

**April 2017
Index**

April 2017

- April 1, 2017 – Electronic Books**
- April 2, 2017 – Returning to Familiar Stories**
- April 3, 2017 – Looking at the Numbers**
- April 4, 2017 – Springtime**
- April 5, 2017 – Friends**
- April 6, 2017 – Another Unfinished Conversation**
- April 7, 2017 – Trusting People with Grief**
- April 8, 2017 – A Global Economy**
- April 9, 2017 – Palm Sunday, 2017**
- April 10, 2017 – Holy Monday, 2017**
- April 11, 2017 – Sittin’ with the Blues**
- April 12, 2017 – Holy Wednesday**
- April 13, 2017 – Maundy Thursday, 2017**
- April 14, 2017 – Good Friday, 2017**
- April 15, 2017 – Waiting**
- April 16, 2017 – Easter, 2017**
- April 17, 2017 – Thinking of Digital Privacy**
- April 18, 2017 – Exercise for Endurance**
- April 19, 2017 – Meetings**
- April 20, 2017 - Grace**
- April 21, 2017 – Changing World**
- April 22, 2017 – Teaching Faith**
- April 23, 2017 – Work and Rest**
- April 24, 2017 – March for Science**
- April 25, 2017 – South Dakota Spring Tuesday**
- April 26, 2017 – Contemplating my Place in the World**
- April 27, 2017 – Words and God**
- April 28, 2017 – The Notes I Keep**
- April 29, 2017 – Speaking of Food . . .**
- April 30, 2019 – Significant Conversation**

April 1, 2007 – Electronic Books

Here are a few things from today's news that you may or may not have noticed:

- Burger King has introduced Whopper Fresh Toothpaste, the first toothpaste with native Whopper ingredients.
- In Britain, Baylis & Harding is launching a Roast Beef & Yorkshire Pudding hand wash.
- It is time for the annual whitewashing of the cliffs of Dover. Crews are using climbing apparatus and paint rollers to keep the cliffs their signature white.
- The British home improvement store, Home Base, has just released a brand-new rainbow paint that allows customers to create a multi-colored wall from a single can of paint.
- A new system of double decker runways could double airport capacity within the next five years.
- For less than \$5 per month, you can purchase beard insurance that pays if you accidentally trim too close and are forced to shave the beard off.
- Pizza Hut has a new scratch and sniff menu to aid in selecting your pizza toppings.

In case you haven't noticed it, all of these stories have one thing in common. They are all April Fools pranks. They are intentionally false stories crafted with the intention of drawing in gullible folks for a brief bit of entertainment.

Somehow, in this year with all of the fake news that has been circulating in relationship to politics, simple April Fools jokes don't hold the same appeal. With politicians of every stripe falsely attributing quotes to Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln and Facebook posts rife with outright lies presented as factual news we are getting used to checking sources and doing Internet searches on most things we read these days.

Even with the list above, we might be tempted to think that April Fools is a day just like any other.

At 63, I've been continuously wearing a beard for more than 43 years and I would have no reason to buy beard insurance even if it were available. At 63, I've also decided that it is acceptable that I struggle with some technological innovations. (How's that for a segue to a new topic given that I don't have all that much to write about April Fool's Day?) Unlike my grandchildren who simply accept technologies as part of life and use

them playfully and naturally, I continue to be impressed with new technical innovations and have become a slower adopter. I'm not a luddite. I use a computer every day. I own a smart phone. I am reasonably competent at keeping our home network up and running and I occasionally can solve computer problems at work. But there are more than a few areas in life where haven't kept up.

My 18-year-old car doesn't have any collision avoidance features. It has no cameras installed and it requires a driver to stay in its own lane.

I don't own a tablet computer. I prefer to read books that are printed on paper.

I wear a mechanical watch that has hands that go around a face with the numbers 1 through 12 on it. It doesn't monitor my heart rate and it has no idea where I am.

That doesn't mean that I won't someday have more state-of-the-art devices. I'm just not likely to be the first person to adopt them.

Over the past several days, however, I have been experimenting with reading books on my laptop computer. My home and my office are overflowing with books. I need to decrease my inventory of books radically. It is wasteful to spend money on single use items, and there are many books that I will read only one time. Libraries are a good alternative, but I read quite a few specialty books that the library doesn't have. And I am impatient about waiting for the arrival of a book through interlibrary loan. There is an appeal to electronic books, but I have been slow to use my electronic devices for reading books. And, as I've already reported, I don't have a tablet computer and have no plans to get one right away.

However, I have downloaded several books and this week installed a new reading application on my computer. The software allows synchronization between different platforms so that if I read a bit on my home computer and then go to the office, the office computer remembers where I was in the book. It has worked perfectly so far. But that isn't the most impressive feature of this new-to-me program. It also synchronizes with the audio book so that I can start reading a chapter on my computer at home, get in my car and play the audio book over the car stereo as I drive to the office and when I get to the office go back to reading on my office computer - all without missing or repeating a page in the book. I am impressed at how well the program works.

And that's no April Fool's joke.

There are still some drawbacks to eBooks for me. I'm not likely to start taking the computer to bed with me and I do quite a bit of reading in bed. It is one thing if I fall asleep reading and drop a book on the floor. It might not be such a good idea to do the same thing with an expensive laptop computer. I've spilled coffee on my books. They

advise against doing the same with a computer. I've even been known to sit in the bathtub with a book. I wouldn't do that with a computer.

Still, I can imagine reading with the computer more. I've installed a half dozen books on my computer and they didn't increase its weight at all. It weighs less than a sizable hardbound book. The screen is bright and easy to read regardless of how good the lamp in the room is. I can adjust the size of the type to my liking. I don't have to look for a bookmark or a pad of paper to make notes as I read.

However, if you tell my kids I've given up regular books they'll assume you are just pulling another April Fools prank.

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April 2, 2017 – Returning to Familiar Stories

My mind has been working over the last week on this morning's sermon. There is so much rich meaning in the texts for today that it is hard to come up with a focus that provides clarity for the preaching moment. One of the problems that ministers often face is the temptation to try to say too much. We have a limited amount of time and we have a huge subject. Our faith comes from a long and storied history and often describing a simple nuance of belief requires a long trip into the history of Christian theology. The people who come to worship in a church, however, did not come from long and complex lectures. They come for inspiration. It is a challenge for preachers every week.

This week we have the story of Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones and the amazing story of God bringing a future for the people of Israel from its past in ways that seemed impossible to the prophet. That would be a sufficient source for a sermon, but we also have the Gospel text which is the report of the raising of Lazarus. The story of Lazarus is complex, with the drama of Jesus' late arrival, the rebuke of the sisters Mary and Martha, the obvious display of grief from Jesus and the dramatic unbinding of the man who had been dead and buried for several days. All of this action takes place less than two miles from Jerusalem, the place where Jesus was crucified and the texts are set into our Lenten discipline of focusing our attention on Jesus death. It will be Palm Sunday in just a week and that day is followed by Holy Week, an intense time of focus and spiritual discipline for Christians when we confront our own mortality as well as the promise of resurrection that lies at the heart of the Gospel.

But sorting out all of the stories is only part of our worship. We will be celebrating communion. We will be sharing the concerns of our community. We will be praying for one another and for the world. It would be easy for me to become like my colleague Pastor Dorotea in Costa Rica who never pays attention to the time once worship starts. "If it takes two hours, it takes two hours." But I can't be that way. Too much of worship is about relationship for me. I know the people I serve. I understand their lives are filled

with many things. I can tell the worship is only part of their story. And I have been called to serve them, not promote some personal agenda.

So it is hard. It takes time and preparation to get the elements to fit.

You might think that this has become familiar territory for me. I have followed the Revised Common Lectionary for all of my career. That means that I've preached these texts on the 5th Sunday of Lent a dozen times - more than a half dozen in this congregation. Leading worship, however, has never become routine for me. The circumstances of the congregation I serve are constantly changing. In fact with the number of funerals and receptions of new members at which I officiate, it is easy to see that the congregation I serve is not at all the same as the one I served three years ago. While there are many familiar faces and plenty of old timers, they have experienced much over the years and are in different places than they were three years ago.

You read the story of Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones differently after a major political upheaval in the country. You read the story of Lazarus differently after you have experienced the death of a brother.

Still, part of the reasons we turn to the scriptures is to be reminded that we are not alone in the vast flow of history. Our people have experienced death in previous generations. We have known political shifts and changes in leadership. We have endured crises and faced tragedies. We have shed tears of grief and tears of joy on the same day before. We belong to a great line of history-making that did not begin with this generation and that will not be completed when our time on this earth has come to its conclusion. The story is, has always been, and will always be bigger than ourselves.

That truth is an important reminder to me as a preacher. The world does not hinge on my choice of words. In fact, in a very short time there will be no one who will remember what I say today. Far more important than the words are the actions. Gathering to share Holy Communion, celebrating at an open table where "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!", making sure that our children are included - these actions speak far louder than the words I will say.

Friday, I led a brief devotion before dinner at the Cornerstone Rescue Mission. The timing of that context is even shorter and the readings for the week are long. I only had time for a few sentences of interpretation and a brief prayer after I read the stories. I hope that those who were in attendance remember the stories even if they don't remember any of the other things I said. The stories endure from generation to generation while the rest of the trappings were part of what has to be endured in that place in order to get your dinner. I hope that the people also remember that they had good food in adequate quantities to satisfy their hunger. The crew had worked hard to prepare a nourishing meal for them. Time passes quickly, however. No matter how good the meal hunger will return. They need to eat again and again.

Our spirits are like that too. We need to hear the stories again and again. So we return to the familiar stories and trust that they are becoming part of our identities as we visit them freshly today.

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April 3, 2017 – Looking at the Numbers

I am not much for statistics. My life is defined by relationship more than it is by numbers. But a recent article from BBC news that I read got me to thinking about the world that we are leaving to our grandchildren. It was filled with numbers and statistics. Here are some numbers that I think will be of impact in the lives of my grandchildren.

83 million is the amount the world population increased in the last year. That is like adding a whole new country the size of Germany each year to the world's population. If you project that across the span of my grandchildren, it means that the world population will reach 11.2 billion people before my oldest grandchild reaches the age of 90. There are population projections that show the population declining, but most of them see continuing population increase until at least 2050 about fifty years later. Of course there is no way of making a completely accurate population projection. Factors such as wars, ecological disasters, famine and a whole host of other elements might dramatically change those numbers. Population projections made in the 1970's have proven to be largely incorrect. Still. The rate at which population is growing at the present is cause for pause.

It appears that the trend of people living longer will continue and combine with a trend toward smaller families. That also results in the average age becoming older. When I was born, the average age of all people alive at the time was around 24 years old. Today it is in the vicinity of 42 years. When my grandchildren enter their nineties, it will be even higher. More elderly people, fewer youth. The statistics have deep ramifications for concepts of employment and retirement and no one knows for sure exactly what it will mean. There are a lot of other factors that will influence employment, some of which I'll address later in this blog post.

By 2030, there will be 41 megacities of more than 10 million people. And by 2050, two-thirds of all people will live in urban areas. Super-dense cities could house everyone on a surprisingly small amount of land. Those 6.3 billion urban dwellers in a city the same density as today's Mumbai could squeeze onto an area the size of the UK. But spread those people out into a city the density of today's Atlanta, and the land footprint expands dramatically, to around the size of the US. Keeping a lid on urban sprawl could be a key priority in the megacities of the future. Odds are against my great grandchildren living with the luxury of space that we take for granted living in the hills.

During the lives of my grandchildren there will be a dramatic change in the source of energy. I'm fairly certain that people will learn to consume much less energy than is the case of our lifestyle, but even so, all of those people will demand a lot of energy. Right now, 86% of the world's energy comes from fossil fuels. Less than 10% of our energy comes from renewable sources. The BBC article cites a 664% increase in solar energy in the past five years. That trend will continue. In the foreseeable future wind and solar energy will rapidly become the most common sources. Betting a country's energy policy - or its jobs - on fossil fuels is incredibly short-sighted. Our grandchildren will look back at our current energy policies as pure folly.

Oxford University researchers project that approximately half of current US jobs can be done by automated machines. Everything from truck driving to package delivery to building maintenance to foodservice will be much more automated in the near future. Many of the jobs that we now envision simply will not be done by humans at all within the lifespan of my grandchildren. Combine that with longer life expectancies and the next couple of generations will be challenged to rethink the entire concept of meaningful employment and financial relationships.

Looking at the accelerating pace of change leaves even the most casual observer confused about what is happening. Nostalgia for the way things used to be is understandable. While it is understandable, it is simply not practical. Attempts to hang on to the way things have been are simply unsustainable.

Political rhetoric aside, we live in a changing world and while we are capable of making decisions about the rate and direction of change, we are not capable of preventing change from occurring. We can argue about the extent and the cause of climate change, but we cannot change the simple fact that the climate is changing. While the mistakes of this generation will have significant effects on coming generations, we will not change some basic realities of life.

In many areas, there simply will be fewer jobs than people who want to have those jobs. The choice of a career path for our children may require a flexibility that we never had to display. Heading in one career direction and then re-training for an entirely different form of work will be required of many in coming generations. Learning how to occupy their minds and energies in the face of insufficient or nonexistent employment will be a challenge for millions of people in the coming years. Making speeches about restoring jobs or pretending that we could go back to the way things were won't change the pace of automation in manufacturing or the increasing global nature of producing consumer goods.

The good news is that I have great confidence in the creativity, compassion and problem-solving capabilities of coming generations. The capacity of humans, when we put forth our best efforts, to learn from the mistakes of the past is significant. The creativity and innovation that enables us to tackle and solve enormous problems when

we work together is vibrant in the generations of our children and grandchildren. While our generation may be the cause of considerable despair, there is great hope in the future because of the children and grandchildren of baby boomers.

There is much that is revealed in the numbers. There is much more that can be learned from our relationships with the children of today.

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April 4, 2017 – Springtime



I received a delightful photograph of my grandchildren yesterday. One of the joys of the technologies we use these days is that images can be shared instantly. I take great delight in the pictures and videos that arrive from our children who live in distant locations. I usually don't post pictures of my grandchildren, wanting to avoid having them identified on the Internet, but this one isn't close enough for identification and the background tells a story.

It is "Tulip Festival" this week in the town where they live. Tulips are a big deal out there. They have images of tulips in pressed concrete in the center of intersections in the downtown area of their city. There are lots of promotions and posters advertising the festival. School children are on spring break for a week to celebrate the arrival of the

brilliant blossoms. There are acres and acres of tulip farms on the flat land the lies between the town and the coast. Yesterday was not super warm, with highs in the mid-fifties, but the sun was out and the fields were filled with bright colors and the children were enjoying the open space to run and enjoy being outdoors.

For contrast, here is a picture from my mid-afternoon recreation yesterday.



It was chilly and rainy most of the day here, with heavy rain falling for brief periods of time. It rained enough to force the barbecue for the opening of National Crime Victims' Rights Week indoors. The last minute change of venue meant some scrambling as we moved the barbecue grill from one location to another. The speakers and guests all filed into a church basement where they were served hamburgers and hot dogs with all the trimmings. A few of us were standing outdoors cooking those burgers and dogs in our rain gear.

I guess the presentations were a success and the people seemed to be enjoying themselves as they sat around the tables visiting after having eaten their lunches, so we'll chalk that one up as a success. Still, it might have been a bit more pleasant had the weather cooperated a bit better.

Now, I know better than to complain about the rain. We need the moisture. The hills are beginning to green up, but I know that conditions are dry beneath the surface. The trees need lots of moisture this time of year to produce needles that are resistant to the heat of summer and the threat of fires that will come later in the season.

So I'm not complaining about the rain.

In fact, there is a part of me that takes a bit of pride in paddling in the snow at least once a year. Some years I get to have a snowy paddle on both ends of the season. We didn't get snow at home, but the rise in elevation at the lake was enough to get the white stuff to stick to the ground for a while. It was melting almost as fast as it was falling. Paddling under a tree was like paddling through a rainstorm. Out on the lake, however, the snowflakes were big and soft and lovely.

It really wasn't that cold, either. Air temperature was in the forties. The water was quite a bit colder. I didn't have a thermometer with me, but there was no rim ice around the edges of the lake, so the water was holding above freezing anyway.

Snow on pine trees is incredibly beautiful. The hills have a way of giving us treats for the eyes almost every day. Even the low clouds were arranged in such a way to give the hills a beautiful, misty appearance. It might not have seemed like the best weather for viewing Mount Rushmore or getting a multi-state view from the top of Bear Butte, but I was toasty warm and very comfortable in my layers of clothing tucked under my spray skirt in my kayak. I wasn't even the only one out on the water. I caught several glimpses of another kayaker, who spent most of his time in the northwest corner of the lake. I think he may have been fishing. I suspect it was a good day to go after some of the big northern pike who inhabit the lake.

Interestingly, the geese were almost all out of the water. They were gathered in clutches around the shore, checking out the weeds for seeds and offering quiet commentary on the various goings about at the lake. There were a few ducks on the water, but the lake wasn't as busy as it might have been had the weather been sunny and the geese attracted to feeding while floating on its surface.

If I am reading the forecast correctly, we should get a swap of conditions. I don't think they are expecting snow for the tulip festival, but rain is in the offering for the rest of the week out there, while we're expecting to see some sunny skies this week. On the other hand, I don't think we'll be seeing many tulips around here. I'm not sure. We gave up planting tulips after several years of watching the deer eat the buds just before they opened up. Ditto with crocus. Interesting plants, but we never get to see the blossoms with the number of deer in the neighborhood. We're weeks away from daffodils and iris in our yard. They'll be appreciated when they do burst into color, but I would advise city activity planners from declaring a tulip festival for the first week of April.

The first week of April, is, however, a good time to remind crime victims that they have rights and that there are advocates who are ready to help them defend their rights. There are enough signs of spring to remind us all that new life bursts forth from some pretty tragic situations. Spring is a good time to reinforce our support of those who have suffered from crime and to rededicate ourselves to crime prevention.

New life is coming. You can feel it in the air even when a few snowflakes fall.

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April 5, 2017 – Friends

We had lunch with old friends yesterday. It happens that today is the 80th birthday of the wife. She was 40 when we met, so that means we have been friends for half of their lives - and more than half of ours. We live about three hours apart and for a decade we lived two days' drive distant from one another. Although we lived and worked in the same town for seven years and spent a lot of holidays and other special occasions together during that time, these days we see each other less than once a year.

Friendship endures over the long-haul, however, and there is no question that both couples value our friendship. It is good when we do get together and we always enjoy our conversations.

Like other strong friendships, when we get together there is an instant flurry of catching up. We know each others' children and grandchildren and, in their case, great grandchildren. We've watched the flow of history in the times of our lives. I officiated at the funerals of both of the parents of the husband. We were there for the wedding day of their daughter, the oldest of their three children. I baptized their first grandson. We met the other grandchildren as they came along. The great-grands are know only to us through photographs and stories shared, but they are unique individuals to us and we are eager to hear what is happening in their lives. They are equally invested in our lives. The husband was the first person, after my wife, that I told of my father's death. The wife was a nurse in the delivery room when our son was born. They are always interested in the stories of our children and grand children.

All the same, as is true in many other relationships, having been friends over the decades means that we know a little about the areas where we disagree. It isn't likely that we have ever voted the same in major political elections. We have different understandings of some of the conflicts of our region. We have different interpretations of the impacts of oil development in Western North Dakota. There are some subjects that we gently avoid in our conversations.

Then there are the areas where we aren't sure whether we agree or disagree. We're comfortable exploring the edges of our relationship by asking questions of one another.

“What did you think of . . . ?” we’ll ask, mentioning a book or movie that we’ve recently read or seen. Of course I don’t go to many movies, so usually I haven’t seen the movie being mentioned, but when it comes to books, I read a fair amount of books, including ones whose viewpoint is quite different from my own. We’ll ask an opinion on some event or activity, even venturing into the edge of politics on occasion. I think it is unlikely that we would openly argue. Our relationship doesn’t carry a need to change or convert one another. When we find a subject on which it is clear that there is major disagreement we either simply listen to the other point of view or change the subject when the opportunity comes along.

As a result, these are very special friends to us. With them we are able to regularly encounter the basic goodness of those with whom we disagree. Sure, we have differences. Still we know that they are very good people with good values, integrity and strong commitment to things that are important to us like faith and family and community. We are familiar with their commitment to service in their community.

As the politics of our country become more and more polarized, as people become more and more isolated from “the other side,” it is critical to treasure and value the friendships that reach across the aisles. I know that analogy is limited, as we aren’t exactly serving in a legislature or engaged in active debate over policy issues. Still it is a wonderful thing to have friends whom you appreciate and value and with whom you can explore, if only tangentially, the differences that divide our communities and our nation.

We are not enemies even when we disagree. Too often we forget that simple fact.

I have friends and family members who are much more confrontational in their conversations. When they encounter disagreement, they speak up. When another says something they feel to be false, they are quick to offer correction. I’ve even been mildly chastised by one of my brothers for being “too conciliatory.” He believes that I am compromising my values when I don’t speak up to correct every difference of opinion. I love my brother, but I couldn’t go through life trying to imitate his style. I suspect that I am much more willing to compromise than he, but I don’t believe that I am compromising my values when I listen carefully to someone who sees the world differently than I.

I value our friendship with these folks. I am grateful for the phone call that invited us to lunch. I am thankful for the effort that both couples give to staying connected. I enjoy our conversations and am eager for more opportunities to spend time together.

We will never be the same. We will never agree on every topic. Still, I think we influence one another. I am a bit less harsh in my judgements of others because I can see the goodness of those with whom I disagree. I think my eyes have been opened to the narrowness of my thought on occasion because I have been willing to listen to someone

that I respect and with whom I disagree. I'm not likely to be converted or changed in my opinions, but it isn't the case that I am uninfluenced by our friendship.

This Lent, as we prepare for the intensity of Holy Week that is just around the corner, I am especially grateful for the simple gift of lunch with friends. They are a blessing and a gift of God.

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April 6, 2017 – Another Unfinished Conversation

I frequently become engaged in conversations that we have to leave unfinished. We are speaking of meaningful and interesting things and the time simply runs out for us, leaving us with more to say, more to listen and more to learn. It happened again yesterday with a group of law enforcement chaplains. We gather once a quarter for training and yesterday received an excellent presentation on law enforcement ethics. The presentation stirred lots of thoughts in my mind.

We were talking about how many ethical dilemmas have some roots in lying. Officers, and others, who stray from the path of ethical behavior often lie about their behavior. Lying quickly becomes a habit. Lies are told to cover up previous lies. Truth-telling is at the heart of the American justice system. The promise "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," is essential to the operation of our courts. The testimony of law enforcement officers is a common feature in prosecution. Whenever that testimony is undercut, it threatens the fabric of our society. Law enforcement is about holding that society together, not about tearing it asunder. An officer who lies about a minor vehicle accident, or an improper relationship, or the amount of alcohol consumed, quickly becomes a practiced liar. It isn't necessarily that lying always accelerates. People are capable of recognizing mistakes, making honest confession and repenting. People can change. But frequently one who lies in one area of his or her life can find it easy to lie in another area.

This is especially critical of law enforcement chaplains. We are held to a higher standard both by our role as spiritual leaders and by our role in connection with law enforcement. This is appropriate. No one is above the law and our religious background teaches us that the law is the way to freedom. People look to us to have the highest ethical standards of conduct. They turn to us with questions about ethical conflicts and decision-making.

The conversation was engaging and, I believe, important for those of us gathered in that room. However, I had a firm ending on the time for the meeting. I had agreed to participate in another important meeting and I knew that others expected me to be present for other important conversations.

So I left with the conversation unfinished. It is a way of life for me.

And when I leave conversations unfinished, ideas often continue to mull in my brain. One of the continuing thoughts from yesterday's conversation is that it seems to me to be apparent that our society has become more tolerant of lying in recent years. It isn't just that we need to defend truth telling in the rank and file - we need to continue to fight for truth in the highest levels of our land.

I'm sure some will consider this to be overly political, but the truth is that I am a political person even though I try to keep politics out of certain arenas of my life. But here goes anyway. I fear for my country when our President, holder of the highest office of the land lies with astonishing abandon. He even denies having said things that have been recorded and when the recording is played back to confront the lie he calls it "fake news." One journalist has even said that lying has become "the defining nature" of his presidency.

Now, having said that, it is important for me to add that I believe that this is a problem with the President and NOT a problem of those who voted for him. People of integrity and good character voted honestly and should not be dismissed or criticized in the same breath as the one who was elected.

And it isn't just the President of the United States. We have learned to accept lying from our elected representatives. One knows that partisanship is frequently put above the truth in political debate and in election rhetoric. We have learned to accept politicians who do not keep their promises and who even deny having ever made the promises in the first place. We expect politicians to lie.

Whether or not we like it, it is those same politicians - the ones we've grown to expect to lie - who make the laws that we expect our police and sheriff's officers to enforce with integrity and a respect for truth that is above criticism.

To put it bluntly and perhaps even a bit crudely, we expect our dedicated and faithful officers to enforce laws that were made by some pretty unsavory liars. It gives me sympathy for those who lived in the time from which Psalm 58 arose, in which an angry but certified holy man asks God to "smash the teeth" of those who spread poisonous lies. Such an observation would probably not have gained me any friends in the conversation with my colleagues yesterday. I pray that I would have found the discretion to say things in a softer tone and with more grace than this morning's writing reflects.

I still believe in the truth.

I still believe in a justice system that is based on truth-telling.

I still believe that we have fellow citizens who live lives of honesty and integrity who can be trusted to enforce our laws fairly and impartially. I have met some of those officers. I believe in them. In fact I believe in them so much that I think that it would benefit our representatives to spend more time with those officers. I think that it would help our government if legislators would take a ride along with one of our officers from time to time. They could learn a lot by spending time with the officers who encounter the problems of our city on a daily basis.

I am encouraged by a group of chaplains and our law enforcement colleagues who give of precious time to have a serious conversation about ethics and truth-telling. I am deeply grateful for the conversation.

I just know that it isn't finished yet.

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April 7, 2017 – Trusting People with Grief

I've been a law enforcement chaplain long enough to know that there is a particular attitude toward death among those who we ask to enforce our laws. Of course, we expect them to come face to face with death. They are dispatched, regardless of the time of day or night, whenever there is a death that occurs outside of a hospital or other place of medical care. They respond to traffic accidents and domestic violence and home tragedies and suicides and homicides and any manner of other incidents. Occasionally they arrive in time to witness death. More often they witness the aftermath and view the bodies of those who have died. I have been witness to several of these occasions and I have noticed a deep sense of respect and reverence among the professionals whom we dispatch to help us deal with these terrible events.

After the event, when diffusing with colleagues, I have heard a kind of callousness toward death. I've been with officers who describe what they have seen with just a little too much detail for my taste. Again, it is not disrespectful, just a bit blunt.

The bottom line is that they are well trained. they have specific procedures that they follow with great care - both to preserve any evidence that may be garnered from the scene so that the story can be truthfully told when the time comes and to provide for the safety of all who are involved. They also are human beings with a deep respect and reverence for life and they understand that these are people with whom they are dealing, not just case numbers and crimes to be solved.

I have been fortunate to witness deep courage in the face of death.

But, I have to be honest, I know officers who are far more comfortable dealing with death at a crime scene than dealing with grief in the house of survivors. They

understand the need for in-person notifications of death. They understand the need for the truth to be told as accurately as possible. They are not, however, trained or prepared to deal with intense emotions and they know intense emotions will be part of the process.

Sometimes they grab a chaplain to help them deal with the house of grief. I know that from experience. I've been on a lot of those trips to make official notification of a death.

If I ever get the opportunity, and I may well do so some day, I'd love to be a part of the training of new officers as they learn the procedures of coroners and investigators and are taught how to deal with death. I'd love to help them prepare to deal with grief as well.

I would tell them that there is no reason to fear the house of grief. I would tell them that it is perfectly acceptable for them to be themselves. They don't need to learn to talk in the voice that all funeral directors use - the voice that they must teach in funeral director's school. They don't need to fake confidence. It is OK to not be confident as they approach an unknown situation and unknown emotional responses.

I also would tell them that sometimes grieving people collapse when they receive the news, but that is OK, too. When they fall to the floor, there is no where else for them to fall. When they don't have words and only tears, there are no words required. Grieving people will ask you the questions for which they need answers. And the initial shock doesn't last forever.

I would say it again and again: When someone responds with shock and an emotional outburst, let them grieve. Give them a few moments to cry and wail and do what they need to do. It won't last forever, perhaps 15 or 20 minutes, but not forever. I would tell them that you can trust people with their grief. And then you can get on with the business that you need to do, answering questions, telling the location of the body and personal possessions, explaining the steps that must be taken.

I would tell them that they don't have to be experts. It helps to know of some resources - how to get in touch with the family's minister or spiritual director, who to call for grief support and counseling, who can help with notification of children, a list of services such as funeral homes, cleaning services, and the like. Initial notification, however, isn't a counseling process. It is a human-to-human relationship. They qualify for that position because they are human.

Here is what I know. the house of grief is a beautiful place. In the house of grief you will meet people who are brave and tender and wonderful. Their instincts will lead those who are paying attention to witness some of the best of what it means to be human.

My colleague, Kate Braestrup, chaplain to the Maine Warden's Service, says, "You can trust a human being with grief. . . . Just walk fearlessly into the house of mourning, for grief is just love squaring up to its oldest enemy. And after all these mortal human years, love is up to the challenge." I think that is what I would tell the officers if I had a change to talk to them.

Our Sheriff's Office is filled with professionals who are well trained and are very good at their jobs. We have coroners who are competent to deal with a death that occurs without the presence of medical professionals. They know how to determine death, make estimates of the timing and even gain insights into the cause. We have victims' advocates who are trained in standing with and for victims in the face of tragedy and crime. We have investigators who know how to gather the evidence. We even have chaplains who provide care for those other professionals upon whom their daily duties take a deep toll and who sometimes need spiritual support in their work.

All of these people, however, need to give themselves permission to just be human and to trust those they serve with the grief they experience. After all, love is up to the challenge.

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April 8, 2017 – A Global Economy

Not long ago I was driving through Rapid City and I pulled up behind a car stopped at a light. It was a new BMW SUV. It had a license plate frame that said, "AQHA - Ride American Quarter Horses." I'm not exactly sure why I was so struck by the license plate frame. After all, we Americans use our license plate frames to advertise all kinds of affiliations. And Quarter Horses are the most popular breed in our country. The American Quarter Horse Association is the largest breed registry in the world. Quarter horses are great for short races, rodeos, horse shows and working ranches. I understand why people have affinities for the breed. Similarly, although I have never owned one, BMW automobiles have an excellent reputation for quality, luxury motorcycles and automobiles. Even though we Americans have trouble correctly pronouncing, Bayerische Motoren Werke and often Anglicize it to Bavarian Motor Works, we're pretty familiar with the brand.

What is more, it would be hypocritical for me to criticize someone else for driving a car that was manufactured in another country. After all, I was driving a Subaru when I was following the BMW.

Both of us consume gasoline, the price of which is based on the wholesale price of a barrel of oil as established on a world market. And that market is complex. US oil-producing areas, such as North Dakota, benefit from the price of oil being high. In fact when foreign countries increase production, driving the price down, the price can slip

below the point where it is profitable to produce domestic oil. Consumers can't tell for sure whether low prices are a good thing or a bad thing. And they have virtually no input into the price of the fuel anyway. Fuel prices are established far from the place we live.

The license plate frame was an illustration of how comfortable we have become with the simple fact that we live in a global economy. Most of the consumer goods we use have traveled a long way before coming into our possession.

The district of Datang in the city of Zhuji in Zhejiang Province in China has become known as Sock City. Most of us wear socks that were made in China most of the time. In fact, if you were to insist on wearing only socks that were made in the USA you would probably have to get pretty good at purchasing your socks over the Internet as opposed to picking them up from a local retail outlet. It might be a bit easier in North Carolina, which is the US state that produces the most socks.

It isn't just our socks, of course. My smart phone that I carry constantly and rely on for communications with the church, Sheriff's office, family and many others, was probably assembled in China. I'm not sure how to tell whether it was assembled by Foxconn or Pegatron - the manufacturer uses both companies for assembly. But assembly is only one step in a process. The components of the phone including transistors, wires, connectors, glass, the processing chip, circuit boards, vibration unit, speakers, accelerometer and various other items all come from different places. It is likely that my phone has parts that were made in Korea, Taiwan, Texas, France, Italy, Kentucky and perhaps even Inner Mongolia. At least Inner Mongolia would be one possible source of rare earth minerals that are required for manufacturing such a unit.

Our food does a lot of traveling. A quick trip through the grocery store will show foods from Texas, Mexico, California, China, Japan, Germany, South Korea, the United Kingdom, France, India and Italy.

It amazes to me that farms in Washington State fill shipping containers with hay that is exported to Japan and China where it is fed to farm animals that produce meat, some of which is imported back into the United States. How can such wild travel of such common goods make any sense at all?

It is pretty hard to live anywhere in the world and not participate in a global economy. Even when we make a concerted effort to buy as many locally-produced goods and items as possible,

Of course my business as a minister is that of participating in globalization. According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus commanded his followers to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . ." From the first journeys of the Apostle Paul the church has seen itself as an international movement that transcends national boundaries and divisions. Our

denomination, the United Church of Christ, participates in Global Ministries and challenges every local congregation to become a Global Mission Church. We understand that receiving and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ is not to be limited to any single location. We understand that we grow in faith by developing partnerships with faithful people around the world and understanding that our religion is not limited by culture, language or national identity.

Being participants in a globalized religion, we are also participants in the global economy. We invest church funds in travel for mission partners and church representatives to worship and pray with those in distant countries. We transfer teaching materials from one location to another. A few years ago I was speaking with a member of a non-denominational congregation in our country who spoke of their church's sponsoring of "smuggling" Bibles into China. I told the person about Amity Printing, a company in China with which our church has been affiliated since its founding. Amity has the capacity to produce 18 million Bibles a year, making it the world's largest producer of Bibles. While most of the Bibles produced by Amity are sold for use in China, the company even produces some Bibles for export to other countries. Although the Amity Foundation dates back to the mid 1980's, Christian missionary partners have been involved in distributing Bibles in China since at least the 1850s. That is just one example of how the church is a global institution.

We who live on this planet are all connected and while we recognize boundaries and divisions, we also understand our common humanity. I'm pretty sure that the person who drives a German automobile and rides American Quarter Horses sees no irony in their preferences.

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April 9, 2017 – Palm Sunday, 2017

As parades go, it wasn't much. We've enhanced it a bit over the years with all of the telling and retelling of the day. All four Gospels have reports of Jesus riding on a donkey in his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. When one looks closely, however, it wasn't exactly the kind of event that the Zealots had been imagining. It wasn't the recapture of Jerusalem that some had predicted. It was a crowd of people waving branches and fronds off of the local trees. A few of the folks spread their cloaks on the ground as Jesus passed. In that region at that time it was customary to cover in some way the path of someone thought to be worthy of highest honor. All of the gospels describe people laying their garments and rushes on the street. John's report is most specific when it comes to describing the Palm fronds.

The use of the palm branch as the symbol of victory was a custom adopted from the Greeks and Romans, cultures that had overrun the region. It was the Romans who were in charge in the days of Jesus.

It is, in fact, entirely possible that Jesus' entry wasn't the only parade in Jerusalem that week. Pontius Pilate, fifth prefect of the Roman province of Judaea, who served under Emperor Tiberius was in town for the Jewish celebration of Passover. Pilate was a member of the equestrian order, an aristocratic class, but ranking below patricians. The title might be compared to that of "knight" in other parts of Europe in the centuries that followed.

Pilate's entry would have been on horseback. The horse was a symbol of his class, office and authority. The horse was a powerful weapon of war in those days and war horses were traded by arms dealers for great profit.

Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey - a colt in some versions of the story. The donkey was an animal of peace. The symbolism of the stories draws a sharp contrast.

What is more, Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, the intense run of activities that culminated with the crucifixion of Jesus. We Christians sometimes use the phrase, "Christ died for our sins." Holy Week makes it clear that it was a bit more harsh. Christ was executed. He was the recipient of capital punishment from a powerful government authority. The charge was insurrection or treason. The trial was brief and quickly concluded. The punishment was swiftly carried out. Less than a week from the entry into Jerusalem that was marked by the palm parade Jesus was dead and laid into a tomb.

Of course that isn't the entire story.

It is clear, however, that Christians have mixed feelings about the celebration of Palm Sunday.

As a child, Palm Sunday was a sort of big deal. My father raised donkeys and we usually provided a donkey - most years a new colt - for the events at our church. We didn't have very many palms. Our church didn't pass out palms to worshipers as is common in the church we serve today. There would be a few florist's palms at the front of the sanctuary. The rest were crude cutouts of construction paper made by the Sunday School Classes. We had a bit of a parade around the front of the church and, weather permitting, we'd go out in front of the church where my dad would be waiting with the donkey. It wasn't as big as Easter - a week away - when there would be an Easter egg hunt and plenty of candy treats for all of the children.

I do remember a conversation that was held between some of the adults in our church one year about the materials that were being circulated to promote One Great Hour of Sharing. The annual appeal takes place during Lent and this particular year there were some pictures in the flyers that showed dirty, ill-clothed children begging for food. Someone in the church thought that the pictures weren't appropriate for children to see

and not the kind of decorations that one would want to have up at Easter, when the church was decorated with pastel colors and fresh flowers. I suspect that there may have been a poster with the same picture on it, but I don't remember that part. At any rate, some of the adults thought that it was important for our church to take seriously the suffering of others. Other adults thought that the overt display of the materials somehow detracted from their idea of a proper celebration. I don't think it escalated to an argument. The conversation, however, did begin for me a process of associating Palm Sunday with human suffering.

For several decades, I would read the entire story of the Passion of Jesus as part of Palm Sunday Worship. The tradition, known as Passion Sunday, grew out of a sense that many Christians attended worship only on Palm Sunday and Easter and missed the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services that told of the pain of his crucifixion. Experiencing only the celebrations without recognizing the deep suffering gives only a partial understanding of the nature of the Gospel. As a result, it became common to begin Palm Sunday with a joyful procession and the waving of palms and then to turn to the reading of the Passion narrative and end the worship service on a somber note. It was a powerful service when properly planned and led.

Our practice has changed a bit in recent years. We now separate the liturgy of the palms from the liturgy of the passion, observing Palm Sunday and then reading the passion liturgy on Monday. Our congregation has adopted a pattern of special services every day of holy week. Most of the members of the church attend some of the special events during the week, gaining a flavor of the events of the crucifixion. It is exhausting for worship leaders, but it is deeply meaningful. I often speak of the week as practice for the grief that we all will one day face.

So we'll have a little parade today. It won't be the biggest parade in our city's story. It won't make the front page of the newspaper. A few of us will walk down Kansas City Street waving our palms. We'll pause in the park to read the Gospel story of Palm Sunday. We'll sing a song. We'll acknowledge that the week is just beginning and that there is much to follow.

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April 10, 2017 – Holy Monday, 2017

Here is a small piece of trivia that some in our corner of Christianity may not have noticed. The Eastern rite of the Christian Church, sometimes referred to as Orthodox Christianity, has a different way of computing the date of Easter than those of us in the Western Church. However, in 2017, the dates line up so we celebrate Holy Week and Easter on the same dates. This occurs from time to time and happened most recently in 2013. Even when the date of Easter lines up, the recognition of Holy Week is slightly different in the two traditions. In our part of the church the first day of Holy Week is Palm

Sunday, which is celebrated both with the liturgy of the Palms and the liturgy of the Passion. Some congregations combine the two liturgies into one service, others separate the liturgies. In our congregation, we read the liturgy of the passion today, on Holy Monday, but that is less common than reading it on Sunday. In a Greek Orthodox church, Holy Week begins on Saturday with the recognition of Lazarus Saturday. The text that we read a week before Palm Sunday, about the raising of Lazarus, is read on the Saturday before Palm Sunday in the Orthodox tradition. Then at the other end of the week, when we observe Holy Saturday as a day of quiet contemplation and waiting and reserve our observance of the Great Vigil until sunset, Orthodox congregations name Saturday as the first day of Easter. Both traditions observe the Great Vigil at sunset (or in some cases a bit earlier for the convenience of worshipers) and the elements of the Great Vigil are similar.

So, depending on how your tradition counts the days, today is the second or third day of Holy Week. The Gospels report several events for Holy Monday including the cursing of the fig tree (Matthew 21:18-22, Mark 11:20-26), and the questioning of Jesus' authority (Matthew 21:23-27). The story that is most common for meditations and reflections of the day, however is the cleansing of the temple. This event is reported in all four gospels, though it appears near the end Matthew, Mark and Luke, and closer to the beginning of John. Some scholars argue that John reports it on a different trip to Jerusalem as there are two stories of the celebration of Passover in John's account. It is a story that reveals a side of Jesus' personality and humanity that is less common. His anger, inspired by the money changers in the temple, is not often revealed in the stories of the Gospels. In Mark's version he directly accuses the Temple authorities of stealing and names the poor widows as the victims of the theft.

In our congregation, we delay the reading of the liturgy of the passion to Holy Monday instead of reading it on Palm Sunday. The tradition is to read the entire passion narrative, usually about two chapters, from one gospel. The service contains no sermon, simply a dramatic reading of scripture. By reading a longer passage, the congregation is given an oversight of the story. Frequently we read only short passages from the text, which give a flavor, but not a sense of the whole. Parts of the passion narrative will be read on each of the other days of Holy Week, but at the beginning of the week, we read the entire narrative to give us a fresh reminder of the story.

On the one hand, my part is relatively simple. I simply rehearse reading the text out loud so that I can do so with a minimum of mistakes during the liturgy. But the challenge is deeper - to read the text with dramatic emphasis to engage worshipers in the story. As opposed to the usual preaching task where I can bring in personal stories or references to contemporary events, my responsibility is to convey as accurately as possible the actual content of a text that has been honored and treasured by our people for millennia. There is a difference between telling the story and reading it and tonight is an occasion for reading.

For me, this experience is shaped by my own personal experiences of grief and loss. To give one specific example, in 2010, my brother died suddenly of a heart attack. The event occurred at work as he drove away from the place where he had loaded his van. The van continued across the parking lot, crossed a street, went over a bank and ended up in the Missouri River. The initial reports made it unclear what had happened. It was only after a medical examination that we learned how he died from the heart attack and the submersion in the river was not a factor in his death. In the early days after the loss, as we were processing our grief, one of my jobs was to listen carefully to the information and reports that I received from his widow and then to communicate them to our mother, who was living in our home at the time. Getting the story right and telling it accurately was important as we traveled our journey of loss and grief. In a similar way, the Gospel reports of the death of Jesus are guides to the grief of the early disciples before the creation of a distinct institution that became the church. These stories are likely the earliest and most direct stories that are contained in our Gospels. Reading them reveals a window on the earliest days of those who were to go on to shape the faith that we have inherited. Although the stories contain profound theological insights, they are not primarily about rational thought and logical thinking. They are, rather, stories of the heart.

All of Holy Week is a time for increased quiet and contemplation. Today is an invitation to read the entire story several times and simply receive it without judgment. Our Eastern rite sisters and brothers call this day “Great and Holy” as they do each day of the week. It is made holy by the stories that we read. Our traditions challenge us to make it great by sharing those stories with as many people as possible.

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April 11, 2017 – Sittin’ with the Blues

Over the years, I have spent a lot of time with people who are grieving. I am often called in to meet with a family when a death has occurred. Not infrequently, I am selected to be the one to carry the news of a sudden or traumatic death to surviving family members. Often, when others learn of this activity they will say, “I wouldn’t know what to say.” My response is that it isn’t necessary to say much of anything. When people are grieving, they don’t need a lot of words. When they are in shock they aren’t going to remember what is said. When circumstances are calmer, they need time to think their own thoughts and process their own feelings. Often what I do when meeting with those who are grieving is to simply sit with them in their grief. As I do, they will sometimes begin to share memories and thoughts of the one who has died. Other times they will simply sit quietly. Almost always they will thank me for having visited.

In those times when I have been wrestling with grief in my own life, I have not been interested in receiving advice from others. That hasn’t stopped them from giving advice. I’ve been told that I will get over it. I’ve been told that returning to work quickly is the

best way to recover. I've been told that I need to suck it up and get on with my life. I'm sure that all of the advice I received was well meaning, but what I most appreciated in times of grief were the visits from people who simply stopped by, asked how I was doing, and spent a little time listening.

Sometimes we just need to sit with our grief for a little while.

The blues is a uniquely American art form that has deep roots in African-American history. Rising up from 19th-century southern plantations, the music originated with slaves, former slaves and descendants of slaves. These were people who were familiar with grief. They were people who knew the pain of loss. They were folks who had felt the burden of injustice. Their music, while familiar with misfortune, betrayal and regret, goes far beyond self-pity. The music isn't about feeling sorry for oneself. It is, simply, a vehicle for communicating honest emotion.

From April 2010 to April 2011, our family experienced the death of my brother, my mother and my father-in-law. My father-in-law died on Ash Wednesday and the cumulative grief served to deepen the season of Lent for me that year. As I reflected on the journey of grief as a time of holiness and drawing closer to God, I began to come to the understanding that the season of Lent is an opportunity to practice grief. The stories of the sadness and loss that our people experienced so long ago serve to help us connect with the grief we experience in the present. We aren't the first generation of our people to have experienced loss and grief. We aren't the first generation of our people to have suffered and cried. Connecting with those previous generations and remembering our collective loss and grief gives us strength for the challenges of the present.

During that same time in my life, I was listening to recordings of blues musicians quite a bit. They seemed to connect with the emotions I was experiencing. Compared to the stories behind many of the blues tunes I was listening to, my life wasn't as harsh or troubled as the journeys that produced the music. Still, there was something reassuring in discovering that grief was an experience that was deeper and wider than just what was happening in my life.

Somehow the connection between the blues and Lent became clear in my mind and the next year, as we began a process of re-thinking our observance of Holy Week, I suggested that a blues concert might be just the right experience to allow people to sit with the holiness of the week instead of just packing another experience into the space. Our goal has been to invite people to slow down, to withdraw a bit from the everyday and to simply experience the journey of Holy Week as a way of connecting with some of the deepest experiences of their own lives and the deepest stories of our people.

Tonight is the night for simply sitting with the blues.

There will be no sermon, no formal liturgy, no extended prayers. We'll simply have live performers giving us a taste of their unique art.

What is interesting about the blues night as the years have passed is that we also have discovered that grief and loss and the blues aren't just about moping around with the darkest thoughts and feeling sorry for ourselves. There is a lot of simply having fun associated with the blues. We laugh as well as cry.

It is that mixture of emotions that I often experience when I meet with a family to plan a funeral. They are sad. They are missing their loved one. But they don't want the service to be all doom and gloom and sorrow and sadness. They have lots of good memories, ones that are funny and silly and light-hearted. They don't want to remember only the pain of loss because loss isn't the most important aspect of their relationship with their loved one. We grieve because we have lost, but we would not experience the loss had we not loved. A funeral properly planned is an occasion of love and respect and thanksgiving for the gift of life.

Holy Week is intense. There will be plenty of emotions inspired by the reading of sacred texts and the sharing of sacred story. We know that the dramatic events of Easter are coming. We know that our emotions will become even closer to the surface as we become more tired with the busy events of the week. But for tonight, we'll just sit with the blues. No specific agenda. No precise timeline. Tonight you'll find us just sittin' with the blues.

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April 12, 2017 – Holy Wednesday

Jesus was asked, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law." His answer was to quote Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." The commitment is sometimes referred to by its first word "Hear" in Hebrew, "Shema," or by the first two words, "Shema Yisrael." His answer is not the least bit surprising. It is a commandment which every Jew is supposed to have memorized. In fact, in Deuteronomy, following the commandment is the commandment to memorize it: "And these words which you command you this day shall be upon your heart."

The commandment to memorize is followed by another specific commandment: "You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise."

It is a sacred obligation to teach the essentials of freedom to our children. It is a sacred obligation to repeat those essentials over and over again in all different settings.

These commandments form an important core for Biblical teaching. The responsibility for passing the faith from generation to generation rests securely on the shoulders of parents who are the primary teachers of children.

In response to that commandment, our congregation is serious about providing opportunities and support for parents to teach their children the core tenants of our faith. We have a solid Sunday School program, but we reach beyond the classes that are offered by the congregation. We work directly with parents to make sure that they have resources and support in their task as teachers of the faith.

For us, in recent years, two events during Holy Week form a place of focus of our support of parents. The first occurs this evening. It is a dinner that is served with a bit of ceremony. The Gospels teach us that Jesus' last supper with his disciples took place in the formal observance of the Seder meal, a meal that is expressly designed around the process of teaching the story of the Exodus to all who participate. It has special roles for children and is designed for passing on the faith. Because we are a Christian congregation and not a Jewish community, we don't do a complete replica of the Seder dinner, preferring to save those occasions for genuine Interfaith events. Susan and I were honored to celebrate the Seder with Jewish friends last Friday. Tonight's dinner will have a few of the elements of the Seder, but is not an attempt to mark the Jewish observance. In its place, we tell stories of the life of Jesus, remembering his miracles of healing, his times of teaching, his welcoming of children, his parables, and much more. We conclude our dinner with the celebration of Holy Communion using the bread and cup of the meal that we have just shared, in remembrance as Jesus instructed his disciples.

There is a natural tendency to shield children from the pain of loss and grief. What we have learned, however, is that children can be trusted with their grief. Children have ways of understanding the events of this life that are deep and meaningful. When I work with grieving families that have children, I encourage parents to speak openly and honestly about death with their children. I encourage them to share their own feelings of grief and loss. Children look to their parents to discover the truth and honesty and openness are needed when there are major changes in family. Over the years I have been struck by the depth of understanding that children bring to the process of grieving. They seem to be perfectly capable of understanding loss. They want answers to their questions. They want to know what happens to the body, where it is placed, who cares for it. They can accept the reality of loss and, in their own way, have a sense of its permanence. When they are included in the family and when their questions are answered honestly and frankly, they enter fully into the process of grief and healing.

So we do not attempt to gloss over the fact that Jesus died. If we are to teach the power of the resurrection to our children, we must be willing to also teach the reality of death. For resurrection is meaningless if there is no death. One of the themes of my instructions this year is that we often say "Jesus died for our sins." Perhaps it would be

more accurate to say, “Jesus was executed for our sins.” Jesus of Nazareth was a victim of a botched trial in which an innocent man was falsely convicted and he was executed by a government that practiced capital punishment. It was a harsh and brutal ending to a life of peace and healing.

We won't dwell on the means of Jesus' death this evening. In fact we won't dwell on his death per se. What we will do is to remind our children that Jesus was a real person who really lived and who really died. His memory is precious to his followers. We tell his stories over and over again so that they will not be forgotten. His resurrection is central to our faith, but so is his life. We will not forget who he was, what he said and what he did. Just as we have been taught these life-giving stories, we teach them to our children.

In the midst of the everyday busyness of our congregation, with music rehearsals and preparations for Easter celebrations and lots of furniture to be moved and arrangements to be made, we pause for a simple family dinner. We eat good food together and we tell our story. It is an event that I have learned to look forward to every year.

We shall talk of Jesus when we sit in our houses, when we walk by the way and when we lie down, and when we rise. And as we do, those stories shall become written on our hearts.

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April 13, 2017 – Maundy Thursday, 2017

The Gospel of John begins the description of the events of Holy Thursday with a description of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. When he came to Simon Peter, a discussion ensued. At first Simon Peter tries to decline having his feet washed and offers to wash Jesus' feet. Jesus says, “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me.” Simon Peter responds with a request to have not only his feet washed, but also his hands and head. Jesus says, “He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over.” This is followed by more discussion of the foot washing including references to one about to betray Jesus. After Judas Iscariot leaves the group, Jesus gives them further instruction.

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” - John 13:34

The Latin word for commandment is *mandatum*. It is from this Latin text that traditional Christians have drawn the name for Holy Thursday, which is commonly known as Maundy Thursday. It is traditional to celebrate Holy Communion on Maundy Thursday and our liturgy for the celebration includes Jesus' instruction to “do this in remembrance of me.” Because of the association with the instruction to celebrate the meal in

remembrance, some have thought of the day in terms of the mandate to celebrate in remembrance. However, most scholars agree that the mandate of the day is the commandment to love one another.

It is the kind of trivial discussion that seminarians sometimes have. Which mandate is the real mandate of Maundy Thursday?

The congregation I serve is a bit like Simon Peter. They aren't big on getting their feet washed. I don't blame them. I don't like the idea of taking off my shoes and socks in public. Still, there is a tradition in the church of offering foot washing as a part of the recognition of Maundy Thursday. While I am a supporter of change and new ways of doing things, I'm not eager to have the traditions of the past be forgotten. We offer foot washing as an optional ceremony in the church parlor prior to the formal Maundy Thursday service. The action is symbolic. We will even simply wipe the shoes of those who prefer not to remove them. We rarely get more than a couple of people interested in having their feet washed.

A few years back I attended public foot washing on a regular basis. My mother, who was a brittle diabetic, needed to pay special attention to the care of her feet. I took her to the Senior Citizens' Center once a month where they had a clinic in which nurses examined the feet of the clients and trimmed their toenails. They prepared basins of warm water and disinfectant in which the clients soaked their feet prior to the nail trimming. The clinics were conducted in a friendly atmosphere with gentle conversation between the nurses and the clients. My mother enjoyed the clinics and I enjoyed going with her. I wouldn't describe the atmosphere as especially religious and there was no mention of faith or belief. However, it was impossible to witness the clinic without developing a deep respect for the nurses, who gave caring and dedicated service to the clients and assumed the role of a servant during the clinic.

The symbol of foot washing isn't the point of the mandate, however. The mandate is to love one another as Jesus has loved us. That, frankly, is even more difficult than washing someone's feet. Loving one another - putting the interests of the other ahead of my own - is a challenge. There are some days when the people around me aren't easy to love.

I enjoy the symbolism of the church. Although the congregations I have served aren't what anyone would describe as "high church," I do enjoy wearing vestments and leading the celebration of Holy Communion. I suppose I enjoy the authority of knowing the words and serving as the officiant. I have had the honor and privilege of serving the leaders of the national setting of our church as they worshiped in Amistad Chapel in our church's offices. I also feel honored to serve communion in intimate settings such as private homes and hospital rooms. And I enjoy participating in communion as a worshiper when I worship in settings where others officiate. The ceremony is deeply meaningful to me.

I look forward to Maundy Thursday with its ceremonies and symbolic actions.

I know, however, that I need to think much more broadly than just about serving as an officiant in a traditional ceremony. Maundy Thursday is a time for me to remember the commandment to love one another. In the congregation will be faithful old timers, who are regular in their church attendance and who miss few services. There will also be visitors who are in the building for the first time. There will be folks who struggle with grief, or mental illness, or chronic pain, or disability, or family dysfunction or one of thousands of different challenges that are a part of our human condition. There will be folks who's politics are radically different than my own. There will be people I've known for decades. There will be others whose name I do not know. I have been called to love all of these people. Their needs are distinct and unique and different. Loving each of them means giving attention to who they are and what needs they bring into the room.

The holy mandate of this day - and of every day - is to love them with Christ-like love, acknowledging that I am often not very Christ-like.

I pray that this day will be holy and meaningful for those who worship with our congregation. I also pray that it will be a reminder of my own personal mandate to love others as I have been loved.

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April 14, 2017 – Good Friday, 2017

Christianity is unique in its conception of God becoming human. We assert that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. I am no expert in world religions, but while there are stories of humans who achieve divine status in other religions, I am not aware of any other religion where humanity and divinity are expressed in the same individual at the same time. It is a concept that is difficult to explain. I have been asked by others, "How can that be?" and I confess that I am at a loss to explain. There are many theological books that tackle the issue with careful attention to logic and the structure of their arguments. I am not very systematic in my thinking and it is likely that a good scholar could find logical errors and incomplete supports in my explanations and arguments. So I do not claim to be able to offer a perfect argument. Nonetheless I am a member of the faith and family of the Christian Church and I live my life inside the basic principles of Christianity.

As a result Good Friday is, for me, not only a day to contemplate Jesus' death, but also to come face to face with my own mortality. To be human is to die. The entire season of Lent is an invitation to reflect on this simple fact. We begin the season with Ash Wednesday, when the ashes on our forehead remind us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. The elements of our physical bodies are borrowed from creation for the

span of our lives. When that span has ended, our bodies return to the earth and become available for continuing creation. Our faith is founded on the promise of resurrection, but that promise is not a promise of immortality.

Today we simply face a deep reality. Jesus died. Dying is part of the reality of being human. We too will one day die.

We cannot fully know death, however. It remains a mystery for all who are living. I have been present at the bedside of dying persons dozens of times. I have watched as they breathed their last. I have been present as the physician comes in, examines the body and declares that death has occurred. I have viewed hundreds of bodies in caskets, prepared for burial. I have seen the results of the mortician's art carefully displayed for public viewing. I have also seen human bodies that were not prepared for viewing. I have been to the scenes of crimes and seen the bodies of victims. Some of what I have seen is not pretty and leaves a stark memory.

Still, I do not know death.

I imagine that death has some of the qualities of falling asleep. Humans have believed this for centuries. We observe that the dying person slips from consciousness and ceases responding to outside stimulation. Because we have experienced sleep we often use it as a way to talk about death. We even imagine that death has some of the qualities of sleep, saying, "She is now at rest."

But death is not the same as sleep. Brain scientists say that neurological activity continues during sleep. It ceases with death. We have some ability to remember dreams and other results of activities during our sleep. Even waking up with a stiff joint caused by sleeping in an uncomfortable position is a reminder that our bodies continue to experience sensations even when we are not actively conscious.

No matter how much I try to imagine death, I know that my imagination is limited. I contemplate Jesus on the cross and I wonder what sensations he felt. Would I be able to endure such pain without crying out? Would I simply pass out and lose consciousness in the face of such torture? Would I lose my capacity to love and allow my thoughts to turn to hate and visions of reprisal? I do not know.

Poets have tried to describe death. They often make it seem beautiful. They also use the same analogies that other writers have employed. "How wonderful is Death/Death, and his brother Sleep!" (Percy Bysshe Shelly) Pablo Neruda describes death as going into oneself "as though we were drowning inside our hearts - as though we lived falling out of the skin into the soul." Charlotte Brontë describes the death of Anne Brontë as something to be desired, but I think that the wish for each breath to be the last is more the wish of the one witnessing the death than that of the one who is dying. We long for

difficult things to be over and it is natural for us to want the agony of watching another suffer to come to an end.

I am a lover of poetry and of those who can craft such word art into inspiration for others. But poetry falls short when it comes to a description of death.

The reality of this day is that we dedicate it to the contemplation of that which we cannot fully know. We talk of Jesus' death. We remember Jesus' death. We worship together and listen to the words that describe the events that lead up to Jesus' death. But we cannot fully know Jesus' death - at least not right now.

My experience of Good Friday is like my experience of the deaths of others. My emotions travel a wide range in a short amount of time. There are sad thoughts and tears well up in my eyes. There are also practical thoughts and my mind wanders to lists of things to do. There are also memories. I do not remain focused on the trial and crucifixion only, but allow myself to think of parables and sayings and the stories of healing and reaching out to those who were marginalized by society. My attention does not stay focused on death, but keeps leading me to thoughts of life.

What I do know is that this day, as awesome as it is, is not the end of the story.

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April 15, 2017 – Waiting

To the extent that Holy Week offers an opportunity to practice for the seasons of loss and grief in our lives, today is a lesson in waiting. Waiting is part of most families' process of dealing with grief. After the initial shock of loss begins to fade, there has to be time for friends and relatives to travel, for preparations to be made for the funeral. Because life is disrupted the cycles of tasks to be accomplished and appointments to be attended is set aside. Most of those who are grieving experience a day or more of waiting.

In the story of Jesus, the day of waiting is Saturday. Jewish law forbid the handling of dead bodies on the Sabbath. Jesus had been removed from the cross on Friday, but there was not time to wash the body and prepare it for a proper burial. It was wrapped in a clean linen sheet and placed in the tomb while the mourners waited. Waiting was one of the tasks of the women who followed Jesus. Theirs also would be the task of cleaning the body and preparing it for proper burial.

As the Christian church began to form itself as an institution separated from the Jewish synagogue, the period of waiting became a formal part of preparation for membership in the church. Lent became a six-week season of preparation for new members before formally joining the church on Easter Sunday. The readings and lessons of Lent were

chosen to provide a comprehensive overview of the life and ministry of Jesus. Lessons in Bible, history, tradition, practices and theology were designed into the weeks of preparation. The intense schedule of Holy Week worship led up to the celebrations of baptism and confirmation that were designed for Easter. After Good Friday, there was a vigil. Those preparing for membership stayed awake and prayed for 24 hours from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday when the Easter services began. The traditions changed over the centuries and the Great Vigil of Easter emerged as a sort of shortened preparation for membership in the church combined with a review for existing members.

The great vigil begins with a celebration of new light. In the times of wax candles, a new Christ candle was formed and lit for the first time at sundown on Holy Saturday. Ceremonies, including the passing of light from candle to candle were formed with their own songs and celebrations of the gift of new light. Readings referring to Christ as the light of the world are offered as priests don freshly-laundered vestments in celebration. The service of the light is followed by a service of the word in which four lessons from the Old Testament cover the span of Hebrew history from creation through the Exodus, the Psalms and the Prophets. Following those readings are Epistle and Gospel readings celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. The sermon is the first sermon of the Easter season. The service of the word is followed by a service of water in which new members of the church are baptized and all are sprinkled with water as a reminder of their baptisms. The fourth and final service of the Great Vigil is the service of eucharist. Celebrants enter the sanctuary adorned for Easter and share Holy Communion surrounded by fresh flowers and signs of resurrection.

In some traditions the great vigil takes place over a 12-hour span from sundown to sunrise with about four hours of liturgy and eight hours of silence and prayer. This service has been shortened to about two hours in common practice and even more into the one-hour service we share in our congregation. We even start our service a bit before sundown for the convenience of families and to allow time for sleep (and writing a blog) before the Easter Sunrise service at 6 am.

That, however, is this evening. Today we wait and we prepare. There are decorations to place in the church and foods to deliver in preparation for tomorrow's festivities. But there isn't much on the to do list for this day.

Practicing waiting is one of the hardest tasks for me. I'm not good at waiting. Our overly-scheduled, too busy pace of life is not a good place to learn the patience of waiting. Bill Watterson drew a "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoon in which the child Calvin is complaining to his father about having to wait for the coals to get hot before grilling supper. His father responds, "You know, Calvin, sometimes the anticipation of something is more fun than the thing itself once you get it. Here we are, its a beautiful evening. Its nice to just sit here and look at the trees while we wait . . . Dinner will be over soon, and afterward we'll be distracted with other things to do. But now we have a few minutes to

ourselves to enjoy . . . These days go by so quickly. It's good that every now and then we have to wait for something."

We're not very good at those few minutes. More like Calvin than his father, we are eager to simply get on to the next event. We don't want to have to wait. Our lives and our society are geared to instant results, fast food, constant communication and a 24-hour news cycle. Unless we look for them and make it a part of our lives, we don't get very many opportunities to practice waiting. Not long ago a young person in our church complained to me about having to wait for popcorn to cook in the microwave, apparently unaware of how much slower that process used to be. Youth in our church find my stories of waiting to use the one house phone in a college dormitory to be some kind of anachronistic tale of times so long ago that they are beyond imagination.

Waiting, however, is good for the soul. It offers healing to our weary lives.

Today we wait . . . and we give thanks for the waiting.

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April 16, 2017 – Easter, 2017

It was one of those phone calls in the middle the night that I know, from the first few sentences that I will not be sleeping any more that night. "The baby has been born, but things are not right. Can you come?" Of course I could come. I did come, not knowing what to expect. I hadn't tracked the pregnancy in detail, but it seemed to me that the arrival of the child was close to full term - the baby didn't come way too early. But there are a lot of things that can go wrong.

We humans are incredibly complex beings with many interrelated systems that sustain our lives. We come into this world in a small size, with organs that can grow over time to provide for the changes that are required to make the trip from infancy to adulthood. At the core of those systems is the human heart with four chambers and a series of valves that control the flow of blood from one chamber to another. The mitral valve helps move blood from the left atrium into the left ventricle, which then pushes the blood out to the body. If the valve fails, or doesn't allow enough blood to pass, back pressure can result and freshly oxygenated blood can flow backwards into the vessels of the lungs. It is life threatening.

In those days there were some cases of successful valve replacement in infants, but the most likely scenario was that a series of surgeries would be required to replace the valve multiple times as the child grew, each of which would be a dangerous and risky procedure.

It was not a moment to consider the costs. It was a moment that demanded a series of careful decisions. Before I arrived at the hospital the decision had been made to proceed with the surgery. In the meantime, the newborn would be confined to an isolette in the neonatal intensive care unit with a variety of different tubes, monitors and machines connected.

Could I baptize the child?

Indeed I could.

Baptism is the mark of the acceptance of a person into the faith and family of Jesus Christ. It is usually a communal activity. My role in the process is often as officiant, but the sacrament is not in my hands. I do not control the movement of the Holy Spirit. The child didn't need special words or actions from me to be beloved. That love was already present. The family, however, needed confirmation of the child's place in the family of the church. Furthermore, since I firmly believe that I have been ordained for the ministry of sacrament, I do not believe that it would ever be appropriate for me to refuse the sacrament when asked. I have never said "no" when asked to participate in a baptism. I will never do so.

Parents and grandparents and a few hospital staff members gathered for the ceremony which took only a few minutes. I was scrubbed and gowned and used distilled water in a sterile container provided by the hospital. I was allowed to remove one glove from a thoroughly scrubbed hand and make skin-to-skin contact with the tiny forehead.

We placed the child in the hands of the surgeons and into God's everlasting care.

The weeks that followed were an emotional roller coaster, with promising days and discouraging days. The surgery was completed, and the tiny heart was responding well, but there were complications after complications. Those of us who visited regularly learned to avoid the main entrance to the hospital and come into the building through a staff entrance not far from the emergency room because the signs of the abortion protestors out front were simply too graphic for us to bear given the drama we were witnessing inside the building. We prayed. We cried. We laughed. We prayed some more.

After a while I became quite unsure about what to pray for when I prayed. I remember driving to the hospital trying to think of the right words to say, knowing that there were no right words. One evening I reminded the family members who were gathered in the waiting room of that first night when we welcomed the child into the family of the church and placed it in God's care. "We trusted God on that night, and we have to trust God tonight. In life, in death, in life beyond death, love never dies and this child can never be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That was the night that the baby died. We had run out of words to say. We cried together and sat together in an exhausted state until we decided that we needed to go home.

Decades have passed. I have not forgotten. I will not forget. I've baptized children in hospitals where the results were different. I was blessed to baptize a child adopted by the parents of the tiny one who died.

I bring each experience with death into each Easter morning. With the passing of the years, there are more and more who have died. I understand Mary in the Garden in ways that I could not have understood when I was younger. She had experienced the raising of Lazarus. She was a believer in resurrection. She had been able to affirm that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. And she knew the reality of death and the pain of grief and loss. Resurrection is not an insulation against pain. It is not a promise that loss will never occur.

I write before the sunrise of this Easter morning. The forecast calls for sunny skies and temperatures in the mid sixties today. That's about 30 degrees warmer than the outside air at the moment. I am tired from a week of exhausting activity, just as I was tired when I sat with the family of the child who died. I know that being tired is temporary. It will pass. Life goes on.

But there is more to the story than that. What I proclaimed to those parents on that awe-full night is true: Love never dies. The one who died is in the heart of God and God's eternal care has no end. This is true of each one of us.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed

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April 17, 2017 – Thinking of Digital Privacy

In the lead up to last year's Presidential election and in the time that has followed, there has been quite a bit of attention paid to psychologically tailored Internet advertising. The basic idea is that personal data kept by Internet marketers and social media can be analyzed and advertising can be tailored to be most effective and then placed in social media to have the maximum effect. One company, Cambridge Analytica, who provided extensive services to the Ted Cruze campaign and then were hired by the Donald Trump campaign a bit later in the run for the presidency has taken perhaps a bit too much credit for their particular brand of data modeling and audience targeting. The company's products are based on solid research, much of it taking place at Cambridge University in England. While their role in the campaign and election can be argued, it is clear that specialized Internet marketing is a part of contemporary life.

There are dozens of companies that provide a variety of personality tests online. You can find out your Briggs Myers type, assess your DISC profile, and discover aspects of your personality without the benefit of a psychologist or extensive psychotherapy. Why spend years in psychoanalysis when a 10-minute online survey will give you instant results? The answer, of course, is that there may be differences in the results.

A few weeks ago, I went to one of the online sites just for entertainment. The site offered a personality analysis based on your Facebook profile. It took your comments and likes and dislikes and analyzed them to yield your personality type. I entered my Facebook information and within a few seconds my results were returned. The results were that the system had insufficient evidence to make any kind of personality profile. It said that I had too few Facebook likes for it to analyze. That result suited me just fine. I'm not a big fan of Facebook, although I do have an account and I check the church's Facebook page from time to time. Apparently Facebook is quite satisfied to retain information on people who don't visit the site much at all. I read that at the current rate by the year 2020 Facebook will have more profiles of people who have died than profiles of those who are living. Living or dead, it appears that my profile isn't very accurate, or at least contains insufficient data.

I persisted and tried another option that offered to analyze my personality type by having me enter some text that I had written. I copied and pasted a blog post from a few days earlier. The results came back quickly. It has been enough years since I took the real Briggs Myers personality test that I don't remember my results completely, but it seems like the results returned by the writing analysis were fairly accurate.

It is clear that targeted advertising is one of the Internet's ways of making money for investors. Web browsers can track searches, The right program can analyze thousands of data points. Then the program targets you with ads based on your browsing history. Theoretically the system places in front of you ads that make it more likely that you will purchase the items being sold.

It might be a bit like my Facebook, that I don't have sufficient data points in my online profile, but it amuses me what ads appear on my browser. This morning the lead advertisement at the top of one of my news pages was advertising a \$70 business card holder. I wasn't tempted. Nor was I tempted by the vacuum cleaner ad that ran down the right hand side of the news stories. I switched to a weather site. No, I'm not interested in a new mortgage. I might be interested in the three signs of a fatty liver, as I do struggle with my weight, but I declined to look at that ad as well. Our local newspaper's web site doesn't employ targeted advertising, so the same furniture and car dealer ads that appear in the print edition popped up. The circulars from the big box stores that are in the print edition are also just a click away. Another news site that I visit daily invited me to check out the all-new, all-innovative BMW 5 series. I'm thinking that a guy who is perfectly happy with his 18-year-old Subaru with 260,000 miles on it doesn't quite fit the demographic of those who are likely customers for a \$50,000

automobile with a horsepower rating higher than my pickup truck. The New York Times, after trying to entice me to pay for a digital subscription flashed ads for Hewlett Packard Enterprise solutions (I didn't click the "say yes" button), pick-pocket proof travelwear, or the limited collection of 33 residents designed by Thierry W. Despont. I don't know who Therry W. Despont is. Perhaps I could Google the name one of these days. I probably won't remember it.

The point I want to make is that so far, in my case, all of this Internet advertising that is targeted based on data points, doesn't seem to know my personality very accurately. While it is possible that they just don't have enough data points in my case, I think it is more likely that I am so eclectic in my browsing patterns that it is difficult to draw conclusions about my personality. The system may also be thrown off by the simple fact that I use Google Scholar as often as I use Google as a browser. I've also been known to use Duck Duck Go, and Firefox, which don't retain browsing history. Then to mix things up even more, I use a variety of different browsers to surf the Internet. I use Firefox Focus on my phone, Apple Safari on my computer, and have been known to use Microsoft Edge on office computers.

I suppose I should be worried about advertisers and those who wish to influence election outcomes compiling so much data and trying so hard to invade my private actions and thoughts, but at this point I can't help but concluding that they aren't being very accurate at reading me.

It makes you wonder how far they are missing the boat with other analyses of data.

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April 18, 2017 – Exercise for Endurance



One constant is that life goes on. Even when a huge, disruptive event occurs, there is a new sunrise, tasks that need to be accomplished, decisions that need to be made. After Holy Week, with all of its activities and its focus on sorrow, loss and death, Easter arrived. On the second day of Easter, a new baby was born in our church family. Today our Church Board and the Department of Stewardship and Budget meet. Life goes on. I did take the day off yesterday, and accomplished a few spring chores around the house, but I know that this week will require effort and energy and focus. That is the way the life of the church is.

One of the ongoing realities of my personal life is that I struggle with my weight. I know well the general principles of diet and exercise. As I have commented before, I am not overweight because of a lack of information. But I struggle with motivation and making permanent lifestyle changes comes hard. I've never been good at going to the gym. A membership in a health club doesn't work for me. I don't like television and gyms are filled with televisions these days. I'm not much for public displays and find the whole gym scene to be not very appealing. I salute those who are good at keeping the discipline of going to a gym and working out faithfully. For me, exercise needs to be accomplishing some work or a part of my recreation, and the best forms of working out for me involve being outdoors.

I paddle my canoes and kayaks as my primary outdoor exercise whenever weather permits, but paddling is probably a better upper body exercise than a whole body exercise. So, this spring, I've been rowing. A few years ago, when our first grandchild was born, I built a rowboat on the theory that a nice, stable craft where a parent could come along would be better for a young child's first boating adventure. Our grandchildren have since grown to the place where they (and their parents) are comfortable in a canoe, but the rowboat is still a very pleasant craft, pleasing to the eye and fun to take around in calm waters. It is a very stable platform for photography and it will easily carry three adults or a couple of adults and lots of freight.

Rowing is whole body exercise, even without a sliding seat. I brace my feet against a foot brace and bend at the waist and pull with both arms and shoulders as I put my weight behind each stroke. The boat is slippery in the water and it is very satisfying to watch the wake behind the boat as I row. In addition, the rowboat is heavier than a canoe or kayak. The process of unloading it from the rollers on the rack on the truck and then loading it back up again after rowing is a workout in itself. It isn't like a canoe that I can turn over, pick up and carry over my head in one smooth movement. And the truck rack is higher than the top of my car, so I have to stretch to get the boat loaded, picking up one end at a time.



Once the boat is in the water, rowing gives the same sense of quiet and connection with nature as does paddling. It is a good solution, which combined with a bit more care and attention to what I am eating, should help me lose a few pounds in a controlled and sustainable manner.

I do have a very nice rowing machine in my library at home, and I do row over the winter as a way of maintaining activity, but it is nowhere near as much fun and satisfaction as actually rowing a boat. When I row my boat, I go across the lake and back. I can explore little nooks and crannies around the shore of the lake. I can watch the geese and ducks. I know that one of these days soon I'll see the great blue herons again. The boat isn't as narrow or quite as maneuverable as a canoe or kayak, so I don't go as far up the inlet to visit the beavers' territory, but there is a lot to observe as I row around the lake.

Life goes on. But Easter is a season that lingers. Fifty days of Easter give us time to think seriously about the concept of resurrection and to remind ourselves of the triumph of life. The simple experience of life going on is one of the ways that we deal with grief and loss. Even in moments of pain and loss we look around and see the signs of God's continuing good gift of life. It isn't just that it was good at the time of creation. It is good now. The signs of spring, the greening of the grass, the budding of the trees, the blooms of the daffodils, the care and concern that we show for one another. The gift of life has the ongoing victory.

There is a tradition, stronger in some areas of the church than others, of playing pranks and jokes in the early days of Easter. The idea is that the greatest joke of all is the resurrection of Jesus. Just what you don't expect comes with surprise and delight. Other surprises and laughter are in order as a response to God's great surprise. We have emphasized this tradition more in some years and less in others. It is, however, good to exercise our sense of humor just as it is good to exercise our bodies.

Life goes on. I need to give attention to what I eat and how I exercise as well as to the list of tasks that need to be done. We have decisions to make as a community and plans to lay for upcoming events and programs. We are at the mid-point of a five-year capital funds drive and we need to keep the energy high.

Exercise builds endurance. And we'll be needing that endurance in the days to come.

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April 19, 2017 – Meetings

A few years ago, when our son was working as a mid-level manager in a large hospital corporation, he commented, "My job is going to meetings." Some days it feels like that is my job. I know that my ordination vows are promises I made to preach and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ. I understand that this congregation called me to provide pastoral

support and care to those in need. I am aware of my responsibilities. But the bottom line is that most of the tasks that one would associate with my job description are simply things that cannot be done alone. I may be the one standing in the center of the chancel leading worship on Sunday morning, but it is definitely a team effort that involves a choir director and an organist, both of whom work with a team of volunteer musicians. It also requires an administrative colleague who managed our publications and worship bulletins, and another administrative colleague who tracks donations and manages deposits. Both of them work with volunteers who count money, collate and fold documents and do other tasks. Then there is the entire Christian education department with a paid Minister of Education and a team of volunteer teachers and resource persons who contribute to and participate in worship.

Our congregation operates with a fairly streamlined constitution and organizational structure. We have established our priorities as Worship, Education, Ministries and Hospitality and have Departments for each of those priorities. We have two support departments, one for buildings and grounds and another for financial management and planning donations. That is six departments under a common Church Board. Then there are task forces and committees and special projects.

You get the picture. Yesterday involved five meetings for me. It was a bit more meeting-filled than a usual day because we had moved some meetings out of Holy Week and because I have found that it is actually helpful to “stack” up meetings on some days to leave other days with more time for other tasks.

People don't join churches to attend meetings. I appreciate those who work diligently to keep meetings at a minimum. But coordinating work requires discussion and working with people involves meeting with them.

I'm pretty resigned to having meetings. In that context, then, I am resolved to organize those meetings in a somewhat efficient manner. When people attend meetings that make a difference and advance the causes in which they believe, they don't feel like their time is being wasted. It is, however, a continuing challenge. People have different priorities for their time.

I believe in worshipful work. I think that prayer and scripture enhance meetings. I think that the work we do is different than the work of committees in other settings. I also try to involve committee members in leading worship and devotional times. I provide resources for them to use. But not every member of our congregation thinks that devotions are essential. I've participated in meetings where the presence of devotions has been questioned. I think people are more focused when we remind ourselves of the reason for the work that we do. Others want to get in and get out and take a look at the number of minutes that we give to worship and want to shorten the meetings.

I understand the sentiment of wanting to shorten meetings, but sometimes the issue isn't the list of items on the agenda, but rather the lack of focus and sense of purpose.

I can get frustrated with all of the "chit chat" that is not related to the purpose of the meeting. We seem to have to discuss the weather, local news, our children and grandchildren, car repairs, interesting natural phenomena and a host of other topics before we get to the agenda of the meeting. Even with a strong leader, we wander in our conversation and get off topic. It is clear to an observer that part of the purpose of our meetings is making connections. We seek to discover the things we share in common and our relationships that extend beyond the agenda of the day. We want to establish relationships with whole people not just business connections. That takes time.

Sometimes our conversations are essential to building relationships that bring forth futures for the church.

We have a few areas in our church life that operate smoothly with minimal meetings. Our Woodchuck Society is specifically organized to avoid meetings. We get together to work together. We have an annual picnic. That's it. No administration, no budget, no meetings. It works very well. There are a few other projects that require fewer meetings. These projects serve as examples of ways we can do the work of the church without overburdening ourselves with meetings. We are neither practiced nor consistent with this approach, however. Some of our ventures simply require getting together to work out our plans.

Our church staff has been experimenting with a model of fewer meetings this year. It is working fairly well, with a few glitches and missed communications. It may be very desirable for other members of our staff and it may be increasing their productivity. I, however, am aware that I have to make a lot more phone calls, send a lot more emails, and arrange to meet up with individual staff members in order to keep communication flowing. The less meetings model probably has resulted in more work for me, despite the fact that I am careful not to be carrying messages between staff members. Instead of checking schedule with everyone at once, I have to check with individuals and then try to coordinate after I find out the various responses. It is possible that an occasional meeting would increase efficiency.

We remain human. Our human systems are not perfect. What works one year will need to be changed in another year. As much as I can occasionally complain about the number of meetings in my life, I know that I won't achieve a meeting-free lifestyle anytime soon.

April 20, 2017 - Grace

Yesterday, as I approached a railroad crossing in downtown Rapid City, the signal lights came on. I stopped before the tracks, as the law specifies. The approaching train was about a block away, traveling at perhaps 20 mph. As I sat waiting at least a half dozen cars in other lanes made their way across the intersection. I guess they were in a bigger hurry than I. When I think of how often I witness a car entering a street from a parking lot or intersection that misjudges the approaching traffic, I realize how dangerous such behavior is. Unlike a car that can slam on its brakes and avoid a collision, a train of more than 50 cars pulled by four locomotives isn't going to stop very quickly.

Some people are always pushing the edges. "How much can I get away with?" "How close can I cut it?" I guess it is human nature to try to get away with a certain level of risk. People enjoy the rush of adrenalin that comes from risky behavior.

As I sat at the intersection, being a bit dismayed at the actions of my fellow drivers, I reflected on another, unrelated conversation that I had a while ago. A person that I know rather casually had asked me about which sins a person could commit and still get into heaven. I want to be clear that I am no expert in such discussions. I do not hold the keys to heaven and I cannot fully know the mind of God. In the case of the conversation to which I am referring, I didn't even know for sure what the questioner's theology of heaven was. I wasn't sure what that person had in mind. I guess they were just wondering "How much can I get away with?" "How close can I cut it?"

I once had a long conversation with a severely depressed person who was struggling with intense addiction issues. That person recounted a long list of mistakes and regrets in a life filled with mental illness and addiction. The argument that was being made at the time was that there were just too many bad things in that person's past. All was lost because, in the opinion of that person, there was no way that their life could be redeemed. Too many bad things had happened for forgiveness to be possible. The person was sure that the only possible future was eternal damnation in hell.

My personal theology does not place any limits on God's capacity for forgiveness. And I don't see heaven and hell as some kind of future rewards and punishment system that seals eternity based on past performance. Forgiveness is a gift that is given without a test of who deserves and who does not deserve it. Grace comes without restrictions. And I have seen enough suffering in this life to conclude that eternity is not some other place or even some other time. People experience judgment and punishment in this life. We also experience grace and forgiveness in this life. It isn't just about what happens when we die.

I had a busy day yesterday. I wasn't initially pleased to be delayed at the railroad crossing. I was trying to get to an appointment on the other side of the tracks and it was just one of a long list of things I wanted to do. Perhaps those who were rushing across

the tracks after the signal began to flash also had busy days. Perhaps they were important people whose time is more valuable than mine. What I do know is that they didn't get the gift of five or more minutes of quiet contemplation in the middle of their busy day. I even moved the transmission into park so I could let my foot off of the brake as I sat and watched the world around me. My thoughts were so unfocused that while I started counting the number of cars on the train, I got distracted and never finished the count. It was a sort of mini-vacation in the middle of a day where most of my activities required a lot more focus and attention. I like to allow my mind to wander from time to time.

There is nothing I can do to alter the train schedule. When I get caught at the crossing, impatience only raises my blood pressure. And there are lots of things in this life that are more powerful than a string of railroad locomotives. Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer is a good one for the frustrations of this life:

God, give me the grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.

Some things in this life simply need to be accepted. The trick, as is acknowledged by the prayer, is discerning when our efforts should be directed towards changing things and when we should accept the grace to accept with serenity.

I was blessed yesterday, not only by the few peaceful moments as the train passed, but also by the good fortune that everyone I saw pushing the limits was successful. No cars were hit by the train and they didn't even run into each other as they switched lanes to get across the tracks in advance of the oncoming train. I have no idea how many were cursing me for having stopped when I could have made it across the tracks before the train got to the intersection. At least no one honked their horn at me, an action that will almost certainly strengthen my resolve and not get the desired results, as a few people who seem to think that a right turn on a red light is somehow mandatory have discovered when honking their horns as I stop to check the safety of entering the intersection. They get to wait for the green light every time.

My waiting isn't always grace and serenity.

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April 21, 2017 – Changing World

Looking back, I am sometimes amazed at how much the world has changed - and how much I have changed - over the span of my career. I was ordained to the ministry in the fall of 1978 - nearly 39 years ago. 39 years is a good run in a profession and I have been extremely fortunate in my work. It would be safe to say, however, that my job is far different than I imagined it would be.

One of the inspirations for me over these years has been the description of the judgment of the nations as described in the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. You know the passage - it's the one about the separation of the sheep from the goats. I've written about it many times before and confessed that I seem to find myself on both sides of that dividing line. There have been times when I have helped, and other times when I have not. Most of us are that way. It is, however, interesting how that story has played out in my life.

"Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee?" As a young pastor, serving a congregation in rural North Dakota most of the people who were truly hungry that I met were passing through our town. There were social safety nets in place to feed most of the locals when they ran low on food. I occasionally witnessed genuine hunger, but it wasn't difficult to offer a helping hand with a bit of food. I don't think I could have imagined, back in those days, what it would be like to have someone come into my office that had gone so long without food that their stomach rebelled when we offered hot food and they got sick. I don't think I could have imagined the number of children in our town who are completely dependent on school breakfasts and lunches. I don't think I could have imagined what it is like to work with someone who is so deeply addicted to a drug that the person will literally starve just to find money for the next hit. In those days I hadn't met the mother who literally pawned the family's refrigerator in search of a solution to her addiction to prescription painkillers. The refrigerator didn't even belong to her. I've helped a few hungry people, but there are a lot who haven't been fed.

"Lord when did we see thee thirsty and give thee drink?" I've always lived in a place where clean drinking water ran from the taps. I'm no fan of bottled water. Who would have thought that I'd live to see the day when in my own country the water wasn't safe? We read stories from Flint, Michigan, and it still seems like it is a long ways away, but we are literally only a leak in a pipeline from the contamination of the water sources of a large portion of the citizens of our state. And, just like Flint, when that happens, those who are most in need of bottled water will be those who have the least amount of money. When drinking water becomes a commodity that is exchanged for money, the poor will go thirsty.

"Lord when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee?" We like to think of our church as a friendly place and usually we are fairly good at hospitality. But the mood in our country has turned ugly towards those who are different from us. Travel bans, trade wars, mass deportations - I don't think I could have imagined, back in the seventies, that these would be serious proposals by our elected officials. I'm trying to wrap my head

around taking my guests to Mount Rushmore this summer and not seeing the wonderful assortment of students from around the world who for so many years have been a feature of that place now fearful to even travel to the United States because of the rhetoric of our leaders.

“Lord, when did we see thee naked and clothe thee?” How did I become a person with a closet full of clothes - way more than I can wear? Some things make a bit of sense. In a couple of weeks we will have our 12th annual Survivors of Suicide walk. I’ve got t-shirts from all 12 years. The t-shirts sort of collect and need to be culled from time to time. There is so much more that I could do to share. I live with excess and an embarrassment of riches with neighbors who have children who could use a decent pair of shoes.

“Lord, when were you sick or in prison and I visited thee?” Just yesterday afternoon, as I was navigating from a high-security section of our county jail down through the booking area and back up into the lobby of a different building, I wondered how I became so familiar with the inside of that particular institution. This morning I’ll share coffee with the staff of one of only three facilities in the United States that house federal juvenile offenders. I not only have an id/pass for visiting in the corrections facilities in our town, I have a separate one for visiting in the hospital. And as much visiting as I do people continually “slip between the cracks,” and end up in an institution without my knowing about it. I’ve visited a lot, but not enough.

I could go on and on, but you get the point. The very concerns that are outlined in the Gospel are real and present in my everyday life in ways that I could not have imagined when I began my path down this career. And things are changing at a remarkable pace. I am sure that I am unable to imagine where this vocation will take me in the next five years, let alone a decade or more.

As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “So faith, hope and love abide these three.”

“And the greatest of these is love.”

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April 22, 2017 – Teaching Faith

It is interesting how we meet strangers in the church. Sometimes our first meeting of a new person is when that person attends worship. We have our usual set of behaviors and someone joins in. Other times someone just shows up at church, often asking a few questions about our services, sometimes talking briefly about faith and theology. Some of these visitors check us out and drift off before we get to know their stories. We hope that they keep looking and find a church that is the right place for them, but we

never know for sure. Others stay engaged with us, sometimes becoming members of our congregation and sharing our life of faith.

Not long ago, I met someone whose initial story to me was that he had no faith background at all. He had grown up “on the streets” and had had no use for ministers or churches or faith. He told me a few stories of his past that seemed to support his claim. On the other hand, he seemed to know a few Bible verses and have a rudimentary concept of some basic principles of Christian faith. He asked me to teach him and I agreed to do so, with the provision that ours is a faith of a community and I could not be his only teacher.

Since that conversation, I have been wondering where the best place to start talking about faith might be. My initial instinct was to start with something like the sermon on the mount or perhaps some of the parables of Jesus. Then I thought that perhaps some of the stories, such as Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the night to discuss Jesus’ teachings, or the rich young man who lacked one thing. It seems to me that stories of conversion might be appealing and that the person I am seeking to mentor into our faith might see himself in those stories.

When we prepare youth for the rite of confirmation, we often spend significant time doing a kind of biblical survey, hitting some of the critical stories throughout the bible. We talk about Creation, the Exodus, the rise of the Monarchy, the Exile and the role of the prophets. We spend some time looking through the Psalms and Proverbs and touching on the stories of Ruth and Esther. Then we turn to the Gospels, touching on the birth and life of Jesus and spending a bit more time teaching about his death and resurrection before studying the Acts of the Apostles, the letters of Paul and the formation of the early church. In a course of preparation for confirmation, we touch on the history of the church, the great schism, the Protestant reformation, and the roots of the Christian Church on this continent. We address contemporary denominationalism by pointing out some of the similarities and differences between our church and other Christian congregations.

Preparation for Confirmation is a fairly heady task, involving a lot of talking and intellectual learning. This is in part due to the fact that most of the students who are preparing for confirmation have grown up in the church. They have, since their baptism, been considered to already be members of the church. They have been taught about the nature of community and the practice of worship and prayer by parents and grandparents and by participation in the community. Their background is already extensive before we start the classes.

it is different with someone who says he has never been a part of a church. He hasn’t had the experience of the community. He hasn’t made friends with other church members. In a way it is an awesome responsibility to have been chosen as the first member of the church to introduce a newcomer into the faith and family of Jesus. On

the other hand, this person brings some ideas and perceptions of the church to our conversations that have come from other people. He has seen the effect of faith on others. He has sensed that the church has something to offer that he wants. There is a part of me that wants to offer him the highest and best of which we are capable and to protect him from some of the petty squabbles that are a part of life together.

All the while, I need to be aware that this individual may not, after all, becoming to me for extensive intellectual teaching. First of all, in every relationship there is an element of simply being present. Before I give advice or counsel, I need to practice the art of listening. The report of Nicodemus' visit to Jesus in the 3rd Chapter of the Gospel of John contains some sage teaching about the basic elements of Christian faith, but it begins with Jesus listening to and really understanding the question of Nicodemus.

Perhaps the starting point of every questing conversation is careful listening to the question being asked.

I am reminded of the young child who asks a parent, "Where did I come from?" The parent, surprised by the question and wondering how best to answer, is resolved to be honest and complete in answering the child's question. The answer begins with a basic explanation of human love, sexuality and birth. The child listens patiently and then says, "That's interesting, but I was just wondering what I was doing before I came into this room."

We can't answer the question until we really understand what the question is.

It is fascinating to me that after a single conversation with an individual my mind rushes to an entire curriculum of instruction. It may well be that I am not really hearing the question of the person who came to me. I am eager to share my faith, but it is presumptuous to think that faith can be transferred without my learning about the faith of the other person. Perhaps the first thing in our next meeting need not be which story or where to begin Bible instruction, but rather a question, "What is it that you want to know?"

I may not be God's gift to this person I have just met, but this person is God's gift to me.

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April 23, 2017 – Work and Rest

This morning as I was scanning the news headlines, there was an advertisement for a Samsung Galaxy 8 phone. I normally ignore those ads. I have a smartphone, but it is a few years old and I have no intention of keeping up with the latest and newest models. I am not shopping for a new one. However this advertisement kept flashing new slogans and, being a reader, I read the slogans as they passed by. The first was "Work without

edges.” I knew that was a reference to the design of the phone which has a display that covers the entire surface of the phone. Somewhere in the rotation of slogans were “Work without pausing,” and “Work without stopping.”

What kind of a life is that? Work without stopping?

There is, of course, a commandment about that:

“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

It is a commandment that doesn't seem to get much attention these days, but then again our society probably won't be remembered as being particularly faithful to “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” or even “You shall not commit adultery.” It is painfully easy to find examples of disregard for both of those commandments in movies and on television. I remember a teacher once saying, If we can't get people to pay attention to the Sabbath, we don't have much of a chance with stealing and adultery.”

Then, again, I'm probably not the target demographic for a new Samsung Galaxy 8. I don't mean to be picking on the Samsung corporation here - there are plenty of other companies whose advertisements and ways of doing business don't line up with my values.

I do, however, think that there are many people who are struggling with work in our contemporary society.

The columnist Courtney Martin reports of telling her boss that she was pregnant: “This is how it went down: Sheepish smile creeping onto my face: “I have something to tell you . . .’ ‘Just don't tell me you're pregnant.’” Her boss was a woman with three kids of her own. The message, however, was clear. Don't mix home and work life. Don't allow your personal life to enter into your work.

It is something that I simply don't understand. My vocation is so much a part of my identity that I can't separate my personal life from my work life. My congregation looks to me not only for what I can do, but also for who I am. The issues are different now that our children have grown and moved out into careers of their own, but as every spouse of a minister will tell you - the minister's family is continually in the spotlight. People are

watching the entire family all of the time. It is something that hasn't bothered me in my time as a pastor. I am who I am. I try to confess my mistakes and learn from them.

I have had very positive experiences with colleagues who are working mothers. They have been faithful and productive employees. But I have also understood that all of the people who are a part of our church - employees and volunteers - have personal lives and those personal lives and their work at the church will sometimes come into conflict. Just last week I sent an email to a leader in our church who had to miss a committee meeting because of family responsibilities. I thanked him for his dedication to his family and celebrated his decision to put their needs ahead of his committee responsibilities. He was missed at the meeting, but I understood. If the church isn't supportive of families, we certainly aren't doing our job.

We don't recommend that people learn to work without pausing or work without stopping.

Of course, I am less than disciplined about the sabbath. I work on Sundays and call Monday my day off, but I don't hesitate to do a bit of work on Monday. I don't make rigid rules about when I am working and when I am at home. I try to build recreation into my lifestyle, regularly heading to the lake to paddle or row, but there are days when those activities need to take a back seat to other tasks. I see myself not only as an employee of the church, but also as a member and reserve the right to volunteer for mission projects and other activities with my personal time. I am quick to point out the commandment to others, but less than perfect in applying it to myself. That is the thing about the commandments. One can never say that one is perfect in meeting every one.

Still, it is an honorable goal to work for a balanced life. When we succeed we are able to bring the whole of our selves to the work environment and give the whole of our selves to our home and family as well. When whole people are fully present, much can be accomplished. I hope that as an employer I have provided a workplace where people feel free to bring the whole of themselves. I encourage conversation about family and responsibilities outside of the workplace. I strive for flexibility that allows for the work to get done, but isn't rigid and understands that sometimes family needs to take priority over work.

We are all human. We have real pulls on our lives. Bodies are fragile and hearts break. Babies are born and parents age. The amazing work that is done by the people at the church comes from whole people whose authenticity and compassion have their roots in family life with other real people.

Work without pausing, work without stopping is not the right slogan for us.

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April 24, 2017 – March for Science

It seems to be part of human nature to observe the world. As far back as we have records of human thoughts, people have looked at the natural world and spoken of the stars in the night sky, the rivers running down to the sea, the immensity of great mountains and the amazing diversity of plants, animals and birds. After the development of language and the capacity to record language in writing, there are many examples of ancient texts that demonstrate human observations of the natural world. There is some scholarly debate about the exact dating of individual Psalms. Originally attributed to David, who lived around 970 BC, most scholars now agree that the Psalms are likely to have come from multiple sources and probably a wide date range from as early as the 13th Century with other Psalms coming from perhaps as late as the 3rd Century. However you arrive at a precise date, it is evident that these poems have circulated among humans for millennia.

Psalm 8 contains observations of the natural world.

O Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is thy name in all the earth!
Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted
by the mouth of babes and infants,
thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes,
to still the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
what is man that thou art mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?

Yet thou hast made him little less than God,
and dost crown him with glory and honor.
Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands;
thou hast put all things under his feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the sea.

O Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is thy name in all the earth!

Not only have humans observed the world, they have made observations with amazing accuracy and consistency.

As early as the fourth century B.C., Eudoxus observed the movement of the planets in the solar system. The contrast between the apparent movement of the planets and that of the stars as viewed from Earth has been noted by many ancient cultures. Ancient Greek philosophers were aware of the movement of the planets, though their conclusions differed as to the reasons. There were observers who believed that the planets orbited around the sun. Aristotle, however, persisted in his belief that the planets and sun orbited around the earth. Aristotle's ideas persisted as the dominant worldview until the time of Nicolaus Copernicus. His observation that the earth orbits the sun like the other planets was a bit slow to gain popular acceptance, but by the end of his life in the mid-sixteenth century there were many other scientists who corroborated his observations.

The movement of the planets is just one area where we humans have been consistent in our observations, but drawn to different conclusions. We are very skilled at making observations, but somewhat less skilled at drawing accurate conclusions from our observations.

We have, however, developed a set of operating principles that guide our observations and help us to evaluate our conclusions. Roger Bacon (1214-1284) is often cited as the first scholar to promote inductive reasoning. He is sometimes referred to as the father of scientific method. By the time of another Bacon, Francis Bacon (1561-1626), scholars had agreed on an emphasis on mathematical description as a key element of the scientific method.

Contemporary scientists place great emphasis on evidence that is acquired by means of the senses, particular by observation and experimentation. By creating precise experiments that can be repeated by multiple observers who observe the same phenomena, scientists have come to rely on a foundation of truth upon which they can agree and human science can move forward.

Study of the history and philosophy of science reveals a remarkable consistency in the quest for truth. The scientific method works as a common language for advancing discovery and exploration. Mathematics is a tremendously useful language for describing the observations that come through our human senses.

Science, however, is not limited by empirical evidence. Sufficient evidence can provide the foundation for making accurate estimates of phenomena that cannot be observed. Mathematical models posit the existence of forces and elements that have not yet been observed and enable scientists to create experiments that might yield direct observation of the phenomena. A recent example is gravitational waves. Predicted in 1916 by Albert Einstein, the first observation of gravitational waves didn't occur until 2015 and wasn't announced until February of 2016, nearly a century after the first prediction.

Not all humans, however, draw their conclusions from careful application of scientific method. While the vast majority of scientists agree on the phenomena of global warming and the role of human activity in increasing the phenomenon, there is a remarkable political debate over the causes of global warming and appropriate human responses. The movement by some political leaders to cut funding for scientific research and to limit the expression of scientific conclusions has amazed and dismayed many of us who have been supportive of the advancement of science.

This past weekend's March of Science, which occurred in Washington, D.C. with satellite marches around the world, including one in Rapid City, demonstrated the support of common people for the scientific method. Here in our town, organizers predicted that perhaps 200 people would turn out for the march. The number ended up close to 1000.

I didn't attend the march, though I am sympathetic with those who demonstrate their support of science. I had other commitments at the time of the march. I did, however, speak with several participants and share their concern about the importance of science in our lives. Science is not a partisan issue, but one that affects the lives of every human being.

As I prepare to head to the clinic for a lab draw this morning as part of my annual physical, I am grateful for medical science and the careful reasoning that lies behind the health care that I receive. I may not have been at the march for science on Saturday, but I am grateful that there are those who will stand up in support of this critical human activity.

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April 25, 2017 – South Dakota Spring Tuesday

Good morning South Dakota! Yes, that's snow out there. The weather bureau says this is a typical storm pattern for the Black Hills and snow can be expected across the entire state with the exception of the southeast corner throughout the day. After all, it is only April 25. We've seen spring blizzards as late as May 11 since we've lived here. The Mother's Day blizzard in 2015 dropped 20 inches of the white stuff in Lead, with a bit less here at the south. We didn't suffer much and the good thing about spring blizzards is that the snow melts quickly. The moisture is especially good for the hills as it tends to soak in a bit better than rainfall. The forecast his week promises the possibility of more snow on Friday and Saturday, though the temperatures will remain high enough that that may come as rain.

There was a moment in my day yesterday that was very memorable. I had a camera with me, but I'm not quick enough or steady enough to have gotten a good picture and as it turned out, I didn't even try. I just sat and watched. I was rowing on Sheridan Lake.

One of the advantages of rowing is that you face the rear of the boat and you can see where you have been. Sometimes that isn't as much fun as paddling facing forward, but some days it is a rather nice perspective. Yesterday, an osprey spotted a fish in the wake of the boat and came right down and caught it. I had a perfect seat to watch the action. For a few seconds, after grabbing the fish, the bird flew low and close to the water just a few feet behind the boat. The fish was still alive and struggling in the talons of the bird, affecting the balance and control of the bird's flight. It didn't take long for the osprey to gain control and altitude and head off to the trees on the shore of the lake for its meal. One doesn't often get that close a look at an event that probably happens every day.

As I thought about what I had seen, I was struck by the remarkable specialization that is a part of the natural world. The fish, evolved to breathe under water and inhabit the subsurface realm of the lake, is well-suited to its environment. It has ways of gathering its food and reproducing that allow it to survive the dramatic changes in the lake as it changes from an open, and slightly warm body of water in the summer to a body of water with a thick ice covering in the winter.

The bird is a magnificent creature. Watching birds in flight has been a fascination with humans for as long as we have been aware of what is going around us. The complex structures of light weight bones, feathers and incredible musculature that combine to allow the bird to fly are just part of the marvel. The osprey is also a tightly-developed hunting creature with amazing eyesight and incredibly strong and sharp talons that serve not only as landing gear for the bird, but also as hunting weapons. When the bird gets to a tree it is able to hold the fish in its beak or in a single foot while it grips the tree branch with the other foot.

To make the scene complete, however, also required humans with imaginations and the ability to work with each other to accomplish large tasks. There are no natural lakes in the Black Hills. The lake where I was rowing yesterday is really a reservoir, the result of a human-contracted dam that banded up a small creek to form a lake. The boat that I was rowing was made mostly of plywood that came from extremely thin veneers peeled off of trees and pressed and glued in layers to form the plywood in a factory. This particular plywood probably came from trees harvested in Central Africa, likely Gabon. It then was formed into sheets of plywood in England and shipped to the East Coast of the United States. I traveled by motor freight across the country to South Dakota where I built the boat to the plans of a naval architect who lives on the Chesapeake Bay in Annapolis, Maryland. The oars I was using to row my boat were made from Sitka Spruce harvested and carved into oars in British Columbia. Parts of my experience were the result of work that people did in at least four different countries on three continents. Still, I call my boat a simple, home-made affair.

Our lives are affected by the lives of others - often those who live in distant places. A little spring snow reminds us that we share the weather with others as well. The wind

that blows across the hills and prairies of South Dakota follows patterns set by the jet stream, currents of air that find their way around the planet. The air we are breathing today may have recently been traveling over another continent.

Along the way, many creatures are engaged in what it takes to survive. The fish need to reproduce in sufficient numbers that they can handle the loss of the ones who are eaten by the osprey. The osprey has to be efficient enough in hunting to sustain not only its own life, but to provide for chicks that will be hatching before long. The water in the reservoir provides for the lifestyle of the humans who share the space with not only the fish of the lake and the birds of the air, but all kinds of other creatures who roam the woods and occupy the hills. We are all connected and we are all dependent upon each other for the lives we pursue.

Over and over again I am reminded that even when I think I'm pursuing a solitary activity I am connected to many other creatures and humans around the globe.

We're all in this together. We need to remind ourselves of that on a regular basis.

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April 26, 2017 – Contemplating my Place in the World

Meeting with colleagues yesterday a familiar topic came up. From time to time we discuss the role of the contemporary church in the wider society. We know the statistics. We have read the reports of the researchers. Mainline congregations are decreasing in membership. Members attend church less frequently than in previous generations. The influence of the church in daily living and in our political structures is in decline. Even with the increased visibility of Evangelical churches in American politics, the practical role of religion in American life is limited.

One the one hand, this is not the worst thing that can happen. There have been times when the church has wielded great political power and those times have not always been the best times for the people. Religious tyranny is still tyranny. The Massachusetts Bay Colony practiced a form of religious intolerance that wasn't the high point in the history of the church. The church is called to carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to care for those in need. It is not our role to be in charge of government.

Still, there is much that our members have to offer to the wider society. Service in government by responsible church members can be of great value to the church and to the community.

As is often the case with our conversations, we didn't come to any specific conclusions. We did talk about some things that we might do as church members and as congregations that would make a positive contribution to the common life. We never

truly finish these conversations. The subject will come up again and again and occasionally we will have a good idea that we will implement. Other times, we simply speculate and ponder about the realities of our lives and then go on to the next conversation.

The truth is that this particular circle of clergy does not represent the future of the church. We are old. The majority of the group are already retired and those of us who are still actively engaged in our careers are likely less than a decade from our retirement. Much of the leadership for the church's next generation is already arising and we don't represent those rising leaders. One of our roles in the church is to step back and offer our support to new leaders who are taking their place in the life of the institution. And the conversations that sustain and support our ministries aren't the centers of interest and activity for the next generation of leaders that they were for us.

This is not an easy time for church leaders. The decreasing budgets of mid-level judicatories and the shrinking of national church offices as centers of resources and programs mean that there is less support from the wider church. It can be lonely to serve a congregation when you sense that the Conference is falling apart and cannot serve as a resource when needed.

Lest I fall into too big a round of complaints, however, I am reminded by poet Ellen Bass that:

"It's a hard time to be human. We know too much
and too little . . ."

It is always a hard time to be a human. We are tiny in terms of influence and power when considering the immensity of the universe. Our knowledge of the vastness of Creation reminds us that our role is very minor indeed. When our time on this earth comes to its conclusion, life will go on. Even when we live significant lives and receive attention from many other humans, we don't really change the flow of the tides or the movements of the planets and solar systems in the vastness of space. Our impact is small.

Still, we are who we are. And the moments in which we live seem to us to be of significance. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "everything here seems to need us." And Ellen Bass, in the same poem quoted above concludes:

"But when Newton's apple fell toward the earth,
the earth, ever so slightly, fell
toward the apple."

We are part of a complex web of relationships that connect our thoughts and actions to the whole of life. Decisions that we make about how to live our lives have an impact on

other living creatures. Our faith can be a light for another person without us even being aware of its impact.

I may never know if a visit to someone who is suffering from despair and depression has somehow lifted their spirits a little. I may never know if a conversation in a jail has helped someone to change their mind or their ways. I may never know if stopping by a hospital room has contributed to healing. I may never know if a sermon conveyed a bit of truth to someone who needed to know that truth. What I do know is that I have been called to relationship and can facilitate others coming into relationship. The future church may be bigger or smaller than the church of my generation. It is not my place to control what occurs after my time. I have, however, been called to serve faithfully in the time that is mine. That involves careful listening, creative thinking, and laying aside fears of change. It means responding to the call to go where I am called, even when doing so leaves me a bit uncomfortable and uncertain.

Returning to Ellen Bass' poem:

“Here I am, suspended
between the sidewalk and twilight,”

Here in this particular moment of my life, as I look back on decades as an ordained minister and look forward to the years that lie ahead, I pray that I can use the experience that I have gained to offer a modicum of wisdom that might somehow guide another. I also pray that I can trust the years of hard work that I have invested to the able leadership of others who will come after me. As my teacher, Ross Snyder, once wrote, “I may not be much, but the cause I serve has greatness.”

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April 27, 2017 – Words and God

There is an inherent challenge when it comes to talking about God. Our words fall short. The full identity and nature of God is beyond the human capacity to express. No matter what we say about God, God is more than we can say. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't talk about God or that we shouldn't try to describe God, just that we need to admit that there is a challenge in the conversation. For a long time, faithful people have wrestled with the limitations of describing God's true nature.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (1740-1890) is the subject of hundreds of stories in the Hassidic corner of Judaism. One of those stories tells of a conversation he had with an atheist, who took great pleasure in publicly denying the existence of God. One day the Rabbi approached the man and said, “you know what, I don't believe the same God that you don't believe in.” Ever since those days, many scholars and religious people have employed essentially the same argument with those who do not believe in God.

Not long ago Tim Keller tweeted, “Describe the God you rejected . . . Describe the God you don’t believe in . . . Maybe I don’t believe in that god either.”

It is a common experience of people of faith when encountering public atheists - when the atheists describe God, they aren’t at all describing what the faithful believe. The God rejected by atheists often bears no resemblance to the God in which faithful people believe.

On the other hand, while such an argument may make for a somewhat convenient way of dismissing an atheist, we who live lives of faith are still confronted with our inability to accurately describe God with the language tools that we possess.

Here is just one example of the difficulty of speaking of God. Many religious traditions around the world claim that there is one and only one God. That claim is at the heard of the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We all claim a radical monotheism. Our common scriptures - shared by all three faiths - declare this in no uncertain terms. Deuteronomy 6:4-5, cited by Jesus as the greatest commandment, says, “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” It is as clear as language can say it - there is only one God.

Earlier in our Bible, however, in the 18th chapter of Genesis, we read the description of the Lord - that same God, using the same word for God’s name - appearing to Abraham. It says, “And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him.” The description of the appearance of the Lord is the description of three men. It doesn’t take much of an imagination to drift off into the Christian description of God as trinity: Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit.

We can’t find the words to express the greatness of God. There is only one God, but the nature of God is relationship. That one God is not singular. You see the problem with language. And you can see how those who choose not to believe in God find our language to be inconsistent and difficult to understand. In the story from Genesis in which the Lord appears as three men, Sarah, the wife of Abraham, finds herself laughing at the news the visitor(s) bring. Later she denied laughing but the story remains. The baby that is born to Sarah and Abraham is named Isaac, which means, “He laughs,” or simply “laughter.”

Sometimes you have to laugh at the struggles of trying to say things that are very true but are beyond the power of words to describe or state. We can’t help talking about the things that are most important to us, but our words fail us.

It is that game of trying to say more than words can express which has become my vocation. I am, after all, a preacher. I use spoken language to convey religious truth in

my everyday work. I frequently lead worship, public events at which I speak openly about faith and the practice of faith in everyday life. I seek to interpret the words of scripture to those who come to attend worship. And it is not only in public worship that I use words as the medium of my vocation. When I visit people in hospital or jail or homes, I know that my presence communicates a lot, but I am rarely completely silent. I usually come up with a prayer or a few other words to express the significance of the moment and to indicate that my presence is itself a reaching beyond myself. What I want to communicate is not so much my personal reality, but the love of God. I want to remind those I visit that they are beloved by God and that their particular circumstances are not unknown to a loving God.

It is a challenge for one who has trouble finding just the right words to describe God. And that includes everyone who tries to talk about God.

Still, the challenge of my life doesn't deter me from trying to talk about God. I have lots to say and I use a lot of words. Some of the words describe the actions of God that are observable in the world: "God creates." "God loves." "God judges." "God comes in Jesus of Nazareth." "God bestows the Holy Spirit." "God calls people into the church." "God promises." Some of the words try to describe God: "Almighty," "Omnipotent," "Holy," "All knowing," "All seeing," "Merciful," "Gracious," . . . The list goes on and on. and all of those words fall short of a full description of the nature of God.

I may not have found the right words, but that hasn't kept me from searching for those words. And it hasn't dimmed my faith in God, who is, after all, beyond the power of words to describe.

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April 28, 2017 – The Notes I Keep

Despite all of the electronic gadgets that populate my home and my office, I still find myself attracted to notepads. I don't have the number of letter-sized pads that used to occupy my desk, but I seem to have an affinity for pocket-sized pads. I always have a small notebook in my back pocket and a few smaller pads on my desk. I'm a bit more organized with my pocket notebook. I use it to make notes or write reminders when I'm in meetings or need a "to do" list. But I'm less disciplined about the pages that I've filled and no longer need. Sometimes I just let those pages remain in the notebook. After a while I fill up the notebook and replace it with a new one. And here is where I make my mistake: I will keep the old notebook just in case there is some note in there that I need in the future. Probably I should just throw it away as soon as I put the new one in my pocket. I rarely actually need the notes that are in the old notebook. The notes in the notebook are for short-term use. The ones that I look back at in a day or two are useful. The lists that I cross off the items as I do them keep me from being distracted by trying to remember all that I have to do. But a week or more later, the information in the

notebook is not well organized enough to be easily accessible. Despite my pledge to go through the old notebook to make sure there are no critical notes, I rarely get around to doing it. Usually the old notebooks disappear in a flurry of desk-cleaning after having sat on the desk for quite a while.

This morning, as I was searching for a list I made a while ago about possible blog topics - a list that was on my computer, not in a notebook on my desk like I thought - I found several note pads with interesting items on them. There was a list of podcasts that I'd like to check out. The list is hardly necessary. I currently have 49 podcasts on my phone that have been downloaded but not listened to. I have far more podcasts than I have time to listen. I don't really need to subscribe to any new podcasts unless I unsubscribe from a few that have become a bit repetitious.

Another list has titles of YouTube videos that someone has recommended. Trust me, I don't need that list. I'll never get around to watching those videos. Watching videos just isn't one of my priorities.

There are a lot more lists. And there are a few pads with random items scattered throughout. Here are some of those random items:

The name of a rust inhibitor someone recommended.

The birth date of my great niece.

The phone number of a campground in Umatilla County, Oregon where we once stayed.

A quote I liked: "Speaking clearly doesn't mean the same thing as yelling at." However, I didn't write down the source of the quote.

A shopping list with every item crossed off except ice. I don't think I still need ice.

The name of a book I've not yet read.

A list of three hymns. I think these were suggestions for a funeral that I officiated at quite a while ago.

The phone number of the motel in Faith, South Dakota.

You get the gist. My notebooks contain information that once held meaning for me, but which is not information that I need to get through the next days of my life. Most of the information could be accessed through other media as well. I know people don't use phone books any more, but it is so easy to look up a phone number on the computer - or on my phone - that I'm more likely to look up the number of the motel, for example, than to try to find the correct notepad. The note was only useful for a few minutes months ago. I don't know why I kept it so long. Even more interesting are the random phone numbers on my pads where I wrote the number, but not whose number it is. Those are only useful for one dialing of the phone and could have been discarded as soon as they were used the first time.

Ah, but I'm not that efficient.

I'm sure I've mentioned this before, but when the family was cleaning out the home of Susan's parents in preparation for its sale, I was asked to empty out a small piece of furniture. It had a drawer that was crammed full of newspaper clippings, check stubs, and a variety of other random items. It clearly was a drawer into which items from the top of the cabinet were stuffed when straightening up the room. The top item in the drawer was a newspaper article about how to avoid clutter. I'm sure that the article had good advice in it. Still, I doubt if the author of that article intended the article itself to become clutter that had to be cleared out years later.

I fear that the legacy I am leaving my children is very similar to that drawer.

My notes may not be as apparently ironic as that saved newspaper clipping. I do hope that whoever is given the task of clearing out my piles of items saved that should have been thrown away doesn't feel obligated to read every page of every notebook.

However, there are a few occasions when I get serious about clearing out some of the clutter and I am going through the items on my desk when I find, amid the clutter some genuine treasures. There can be some real value in sorting through the items. If I were disciplined to sort through the clutter every day it wouldn't build up. But it is easy to convince myself that I'm too busy or that other tasks take precedence.

By the way, I did find the list of possible blog topics. Most were ideas that were old and not appropriate. I decided to discard that list and start over.

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April 29, 2017 – Speaking of Food . . .

A few years ago my mother was living in our home. She was diabetic, which meant that we had to be very conscious of having regular and well-balanced meals. It was also a very busy time in our lives because we were balancing work and community obligations with the need to spend as much time as possible at home with mother. Most days I rose early and left for work before the rest of the household got up. I would come home to prepare and serve lunch and we did a little "dance" with evening meals, alternating them depending on who had which responsibilities at work. In those days I could not sing in the choir, for example, because Susan was responsible for youth group which met at the same time. When we were rushing, I sometimes resorted to carry out from area restaurants for lunch plans. The problem that I encountered was that virtually all restaurants' portion sizes were too large for mother and most were too high in carbohydrates for mother's needs. Sometimes I could craft a meal from the deli at the grocery store. Other times I would order a single carry out and modify it with additional items from home, adding a salad or other food to the protein from restaurant carry out.

In the years that have since passed, there are a lot more food options in our community. There are simply a lot more restaurants from which to choose. I'm not sure that the expansion in the number of restaurants has resulted in better eating options, however. Certainly there is more diversity in what is available. We have foods that reflect the traditions and cultures of more countries than was the case a decade ago. Portion sizes, however, remain very large and most restaurant fare is high in carbohydrates and short on fresh fruit and vegetables.

Like other consumer goods, sometimes what we have is more the illusion of more choice than more real options. Having televisions in various sizes from less than 20 inches to over 65 inches makes it look like there are a lot more options than was the case when the average home had a 19 inch television, but even with the proliferation of brands and sizes, television is still basically television. If you are really interested in diversity of programming, software is far more important than hardware. It isn't the television that provides the entertainment, it is the choice of services that you display on the television.

When it comes to eating, I still find it hard to get a good meal in a restaurant. I don't mean that they don't have good cooks. They do. I don't mean that there aren't a lot of choices. There are. It is just that a true healthy choice of balanced nutrition is still far easier to come by through cooking at home than by going out. People with dietary restrictions must find this even more true than I.

And the bottom line is that the strategy of expansion, expansion, expansion is not working for the restaurant industry and it isn't a sustainable model for real growth. Most franchise restaurants create the illusion of growth for their boards and shareholders by rapidly expanding the number of restaurants. This strategy, in the long run, is not sustainable. Take Chipotle as an example. It might not be a very good example, because they had a food contamination scare and problems with slow service and unclean restaurants that caused declines in sales and in in stock prices. Nonetheless, the chain responded by opening new restaurants at breakneck pace. After adding 240 new locations in the last fiscal year, this week it reported that it opened 57 more new stores in the first quarter of this year.

The common perception in restaurant board rooms is that Americans are eating out more and the way to capitalize on that trend is the open more and more locations. There is a grain of truth in that. We do indulge in eating out a lot more than previous generations. But the industry might not have noticed that that trend will not continue forever. In the first place, the expansion has slowed to around 1 percent per year in recent years. And in 2016 restaurant visits actually declined.

The result is that more and more restaurants are competing to serve the same or slightly fewer meals.

It is simple capitalism: supply and demand. When the supply outruns the demand, profits decline. Despite the rush to expand the number of restaurants latest statistics show the total number of U.S. restaurants declined by 2 percent from the previous year. While new locations are being opened, existing locations are being closed due to a lack of business. McDonald's, for example has trimmed about 200 locations in the past couple of years.

Internet food sellers are heavily marketing food delivery services. Most of these deliver raw ingredients which are prepared according to carefully designed recipes. Many of them involve subscriptions where food orders are placed automatically, resulting in less time for shopping and less decision-making in planning menus.

For us, however, the thing that seems to work the best is to do our own planning and shopping and food preparation at home. We get the food we need in the portions that make sense with less waste. You'll occasionally see us go out for lunch or dinner, but those occasions are not as frequent as was the case a few year ago. I understand that we aren't typical consumers and our tastes don't reflect any trends.

Still, I think the economy of food is beginning to shift. Visits to restaurants will probably continue to shrink. Chili's, Outback Steakhouse and Carrabba's Italian Grill all saw the number of guests shrink in the last quarter. Some restaurants will make up for part of the decline by selling more expensive items to the customers who remain. That seems to be the case with McDonalds and Starbucks, both of which saw declines in numbers of visits, but increases in sales.

Fortunately for society, investors aren't consulting my blog when making decisions about where to put their money. But don't look for many restaurant reviews in this space. When we first moved to Rapid City I commented to a newspaper reporter that I thought the best cup of coffee in our town was served in our kitchen at home. After the article was published we received quite a few coupons for free cups of coffee. So, if any restaurant owners or managers are reading this, I'll state for the record that the best meals I get come from the kitchen at our home. That's not likely to change.

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April 30, 2019 – Significant Conversation

According to several different sources, the average person walks about 3 miles per hour. There are a lot of factors that can influence the pace of walking including the load that one is carrying, the steepness of the terrain, the number of obstacles on the path, and the overall physical health of the walker. Taking the average, most people can cover a distance of seven miles in a little under 2 1/2 hours - less than half a day.

Seven miles is the distance between Jerusalem and Emmaus as reported by the Gospel of Luke. We do not know for sure how long it took the disciples to make that walk, but it is fair to say that they probably invested a couple of hours at least. The point I am trying to make is that their recognition of Jesus wasn't instant. It took time. It required significant and deep conversation.

It is fairly difficult to find people who will regularly make that size of an investment in growing their faith.

We are a society that expects instant results and we don't like waiting. It is difficult to obtain accurate information, but most of us invest significant amounts of our time in short conversations. Quora reports that the average phone call in 2010 was 1 minute and 40 seconds. Stanford University did a study of people in social settings and determined that the average amount of time given to a topic is 3 minutes and 20 seconds. Our days are filled with short conversations focused on communicating relatively small amounts of information.

In getting information out to the members of our church, we have learned that it is necessary to use a wide variety of media because we have members who simply do not answer their telephones - you can't even get the average 1 minute and 40 seconds from those folks. A text message or a tweet might be more successful in communicating. And 140 characters doesn't allow much significant information to be transacted.

We are left with a bit of a dilemma. We feel called to communicate the good news of the resurrection of Jesus to others. But it is not a simple message. "Christ is alive! Christ is alive indeed!" is a good slogan. It is a meaningful exchange to those who have been through the long journey of Lent and Holy Week together. But fully conveying the message and meaning of the Gospel requires significantly more relationship and significantly more exchange of information.

Jesus and two of the disciples gave it a seven-mile walk with conversation.

The conversation began with Jesus asking a few simple questions about the conversation he was joining. Then he listened as those walking with him told him of what was happening in their lives. Only after that time of listening did he begin to teach them what they needed to learn.

Of course the setting has a big impact on how long it takes to communicate essential information. When I visit people who are recovering in the hospital, it is not uncommon for it to take less than five minutes for me to listen to a summary of the patient's condition. People often aren't in much of a mood to talk in that setting. A brief visit with a simple prayer usually is best.

On the other hand, when I visit in the jail, it generally takes a minimum of a half hour for the inmate to tell me what is going on in their lives. Of course there are less events in the lives of inmates than in the lives of hospital patients, but the inmates have been isolated and haven't had anyone with whom to talk. It takes a while for them to simply speak some of the ideas that have been rummaging around in their heads while they have been sitting in isolation. Visiting people in their homes or workplaces varies greatly in the amount of time that I need to listen depending on what other events and activities are occupying the person I am visiting.

Two disciples with a bit of distance to cover, who were used to walking, gave an excellent setting for a conversation of significance.

That is something that is difficult to get in today's world - a conversation of significance. We often occupy the same space and don't engage in very much real conversation. My wife and I love to talk to each other and have substantial conversation most days, but there are times when we are both engaged in different activities and though we are in the same home, hours can go by without much substantial conversation. I speak with my co-workers each day that we are working together, but there are times when I am not informed of the latest and most important events in their lives because our conversations are focused on work that needs to be accomplished.

I don't know if there is any way to invite people to slow down and take the time to really get to know one another. I don't know if we can set aside our electronic devices and simply have a good conversation. For a hyper-connected society, we really aren't very good at really communicating.

The account of Jesus and his disciples on the road to Emmaus takes up a couple of paragraphs in the Gospel of Luke. It doesn't report every word that the travelers exchanged in their seven-mile walk. The Gospel writer shortens the event for the sake of the story. Much is left to our imaginations. But it is clear that the exchange was life-altering for the walkers.

At this point in my ministry I am eager for those few opportunities for life-altering conversation. I am aware that it requires that I slow down and make significant time for listening. I am aware that as wonderful as our electronic devices are they don't give us what we need from face-to-face contact. Despite the hectic pace of the world, I need to learn to slow down and give my attention to others.

Who knows what wonderful life-giving discoveries we can make. After all, the story in Luke reports that the disciples, tired after their walk and ready to stop journeying, got up after supper and walked back to Jerusalem because they couldn't wait to tell the story to the others.