don't know if this campground is open year-round, but it takes serious campers to spend too much time living in an RV in snow country. I suspect that if the campground doesn't close for the winter, it isn't very full by the end of November. But the extended season provides a small income stream and contributes to the overall financial picture of the campground and most of us spend most of our time inside our rigs once it got dark. The work load is probably pretty light this time of the year compared to the height of the tourist season.

Today we have a short drive to Olympia and will be there in time to see our son at work before he leaves for the day. Although we were able to have a short visit with him on Tuesday when he was in Montana for a business trip, we're looking forward to spending some time with him and his wife in their home. We are grateful that we have the luxury to visit family that lives so far away.

October 6, 2007 – Investing



There was a wonderful change of mood as we arrived in Olympia yesterday. We visited our son at work, where he had just completed his annual evaluation. His work report showed that he exceeded expectations and awarded him a pay raise. As we walked down the corridors in the hospital and were introduced to the others who work there, we heard lots of words of praise for his work. And he is clearly pleased with his job. He has found a place where he can serve and where his work is deeply appreciated. He has learned the complex systems of the bureaucracy of a large hospital. He has found ways to make positive changes and to contribute to the overall mission of the hospital.

After he finished his work, we went to their apartment. Over dinner we heard about his wife's work and classes. She works for a non-profit agency that provides services to adults with disabilities and is studying for a masters in counseling. She is clearly excited about her classes and described the other students and some of the people served by her agency with great enthusiasm and animation. They are fun people to be around. And, in our culture, bragging about your children is acceptable in a different way than proclaiming other accomplishments, so we will have plenty of stories to tell when we get home.

One of the themes of this trip has been the worries that we carry for other family members. We have had serious talks with my sister about our mother's care and the problems that other siblings have had. We have spent significant time arranging for Susan's father and making sure that arrangements for her sister are in place. There

have been a few phone calls that bring more worries as we have traveled. I wrote earlier this week about how we sometimes feel squeezed by the pressures to care not only for our parents, but also our siblings.

But visiting our son and daughter-in-law reveals another important dimension of living in family. We are connected to a bright and promising future. We do not belong to one generation only. Just as the sacrifices and accomplishments of the past have contributed to our lives today, we have made investments in the future. And occasionally we see the promise that the future holds.

Although we have tried and we keep putting small amounts of money into savings, Susan and I have never been great savers. Our income has been consumed by present expenses and our desire for travel and exploration. Quite frankly, neither of us gets very excited thinking about financial investments. But we have, over the years, made some other kind of investments that are really paying off in this phase of our lives.

We have invested heavily in education for ourselves and our children. With education comes a certain freedom of employment and a wider range of choices in the type and location of one's work. Education also gives the ability to contribute to the wider community. Isaac's research skills give physicians essential tools when they confront unusual medical conditions. Rachel's knowledge about children and human development gives her the ability to teach essential life skills to a classroom of preschoolers.

Recently I was talking to a parent of a high school senior who was very concerned about the cost of college. I said, truthfully, "Next to our home it is the second-largest investment we have ever made. I have spent quite a bit of time worrying about the expense and the money we borrowed to make it all happen. But I have never spent money in my life that gave me more satisfaction. Most other things you purchase depreciate. Buy a car and ten years later you'll have to buy another one. But your children's education continues to appreciate in value."

We are blessed with significant and meaningful work. Often, though we cannot see the results of our work, we know that it is important. At significant events, such as funerals, weddings, and baptisms, we know that our role is essential in our community. Even when we are frustrated with some aspect of our work, we know that we will continue to serve as ministers. But our work as parents surpasses everything else we have done in this life in terms of satisfaction and sense of accomplishment. I felt as proud when Isaac graduated from UNC as I did on any of my own graduations. I beam when a young parent tells me what a truly kind and loving teacher Rachel is and that she has a special gift with children. When we have the opportunities to speak with their bosses, we hear glowing words about their contributions to their respective organizations.

It is unwise to live your life through your children. One has to be careful to continue to grow and learn and be involved in one's own world and freedom and responsibility are essential elements in the growth to maturity of all children. Our children's successes are truly their own. But we have been allowed to invest in them.

And the investment has proven to be valuable indeed.

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October 7, 2007 – Rainforest



I've written about cedar before. It is a favorite wood for boat builders and the trees are magnificent. We visited a farmers market yesterday and one of the stands had native plants for sale. I was tempted to purchase a couple of cedar trees and plant them in my back yard. I know that they would take a lot more water than the things growing there, but at the time it seemed like something we might do. However, I decided against purchasing the trees, thinking of the issues of getting them home.

In the afternoon we took a walk in a real cedar forest. It is very different than the woods at home. The forest is very diverse, with Cedar, Douglas Fir, Hemlock and Oak trees. All are mighty and very tall. And there is a continuous ground cover of ferns and small plants. The ground is spongy and wet and most of the time there is moisture dripping from the trees overhead. Cedar trees do best in the temperate rain forest. It should come as no surprise that the two great cedars of this continent, red and white, come from the Pacific and Atlantic Coasts. As much as I love cedar trees and as much as I enjoy working with their wood, growing them in my backyard is probably not a good idea.

Part of what makes Cedar so valuable is that it doesn't grow everywhere. Scarcity, or at least the knowledge of a finite quantity helps us to value the gifts of this world. Even in the rain forest, it takes 150 years for a cedar tree to mature. Unrestricted consumption will result in shortages for future generations. The forest is renewable and new trees will

grow, but we must balance our harvest with the ability of the forest to produce new trees.

Walking in the woods yesterday, I was once again reminded that the woods have a value that is independent of their ability to produce the wood that we need for our various projects. Especially in the urban areas of this world, there is a great value to quiet places where human impact is reduced and one can glimpse the grandeur of creation. Just a few miles from the forest I-5 carries its constant flow of six lanes of high speed traffic. To the north lie Tacoma and Seattle, two very congested cities. The crush of people means a need for more goods than are produced locally. Trains and trucks need to be in constant motion to bring the goods in to the people.

The forest, in contrast, is a place of very slow motion. The banana slugs that creep along the forest floor, the gentle dripping of the water, the rustle of the leaves in the wind - all of these natural elements occur at a slow pace. Even slower is the growth of the plants and trees. Days - even years - can go by without any appreciable change in the forest. Even though there is much going on, the general appearance stays the same.

It is good for the human spirit to take a walk in the forest. Standing among giant trees makes one feel a sense of smallness. Watching the slow, but constant process of growth and renewal helps one to understand that we are a part of a creation that is much bigger than ourselves. Listening for the rustle of leaves and the calls of the birds and looking at the sunlight filtered by the branches of the canopy high overhead renews a sense of the great beauty of this world. For we are blessed to be a part of this web of life.

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October 8, 2007 – Puppies



Our son and daughter-in-law have been in touch with a dog breeder about adopting a puppy. They did their research about breeds and chose a type of dog that they could provide for in their apartment. The litter from which their puppy will probably come is now five weeks old, and it will be about three more weeks before the breeder has decided on which puppies will be kept. The breeder is looking for specific qualities that will make the dog or the offspring of the dog winners in the show ring. The shape of the head, the color of the fur, the markings, the height of the dog and other factors are important in breeding a winner.

Choosing a puppy for a pet is a slightly different process. Personality is probably the most important characteristic. Of course when choosing a puppy knowing the general size of the adult dog is important as is understanding the dog's requirement for physical exercise, food, and the like. One wants to be sure that one is able to provide a good home for the dog. But the qualities that make for a winning show dog are not as important when choosing a pet. A dog that is slightly smaller or slightly larger than its peers may in fact be endearing to a family. Colorings and markings that are a bit unusual can be appealing features in a pet. And the puppy's ability to adapt to humans, learn discipline and behave in a home are more important than how it interacts with other dogs in a show ring.

We had a delightful time playing with the puppies and observing their differences and similarities. The breeder also showed us several adult dogs so that we could see their

size and learn a little about their personalities. The breeder was very patient and had lots of time and enthusiasm for the puppies and for talking about her dogs.

As parents, we enjoyed observing how our son and daughter-in-law were working through this joint decision. We did not have a pet dog in our home when our children were growing up and our son is by nature a very cautious person. He wants to take his time and make the right choice about the dog. Our daughter-in-law is eager to have a dog, but is willing to do her homework, study the various breeds, and understand the processes of how to get a dog that will fit well into their lifestyle. Together they have to come up with a joint decision about inviting another creature to join their lives. Both of them see the commitment to a pet as a long-term one, lasting for the rest of the life of the pet. So it is a big decision, and we, as parents, enjoy watching our children face responsibility and make decisions.

The breeder is careful and will make sure that each puppy, whether kept or sold, goes to a good home. Her standards of care for the puppies are rightly very high. She is taking her responsibility seriously and getting to know the prospective buyers well before making a decision. It is a fun process to observe.

But in the meantime, the puppies are just plain cute. They are cuddly and they'll crawl up into your lap and fall asleep. We are attracted to young animals and have a basic urge to care for them. We know that they will soon grow into adulthood, but there is a special joy in their young lives. The ways of the birth and life and death are among the most important lessons that pets help us learn. Having an infant that grows into adulthood is a delightful gift and an amazing process to watch. Thank God for puppies.

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October 9, 2007 – Pumpkins



Even though we usually aren't very good at talking about it, we have a fascination with death. Halloween is a public holiday that gives limited permission to think and talk about death. Images of ghosts and goblins, of skeletons and other things associated with the end of life combine with a superstitions about what happens to humans after death. Most of the stories are treated as fiction, we don't really believe that skeletons can walk around separately from the rest of the human body. And most of us don't believe in ghosts returning to haunt the living - at least not in the way that is reported in most Halloween stories.

But we do like the holiday, and we often associate it with children. We've dressed it up with candy and lots of make believe, including dressing up in ways that sometimes are scary and sometimes just fun. For a society that is so uncomfortable in talking about death at all, and one where children are often treaded as if death did not occur, there is one holiday in which death is not dealt with directly, but is hinted at again and again and we've turned it into a holiday for children. It is a little bit strange.

Of course, Halloween also incorporates a generic harvest festival. Pumpkins that spend most of the summer being green begin to turn orange in the fall and they are one of the favorite symbols of the holiday. The tradition of carving faces into the pumpkins may come from the shape of the pumpkins, or their texture, or the simple fact that the way the seeds are suspended inside makes them easy to hollow out.

Yesterday we visited a pumpkin patch to pick out a few pumpkins for the fall celebration. The farm was set up with lots of games and activities to keep visitors engaged and happy. They had pumpkin bowling, where you could roll a pumpkin down a wooden lane at bowling pins. They had hay rides and a petting zoo. They had a concession stand and sold all sorts of farm products as well as fruit and sweet corn. They had a corn maze and a separate hay maze set up in a barn. There were wheelbarrows for carrying pumpkins and for giving rides to children. A lot of effort had gone into making the visit to the farm a fun experience for people of all ages. It had the mood of a country fair and almost none of the usual references to death that one finds in some Halloween celebrations. There were no pictures of ghosts or witches and the only black cat was a kitten in the petting zoo.

I suspect that many people have forgotten the connection between Halloween and death, and don't think of the holiday as being much more than an opportunity to dress up and have a bit of fun with make believe. Halloween, or "All Hallows Eve" is the night before All Saints Day. On All Saints we remember those who have died, especially those whose lives were lived in special service to others. We acknowledge that death is a mystery, but that in some sense we remain connected to and affected by the loving actions of others who are no longer living. Around that holiday grew up the traditions of the night before - a sort of evening of the dead, so to speak. Many cultures have a holiday that recognizes and explores death and parts of those traditions have been incorporated into contemporary Halloween celebrations.

Of course we will all someday die. And there is no reason not to be honest about this reality and to spend some time thinking about its meaning. But no matter how much we try to imagine the nature of death itself, death remains a mystery. What happens to us after we die is a matter of faith. Scientific explorations of death and observation of dead bodies tell us that there are great physical changes as a body decomposes. And it seems obvious that there is a big distinction between a living body and one that has died.

Faithful people have developed a system of beliefs that focus on death not being the end. It is not the end of life, nor is it the end of relationship. There is something that lies beyond death and although we cannot observe it, or fully know it in this life, we are convinced that love and life continue.

As we prepare to celebrate the on-going nature of love and life on All Saints Day, perhaps it is good to pause on the evening before and contemplate the mystery of death. Besides pumpkins are a lot of fun.

October 10, 2007 – Reflections of the Past



Some of the places we go hiking were not always nature preserves. Woodard Bay off the Puget Sound is now a tranquil place with tall forests and a quiet inlet full of harbor seals. At one time it was a transfer point, where logs were unloaded from the railroad and formed into rafts to be floated to the sawmill in Everett. At the height of logging in the Pacific Northwest, a million board feet of timber per day was unloaded from the trains. That style and level of logging was not sustainable over the long term and the business shifted. The days of the huge log rafts are now passed and gone with them are the logging camps with hundreds of workers living in tents or other temporary housing. Some of the land that was used by the timber companies has now become public land and is kept as preserves or parks that allow for public recreation.

As we walk in these quiet places, signs of the past remain. There are bogs that are the remains of logging activity in the area. The water is close to the surface and almost any digging results in a small pond or puddle. There are trails and roads and the remains of railroad beds. In the bays there are pilings and docks and other structures slowly rotting and being reclaimed by the earth. AT Woodard Bay, there are interpretive signs that tell a little of the history of the area and reveal the hopes and dreams of the land speculators and loggers sailors and others who once came to the area.

Of course the loggers were not the first to discover this place. The rich tidal flats of the southern sound yielded oysters and clams and other foods. Native Americans used canoes and other boats to access the quiet inlets and harvest the shellfish. During the

salmon run in the fall, they harvested and preserved salmon and steelhead and other fish. There is archeological evidence that humans lived in this area for many centuries before the arrival of Europeans.

It is good to be reminded of the past. Even when a new vista makes us feel like we are engaged in fresh discovery, we are not the first to walk on this land, nor the first to see this view. Our perspective is unique, but we are a part of a long story of people and history-making on this planet. And we are not the last generation. How we treat this land and the kind of marks we leave upon it will be witnessed by and affect the lives of future generations. It doesn't take much reflection to see the value of preserving some of this earth, in as near a natural state as possible, for future generations. But it is also good for us to remember and preserve the human history. The hopes and dreams and contributions of previous generations can be an inspiration to us and to future generations. We also can learn from the mistakes and failures of others.

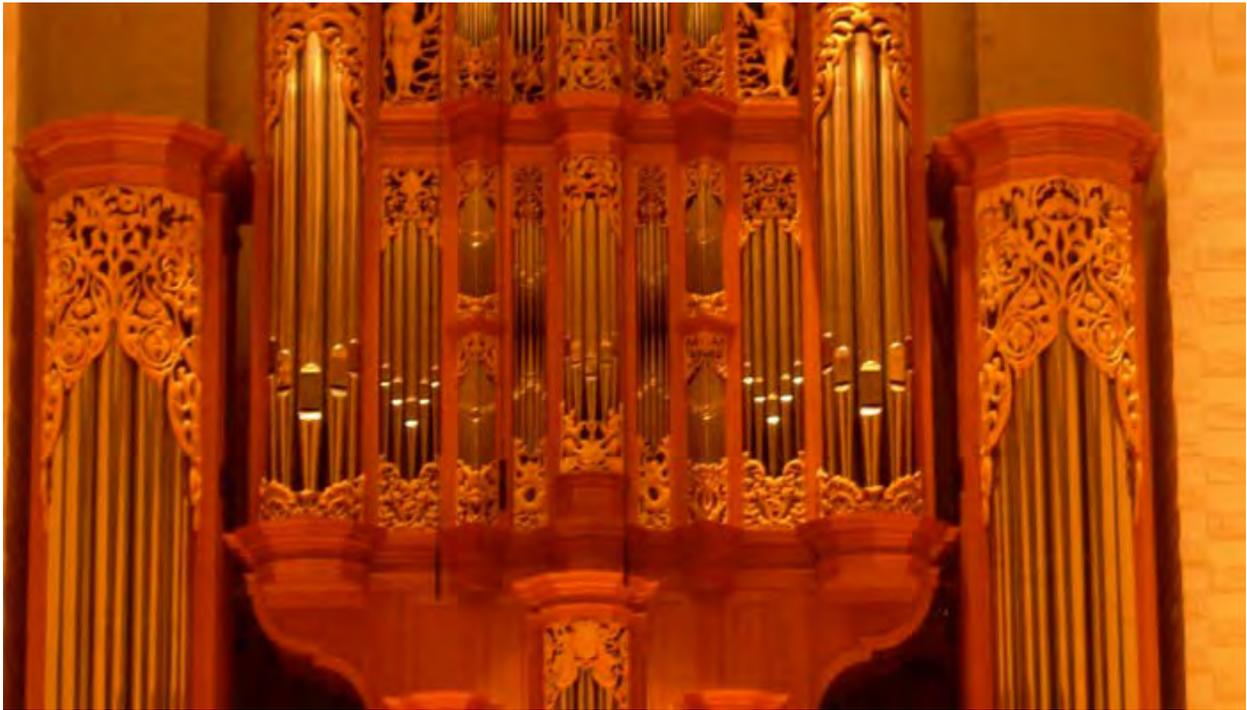
The story of people is a resource worth preserving for future generations as well.

It is likely that we will make many more visits to the place where our son and daughter-in-law live. And as a part of those visits, we will continue to hike and explore the land around their home and discover the beauty that is a part of this part of the world. We make similar explorations in our home place as well. And as we explore we will continue to learn about the relationship of the people and the land.

And we will add our stories to the unfolding story of humans on this planet. May we learn from the past and make positive contributions to the future in the brief moment of time that is ours.

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October 11, 2007 – Pipes



Yesterday we visited Pacific Lutheran University, where our daughter-in-law is a student. PLU has a very good reputation throughout the nation and especially in the Pacific Northwest as being a very good school. It also has a reputation for being expensive. Education is not free and when it is done correctly it is not inexpensive. But it is an investment that if properly managed can yield great benefits not only to the individuals, but to the society at large.

The buildings on PLU's campus are as one might expect: solid and utilitarian. For the most part, the buildings on the campus are finished with brick exteriors and are conventional in their shape and construction. The newest building on campus, housing the science and business departments, has been carefully constructed to be energy-efficient with a lot of passive-solar features.

One of the newer buildings on campus is the performing arts center. PLU has a very strong music department and has provided musicians for churches throughout all of its history. In the early days of the university, all students took private vocal lessons, offered on a voluntary basis by the faculty. One time, the entire university band climbed Mt. Rainier and played "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" at the top. It is a Lutheran university after all. The performing arts center continues the PLU tradition of utility, with bare concrete floors in the corridors, mostly rectangular rooms and few curves. But they didn't cut any corners when they placed the order for their pipe organ.

Built by Paul Fritts & company, of Tacoma, the 80-rank, 3-manual tracker organ boasts 56 stops and is decorated with elaborate carvings. The Gottfried and Mary Fuchs Pipe Organ occupies the entire front wall of the large auditorium. The console is deep within the instrument itself, accessed from the second story of the auditorium. The organist is literally surrounded by the instrument, working the direct tracker action and feeling the vibration from the pipes, which range up to 32' in length. Completed in 1988, the organ had an initial cost of about one million dollars. It is truly a grand instrument, demanding the highest and best of each organist who attempts to play it.

Perhaps most impressive about the organ is the purpose to which it is dedicated: the education of students. The organ is probably the most demanding of all musical instruments. An organist must be able to read three or more staves of music, while simultaneously using both hands and both feet to manipulate pedals and keys that are arranged on multiple keyboards. An organist must possess an understanding of the design and construction of the instrument to compensate for delays in the action of the organ in order to produce music with precise timing.

The mastery of the organ is worthy of a lifetime of dedication. And the love of the instrument must be discovered early in life in order to allow for the years of practice that are required. The organ is also physically demanding, requiring conditioning and exercise of hands and feet, arms and legs.

Teaching the organ is a task that is truly worthy of a university. It combines many academic disciplines and demands clear thinking and intellectual discipline to master the instrument. What better place for such a wonderful machine than a college?

As we visited, a student was taking a private lesson on the organ. The teacher was sitting at the student's right hand, offering advice and counsel as the student struggled with setting registrations and playing a piece. The teacher had slowed the tempo of the piece so that each note could be placed precisely. Even a casual listener could tell that the student was struggling with rhythm. The organ is not like a piano - the delay caused by mechanical action and the flowing of air into the pipes means that the student has to learn to anticipate the sound before it is heard. Waiting to hear a note before the next is played means that the music will slow to an unbearable pace. The student needs to learn to play ahead of the sound and to recognize mistakes and missed notes before they are heard.

Difficult challenges are worthy of human enterprise. If it were easy to play the organ, there would be an excess of organists. Mastering a truly difficult set of skills will not only distinguish the organist, but provide a unique contribution to the church and to the society.

It was another reminder to me that part of the responsibility of having a pipe organ is the responsibility of teaching. Each instrument should become a center of learning and teaching and an opportunity for gifted students to tackle the challenge of one of the most difficult and glorious instruments ever built.

It was a joy to visit PLU and see and hear their organ. And it is a reminder to me of our continuing obligation to teach as we practice our faith.

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October 12, 2007 – Harbor Seals



One of the delights of traveling is seeing new animals and learning about the various elements of life in an environment that is very different from home. The southern Puget Sound has many harbor seals. They are probably as common as deer are at home. The locals who work around the water scarcely take notice of them. But I have very little experience with the creatures.

They are curious and will swim out to the kayak when I am paddling, but they tend to follow it, so they are hard to see. I have to twist around and look backward to see them and this is an awkward angle for taking pictures from the boat. But when I come up to a dock, they will swim right by and it is easy to get a picture. The seals eat fish and the sound is rich in food for them. There are plenty of old pilings and floating rafts left from the days of logging and the seals will crawl up onto floats to sleep and sun themselves. I am sure that there are marine biologists who have made estimates of their numbers, but it seems that there are a lot of them and that they are widely disbursed throughout the sound.

Their faces remind me of a puppy, with long whiskers, dark eyes, and a long nose. They look friendly and don't seem threatening at all once one gets used to the surprise of seeing them. They are very quiet and quick swimmers and I don't have the experience to anticipate where they will surface, so I am a little startled upon first sight.

The diversity of life on this planet continues to amaze me. There are so many different kinds of creatures, each adapted to a specific environment, yet able to adapt to changes. Paddling in the areas that I have been able to explore, one is constantly aware of human presence. There are a lot of homes built right at the edge of the water and there are very few stretches of coastline that are not dotted with buildings. Even out on the water, I can hear the sounds of aircraft and trains and other signs of human activity. The sound is much different than it appeared to Peter Puget when it was first explored by Europeans. Although humans have lived along the shore of the Sound for thousands of years, it is only in modern times that the population has been great and the impact of commercial activity has been so significant.

It was interesting to reflect on the seals as I paddled my kayak. The boat I have been paddling on this trip is made in the shape of a Greenland Kayak. These boats were used to hunt seals. Greenlanders hunted the seals for food and used their skins for a wide variety of purposes. Greenland kayaks were wooden frames covered with seal skins. My kayak is covered with dacron, sealed with polyurethane. I joke that there were no seals in South Dakota and Buffalo hide is too heavy. The reality is that I never intended to cover this kayak with animal skins. But you can see why it occurred to early boat builders to use seal skin. Seals are such good swimmers and their skin protects them from the cold and enables them to slip smoothly through the water. Creating a sleek design covered with the same material, the Greenlanders built kayaks in a variety of sizes and shapes, and over the years refined their design to make a very seaworthy craft. My kayak is an imitation, built to lines drawn off of a traditional kayak that has been preserved in a museum. It is a wonderful little boat that carries me around the water to see sights that I could not see from the land. Sitting low, nearly at water level, I have a perspective that is different from that of someone traveling in a larger boat. My wooden paddle enables me to be quiet as I explore and the narrow boat leaves almost no wake as it slices through the water. it is a good way to look at the world.

And it has been fun to allow my boat to paddle with the seals - it seems very much at home in this environment.

October 13, 2007 – Stories



The waters that I paddle with my kayak have been explored, mapped, charted, fished, and known by humans for a long time. But they are places that are new to me. And sometimes, when there is little or no other traffic, I can paddle away from the harbors and marinas to places where the shoreline is less developed and think back to the time of discovery. It took a while for Europeans to discover the Puget Sound. Sir Frances Drake probably didn't come far enough north. The Spanish Explorer known as Juan de Fuca discovered the straight that bears his name but never sailed very far into it. The first recorded exploration of the Puget Sound by Europeans was the 1791-92 voyage of the British ship *Discovery* under the command of George Vancouver. That same expedition had officers Peter Puget and Joseph Whidbey. The names of all three officers remain the common names of the sound and two of its major islands.

By the time Europeans arrived, the indigenous people had developed a culture that was similar to, yet distinct from that of coastal tribes. The protection of the inland waters made the weather a bit more mild and the abundance of shellfish and other food from the sea made living quite easy. Giant cedar trees were abundant and relatively easy to harvest and work for homes and canoes. Life was good for those who lived along the Puget Sound. Some groups moved several times a year, laying large cedar planks across several canoes and piling all of their goods upon them. They would seek out places of abundant food. They knew where the salmon would be running in the fall and where the clam harvests were most plentiful.

This relatively easy life gave opportunity for the rise of a culture that was rich in religion and story. The northern coastal tribes had developed the practice of carving totem poles to record the honors of a great person or family. The people of the sound adapted and expanded the tradition and began to carve story poles for the instruction of children. The poles, sometimes 60 feet tall or more, contained a series of carvings, each of which represented a story with some moral lesson for young people. Learning to use your mind instead of physical strength to overcome an enemy who is stronger, the importance of generosity, the wisdom of other creatures in nature, and explanations of the different roles of different creatures were all taught through the practice of telling and re-telling the stories of the story pole. Story poles were the curricula of an organized educational system.

Fortunately some of the story poles have been preserved along with their stories. One story pole stands on the capitol grounds in Olympia. Contemporary efforts at caulking and sealing the pole have not succeeded in preventing the natural process of decay and the pole will have to be removed in the near future and stored in a climate-controlled area. But we were able to see it standing and read about the stories that it represents in a brochure prepared by the state.

Looking at the pole got me to thinking about what stories are most important to us. What are the stories that we consider essential for every child to learn and to be able to pass on to future generations? We tend to preserve our curricula in books and not carve it into cedar trees, but we do have treasured stories that we consider to be worthy of keeping forever. Like the stories of the story pole, the stories of our Bible are handed down from generation to generation. Each generation is given the task of providing interpretation and looking for connections between the stories and contemporary life. Ancient truths stand in the midst of changing circumstances.

The history of our people also seems to be worth preserving, even though we all report history from a particular point of view and the stories of victors are often different from those of the defeated. Music and art also are worthy of being passed from generation to generation. Our curriculum is probably too complex to be translated into a story pole. We may leave large amounts of data in electronic storage. I wonder if the curricula left behind by our generation will be as beautiful and inspiring as a single story pole.

Part of what makes us human is our ability to tell stories and pass on information from generation to generation. May our stories provide genuine guidance to the generations that are yet to be born.

October 14, 2007 – Nature’s Extravagance



We have been driving over the passes again, crossing from the Pacific coast to the midwest. The Rocky Mountains are a magnificent spine that runs down the length of the North and South American continents. The northern Rockies are primarily evergreen forest, covered with pine, fir, and spruce trees. But autumn brings splashes of color. The tamaracks turn yellow, and aspen, maple and oak show up with their colors as well. The maples are brilliant, with leaves that turn from green to yellow and then from yellow to red. You can see all three colors on the same plant. The plant has no particular need of all of these colors. Unlike spring flowers, whose brilliant colors attract insects and birds to pollenate the plants, the colors of fall have no role in the survival of the plant. They are merely a gift of nature.

What a delight it is to be able to see in color! The process of color vision is amazingly complex, and took a long time to evolve to the state we experience in our lives today. The ability to distinguish colors plays a role in our survival and quality of life. Simple tasks, like determining whether to stop or go at a controlled intersection, matching our clothes and recognizing a loved one in a crowd all depend on color vision. Colors warn of danger and help us choose healthy food to eat. Persons with various forms of blindness, including color blindness can live healthy and meaningful lives and experience much of the richness of the world, but we view their condition as a disability and made adaptations for them. Color vision is required for operating aircraft and some types of equipment and is essential for certain jobs, such as design and materials

selection. One can live and live well without color vision, but having the ability to see and enjoy color is a definite gift.

The world offers colors as signs for many different conditions and situations. The colors of the sky indicate coming weather. Fruit changes color as it ripens to indicate the best time to harvest and eat. The brilliant colors of autumn, however, seem to be a pure gift. They exist simply for the glory of color and season. This world is inherently beautiful and part of human experience is the joy of experiencing beauty.

As we head for home and return to our everyday work, we are grateful for the show of color along the way.

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October 15, 2007 – Homeward Bound



We'll be home again today. This year has been a year of camper travel for us, with trips to both coasts. We've had the opportunity to paddle in some beautiful waters and explore new country. The camper allows us freedom to stop where we want. As much as we love traveling, there is much at home that beckons. Fall is a busy time in the life of the church, with classes gearing up, stewardship drive time, and many other activities. It is also a good time to travel, so achieving a balance requires attention to both the journey and the activities at home. Cell phones and the Internet allow for staying in touch as we travel. But we are glad to be heading home.

The core of this trip has been a delightful visit with our son and daughter-in-law, but there has been a lot of other family business around the edges. Conversations about care for my mother, consultations with sisters and brothers, various family crises and the like have demanded our attention. We have managed to visit face to face with four of my brothers and sisters, something that is relatively rare for us in such a short amount of time.

I have commented that my role in my family is such that much of family business has a similar emotional quality and mental investment as my daily work in the church. Working with people to solve problems is a large part of any job. Juggling family and work is always complex and it doesn't seem to be getting any easier now that our children are adults.

But there are many exciting things that beckon us to return home. We'll see visible progress on the Habitat for Humanity house, but there is much work that remains. The fall stewardship drive at the church will demand attention this week and we have a newsletter to get out next week. Worship and educational programs are going full speed ahead and there will be pastoral concerns to address.

At home there will be fall chores as we begin to get ready for winter. The garden needs to be tilled and there are some remaining yard work chores to accomplish before the really cold weather. The camper needs to be winterized and stored and there are boats to put into storage as well. Our lives are filled with lists of tasks to accomplish and, for the most part, we thrive on work and challenges.

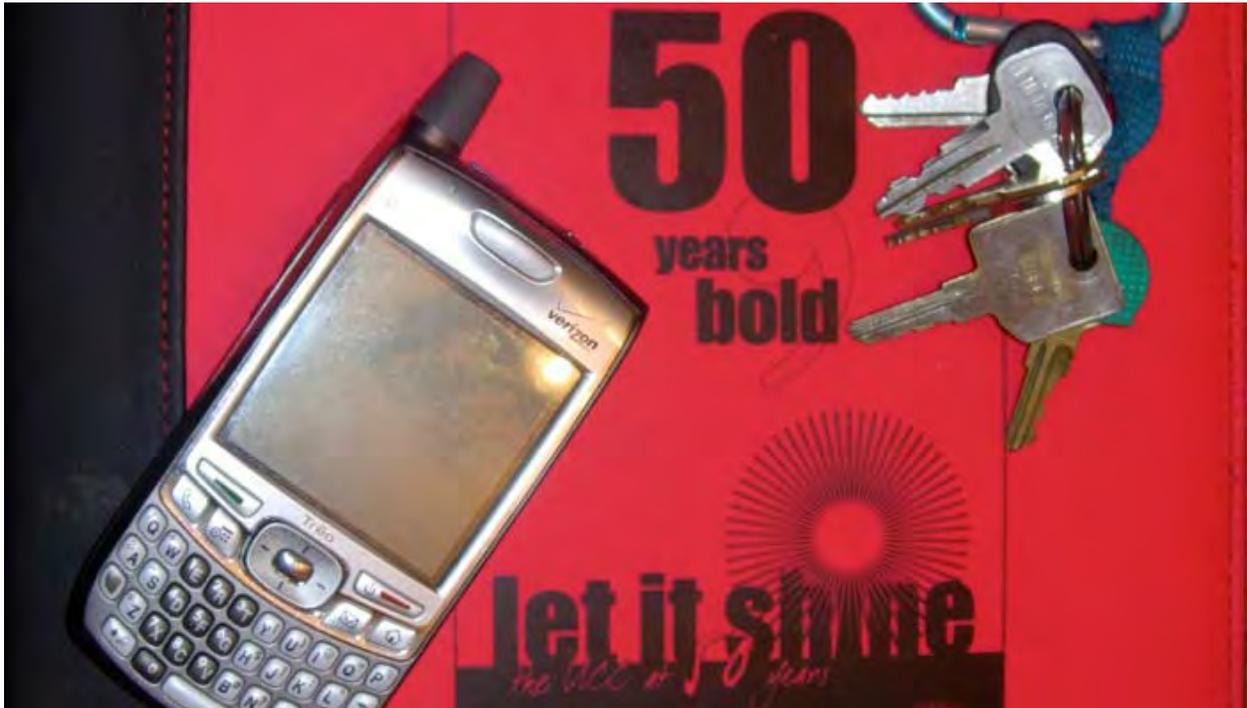
It is good to have a vacation to break the routine and we find that connecting with our families is essential. Often our conversations when we are face-to-face are not the most significant ones, but we need to maintain the relationships in order to be able to work together in times of crisis.

Life is a rhythm of traveling and coming home, family and work, closeness and distance. And in that rhythm is the music of hope and joy.

May we continue to strive for balance in our living.

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October 16, 2007 – Tools



When I was a child, a local carpenter and cabinet builder helped our father with adding a room and doing some remodeling to our home. I remember the carpenter's tool box. It was made of wood with a long handle across the top. The short end of a framing square stuck out of the top. There were individual slots for several different types of saws and a relatively large area for hammers, chisels and other hand tools. There were two or three block planes and an assortment of screwdrivers. There was a folding ruler and a rolled tape measure. A two-foot level rested at the bottom of the box. There was a brace and a collection of bits. Scraps of wood and sandpaper took up part of the toolbox as well.

There were probably other tools that I don't remember. Looking back, he must have had a jig of some sort for cutting dovetail joints, though the jig, like his tool box and mitre box was probably home-made.

It was a different assortment of tools than you would find in a carpenter's toolbox today. There were no power tools, no battery chargers. Some of the tools, like the block plane and brace and bits are considered to be antique in some circles today and not necessary for a working carpenter.

The tools of a minister have changed over the years as well. As recently as the first fifteen years of my ministry, none of my colleagues had a cellular telephone and most of us worked in places where there was no service for such devices. Today, virtually every minister carries a cell phone and considers it to be an essential tool for ministry. I

remember when computers were first introduced as tools for ministry. We attended workshops and marveled at machines that produced address labels and kept track of the members of the church. Now computers are seen as essential for the operation of a church. Few, if any, of my colleagues hit the road with a bed roll and a couple of cooking pots tied behind their saddle any more. An automobile is seen as necessary for a working pastor in most locations.

But tools are not the same thing as work accomplished. There are plenty of well-equipped home shops with cases and cases of tools that are seldom used. The simple wooden cabinet made with a few hand tools by a relative five generations ago continues to serve well and will be passed on to another generation when we have finished with it. My grandfather taught me, “a craftsman always takes care of his tools, but he will be judged by the things he builds, not the tools he used.”

Today, as I return to work after a vacation, I’ve made sure that I have all of my tools. A briefcase holds my computer, pens, notebook and a small bible. I’ve got my phone clipped to my belt and my keys in my pocket. When I arrive at the office, there will be a desk phone, photocopy and fax machines. We have plenty of tools.

But our handiwork will be in the relationships that are built and the faith that is shared, not in the tools we use. As essential to my work as the outward items are the experiences and memories I carry. The books that I have read and the discussions I have shared have shaped my theology and my theology informs not only my faith, but also my presence with others. The experiences I have had in nearly three decades of ministry inform the decisions I make day to day. My identity is more essential to my work than the tools I carry.

But this job does not rest on my shoulders alone. Ministry is a network of relationships. The many partners with whom I share this work, most importantly the individual members of the congregation, are the real resources for the life of the church. The real toolbox is not filled with gadgets and physical objects, but rather relationships with people.

May I be a true craftsman and take good care of those relationships today.

October 17, 2007 – Foggy Day



My first day back in the office after vacation yesterday was a challenge. There were several surprises and not all of them were pleasant. The financial reports of September activity did not contain good news and it September is usually a strong month. I have not figured out what is going on, as finances are usually an indicator of a bigger picture and a general lack of morale or enthusiasm about the church is often a signal or opportunity for change. I wanted to have time to reflect and try to analyze things, but there just wasn't time. I needed to catch up with people, prepare for meetings, and there was a list of phone calls to return. There is a funeral to plan and a grandson of the church was injured in Iraq. The injury appears not to be as serious as initially presented, but we needed time to talk and pray about the impact the injury and the deployment are having on the family. There were evening meetings that demanded my attention and focus. It was after eight when I left the office, having eaten a quick lunch at my desk and not stopped for dinner.

As I drove up the hill towards home, it was quite foggy - enough that traffic was moving a bit slower than usual. I don't have the skill to make a photograph of fog after dark, so the illustration for today's blog is of a foggy morning in Washington during our vacation. But it serves to remind me of the fog. Somehow fog seemed appropriate weather for my mood. I had worked hard all day, but the day had lacked focus. The day continued with a phone call after 9:30 p.m. that contained more disappointing news.

Although understanding of the dynamics of life in the church is important, often when the church is in a slump, identifying the next steps is far more important than getting a complete answer to the question “why?” Our Department of Stewardship and Budget was very good at their meeting last night of having open and free discussion and then setting out specific and concrete actions for the next month. We left the meeting without having a full understanding of why donations are down, but with a sense of what we are going to do to educate the congregation about what is going on and work to correct the shortfall.

I suspect that we will be wandering in the fog for a while now. Every crisis presents opportunity, but it has to be recognized in order to be seized. Many of the things in life that are worth doing are difficult. This congregation is a very strong congregation and we will see our way through this situation and discover our focus again.

The hardest part of all of this for me is that I tend to take much of the life of the church personally. My mind immediately rushes to, “it must be me.” “I must be doing something wrong.” “Maybe I’m the problem.” There is a certain arrogance in the assumption that the church is so affected by any one person and assuming that I am that person involves making a lot of false assumptions about my place and power in the church. Further, experience has taught me that when I take things personally and identify too strongly with the church, I can become a barrier to the changes that need to be made and the newness that is emerging. I know all of this in my head, but emotionally, it is very difficult not to feel hurt when things aren’t going quite right in the life of the church. My emotions can keep me from thinking clearly. They are a part of the fog in which I wander.

So I need to remind myself that in our country, fog is a good sign. It means that there is some moisture in the air. In a place that often suffers from drought, the fog distributes moisture to the plants in an efficient manner. And fog forces us to slow down, another thing that is valuable from time to time.

This morning, there is no fog in the air. I’m probably thinking a bit clearer, too. But I hope that we don’t rush towards quick fixes without considering all of the options that lie before us as a congregation. Perhaps dwelling in the fog for a while is good for us as we explore the deeper meanings of life together in Christian community.

October 18, 2007 – Woodchucks



Early tomorrow morning, I will be on the road to Wessington Springs, a community on the East side of the Missouri, about 4 1/2 hours away from home. I've driven across the state a lot of times and one of the images of driving across South Dakota is that one quickly leaves the tree-covered slopes of the Black Hills and most of the drive is in open country. Trees are a scarce commodity in much of our state. But here in the hills we have plenty of trees. In fact, examination of photographs from 100 and more years ago reveals that there are more trees now than when European settlers first saw the hills. Like many other drought-stressed forests of the west, the hills have lost a lot of trees to bark beetles and there have been some significant fires in recent years. Even more fires lie in our future, as the trees killed by the beetles provide dry fuel and the heavily forested slopes provide huge amounts of fuel for large fires.

One way to decrease the risk of losing homes to fire is to thin the trees near dwellings. The increased spacing between trees allows the trees that are left to thrive and become more drought and disease resistant. Considerable thinning was a part of the natural cycle of fire in years past, but contemporary fire suppression and increased construction of homes in the forest have disrupted the cycle and resulted in a forest that is thick, overgrown and ripe for big fires. Thinning the trees by allowing lightning-started fires to burn results in the loss of homes and a danger to human inhabitants of the forest.

So it becomes necessary to cut down selected trees. The trees can be cut and split into firewood. But the hills are producing more firewood than its residents can consume. A few years ago, members of our congregation who were trimming trees on their property, discovered that there was a need for firewood on the Cheyenne and Pine Ridge reservations. A small project of delivering firewood to our neighbors began and continues to grow.

October is the time for the first of our deliveries. A caravan of pickups and trailers will head to Eagle Butte on the Morning of October 27. This year volunteers from our church will be joined by volunteers from a congregation in Wisconsin who have come out to share in a mission trip. The Wisconsin volunteers will be working the week before the delivery cutting and splitting additional firewood on property owned by members of our congregation. We also have a large pile of logs donated by friends of the church, sitting on the church lawn waiting to be cut, split, loaded and delivered. A trip in November to Wamblee is also being arranged.

Delivering fuel for winter heat to people who need it is a valuable enterprise. But even more valuable are the relationships that have formed and continue to grow. Each trip gives more opportunities to get to know our neighbors and colleagues, to meet family members and learn more of the stories of people we might never have met were it not for the firewood project. This month promises new relationships and ties to sisters and brothers from Wisconsin who will share our adventure and mission. The people who volunteer to cut, split, load and deliver the wood have a lot of fun working together.

The group has been dubbed "The Woodchuck Society," and membership is open to anyone who wants to get involved. Those who aren't able to lift and load firewood donate cookies or other refreshments for the workers. Children are always welcome in a job where the size of the load can be adjusted to the size of the person carrying it. Elders might work at a slower pace than they once did, but continue to be valued contributors to the project. Each year the number of persons involved grows and an annual summer picnic celebrates the new members and provides additional opportunities for fellowship.

Warming homes is necessary for survival in the Dakotas. Warming hearts is necessary for survival in any climate. The Woodchucks are engaged in both enterprises.

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October 19, 2007 – In Between



Picture is a portion of the cover of the Fall, 2007 special issue of Smithsonian Magazine.

The current issue of Smithsonian Magazine highlights 37 innovators in the arts and sciences who are under 36 years of age. They are brilliant. They are inspiring. Their stories are a delight to read. They are contributing deeply to this world and improving the lives of neighbors and people they will never meet. We are fortunate to have such wonderful people in our world.

And I am not one of them. No surprise. I'm too old. I wouldn't have been on such a list when I wasn't too old, either. That's no surprise, either. It will have to do to simply share this planet with these persons and marvel at their brilliance.

Some types of brilliance are the province of the young. Gymnasts, musicians and mathematicians often make their contributions to the world at a very early age. Both physical and mental agility often are achieved at young ages and present special problems for aging persons. Prodigy appears long before age-related memory loss sets in.

But young people are not the only significant contributors to the world. There are artists and teachers and innovators who make their contributions well past the age when many have retired. I heard part of an interview last week with Millard Kaufman, who just published his first novel at the age of 90. It has been met with critical acclaim. He has peers who have been publishing novels for nearly 70 years. Berry Fleming, the novelist

who recently died at age 90 had his novels published in the '30's and '40's. The composer Elliott Carter just debuted a new quintet for piano and strings in Chicago, Cleveland and London at the age of 90. There are countless stories of artistic and intellectual innovation by persons who are considered to be senior citizens.

There is a wisdom that comes with age and experience that is of great value to the world. Memory of past events is one of the ways in which we are freed from repetition of mistakes. It may be that our society currently overvalues youth and under values wisdom and experience. To the extent that this is true, we do so at our own peril and to our own detriment.

Being astounded at the great creativity of youth and the great wisdom of age, I have to admit that I belong to neither category. Whether or not I will develop wisdom remains to be revealed, but none of us get a second chance with our youth. Recently a brilliant young musician was rehearsing in our sanctuary. I listened for some time, amazed and thrilled with the music. After the piece was finished and I returned to my office I thought to myself that my mother really was right about practice. Perhaps if I had practiced more as a youth . . . But the truth is that I will never know because that time is now past and I have a new stage of life in which to live.

Being in between is a place with a few less pressures, in a way. I can both say goodbye to my youth and enjoy the wonderful contributions of the youth of our community. I can be amazed by and benefit from the wisdom of elders while honestly confessing that I have not yet become one of them.

But being in between is also a place of great possibility. May creativity and innovation be the hallmark of this phase of my life and may I have enough experience to occasionally demonstrate a bit of wisdom.

One thing is for sure. By the time I'm 90, none of the people profiled by the magazine will be under 36 any more.

October 20, 2007 – Crossing the River



The Missouri river is a dividing line in the Dakotas. We talk of the differences between east river and west river. The western side of both states tends to be ranch country, with lower population and a dryer climate. There was a time when the river was a significant barrier to travel, but today the river is spanned by many bridges and even in the many places where it is widened by dams, it is easy to get from one side to the other. And those of us who live in the Dakotas tend to exaggerate the differences between the east and west. For the most part we get along well with our sisters and brothers across the river and have far more in common than the few differences we have.

In a semi-arid land, the large river is always a wonderful sight. As we head across the prairie, the flat lands give way to a series of bluffs and breaks and we head down toward the river. It is big enough to have many moods and to reflect the weather of the day. On a clear, sunny day like yesterday, the river is a beautiful blue and alive with people fishing and recreating on its surface. On the western side of the river where the Interstate crosses there is a restaurant called "Al's Oasis" that is a common stopping place for people from all over the state and a meeting place for travelers. It is a rare day when long time South Dakotans don't meet a friend or two when they stop at Al's.

Yesterday my trip across the state was rushed, with a funeral to attend and a meeting to end the day back on our side of the state. Even when I am in a hurry, there is time to marvel at the natural beauty of the place where I live and enjoy the sight of the river

when I crossed it. Heading west in the evening, the setting sun, though a bit bright in the windshield, offered beautiful views of the badlands and hills as I approached.

We are defined by the land upon which we live. Our identity is shaped by the shape of the land. Our modern modes of travel do not provide the connection that riding a horse or walking provides, but we still are affected by the views that we are given. I feel blessed to live in country that is relatively open, without too many human residents. The wide-open grasslands and widely-spaced ranches of west river make me feel at home and give me a sense of freedom that I enjoy. What a delight to be able to see and to be able to see in color!

Today I get to stay near home. There will be time to work on the Habitat house, time for family, and time to prepare for worship tomorrow. After a day with over eight hours in the car, it is good to spend a day outside working. One of the joys of my job is the variety of the work.

As we live and work, the river keeps flowing through our states and past our lives. It shapes the land and the land shapes us. May we never forget to give thanks for the marvels and beauty of this world.

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October 21, 2007 – Persistence



We live in a time and place of instant gratification. We complain about how long the microwave takes to heat a meal, expect our loved ones to be constantly available to answer phone calls, and use electronic devices to watch television programs when we want. The capacity for instant messaging is carried in pockets and purses. We want results and we want them now.

Persistence and patience are rarely demonstrated as virtues.

But there are many things in life that take time. And many worthy tasks that would never be accomplished if people gave up when they met resistance or opposition.

Yesterday, we completed raising the walls on a duplex home that we are building in partnership with Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity. At one time, I believed that we would be accomplishing this task in July and it is nearly the end of October. There were delays in getting the plans approved, delays in tearing down a structure that had been on the lot, delays in getting the excavation and concrete work completed and delays in getting volunteers deployed on the project. We moved our start date back from July to August and then to September.

And of course, raising the walls isn't the critical date in a home - move in day is the critical date. And that date is still many months away. Our dream of having the families

in the home by Christmas will have to give way to a goal of having them in their homes by Easter.

But the persistence we demonstrated in this project is minor compared to the persistence that has been shown by others. This duplex will represent families number 50 and 51 who will move into homes built in partnership with Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity. Some of the founders of this affiliate have been waiting for this day for more than a decade. And there are many more families in need of homes. I have heard the projection that it will take building homes at the rate of 100 homes per decade for 50 years to eliminate poverty housing in Pennington county. Whether or not that statistic is the correct count, the reality is that there remains a lot more work before we can say that the need has been met.

It will take persistence. It will take patience with meetings. It will take fund-raising events and programs. It will take presentations to service clubs and churches. It will take work days and hours of telephone work to line up volunteers. It will take meals served and cookies baked. It will take gallons of coffee and lemonade and water. It will take getting up early on the days when we would prefer to sleep in. It will take going out on the days when we would prefer to stay home. It will take putting off some of our own home maintenance chores to work on homes for others. It will take persistence.

I am not sure why we lack patience and persistence in our culture. Perhaps it comes with some of the impressive gains in technology. Perhaps it comes from global communications systems. Perhaps it comes with relatively easy modes of travel. But all of our instant gratification comes with a price. We create very large problems with some of the things we do. The consumer culture of the United States is extremely energy greedy. We consume resources at such a high rate that future generations will not be able to sustain our level of consumption.

Big problems require persistence to be solved. Developing persistence may indeed be part of the solution to the problems we are creating. Slow down. Be patient. Make commitments to projects that are bigger than yourself. Invest in the long term.

The job is not done. Even with the roof trusses going up this week, work will remain for months. It is turning out to be an exercise in just what we need to live responsibly in our time: persistence.

October 22, 2007 – Day Off



I have been back at work for only a week since we completed our vacation and we have had two generous vacations this year, both of which were filled with relaxation and wonderful adventures. But I am ready for a day off. It is not that I need to get away from my job, it is the long list of other tasks that need to be accomplished. I need to drain the water from the camper and get it unloaded, make arrangements to have the oil changed in the pickup and get it ready to haul firewood to Eagle Butte this weekend, clean and sort equipment in the garage, stow kayaks and canoes to make room for other projects, mow the lawn, finish cleaning out the garden plot, wash clothes and pack for a trip midweek to Cleveland. Oh, and I have an appointment with the dentist to get a cavity filled.

It seems that my days are often busy and filled with more tasks than I have time or energy to accomplish. I suppose that I might get frustrated with this, but it seems like a good thing to have meaningful work to do. I think that I often seem disorganized to others who are more systematic in their approach to routine chores such as cleaning and yard work. And disorganized is probably an appropriate description. But this state allows me to have fresh and new tasks every day and when I become stymied by one task, there always is a different task to which I can turn.

I don't think I have ever had much of a problem with boredom. There are a lot of books that I want to read and many tasks that I could work on in almost any location. I enjoy

staying in touch, but am always behind in my correspondence. It seems unlikely that I will ever run out of things to do.

And that is a blessing. Truly.

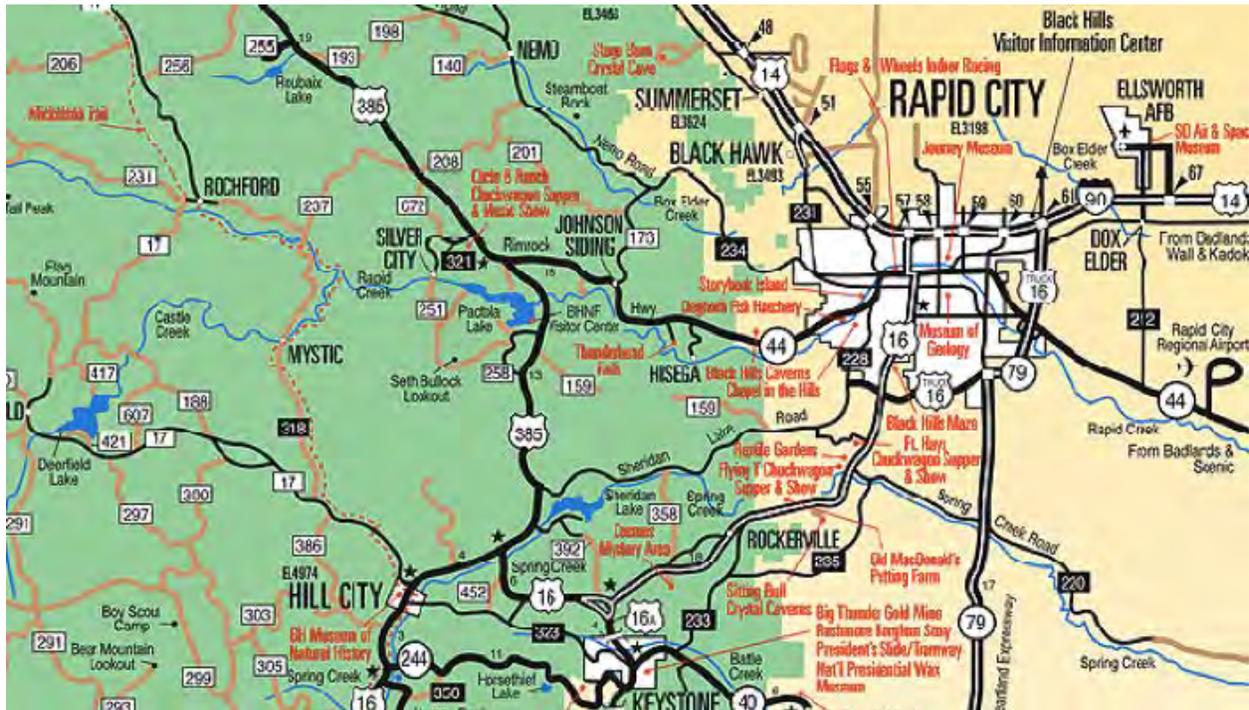
From an early age, the morning has been a time when I feel refreshed and ready to tackle new challenges and new jobs. I awake, look at the rising sun, and feel that I can accomplish a great deal this day. Of course, I often over estimate my abilities and find a long list of undone chores at the end of the day, but I am learning to live with undone tasks and to sleep knowing that there is much to be done tomorrow.

So today's blog entry is both late and short.

There are many other things to do.

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October 23, 2007 – Maps



I grew up in a home with lots of maps and charts. My parents would often spread a map across the kitchen table to plan a trip or think about different places. We were often given old aviation charts or road maps to play with. We would draw lines on the map and envision trips that we might take.

The refinement of aerial and satellite photography and the development of the global positioning satellite system have resulted in maps with incredible detail. Tools such as Google Earth allow users to have a bird's eye view of their neighborhood and its relationship to the rest of the world. I can spend hours and hours looking at places that are special to me, places that I have visited, and places that I want to visit someday.

We can use maps to plan future trips, but they do not predict the future. No map, no matter how detailed, can provide the experience of travel itself. The map won't show the changing colors of the leaves, the wildlife that can be spotted, or changing weather conditions. Part of the lure of travel is the possibility of the unknown, the opportunity to have a new experience and to see things beyond the horizon. Even though maps are wonderful tools, they are no substitute for the journey itself.

Ross Snyder once wrote, "There is no well-marked road which our history will take. It turns, writhes and darts with surprise unforeseen. Our life is a mountain with valleys between, and spiraling paths through the mixed up ravines." The idea of thinking of life as a journey is ancient and useful. But life is a journey to an unknown destination. There

are some things that we can learn from the experiences of others. And there are some indications of future events in the commitments we make and the relationships we build. But there is no way of predicting the actual events of the future, our reactions to those events, or how it will feel. Each new experience has its own set of circumstances that makes it unique.

I have a red notebook that I use to make lists of tasks to be accomplished and notes of things that I don't want to forget. The notebook is a sort of map of my life. This blog is another type of map. Neither come close to telling the whole story. Like the symbols of a map, they contain reminders of realities that are far bigger than themselves. They point toward the journey, but are not the journey itself.

So we continue to journey into the unknown, like the opening of the old Star Trek television series: "To boldly go where no [one] has gone before." Except that sometimes our journey is not bold, but rather timid. And sometimes it feels like we are repeating portions of the journey over and over again. Yet each human life, and each human death, is unique in all of time and space.

There are many guides for the journey, but no maps. For that we'll have to be explorers of our own territory, mappers of our own inner landscape, pioneers in our own generation.

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October 24, 2007 – The Mood in Cleveland



I head to Cleveland again today for meetings of the corporate board of Local Church Ministries, a covenanted ministry of the United Church of Christ. The next five days will be filled with meetings and decisions, budgets and planning. There will be differences of opinion and approach and the hard realities of limited time and funding. The mood in the national setting of the United Church of Christ has been strong lately despite the fact that the United Church of Christ, like other mainline denominations has faced shrinking budgets and membership.

The mood in Cleveland will be different than it might have been. Had Cleveland won one more game in its playoff series against Boston last week, the world series would be starting in Cleveland, across the street from the hotel where I will be staying. As it turned out, the season is over for the Cleveland Indians and the series will begin in Boston tonight. That will make my travel a bit more simple and my stay a bit more quiet.

I am sure that there is lingering disappointment in Cleveland. There had been strong support for the team and they had come so close to the world series. But the system in Baseball allows for only two teams in the series and only one will emerge as the winner.

Life in the church is different.

Sometimes, in the church, what appears to be a loss is really a victory. Even in the midst of death, God's gift of life has the final victory. We are, after all, a people of resurrection.

Faithfulness does not lend itself to statistical analysis, and it cannot be measured by counting. The United Church of Christ and its predecessor denominations are a church of prodigious firsts: the first to ordain an African-American, the first to ordain a woman, the first to ordain an openly gay minister. Each of these firsts was, in its time, controversial. Each distinguished our church from other expressions of Christianity. Each proved to be an example later followed by other denominations. When we celebrate and pat ourselves on the back, we are quick to make lists of our "firsts."

But faith is not a race. And being a church isn't about being first.

I wonder if we have come to a time in our life together when we ought to turn our attention from our "firsts" to our enduring commitments. Where are the areas of life that we will never abandon, no matter what? What principles and relationships do we hold for which we are willing to die? Which of our commitments will we be the last to abandon?

It will be interesting to assess the mood in Cleveland as one of the historic boards of this historic denomination meets. Local Church Ministries continues the work of the Board for Homeland Ministries. A new name and a new slice of history cannot change the legacy of faith that we have inherited. We manage the oldest press in the United States and a network of services to congregations and communities that stretches across this country. We are the recipients and stewards of historic endowments and legacies that were donated that the church might continue certain ministries in perpetuity. We are partners not only with our church in this generation, but also with those who have gone before.

As I prepare to depart and head into a long week of many meetings, I continue to wonder about the mood in Cleveland. Whether I discover joy or despair or anything in between, I pray that I will discover faith, that I will act with faith, and that my participation will honor all of the generations of our church.

October 25, 2007 – Flying



I grew up around airplanes. Both of our parents were pilots and a reasonable slice of our family's income came from Sky Flight, Inc. Our family-owned airport operation sold fuel and repairs to pilots and aircraft owners, provided charter services, flew forest service, national park, and fish & game contracts, sprayed agricultural chemicals, provided air ambulance services and just about anything else that could be done to earn a living with airplanes. I don't remember my first ride in an airplane, but I do remember when everyone in my class got an airplane ride.

Airplanes were working tools, safety was the primary concern, and it was assumed that it was the wave of the future and one day personal airplanes would be as common as cars. The predictions about inexpensive and common air travel haven't worked out yet, but Sky Flight, Inc., accumulated an enviable safety record, providing a wide range of aviation services for a quarter of a century without a fatal accident and very few accidents of any kind.

I have always loved flying, even when it amounts to being a passenger herded into a long tube without any hope of looking out the front. A window seat is an advantage to me, but I'm willing to ride in an airplane for all sorts of adventures. I fly a moderate amount for work-related events such as meetings in other cities. I earn enough frequent-flyer miles for an occasional free or reduced-price trip, but I don't belong to the elite business-class who board the plane whenever they want.

I'm a member of the crowd that stands in line at the ticket counter, at the security screening checkpoint and at the boarding gate. I wait my turn and cram my bag under the seat in front of me like everyone else. I know how to keep my elbows to myself when I have a middle seat and how to keep my feet out of the aisle when the beverage cart rolls by.

But I enjoy it for the most part.

Yesterday tested my mettle a bit. Pheasant hunting meant that there were a lot of people on my first flight traveling with guns. These are inspected by TSA, ammunition is removed, and they stowed in the baggage compartment so there is little or no danger. But the inspection process and the process of handing keys to inspectors and then back to owners means a huge line at the ticket counter. I had a suitcase to check, so couldn't do my boarding passes at home and had to wait in line, which stretched to the door by the time I arrived. Once I got through that line, there was a line at security. I've learned to remove my belt and watch, get my things organized for the screening and can pass through quickly. But there are plenty of folks who don't know or didn't read about the liquid requirements, or forgot to remove an item from a handbag, or who are wearing enough metal to never get through the magnetometer. The line was moving slowly and they were calling our flight by the time I got to the gate. The long line of people behind me meant a slight delay in our departure but we were soon on our way.

At my plane change in Minneapolis, the gates were almost as far apart as they could get, from one end of the G concourse to the other end of the A. The tram was not in service and there were two broken moving walkways on my journey. I didn't have enough time to get my usual cup of coffee in the Minneapolis terminal, but was on my next flight with a bit of time to spare.

In Cleveland, I forgot that all of the food vendors are inside of security, so I decided to go ahead and claim my bag, take the train downtown and check into the hotel before getting dinner. The trip took from 6 a.m. until 3 p.m. It was 7 hours after correcting for the time zone changes, but only half of the time was actually riding on an airplane, and none of the time was sitting in a lobby, eating or drinking. Probably an hour or more was standing in line.

On the other hand, I made it from Rapid City to Cleveland in less than a day with time for meetings in the evening. And we have grown to expect to be able to do that kind of traveling on a regular basis. And most of the way, the view from the airline window was fabulous. The clouds that are making Cleveland a gray city didn't begin until we were descending into Cleveland.

It is easy to stand in line and think of ways to improve the efficiency and convenience of air travel. A separate line for those traveling with weapons would clear up the wait at the

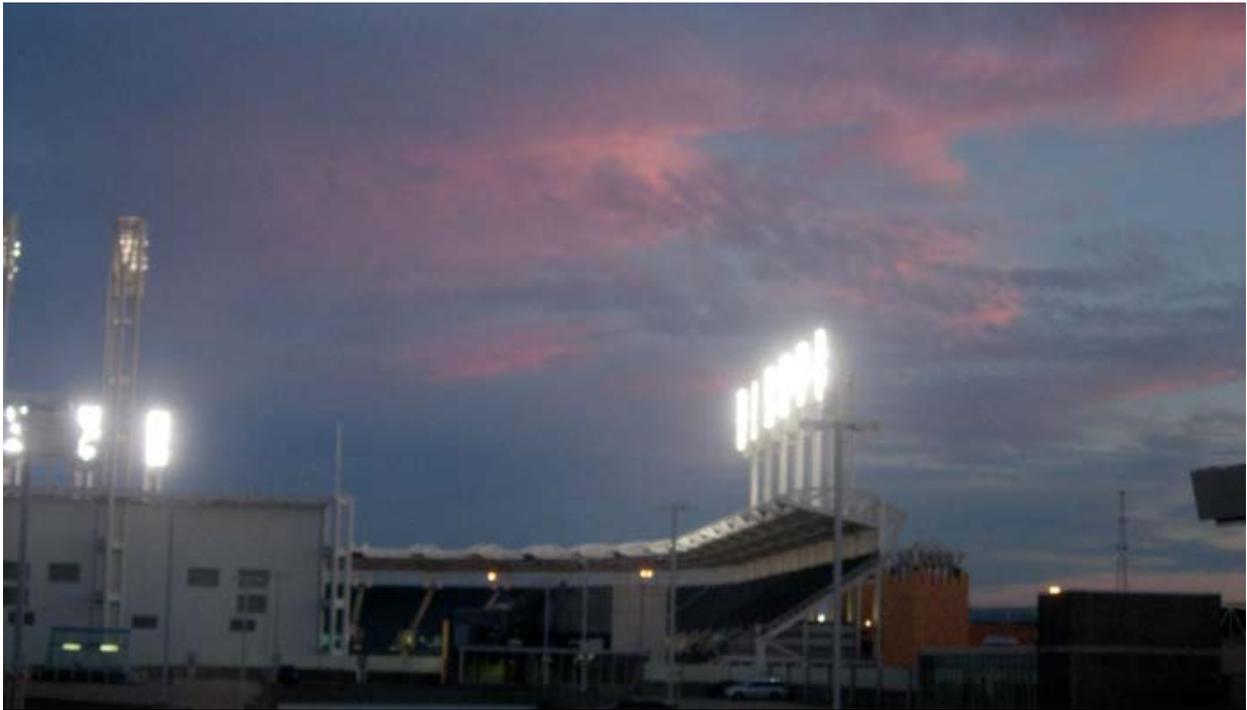
ticket counter. Security screening that focused on real threats instead of checking the size of toothpaste tubes could be much more efficient. An airline ticketing system that recognized the time to get from one gate to another and a gate assignment system that took into account the most frequent transfers would make for less panic and more ease at hub airports. The list could go on and on.

Having said all of that, we enjoy a freedom to travel that has never been equaled by any other group of people. I can have meetings in three different time zones in the same day. And our church can gather people from across the nation to work together on big projects. It is an amazing system, when you think about it.

With all of its inefficiencies, the system is probably way more efficient than if we each had our own private airplane.

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October 26, 2007 – On the Board



My father served for many years on the Board of Trustees of Rocky Mountain College. It was something that his father-in-law had done before him. Volunteer service on a non-profit board was a path of service that was an expression of faith. Over the years, I have served on my share of boards, but never the board of an institution as large as a college. I have served on church boards, of course, but also the boards of directors of arts agencies, Habitat for Humanity, and other community service agencies. I have served a full term on the board of directors of the South Dakota Conference.

But my responsibilities on the board of Local Church Ministries puts me in a different league. There are many different corporations within the national setting of our church. There is a church loan and financing corporation, a LLC that owns and manages the hotel, the corporate boards of Justice and Witness Ministries and Wider Church Ministries, the Pension Boards, the Insurance Advisory Board, and several other groups. Local Church Ministries is an Ohio Corporation charged with administering services to local congregations of the United Church of Christ. We encompass much of the work of the old United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, the Coordinating Center for Women, and the Office for Church Life and Leadership. Our annual budget of nearly 12 million dollars is smaller than the combined budgets of these agencies were a decade ago, but still represents a large portion of the national church. Just over one quarter of the income for our work comes from Our Church's Wider Mission and the Strengthen the Church Offering, contributions from local churches and their members. About half of the income comes from endowments and special funds that we manage

as endowments. And the balance of our income is from direct fund-raising and giving. The budget is complex and difficult for a newcomer to understand.

One of our biggest investments each year is people. The personnel committee of the board, on which I serve, has responsibility for ministers and staff who provide direct services to Associations, Conferences and Congregations in areas as diverse as stewardship, education, publications, authorization of ministry, search and call of ministers, women's ministry, men's ministry, worship, church school and adult education resources, and other areas. Under our care is United Church Resources, which is the warehouse and distribution system for all of the printed and published materials of the church as well as identity items, clothing, and other resources for ministry.

We are a large and diverse board, with representatives from the 39 conferences, groups that represent historically under-represented people within the church, and special groups such as seminary students, the council for youth and young adult ministries, and others. Such a large board can, at times, be unwieldy and complex, but for the most part people are able to focus on the ministry of the church and handle disagreements with dignity and respect. We work from a consensus model much of the time, but return to Robert's Rules of Order when conducting formal business.

There are some major challenges ahead for the church in its national setting. We remain unduly complex for the size of our job. The quest for boards that are diverse and inclusive of all of the groups within the church has resulted in large boards. The history of the church and the division of corporations to limit liability in areas of pensions, insurance, property management and the like has resulted in too many boards and too much of the church's money invested in meetings. Our ministry is limited by the unwieldiness of our structure.

A restructuring of the church's national setting in 2000 was a move toward simplification and a breakthrough towards a new way of life. This new structure is not fully tested, yet it is clear that additional streamlining is necessary. The risk of excessive streamlining, of course, is placing too much authority in too few hands. It is a balancing act and my role is that of one small player in a big system. It may be that my contribution to this will be a vote that essentially eliminates my own position, though those choices are, I suspect, still years away.

After dinner last night, I peered out of the hotel window and saw the lights on in the sports arena that would have housed the world series had one game in the playoff series between Boston and Cleveland gone differently. There was a soccer match going on and the crowd was probably light, judging from the empty seats I could see. The sun was setting and casting a pink hue on the clouds overhead. There are probably quite a few people in Cleveland who are thinking about what might have been.

Sometimes we get that nostalgic feeling going in our church life, too. We wonder what might have been had we made different choices or had different people been in charge. It is a pointless conjecture. The time has come for us to think about what might be and where God is calling us in this generation and time.

I wonder how often my father was called upon to choose differently than his father-in-law would have done as he served on the College Board. I wonder if he gave it much thought. I suspect that he was aware and yet courageous enough to make choices for his time and his generation. I pray that I will find similar courage as I serve on the board.

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October 27, 2007 – Silence and Speech



In the balance of silence and speaking, silence is often the better part. I speak in the sanctuary of our church every week. But I have learned that in order to do so, I need to spend significant time in that place being silent. I go there in the morning when there is no one else in the building and I sit and take in the beauty of the space.

I am learning to be quiet more often when I attend meetings. I used to feel that even if the discussion was not going my way, I owed it to others to speak my opinion. Later I learned to use my words when they would help the process and keep them to myself when they might impede the process. Most of the time, I am uncertain.

Yesterday, as is often true when I am in church meetings, it became clear to me that my opinion was not the same as that of the majority. I know that church life is not about winning. It is about faithfulness. I decided that speaking out would only prolong an already too long meeting, so I decided to be quiet.

It might not have been the right decision. There are times when silence is complicity.

There are times when being silent is exactly the wrong thing to do. Last summer Marian Wright Edelman urged us to stand up when we want to stay home, to speak out when we want to be quiet.

So today's picture is not of the place where I am. It is of our sanctuary at home. With this picture, I began my morning by sitting quietly and reflecting on the people who fill that place and the church that I love. And then I wrote the statement that I propose to make before we vote on a proposal to restructure the church. It remains to be seen whether I will be silent or speak, but if I do speak, I hope to say something like this:

"I stand before you as a newcomer to this board. And my words may be out of order, because I do not rise to urge you to vote in one way or the other on this motion. I rise to explain my vote. I have endeavored to listen diligently, carefully, and presently to the debate and discussion on this matter. I have not yet heard an argument that would compel me to vote one way or the other.

"I have heard voices of power and privilege. Even before the meeting, the chair of the South Dakota Conference Board of Directors and our Conference Minister gave me advice on this vote. Here at this meeting, conference ministers, the general minister and president and the leadership of this board have all sought to convince us to vote the same way. I am told that other collegium officers are in agreement. These are voices that I will not ignore. I have promised in sacred covenant to honor the leadership of these people.

"I have also seen the powerful witness of one man who has said that through prayerful discernment, he has been led by the Holy Spirit to step aside because it is not his vocation to lead our beloved church in this direction.

"I am deeply aware of the sense of brokenness in the church, a brokenness that is not reserved to the national setting of the church, but extends through our conferences which are in disarray, our Associations which are confused to the very core of our church life – local congregations who have become disconnected from the joy of mission and giving that once characterized our church's wider mission.

"I know that another organizational chart and a new structure will not be the source of our healing, though my faith in healing and resurrection remains unshaken.

"My own personal experience makes me lean towards voting for this proposal, for its result would almost certainly mean that as the number of people serving in the national setting of the church shrinks, I would surely be returned to my home setting, and time and time again my church has illustrated to me that my gifts are much more suited for the local church than its national setting.

"But I have decided to vote "no" because in so doing I will be standing with a passionate minority and I know that our church has often been well served by its minorities. In so doing I will stand with other teachers and advocates for children in our church's life who understand that it takes more than quotas and numbers for their voices to be truly heard

and taken seriously.. And I know that by choosing to stand with those who will lose, if not today than one day soon, I will still belong to this church of extravagant welcome.

“God has not called me to be among the winners. Nor has God called me to be politically astute. God has called me to be faithful. I pray that you will continue to help me discern God’s call, for God is still speaking, and I am still listening.”

I will be listening carefully to God to guide my silence and my speaking today.

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October 28, 2007 – Serving God in a Particular Place



Like most, if not all, Christians, I continue to examine my vocation and ask, “Is this where God is calling me to be and work at this time?” It is a question that has not gotten any easier with age and experience - at least not yet. I have learned that knowing what I want is not the same thing as discerning what God wants for my life. Even though God speaks to me through that inner voice that sometimes includes my deepest desires, God also speaks through the witness and words of other people. Discerning God’s call always involves careful consultation with others and a process that is open and honest.

A few years ago, I thought that I was being called to become a conference minister. There were voices other than my own who said that I might be good at that job. I had a deep passion for the work that might be done and a vision for the unfolding future of a specific conference. I carefully went through the process of preparing a profile and applying for the position. Along the way there were genuine voices that spoke simple and honest sentiments like, “I hope you don’t move,” or “I’m glad to be your reference, but I don’t want to lose you as our pastor.” I interpreted these as commentary on the job I was doing, but didn’t understand them as God’s voice about my vocation at the time.

When, through the grace of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the search committee, after having considered my profile and interviewing me, called a different person to the position, I was disappointed. It was a blow to my ego. I am not used to hearing the word “no” when it comes to my vocation. I couldn’t, at first, recognize the voice of God speaking through the decision of the committee.

Today I know that I was not called to serve as a conference minister because it is not the right place for me to serve God. I am grateful that even though the answer was not what I wanted, it was still the right answer. I love the church - all of the church. That includes the work of the church in its conference and national settings. And I have been called to serve in those settings, though not in the role of conference minister. I can contribute more and serve more faithfully as the pastor and teacher of a congregation who occasionally leaves that congregation for brief periods of time to serve on a board or committee and then returns to my local setting.

The local church, of course, is not static. The congregation I serve today is far different from the one I was called to serve 12 years ago. And I am a different minister than the one they called. Some days I believe that I have even improved. I have gained some insights and wisdom. And neither I nor the congregation are staying the same. So we will journey together for the brief moment of time that is ours.

This is not to say that we will avoid commitment.

I am not investing my time in searching for a new call. I am investing it in serving a particular congregation in a particular place. But I know that the new church that is emerging will call new leadership in its own time. I am inspired and challenged by the young pastors I meet. I know that my years of active ministry are not unlimited. And I am confident that God will continue to provide leaders for all of the church in each generation.

I do know that the future of God's church is not limited to my vision or to what I want. I am grateful for the other faithful Christians who share the journey with me and are honest in their words and opinions. It is clear that we all belong to a movement of disciples throughout the generations that is much bigger than ourselves and much longer than our time on this earth. For that I am grateful.

Some days I wish God would give me a clear sign that is impossible to ignore. Occasionally God does, like the day I received the call from the search committee informing me that I was not their candidate. Most times the signs are more subtle and more difficult to read. I will be wise to listen carefully to what others are saying as together we discern God's call for the church.

I rise this morning deeply grateful that this is the last day of meetings in Cleveland for now. I will board the plane this evening and go home. I will refocus my attention to the mission and ministry of a particular congregation and to serving God in that place. The politics and passion of the church's national setting is not my home. I continue to be called to come here for occasional service, but I know where I belong and where my home is.

I have slept well in the comfortable beds of the UCC hotel in Cleveland, but I won't miss the hotel when I get home this evening.

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October 29, 2007 – Home to the Hills



Travel went amazingly smoothly yesterday. My flights were on time and I was able to make the transfer in Minneapolis without having to run through the airport. I am told that my suitcase will arrive sometime today, perhaps by 4 or 5 in the afternoon. Not bad. And I didn't have to carry my suitcase to the car last night - they'll deliver it to my door.

I witnessed two rather dramatic arguments during my travel. The first was as the occupants of our the plane we were waiting for were unloaded in Cleveland. A woman who had checked a bag on the airplane was being directed to baggage claim to get her bag. She was furious and raising her voice so that we all knew it. The bag was her carry on and she wanted to have it at the gate and didn't want to have to go somewhere else to retrieve it. The airplane was a DC-9, which has spacious overhead bins and standard seating, so I suspect that the bag had to be checked because it was too big to fit into the space. At any rate, the person that she was yelling at was powerless to change the situation. The gate agent at Cleveland had never seen the bag, never touched it, had made no decisions about how it was to be handled, and was powerless to affect the flow of baggage toward the normal claim carousels.

The second argument was less dramatic, but concerned luggage that had missed the connection in Minneapolis like mine. Again, the agent who was taking the information and explaining the process was powerless to provide satisfaction to the weary traveler. "I can't guarantee that the bag will be on the first flight in the morning. It is a small plane

and sometimes bags don't arrive until the second flight." The agent was trying to avoid making a promise that might not be kept by the airlines, and give some information based on prior experience. Since it wasn't the news the customer wanted to hear, the customer was trying to get the agent to change the story. It would have been easy for the agent to just say what the customer wanted to hear and go home to bed, knowing that someone else would be dealing with the customer in the morning. But the agent was trying to give honest information and help the customer know what to expect.

Anger often results in energy being expended in non productive ways.

We have learned to expect anger and frustration as a part of air travel. Often it is not our own, but witnessing the anger and frustration of another. On the other hand, it is amazing that so many people are able to travel so many miles in such a short time. With all of its frustrations, it is still possible to have a day of meetings in Cleveland and go to bed that evening in Rapid City.

The psychological distance may be farther than the physical distance, which may have something to do with the anger we sometimes witness. The work of the church in its national setting is a different scale and pace than the work we do in our local churches. But the connections need to be made. Truly what is done at one place in the church has an impact on what happens at other places in the church. We are connected and people are the conduit for those connections. It is not just that I do different work when I am in Cleveland, I also need to carry the story and faith of the people in the hills to Cleveland with me and bring the story and faith of the ministry of the church in its national setting back home to the people and church where I belong. The size of the gulf between the two worlds is dependent in part on my attitude and my faithfulness in making the connections and telling the stories.

I am glad that today is not a day of airports and travels. Mundane errands, a visit to the hospital, and reconnecting with folks in the hills will result in a slowing of the pace and a re-focusing of energies. Tomorrow I'll tackle the undone work at the office and set about the process of making more connections.

And who knows? About half of the undelivered luggage is paperwork and projects. The other half is almost all dirty laundry. I may get a day's break from both of those as well.

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October 30, 2007 – Be Prepared



Photo from FEMA preparedness brochure.

The newspaper periodically does an article encouraging people to have emergency supplies on hand in their homes at all times. There was an article in today's paper, on the front page of the family section, advising readers to make sure they have a supply of water, food, clothes, medicines, flashlight, can opener, radio, personal items, first-aid kit and essential records. The Internet is full of checklists and ready-made kits from the Red Cross, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Department of Homeland Security and many other sources. All encourage people to imagine a worst-case scenario and have all of the supplies they might need on hand at all times.

It is good to be prepared and the supplies listed in the articles are good to have on hand. But disasters are by nature unpredictable and there are many different kinds of disasters. A camping trailer loaded and ready to go is a good technique if your home is threatened by fire, but not the right tool for dealing with a disruption in the fuel supply. Emergency food is essential if you are trapped in your car or home in a blizzard, but in most natural disasters, food and clean water show up quickly. The Red Cross and Salvation Army are both set up to feed a lot of people efficiently. The best place to store your emergency kit is different, depending on the threat. Supplies stored in the basement might be flooded or too difficult to reach in a structure fire, but great resources for a blizzard. The lists are helpful, but they often fail to mention some very important survival tools. Among them are:

Community. The assistance of family and friends in the event of a crisis is essential and often cited by victims as the most important factor. It is easy to be overwhelmed by major problems and difficulties. The “go it alone” strategy is often a poor choice in an emergency. If we would truly be prepared for the unexpected, we must nurture relationships with others.

Imagination and memory. Disaster survivors often report of the importance of using their mind to distract from pain and suffering. Being able to remember the good times or imagine a place that is better than the present often aid in enduring pain and discovering solutions that are not immediately obvious. In situations of extreme trial, survivors are often ones who are willing to try things that are not on the lists and that have not been attempted before.

Faith, hope and love. Belief is essential in difficult situations. What is immediately evident is often not the whole story. Faith is essential when one comes face to face with death. Spiritual maturity can provide calmness in the midst of crisis, a connection with power that is beyond the individual and a conviction that the present reality is not the end of the story. Hope of a better tomorrow has enabled people to endure trials and difficulties that can break the spirit. And loving and being loved can provide the qualities of self sacrifice and service that have a much larger impact than any personal survival kit. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “the greatest of these is love.”

When contemplating an emergency, it may well be the things we carry inside ourselves that are more important than the supplies we pack in our emergency kit.

October 31, 2007 – Halloween



Halloween is an interesting holiday. On the eve of All-Saints Day, when we remember and celebrate the many contributions of those who are no longer living, we dress up in costumes, share candy and treats with neighbors and strangers, and decorate our homes with pumpkins and other symbols of harvest and fall. The holiday is considered a children's holiday. Much of the celebration centers on activities and treats for children.

But Halloween is also a day to face our fears. Some of the trappings of the holiday center on superstitions and small fears that can be easily overcome. Part of the holiday aims at surprise and the short-lived feeling of being startled. Halloween is a holiday that isn't afraid to at least hint about the reality of death. From skeletons to ghosts, from fake tombstones in the lawn to coffins and other items associated with death, there is a sense that one of the scary things about Halloween is death.

Scary movies focus attention on what might happen if people who have died came back to life, but the real fear that we often cannot admit is that we fear our own death and are struggling with some sense of what it might mean.

We live in a society that is reluctant to speak of death. Even with the graphic photographs that are displayed on television and in the movies, there is a sense of unreality about death. It is often shown only partially, without pain or grief. It is as if we have a limited capacity to deal with this particular reality.

In reality, death is quite unlike the image in the media, and very unlike the scary figures of Halloween. In reality death is often very peaceful, a slow transition from this life, a gentle cessation of breathing. The mind clouds as the body shuts down, communication with others is reduced and family and friends who are gathered round have a sense that taking leave is a gradual process.

In real life, people who have died do not suddenly come to life again. Resurrection does not produce zombies, living dead, or skeletons who can move on their own. There is a real sense of loss and deep grief. The world is changed for those who remain living. While the process of grief is a healing process, one never gets over the death of someone who is beloved.

Halloween is a controlled holiday. We can accept small thoughts about the reality of death, but we don't go too far. We enjoy the brief adrenalin rush of a small scare but aren't yet ready to confront our deepest fears. We dress up in costumes and pretend, but don't acknowledge the deep changes that we will one day face. Playing, however, can be a way of rehearsing for reality. Perhaps Halloween gives us the opportunity to think, if only for a few moments, about the bigger realities of life and death.

So we will enjoy the children tonight and eat a treat or two. But perhaps somewhere in our celebration is an opportunity to confront our fears and grow in faith.

Happy Halloween! And may your day be meaningful.

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November 1, 2007 - Holiday



We were at home for Halloween last night for the first time in several years. Our home doesn't attract the numbers of trick or treaters as locations in town, but we had between 25 and 30 children stop by for a treat. It was fun to see the costumes and watch the faces of the children as we opened the door. One little preschooler looked up at me after I had put a treat into her bag and said, "Thank you, Santa."

I do have a grey beard, I am overweight and even under the porch light the lighting was not good. I suppose that I did look like Santa to the child. And given the decorations in the stores, one might believe that it was nearly Christmas. One popular Halloween costume website features a "Jesus" costume for those who want a religious theme for their celebrations.

Holiday-focused marketing has become an important part of retail sales and the stores are so dependent upon Christmas sales that they are tempted to begin their marketing earlier and earlier each year. I am no expert in marketing, but it does seem to me that we could reach a point where extending the season has little affect on total holiday sales.

At least I hope so.

One of my colleagues commented during a staff meeting last week, “Christians adopted a pagan holiday for our Christmas celebrations. It appears the pagans have taken it back.”

The qualities and sentiments that mark the religious observance of Christmas are rarely a part of contemporary marketing. Trees, lights and outdoor display items often reflect a secular theme. Animals are popular, as well as images of Santa Claus, lights designed to look like icicles hanging from the eaves and even patriotic items such as American flags are available. For those who want a bit of a religious theme, there are brightly lighted nativity figures that can be displayed along with all of the other items.

I am not inclined to be a “grinch” about Christmas. But I do enjoy celebrating Thanksgiving as a unique and independent holiday and I think that the preparations of Advent make the celebration even more meaningful when we wait until Christmas. Anticipation is part of the wonder of the season. For Mary and Joseph, the preparation took months. We’ve compacted it into a four-week season, but it is still very meaningful.

Each year we discuss the use of Christmas carols in worship. We have lovely Advent carols and there are 12 days of Christmas in which to sing Christmas carols, but our congregation would not be happy if we had to wait until Christmas before singing any carols. So we include Christmas carols as part of our preparation for Christmas. And, after a conversation with the fire marshall a few years ago, the trees in our building are artificial.

But there remains a special quality to the celebration of Christmas at church. Many of the trappings of the commercial world have fallen away and we focus on hope, peace, joy and love as we journey through the weeks of Advent. Our Christmas Eve celebration is one of the best-attended services of the year, filled with tradition and familiar music.

We will wait for even the beginning of Advent.

It doesn’t start with the packing of the Halloween decorations.

And waiting is much of the joy of the season.

November 2, 2007 – Gratitude



It seems to me that my life has been filled with a great many privileges, most of them completely unearned. I was born into a loving and caring family and was given the benefit of stories and books and travel and adventure. I grew up with sisters and brothers in a place where we always had enough food, decent clothing and a stable home with room for all. I was surrounded by grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins and knew that there was always a network of family who would lend support to me. I was given opportunities to work and contribute to the family early in life and to know the joy of rest when one is really tired. I grew up in a place of incredible beauty. Hiking, camping, fishing and hunting were a part of our family life and I was taught to appreciate nature and to tread lightly. I have benefitted from a good deal of high quality education and learning and have been enabled to earn degrees and credentials. I have been offered meaningful work and fair compensation.

I have never been the victim of war or discrimination or poverty or divorce or abuse or neglect. I have never lacked for clean water to drink or clean air to breathe. My life has been relatively free of pain and the bits of pain that I have endured have been both bearable and instructive.

It would seem that gratitude would come naturally to me, and I think that it does. But I am aware that there are times when I take my privilege for granted, or even worse, convince myself that it is a product of my own doing. I work hard and I earned the right

to live where I do. The statement would be true if it were not for those who work hard and do not have simple, decent housing.

Too often our assessment of our lives has roots in comparisons. Whenever this happens we are dangerously close to thinking, "Thank God, I'm not . . ." Prayers of gratitude that we don't live in some other place, or were born to some other parents, or have found some other friends, or have some other circumstances ring hollow.

The truth is that whatever we have - all of it - is a gift of God. We haven't earned the right to look at the beauty of fall colors or feel the chill of autumn winds. We haven't earned the right to look out at the deer in the yard or smell the pine trees. We haven't earned the love and affection of our families. All of it, our life, our breath, our heartbeat - all of it is a gift from God.

Gratitude is inevitable when we are truly honest with ourselves.

Life is good and God is good.

This does not mean that there are no injustices in this world - humans have caused incredible suffering and pain to each other. This does not mean that there are no problems that we are called to address. We can have a major role in bringing relief and peace and hope to others. But all of our actions stem from a simple attitude of gratitude.

A day of Thanksgiving is simply insufficient in the face of the incredible goodness of God and the abundance of blessings we have experienced. So, I propose that we set aside a season for gratitude and begin each day with a simple prayer of thanks.

God is good all the time. All the time God is good.

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November 3, 2007 – What Church is That?



It is interesting to observe the reactions of people when they find out what I do for a living. There is often a bit of curiosity and follow-up questions about which church I serve. In a community with over 120 churches and para-church organizations, it is difficult, if not impossible, to keep track of all of them. There are a lot of people in our community who introduce themselves as pastors and ministers. And there is a great deal of variation in what those titles mean. In congregations, like ours, with a tradition of educated clergy, introducing oneself as a minister says something about the level of education one has completed. There are other congregations where education is not part of the definition of minister. Most ministers have to maintain their professional status with some kind of committee on the ministry, but not all. In some traditions, a call to the ministry is an internal feeling that does not need to be verified or authenticated or discerned by anyone except the person declaring the call.

One of the most common questions I get, when people are trying to figure out who I am, is “where is your church located?” Since our address is not one of the major streets in our town, I often have to give a more general description of the location. But a common identifier in our community is, “It’s the church with the big white cross.” Many people who do not know the address, recognize the cross. It is a symbol that identifies us in our community.

A few people will ask questions about the history of our congregation or the United Church of Christ, but most prefer to talk about how beautiful our building is or a concert that they once attended in our sanctuary. It always makes me a bit nervous, because there are a lot of false assumptions about ministers and the church. People who are not active in a congregation often think of ministers as a single category, and usually are thinking about television evangelists when they think of what a minister does. At a recent gathering of counselors and social workers, one participant assumed that all ministers lacked any professional training or credentials in counseling and did not feel bound by confidentiality rules or privacy laws. It took a little while to explain my background and to distinguish myself from others with different professional experiences and standards. I'm sure that this happens to other groups of people, such as social workers or doctors, but in many of those professions, one can make an assumption about the level of education by the profession.

I often wonder what that white cross means to those who are not a part of our congregation. Does it imply a particular set of positions on controversial political issues? Or would they understand that our congregation has a wide diversity of opinions and that we are not bound together by agreement on political issues? Does the cross imply a consistent interpretation of scripture and shared dogma? Or can outsiders understand that we struggle to interpret scripture faithfully in our time and are open to new ideas and insights? Does the cross imply some moral code and a particular attitude toward those who have broken the code? Or does it speak of the extravagant welcoming of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Does that cross indicate a propensity to proselytization and pressure to convert to our way of thinking? Or does it reflect our broadly ecumenical spirit and openness to interfaith dialogue?

Because evangelism has often been blurred with proselytizing in our time, I am careful not to be pushy with my faith or my church membership. On the other hand, I do think that our congregation has much good news to offer and I am always happy to talk about how we might meet the needs of others and how association with our congregation might help someone continue to grow in their faith and discipleship. I often wait for the other to initiate conversation about our church. I try to be honest and faithful in my answers to their questions.

But sometimes I feel like asking a few questions about their faith as well. Do they think that churches are institutions of the past and are not relevant to the life of educated and intelligent people today? Do they think that there is some gap between science and religion and that people have to choose one side or another? Do they think that membership in a church involves the rejection of rational thought or scientific method? Do they think that we are only interested in money? Do they think that our structure is hierarchical and that I am somehow in charge of all of the members of the church? I am often filled with questions about what strangers think about religion or the church or my vocation.

It is good to have a symbol. I like using the cross to identify the location of our congregation on the geographical map of our congregation. Now, if we could have a symbol to show our place on the theological spectrum . . .

Perhaps the cross is the best symbol we could have chosen. It identifies us with Jesus Christ for most people. And we are unapologetically Christian. The lives we live in our community will tell a better story than any symbol we could choose. In the meantime, “Yes, it’s the church with the big white cross under dinosaur hill. The one where all the concerts are held.”

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November 4, 2007 – A Small Reminder



I hit my thumb with my hammer yesterday. It is a small injury and could have been much worse. I had been using my heavy framing hammer and 16-penny nails all day and was getting tired in the afternoon. It has happened before. And it will happen again, I'm sure. It is part of building a house by hand. I noticed that two other members of our crew were wearing gloves to protect their hands, one from a blister another from a cut. We put a bit of ourselves into each house we build.

In my case, it isn't much. It hurt a little bit at the time and I took a little tylenol last night, but it won't interfere with my using the computer or doing any of the other parts of my regular job. In a way it is a bit of an advantage. It gives me an opening to talk about Habitat for Humanity when someone notices it, though that isn't likely to happen very much as a small bruise under the thumbnail doesn't show very much.

We were framing interior walls yesterday. The house is not too large, but there are plenty of closets, a utility area, and other areas in the house that require careful framing. We had lots of short walls to build. Mostly that involves nailing together 2x4s and it is quicker to do that by hand than to drag around the air hose and power nailer. We had a small crew, which was perfect for the size of the job and we didn't run into each other too much. The weather was beautiful and we had a good day working together. It is a great way to forge friendships.

When I am actually working on a house with others, it is not difficult to remember why we do this work. We often are able to work alongside the homeowners as they put in their sweat equity hours on the house. And we hear the stories of people who have gotten stuck in a cycle of substandard housing and remember the vision of a simple and effective way to change that cycle through volunteer work and interest-free loans. Habitat for Humanity really does work. The more houses we build, the more we are able to build. Family by family we are forging partnerships that expand beyond our usual community of contacts and friends.

Habitat for Humanity isn't my main job. Most days, I'm wearing a dress shirt and tie and sitting in an office or visiting in people's homes. It is a day-off activity - something that I do outside of my regular job.

So a tender thumb is just right. Whenever I become complacent . . . whenever I am tempted to complain about the stresses and problems of everyday life . . . whenever I am frustrated with the costs and work of home ownership . . . whenever I forget how connected I am to others in my community whose needs are different from my own . . . I can just push my left thumb into my forefinger and I'll receive a sharp pain shooting up my thumb to remind me how lucky I really am and how good I have it.

The thumb will heal. The pain will go away. Which is another reason to keep building.

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November 5, 2007 – Cane Seats



The earliest canoes probably didn't have any type of seats at all. Canoeists knelt in the craft to keep the center of gravity low and the craft stable. Cargo could be arranged to provide a place to seat when necessary. Thwarts also provided a place to rest from kneeling on long trips. The rise of canoes as recreational craft in the 19th century resulted in a wide number of refinements, including seats. Some canoe seats are as simple as a couple of thwarts with canvas slung between them. Others are more elaborate. Some even feature back rests.

Cane seats had the advantages of light weight, and pleasant appearance. And water drained quickly and easily from the seat keeping the paddler dry. Cane seats were also popular in furniture at the time and a skilled craftsman could weave natural cane into a seat in a little over an hour.

I got my introduction to caning from my wife's father and grandfather, both of whom re-caned and re-finished furniture for their own families and for friends. The weaving patterns are based on tradition and I have only learned one pattern for caning. They also taught me to install pre-woven cane in a chair where a channel is cut with a router and the cane is wedged in with a single wider piece to seal it. I prefer hand-caning, where a row of holes are drilled through the seat frame and the cane is woven one strand at a time. I'm not particularly quick - it takes a couple of hours for me to complete a single cane seat.

When I am restoring a canoe, I usually use natural cane, which can be purchased in bundles, soaked in water and woven into seats. For my own canoes, I prefer plastic imitation caning, which lasts much longer and is more water resistant. Natural cane needs to be shellacked, and plastic cane needs no maintenance, other than an occasional cleaning with a damp rag.

There aren't many people left who know how to cane a seat. There are a few books with clear instructions that will preserve the craft, and a few old-timers who learned from other craftspeople who can pass on their skills and knowledge. Virtually all contemporary furniture that employs caning uses the pre-woven sheets that are made on a machine and then cut to fit any shape or design desired.

There are many other traditional crafts that are fading in the light of modern technology. And there are a host of new hobbies and skills that our grandparents couldn't have imagined. We live in a world where much is changing and newness is constantly emerging. We couldn't stop this progress if we wanted to. Change is an inevitable part of life.

But in the midst of all of this change, it is good to have at least one skill that has been passed down from previous generations. Perhaps one of the responsibilities of having been taught by my elders is the obligation to teach someone younger than myself how to cane seats. Neither of our children have yet expressed an interest in learning the skill, but there will be time should they ever want to learn. It is hard to tell where I might find someone who is interested in learning the skill, but when I do, I hope I am gracious enough to be a patient teacher.

November 6, 2007 – Aerialists



Yesterday, we had the assistance of a professional framing crew as we placed the roof trusses on the Habitat home we are building. It was amazing to watch these men work up on top of the walls. Before the crane started to lift the trusses, they ran a line to check the walls and make sure everything would line up. I was amazed to see them walking on top of the 2x6 and 2x4 walls. A 2x6 wall is only 5 1/2 inches wide. Not only could they balance on the walls, they could pause, bend over and drive a nail without losing their balance. Then, when the trusses came, they climbed on them, standing on boards that are only 1 1/2 inches wide, measuring accurately and nailing boards into just the right place. Most of the time, they were using a heavy air hammer as well as the tools they carried in their tool belts. In a single day's work, they had completely installed the roof system for the duplex. I spent most of the day looking up and occasionally fetching a tool or tossing up a piece of wood to the workers.

I have no fear of heights and I used to climb ladders and towers with ease. I don't mind shingling or other work on a reasonably-pitched roof. But I have to admit that I am not as nimble nor as well-balanced as the framing crew that helped us yesterday. Balance is probably a virtue of younger people. Aging and carrying a few extra pounds probably are no help. And the memory of a good fall can shake one's confidence for a long time. It is possible that the members of the crew, who were all younger than I, will one day find themselves on the floor looking up as someone else does the high work. But even if that is true, it takes nothing away from their skill and artistry as they go about their everyday work.

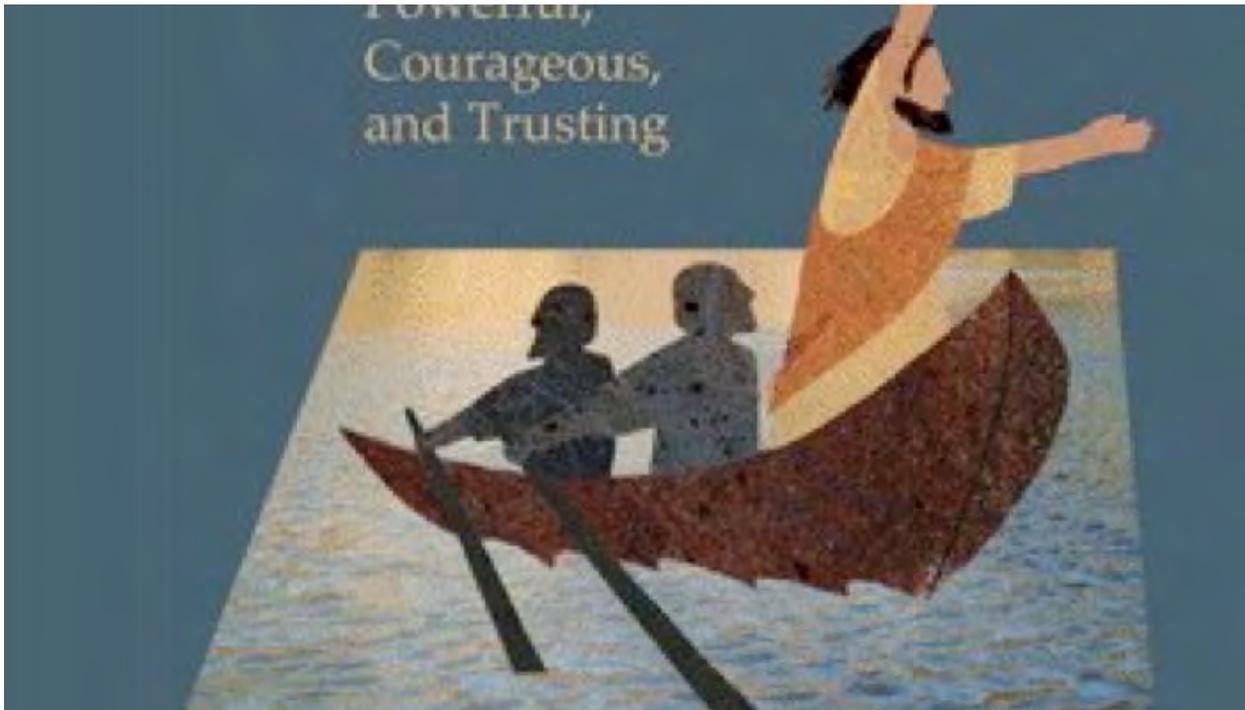
Their contribution to Habitat for Humanity is significant. The work they accomplished in a day would have taken our crew of volunteers much longer to finish. Their work meant that the crane operator was kept busy and the work with the crane was accomplished in just over two hours. While the crane was donated, keeping the time down enables the crane company to continue similar donations for other Habitat projects.

One of the joys of working with Habitat for Humanity is the opportunity to witness the incredible generosity of the community. Financial generosity is significant, but the generosity of time and talent and spirit far exceeds what is given in dollars. It is the generosity of spirit that makes working with Habitat for Humanity so meaningful. People who possess skills that I do not are willing to pitch in and help. They donate their time because they believe in the project and because they believe in the power of communities. When people are enabled to own decent housing they are able to contribute to the community in ways that were not before possible. The net effect is far more than a better home for a family - it is a better community for us all.

I had planned to take coffee to the workers at 8 in the morning. I ended up staying the entire day, enjoying their company and admiring their work. For all of the people who will one day sleep under that roof, and for all of the neighbors, and for all of our community - THANK YOU to the skilled volunteers.

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November 7, 2007 – Teaching



From the cover of the Resource Book of the Kerygma Course: "The Gospel of Mark" by Carol J. Miller.

In our tradition, a minister is ordained both as a pastor and as a teacher. The teaching role has not always received equal by ministers or by congregations. Leading worship and preaching seems to be the most important role for many ministers. Teaching, however, is at the core of the Christian tradition. Jesus was called rabbi which means teacher. The concept of teaching is far more ancient than school. In contemporary times, we often relegate teaching to schools and see school teachers as the only teachers in our community. But the role of teacher is much more broad than just those who instruct in formal school settings.

One of the images of Jesus that one gets from reading the gospels is of a traveling teacher, who has many stories to tell, usually filled with deep meanings, who also heals people and reaches out to those estranged. The gospel writers collected the stories of Jesus with an appreciation of their value not only to those who first heard them, but also to future generations of believers. Jesus' teaching seems to be quite widely accepted, although there were often critics, including the residents of his home town and some of the leaders of the temple. Some recognized Jesus' message as a new kind of teaching and they acknowledged the authority with which he taught.

The teaching is done within the synagogues of local communities, but it is also done outside of the institutional setting. The gospel writers report many parables and other teaching stories that were delivered outside or along the road or in the homes of hosts

that Jesus met along his journeys. Jesus' teaching did not require an institution or a particular building. People did not need to go to Jesus. Jesus came to the people, bringing his particular style and content of teaching to the places where they lived their everyday lives.

Meaning no criticism or disrespect to the many faithful and dedicated teachers who work primarily in schools and other institutions of learning, it is important to note that there are many lessons in life which are best learned outside of the school. The book of exodus clearly gives the responsibility for remembering the history of our people to parents and grandparents. Teaching of our history is to be done in the home and every parent and grandparent bears responsibility for teaching. The critical elements of the gospel tradition: faith, hope and love, are perhaps more often caught than taught. It takes a special dose of inspiration and many different real-life experiences to learn the true meanings of these concepts.

The principles of service and mission are often best conveyed by engaging in the process. We learn by doing in our quest to be of genuine service to others. Often in the process of developing mission, we make mistakes and have to learn and re-learn lessons. Among the most difficult lessons of mission is found in our tendency to confuse our own needs and wants with those of the people we serve. Because it feels good to give, we often give the wrong items in the wrong way. Because we enjoy witnessing change, we are tempted to initiate changes on our terms without fully considering the wants and needs of others. These lessons are best learned in context, by working side by side with partners in mission and developing relationships that allow us to release control and give more freely.

There are many opportunities for a minister to teach and engage in the process of learning beyond the walls of the institutions we have made.

But I still enjoy teaching classes. I love the Bible and enjoy opportunities to engage thinking people in exploring the nuances of its meaning. Together we seek additional familiarity with the ancient texts and discover new meanings for our lives today. The discipline of following a curriculum and following an ordered course of study can be helpful as we encounter and engage the sometimes complex theologies of the bible.

So, in the midst of the other activities of my life, I enjoy teaching classes. And I am careful, when I introduce myself, to say that I am a pastor and teacher. Both titles are meaningful to me and both describe the ministry to which I have been called.

November 8, 2007 – Volunteering



Our youth group paid a visit to Pennington County Search and Rescue last night. The youth enjoyed seeing the rescue equipment, touring the communications trailer and taking a ride in a snow cat. They tried on the emergency helmets and protective clothing that is worn by the members of the search and rescue team when they are at the scene of an accident. They were impressed with the all-terrain vehicles, climbing and rappelling ropes and harnesses, and other specialized equipment that the team uses.

But more importantly, we hope they caught a bit of the spirit of an all-volunteer community service organization. We used the parable of the Good Samaritan for our devotions and discussed Jesus' story of the one who renders aid to someone in need in response to the question, "who is my neighbor."

It is easy to find examples of individualism and selfishness in our society. Terms like the "me generation" have their roots in a basic reality. And one could become cynical and invest a lot of energy bemoaning the loss of community and the erosion of basic values that we hold to be important. But in terms of creating the kind of experiences that help young people make healthy choices with their lives, cynicism and complaining don't have much impact. Far more important is providing opportunities for young people to experience and know about positive contributions of community leaders.

It is not difficult to find examples of volunteerism, generosity of financial resources, time and talent, and positive community values. Building a community is, in part, a process of

adding strength to strength rather than one of offering criticism and complaint. This does not mean that one should be silent in the face of injustice or complacency. Sometimes a prophet's strong voice is needed in order to call people to change directions and make different choices. But in the larger picture our children and youth learn far more from positive examples than from our words of complaint.

I know this from a very personal experience. A few years ago, after being burned, I needed to take an 80-mile ambulance ride to obtain care in a regional medical center. The trip wasn't much fun, but it was made easier by the attentive care of a volunteer EMT who monitored my blood pressure and IV and provided a calm and reassuring presence as I rode along. I had first met that EMT years earlier, when he was just a boy at church camp. Somehow his experiences in church and camp enabled him to become an adult who was willing to invest his time and energy in volunteer service.

More often the payoff isn't that direct. The person in need of rescue is a stranger and someone with whom we will not have contact after the crisis is finished. But the value of the gift is not dependent on who is being served. Like the story of the good Samaritan, being a neighbor is defined more by our choices and service to others than by where we live.

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November 9, 2007 – Losing



Dave Eggen/Inertia - from the Rapid City Journal

Yesterday, the Cavaliers from St. Thomas More High School competed for the state 11A football championship. It was their fourth appearance in the state championship game in the past four years. And it ended with their fourth loss. The game wasn't even close. The newspapers reported the 51-13 game as a blowout. The last game of his high school career ended with the lowest passing totals for quarterback Nathan Jacobson. Passing for the game was a minus 8 yards with only one completion and two interceptions.

High school athletics are emotion-charged and part of the appeal of the games for spectators is that the games are unpredictable. The coaches will analyze the game over and over for the next week or so and then it will be forgotten - at least until next season.

For the high school students who played in the game, however, the impact is much different. They had imagined themselves winning the game. Even though several of the players had been members of previous years' teams who had lost in the championship game, things seemed different to them this year. This was supposed to be their year of victory and there is a sense of having lost something more than a football game - of having lost a sense of their identity and a part of their image of who they are. They, too, will replay the game over and over in their heads and think about what might have been.

In a larger picture, after years and decades have passed, however, their perspective may change dramatically. Despite what many people tell youth, high school is not the high point of a life well-lived. There are many more challenges and experiences that lie ahead for the players and fans of this year's team. All of them will face contests that are more significant and more important than this game. Some will face life-threatening illnesses, others will experience the loss of a job or the loss of a close family member. Most will find themselves in situations where the easy way out is not the best solution. In some of life's most important experiences, having learned to take a loss, pick up the pieces and go on with life is a far more valuable memory than dancing home with a trophy.

The scoreboard and the newspaper headlines do not tell the real story of the game. It is not the awarding of a title that determines who emerges as winners and losers from the game. How these young people use this experience to shape their responses to the events that still lie in their future will be far more important than the location of the trophy or the ranking of teams in a record book.

At the time of Jesus' crucifixion, it appeared that the might of the Roman Empire had won. They exercised their power to crush the obviously weaker Jesus and believed that they had crushed the movement that was forming around his ideas and beliefs. Things look much different from our perspective today. The great stories of life often involve a reversal of roles and things that appear to be losses at the time can become victories when seen from a broader perspective.

The St. Thomas More football team will return home today as winners - if they use this experience to forge their characters and understand that today is not the end of the story.

November 10, 2007 – Deer



We have a buck deer that has been hanging around the church for several years, now. I've been aware of him since he was a spike. Now he sports a large rack of antlers. Yesterday, he and a group of five does came right into the front yard of the church to eat the green grass of the lawn. They are urban deer. They have grown accustomed to the houses, buildings, cars and comings and goings of people. The church and the houses around it have been here all of their lives. They can run across the street and into the tree-covered hills if they are feeling threatened, but they are used to coming right into the city to feed. And they are not especially frightened when I pull into the parking lot with my pickup.

Late yesterday afternoon the lighting was getting poor, and I was too far away for the flash on my camera to be effective, so I braced my arms on the hood of my truck and got a bit of a picture. The slow exposure resulted in some blur, but you can get a bit of the scene from looking at the picture.

It is a wonderful thing to live in a place where there are animals who are, for the most part, wild. The deer have made adjustments to the presence of human activity, but we are still allowed to see them on an almost-daily basis. They go on with their lives. Old risks, such as predators are reduced, and new risks, such as traffic are not significant enough to put a dent in the population. In fact, the population of deer in the city is so great that there are frequent complaints about over population and city officials have

tried several different schemes for population control, none of which have had a very dramatic effect on the number of deer we see.

And it appears that the natural process is well underway to guarantee a good number of fawns next spring.

I enjoy watching the deer and witnessing the cycles of their lives, but I admit that they often surprise me. Although I grew up in a town much smaller than Rapid City, with abundant wildlife in the surrounding countryside, we didn't have deer in town when I was a boy. The population was smaller and the deer preferred to stay away from all of the human activity. Even a couple of miles out of town a glimpse of a deer was all one got when hiking along the river or up in the trees.

I am not a biologist, but our current situation of seeing lots of deer in town is probably the result of the overpopulation of deer. A harsh winter might create a situation where there was a shortage of feed and the population would decline by starvation and disease. We have already demonstrated that we are not tolerant of mountain lions and wolves in urban areas, and I am told the number of hunters is declining slightly, so predation is unlikely to be sufficient for population control.

But for now, I do enjoy the deer. And the buck is so regal looking these days, often holding his head up high and towering over the does in his group. Some of our neighbors probably consider the deer to be a nuisance, but I don't mind sharing the lawn with them. For now, we have developed a tolerance of each other's presence that gives the deer easy access to good food and me the opportunity to look at the deer from time to time during my working day.

And the deer are always in motion, showing up in places that surprise me. The dinosaurs on the the hill haven't moved in years.

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November 11, 2007 – Tight Spaces



Yesterday a friend and I found ourselves up in the rafters of our Habitat House, putting screws into sheet rock to make sure that the firewall between the two halves of the house meets all of the current code. The crew at the Habitat House is a fun group of people and we have worked together in a variety of settings and enjoy each other's company. Yesterday was a beautiful day in Rapid City and we felt fortunate to have an outside job for such a day.

Part of the job yesterday involved working between two trusses that were attached to the side walls with one inch between them at the bottom. We were able to spread the tops to about 4' apart, where they ran into the adjoining trusses. We placed a 2 x 4 in the bottom for a place to stand and worked with that 3 1/2 inch platform underneath us. We had to bend over and turn around several times as we placed screws every eight inches on 2 foot centers. It was awkward, but not quite as bad as we had imagined it might be.

Looking at the pictures this morning, I couldn't help but remember some other tight spaces we have been in. I have pictures of us removing the tin from an old roof, working in a tight space beneath a new roof, at our sister church in Costa Rica. We have shared the rapidly shrinking space inside the back of a pickup and trailer as we loaded firewood for delivery to Wamblee or Eagle Butte. We've worked together cleaning the basement at the church and clearing out the shed for a rummage sale.

One of the things about sharing in the life of the church is that there are many opportunities to work together. And working together is a wonderful way to get to know others and to form a community of mutual support and care. As we work we tell stories about our families and our growing up years. We share dreams and plans for upcoming trips and vacations. We develop genuine care and compassion for one another. We put our faith into action as we go about the business of doing the work of the church.

Often the theology of working together is a better way to express our faith than pages and pages of words. What we do says a lot about what we believe. And sometimes we do not need words to offer praise and thanks to God.

It is a blessing to have meaningful work in this life.

It is an even bigger blessing to have friends and partners to share that work.

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November 12, 2007 – Ethiopia



AP Photo

When I was a child, I remember meeting a family who spent time serving in Ethiopia. The whole family had lived in Ethiopia for a couple of years. The parents had worked in aid programs and the children had gone to school and participated in life in Addis Ababa. Ethiopia seemed so far away and so exotic that I had trouble imagining such a trip. Upon their return, I heard a presentation about their trip and was surprised that they emphasized how many similarities they found. They spoke of a relatively stable government, of people with hopes and dreams that were similar to ours. They spoke of the challenges of the growing desert and the need for innovative projects to insure that agriculture could keep up with population growth. They told of universities and educational institutions and life in a city. Things in Ethiopia were different than I imagined, but it still seemed like an exotic far-away place.

Ethiopia still seems very far away. Most Americans don't have a clear sense of the geography of Africa and are confused about which countries lie in which locations on the continent. But we live in a global economy and we are learning again and again, often tragically, how events in a far away place can have a direct effect upon our lives.

Three of Ethiopia's neighbors, Sudan to the west, Eritrea to the north, and Somalia to the east, have been embroiled in decades-long civil wars with incredible loss of life and human suffering. Refugees by the hundreds of thousands and at times by the millions have crossed the border into Ethiopia. At times Ethiopian troops have been called upon

to push refugees out of their country, with tragic results. International aid groups have at times been overwhelmed by the refugees. Violence in and near refugee camps has inhibited the ability of the international community to respond. Currently no groups feel safe to operate in Somalia and the cost in human suffering and death is almost beyond imagination.

The surrounding instability has brought terrorism and violence to Ethiopia as well. Currently Ethiopian troops are fighting a difficult war in Somalia, trying to bring stability to a country that seems to be impossible to stabilize. As US troops discovered in the 1990's when anarchy first overwhelmed Somalia, there is no "winning" in a land of such chaos, but for Ethiopia, there is also no withdrawing, with the very real possibility that the violence will follow the troops home. Somalia has become a breeding ground for terrorists and pirates in the past two decades. The United Nations is unable to operate safely in the region and African union troops are too small in number to be effective.

As stories begin to be published of the intense suffering of the violence of Ethiopian people and their neighbors, there is a bit of world concern. A few Sudanese refugees have made it to the United States, and stories of the "Lost Boys," temporarily captured the imagination of some Americans. But the turmoil and suffering continue. The deaths are too many to count and the news is too horrible to afford sustained coverage in the United States.

It is all too horrible and too far away. But we know that we ignore the sufferings of others at our own peril. And in this world, what happens to others, no matter how far away from us, has an impact on us.

For now, I try to keep up by reading stories and following events on the Internet. I try to study and learn what I can from books. And I remember those who are far away in my prayers.

I do not have solutions. I do not pretend to have wise counsel for those who craft foreign policy. But I pray that we discover some way to bring a measure of relief to the victims of this incredible run of violence and compassion to the suffering children who have never known a world with any measure of peace. Solutions do not always need to come from us, but ignoring the suffering of others cannot be our way, either.

May the cries of anguish that come from Ethiopia and from its neighbors be cries that this world will not ignore.

November 13, 2007 – Hardware



I enjoy many home repair jobs and I like having the ability to fix a few things around the house. But it is possible that it would be less expensive to hire a professional for some of the jobs I do. At least we could cut down on the use of fossil fuels if I could do a simple home repair with a single trip to the hardware store. But most jobs involve two or three trips, and a lot of jobs involve buying a new tool, which is never figured into the cost of the repair, because the tool is reusable and added to the stock of tools that threatens to take over the garage completely.

On Saturday, Susan painted a bathroom. It is a simple task, really. A trip to the store to pick up paint, masking tape and covers for the paint roller. Then another trip to the store because the trim brush we knew we had had been used to apply canvas filler to a canoe and needed to be replaced. Then we discovered that the mirror had never been properly mounted and was attached to the wall with just a few screws in the sheet rock. Another trip to pickup hollow wall anchors. We decided to add a cabinet that we had picked up at a rummage sale, but needed refinishing. Another trip to pick up a new blade for a scraper. Before we knew it we'd driven about 80 miles back and forth to the hardware store and spent about the same amount of time picking up pieces and tools as we spent painting. But, by Monday night the job was completed and the bathroom looks great.

The tools are cleaned up and put away. Now, if we can only remember where we put the extra wall anchors next time we need something like that.

Of course painting the bathroom made it clear how dingy the paint in the hallway is. And we really should go ahead and paint the kitchen, too. And the wood floor in the kitchen needs a repair under the refrigerator. Heck we might as well refinish the floor if we want to make it look right. And if we're going to all that trouble, we should shampoo the carpet in the living room and the entryway paint could use some attention, too. And I have to remember to fix the railing on the porch before guests arrive for Christmas events. Looks like it's going to be a good fall for the hardware store.

I am sure that there are homeowners who are organized and are able to complete a home repair with a single trip to the store. And there are ones whose garages are organized so that they never purchase items they already have on hand. And there are astute bargain hunters who know which items are best to buy at the big box stores out by the highway and which are worth a trip to the local hardware dealer closer to home. I tend to be more random in my shopping. I've been known to visit three or four different stores in search of a single board or a special tool.

And in the midst of all of that activity, yesterday was the day that one of our church members was struggling on the edge of life and death in the hospital, so three trips to the hardware store were in conjunction with getting cleaned up and paying a visit at the hospital.

Nearly fifty years ago, this church member was deeply involved with the construction of a new building for our church and for many years after the church was finished, it was a weekly ritual for him to head to the church basement after worship to check out the boiler. He did little jobs like changing filters and lubricating bearings in pumps and fan motors. He listened to the heating system for changes that might indicate problems. He fixed things that needed repair. It must have worked, because the boiler that was rated for thirty years when it was installed will turn 50 next year and is serving us for yet another approaching winter.

I wonder how many trips to the hardware store he made.

November 14, 2007 – The Clock



We have a wall clock that hangs in our living room. It was a prominent feature in the home of Susan's grandparents and the home of her grandmother's family before that. The clock has had phases of not running, but we have found a skilled clock repair person and it is back to its routine of striking each half hour and hour as it has done for most of the last 150 years. The sound is gentle and familiar and the regular "tick tock" of the clock can be heard in other rooms of the house when we are quiet.

Some of the paint has rubbed off of the face of the clock, but the Roman Numerals are all still visible and it isn't difficult to tell the time with a quick glance. It is an eight day clock, and like most clocks with this type of movement, it runs a little bit fast the first part of the week and a little bit slow the second part of the week. Our goal is to to keep the clock within 5 minutes of the correct time, and now that the clock has been freshly overhauled, it stays within that range.

It is a reminder of a different time and of a different way of thinking about time.

Unlike the clock in the upper right-hand corner of my computer screen that consults with the Internet or the clock in my cellular telephone that checks with the nearest tower, this clock has no feature to automatically set itself or synchronize with any other clock in the world. Unlike the digital clocks in the microwave and the stove, it does not display the minutes digitally or glow bright colors in the dark. Unlike my digital wrist watch, it does not tell the exact time. It's better for letting us know about what time it is. When I wake in

the middle of the night and hear it chime, I can count the chimes and know about how much more time I have before time to get up. When I hear it strike the half-hour after breakfast, I know it is time to take a few more sips of coffee and head out the door.

For most of its career, the clock was hung on the walls of farm houses where the schedule revolved around the rising and setting of the sun and the seasons of the year more than around the specific time of day. For years, the clock was consulted after dinner to determine when to turn on the radio to catch the Twins game on WDAY. Daytime games were a rare treat in the household, but evening games could be tuned in when the day's work was completed.

For most of its life, the clock would run without more attention than a weekly winding for fifteen to twenty years and then need the attention of a skilled clock repairman. Bushings and gears would show wear and the oil that lubricated the clock would become gummy and dry out. That usually meant a trip to a jewelry store in the city and a second trip to pick up the clock a week or two later. As the years passed and the technology of clocks changed, people who knew how to repair such clocks became a bit more scarce, but we've been able to find someone in the places we've lived since the clock came into our possession. I don't know how much longer the clock can continue to be repaired, but it seems to have many more decades in it - probably more than I have in me. It's been in the family for four generations and should be around for a few more. It doubt that the same can be said of any of the modern digital clocks in our home.

For many generations, our people have known that there are many different ways to measure time. In the language of the new testament, Chronos referred to the regular passage of time as demonstrated by the rising and setting of the sun, the passage of seasons and the movement of the planets. Chronos was the regular and sequential passage of time. But there was also Kairos: the opportune moment - the right time. Chronos counted the quantity of time. Kairos counted the quality.

Anyone who has been in love knows that not all moments last the same amount of time. Psalm 90 tries to compare human measurement of time with God's measurement of time saying, "a thousand years is but a watch in the night."

The careful skill of some of the best craftsmen in the world designed the wall clock to measure chronos time. The regular ticking of the parts and the measured turning of the gears was designed to accurately count minutes and hours. But as the decades have passed, the clock has become more of a measure of kairos time. Even when it stops because we forgot to wind it or because it needs repair, its presence in our home reminds us that we belong to something much bigger than the span of our individual lives.

And today as I listen to its regular “tick tock” it is immensely comforting to know the sound I hear was also heard by our grandparents and will one day be heard by our grandchildren.

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November 15, 2007 – Cathedrals



During the age of the great cathedrals in Europe, the largest buildings and most expensive construction in most communities were church buildings. Large sanctuaries with high, vaulted ceilings and towers pushed the limits of engineering knowledge. Expensive artwork and furnishings filled the cavernous spaces. The most talented architects and builders of the day were engaged in the construction of cathedrals.

Things aren't quite the same in contemporary America. The skylines of our cities are not dominated by spires and bell towers. Office buildings, banks, hotels and condominiums are often the tallest buildings. Sports arenas and convention centers sport the largest rooms and the most impressive roof structures. But when it comes to sheer cost per square foot, it is hard to find a building more expensive than a hospital or medical clinic. And there is an expansion in the number of buildings being built.

Part of this building boom is due to an increased demand for space. Hospitals have gone from wards, with many beds in a room to semi-private, with two beds in a room, to private with only one bed per room. Increased automation of records and the dispensing of medicines takes room. Computers, charting, and records take up more space. Advanced diagnostic equipment such as CAT scan and MRI machines are large and require special shielding, equipment and support. Rapid City Regional hospital is a ten-story hospital. With the exception of the surgical intensive care unit, patient rooms occupy only five of the ten stories as the ninth story is closed for remodeling. More than

half of the total space of the hospital is devoted to services and activities other than direct patient care.

Hospitals and medical clinics have become patrons of the arts, with lobbies, hallways and other areas adorned with original artwork. Recently, while waiting for a doctor in an examining room, I noted that there were four pieces of original artwork in the examining room. I didn't have time to count the number in the lobby and hallways.

Part of the growth in medical buildings is due to the population curve. With an increasing number of aging citizens and our tendency to consume more health care as we age, medical care is definitely a growing business. Even without the growth in numbers of people treated, the growth in cost per person treated is among the fastest growth areas of our economy. Health care-related businesses such as pharmaceuticals, diagnostic equipment and medical building construction exercise sizable power in government and business.

Like the cathedrals of the past, hospitals have a hierarchy of leadership with specialized clothing and symbols of authority. There are specialized rules of behavior for those who enter health care facilities and submission to a higher authority is a part of the process of receiving treatment. Health care often requires dramatic repentance in established patterns of behavior. Changes in diet, exercise and other lifestyle areas are often integral parts of medical treatment.

Of course, the distinction between churches and hospitals isn't a clearly drawn line. Many hospitals were started by churches and church organizations are still very active in health care. Although scientific methods dominate health care, faith hasn't been driven out of the healing process and research continues to be conducted into the power of prayer, the presence of religious services, and other places where religion and scientific medicine connect.

Like cathedrals in former times, hospitals handle enormous amounts of money and the resources are not distributed in equal amounts to all who are a part of the process. With guaranteed annual income in excess of three quarters of a million dollars for medical specialists and hourly wages below \$10 per hour for cleaning staff and daycare workers, the hospital has one of the largest ranges of income in our community. There are definitely classes and strata for the people who work in the hospital.

Drawing parallels between hospitals and cathedrals has limits. They are not the same. But just as the era of the most opulent cathedrals gave way to smaller and more practical buildings for churches, so too, I suspect that there will be a time of less ostentation and more practical construction in the future of health care.

As for myself. I don't need the private "suite" or motel amenities when I need treatment in the hospital. I won't be sad if I end up in an area of the hospital with a lower level of luxury. A clean bed and contact with people who care should be sufficient.

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November 16, 2007 – Out of the Darkness



AFSP photo

Tomorrow is the National Survivors of Suicide day. It occurs every year on the Saturday before thanksgiving. Holidays are often hard for those who have had a loved one die. Grief can take over a holiday and change its meaning entirely to someone who has experienced a significant loss. Those who have had a loved one die by suicide are often silent in their grief, in part fearing the stigma that is attached to mental illness. We can say the words, “Depression is an illness like any other, and if left untreated it can be fatal.” But we know that mental illnesses are often seen by those who have not experienced them as character flaws. Sometimes mental illnesses are seen as moral failings.

And most frequently, mental illnesses are the subject of silence. People don’t know what to say, so they say nothing. Perhaps it is because the will to live is so strong in most people. We can’t imagine what it might be like to be so filled with anguish that we could consider death as a way to stop the pain. Of course this is true of other illnesses as well. People who have never experienced cancer cannot imagine what it might be like to have their own cells betray them and begin to take over major body systems. People who have never experienced heart disease cannot imagine what it might be like to have one of your major organs begin to reject your body. Empathy and compassion do not require us to have the same experience as another. They do, however, require that we make a human connection. They require that we lay aside blame and provide appropriate care.

Fear is another factor in the stigma attached to mental illness. People are afraid that a similar thing might happen to them. They stay away from the family and other survivors in part because they are afraid of death and a sudden and tragic death by suicide is a fearful event.

The church has a poor track record when it comes to death by suicide. For much of its history, the mainstream church has labeled suicide a sin and judged it to be among the most serious of moral failings. This attitude is reflected in most states of the United States that label suicide a crime and secure the place of death as a crime scene, seeking to gain full understanding of the means of death, without taking seriously the true cause of death.

Most major mental illnesses are treatable, given appropriate diagnoses and access to appropriate care. The combination of modern drugs and behavioral therapy seems to be most effective for many who suffer from mental illnesses.

So tomorrow we will gather as we always do, to hear the latest news of research from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and to meet with others who have experienced the loss of a loved one to suicide. There will be tears shed and remembrances treasured. There will be a place in our community where talking about mental illness is encouraged. There will be professionals who can help families find help in their quest for treatment. Small groups will provide support for grieving survivors.

But more important than the event is the publicity. Bringing suicide to public awareness and getting information to people who might never attend a survivors' event is the first step to removing the stigma. And removing the stigma might make it able for someone who is now suffering in silence to seek treatment.

As to the church. We are a confessional institution. It is our way to admit the mistakes of the past and correct the teachings of the present. Mental illness is a medical condition. A disease of the brain is as real and as painful as the disease of any other organ. Those who contemplate suicide and the families of ones who have died by suicide are deserving of the support, love and care of the church. To do otherwise is to fail to follow Jesus, who was quick to reach out to those who were outcast by the dominant society.

There is much work that remains.

November 17, 2007 – Cloudy Days



We have had an unusually warm fall. The area has been covered with clouds for the past few days after an unusually windy period last week. The clouds insulate the hills and keep things warmer overnight. It is a bit strange for it to be so warm in November and we keep waiting for the really cold weather to set in. Part of the local lore is that we need a good cold spell to kill the germs and get us feeling healthy again - not that there is any amount of sickness around. A few people are sneezing with allergies and there is a lot of dust in the air that clogs sinuses and causes us to blow our noses from time to time. For the most part, it has been a very pleasant fall.

But we are ready for moisture in any form we can get. A good multiple-day blizzard would lift the spirits of most of us if it avoided the travel days for families getting together for Thanksgiving. Our reservoirs are running at 50% and lower of their storage capacity and the ground is dry when we walk in the woods. A wet winter would do the hills a lot of good.

Unlike those who live in coastal areas or places with more moisture, cloudy days are rare for us. Most days are full of sunshine and bright blue skies. We get storms, but they pass by and soon we return to the blue skies. Our clouds rarely hang around enough to dampen our spirits and the high clouds overhead don't interfere with our lives much at all.

Forecasters say that the jet stream is headed south in the next few days and the cold weather will replace the unseasonably warm weather that we've been experiencing. Some say we could be seeing a snow shower by mid week next week.

The weather is a favorite topic of discussion in many of the places I visit. When we are unsure of a topic, but need to establish a connection, the weather provides us something to say while before heading into more important topics. I am struck by how often a visit in the hospital includes comments on the weather, even though the patient is largely unaffected by the weather outside. Last week, I visited a church member who is over 100 years old, completely blind and goes out of her nursing home only when she has a doctor's appointment or for a rare wheelchair stroll when the weather is perfect. But we began our conversation with her asking me about the weather.

Perhaps we like to talk about the weather because it is always changing. Perhaps we find it to be a non-threatening topic of discussion. Perhaps it is a way of establishing our common humanity. We are all affected by the weather. Weather is something that we have in common even when we have differences in family life, religion, politics and other areas of life.

Whatever the reason, you can be sure that I'll have a conversation with someone about the weather today. And our weather is so pleasant that the conversation is likely to be pleasant, too.

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November 18, 2007 – Many Missions



Yesterday, I stood in the church parking lot, dressed in a suit and tie as a fleet of pickups and trailers, carrying 10 cords of firewood headed out of the parking lot to make a delivery in Wanblee. I had mixed feelings as they headed out to do their work. On the one hand, I was grateful that our church has enough leadership for the project to continue without my participation. No project should become overly dependent on any one person and we ought to be working for projects that develop new leadership and that continue when members are engaged in different projects. On the other hand, we are not the kind of church whose pastor sits in an office while the members do all of the hands-on mission. We have always worked side by side in our mission projects and gotten to know each other by sharing the work of the church.

And, quite frankly, my sermons and worship leadership are not forged in books and study only. They come from direct experience of the life and work of the church. The woodchuck project is direct mission at its best. We have a surplus, in the hills, of trees that need to be thinned for the health of the forest and the protection of homes. In the badlands and on the prairies are people who need firewood for winter heat. It is a good match. Cutting, splitting and delivering firewood is an excellent vehicle for relationships with our neighbors and for a starting point of reconciliation between people who have not always had the level of understanding of one another that they might. I want to be a part of this project and of the wider life of our church.

But it was not to be yesterday. Yesterday was the national day of remembrance for survivors of suicide and we had a panel, teleconference, worship and support group activities at the hospital. And I officiated at the funeral of a 98-year old community and church leader. The large congregation at the funeral gives our congregation an excellent opportunity to reach out into the community and provide support and services for people that we might not otherwise touch with our ministries.

While all of this was going on, our Habitat for Humanity project proceeded with student volunteers from the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology providing labor while many of our regular workers were engaged in the firewood delivery.

The church is not a place of a single project, but rather the home to many missions. It is not a case of one project competing with another, but rather a growing understanding that serving a complex community means having many different opportunities for service, and many different programs and projects.

And even though I like to, I can't be everywhere at once. The church isn't about me.

What I can do is work with partners in mission to develop and expand the outreach of the congregation. I can facilitate and encourage the ministries of our members. I can become involved and offer my time and labor when possible. And I can stay out of the way when good projects begin to have a life of their own.

I don't ever want to become the kind of administrator of a religious institution who sits in an office and directs the work of others. Quite frankly, I hope our church never needs such a person. We are a family of faithful people with many missions in which to engage as together we seek to be disciples of Christ and faithful members of the church.

Next time the pickups leave the parking lot, I hope that I'm along for the ride, and the work, and the fellowship of service.

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November 19, 2007 – Under the Steeple



Our church building has a tall steeple over the center of our building. Perhaps it is not the most impressive architectural feature of the building, but it is large enough to contain our bell and is topped with a shiny cross that proclaims the identity and purpose of the building. Steeples and spires are less common in our part of the country than in other places, but most churches have some form of tower or high point to mark their identity.

For some time, my column in the church newsletter has been entitled “The View from Under the Steeple.” It seems to me that the perspective of those of us who come to the church each day for our work is slightly different from those who come less often. Most of our members know about the worship services, concerts and music programs. They have participated in the dinners and special events. They are familiar with the sanctuary, fellowship hall, parlor and classrooms of the church.

There are a few others, who volunteer in the office or have helped to clean the basement or the music storage areas, who know the building more intimately and have discovered some of its nooks and crannies and special areas that are not on the pathways more commonly traveled. They have probably met some of the people who don't come to the church to worship, but who turn to the church as a source of food or other support in a time of crisis. They probably have some sense of the chain of meetings in which church staff participate as we seek to coordinate our work with other churches and agencies, to find solutions to common problems and participate in the life of the wider community.

But it still surprises me, occasionally, when I encounter members of the church who really don't know what my job is or how I spend my days. I forget that most people only see part of the picture of what I do and know only part of what is involved in serving as pastor to this exciting and eclectic congregation. I confess that it is hard for me to describe my work, because it varies day by day. I have certain routines, such as arriving at the office before 7 a.m. and dealing with e-mail and a paperwork before the phone starts to ring. I am likely to be working on Sunday's sermon on Tuesday and Wednesday and starting my day on Friday by finishing off the bulletin. There were three days last week when I worked straight through the day into the evening without taking time for meals. But there are also days when I come home for lunch and take a nap before returning to the office. Some people think I take Saturdays off because I rarely make hospital visits on Saturdays, which are reserved for projects like Habitat work days and firewood delivery for which I am not cleaned up the way one should be for visiting in the hospital. I do try to take Mondays off, and most of the regular readers of the blog know that I post later on Mondays and sometimes even sleep in.

But there are parts of my job that are more important and more exciting than taking the same day off each week, and while I try to be faithful to rest and recreation, I am grateful for a job that has a great deal of flexibility in schedule and shift my break times to adjust to the needs of the congregation.

For the most part, the view from under the steeple is a great view, and the work we do is filled with prayer and joy and a team of people who genuinely care for one another. We're pretty good at listening to each other's frustrations and providing support when life's pressures weigh heavily.

I often joke about having a job where I work only one hour a week or describe my job as one where the difference between working and not working is so subtle that most people can't tell the difference. It is partly true. The life of a pastor often doesn't feel like work - it often feels like doing the things I want to do with my life and my time. And the family I grew up in is complex enough and filled with enough crises and tangled relationships that taking time with my family feels a lot like what I get paid to do when I work for the church. A pastor is who I am, not just the job that I do. It is an identity that is always with me more than a place of work.

Still, today, I probably won't check out the view from under the steeple. Chances are I won't enter the building until sometime tomorrow. It will be good to catch up with chores at home. I doubt if I'll forget too much in one day. And besides, most of the people in the church know my cell phone number and the rest know my home phone number. If there is a reason to change my plans, I'll be in touch . . .

November 20, 2007 – What is the What



Photo from www.valentinoachakdeng.org

I've just finished reading "What Is the What," Dave Eggers novelized autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng. The book is almost impossible to describe. I picked it up because I had read other fiction by Dave Eggers and had enjoyed his style. A few years ago I read his "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius," so I had some sense of Eggers' ability to tell a story based in fact in a way that stretched the limits of reporting and yet, somehow, revealed a truth that is somewhat deeper than a list of events or report of activities.

The challenge of this world with all of its violence, innocent victims, and incredible suffering is that there is no good way to tell the truth of many human tragedies. We are so overwhelmed by the realities that are reported that we tend to tune out and shut down our thinking. We have all read reports of the "Lost Boys" of Somalia and many of us have had opportunities to meet some of them. We have read newspaper reports and watched television documentaries about the violence in the region and are almost paralyzed by the overwhelming human suffering.

Eggers telling of the story of Valentino Achak Deng is painful to read at times. The relentlessness of suffering that Deng and others faced is overwhelming. But there is a deeper story that comes through - one of hope in the midst of the deepest tragedy, of the triumph of the human spirit amidst impossible odds. It is a survivor's story on the level of Elie Wiesel's "Night."

Sales of the book and additional support by donors are enabling some incredible work to be done in Somalia to rebuild communities and create opportunities that had not before existed. But more important than the funds raised is the awareness raised. The packaging of the story of Valentino Achak Deng into a story that we can read serves to renew our awareness of our connections with the statistics and masses that we often ignore when they are reported on television. One story can make a much stronger connection than the reports of the numbers of people living in refugee camps or the statistics of tragedy in a place on the other side of the world.

The partnership between Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak Deng brings light to one of the darkest corners of human experience in our generation. Their story is one that I won't soon forget.

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November 21, 2007 – A Few Flakes



A few flakes of snow fell yesterday and the day stayed cold enough for them to stay on the ground. There wasn't enough snow in our area to disrupt driving or to threaten holiday travel plans, just enough to remind us that this is November and it is time for a change in the weather. It seems right that we should be getting some snow, and we'd love to have a lot more so that the moisture could slowly sink into the ground, but for now it is just a dusting of snow.

The change of seasons is a reminder that we are behind our schedule for the construction of the Habitat for Humanity house. We had hoped to have the home enclosed before inclement weather set in. In years past, home construction usually slowed to a very slow pace when the weather turned cold. Now we have space heaters and can hang a bit of plastic to create a warm working space for some of the work. Other work can be accomplished on sunny days when there is no precipitation and we will have plenty of those days throughout the winter. After missing two work days for the Thanksgiving break, we'll be back at work on the house and should have it enclosed by Christmas.

Winter was a threatening time on the plains in years past. Many plains tribes counted the age of a person by counting how many winters that person had survived. Winter was a time for less physical activity and more waiting. Energy was conserved. It was also a time for telling stories, for recounting challenges and opportunities of the past and for teaching children the essential lessons of life. Summers and times of good weather

were opportunities to teach skills. Winters were opportunities to teach about the meaning of life and the proper application of the skills that had been learned.

Our lives are less linked to the seasons than previous generations. We have excellent heat in our homes and automobiles and air conditioning when the weather turns warm. We have a steady supply of food year round and our stores are stocked with fresh produce that was grown in distant locations where the weather is different. Many people exercise in gyms with climate-controls and bright lights that offer a consistent environment regardless of the outside weather. But even when our diets and routines are changed little, we notice the passing of seasons and feel some of their effects. There is less daylight and we read and work inside at times when we would be seeking outside activities in the summer.

A few flakes do not mean that winter has set in. It is just enough to create a good mood for Thanksgiving without disrupting travel plans. Tomorrow's celebrations may offer an opportunity for a walk in the woods after sharing a meal together, and the cool air won't be enough to deter us. We continue to find the simple joys of walking and working outside to be more appealing than health clubs and exercise machines. Among my prayers of thanksgiving for the day will be thanks for the snow and for the flow of seasons. We are blessed to live in a place where there are seasons to mark the passage of our lives.

I've survived 54 winters and prospects look good for surviving this one. Perhaps it will give me some good stories to tell on a cold winter night decades from now.

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November 22, 2007 – Thanksgiving



I am grateful for loving and being loved, for having discovered the great love affair of my life at an early age, for commitment and marriage, for children and their adventures, for health and meaningful work, for a flexible schedule and undone tasks, for parents and siblings even when their lives are complex and sometimes frustrating, for having discovered my vocation and being given opportunities to pursue it.

I am grateful for books, vision, color, the many different animals and people who surround me, for having memory, and being able to hear, for music and having opposable thumbs, for rain, snow, wind and clouds, sunrises and sunsets, canoes and the people who build them,

I am grateful for the reality of God and for the idea of God, the ability to think about God as well as experience God, for the incredible presence of God in human form: Jesus - incarnated - with a body like ours, who lived, died and was resurrected. For the Bible and for the challenge of studying its complex web of history, family story, poetry, prophecy, worship, parable, visions of the future and so much more. For the church that spans generations of seekers and faithful. For doubt and questions and uncertainties. For fellowship with other believers and conversations with those whose beliefs are different. For teachers and mentors and guides.

I am grateful that I have a complex brain, and for the miracle of the heart and its incredible process of circulating blood throughout our bodies. For mountains, lakes,

rivers and oceans, for crisp apples, sweet corn, onions, mushrooms and chocolate. For coffee and tea and orange juice and cool, clear water.

I am grateful for trees and grass, for the moon and stars, for a comfortable chair and a warm home with room for guests. For kites and jelly beans and blueberries and deer and turkeys in my yard, for hope and imagination and inspiration and new ideas. For old ideas that have worked for generations and new ways of doing old things. For the ability to talk and the ability to listen and the many different languages, not all of which are based in sound.

I am grateful for friends of many ages, for people who make me think, for people who make me frustrated and people who just don't get it, and people with whom I'm always at home no matter where we are. For people I can trust. For generosity and need, for the ability to serve others with hard work and time and energy.

I am grateful for the ability to get really tired and the ability to sleep.

I am grateful for open prairies and badlands, for buffalo and horses, for wild thunderstorms and the truly big ideas that take generations to form. For the vast distances of space and the amazing diversity of microscopic organisms. For the ability to feel pain and to empathize with the pain of others.

I am grateful to live in a time when pianos have been invented, and violins and trumpets and pipe organs. I am grateful for the rich elegance and beauty of an unaccompanied human voice singing a simple melody and for the sound of a babbling brook and the birds singing at sunrise.

I am grateful for campfires and hugs and fresh tomatoes, for having toes and being able to walk, for light and dark, day and night, summer and winter, change and hope. For early morning and empty spaces, for late nights and crowded cities.

I am grateful for Christmas eve and for baptisms, for communion in groups large and small, for long walks and sitting quietly.

I am grateful for a list too long to post here or even write in any one place.

I am grateful for today.

November 23, 2007 – Not Shopping



We are told that today is one of the biggest days for retail sales in America. There will be special deals and long lines and extended hours at most stores. There are people who are already heading to the mall before sunrise this morning. It has become a tradition to kick off shopping for Christmas gifts on the day after Thanksgiving.

I won't be shopping today.

I have nothing against those who are out looking for bargains and gifts, nor do I have any problem with business owners and workers who are trying to earn a living. It is just that I need to prepare for Christmas in a different way. Our celebrations will include gifts for each other, and we will purchase most of those gifts. But we do not want to make the gifts the center of our celebration. And we do not want to have the quest to buy things consuming too much of our time and energy.

We live in one of the richest countries of the world and have access to more consumer goods than ever before. But the things that are most important aren't for sale in the stores.

Here are some of the things I am doing to prepare for Christmas.

I am taking a careful look at my schedule and commitments to make sure that I have time for my family and friends. I want to attend a few concerts and holiday events, but I

don't want to balance those events with quiet times for listening and talking and being together. I want to make sure that I have energy and enthusiasm for the time we have together.

I am spending extra time this week cleaning and sorting at work and at home. I know that this type of organization is not my best quality, but with discipline I can clear some of the clutter and make the decision to get rid of a few of the things that are un-needed and unnecessary. I will discover some items that can be donated to the Habitat re-store and the rescue mission store and make sure that after the holiday I have less things in my life than before.

I am renewing some of my basic disciplines of prayer, study, and quiet time. I will take time each day to step out of the rush and bustle and hectic pace of life and offer thanks to God and renewal to my spirit.

I am paying attention to my eating and trying to be careful about the quantity and quality of food I consume. I plan to purchase more food for health and less food that I do not need. And I will substitute short walk in place of a snack from time to time.

Maybe this is just a modified form of resolutions for the new year. After all, this Sunday is "Reign of Christ," the last Sunday of the church year. Our new year begins with Advent. But I hope that it is a deeper discipline - a commitment to making real changes in my life in preparation for the miracle of incarnation. God with us in human form opens the door to the possibility of realigning our priorities and making new beginnings.

I'll be doing some shopping between now and Christmas. But I hope I can do it little by little and not all at once so that I can think about the reason for the gifts - my sense of gratitude and the wonderful people who are in my life.

May we all spend part of this season waiting.

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November 24, 2007 – Shorter Days



Shorter days mean that we spend more time in the dark. Rising before sunrise and going to bed after sunset are a way of life for a few months now. One advantage is that I pay more attention to sunsets that I do at other times of the year. The shorter days give a heightened appreciation for sunlight. I find myself trying to arrange my days so that I can do certain chores and activities during the light of day.

We live with all kinds of modern conveniences that make it easy to function when the sun is not visible. We have good lighting in our homes and bright lights on our vehicles that make it easy to do a wide variety of tasks and even travel comfortably in the dark. We are much less affected by the change in the length of days than were our predecessors. But we are not entirely unaffected by shorter days.

I am fortunate to live in a neighborhood that doesn't have too many lights. We have no street lights and we have a good view of the stars at night. We allow ourselves to experience at least a part of the darkness of night. Those who live in cities and other places with lots of light all night long miss the beauty of the darkness.

Doctors have given the name "seasonal affective disorder" to a wide range of symptoms that affect some people during the winter. The condition can be severe, requiring hospitalization and medication. It is not a condition from which I suffer, but I do find that I need to be a bit more intentional about planning outdoor activities in the winter. My job doesn't require me to spend much time outside and I can find myself working under

artificial light most of the time and it helps my attitude and my mood to simply plan a short walk or other outdoor activity each day.

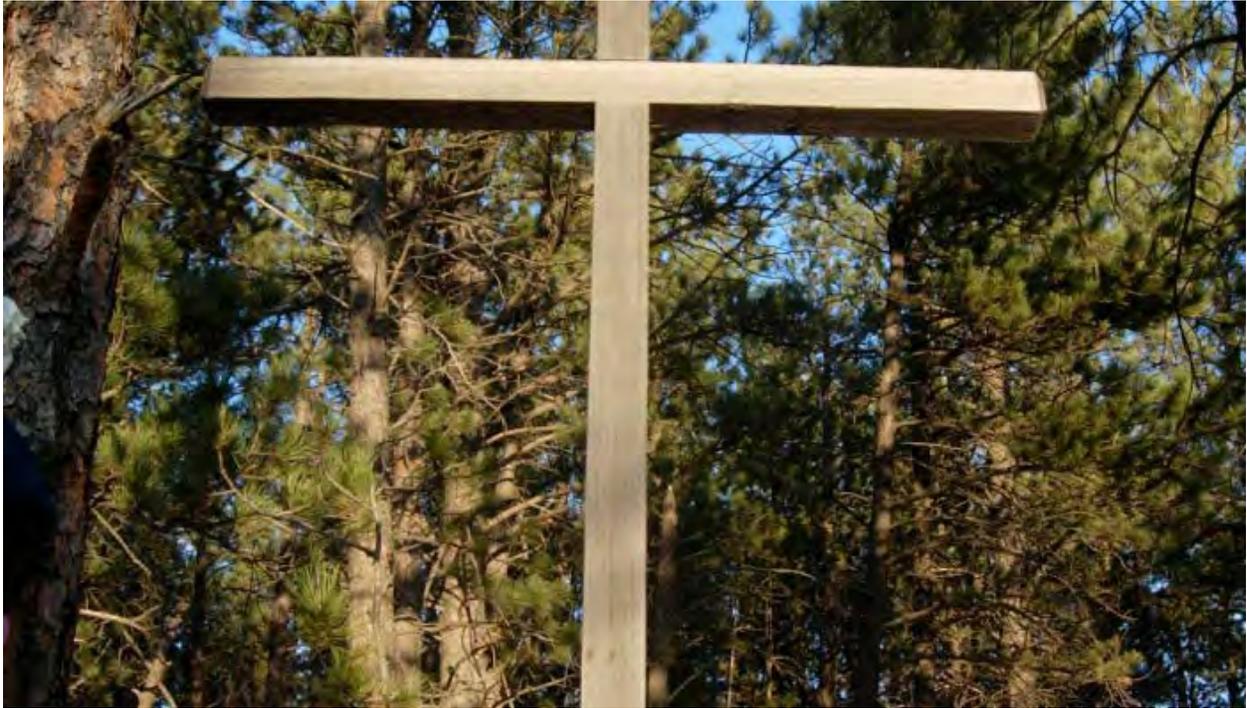
I can understand how midwinter festivals developed in northern climates. People payed attention to the length of the days and when the shortest days had passed and the days began to get longer, there was reason to celebrate the return of light, even though it would be months before the longer days resulted in warmer temperatures and a true change of seasons. We live in a climate that is a bit more mild. We'll get some warm days even during the middle of winter and there is rarely a day when it is much of an inconvenience to go out for a little walk or another activity.

The celebration of Christmas near the winter solstice developed as the church expanded into more northern climates. The blending of several holidays and the arranging of celebrations of the events of the life of Jesus throughout the church emerged slowly and was influenced by new converts to the religion as well as the realities of their circumstances. As Christianity expanded to new locations on the globe, different relationships to the seasons were encountered. Our experience of the flow of the seasons is quite different from that of people who live in the Southern hemisphere, where Christmas comes at the height of summer and Easter is in the middle of the fall.

But for us, who live in this part of the world, the shortening of the days and the season of Advent go together well. As we await the return of longer days, we also anticipate the coming of Jesus as the light of the world. The language is symbolic and the symbols fit the place where we live.

So today we will treasure the daylight that we have and attempt to use it wisely knowing that our experience is different from those who live farther to the north or to the south. And before long the days will begin to lengthen.

November 25, 2007 – Reign of Christ



Today is the last Sunday of the church year. It is the day we call “Reign of Christ.” Other Christians use the more common name, “Christ the King.” The choice of names reflects a subtle, but important shift in theology. Throughout the history of the church, monarchies have been dominant governmental structures. Christ the King was a name given to a day set aside to remind the faithful that the true power and authority on this earth does not rest in earthly authorities. With the rise of democratic institutions and different forms of government, there are fewer monarchies and the language of monarchies is often seen as obsolete. Personally, I don’t find the phrase “Reign of Christ,” to have any more meaningful language or to be less encumbered by the language of monarchy, but using the less familiar term may force a pause to think.

The powers that are often recognized in this world - those of governments who can raise armies and police forces and enforce their authority - are all temporary. Not only is it true that governmental powers are occasionally overturned, the people who assume the roles of power are finite. They all will one day die. Power and authority will be shifted to another person in the course of time. Ancient rulers often claimed that they ruled by divine authority, and in some cases, claimed that they were gods themselves. The claims of modern governments are often less dramatic. We are used to governments claiming their mandates and authority from their interpretation of polls or the votes of the people.

Christians believe that there is a structure of power and authority that is not limited by or subject to the powers of this world. Even beyond the laws of nature or the gigantic powers of the movement of the universe, there is a moral authority to which faithful persons turn. At times, this might even mean coming into conflict with civil authorities and suffering the consequences of civil disobedience. In dramatic instances, civil disobedience and answering to the call of God can be embodied by groups of people and not just individuals as was demonstrated during the civil rights movement in the United States and in civil actions in other places around the earth throughout history.

Early Christians often found themselves at odds with governmental authorities. Many were persecuted and put to death for their faith. Before Christianity became a mass movement and popular with governments as well as individuals, the faith was a risky business that might result in dangerous consequences for those who practiced the faith.

Living in a country where Christianity is the dominant form of religion can have its own consequences, however. We might confuse allegiance to our faith with allegiance with our country. There is a blending of patriotism and faith that forms a kind of civil religion that is not entirely faithful to the historic and Biblical faith of Christianity. Confusion between the authority of persons and the authority of God abounds. There are those who do not make a distinction between complying with the government and doing the work of God.

This is the day to renew our understanding and our commitment to follow Christ regardless of the consequences, and to live our lives according to the call of God rather than the whims of popular culture or popularity. It is a process that is difficult and one that we seldom achieve. Thus an annual holiday is a good reminder that we still have a long way to go.

May Christ reign in our hearts and in our actions today and every day.

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November 26, 2007 – Remembering Charlotte



Our family has never been very demonstrative about our grief or showy about our memorials, preferring a more private way of mourning and trusting the lives and relationships of our loved ones to be their strongest memorials. We don't have many markers, monuments or buildings bearing the names of our loved ones. It seems good to us for it to be this way, but we do take time to remember and occasionally, we like to share our memories with others.

Several years ago, we began to create flower arrangements around the Advent wreath in memory of Sybil and Bill Pogany. Sybil and Bill were Susan's aunt and uncle and had become beloved by many. They had been managers of Placerville Camp during the 1960's and '70's and were active members of the congregation we serve. So it seemed appropriate to celebrate their lives and remember as we prepared for Christmas each year. I took pictures of the advent arrangement a couple of times and showed them to Charlotte, Sybil's sister and Susan's mother. She seemed so delighted with the memorial and the pictures would always spark wonderful conversations of pleasant memories.

The years have passed and early in the summer of 2005 Charlotte died. It was a quiet and intimate time for the family. We struggled with the planning of the public parts of the grieving, but had nice memorial services at her home church and at camp. The family gathered and we remembered, celebrated a life well-lived and shared our sense of loss.

Since Charlotte's birthday was in November, near Thanksgiving, we have been allowed to become the sponsors of the altar flowers at our church for one of the Sundays in November each year. This gives us another opportunity to remember. This year, Susan began collecting different gourds and decorative squash in early October and kept on the lookout for other items that might symbolize the abundance of the fall season. Charlotte was a woman who shared abundantly. If we came for a visit, she would try to serve all of our favorite foods, even if we were there for a short time. If she packed a little lunch for us as we left their home, we'd be snacking on the goodies for many days. Once I mentioned that I would like to have a certain type of short-sleeved shirt. She bought me five or six shirts. Her generosity knew no limits. Our family has made a verb out of her name. When someone is fussing about during a meal time, putting more and more things on the table when we would prefer that the person just sit down and join us, we call it "Charlotte-ing." So the abundance of fall harvest seemed like a good way to remember and celebrate Charlotte.

After church, several people commented on the beautiful flower arrangement. Since Susan had done all of the work, I tried to direct the praise toward her. There was a little awkwardness as I thanked people for their kind comments. I'm a bit like Charlotte in not wanting too much attention directed towards me. I'm OK to be up front when I'm leading worship, but when worship is over, I'd like someone else to be the center of attention. Charlotte was never one to seize center stage. She was much happier to work in the background and direct attention to her family.

Being the first son-in-law to join a family of three daughters, I had more than three decades of being a member of Charlotte's family when she was healthy and able to shower me with her love and kindness. I always felt that I had a place of privilege and honor with Charlotte, but I suspect the other sons-in-law felt a similar sense of being special when they were with her. I used to sometimes joke with her daughters that I ended up being the favorite of Charlotte's children. She had a way of making me feel loved and treasured.

It is good to share these wonderful memories with others - especially those who did not have the privilege of knowing Charlotte in person. She had much to teach us about gracious living, about choosing the path of service, and about placing family at the center of our lives. We have had our lives shaped by her active loving. And there is a little bit of Charlotte in each one of us who were members of her family.

As we pause for the festival of Thanksgiving each year it is good to give thanks for having loved and having been loved by Charlotte.

November 27, 2007 – Rams



This photo was sent by e-mail from Mark Darrow. I do not know who took the photo.

We live in a place where people and nature mix. Usually this is a good mix. Sometimes it presents special challenges. The increasing development can result in the loss of scenic vistas and change the nature of our hills. There is much debate about whether or not and if so how we should limit and control development. Animals have to adapt in order to live in places with more people, more houses, and more traffic. The ability of the hills and the animals to adapt is amazing.

In the fall, the natural cycles in the lives of the animals take over. With their attention directed to the fall rut, antelope, deer, elk and big horn sheep are less aware of humans, more likely to run out onto the highway and, occasionally put on displays that humans get to witness. The battle of two bighorn rams pictured above took place right in town, near the fish hatchery. Locals often refer to this band of sheep as “catholic sheep,” because they can often be seen nibbling in the yard of Blessed Sacrament church. By that standard, I guess we have “UCC deer” on our side of the hill, though they don’t seem very interested in the subtleties of theological discourse.

This interface of humans with wild animals is often addressed in terms of the problems that are created. Excessive urban deer populations damage trees, create traffic problems, and stress ornamental plantings. Deer can become aggressive when humans come too close. Turkeys, geese and ducks are messy birds when they flock on lawns and public parks. The decrease in habitat threatens wildlife populations in a variety of

ways. People have an uneasy relationship with predators. There are no wolves left in the Black Hills, and there is an ongoing debate about what population of mountain lions is acceptable. The department of fish, game and parks is constantly under fire and the subject of angry letters to the editor for their policies.

For those of us who live here, however, the connections between animals and people isn't experienced primarily in terms of its problems. The sound and sight of two bighorn rams crashing their horns and skulls together is truly amazing. The sight of a newborn fawn in the spring is a wonder. The sight of wild turkeys crossing the driveway is comical and brings a smile to our faces. The occasional glimpse of a bull elk is awesome. The elusive nature of Mountain Lions, whose presence we mostly know by tracks and signs rather than frequent sightings lends mystery to our lives. We benefit in so many ways from the presence of the animals.

We are not alone. And the decisions we make affect other creatures whether or not we are aware of our impact. Seeing the animals regularly helps to remind us that what we do and how we live creates an impact that reaches beyond ourselves.

Among the things for which I give thanks each day is the joy of living in a world with so many diverse and beautiful animals.

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November 28, 2007 – Visions of Peace



After nearly seven years with no direct peace talks, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas shook hands in front of President Bush in Annapolis yesterday. The handshake is the easy part. Building a lasting peace will require much more work.

It seems appropriate for peace talks to take place during Advent, the season when Christians read from the book of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah spoke in Jerusalem in a time when Judah was not the dominant power of the world. Assyria was far more powerful in military, trade and many other areas of life. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been conquered in 722 bce. And the domination of Israel was far more than a military loss. The people of Israel were sent into captivity. Conquered, dispersed, and exiled, the Assyrians expected them to someday assimilate and the nation of Israel would be forever annihilated. Over the next two decades Assyria threatened Judah with the same fate.

The prophet Isaiah began his witness in Jerusalem with this threat as a background, but he was also aware of another problem that he had to address. Judah and Jerusalem, despite their heritage and the lofty names they possessed, could no longer claim to be morally superior to their enemies. The treatment of widows and orphans, the disregard for immigrants and aliens, and the profiteering at the expense of the country's poorest citizens presented clear evidence that Jerusalem had failed to live up to their covenant with God and to provide a shining example to the other nations of the region.

Isaiah was appointed to speak truth to his homeland. Plenty and comfort had created a false optimism. The future was truly more threatening than political leaders would admit. Pride and denial was rampant in the homes of leaders and the temple itself.

But Isaiah's prophecy does not begin with gloom and doom, rather it begins with a note of hopefulness. All is not lost. Jerusalem could become a city of hospitality and welcome for all of the nations. It could be different from the surrounding countries in terms of how it treated widows, orphans and the poor with justice and mercy. It could regain the moral high ground and be restored to true peace with justice.

That vision and that hope, sadly, remain unfulfilled in our generation, nearly three thousand years later. Formed from the collective guilt of the world and the incredible heroism and sacrifice of Jewish settlers and leaders in the shadow of the 20th century Holocaust, the modern state of Israel has moved from poverty to wealth, from the brink of genocide to global power. They have been wise in perceiving the many threats from the outside and even some of the the internal threats to peace, and security. They have developed the weapons of war and proven the ability to use them effectively. And the United States has supported and backed their journey in the past sixty years.

But, once again, Israel is in need of a prophet to remind them and the whole world of God's call to justice. Comfort and security are not the same thing as genuine peace. Genuine peace can be established only when justice for all, including the poorest and most displaced people, is maintained and defended.

I confess that I am not as hopeful as I might be with this new peace initiative. The past seven years speak more loudly about our lack of commitment than one day does of a renewed commitment to peace for Israel and Palestine. The people of Gaza are not even represented in the talks as their elected leader is excluded. The road to peace is long and fraught with danger and risk.

Yet we dare to read the audacious words of Isaiah who spoke out in the face of almost certain military defeat. The power of Assyria was overwhelming and any realist could see that Judah was headed for the fate of Israel. But the words of hope that Isaiah spoke in that dark hour ring through the years of history and the pressures of translation into other languages. And they will be proclaimed from Christian churches throughout the world this Sunday.

Surely we can dare to believe in peace.

Surely we can dare to work for peace.

Surely our faith is more than words alone.

A generation of radicals and extremists stands in need of a stronger and better vision of their - and the world's future.

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November 29, 2007 – Everyday Views



One of my teachers made a discipline of photographing the same Illinois farm for over 50 years. In that span of time, he collected thousands of pictures of four generations of the farm family and thousands more of the buildings and land. As opposed to photographers who focus on the exotic and unfamiliar, he made a practice of focusing the regular and the familiar. His collection of photographs are stunningly beautiful and fascinating.

One of my challenges in maintaining a daily blog with a photograph is that I do not take photographs in an orderly fashion. There are days when I take over a hundred photographs and there are weeks when I take only one or two. But the pace of a daily discipline requires that I select a photograph each day. Last spring, I tried to focus my energy on the discipline of taking more photographs - of having a selection of photographs that I had taken between each time I wrote in the blog. The discipline worked and the subjects that I photographed gave me ideas for the articles.

After a while, I discovered that I was collecting a lot of photographs of sunrises. The view as I drive into town in the morning is usually dramatic and gorgeous. As I look back over the photographs that I have collected, there are many views that are very similar. Although I will never tire of seeing sunsets, my photographic abilities are such that the pictures I take are very similar to each other.

And how many articles could one write about sunrises anyway? Regular readers will note that on at least four occasions, I turned the camera around and took my picture at the other end of the day, with photos and articles on sunsets.

The discipline of any daily journal is to notice and write about the ordinary. We develop routines and patterns. There is newness in our lives every day, but some days the changes are subtle and require close observation. My life is blessed with more travel than most, but there are also times when I write the blog sitting on the same chair, with the computer on the same table as the day before.

Of course that reality is part of the point of the blog and of the Christian faith. We believe that God comes to us in the everyday and familiar. God incarnated - in human form - means that God's presence is not some magical, supernatural phenomenon, but rather the divine is discovered in the ordinary and common events of our lives. We do not need prayers and ceremonies to make water holy. Every drop of water is a sacred miracle independent of our words and actions. We have special ceremonies for celebrating communion, but in truth Jesus asked us to remember him each time we eat and each time we drink. The highest ritual of a cathedral is no more sacred than a family sitting down to a simple supper. Christ is equally present in either location, and has never depended on our rituals and prayers to enter into this world.

Certain days stir my excitement and energize my passions. I find myself anticipating and enjoying travel. Waking up to the sounds of a language that I understand only partially and going a place I have never before been are experiences that I long to have again and again. Days of reunion with family members are treasures for which I yearn. The challenge of addressing a new audience or leading worship in a new setting can really get me excited.

But today is also a day of untold promise. Doing the usual things, going to the usual places, speaking with the usual people - all of these things hold the possibility of a genuine encounter with God. In less than an hour there will be another spectacular sunrise that is not dependent upon my camera in order to exude beauty. I will be given the opportunity to work alongside people of integrity and commitment. I will have conversations that shape the story of my life. It is one of the rewards of life in covenant. The promises that bind us to one another yield the opportunity to know each other more deeply and to love and care for each other in new and wondrous ways.

Who knows what photographs I will take today. Perhaps, if I am lucky, they will resemble photographs I have taken before and will challenge me to look closely to discern the differences. For when we look more closely, we are certain to be surprised.

November 30, 2007 – Up on the Rooftop



Progress has slowed on the construction of our Habitat for Humanity home. A Thanksgiving break and colder weather has resulted in smaller crews and less work accomplished each work day. But we are forging ahead. Our original timetable for the project called for us to have the home ready for the family to move in by Christmas. That was before delays in obtaining a demolition permit for the structure that had to be torn down to make room for the new home, and before the delays in designing our affiliate's first duplex home, and before the delays in excavation and concrete work, and other parts of the project. We've been saying that we'll get the family moved in by Easter, but that is probably too ambitious, given the amount of work that remains.

There is a certain degree of frustration that things have not gone as planned. But there is a satisfaction in simply keeping on going even when the going is tough, and knowing that somehow we will finish this home and one day we'll start another.

We are almost finished with the framing. We could be ready to begin installing roof decking tomorrow, if the weather isn't too cold and we have a large enough crew. We may not be finishing this house, but we'll be up on the rooftop by Christmas. Maybe we can even sing a few bars of the song about Good Saint Nick as we work.

This house by itself is a big vision. A small collection of churches, with not too many members is working on a project that costs nearly \$100 per member and entails

thousands of volunteer hours. And it is a part of an even bigger vision: to eliminate poverty housing by building homes and selling them with no profit and financing them with no-interest loans. The idea is based in Biblical financing and Biblical concern for our neighbors. It is an achievable goal, but a very big one. The great causes of this world are often ones that cannot be achieved in a single lifetime.

And the way we tackle the goal is one board at a time - one nail at a time. We work until we run out of energy and then get up another day and work again. Easy success can sometimes be a sign that the project we tackled was too small and that we might be engaged in something much bigger.

Paul talks about being fools for Christ. And perhaps that is what we are.

No, it's not Saint Nicholas up on the rooftop, just a few faithful souls who refuse to give up. Fools for Christ, I'd say.

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December 1, 2007 – Evel Knievel and his Flying Daredevils



Photo from Kelly Knievel.

When I was a kid, we thought that all famous people came from far-away exotic places. Except for Evel Knievel. He came from Butte - 150 miles west - the place we used to call "the armpit of Montana." Butte was a rowdy mining town with a reputation for bars and fights and trouble in general. And Evel Knievel fit right into that crowd. For some reason, we all knew that his real name was Bob. That was before Butte had Evel Knievel Days. The big stunt in the early days was jumping over a stock tank with about a dozen rattlesnakes in it. He used ramps fashioned from plywood and 2 x 4s and rode a motorcycle with most of the extras, including the muffler, removed. The venue was rodeos and county fairs and he would do a lot of riding around, popping wheelies, making dust, and revving the engine to make a lot of noise. Usually there was at least one aborted attempt before he made the jump. He never missed the jump in the early days. It was about showmanship more than actual risk. He couldn't have cleared much more than expenses.

But a few years later he was taking real risks, jumping over rows of old cars or school busses or Mac trucks. He started to wear showy clothes and red, white and blue jump suits. When he crashed the landing after jumping the fountains at Caesar's Palace, he was in the hospital for a long time. There were rumors that he was dead or that he was being kept artificially alive and that he had broken every bone in his body. Not quite true - I think his lifetime tally was around 40 broken bones. His son, Robbie made the Caesar's Palace jump 20 years later.

A lot of people paid attention and watched TV when he made the rocket cycle attempt over the Snake River. It was the fall that Susan and I moved to Chicago and started seminary, so I tried to attach myself to any news from Montana or about a Montanan. We didn't have a TV in those days, but we gathered around a small black and white set in a friend's apartment to watch the takeoff and parachute open. Some folks say he chickened out and pulled the rip cord. The official story was that the parachute mechanism failed. I suspect the latter - at least I believed that he was willing to crash his motorcycle into the canyon wall even if it meant risking death.

He started to look a lot older than his real age. You could tell his joints hurt when he stood up. And he started to spend a lot of time in other places, buying a home in Florida. More rumors said that he had gambled away all of his money.

Robert Craig Knievel died yesterday. He hadn't been well in years. He was on oxygen and his lungs were full of scars from rib punctures and other trauma. I hadn't thought about him in years, either. For a while it seemed like Robbie might take over the business and he made a lot of jumps, including several that his father crashed. But you don't hear about either of them much anymore. Watching someone break bones and bust up their body just isn't entertaining to me. But there was a day when a showman put Butte, Montana on the map and people who had never been there knew it was Evel Knievel's home town.

I seem to have lost most of my need to gain attention by having been from the same state. I'll probably tell an Evel Knievel story or two today or tomorrow and then we'll go on to other things. But I think I learned a little bit about showmanship and about storytelling from the rodeo show circuit antics of a guy who never wanted to make his living from a regular job and discovered a way to make a lot of money by getting people to watch him, even if he eventually spent more than he made.

He is one of a long list of characters who make this world intriguing. You know: the kind of person you'd never want to be, but who makes life interesting nevertheless. Sometimes your parents are right when they say, "You better study hard. You wouldn't want to grow up to be like him." True, but I'm glad part of my life was lived during the lifetime of Evel Knievel. It will give me stories to tell for the rest of my life.

December 2, 2007 – A Skiff of Snow



We received about 1/2 inch of snow yesterday. It wasn't much and the hills need a lot more snow, but it was something and it changed our pace of life. The usual slipping and sliding that accompanies the first slippery streets of the fall occurred. I didn't notice any major accidents, just a few cars up on the sidewalk or headed the wrong direction for a few moments. We decided that it was getting too slippery to be putting particle board on the roof of the Habitat for Humanity house and so cancelled our work day. The slowness of our progress is a frustration at times, but it was the right decision for yesterday. We don't want to have someone get hurt.

It didn't turn out to be a bonus day, as there were plenty of other things that needed to be done. I spent more of the day working at the computer than I would have otherwise done, but I suspect that the main benefit of canceling the Habitat work day was a slight decrease in the amount of undone work at the end of the day.

By late afternoon the snow had stopped and there was enough to shovel the driveway but not enough to make that a big chore. I suppose that the snow might result in a slight decrease in attendance at church today, but our experience is that those who have the most reason to stay indoors on a slippery day are the ones who wouldn't think of skipping church. With two concerts in the building today, I'm glad that the parking lot has been plowed and we are ready for the coming and going of people.

A real snow storm slows us down a bit, or at least it shifts our priorities. Even with a good snow blower, it takes time to clear the driveway and walks. Travel slows a bit and driving requires a bit more attention. People stay home and meetings get cancelled. I enjoy the storms if I don't have to be out on the highway or worry about a family member who is traveling.

Even a bit of snow is a good way to start Advent. It reminds us that the seasons really do change. The snow leaves a freshness on the ground that helps us pull away from our usual activities to simply look at the world for a few moments. Advent is a season of expectation and perhaps this Advent will yield much more snow before it is over.

Today we will read the familiar texts and begin what I hope is much more than ritual repetition. We need to remind ourselves on a regular basis that we are called to live in hope - that the problems of this world are not the final word on the condition of humans. Hope, peace, joy and love become more than words during Advent. For those of us who live in the church they are real possibilities and though they exist as promise, they also are present in our lives right now.

Sometimes it only takes a skiff of snow to remind us of the deep snow that our beloved hills really need. Sometimes it takes only a glimpse of hope or peace or joy or love to remind us of the future that beckons us to move ahead. So "let it snow, let it snow, let it snow." And may the gifts of hope, peace, joy and love also continue to shower down upon the people of this world.

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December 3, 2007 – Faith and Art



Our evening ended with a delightful arts experience last night. While jazz artist Jim Szana played the piano, daughter-in-law Charity Szana painted a large canvas with oils. At the end of the evening, we had watched a painting emerge as we listened to favorite and new tunes on the piano arranged in a continuous string with themes emerging and reappearing.

At the end of a long day, it was a relaxing evening and I might have been tempted to close my eyes and nod off had it been just the pianist. I love jazz piano and I am fascinated by the mind of an artist who can keep all of those chords and melodies in their mind while at the same time engaging in the physical activity of playing a piano. But part of what I enjoy about jazz is that my attention does not have to be focused. The artists are focused and I can sit back and listen and allow my mind to wander.

But the experience was different last night. My imagination was captured by the emerging painting. I don't know about the technical aspects of painting, and it was fascinating to see how the colors were applied in bold lines and the image planned out. Colors were mixed on the palette, with very little mixing on the canvas. From my position in the back of the room, it looked like what was being painted were solid colors, but when I approached the canvas during the intermission, what I had thought was solid black was a mixture of blues and purples. The yellows and oranges had a lot of variation.

The scene could have been a sunrise or a sunset, with an area of bright yellow on the horizon. As I watched the painting, I was facing toward the East, so I thought of it as a sunrise, but I suspect the artist was thinking sunset. Somehow, the concept of painting light is much more challenging in my mind than painting a solid object. How does one portray the ever-changing nature of a sunrise or sunset? Yet the scene was unfolding before our eyes.

Occasionally my mind would wander to the music. I'd catch a particularly innovative juxtaposition of melodies that I would have never thought to put together and my mind would follow the music for a while. It was a fascinating process of being engaged in the creative processes and collaboration of others. The small audience was less of an audience and more participants in the process.

I had written a small piece for the back of the program about the relationship of the Church and the arts. There is much more that can be said about the subject and much more thought that I could invest in it. Both the arts and religion are a striving for that which is beyond. The painting is not reality, but it attempts to represent reality in a fresh way - to point beyond itself to the beauties of creation. The church is not God. We don't have a corner on thinking about or praying to God. That happens outside of the church in a million different places. God is not constrained by human institutions. And yet, there is something about the institutional church with its disciplines and commitment to regular worship and prayer that engages us in an increased awareness of the presence of God and the movement of the Holy in our midst.

During the season of Epiphany - the celebration of light - the painting will be hanging in our church as an invitation to reflect on the presence and power of light and how we think about light. The painting is not light itself. In fact, without light one could not even see the painting, but when light is reflected off of the painting, it makes us think of light. It will be interesting to have conversations with members of the congregation about how a painting that does not depict overtly religious scenes of expressly Biblical themes can nonetheless be an inspiration for religious thought and prayer.

We live in a world of incredible beauty and diversity. Our senses are only able to take in part of this beauty and our brains are only able to process a fraction of the reality. What we see and how we see is different from the vision and experience of others. Art is one method of focusing our senses, but it does not give us the same experience of reality. Each person who looks at the picture will see something a little different from what another sees.

God is greater than our ability to imagine or reason. We can't think our way to God. We can't imagine the fullness of God. Each person who encounters God has a unique experience. The institutional church helps to focus that experience for many, but it is not the only way to encounter the holy.

As we live and explore, may we continue to express the joy of art and beauty in this world.

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December 4, 2007 – Stories of the Century



Today I will participate in leading a funeral for a woman who was 98 years old. I have had the privilege of sharing in several such funerals over the years, averaging about two per year of persons who have lived into their late nineties or early 100's. A life that spans nearly a century offers an entirely different perspective than mine. Being in my fifties, I am aware of the sensation of time passing more quickly. A year is a much smaller portion of my life experience than it was when I was in my twenties. I imagine that the sense of time passing quickly doubles for one who nears 100 years old.

The past century has been one of momentous world events. There have been two world wars, American involvement in fighting in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and many other countries of the world. A person in their nineties can remember the great depression and the civil rights movement. Over a third of the events reported in American History books were life events for centurions.

The past century has been one of many different changes. We still have one member of our church who was born before the first powered manned airplane flight. Those who have lived into their nineties remember a time when personal automobiles were very rare and computers had not been imagined. Theirs was a world of hand tools and manual devices as the industrial revolution produced great innovations in how work was done.

Longevity is not the only measure of the value of a person's life, but those who have been blessed to live for many years have great value for our society. Their perspectives and stories reveal a wisdom that is forged only through extended experience and having survived many different kinds of threats and dangers. Their understanding of the nature of time may be more realistic than that of those of us who are caught up in the network of schedules and meetings and deadlines and everyday business.

There is a certain sadness involved in any funeral. The loss is real and even though we have known that this day would surely come, there is no way to truly prepare for it. The death of an elder is by its nature the beginning of an entirely new experience. We have never known life without this person.

So we will gather with reverence and respect and give thanks to God for this remarkable life and for her unique contributions to the lives of others. The crowd will be small. One thing about living so long is that one tends not only to outlive one's peers, but one outlives many people of the next generation as well. The person we gather to honor has experienced more funerals and known more death than any of the rest of us. And as we gather, we will once again be reminded of the frailty of our own existence on this earth. Although some of us will live for many decades, none of us will live forever.

Perhaps our elders have yet more to teach us about dying with dignity and facing the inevitable with grace.

Some have predicted that the coming generations will experience longer lives and that it will become routine for humans to live more than 100 years. There is probably no great blessing in adding a few years to the span of a finite life. But there is no great curse in it, either. Each moment of life is filled with potential for loving and potential for adventure.

It is not how long we live, but how well we live that will matter in the centuries to come.

December 5, 2007 – Alberta Clipper



We keep our eyes on the weather around here. I suppose that it is the same everywhere, but part of what attracts people to this part of the world is the wide variety of outdoor activities. We spend time outdoors and enjoy our connections with weather. Yesterday was warm and windy. The temperature got up to about 65 degrees in the middle of the day. But by mid afternoon the wind had brought colder temperatures and there was talk of an Alberta Clipper. Alberta Clipper is a local name for a major weather system that comes from the northwest, carrying cold and, when we're lucky, moisture. With the major storms that have buffeted the Pacific northwest recently, we've been hoping for our first major snow storm of the season. This morning, however, there is no snow on the ground. Perhaps our promised storm is just delayed.

Whether or not we get the big storms, we have had some dramatic skies. The clouds billow and roll about the hills and the light filters through and around the clouds to give us an ever-changing view. I find myself looking to the sky each opportunity that I get. Each view is different from the previous one.

We live in a world of infinite variety. There is no limit to the number of variations in the view when we look toward the hills or out over the prairies. Our lives are enriched by forces that are beyond our control - forces that do not require our participation, or even our awareness in order to continue. And yet, somehow, we human beings are aware of the world in which we live. Here in our little corner of the world we look out and pay attention to what is going on.

Over the millennia, people have had many different notions of the nature of consciousness. There is general agreement that the brain is essential to consciousness, but the precise location of consciousness within the brain is difficult to locate. It seems that more than a specific location, it is a series of electro-chemical relationships that enable us to be aware of the world and to draw meaning from the signals of our senses. With everything that we have learned so far, mystery remains.

It is a source of joy and wonder to live in a world where so much remains to be discovered. Each day brings the potential for new understandings and the possibilities are unlimited. Even if we were to produce an major breakthrough in the understanding of our observations each day, generations would not come to full understanding. There is more to be discovered, more to be explored, more to understanding.

And we live in the knowledge that there is more to come.

May we be surprised by the gifts of today.

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December 6, 2007 – My Dad



One of the projects that I work on when I have a few minutes is sorting and scanning color slides that we have collected over the years. I am trying to build an archive of digital images as a way of dealing with the inevitable deterioration of the film. Many of the pictures are simply nice to have, memories of another time and of places that we have visited. From time to time, however, a particular image strikes me as unique or special.

Yesterday, I inserted a slide into the scanner and discovered my father looking out at me. It was a younger image of him than I usually carry in my mind. I can tell by the background that he is standing in his store, but before the additions to the buildings and other improvements that he made. In the picture he is young enough to show the incredible enthusiasm and energy that he brought to life, and old enough to show the trustworthiness and wisdom upon which we learned to rely.

Each human being is a web of relationships. We are who we are because of the other people in our lives. We carry within us part of the people who have shaped us and made contributions to our lives. This is obvious in the case of parents. They are a part of our genetic code. But it is true, also of significant teachers, pastors, friends, and others whose spirits are revealed in our values, commitments and ways of living.

I look at the picture of my father and I can remember unloading trucks and stacking feed sacks with him. He could pile 50# bags as high as he could reach, and he worked at a

pace that was hard to imitate. He taught me to work smart, using leverage to move heavy items and lifting only when necessary. "Look at a job and make a plan before you start to work." "Instead of fighting gravity, get gravity to work for you."

One of my first jobs was sweeping the feed warehouse. When I got big enough to move feed bags, I would help load customers' trucks. We kept our inventory moving, stacking new product in the back and moving things forward so that they were delivered in the order we received them. Later I moved on to simple repair tasks and assembling machinery, from there to delivering machinery to customers. There was always work the the shop. And for an incredible number of jobs dad would be there at my side helping, encouraging, and showing me how to do a job.

I suspect that the way I work with others is very similar to the way he worked with me. I know that the hours I work and the passion I have for the things I do reflect his long days and deep commitment to the causes and organizations in which he believed.

Of course, we are not the same person. There are many differences, perhaps most obvious to those who knew us both well. And I have been influenced by many other people over the years. But, staring at the old photo, I am reminded that my character and my identity were not self-built in out of some superior strength of will. I am who I am because of the people in my life who believed in me and who gave of themselves to help me become myself.

How lucky we are to have these photos. Our children were born after my dad died. They never met him face-to-face. But they know him and he is a part of who they are. It is more than the stories we tell or the pictures we view. His presence in their lives is much deeper than that.

Looking at the photograph, I can see myself and sense his life in mine. But I can also see our children, with their ability to work and their caring for other people. And I can sense the presence of countless generations who came before my father and countless generations yet unborn. There is a stream of life to which we belong and, indeed it is much greater than our present moment.

December 7, 2007 – Be Careful Out There



We got a little more snow yesterday and the forecast calls for additional snow today and tomorrow. It seems as if our Habitat for Humanity work days will slow. We just don't have our building enclosed enough to work outdoors in the snow. Yesterday's snow resulted in relatively slippery roads and driving to the church after lunch, I went by an accident that involved at least four cars. There were cars aimed in several different directions with various dents and parts falling off of them. It was on a windy stretch of road and there was a Highway patrol officer and a county sheriff's deputy on the scene, but when I drove by, they were able to do little more than direct traffic. It didn't appear that there were any injuries, but I'm sure that until they got the cars towed away and the people off of the road, there was substantial risk.

It takes a few storms before people remember that it takes longer to stop, that cars don't steer as easily and that you cannot follow as close to the car ahead on slippery roads. Accidents happen and they can happen to anyone, but when we study the events, we discover that many accidents are preventable and that knowledge, skill and caution can increase safety for those who drive in the winter.

I worry most about the younger drivers. They have good motor skills, quick reaction times, and can be excellent drivers, but they also tend to be a bit over-confident and have not always had the experiences that teach caution. We were lucky with the accident yesterday. It is a stretch of road where people tend to drive a bit too fast. The slope of the road and the curves have resulted in lots of cars going into the ditch. In

yesterday's accident, someone slid into the wrong lane and there was a car coming the other direction. Others were unable to stop and the situation got worse.

Long before there were any cars in this country, people were aware of the challenges of winter. It was harder to find food and blizzards made it difficult to tell where one was or which direction to walk. Cold temperatures and the moisture of the snow combined for conditions that were lethal for those who didn't have good survival skills. Folks tended to stay close to home in the winter. It became a time for storytelling and teaching youngsters. Relationships were nurtured and the pace of life slowed.

We seem to be unable to slow our pace, even when the weather suggests that we might. We want to keep going and attending all of our events and activities. When it snows enough for school to be cancelled, the shopping mall will report a day of record sales. People seem to enjoy the challenge of getting around town even when the weather is harsh. Fewer homes are stocked with enough groceries to last for more than a couple of days, so trips to the grocery store are made almost as often in bad weather as in good.

Too much going, however, robs us of winter's potential for telling stories and teaching and learning from each other. We are less likely to live in multi-generational housing units than were our forebears, but we could use the time to get to know one another better and to remember the stories of our people, if only we would slow down and see the weather as a gift instead of an enemy to be conquered.

So for those of you, who like me, will be heading out and about in the snowy weather, be careful out there. We haven't heard all of your stories yet and we want to keep you safe for the days when we do slow down enough to talk and listen.

December 8, 2007 – Holiday Fatigue



Photo by Dick Kettlewell/Rapid City Journal

It is only the eighth of December and already we are beginning to feel a bit of holiday fatigue. We are trying to coordinate schedules so that we can attend some of our favorite holiday concerts and fund-raisers as well as find time to pursue other activities. It isn't easy with all of the events that are scheduled in the month before Christmas. Area schools have holiday concerts and events and most of the musical groups in town have some sort of special concert. Last week we had two holiday concerts in the same day at the church. This week, I'll be traveling from church to nursing home services to a hand bell concert with little time to spare between events. Tonight is the annual Acoustic Christmas concert and gala fund-raiser for Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity. There are special holiday concerts by the symphony and children's chorus and area musical groups of many different types. It isn't possible to attend all of the events.

And it is not just musical concerts. Last week Hospice of the Hills held a candlelight memorial service for families they have served. At least three area funeral chapels are having their own holiday candlelight services. By the time Christmas Eve comes, it would be possible for church members to have attended three or four candlelight services.

The events compete with each other for attention and audience. Individually they are wonderful, high-quality events. Taken together, they crowd the holiday with too much going, and too many events. And almost all of the events are competing for the time

before Christmas, each wanting to get the jump on the other. During the season of Advent, when our religious traditions invite us to slow down, to wait, and to live in anticipation the social calendar has an entirely different message: "Hurry up and celebrate!" Part of Advent for me is the anticipation of that delicious calm that descends on Christmas day when there are fewer events and more time to just sit and think. The season of trying to do everything promises a few days of doing less.

I keep thinking that our community will reach a point of overload, and perhaps that time has come. Some holiday concerts have reported disappointing turnouts. The weather may be providing some challenges for events. I have heard of some events that have been cancelled due to the snow in our area. But for many participants the weather just adds to the challenge with walks to shovel and driveways to clear, and added time for driving.

It is easy to forget the purpose of our celebrations amidst the hustle and bustle and busy days of the season. Perhaps I need to adopt a new Advent discipline - choosing one event to miss each week in order to make time for quiet contemplation. It isn't a natural behavior for me and choosing would be difficult. But it is an idea that is worthy of consideration.

In the meantime, I live in anticipation and expectation of the Christmas "day off" mood. After all, anticipation and expectation were among the emotions that preceded the birth of the Christ child long ago.

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December 9, 2007 – Sorting



We have a couple of on-going projects at our home that involve sorting through old photographs. To understand the size of this job, it is important to note that Susan's grandmother, Amy, was an excellent amateur photographer in the days when cameras were rare. And Susan's father was also a very good amateur photographer. We have had access to quality cameras and have shared a love of photographs for our adult lives as well. The result of three generations of making and collecting photographs is an organizational problem that has gotten a bit out of hand. There are drawers and boxes of photographs. There are carousels and cases of slides. There are envelopes and notebooks of negatives. Our digital archive project now exceeds 10,000 images. And there are albums enough to fill a bookshelf.

The photographs are treasures to us. And we know, from the experience of our family, that some of the photographs will be treasures to the next generations. But in order for them to be meaningful, they need to be sorted. Not every photograph in our house is worth keeping. Many photographs need some form of identification of the place and the people in order for the viewers to know what they are looking at. Digital archives need keywords attached to the images to aid in sorting and finding the image that is wanted at a particular time.

Sorting photographs is a good way to sort memories as well. When we go through photographs together, we soon begin to tell stories of the events and people whose

images we have. And the stories of our lives need to be sorted periodically in order for them to be meaningful.

Our people have been sorting through our stories for many generations. There have been events in the story of our people that have prompted organized collection of stories. The questions of “Who are we?” and “Where did we come from?” forced our people to decide which of the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would need to be kept and told over and over. We had to decide what stories of the Exodus from Egypt were essential to be taught to each new generation of children. We collected poetry and proverbs. The great effort of Solomon to collect all wisdom and knowledge into a central location was a colossal failure from many perspectives, but even that effort produced collections of common words that we carry with us wherever we go and read over and over again. Gospel writers did not have the ability to produce complete biographies and had to choose which were the most important stories about Jesus to incorporate into their narratives. Letters of Paul and other early church leaders were collected and sorted. Some are incorporated into the Bible, others are not. Many have been lost forever.

The process of sorting continues even after the canon of the Bible was established and our leaders have declared that it is complete. The Consultation on Common Texts meets regularly to deliberate on which scriptures should be used on which occasions for public worship. Individuals and groups develop plans of reading and guides for the study of our scriptures. Historians and theologians assist with the interpretation of these texts so that we can understand their meaning for our time.

Sorting is one of the essential tasks of each generation. Which treasures to keep and which to discard is an unavoidable choice. And the criteria for making decisions changes with the collected knowledge and wisdom.

We feel especially fortunate to have occasional opportunities to sort when our parents and children are present. The wisdom and enthusiasm of multiple generations adds to the richness of the experience and the quality of the stories shared. Of course, we know that sorting is a task that will never be fully finished. We will do our part, but there will be some things left unsorted when our time has come to its end. Some of the sorting will be left to future generations. Some will occur naturally when we move or invite others into our home. Occasionally items are lost that we meant to keep and often items are kept that we cannot remember why we didn't discard them years ago.

So whenever we have a few moments, we try to do a little sorting. It is a worthy task, but one that we will never finish. There will always be something to do and for that we are grateful.

December 10, 2007 – Sanctuary



News of the shootings at a church and a mission training center in Colorado is beginning to circulate in our community. Details are sketchy, but a man who grew up in our town was among those injured in the attacks. It is not the first time that there have been shootings in churches, and there is nothing in the news that indicates why this particular church was chosen. What was interesting to note was the sophistication in the response of the church. It was clear that they had a plan in place to name who would be the spokesperson to speak to the media. An announcement said that the church's security plans were in place and that they had worked according to plan.

I don't know many churches that have security plans, much less the ability to put one in place and then be ready to talk to the press after a crisis. New Life Church is not a typical congregation, however. Membership is hard to count in mega churches because they don't keep the same kind of records that other congregations do, but the church has a stadium-sized worship area that can accommodate 10,000 people. Worship services are intense technical productions with multiple sound and light consoles, video screens and jumbotron projection systems. The church is a self-sustaining enterprise in terms of leadership, with most of its leaders recruited from within. There are a number of schools and academies for training church leaders and most programs of preparation for leadership take less than a year. The church was in the headlines not too long ago when its founding pastor, who at the time was president of the National Association of Evangelicals, was dismissed in a scandal involving solicitation of sex from male prostitutes. None of this has any apparent connection with the shootings.

The church is big and visible and its services are charged with emotion. One can imagine that someone might get worked up and angry and even have harsh words for the church or its leaders. Bringing a gun into the church and shooting people is another matter entirely. Churches have a long tradition of being places of sanctuary without weapons or the need for security measures. But the definition of church is in transition in our culture. Independent organizations without historical or structural ties to other churches are common. Churches in many locations have grown into extremely large organizations that provide a wide variety of services to people, including many that are not traditional roles for churches. Retail sales, theatrical lighting and technical effects, coffee shops and health clubs are added to more traditional fellowship groups, education classes and day care services.

And the big churches have security systems and armed guards that are modeled on those provided by shopping malls and amusement parks. And recent news has shown us that shopping malls can be dangerous places when an individual with a gun starts to shoot.

It may be that in our culture there is no place of sanctuary - no place that is truly safe.

Although such incidents are not totally unknown in the rest of the world, the United States has more incidences of shooting of random victims in public places than the rest of the world combined. The sense of peace that we have is an illusion. We live in a violent society and no place is immune to the violence.

In the midst of this culture, we will continue to provide a place of sanctuary in our church. We will not react to this incident with fear and the raising of barriers. We will not be hiring security guards. We will, rather, develop our community as a gathering of friends, who know and trust each other. While we want to grow and to welcome others into our midst, we have no intention of becoming so large that we become a gathering of strangers. We'll leave the mass stadium events and technical showcases to others. We won't be patterning our facilities or services after other large scale operations such as theme parks, shopping malls or mega churches.

It will not make us immune to violence. But we will form a community that is able to respond to a violent world with compassion and care and support for the victims. We seek to have the capacity to reach out to others in appropriate ways to provide for the needs of our community and our world. Our sanctuary will not be protected by physical barriers, but rather offer peace that is based on knowing each other, trust, and lives of quiet faithfulness. And we will pray for the victims of violence wherever it occurs.

December 11, 2007 – Oranges



It was a tradition, when I was a child, for each of us to get a large orange in our Christmas stocking. The tradition came from at least one generation before ours. Fresh fruit was a rare treat in the winter for a family on a farm in rural North Dakota. But at Christmas oranges would arrive by train all the way from Florida and they became a part of the tradition of the holiday.

We no longer slip oranges into stockings for Christmas, but we do have a tradition of good, fresh fruit in our home. A local service club sells fruit at this time of the year as a fund-raising activity and we almost always purchase fruit for our family. However, it isn't as rare or as special. Our stores are filled with quality fruit every day. The distance between the orchards and our home has been bridged by a network of shipping that includes large cargo ships, aircraft, and trucks that can span our globe in a matter of days. Not only fresh fruit, but fresh fish and exotic foods from far away places have become common and expected items in our stores.

I have been told that the amount of fuel used in transporting food is a large factor in the emission of greenhouse gasses. One source claimed that the average American could do more to reduce global warming by the decisions about what we eat than by decisions about what we drive. I have read several different profiles of individuals and families who have decided to eat only foods that are grown locally. The author, Barbara Kingsolver has documented a year of her family's quest to realign themselves with the food chain in "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle." It is the only nonfiction book by this award-

winning author. Like her other books, it is very well written and speaks of the bounty and abundance of life and the joys of growing, harvesting and preparing their own food.

We have developed a lifestyle that is filled with food grown by people we have never met in far-away places, but there have been some changes in our lifestyle and food consumption in recent years. About a quarter of the coffee we drink comes from a women's co-operative in Costa Rica and we carry the coffee home with us when we travel there for visits with our sister church. The balance comes from a small fair-trade importer who is actively involved in community development in Costa Rica. There is a lot of transportation involved. You have to go a long way to find coffee.

Our corner of the world produces protein. Cattle and sheep have replaced the buffalo that once roamed the prairies, but local ranchers, the Inter-tribal bison cooperative, and the Sinte Gleska bison ranch produce a supply of local bison. With adequate storage, a family could live on local game. Deer, elk, antelope and turkeys abound. Our land is also reasonable for growing vegetables, if one has a source of water. We still have tomatoes from our summer garden for our table and we are not what one would call serious gardeners. We could have grown more sweet corn and canned it for eating in the winter. One doesn't have to go too far to find wheat for flour.

But if we were to eat only food that is locally produced, we would have less fruit in our diet. We could grow raspberries and strawberries in our garden. Chokecherries could be harvested within a short distance of our home. Apples, plums and pears can be grown here, but require patience, time and a constant battle with insects and worms. Family favorites such as bananas come from Costa Rica and oranges and grapefruit come from Texas, Florida or California.

A trip through our cupboards would reveal olive oil, spices, and a host of other foods that simply cannot be obtained from local sources.

It is unlikely that we will make as dramatic a shift in our lifestyle as did the Kingsolver family. Yet, we will continue to become more aware of the foods we eat and the full cost, not only in terms of money but also in terms of impact on the world, of the foods we eat. Certain items may become a little more rare in our diet. And scarcity can make us appreciate them even more.

Maybe it is time to return to the tradition of an orange in our Christmas stockings. At least it is time to think about the food that we eat and the effect that our decisions have on others.

Over the years, we've tried a variety of filing systems and ways of reducing paperwork, but it seems that a certain amount is inevitable. At least once paper has been run through the shredder the recycling center is set up to accept it and we even use a bit of shredded paper as packing material for holiday gifts that are sent through the mail, though the weight of paper makes other packing materials often more desirable.

But there is something that seems so wasteful about the way our society uses paper. Solicitations and advertisements that we do not want come to our home because sending out a lot is an easier way to get them to the target audience than sending selected mailings. We find ourselves doing the same thing at the church from time to time - we send mailings to our entire mailing list in order to get the bulk mailing rate or to avoid the staff time of sorting and selecting recipients. We often send the same information to our people multiple times in multiple formats to make sure that we have communicated the information we are trying to distribute.

High speed printers and copy machines are in every office and making 100 copies of anything is as simple as making ten or even one. I've been known to make extra copies of worksheets for a class when I don't know how many people will be coming. Somehow, it seems better to have to recycle a few copies than to run short and have people share.

It would be easy to blame others for the mountains of paper in my office and home. The truth, however, is that I am part of the problem. Part of the solution is a change in my thinking. The well-worn mantra of reduce, re-use, recycle really makes sense.

I can reduce the number of copies I make and the amount of paper I use. I can re-use sheets of paper when the back is blank, I can increase the amount of paper I recycle.

Perhaps I should begin by making a note. Or printing out this blog to remind myself.

Just kidding!

Good luck in your battle with excess paper today.

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December 13, 2007 – Caroling



Molly organized the confirmation class and the youth group to go Christmas caroling at Westhills Village last night. They met at the church for supper and an opportunity to sing through the carols and then went over to the retirement center, where they sang in the lobby just after dinner. A good group of the residents gathered to share Christmas cookies and to hear the group sing the familiar carols.

It was interesting to see the youth arrive at Westhills. They are a confident and self-assured group of people who are at home in a wide variety of settings. But I could tell as they came into the building that this was not a familiar place or a familiar culture to them. We have tended to stratify our culture, dividing up by age. No one under the age of 50 is allowed to live at Westhills and most residents are in their seventies or older. Chances are the residents of Westhills would feel out of place were they to enter a middle school during the lunch hour.

Christmas caroling is a good way to share the joy of Christmas and to reach out to others during the holiday season. I'm sure that Molly, when deciding to organize the caroling party, was thinking both of the fun the youth would have and the joy the seniors would feel when the youth came to visit. She might have even imagined that the residents at Westhills were lonely and in need of visits.

Actually, living at Westhills is not a lonely existence. It is filled with social activities and events and most of the residents get out for community events on a regular basis. Even

those who have a tendency to be a bit isolated need to get out of their apartments and eat in a common dining hall once a day. In some ways, for people who have been private people, the constant contact with other people is one of the challenges of adjusting to life at Westhills. It isn't loneliness that the carolers overcame last night, it was the barriers between ages. One of the residents commented to me, "We get lots of singers around here, but it is good to hear young voices."

There are not very many opportunities in our contemporary culture for people of different ages to get together. Schools are graded. Elementary and high school students don't mix. Most clubs and social groups are stratified by age. Churches are becoming more stratified by age. Church growth experts assert that one of the ways to make a church grow is to pick a particular age of people and plan activities and events for that specific group.

And the caroling party didn't really provide much of an opportunity for the mixing of people of different ages. The youth walked in the front door and sang in the lobby. They were clustered in a group and they quickly left when the singing was over. There were a few minutes at the beginning and end of the singing where people greeted one another. Some of the youth are probably unaware that the people for whom they sang live in independent apartments and that there are other areas of the facility for assisted living and nursing home care. The adults in the room didn't have an opportunity to learn about the interests of individual youth.

But the event was important nonetheless. One event can't build all of the connections that we need for a healthy society. But it does open a few doors. The youth learned that people who are decades older than them are not scary and that the place where they live is really a very nice place. The seniors were reminded of the energy and enthusiasm of the youth and saw that not all youth fit the stereotypes portrayed on television.

And perhaps when they meet at church or in another setting they might acknowledge that they have met and pause for a bit of conversation.

The earth wasn't transformed last night. Society wasn't reconstructed. Lives will, for the most part, go back to normal. It wasn't dramatic. Nonetheless it was a good time and an opportunity that I'm glad we didn't miss.

We're all in this life together: old and young and in-between. And we need each other more than we realize. And it is good to be together, if only for a few moments.

December 14, 2007 – A Little Help from our Friends



The “Thursday Crew” of our local Habitat for Humanity affiliate helped us on our house yesterday and we had a couple of new volunteers on our crew as well. The large crew of volunteers really lifted our spirits. We accomplished a great deal. The north side and two ends of the roof are sheeted, one of the porches is framed and the other is laid out. If the weather cooperates, we will have the roof sheeting all in place by the end of Saturday’s workday. We’ll be ready for the delivery of roofing, windows and doors within a week. We might have the house enclosed by Christmas.

The snow and drop in the number of volunteers had been frustrating me. The few faithful workers who show up for every workday were getting a little tired. We enjoy working together and we weren’t really noticing our frustration, but the gift of additional workers and a nice day really made a difference. Having so much progress in one day gave us visible evidence that we are moving toward our goal.

It illustrated in such a visible way the truth that has been there all along: We are not in this alone. The vision of simple, decent housing for all of God’s people is one that is shared by many. The conviction that the economics of the Bible are real-world economics that work in our everyday economy is illustrated again and again.

Of course the job isn’t easy. It requires a lot of dedication and persistence, sweat and intelligence. And it requires something that we are often reluctant to admit: we have to ask for help. The amount of money and volunteer hours required to build homes is

significant. This is not our project, at least not ours alone. We are attempting to do God's work and God's team is bigger than ours.

We have known this all along. But there are days when we convince ourselves that we are doing the work and that we are accomplishing the task. The fallacy of this thinking shows in our weariness and frustration and the lack of progress in some days of work. And the truth of God's wisdom and grace is illustrated when others join in the work and lift more than boards and hammers. They lift our spirits as well.

There will be more frustrating days and there will be more setbacks. But this week, we are basking in the joy of friendships built and strengthened by working together. There are many gifts in this world. The beauty of the earth and sky, the wonder of animals, the joy of family, the power of love. But among the sweetest is the gift of meaningful work. For me, at least, the joy of finishing a job is nothing compared to the joy of knowing that the job is bigger than me and that work will remain tomorrow and in the days to come. What we are doing is more than the work of a single generation - we've been given the gift of an invitation to participate in something bigger than ourselves.

And who knows, one of these days our little crew may arrive at someone else's work site just in time to be of genuine help and to raise their spirits. Because when we finish this home, there are still many more to be built.

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December 15, 2007 – Listening to the Children



We attended the Christmas program at our daughter's day care yesterday afternoon. It has been a while since we attended a daycare Christmas program. Our daughter is the teacher, now. The children sang a few Christmas songs and there were cookies and juice for all after the program. The children were in an excited and animated mood and they knew the words to the songs. The room was filled with parents, grandparents and friends.

The daycare center is a place that puts the children first. The room is set up for them, and the furniture is all their size. There were no chairs for adults, who had to stand as we watched. Security systems and video cameras are installed to keep the children safe and there are plenty of well-trained staff persons to make sure that they have the attention and care that they need.

Children arrive at the day care center as early as 7:45 a.m. and can stay until 6:00 p.m. Although most children don't spend the full ten hours at the center, it is typical for a child to spend more than half of his or her waking hours at the center five days per week. The staff at the center get to know the children as well as the parents. Weekends are the only time the children see their parents in the daylight during the winter. The center accepts infants as soon as the parents bring them and cares for children until they are old enough for kindergarten.

Quality childcare is essential because so many families rely on the income from both parents. The long days at the day care center reflect the long days that the parents are working.

The program was unique precisely because moments like it are so rare in the lives of the children. For a few minutes they were the center of attention for both the teachers at the day care center and for their parents, families and friends. Most of the time, the children don't get their teachers and parents at the same time, and their schedules are arranged around the needs and convenience of their parents. By necessity of their busy schedules, parents drop off their children at the center and focus their attention elsewhere for most of the day. The system is far from perfect. Children need more time with their own parents. The cost of childcare seems very high to parents and is a challenge for many, but is insufficient to provide enough salary for the workers to insure stability. The turn over in day care workers is so high that the children are used to thinking of the adults in their lives as people that are here one day and gone the next. The time, energy, and love we invest in their lives is essential. Any neglect or abuse has effects that last for many generations.

But the system is also marked by people who genuinely care for the children and who are willing to invest their time and energy in meeting the needs of the children and providing for their care and education.

So for a few minutes yesterday, we all listened to the children. And we all remembered how precious and important they are - not only to their families - but to all of our community.

We need to listen to the children more often.

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December 16, 2007 – Layers of Tradition



Christmas is a season that is filled with traditions. We have special meals, special events, special clothing, special decorations and other traditions that have become a part of our lives. There is a fair amount of repetition of what we have done before. Sometimes we are aware of the origins of the tradition and sometimes we can remember little more than “It’s the way we’ve always done it.” Like many families, we have Christmas traditions that come from the homes where we grow up that were blended when we were married. We’ve added traditions that developed over the years and were introduced by our children and others. We have decorations that have been acquired over a long period of time from a wide variety of sources. Some traditions fade as new ones arise, but others are treasured and kept each year. Our celebration reflects layers of tradition.

A similar blending of traditions is part of the celebrations at the church. Generations of church school children and teachers have presented many different programs over the years, and a lot of traditions have developed. Different members of the congregation focus their attention in different places as we prepare for the celebration of Christmas. For some, music is the center of their traditions, for others it is the poinsettia plants, for others the candles, and others focus on the costumes for the pageant. Our 7:00 p.m. Christmas Eve service reflects the many layers of tradition with different members of the congregation seeing different elements as the essential traditions. As a result there is a blending of elements and traditions in the service that leaves little room for variation and change over the years.

This layering of tradition did not begin with our generation. The origins of celebrating Christmas near the winter solstice was introduced by the church because it was already a time of celebrating. Before Christianity became the dominant religion much of Europe had various forms of holidays around the shortest days of the year with special foods and events. The church rejected some of the elements of these celebrations and co-opted others. The use of candles and other lights seemed to fit with the notion of a baby born at night. Gifts for children blended with the story of the gifts of the Magi to the infant Jesus. A brief look at any church's celebration of Christmas will reveal traditions that came from the stories of the Bible as well as traditions that came from other sources. Some traditions originated within the church and have been adopted by the wider society. The stories of the generosity of Saint Nicholas of Myra grew and were changed into the contemporary Santa Claus, whose modern outfit comes more from the advertising of Coca Cola than from the way the saint dressed.

Whenever we examine our traditions, we discover that they have been blended from many different sources. A pure celebration that draws from only Biblical sources would seem incomplete to us. The Bible makes no mention of food in the birth narratives. Outside of the swaddling cloths, there is no mention of clothing. It is a bit of a stretch to get the notion of lights from the "one true light" mentioned in the Gospel of John and few decorations have biblical origins. Even traditional nativity scenes are far from accurate in terms of the Bible. Shepherds and Magi come from two different books of the Bible and there is no evidence that their visits were at the same time. The notion of the manger where the child was laid being in an outbuilding, shed or barn comes from a misunderstanding about where people in the ancient near east lived.

We draw meaning from a variety of sources and interpretations and the many layers of our traditions reflect the complex stories of our people. We have always lived within communities, not separated ourselves from them. The distinction between secular and sacred blurs in practical living. God is present everywhere. There is a touch of holiness in the most mundane of places. And the secular world of marketing and the economy reaches into every corner of our lives. We are shaped by the times in which we live.

Sometimes, as we celebrate, it is good to reflect on the sources of the various traditions and stories. And it is important to remind ourselves that our traditions are living traditions that are constantly being shaped and changed. As we remember the past we acknowledge that we also have a future.

Advent, the season of preparation for Christmas is a good time to reflect and to recognize the layers of tradition in which we live.

December 17, 2007 – Into the Woods



Busy professional and personal schedules have changed the notion of “day off” for us in recent weeks. Like many other busy families, we have a long list of activities and demands for our time. So today is the day when we can find time enough to head out into the hills to get our Christmas tree. We could buy a beautiful tree from the Boys’ club, but we prefer to make our own selection and know that our tree has come from an area where thinning will help the health of the forest.

But far more importantly than the selection of the tree is our personal need to get out into the woods. Our lives are often too full of cars and meetings and time inside buildings. Living on the edge of the national forest creates wonderful opportunities for hiking and exploring and getting in touch with the natural world. And, all too often, we do not take advantage of these opportunities.

Today should be a great day. The temperatures will be mild and the snow cover is light. It has been long enough since the last snowfall that it will be easy to see the tracks where others have gone and find our own section of woods to hike. I know a place where a simple creek crossing will separate us from the places where most people go in search of a tree. Warm clothes, a bow saw and a little time are all that are needed. A thermos of hot coffee can make the return to the pickup a treat.

We will have a fresh tree to put in our living room that will stay fresh through Epiphany Sunday. We know from experience that our cats love having the tree and it provides a

focus for our family as we gather for our Christmas celebrations. The decorations have been collected over the 34 years of our marriage. Some of them came from our childhood homes and others have been made by family and friends over the years. Instead of seeking the “perfect” tree and covering it with matched ornaments, we prefer a tree that has a unique shape and our eclectic collection of decorations.

Since we have additional family members arriving this evening, it will be a bit of a rush to get the house decorated and ready, and there will be more decorating that will be done after our relatives arrive. However, we learned long ago that it is the people who make the holiday and not the decorations or other preparations. We will have plenty of good healthy food and a week from today the pace of our lives will slow to allow time for visiting and sharing with our families.

The gift of the forest today will be a tree, and the tree comes with a bonus: a hike in the woods. The way to responsibly harvest a Christmas tree is to walk far enough away from the road to locate a place where cutting a single tree will leave room for the remaining trees to grow quickly. Once the snow has filled in my tracks, the only sign of my presence will be a small stump close to the ground that will quickly become home to insects and return to the soil to nurture new trees.

Fresh air, a beautiful day for a walk, and the return to family and home. Life is indeed good and today is a blessing.

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December 18, 2007 – The Angel



The angel that sits on top of our Christmas tree wasn't designed to be a tree ornament. Years ago, my mother made the angel by knitting a cover for a few pieces of styrofoam. She glued wings and other features to make a decoration that could sit on a table. That year as we decorated our tree, we had not star or angel for the top of the tree and by making a small hole in the base of the styrofoam, the angel sat comfortably on top of the tree. A tradition was born. The angel has been at the top of our tree for all of the lives of our children. They can't imagine our tree without that particular angel.

The tradition of angels goes back to the earliest celebrations of Christmas. In Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus, angels are used by God as messengers in several places. Angels appear to Elizabeth and Zechariah, to Mary and Joseph, and angels announce the birth to the shepherds. It is likely that our notion of angels is at least partially different from the beliefs of some of the first hearers of the Gospel story.

The idea of monotheism - the believe that there is only one God - did not develop quickly. Even after Abraham and Sarah proclaimed that there is only one God and that God is in every place, the notion that there were many different gods who had different powers and areas of concern persisted. The temptation to place faith in different gods accompanied our people as they left Egypt and wandered in the wilderness. Each time our people encountered different people with different faith, some were influenced by the new beliefs.

The idea of angels may have developed in part as a theological answer to polytheism. Instead of many gods who go back and forth from heaven to earth, there is one God, whose home is heaven and messengers are sent to earth to communicate with people. It explained the experience of receiving an idea from a human that later turned out to be a truly holy thought. The messengers that bring news that Abraham and Sarah will have a child, though carrying laughable news, turn out to be right. Such a message must be a sign from God and the ones who bring it must be special.

Angels became the name that people applied to many who carried God's news in human form. People being complex thinkers and the Bible being a complex book, there are, however, others who carry God's message. Prophets speak the truth of God's call to the people to justice and peace, but they are not called angels. It is almost as if angels carry good news from God and prophets carry a message of judgment.

Throughout the centuries theologians have debated and considered the nature of angels. Are angels special assistants to God? Do angels always have a physical body or do they change? Are angels people who have died and gone to heaven who are appointed to leave heaven temporarily with a message? How big (or how small) are angels?

The idea that God's message can arrive in the form of a human being, or at least a being that appears to be human, also carries theological problems: If God is all powerful and in every place, why is a messenger needed? If angels are required to carry messages from God, are they also required to carry prayers to God? Is there a hierarchy of angels with some having more power and responsibility than others? Are some archangels and others just voices in the heavenly choir?

The concept of angels continues to change as the generations pass.

For us the angel on the top of the tree is not a statement about adherence to any particular idea about angels. It is a simple symbol that God has sent good news to a world that needs to hear good news. We are not alone. The limits we perceive are not final. Death is not the end. It is good news. And that small figure of yarn and styrofoam is a reminder of something much bigger than a tree or the decorations of the season. God comes to us directly - in terms we can understand - in human form. And even though we can't fathom all of the details, we somehow get the message. And the message is good news indeed.

December 19, 2007 – Spirit



Our neighborhood has some families who work very hard at outdoor lighting displays as a part of their Christmas celebrations. Lights on the house, lights on trees and bushes, candy canes, deer, Santa Claus and reindeer, colored lights, icicle lights, white lights, flashing lights, and LED's - We even see an occasional nativity set, complete with electric Mary, Joseph and Jesus. It is fun to drive around and look at all of the lights. There are companies who market lighting tours for those who want to ride in a limousine and check out all of the lights.

I am sometimes amazed at the amount of time and money that people are willing to invest in these displays. While I see nothing wrong with their efforts, we have chosen not to express ourselves in the same way. Our decorating is mostly on the inside of our home and though we do put lights on our Christmas tree, there aren't a lot of lights involved in our style of celebrating Christmas.

A few years ago a neighbor, trying to gently coax me into some outdoor lights, said, "Come on, show a little holiday spirit." It is a curious phrase and reminds me of high school days, when school spirit was something that was expressed in how hoarse one was on the day after the big game. I am not sure that spirit is most frequently expressed in outward and visible signs.

I am, however, genuinely interested in spirit. The powerful and energizing presence of God in our lives that moves through the very core of our being is a powerful motivation

for living and for being engaged in the world. Like the Hebrew “ruah” and the Greek “pneuma,” our English word, “spirit” is connected with our word for breath. To inspire, literally means to infuse with breath. To expire is to have no breath of life left. Like the air that enters our lungs and the oxygen that comes from the air to sustain our lives, God’s spirit becomes a part of our innermost being and is the source of life itself.

Christmas, for me, comes as a whisper. In the flicker of the flame of a single candle the incredible mystery of God’s presence is expressed. In the birth of a child in a common room without the notice of the world’s powerful and rich, God is with us. In the breath of life, the holy enters into the commonplace and dwells in the every day.

I love the holiday lights. I would never discourage anyone who wants to make a big display. But it is not the only way to experience the spirit of Christmas. In the smallest and most dimly-lit of homes the miracle of Christmas continues. God is expressed in human form - spirit made flesh - incarnation - Emmanuel - God is with us.

Perhaps that is part of what makes the spirit so powerfully intriguing to me. We do not control its coming. We do not control its expression. We can’t measure or evaluate its presence. We don’t always know the signs to recognize the spirit. It is not a contest of the biggest or the brightest.

“The word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. And we have beheld its glory.” The true glory of the season shines brighter than a million bulbs - brighter than a million stars.

And the best signs of the spirit won’t be taken down and stored for eleven months of the year.

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December 20, 2007 – Still Waiting



The length of Advent varies, depending on which day of the week Christmas lands. Advent begins four Sundays before December 25. This year with Christmas on a Tuesday, Advent is one day longer than last year, but several days shorter than if Christmas were a Saturday. I've had several conversations with people who wish it were a bit longer. They have many preparations to complete, purchases to make, and errands to do. The question, "Are you ready for Christmas?" is a favorite topic for short conversations from the grocery store checkout line to the church.

And yet much of the community looks like Christmas has already arrived. Christmas carols are playing in lots of places. Christmas concerts have been held for weeks. The town is decked out and decorated for the season.

But we are still waiting.

And, in a sense, it is not possible to be fully prepared. There are organized persons who will have completed their shopping, wrapping, baking, cleaning, decorating and other activities on schedule. And others will be working right up to the last minute to complete tasks. But Christmas still holds to the power to surprise us. Like the birth of any child, not matter how anticipated, no matter how prepared, incarnation takes us by surprise. The best of our imagination combined with the wisdom of those who have experienced the birth of many children will not prepare new parents for the first glimpse of a newborn

baby. The most sophisticated theology and deepest faith does not fully prepare one for a genuine encounter with Christ.

Like all communities, ours has individuals who are nearing the end of their lives. Many have come to terms with the reality of death, made preparations, and are at peace with their families and with God. But death comes on its own time. And often the path to the end of life is filled with an increasing number of chronic conditions. Living with disability can, for many, be more difficult than facing death. Once one has accepted the reality of death, it can be difficult to accept the reality of living. When someone tells me that she or he is ready for death, I wonder if she or he is ready for the rest of life. Waiting can be a tough reality.

And when we wait for a long time, we lose our alertness. The edge of anticipation is dulled by the reality of day to day living. Advent is our annual reminder to keep awake and to live with an alertness for the things that are yet to come. Even though we think we know what lies ahead, there are still many surprises.

Christmas comes on a set day. We know when it will happen. It wasn't that way for Mary and Joseph, and it isn't that way for most of the events of our lives. As genuine as our celebrations may be, we know that more of life is anticipation and waiting than occasions of celebration.

And waiting can be a very positive experience. There is joy in anticipation. Hope is born of the realization that this is not the end. Love grows deeper through time. A deep peace descends when waiting is accepted. Despite the cultural push for instant gratification. Waiting can be sweet indeed and those who miss the experience of waiting miss much of living.

It is often said that "the best things in life are worth the wait."

Perhaps the best of living is the waiting.

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December 21, 2007 – Windows



Yesterday was a beautiful day for working on the Habitat house, with the high temperature near 50 degrees. The melting snow on the construction site meant a lot of mud, but we improvised a pathway of scrap boards and kept working. We finished putting the sheeting on the roof. The shingles were delivered. We rolled out the tar paper on the roof and nailed down the first row of shingles. While one crew was working on the roof, another was installing windows. The result was dramatic. By the end of the day our house was enclosed. We won't have to shovel snow from the inside any more.

There is a lot of work that needs to be done before we are finished. Plumbing and wiring will be subcontracted, but we have lots of sheet rock to hang, and the interior walls are not framed in one half of the duplex. On the outside we have the rest of the shingles, siding, soffits, and fascia to install. The shingling will go quickly. The siding may wait for a break in the weather. The hip roof means that we have no gable ends that need siding, so that process will be a bit easier than some homes.

For now, we can take a little Christmas break and know that the house is safe. And we can return to work soon knowing that we will have crews to finish the work. The increase in volunteers in the last couple of weeks has made a big difference. Having the house enclosed is a major turning point in the construction process. We go from framing to finishing.

Of course, when this house is finished, we will need to be building another. The work of providing simple, decent and affordable housing for people is far from accomplished. Too many families are living in sub-standard housing. Too many children have to move multiple times each school year because their family cannot find or afford adequate housing. When viewed from the perspective of the huge problem that is before our society, our efforts seem very small. But big problems are solved one step at a time. And the financial structure of Habitat for Humanity means that the more we build, the more we are able to build. Income from mortgage payments helps fund new construction.

Back in April, we devised a brochure that envisioned having the families in this duplex by Christmas. Multiple delays in our project has put us at least two months behind schedule. We are delayed, but not deterred. Like the whole world in the season of Advent, our families are still waiting. By now, however, we have enough experience to know that Easter is coming. There will be trials and problems to be solved, but we will finish these homes and the families will be able to move in.

So today is a day to pause and enjoy to the progress to this point. I'll drive my family by the site and show off the construction when they come for the holidays. We've got walls and a roof and windows.

And as the days pass and 2007 gives way to 2008, we'll keep building.

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December 22, 2007 – Counting the Days



When I was a young child, there was a huge sense of anticipation about Christmas. We would count the days and know exactly how many days until Christmas. The newspaper would report the number of shopping days left in that time when not every day was a shopping day. When Christmas got close, down to three or four days, the excitement was almost unbearable. The days seemed to get longer and the wait was difficult.

As time went by, the anticipation of Christmas and the counting of days was focused on our children. As the days seemed to get longer for them, they seemed to be getting shorter for us. We had a long list of tasks that needed to be accomplished and we learned to divide up the chores and consult frequently to make sure that our work was coordinated.

Now our children are adults. But there is great excitement in our household, because our children are coming for Christmas. They arrive on Christmas Eve and we are counting the days. While there are still many tasks to be accomplished and preparations to make, a bit of the sense of “I can’t wait!” has returned to our lives.

Yesterday was snowy and blustery all day with warmer temperatures and freezing rain in the morning and a bit of snow in the afternoon. The winds were high and in the afternoon the Interstate highway was closed, stranding homecoming college students at Wall, about 50 miles east of town. The shopping mall and other area stores were busy despite the slippery parking lots. Sanding trucks were making the rounds to keep the

city streets from becoming hazards, but there were still slippery spots on the side streets. I am sure that the conditions slowed some people in their rushing about town.

From a theological perspective, Christ comes whether or not we are ready. The gift of Emmanuel - God with us - is given on God's terms in God's time. We make preparations, but you can never be truly ready. There is always an element of surprise and wonder and awe in any encounter with God.

We will have a few more days of rushing about and getting ready. There are service plans to complete, an unfinished sermon on my computer, and I am working on a funeral service for the day after Christmas. There are little details, such as hymnals to put out in the sanctuary, a star light to put up for the Christmas Eve service and candles to put out in the pews. There will be time for all of the tasks.

But we are counting the days. The sense of anticipation is building. And joyful anticipation is a good feeling.

It is good to be waiting.

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December 23, 2007 – The Longest Night



The ancients didn't have access to all of our modern tools for observing the universe, and while they were very accurate in their observations of the movements of stars and planets, there was some variation in dates and counting. Our calendar doesn't quite line up with the solstice, when the sun is at its greatest angle on the other side of the equator from our point of view. Solstice usually occurs on December 21 or 22, but can be as early as the 20th or as late as the 23rd. Solstice occurred yesterday, making it the shortest day of the year. From now until June the days get longer for those in the northern hemisphere while they get shorter for folks in the southern hemisphere. Both Christmas and New Years are holidays that have part of their roots in the celebration of the beginning of lengthening days. Traditions such as keeping a fire burning all night long, parties, and other celebrations are more ancient than Christianity.

We tend to separate the observance of Christmas and New Years, an attempt to separate the sacred and secular elements of the celebrations, but our traditions blur and our celebrations contain elements from a wide variety of sources. And Christianity is a world-wide religion, with more than half of its adherents celebrating near the summer solstice, when the nights are short and the days are long. An all-night fire in Australia, for example, is more likely to accompany a beach party than the traditional northern yule log warming the hearth all night long.

But on our calendar, Christmas and New Years come exactly a week apart every winter and mark a week of celebrations and activities. Few contemporary Americans observe

the full 12 days of Christmas and most of our celebrations are reserved for just two days. But those two days are almost universally observed as a holiday and having them a week apart makes for a festive season.

The solstice was cold and clear in our part of the world. The clear skies gave us lots of moonlight and the shortest night of the year was far from the darkest. The high winds of the day before had left us and there was bright sunshine during the day. The lines at the car washes were particularly long as folks took advantage of the weekend and the break in the weather to have a layer of salt scrubbed from their vehicles. I suspect that the parking lots at the shopping malls were full. I stayed away and worked on projects at home most of the day. By tomorrow, our house will be full of family and we'll be cooking all of the foods of celebration and working our schedule around the special services at the church. The holiday is upon us and it looks like folks will have reasonable traveling weather around here.

Today is a day for worship and for waiting. In a few hours we'll gather in the warmth of the church and light candles and watch their tiny flames flicker as we sing familiar carols and hear an ancient story that many of us have known for all of our lives. Like other years, our celebration will contain the elements of real life. There is a family in our church who have experienced the death of their father and grandfather and the funeral won't be until after Christmas. There are families who are separated by the war and other events. There are families who have had to place a loved one in a care center. There will be empty places at many dinner tables this year. There are also new babies and new marriages and families trying to forge new traditions. We are a complex people and our celebrations are far from simple.

The solstice reminds us that we are a part of a universe that is far bigger than ourselves. Not everything revolves around our schedule. Our calendar is not the only way to mark the passage of time. Time itself looks different from different perspectives. Christmas reminds us that one child can change everything. In this vast and wide universe the intimacy of love in human form is truly sacred. Emmanuel - God with us. Peace - genuine peace - is a gift of this season. May we be ready to receive it once again.

December 24, 2007 – Eve



Today is the day of our celebrations. It will be a busy day, with preparations to be made at home and at the church. We've got an airplane to meet with family arriving and cooking and preparations for tomorrow and two services this evening. I woke up this morning thinking about the word, "Eve." When we use it in the context of Christmas Eve, it is a shortened form of evening and indicates the connection of the night before a day of celebration. The recognition of the night before comes, in part, from the Jewish tradition of the day beginning at sunset. The evening and nighttime belong with the day that is yet to come rather than the one that has just passed.

But Eve has another meaning, also deep in Hebrew traditions. It is a name. In the tradition of the Torah, Eve is the name that was given to the first woman. It means life, based on the verb "to live." In our family, Eve is a family name with two spellings. My maternal grandmother's name was spelled Eva and pronounced with a soft "e," similar to the Hebrew pronunciation. Our daughter's middle name has the traditional English spelling and long "e" pronunciation "Eve." The personality of each reveals the power of life. Eva, mother of five daughters, is a giver of life to our family. Eve is a unique gift of God that brings life and energy to our family. And both bring to mind the anticipation of the "evening" use of the word as well. In each we sense anticipation of a future that is yet to unfold.

It has become a contemporary tradition to stay up late on New Year's Eve to greet the midnight hour and celebrate. My personal tradition is a bit different. I don't always make

it to midnight on New Year's Eve, but I always stay up past midnight on Christmas Eve. We will celebrate Christmas Eve with a candlelight communion at 11:30 p.m. that concludes with the tolling of the Christmas bell at midnight. Shortly after the service I will turn off the lights and lock up the church and head home on streets that are much quieter than they were 12 hours earlier. The rush and bustle of Christmas preparation will be over and a peacefulness will have come to our community.

The quiet is only temporary. There will be much cooking and giving of gifts and sharing of family traditions in a few short hours, but the eve is for anticipation and waiting. It is, as one song declares, "the most wonderful night of the year."

Our family observes a modification of the tradition of St. Nicholas on Christmas Eve. We hang stockings for each family member and as we go to bed on Christmas Eve, each of us deposit small gifts and treats into the stockings of the other family members. Opening the stockings and looking at their contents is one of the first events of Christmas morning. After everyone else has gone to bed, after the services at the church are done, after all of the preparations are complete, I have a few moments alone in the wee hours of the morning to drop a few trinkets into the stockings and to think individually about the members of my family and the ways that each is a blessing to me and a gift to the world. Some years I start with the oldest member of the family and other years I start with the youngest. Sometimes I mix up the order to suit my fancy. Either way, there is an "Eve" in my Christmas eve. Life - the breath that God breathed into the human he formed of the humus of the earth - the same breath that sustains our lives - Eva - Eve. No matter how you think about it, it is a blessing. Indeed it is a holy night.

I'll have to take a nap today so I have the energy to stay up late. I wouldn't want to miss it.

December 25, 2007 – Christmas



Today began in the church with candles and communion. As usual, the mix of people who were a part of the service came as a bit of a surprise for me. There were familiar faces, who always are there for this service, new faces, whose names I do not know, and folk I know, but was not expecting to participate. Serving communion in this small and intimate service, I have the opportunity to look each worshiper in the face and think of the different stories that were passing before my eyes. There were worshipers of all ages, from tiny children up long past their usual bedtime to seniors who were accompanied by another family member in order to be out on such a night. It is a rich tapestry of our human family that gathers around the communion table.

And this community has many prayers. There are health concerns, there is grief for family members who have died, there are complex family relationships, there are unresolved conflicts, and there are many more stories. Our prayers are not only for ourselves, however, we live in a world that is torn by war and the lives of others are impacted by our own choices and decisions.

For a brief moment last night we celebrated the gift of peace that is freely given even before it can be fully received. In an imperfect world, we celebrated the perfect incarnation of Christ. It is and remains a mystery beyond our understanding - beyond rational explanation. Emmanuel - God with us.

The night was short and I could use a little more sleep - there will be an opportunity for a nap later. A fresh dusting of snow is greeting us this Christmas morn. Soon others will be rising and our family will begin a day of celebration. There are presents to exchange, meals to prepare and share, and stories to tell. I am looking forward to all of it. And I am treasuring the quiet moments before all of the activities begin.

Once again Christmas has arrived. It comes in spite of the confusion and commercialization of the world. It comes in spite of our own misunderstandings and misplaced priorities. It comes in spite of the problems and pressures of the world.

Merry Christmas!

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December 26, 2007 – At the Table



One of the blessings of the Christmas holiday is that there is a change of pace. At the church, the focus of much of our attention is the services that we hold on Christmas Eve. On December 25, we have no services at the church. And most of the members of the church have the day off. With the exception of a few first responders, the day is reserved for family activities. After weeks of preparation, part of the celebration is for our families to make the gift of time to each other.

Our society is filled with places where people are divided by age. Most schools are based on developmental theory and group children by age so that learning is presented to a group of peers who are at similar stages in their growth and development. There are a lot of other institutions that provide programming for children of specific ages. Even in the church, we plan and carry out programs that are aimed at particular ages of people.

Our family homes, however, remain gathering places for multiple generations. One of the joys of being in the middle generation is the joy of watching the changing relationships between our children and our parents. Working together to put a meal on the table, sitting around the living room sharing conversation, or gathering to play a game - all are ways in which children and elders are learning from each other. As the years pass, the generations of our family change. The three generations of our family who gathered for Christmas dinner yesterday were all adults. It hasn't been long since

our children were young and our celebrations centered on events and activities for young children. That time will return as our family grows and changes.

In our home, the kitchen table is the main gathering place. It is not only the place where we share meals. After the food is put away and the dishes are washed, we sit around the table to look at pictures, play games, or just talk. Yesterday there were stories of past Christmas celebrations and talk of Christmas traditions. But there was also a new game and new relationships growing and new skills being learned. And stories were shared of hopes and dreams for the future as well. The past, present, and future were blended in our conversation and in our consciousness. As is typical, our family was joined by a new friend yesterday. The shape of our families and the number of people is constantly changing.

It was a real treasure to have a day at home with family.

In the church, Christmas is a season focused on 12 days of celebrations and observances. Our society doesn't really pause for a full 12 days. People will be returning to work today and there will be a resumption of the activities that were suspended yesterday. But we do maintain a change of pace between Christmas day and New Years. For that week, at least, we do slow down and turn our attention to family and home.

So we know that there will be more opportunities to gather around the table as Christmas continues. With joy we will treasure each day and each person. And we offer our sincere prayer of gratitude to God.

Around our family table, we have shared a simple table grace for as long as I can remember:

We thank thee, Lord, for happy hearts,
for rain and sunny weather,
We thank thee, Lord, for this our food
and that we are together.

Indeed our hearts are filled with gratitude that we are together.

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December 27, 2007 – Turkeys



On the third day of Christmas, my true love gave to me three French hens, two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree. In the traditional song, the gifts of the first four days of Christmas are all birds. None of them, however, are turkeys. We've had turkeys for Christmas. There are plenty of wild turkeys in our neighborhood and we have given up feeding birds on our deck, for the most part because the turkeys are the only birds that get the food when we do feed. The turkeys are large, awkward and messy birds. And they don't appear to lack for food. So most days we don't feed them. But I have put out some cracked corn and sunflower seeds in the feeders for Christmas.

This is not done out of a sense of guilt. The turkey that we ate was farm raised and barely a relative of the wild birds that are in our yard. And if you watched the wild turkeys for any amount of time, it would be hard to feel much remorse about occasionally eating one. There is no shortage and they show little affection or concern for one another.

No, the birds are being fed mostly for the entertainment of our guests. My mother loves to watch the turkeys. And our daughter-in-law has never lived where there are deer and turkeys in the lawn. A little feed brings them up on the deck where they are easy to see. When Christmas is over, I'll stop feeding them and they will stop coming up onto the deck.

In the meantime they are entertaining us - and our cats. There is a definite pecking order with the toms and the largest hens dominating the group and getting the most food. They push and jostle and frequently fall off of the deck railing. They are awkward flyers and usually crash land when they try to swoop down from the tree. They bump into each other and the deck railings. I only feed turkeys when our deck furniture is put away because they try to climb on the furniture and inevitably turn it over and I want to save the chairs we sit on from the mess of the turkeys as well.

They are entertaining. They're not calling birds, French hens, turtle doves, or partridges, but "a turkey in the back yard," does fit in the place of "a partridge in a pear tree," and we don't have a pear tree anyway. We have our own version of the song.

Turkeys, however, don't seem to come in the singular. We usually have more than twenty at a time. A few scouts will appear, peeking up into the deck and the next time we look out the window the whole flock is assembled. Often when we aren't feeding them, we'll see the toms separated from the hands and chicks, but when the food is out, they all arrive together. The ones who can't crowd onto the deck wait in the yard until they can jostle their way up for a few bites. We have two large feeders and a pin to hold an ear of corn and they can clean out the entire supply of food in fifteen minutes or less. Then they'll check back two or three times during the day to see if I have put out more food, which I never do. Once a day is enough.

The cats, who have become mostly indoor creatures out of my fear of coyotes, mountain lions and the traffic on Sheridan Lake road, are both convinced that their hunting skills would be equal to that flock of turkeys if I would just let them out. When I do let them out, they re-evaluate their hunting skills - or their appetites - and hide under the deck until the turkeys leave. I've never seen one of our cats actually chase a turkey, but they certainly watch them closely from whatever vantage point they can find.

A bag of sunflowers and another of cracked corn once a year is inexpensive entertainment, though I don't keep track of the time invested in filling feeders and cleaning the deck. I have to get out the power washer after feeding the turkeys to clean the deck.

Now Saturday in the song is "five golden rings." I'm definitely going to have to come up with an alternative to that one. Don't expect milking maids or leaping lords, either.

Merry Christmas!

December 28, 2007 – Worldwide Mourning



Photo from BBC World News

World attention has been focused on the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan. In keeping with Muslim tradition, her body was quickly buried and most of the mourning takes place after the details of burial have been completed. There was little surprise around the world. Pakistan is a place of incredible violence and there have been constant threats since she returned in October, including the bomb blast on the day of her arrival that claimed the lives of more than a hundred and twenty people. Her family legacy was one of politics and violence. Her father, who also served as prime minister of Pakistan, was hanged for his role in the killing of a political rival. Benazir served twice as prime minister of Pakistan, the first woman to lead a modern Muslim country, but both terms as prime minister ended in charges of corruption. Hers was a troubled life that seemed to spiral towards trouble and violence.

There will be no shortage of commentaries about her life. There will be no shortage of stories about Pakistan's troubled present and the unclear future that lies ahead. There will be no shortage of stories about how the government in Pakistan affects events around the world. In the midst of all of these stories, the untold story is that the world has learned to accept suicide bombers and violence as normal. We were expecting another bomb to go off. We were not truly surprised that her life ended in violence. Killing is accepted as a way of expressing disagreement.

The truth is that every bomb blast - every act of terrorism - is an affront to every human being. We do not have to kill those with whom we disagree. We are not forced into a position where there are no other options. The gunman and suicide bomber was living a lie. The lie was that he had no other options. The truth is that there were plenty of other options. The truth is that the choice to perpetuate violence does not provide a solution, and lays the ground for further violence. True life means living with disagreement and opposition. Death and violence only create losers - there are no winners.

Choosing to kill represents a failure of human imagination. Seeking alternative solutions requires incredible energy and creativity. Finding a way forward in complex world is not easy. Revenge never settles a score, but few victims can think clearly enough to understand this truth.

The most fitting memorial to Benazir Bhutto would be an end to the violence in Pakistan. The various political parties need to seek political solutions. The cycle of killing must be interrupted. Unfortunately there are few in the world who expect this to happen. World attention is focused on Pakistan in part because there is an expectation of further violence. We need to raise our expectations and commit our energies to new and different solutions.

It is a short step from accepting violence as the way of life in another country to accepting it as a way of life at home. May our outrage find expression in the genuine quest for new ways to solve the world's problems.

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December 29, 2007 – 50% Off!

Christmas

50% OFF

Yesterday when we were driving home, we saw a sign that declared, “Christmas 50% OFF! I’m sure that the intention was to advertise Christmas-themed merchandise that had a price discount, but it got me to thinking what it might mean to have Christmas 50% off.

Christmas 50% OFF! Instead of 12 days of Christmas, have only 6!
Christmas 50% OFF! Mary, Joseph and the Baby without the shepherds and wise men!
Christmas 50% OFF! Candle lighting without the pageant!
Christmas 50% OFF! A tree without the decorations!
Christmas 50% OFF! All worship services 1/2 hour or less!
Christmas 50% OFF! God loved the world so much that he allowed his son to visit the world about half the time.

Marketing is becoming more common in the church, with professionally designed advertisements, branding, logos, and other things that have been adopted from the marketplace.

Perhaps we should consider having sales at the church. Most churches have some sort of sign with a changeable letter board.

Baptisms 2 for the price of 1 for a limited time only!
This week’s special: Communion without confession!

No offering plate will be passed to the first 10 people to sit in the pews this week!
Join today and we promise you won't have to serve on a committee for the first three years of your membership!

The first fifteen new members this month will never be asked to teach Sunday School!
Why go to Los Vegas? Show us the ad and we'll match any wedding chapel's price!

The possibilities are limitless.

Then again, will "discount" Christianity have the durability to stand up to life's real crises? You wouldn't want to run out of faith just as you experienced the death of a loved one. It might be rather inconvenient to have faith that stopped just as a doctor was delivering news of a major illness. It could be very sad to realize that you had enough faith for good times, but ran short when times get tough.

The truth is that the commitment required for genuine faith is high. Christmas doesn't come at a discount price. God's gift is costly.

And marketing doesn't really work when it comes to faith. Discipleship is not measured in numbers. The church with the biggest attendance may not be the church with the deepest faith.

So you'll have to go to the store to find Christmas 50% off. At the church it's still full price.

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December 30, 2007 – Working Together



We had a good crew with several new faces at the Habitat build site yesterday. The weather cooperated and we got the roof shingled. Just a bit of the ridge cap remains and we'll get that done on Thursday. The doors are hung and the house is weather tight. Working together is the name of the game. We had the right tools and enough people to accomplish a big job in a single day. It was a good way to celebrate the middle of the Christmas season.

Many people give special thought to charitable giving at this time of the year. The end of the year brings thought of taxes that need to be paid and planning to take advantage of tax deductions makes sense. Some organizations hold special fund raising activities during the holidays that are geared to take advantage of the spirit of giving that is a part of the season to respond to needs that exist year round. It is a wonderful thing to throw a big Christmas dinner for homeless persons and to gather lonely folk for a common meal as long as we don't forget that homelessness knows no season and loneliness exists even when the holidays are past.

In addition to thinking about charitable giving, Christmas is a great season to think about gifts of time and energy. Habitat for Humanity, brings together financial generosity and generosity of time and talent in a unique combination. In addition, Habitat allows people to work together with the folks being served as Habitat families earn their sweat equity in their homes.

One of the workers yesterday was a man we had never before met. He lives in the neighborhood, about two blocks away from our building site, saw the work and decided to volunteer. He is a professional roofer and brought a great deal of expertise to yesterday's job. We wouldn't have gotten as far as we did without his help. It is a bit like an old time barn raising or other such events. The whole community comes together to accomplish a big job in a short amount of time.

The house isn't finished. There is a lot of work remaining. But we have gotten a few much-needed boosts of help in the past few weeks and have felt the support of the community.

And we have known the joy of working together and making new friends.

We thought we were giving, but are deeply grateful for all we have received as we work together.

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December 31, 2007 – The Star Didn't Move!



The 7:00 Christmas Eve service at our church is steeped in tradition. There is a pageant with live persons acting out the parts of Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, shepherds, angels and wise men. For many years the shepherds had live lambs borrowed from a rancher in the region. The service ends with passing the light from one candle to the next until each person has a lighted candle. We sing "Silent Night" in the candlelight. The tradition started many years ago when families were larger and the percentage of children and youth in the congregation was larger. In those days, there were rehearsals and many people were involved in the production. The words for the pageant were taken directly from the Gospels of Luke and Matthew.

The church loves the tradition. And the majority of the members don't want it to be changed. Before I came to be the pastor of the church, there was a divorce in the family of the ranch that supplied the lambs and the lambs were dropped from the pageant. I'm not sure exactly when this change took place, but it happened before I became pastor and this is my thirteenth Christmas with the congregation. I hear about the lambs every year and about how sad some members are that there are no longer live lambs in the pageant. In those years, no one has ever offered to help arrange for lambs, they just need to express their dislike of the change.

Over the years, the choir has been able to change anthems and each year it is a challenge to fit the choir's music into the service because the number of pieces they choose depends on the number of choir members who are in town for Christmas, the

number of rehearsals, and some years the health of the choir director. The congregation seems to tolerate this change well, but makes it clear that other changes would disrupt their tradition.

The technology of the service was simple, but one thing that impressed participants was a star that was projected on the wall of the sanctuary. They used a simple cardboard cutout and a slide projector to project the star. The projector was placed on a turntable and moved so that the star started on the side wall of the sanctuary and moved as the wise men entered to the front of the sanctuary. This took one person to move the projector and another to dim the sanctuary lights so that the congregation would notice the star. The slide projector was designed for a much smaller room, so the star was only visible with the lights dimmed considerably. People loved the effect.

Four or five years ago, the projector broke. Replacement parts were not available and although I later was able to obtain a used slide projector, none could be found in time for Christmas. I replaced it with a theatrical shape projector that produces a much brighter star and the pageant went on. Moving the star, however, became more complex. A kitchen turntable wouldn't work to move the projector and the new projector needed to have its focus adjusted to deal with the nearly 70 foot change in the distance the light was projected during the arch. For a couple of years, we had various volunteers move the star and there were several "glitches" with trying to rotate an entire light tree instead of a simple slide projector. Three years ago, I had no volunteers available and so decided to just run a cable to the front of the church so I could turn the star on and dispense with moving the star. A couple of members of the congregation spoke to me about the star no longer moving, but I thought that we had weathered the change.

Yesterday, the star was the main topic of conversation. I heard complaints about the star not moving from a half dozen members both before and after the regular service. One member said to me, "The star that moves is the main reason I come to church on Christmas Eve!"

The problem isn't the star. I will probably purchase a stand for a follow spotlight and recruit an operator so that the star will move next year.

But the truth is that I cannot meet the expectations of the congregation for this service. There are too many people who come to the service in search of a feeling they once had in the past, and are quick to blame the church when they don't have the same emotional experience year after year. They don't think rationally about it, they simply are disappointed and vocal when the feeling they remember isn't reproduced.

I, on the other hand, don't own the tradition. My role in the service is fixed. I am expected to maintain a tradition that I didn't participate in developing, that I don't fully

understand, and that has never produced the emotions for me that members of the congregation are expecting. It is a “no win” situation. There is no way for me to meet the expectations of the people. And I am not used to not being able to meet the expectations of the congregation.

While the majority of the church looks forward to the service with hope and great expectation, I dread it. The griping about the star was enough to start a year of anxiety for me. Making the star move is relatively easy. Finding live lambs is possible. But I can't change the sociology of the congregation and suddenly change the ration of children to adults. I cannot change the hectic schedules of families to make more time for rehearsals. I cannot consistently produce the warm feelings that some remember. I cannot keep the members of my congregation from aging. I cannot stop the world from changing.

And no matter what I do, there will be complaints next year and the year after that. While I seek to respond to the wishes of the congregation, I also need to develop a thicker skin about the complaints and understand that the complaints are not primarily about my job performance, but about the distress of people at the reality of change in the world.

Christmas has little to do with making me feel good. In Christ, God comes to the reality of this world, not to some idealized world. God is always calling us to the future and not heavily invested in maintaining tradition for the sake of tradition.

But yes, in answer to the question, the star will move next year.

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