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January 1, 2017 – New Year’s Day, 2017

I’ve been thinking for several days that I should write something dramatic to mark the beginning of a new year. The problem is that I don’t seem to have anything very dramatic to write. It seems to be popular this year to list all of the bad things that happened in 2016, to declare the year a disaster, and to wish it good riddance. There were some dark moments in the year just ended and there are signs that the continuing deep divide in our national political situation is far from over. 2017 will see a dramatic shift in leadership in our country, with the in-coming president very different from the outgoing one. Our new president so far has proven himself and his decisions to be quite unpredictable and I’m sure that there will be surprises, but I’m in no position to have any insight on what or when the news will be rocked with headlines we didn’t expect.

2017 might be a significant year in the history of the tiny island of Majit. Majit is a stony island surrounded by a fringing coral reef in the Pacific Ocean. These days it is home to about 300 people and is lush with pandanus, breadfruit and taro. It has a beautiful freshwater lake, which is rare in the Marshall Islands with indigenous ducks. 200 years ago, German navigator Otto von Kotzebue, sailing in Russian service, made landfall at Mejit Island on January 1, 1817. Apparently unaware that the Spanish expedition of Ruy Lopez de Villalobos had recorded the island in 1542, and that the expedition of Miguel Lopez de Legazpi recorded it on January 9, 1565, Kotzebue named the island New Year’s Island. The natives took no note of the new name, but the name New Year’s Island stuck in German minds and in 1884, Mejit was claimed by Germany along with the rest of the Marshall Islands.

Then in 1917, with a world war raging in Europe and Germany’s attention focused elsewhere the island came under the South Pacific Mandate of the Empire of Japan. That remained in place until it came under the control of the United States at the end of World War II. Finally, in 1986, the Marshall Islands became independent once again.

On the other hand, the events of 1817 and 1917 might not have been all that significant to the inhabitants of the island. They call their home simply, “paradise” and their main claim to fame is the production of pandanus leaf mats. When you live on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean it may be easier to ignore world politics and focus on getting along with your neighbors. After all the 300 or so people who live there have to share their island that is so tiny that the major division of the land is the runway of the airport.

All of which is to say that I don’t really have any dramatic predictions about 2017. It appears that it isn’t starting out quite as grim as 1917, when the war raging in Europe was soon to engulf the United States in its bloody and cruel machinations. Even though the war was fought on foreign shores, its toll on Americans was significant and it demonstrated how interconnected we are with partners around the globe. Something that happens in a distant location affects us here at home.

The number 7 is one of the most significant in the Bible. It denotes completeness or perfection. After creating the world in six days, God rested on the seventh and the seven-day week has been adopted by virtually all human cultures. The number 17 seems to be a bit less significant, though it is a prime number.

But I know that the year will be significant for some people. There will be births and deaths and other events that deeply affect those whom I love and serve. There will be marriages and divorces and any number of major adjustments in the lives of families for whom I have deep concern. 2017 will see refugees forced to leave their homelands and join the mass of wanderers who are trying to make their way in a hostile world. It will see its share of tragedies and triumphs.

My first prayer for the new year is a prayer for peace. With saber rattling going on around the globe and angry rhetoric from world leaders, it feels as if peace is a very fragile commodity. And its absence in the Middle East especially in Syria and Iraq could see another year with 10,000 or more deaths. There seems to be no end in sight for the war in Somalia which drifts into Kenya. Communal conflicts in Nigeria continue to claim too many lives and the War of Darfur continues in Sudan. It is clear that we have not learned to live in peace with one another and that the killing of innocents continues. But we have been surprised by the outbreak of peace. The 2016 peace deal in Columbia reminds us all that peace is possible and worthy of our continuing prayers.

I also pray for truth. In John's Gospel Jesus declares, "You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free." Despite pundits who declare that all truth is relative and that we live in a "post-truth" society, I continue to believe that absolute truth exists and that humans can discern the truth. The quest for truth is a noble endeavor and we are not condemned to base our lives and our decisions on half-truths and outright lies. A prayer for truth seems in order as we begin the new year.

Peace and truth are sufficiently elusive to be high goals for the year to come.

Along with my family, friends, and neighbors I begin this year with a small degree of trepidation. I'm hoping that not all the surprises will be disastrous.

Perhaps, if I start working on it right now, my journal entry for January 1, 2018, can be more dramatic and meaningful.

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January 2, 2017 – Stable Points in a Changing World

I've never been one to resist change. I find that change is healthy and a normal part of life. I am, however, aware that the rate of change continues to accelerate. The amount of change that I have experienced is nowhere near as much as will be experienced by my grandchildren.

One of the reasons that I have been able to embrace change is that I have some very stable points in my life. I was 20 when I married and was extremely fortunate to have found my mate at such an early age. We have both been blessed with good health and a growing relationship. After being students together for the first five years of our marriage, we began to work together. We have either job shared or worked for the same employer ever since. I've heard lots of stories about couples who found that working together wasn't the right choice for them. In our case it has been exactly right.

That means that both of us have been in the same career, working continuously for 38 years. During that time, we have served three parishes, a relatively small number in our field of work. After seven years in our first parish, we worked ten years in our next and have been in this placement for twenty-one years. That's also 38 years for both of us without a break in employment.

Young adults beginning their careers probably cannot expect such employment stability. There are very few jobs that will even continue to exist for an entire working life. Jobs that are essential today may cease to exist in the future. For example, at the moment our economy is dependent upon truck drivers. But someone starting out a career in that field can expect to be replaced by an autonomous vehicle long before retirement comes along.

Beyond the dramatic changes in the types of employment that are available, there are lots of other reasons that people currently working will experience major job transitions. The constant reconfiguration of corporate structures means that many productive employees will find their jobs eliminated not as a result of any action they have done, but because of changes in corporate policy. Huge corporations, striving to become even larger often eliminate positions in response to temporary conditions rather than the long-term best interests of the company. "Merge and purge" has become an accepted corporate strategy in a wide variety of fields. Successful corporations that are growing through mergers suddenly find that short term profits can be boosted by simply changing the number of employees.

Beyond that, I realize that we were extremely lucky to discover meaningful life's work early in our lives. I know a lot of stories of people who pursued a particular education and career only to discover that they really didn't enjoy the actual work that much. I know an engineer who left a high-paid research job to become a home handyman. I have a minister friend who started out as a meteorologist. There are plenty of stories of

people who have started out in one direction and have made a successful career change. Sometimes it takes a major change to discover one's true vocation.

As is true with other life ventures, sometimes the choice of a career sometimes requires a few false starts. There is no better way to discover the true nature of a job than to engage in that job. I have followed the career path of a person who started a 9 to 5 job after college and was continually dreaming of becoming his own boss. He had all sorts of ideas for entrepreneurial enterprises. One day he figured out how to start his own business. The stress of being responsible for everything was overwhelming. The fantasy of running his own business was very different from the reality of long days and late nights and constant worries about cash flow. His once predictable income was replaced by a series of ups and downs. After less than five years he shut down his business and went back to working for a large company. These days he runs a small enterprise on the side that sells his hobby products over the internet. It provides a supplement to the income from his regular job without all the managerial stresses of running a larger enterprise.

Looking back, I realize how extremely fortunate I have been in my own career path. I have a vocation that doesn't have much of a career ladder. the difference between the highest- and lowest-paid jobs in my profession isn't that great. There is no point in comparing myself to my colleagues. I have no aspirations to a job different from serving a congregation.

Stability in my employment has given me the luxury of being open to dramatic changes in other areas of my life. The church certainly isn't the same as it was when I began working for it. What I do in my daily life has many aspects that are very different from when I began my career. I couldn't have imagined that I would be spending time troubleshooting computer network problems at the beginning of my career. Knowing how to clean the type and replace the ribbon on a typewriter was the extent of the technical knowledge that was required. The processes of designing web pages and keeping up with social media was not a part of my academic training. Even consistent tasks, such as planning worship and providing pastoral care, have been changed dramatically by the rise of computers, cell phones and other devices. I am surprised by how much pastoral counseling I do over the telephone and am increasing the amount that is done by email and text exchanges. The changes aren't caused by my need for increased efficiency. When it comes to efficiency, there is no way of doing counseling that is better than face-to-face conversation. However, the complex schedules and lives of the people I serve demand flexibility from me.

Still, amid all the change, some things remain the same. And in a world of change I am grateful for the constants. There are probably millions of people who are beginning this year resolving to find a new job. Fortunately, I'm not one of them.

January 3, 2017 – Linger in Christmas

There is wisdom to the season of Christmas. For many people, today marks the end of the holiday season. The solstice has come and gone. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are past. New Year's Eve, New Year's Day and the Monday holiday have come and gone. Rapid City Area Schools resume their normal sessions today. The school busses will soon be rolling, and the halls will ring with the echoes of children. Offices that have been closed for the holidays will be bustling. The bank will be busy preparing end of the year reports and making sure that all of the accounting is properly done. Accountants will be gearing up for the busy tax season. Retailers will be making exchanges and getting their stocks for Valentine's Day and Easter.

And it is still Christmas. In the church, Christmas is a 12-day holiday, and it continues through Friday. We are in no rush to return to normal.

This year the weather seems to be carrying a similar message. Although the forecast doesn't call for much snow in the week to come, it will be cold, with overnight lows below zero through the week and next Sunday being our first chance of a high that is above freezing, and then barely so. The light may be returning to our northern location, but it is going to take a while before we feel its effect. It's a good time to hunker down and plan some indoor activities.

Parker Palmer reminds us that darkness can be a teacher and that we ought to look to this season for the lessons that we might learn. "Are we so eager to get to the light that we fail to dwell in the darkness long enough to learn what it has to teach us?"

He is not alone.

Theodore Roethke says, "In a dark time, the eye begins to see."

Wendell Berry says: "To go in the dark with a light is to know the light. To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings, and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings."

And Rilke says, simply, "I have faith in the night."

There are life-giving lessons to be learned even in the darkest times of the year.

It is very natural to anticipate the future and to want to rush to the seasons of dramatic change and new life. In the cycle of readings that is our lectionary we begin on Sunday a rush through the life of Jesus. We go from birth to death in the seasons preceding Easter. Friday is Epiphany with its celebration of the gift of light. Sunday is the baptism of Christ. This is the time of the year that we dwell in the Gospels, focusing on Jesus' disciples, ministry, and teaching.

But before we begin that rush, perhaps it is appropriate to dwell where we are for a few more days - to hunker down against the cold, to just sit with the images of Christmas, to learn the life-giving lessons that are present in this season.

One of the deep lessons of this season is the simple observance that we are not alone. God comes to us. Left to our own devices, we humans have all kinds of ways of getting ourselves into trouble. The simple commandments on living a life of freedom escape us. We turn to all kinds of idolatry and place our trust in any number of false gods. The lesson of the hard times in our lives, however, is the message of Christmas: God comes to us. We are not alone. That is a thought worthy of deeper contemplation. In the darkest days of our lives, when we are most tempted to feel lonely, God is present and persistent in our lives.

A poem by David Whyte has been stirring me this season:

Your great mistake is to act the drama
as if you were alone. As if life
were a progressive and cunning crime
with no witness to the tiny hidden
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding
out your solo voice. You must note
the way the soap dish enables you,
or the window latch grants you freedom.

Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.
The stairs are your mentor of things
to come, the doors have always been there
to frighten you and invite you,
and the tiny speaker in the phone
is your dream-ladder to divinity.

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into
the conversation. The kettle is singing
even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots
have left their arrogant aloofness and
seen the good in you at last. All the birds
and creatures of the world are unutterably
themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

For the past several weeks I have been visiting a man who is confined to a very small room. His visits from others are infrequent. He can't get out. His days are filled with a mind-numbing loneliness. He watches too much television. He worries too much. Doing his laundry is the high point of his week. The food is boring and repetitious. The view out his window is the same every day. Some days the litany of his complaints takes up most of the time that we have together. I have given him a bible and try to guide his reading, but also want to allow him to read randomly - to wander through the scriptures in no apparent pattern, looking for things that others have not yet discovered. I pray with him. I pray for him. I ask him what he can teach me. Sometimes it is just a word of Lakota, a language he speaks that I do not. Sometimes it is a story of his past. Sometimes he thinks he has nothing to offer. Some days all I have to offer him is the reminder that he is not completely alone.

It is a season of waiting and watching. The answers are not all visible.

For now, I'm in no rush to have this season come to its end.

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January 4, 2017 – Not Sweating the Details

I have a brother whose birthday is December 24. I was just 2 1/2 years old when he was born, and I have very little memory of the event. I can remember that we opened our Christmas presents in the hospital day room. I can picture that room in my mind with a Christmas tree. I have another memory of walking from our house, across the back yard and entering the hospital through the emergency entrance, but that could have happened any number of times and I'm not sure that the memory is of the time when my brother was born. We have a few pictures of the baby and at least one that was taken in the hospital. I don't remember anything about my mother being pregnant. I don't remember where the baby slept when he first came home. It wasn't long before we shared a room and most of my memories of my brother come from after we were sharing the room.

If you ask my sisters, they have clearer memories of my brother's birth. The sister closest to me in age was 4 1/2 at the time. She can remember a few details. My older sister has been through a major cardiac event and surgery in recent months and some of her memories are a bit clouded.

My brother, of course, has no specific memories of his own birth.

Our parents are no longer living, so information from them is limited to our memories of the stories that they told.

Last month, on December 24, 2016, my brother turned 61. At least we all agree on the date and the number of years that have passed.

Many Biblical scholars agree that the Gospel of Mark was the first of the four gospels to be written. There is some disagreement about the exact date that it appeared, but it is common to place the dating of the gospel at about 70 AD. That's about a century after the birth of Jesus. We shouldn't be surprised if it is lacking detail about his birth. Mark's gospel doesn't have a birth narrative. It begins with the prophecy of Isaiah and the story of John the Baptist's preaching followed by the story of Jesus baptism as an adult.

Matthew and Luke were written independently of each other, one or two decades after the Gospel of Mark first appeared. Matthew contains a genealogy of Jesus, traced through his father's side of the family, followed by Joseph's discovery that Mary was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. Then it goes on to say that she bore a son and Joseph named the child Jesus. Matthew also reports of the visit of wise men from the east and the flight of the holy family to Egypt to escape Herod's killing of the innocents. Neither of these details are reported in any of the other gospels.

It is from the Gospel of Luke that we get the story that we tell every Christmas. The second chapter of the Gospel contains the familiar story that begins with the decree of Caesar that all must go to their ancestral homes and the birth of the baby, who was laid in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. Of course, our modern telling of the story adds all kinds of characters and details that are not included in the narrative of the Gospel. We think of an "inn" as a public accommodation rather than the guest room of a common home, which is what the word refers to in the gospel. That word is only used one other time in Luke's gospel, and that is in the reference to the upper room where Jesus shared the last supper with his disciples. We've also added the character of an innkeeper and details of "no vacancy" as the reception of the couple. We've added the presence of animals, though there is nothing in the gospel to indicate that there were any animals other than the sheep who were not at the home, but rather out in the fields with the shepherds at night.

And, unlike the stories in my family about my brother's birth, we do not agree on the day or even the year of Jesus' birth. Precise dating is made even more difficult by the fact that there have been a couple of changes in the calendars that we use over the centuries. The shift from the Julian Calendar to the Gregorian Calendar shifted things dramatically. The only clues we have to the season of the year is that the shepherds were out keeping watch over their flocks by night, which probably means that it wasn't the dead of winter, when the flocks were brought back into shelter at night.

The placing of the celebration of Christmas as a major event in the Christian Calendar didn't occur until centuries after Jesus' death and resurrection. The first recorded date of Christmas being celebrated on December 25th was in 336, during the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine. The official order of the church to celebrate Christmas on December 25 occurred a few years later when Pope Julius I officially declared the holiday. Many of the traditions that surround the celebration have their roots in other

non-Christian winter festivals. Germanic peoples celebrated a festival called Yule or Yuletide during late December and Early January. Various other winter festivals were observed in other parts of the world as well.

I don't think that I need to know all the details to acknowledge my brother's birthday. It seems like an occasion worthy of celebration even if I can't recall exactly what happened. We've even had some good family celebrations in which we brought different and sometimes conflicting memories to the table.

It shouldn't surprise us that the focus of our Christmastide celebrations is elsewhere than complete historical accuracy. We've discovered meanings that are important to our faith that include interpretation and millennia of traditions. Those who want to get too picky about the details might find themselves left with very little to celebrate. For the rest of us the season of hope, peace, joy, and love is an important part of our annual cycle.

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January 5, 2017 – A Truth That Cannot Be Ignored

Some of the readers of this blog may be getting tired of my repeated commentaries about life in a "post truth" society, but I simply can't buy the concept. In fact, truth continues to exist. Not everything is subject to interpretation. Facts catch up even with the most ardent deniers. Say what you want about death, for example, and you will still one day die. There are absolute truths whether or not they are acknowledged.

The way we get our news has changed dramatically from just a few decades ago. There is less commonality about news sources than was once the case. When America had only three major television networks, most of us got our news from the same source. As recently as 1990, the average episode of "Cheers" on television was garnering 20 million viewers. In 2016, the top-rated news program garnered 3.42 million viewers. These days a YouTube video with a million hits is viral. A single news source is unlikely to garner the kind of following that was common in previous times. More sources mean more viewpoints, but that is only a potential because people tend not to sample a variety of sources, but rather stick with a few limited sources. The average American viewer is not connecting with a wider variety of sources, but rather only watching the perspectives with which that viewer agrees.

This makes it more difficult for the truth to be communicated.

In the 1990's when leaders mounted a campaign against drunk driving and the concept of a designated driver became popular, major television shows aired episodes on the subject. People got the idea. Highway fatalities dropped.

It is a different matter for the campaign against distracted driving. Although most states have laws against texting and driving, enforcement is limited. And when drivers are caught, the penalties are relatively light. Here in South Dakota, for example, the maximum fine for texting while driving is \$100. A first offense DUI, by comparison carries a minimum suspension of driver's license of 30 days. A fine of up to \$1,000 and a jail sentence of up to one year can be imposed.

But the reality is that distracted driving is killing people in our country. Say what you want about post-truth, the truth is that people are really dying. 2015 brought the biggest percent in U.S. traffic deaths in 50 years, with an 8 percent increase. That surge in deaths continued into the first six months of 2016, with a 9% increase. There is little doubt that the increase will be sustained when the statistics for the last half of 2016 are released.

Driving is a difficult task and there are many reasons for accidents, but there is little doubt that the biggest reason for the sudden increase in traffic deaths is driving while distracted. Recent polls show that people believe that distracted driving is a problem, but those same people believe that they do not drive distracted. In other words, people believe that the problem is with other drivers. They believe that they are above average and are the exception.

The problem isn't just texting and driving. People are carrying on deep conversations while driving. Even when a hands-free device is being used, attention is being diverted. In addition, people are taking quick glances at their e-mail, checking Facebook, using their smart phones as navigational devices, and doing countless other tasks while driving. Popular culture has led us to believe that we are good at multi-tasking. The problem is that multi-tasking is inconsistent with safe driving. We live in a busy, fast-paced world where our brains are already overloaded, and we have become accustomed to not allowing our brains to process what our eyes see.

A safe, effective driver has heightened situational awareness. Rather than focus attention on a tiny screen, driving is a task that requires awareness of the big picture. The eyes must be constantly scanning from mirror to windshield, from windshield to gauges. Understanding what is going on down the road as well as what is going on in adjoining lanes is critical. Tunnel vision is dangerous.

We are not doing a good job of teaching teens the skills needed to be effective drivers. And we are not providing them with good examples, either. Becoming a sophisticated, attentive driver requires practice of specific skills. Retaining those skills requires constant practice as well.

Getting this message out, however, is much more difficult than it was back in the days of the educational campaigns seeking to reduce drunk driving. We no longer have true mass media. It has been replaced with many different, smaller outlets. And those outlets

have become accustomed to competing by providing contrasting opinions. There are very few subjects on which the media outlets allow themselves to express agreement. “Our truth is better than their truth” arguments are constant and when played in certain ways increase profits for the media outlets.

All of that wrangling, however, doesn’t change the bottom line. Americans are slaughtering themselves and others on our highways. It is getting more dangerous out there. And there is no quick technological fix for the problem. While autonomous vehicles that don’t require constant driver awareness are in the works, it will be a decade or more before they are common enough to have much of an impact on highway safety.

40,000 people a year is a reality that cannot be ignored. If we lost one tenth of that number to a terrorist attack, the outrage would be impossible to ignore. Somehow, however, we have become accustomed to highway deaths and accept them as “normal.” There is nothing normal, however, for the families who have lost loved ones to distracted driving.

Driving is one of the riskiest activities any of us undertake in spite of decades of vehicle design improvements and traffic safety advancements.

So put down the phone, pay attention and drive carefully. Take a defensive driving course from time to time. Practice your situational awareness and stay alert. This is serious business.

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January 6, 2017 – Epiphany 2017

In our congregation, we have two hymnals. Our “old” hymnals are The Pilgrim Hymnal, the 1959 edition. The congregation had previously used the 1939 edition of the same hymnal. Our “new” hymnals are The New Century Hymnal, published in 1995. We’ve had the new hymnals in the pews for nearly 20 years now. There are still several hymns in the book that are unfamiliar to the congregation. That should not come as a surprise, because there are also hymns in the Pilgrim Hymnal that were also in the 1939 edition that are unfamiliar to the congregation. Churches tend not to sing all of the hymns in the hymnal but discover favorites that are repeated.

One of the hymns that is in our hymnal that our congregation has not yet learned to love is the George Eldekin adaptation of the Charles Wesley hymn, “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing.” The hymn uses the traditional words and blends them with the refrain of “Jesus, the light of the world.” It also has a chorus:

“We will follow the light, beautiful light,
come where the dew-drops of mercy are bright,

Shine all around us by day and by night,
Jesus the light of the world.”

This is becoming one of my favorite Epiphany hymns. There are several performances of the hymn that have been uploaded to YouTube and if you search “Jesus the Light of the World” or “Hark the Harold Angels-Jesus the light” you can find several choral renderings of the song.

I think that our wonderful, classically trained organist is a bit intimidated by more jazz rhythms that are a bit irregular, though when he sets his mind to it he does a wonderful job with whatever music we ask him to play. Perhaps it is more a case of a pastor who is a bit sensitive he hears negative comments from the congregation about any element of worship, including the selection of hymns.

Still, I can't help but believe that if our congregation got to know the song, it would quickly become one of its beloved hymns.

Today is Epiphany Day, the day set aside for the telling of the story of the journey of the magi and their gifts to the infant Jesus. Epiphany is the season that reveals the identity of Jesus and celebrates the introduction of Jesus to the entire world. As the magi were from distant lands and presumed not to be Jewish, the telling of the story celebrates the identity of Jesus as savior of all people and not just the Jewish family to which he was born.

The season is filled with narrative stories that are a joy to a preacher with my style. The baptism of Jesus, the wedding at Cana, stories of preaching and teaching and healing.

T.S. Elliot's poem, “Journey of the Magi” is a sermon, an imaginative reflection of the events outlined in Matthew's gospel:

A cold coming we had of it,
just the worst time of the year
for a journey, and such a long journey:
the ways deep and the weather sharp,
the very dead of winter.
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory
lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted the summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
and the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
and the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
and the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
and the villages dirty and charging high prices:

a hard time of it.

At the end we preferred to travel all night,
sleeping in snatches,
with the voices singing in our ears, saying
that this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
with a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
and three trees on the low sky,
and an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
and feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
and arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
and I would do it again, but set down
this set down
this: Were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
we had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death.
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
with an alien people clutching their gold.
I should be glad of another death.

The element of the journey that we usually emphasize in this season is the star that guided the magi. That star, which gamers no motion in Elliot's poem, is a reminder of the light of Christ.

John wrote: "What came to being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

The hymn rings in my ears as I reflect on the season:

"We will follow the light, beautiful light,
come where the dew-drops of mercy are bright,
Shine all around us by day and by night,
Jesus the light of the world."

There is no shortage of darkness in our world today. It is not difficult to find things about which to be upset and even fearful. The uncertainty of world politics, the frailty of financial systems, the continuing segregation of the environment and the dirtying of water and air. One wonders what kind of a world we are leaving to our grandchildren. We, however, choose not to dwell on the darkness, but rather to turn to the light:

“God is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? God is the stronghold of my life; of whom should I be afraid?” (Psalm 27:1)

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January 7, 2017 – Comfortable Being the Old Guy

One of the joys of the church is that it is truly a multi-generational institution. People bring their babies to church shortly after birth. Our church school's largest age cohort is preschoolers: children under the age of 5. We have members in every decade of life, including those over the age of 100. Right now, we only have one member in that age category, but there have been times in the past 20 years when we have had more. We have sent mission teams to our sister church in Costa Rica with at least one member of each of seven decades: teens, twenties, thirties, forties, fifties, sixties, and seventies.

There aren't many other institutions in our society that embrace such age diversity. Even family-based institutions such as the YMCA do most of their programming by dividing people up into age groups. We have a time every week when we gather for worship and intentionally bring together people of all ages.

As a result, I have friends who are 30 or more years older than I as well as those who are 60 years younger. I started working as a pastor in my twenties and now have served in that role through a broad swath of my middle life. As I have served, my perspective on age has changed. When I began my career, I would think of those older than me in two categories: those who were actively working and those who were retired. For the most part, these were two age divisions, though people retire at different ages. From the perspective of my twenties, those who were retired were really old, while some of those who were actively working seemed to be not so old, even though they might be decades older than I.

For a long time, I was too young for some areas of church leadership. When I began my career, I didn't know anyone younger than 40 who was pastor of a congregation of 500 or more members. Most of the people I knew who served as Conference ministers and in the national setting of the church were likewise 40 or older. That has shifted a bit over the decades, and we now see a few younger people serving in leadership roles previously reserved to those who were mid-career or older. Because there are many ministers who entered the ministry as second or third careers, the age of a minister doesn't reveal much about how many years of pastoral service are behind that pastor,

but there are a lot of different life experiences that can contribute to the effectiveness of pastoral leadership, so just having spent a long time as a pastor doesn't necessarily mean that the person is somehow more capable than one who is newer to the vocation.

I have been thinking about age quite a bit recently because with the new year I have been shifting my areas of responsibility as a Pennington County Sheriff's Chaplain. Recently I have been spending more time at Western South Dakota Juvenile Services Center. We are fortunate in our community to have a facility that has achieved the highest level of accreditation from the American Correctional Association. This system of continuing assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the facility and its policies and procedures assures that quality of life for both those who are confined in the facility and those who work there is always foremost in the minds of its leaders. I am enjoying the change and the process of getting to know some members of our community that I had not previously known.

From the perspective of the youth who are receiving treatment and education at the center, I am really old. I'm pretty sure that I am the oldest person who is regularly spending time at the facility. When I go into a staff briefing, I'm clearly the oldest person in the room. Just yesterday I was having a conversation with a corrections officer who was surprised to find out that I have a regular job in addition to my volunteer work. He had just assumed that I was retired and picked up the volunteer position to keep up community involvement.

There are many youth in the facility who simply cannot imagine ever being as old as I have become. WSDJSC is designed to provide services to youth from 10 to 20 years old. It isn't uncommon for teens, especially those who have experienced trauma, abuse, addiction, or other problems, to believe that their lives will be short. Even for "at risk" youth life expectancy is in their seventies, but many believe that they will die before they reach the age of thirty. Thinking of what it might mean to be over the age of sixty is a real challenge for some of the youth.

This holds some distinct advantages for me. Although my role at WSDJSC is primarily as chaplain to the staff, and I don't have very much direct contact with the youth, they see me as an anomaly. I'm no threat to them. I'm just that old guy with the white beard. However, I hope that I can help some of them to discover that they too are in the process of aging - one year at a time, just like me. Although nothing can prevent tragedy from unfolding some of these youth, many of them will live long lives. Some of the habits and decisions they make at this age will have life-long effects. They are far more likely to end their life's journeys after many seasons of chronic pain than in a burst of glory in a dramatic event. And some of them are making choices right now that will increase the amount of chronic pain they will experience. But that isn't a lesson they are able to learn from an old guy like me.

I'm just hoping that I can get some of them to consider the possibility of growing old. I'm not sure how to do that. For now, just being who I am and being visible to the youth seems like one step in the right direction.

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January 8, 2017 – Let it Be

The Gospel of Matthew reports that John was reluctant when Jesus presented himself to John for baptism. "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus, however, persisted, saying "Let it be so for now."

We like to imagine the life of Jesus as being perfectly ordered, without any mistakes, with every event preordained and anticipated. The gospels, however, present quite a different story. Jesus made his way through life with a normal amount of making do with the circumstances in which he found himself. In his encounter with his cousin, he doesn't offer a final solution or a perfect resolution. "Let it be so for now."

Matthew devotes only four verses to the report of the baptism. Mark is even more brief, leaving out the exchange about John's reluctance. Luke, too is brief, reporting the event with just two sentences. John's gospel gives no report of the baptism, but rather speaks of John having seen the spirit descend on Jesus. The baptism gets a brief indirect mention in Acts, "the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached." That's it. just a handful of verses, mostly repetitions of what others have said.

From these few verses, tradition has handed us the festival day that marks the first Sunday of Epiphany. What the Gospels report is that the Spirit of God descended. Three of them mention God's voice saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

The story might have carried special weight in the early days of the growth of the Christian movement among Jewish communities. Convincing faithful Jews that Jesus was the Messiah was a bit of a hard sell. The anticipation of the messiah carried with it expectations of political and governmental upheaval. Jesus brought no such change. The stories that had been told about the coming messiah promised a return of Israel's prominence among the nations. Nothing like that happened. What happened was that Jesus was crucified. His death and resurrection brought something that was entirely different than what was anticipated. The people were looking for an easily recognizable assertion that God oversees the entire universe. What Jesus brought was the assertion that God is intimately involved in the details of human life - even the decision to be baptized.

We've had a lot of discussion - some would say argument - over baptism across the history of the church. Some baptize infants. Some feel that active consent must be

involved and wait until the child is older. Some use water as a symbol, springing or splashing or pouring a bit of water on the one baptized. Others are literal, immersing the entire body beneath the surface of the water. Those discussions have resulted in divisions in the family of Christianity - different denominations have different interpretations. Some don't even recognize the baptisms of other parts of the church as valid.

We don't often dwell on that discussion between John and Jesus. John argues that it should be one way. Jesus says, "Let it be so for now." Despite our centuries of arguments over the precise method of baptism, which is not fully described in any Gospel account, we seem to have missed the fact that Jesus' baptism was a bit of an improvisation. It wasn't carried out exactly the way John had imagined. John might even have questioned the need for Jesus to be baptized in the first place. After all, from what did Jesus have to repent? Jesus replies simply, "Let it be."

The Beatles song attributes the words of wisdom to Mary: "And in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me, speaking words of wisdom: let it be."

There is another aspect of the exchange that interests me. Jesus doesn't interpret his baptism as a kind of permanent, once and for all event. After he urges John to let it be, he adds, "for now." Is this an indication of the temporary nature of the baptism - or of the temporary nature of life itself?

It is possible, of course, that I am employing the old preacher's trick of reading far too much meaning into far too few words. Looking for things in the text that aren't really there. On the other hand, the words of God reported by the synoptic gospels do get repeated. In the seasonal traditions of the church, we read those words at the other end of the season of Epiphany, at the transfiguration, when the voice from the cloud says, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." It is a different event, with different witnesses. The words are remarkably consistent.

Not long afterward those words are even more poignant when the gospels reveal that the beloved of God has been executed in one of the cruelest forms of capital punishment ever devised. It wasn't the role for God's chosen envisioned by many people of faith. We seem to be better able to imagine God present in the moments of Glory and recognition than alongside the outcast of society on the cross.

I've felt the stirrings of the spirit at baptism. I've looked into the eyes of a child as I touch their foreheads with a wet hand. There have been moments when there has been no doubt in my mind whatsoever that this is a child of God deeply beloved by God.

At those moments there is no need for further confirmation of the goodness of God - it is undeniable. Even though human life is fragile; even though this child will experience pain and grief and may even be the cause of pain and grief for others; even though the

span of our lives is short - God's love is undeniably present. At moments like that it makes sense to let it be and simply acknowledge the power of the experience.

My life and my ministry still incorporate a fair amount of improvisation. I'm not often sure that I'm right or that I fully understand the consequences of my choices and behavior. I am, however, grateful for the moments when I feel permission to "Let it be for now."

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January 9, 2017 – A Giant Falls

The weather that makes the news is the weather of extremes. We have no need of cable television in our home, but when I visit in nursing homes, one of the popular channels for the televisions is the Weather Channel. I really wish that nursing home administrators would re-think this practice, because the channel is a stream of the most dramatic and disastrous weather occurring in the world and it only takes a slight amount of dementia to make it difficult to distinguish between the report on the television and the actual conditions outside of the building. The Weather Channel drifts from disaster story to disaster story:

- California, Nevada Face Major Flooding
- Helena Kills 6, Wreaks Havoc in Northeast
- Beijing Residents Warned to Toxic Snow
- Watch! They Can't Stop Sliding
- Watch the Tree: Lightning is About to Strike
- The Coldest Weather We've Had for 20 Years
- Trapped: Cross Flooded Streets and it Could be You
- European Snowstorm Kills More than a Dozen
- Southern Travel Shut Down

You get the picture.

Another place where you'll often find the Weather Channel jumping from disaster to disaster is in the waiting areas of an airport. I sort of get it. Weather is a very important factor in commercial aviation. But you're unlikely to get a story reporting on the fact that 2016 was one of the safest years in the history of modern aviation from the Weather Channel. When I'm preparing to board an airliner, I'd prefer not to focus my attention on stories of disaster. I enjoy flying and don't want that joy taken from me.

Weather and weather extremes are part of our natural world. Great storms and the plants that survive them are among the wonders of nature. The beloved pine trees that cover the Black Hills are here in part because they are highly resilient to harsh weather and bad soils. The forest endures deep cold, high wind, periods of drought and times of flash flooding. There are survivor trees even in the largest wildfires. A cousin species to the Ponderosa Pine, *Pines longaeva*, also known as Bristlecone pine, is among the longest-lived life forms on the planet. Those trees tend to grow in places that are

exposed to some of the greatest weather extremes. They have persisted in spite of storms and winds and freezing temperatures.

Still, part of extreme weather is that some of the trees will fall. When winter storm Atlas blew across the plains setting records early in October of 2013, two of the trees in our back yard ended up on the ground. It was sad to lose them. It is, however, the way of nature.

In the way of the world, one of the forest giants fell yesterday afternoon. The Pioneer Cabin tree, sometimes called the tunnel tree, located in Calaveras Big Trees State Park in California succumbed to the winter storm that has closed the Generals Highway in Sequoia National Park and led to flash flooding in several northern California locations.

At 150 feet, the Pioneer Cabin tree was tall compared to anything that grows around here. It was not, however, particularly tall for a Sequoia. They have been measured at heights up to 279 feet. It was, however, very wide in diameter - about 33 feet. 137 years ago, when the grove in which it is located was on private land, the owners carved a tunnel through the base of the tree wide enough for a car to drive through. The tree became famous because of all of the pictures tourists took of it. The tunnel exposed large areas of hollowness within the tree, creating a chimney like effect. Tourists flocked to the tree and in the early days carved their initials into the soft wood. By the time I saw the tree, they were no longer driving cars through it, but you could walk on a paved path right through the center of the tree. The entire grove of trees is awesome and leaves a permanent impression on visitors. the opportunity to look up into the heart of a living tree was an added bonus.

That tree must have endured some monstrous storms. It also survived several fires that burned the duff off of the ground and left scars on the tree that subsequently healed. Giant sequoia trees don't survive storms by being deep rooted. The roots are very shallow for such large trees. They survive by being flexible. the giant trunks bend as the tops sway in the wind. The great weight of the trees allows the bases to remain firmly planted even when water washes out around the roots. Their height keeps the branches out of the reach of fire and the trunks have an amazing ability to heal when burned.

But somehow, the winter storm of 2016-17 proved to be the one that felled this tree. The pictures which have been posted in many newspapers and on the website of the Calaveras Big Trees Association show the giant shattered into many pieces on the ground.

In the way of big trees, if the tree is left to lie where it fell, it will become a grandmother tree. New seedlings will take root in the decaying wood on the forest floor and will be nurtured by the nutrients from the tree. In time the old tree will disappear as the younger trees take root in the soil. That process doesn't, however, occur quickly. Giant sequoia trees take a long time to grow and live very long lives. The oldest recorded sequoia by

ring count was 3,500 years old. It was a substantial tree when Jesus was born. A sequoia pinecone can remain green and closed for as long as 20 years after it falls from the tree, opening only when conditions are right for new growth.

I hope no one decides that the tree needs to be replaced. I see no advantage in carving a tunnel through another giant tree. Still, I'm glad that I was around to see this tree. It is a sight I'll never forget.

And, as for the weather channel, I don't think this one's a disaster. It is the way of the forest.

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January 10, 2017 – Online Security

I had to stop by a local financial institution yesterday to sort out a problem with my online banking. This institution uses security questions as a means of decreasing the likelihood that an unauthorized person could gain access to the account. Some cyber security experts have decided that passwords are insufficient because users often choose the same password for multiple applications or use words or phrases that are easy to guess.

It seems like a good idea. I want my online banking to be secure. It would create all kinds of problems if it were to be hacked. The problem is that I've read a summary of the new Google study that said that the effectiveness of security questions is minimal at best, warning that these questions "are neither secure nor reliable enough to be used as a stand-alone recovery mechanism."

Here's what happened to me. I set up my security questions and answers quite a while ago - more than a year. Because the system asks the questions randomly it happened that one question hadn't been asked for a long time. The question that hung me up was this: "In what state does your nearest sibling live?" OK the problem poses a problem for me right off the bat. I grew up in a large family. I have four remaining siblings. I was taught not to play favorites. Does the question imply closest in physical location, or closest in age, or closest emotionally? Then, once I choose a sibling, I must decide how I answered the question. Did I put down just the name of the town, or did I put in city and state? Did I abbreviate the state or spell it out? Did I put a comma between the city and state? I know where my siblings live, but that doesn't give me the answer to the question. Then, there is the simple matter of the fact that a couple of my siblings have moved. Was the question asked before or after the move?

To make matters worse, once you answer incorrectly five times the system locks you out. Hence my trip to the financial institution. You can do this over the phone, by the way, if you can remember your password for telephone assistance.

In the office at the financial institution (notice how carefully I am avoiding giving the name of a specific institution - not for security reasons, however) the person assisting me was able to discard the problem security question forcing the system to ask me another. Fortunately, I got the right answer to the second question, which was strange as the question was "Where was your wedding rehearsal dinner held?" That's a trick question in my case as we did not have a wedding rehearsal dinner. We did, however, have a reception with refreshments and I remembered where it was even after more than 43 years. "Whew!" I was into the system. Of course, now, I had to select and set up five new security questions. The system lets you choose from a list of about 20 or 25 questions. You must provide a distinct and different answer to each question. It seems to me like the best way to go with the questions is to give honest answers. However, that is not as easy as it sounds. More than half of the questions begin with "What is your favorite?" That's something that really changes - a lot!

"What is your favorite type of candy?" I have no idea. I can't even decide on my favorite type of cookie. Some days it's molasses cookies. Some days it's ginger snaps. Then I would have to decide whether to capitalize the names of the cookies. I thought about making every answer lower case, despite grammar rules. Then I remembered that the answer that I did get right included capitals. Hmm . . . it was a dilemma. I ended up writing down the answers to the security questions and answers. When I got home, I transferred the information to a secure online digital vault that I maintain. Of course, that is dependent upon my being able to remember my user name and password for that digital vault. I guess I should share that information with a trusted love one as a bit of back up. You can see how "security" soon becomes a bit less secure.

Back to the question about favorite candy. This could be a big issue for people who chose that question. I did not. On the day after I struggled with the financial institution's security questions, I got up to read in the Washington Post that "Candy and gum are no longer Mars' biggest business." Say it isn't so! The maker of Snickers, Spearmint gum, Milky Way and M&M's just spent \$7.7 billion to buy a doggie day-care company based in Los Angeles.

Don't get me wrong. I like dogs. Man's best friend and all. I have two "grand-dogs," beloved pets owned by our children. I guess diversity is good for business. This isn't the first foray of Mars companies into pet care. The company already owns Mars Petcare, based in Belgium, with 40,000 employees in 50 countries. Still, mixing candy and pet care? What will they do next, mix chocolate and peanut butter in the same candy? OK, I know that's Hershey's not Mars.

I guess we'll just have to think of them as a candy/gum/pet business. They're not making it any easier to determine what my favorite type of candy is.

I guess I could go with a generic answer like "chocolate," but I'm not sure that is true. Do I like chocolate more than cinnamon? I don't know. Caramel is a good flavor and I like toffee. I don't think "chocolate" would be a secure answer. Any hacker could guess that one.

Here is the deal. Security questions don't work. According to SecurityWeek, 40 percent of English-speaking users in the U.S. said they couldn't recall their answers on demand. 37 percent choose false, easy to remember answers instead of answering the questions honestly. According to the Google study, hackers had a 19.7 percent success rate guessing the favorite food of English-speaking users on the first guess. Hackers are better at getting the right answer to my security questions than I am.

I'm glad the financial institution is relatively small and local and that I know that people who work there. It seems like I'll be in to see them again and again. Online banking might not be saving much time.

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January 11, 2017 – A Shortage of Philosophers

The traditions of the western academic system demand that people who are truly educated be evaluated as to the broad scope of information and skills, not just to their ability to master a narrow field of information. It is no mistake that the highest academic degree is the PhD, or Doctor of Philosophy. Up until about the last 50 years or so it was equaled in status only by the ThD, or Doctor of Theology. In the traditional structure, a bachelor's degree indicated basic competence in a specific academic discipline. A master's degree indicated sufficient competence to be able to teach the subject. A doctor's degree indicated a more broad-based level of education that enabled the bearer of the degree to teach courses in other fields as well as provide general oversight to educational programs. Over the centuries, certain fields began to require advanced degrees for the simple practice of the discipline. These practical degrees included specialized doctorates, which do not traditionally include as broad-based education as a PhD, but which require similar amounts of time in order to obtain advanced specialized education. Chief among these professional doctorates were JD (Juris Doctor), the professional law degree; MD (Medicinae Doctor), the professional medical degree; and D.Min (Doctor of Ministry), the professional ministerial degree. Interestingly, in traditional studies, the Ph.D required proof of competence in at least two languages. The professional doctorates required working knowledge of Latin as well as demonstrated ability to read and write professionally in an additional language.

Over the past half century, however, educational standards and degree requirements have shifted and changed. Increasingly, PhD degrees are awarded to those who have extreme specialization without the broad-based educational background previously assumed. Requirements to have mastered basic philosophy, the history of philosophy and the philosophy of a specific discipline have fallen away. The result is that more time is freed for specialization and advanced study in a particular field. As philosophy requirements have fallen away, the amount of specific research involved in a PhD thesis has increased.

Concurrent with these changes in advanced education, there has been a general decrease in liberal arts as a field of study for bachelor's degree. Increasing pressures to evaluate degrees in terms of earning capacity has produced a great expansion in focused undergraduate degrees. It is common for a student to earn an engineering degree without having seriously studied philosophy, art, religion, biological sciences, or even so called "soft" sciences such as sociology or psychology.

I know all of this is pretty boring to those who aren't involved in academia, but there are noticeable effects of this increased specialization in education. We have produced a generation of people who are competent, even brilliant, in their fields, but who lack basic ethical and philosophical skills to evaluate the results of their work.

There are brilliant engineers who can write the algorithms to make FaceBook connect people with each other, but they want to absolve themselves of responsibility for the role of their product in spreading false news and outright lies. There are superbly competent geologists who can lead the search for fossil fuels who don't even see the connection between their professional activities and the environmental costs of rapid extraction and burning of those fuels. The brilliant minds that create the ability to amass huge wealth through short term gains, know too little of the basic principles to understand that short term wealth amassed comes at a future cost.

In another field, contemporary economists frequently quote Milton Friedman as the source of the phrase "there's no such thing as a free lunch," meaning "you don't get something for nothing." The problem with this thinking is that without knowing the deeper origins of the phrase, they don't understand its role in American history and politics. The phrase certainly did not originate with Friedman, who loved to use it in his writing and lectures. The idea was controversial in the days leading up to prohibition in the United States between 1920 and 1933. A free lunch was a common practice in those days. The term "free lunch" wasn't used to describe handouts of food to poor and hungry people, however. It denoted free food that American saloon keepers used to attract drinkers. Free lunches were provided to anyone who bought a drink. Obviously the temperance lobby didn't like this inducement and were quick to point out that the drinkers were actually paying for the lunches in the prices paid for the drinks that were served. Advocates of temperance filed claims of false advertising against those who

were using free lunches to promote their establishments. In some cases saloon keepers were successfully prosecuted for such false advertising.

In the post-prohibition era, Henry Wallace, the second person to serve as Vice President under Franklin Roosevelt, wrote an article for *The Atlantic Monthly* in which he argued for a worldwide system that provided for “minimum standards of food, clothing and shelter” for people throughout the world. He offered the opinion that “if we can afford tremendous sums of money to win the war, we can afford to invest whatever amount it takes to win the peace.” Although Wallace never claimed that such standards of food, clothing and shelter would come without a price, only that the price was affordable by modern societies; his critics were quick to accuse him of proposing the impossible using the phrase “there is no such thing as a free lunch.”

OK, that’s a lot of history, and perhaps too much for a simple point, but the bottom line is that when we fail to teach the depth of complex concepts in our institutions of higher education the result is graduates who are not able to foresee the consequences of their actions. Failure to recognize the consequences of actions generally results in significant trouble down the road.

We live in a society that is experiencing a severe lack of ethical and philosophical education. Just because we are able to build advanced technologies doesn’t mean that we should build them. We might be able to engineer the genetics of human beings, but if those who are designing those genetic engineering feats have no ability to consider the consequences of their actions, the results could be disastrous.

My parents taught me a basic philosophical concept early in my life: “If you make a mess, you are going to have to clean it up.” We would do well to apply that concept to the engineers and politicians and seekers of short term profits in our time.

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January 12, 2017 – Seeking Happiness

Not long ago I heard part of a TED talk by Matt Killingsworth. Killingsworth is a Robert Wood Johnson Health and Society Scholar and the developer of a phone application called “Track Your Happiness.” The application is designed to collect data on what makes people happy and gives them a sense of living a fulfilled life. It uses text messages to ask people what they are doing, how they feel, what they would rather be doing, and similar questions. Then it compiles the individual data and reports to the individual so that the person can see what activities make them happy and which ones diminish their sense of satisfaction with life.

The application also collects global statistics that aid in Killingsworth’s research. He can go through the data looking for trends. What things in general produce happiness for

people? Although Killingsworth doesn't believe that there is any single key to happiness, he does believe that he has found some trends that are worth sharing.

Before I go any farther with my reflection on the data Killingsworth has collected, I need to say that I personally would never participate in such an exercise. If I am engaged in meaningful activities, which is most of my life, I'm not willing to turn my attention away from what I am doing to respond to a series of questions posed by my phone. Unless I was at a moment when I was bored, I'm unlikely to respond to the application whether it is sending me text messages. So, as an obvious example, I don't text when I'm driving. Therefore, the application can't evaluate whether or not I like to drive, which I do. I suspect that I'm not the only one who feels that way and therefore, the data produced by the application needs to be viewed with a fair dose of skepticism, because I think it could easily be inaccurate.

Having said that, in his TED talk Killingsworth noted that one of the things that seems to be consistent across differences of race, gender, ethnicity, income, and type of employment is that people report that they are less happy when they are distracted and daydreaming. Doing one thing while thinking of another does not produce happiness, according to his study. Multitasking makes people feel distracted and distraction leads to unhappiness.

Conversely, he noted that being completely focused on a single task - absorbed in the moment - leads to the most happiness for people.

I think he has just invested a lot of money and energy in discovering a truth that is self-evident. The things that capture our attention the most fully are the things that make us the happiest.

To the extent that this is true, the opposite is likely to also have merit: having to juggle too many thoughts, projects and responsibilities all at once leads to unhappiness.

There is such a tendency to remain overly busy in today's world. Parents over schedule their children and get them involved in constant activity from very young ages. Elementary students are enrolled in organized sports programs that have schedules that demand hundreds of hours of commitment each season. Children are carted from music lessons to sports practices to organized play events. Time for free play is diminished. By the time they are teens youth are expected to use electronic devices to organize their own schedules and compile lists of tasks to accomplish and things to do. The expectation that young people be able to do more than one thing at a time is so intense that responding to their cell phones becomes second nature to them. Studies show that teens who express strong support of laws against texting and driving themselves engage in the activity believing that they have exceptional abilities both as drivers and as users of technology.

We shouldn't be surprised. We raise them to believe that doing many things at once is a virtue.

Killingsworth's research indicates that we may also be raising them to be unhappy.

Recently I was visiting with a couple in their home office. Both were sitting in swivel chairs with their backs to their desks upon which their computers were sitting. I was sitting in a chair talking to them about various church activities and projects. As we visited their computers would beep with incoming messages. From time to time one of them would swivel around, check what was going on with the computer and perhaps type a quick response, then turn back to the conversation. After some time of this activity my phone vibrated with an incoming message. I reached for it and looked at the screen to see the source of the message. This is something that I try to never do - be distracted by my phone when I am visiting with church members. But there I was, with my phone in my hand and my vision averted from the people I had come to visit. I apologized and quickly put the phone away.

It didn't faze the people with whom I was visiting in the least. One of them said, "Don't worry, you can answer it if you want." That may be acceptable behavior for a pastor in that person's mind, but it isn't the kind of pastor I want to be. When I lead worship, I remove my phone from my pocket and leave it on my desk or in the pocket of my jacket. I don't even take it into the sanctuary with me. Perhaps I need to do the same thing when I pay a call to church members. I could leave my phone in my car. I know if I did so, there would be some complaints that I'm slow in responding to messages, but that is already the case, and I can deal with that criticism. It probably would mean that my colleagues who spend more time in the office would receive more calls asking where I am and why I haven't responded. I suppose annoying them with interruptions isn't in the best interests of their happiness.

Having heard the TED talk, I have concluded that I am happier than the people who have installed that application on their phones. I have a pretty good life. Maybe the secret to happiness for me is to go through my phone and see what other applications I can remove. Then I can seek more opportunities to put the device aside entirely.

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January 13, 2017 – Meetings

One of the realities of my job is that I attend a lot of meetings. I get to see a wide variety of different leadership styles and institutional strategies. Lately I have been joking that one of the things I'm looking forward to at retirement is retiring from going to meetings. While there is seriousness to that statement, I know that the reality is that I will continue to attend meetings after I retire simply because many of the meetings, I attend are not requirements of my employment, but results of volunteer activities in

which I am engaged. Still, I have cut back on meetings quite a bit in the last five years. I serve on fewer boards of directors of non-profit corporations. I have stepped aside in some institutions to make room for new leadership.

Yesterday was a particularly grueling day of meetings. My first meeting of the day began at 8 am and I was still in a meeting at 8 pm, having had a noon meeting so the day proceeded without a break. But as I went through the day, I kept thinking about how “at home” I feel in a variety of community institutions. Here is a brief view of my day through the lens of the doors through which I walked:

I strolled through the doors of the administrative building of Black Hills Works like I owned the place. I’ve spent a lot of time in that building over the years. I really love the institution. I’ve delivered invocations at fund-raising banquets, attended human-rights committee meetings, participated in hearings, and appeals, attended retirement parties, been trained, led trainings and presented human rights lectures in that building. Mostly, however, what I love about the place are the people that I meet when I walk down the halls. We’ve been through much together. They are my friends.

I shoveled a layer of snow off the entryway under the port cohere of our church before heading inside. I listened to the chatter of preschoolers arriving, hanging up their coats and saying goodbye to parents and grandparents as the buzz of the start of our day filled the building. I entered the code to alert the security service of our authorized presence in the offices. I sat at my familiar desk and checked my email inbox. There was the usual clutter with enough significant communication during all of the other stuff to require careful reading and sorting. I took a quick stroll through the sanctuary and allowed the memories to wash over me. I love this building. I love the people who are its congregation. I have so many memories that if I allow myself to dwell on them, I am overwhelmed.

Later I walked across the very familiar parking lot of Rapid City Regional Hospital. That building holds a lot of memories for me. It was the place where I sat in the waiting room as our pre-toddler son underwent orthopedic surgery. I remember the feelings of being out of place in what at the time was a huge institution to me. I remember being confused by entering through the emergency room on the second story and taking an elevator down to the first floor, which also was on the ground. The layout of the building confused me. These days I wear an official name badge, know exactly where I am going and have access to much of the building. It is the place where my mother died. It is the place where I have prayed with hundreds of patients and families. I am at ease in that place and know my role. There are familiar faces at every corner of the hallways. It is filled with my friends.

I still get excited when I walk through the doors of the offices of Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity and climb the staircase to the training room. I remember when we didn’t have an office for Habitat. I can remember when we had our first board meeting in the

little converted house that we had moved to the tiny lot on Herman Street. We were focused on building houses for others and didn't even have enough chairs for the members of our board at our first meeting there. Now we have a fully accessible two-story addition on our Re-Store and a staff of professionals and volunteers who serve a thriving community institution. We aren't just building houses, but entire subdivisions and engaged in extensive home remodeling efforts to provide for the needs of our community.

With my hospital ID badge put away and another official ID clipped to my shirt, I used the magnetic key card to enter through a doorway marked "Authorized Persons Only" at the Public Safety Building on our city's law enforcement campus. As I climbed the stairs to the chaplain's office on the second floor, I greeted patrol officers and investigators going about their business. I reflected on how at home I feel in the various institutional buildings run by the Pennington County Sheriff. I come and go from the jail, the juvenile services center, the city-county alcohol treatment center, and the county courthouse with the confidence of one who has spent enough time in those building to know my way around. I am familiar with procedures and know the people who work to keep us safe.

The next meeting of my day took me back to the church and territory that is very familiar. We had printed agendas, but I didn't need an agenda to know the business of the Department of Worship. As the group selected leaders and made job assignments for the year to come, it was probably a bit of a learning curve for the new members for whom it was their first meeting. They will be good leaders for our church and I'm looking forward to the work we will do together.

My last meeting of the day was at the downtown offices of our treasurer. We always hold our budget planning session in a meeting room at the CPA firm where our spreadsheets can be projected, and numbers adjusted in a way that allows us to keep track of the bottom line. Our treasurer began her work in the church a year before I did. That means that this is the 22nd budget on which we've worked together. We have a clear style of working together. I have a deep appreciation for her leadership and service to the congregation.

As I headed home for the evening, I thought to myself, "I'd better quit complaining about meetings. When the day comes that I need to move on to other things, I'm really going to miss these places and these people."

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January 14, 2017 – Navigation

My parents were both pilots in a time before GPS. In fact, my father flew thousands of hours with virtually no radio navigation systems, and when he did have what were more

advanced instruments for the times, they were basic compared with the equipment that is found in every airplane today. Knowing precisely where he was was a matter of critical importance to him. I remember flying fire patrol with him when I was a child. He would have me name every creek and drainage as we flew over the mountains. He would quiz me about where we were and what landmarks I could see outside of the airplane windows.

Being aware of location and situation was drilled into us when we weren't flying as well. If we were hiking or hunting, he would ask what direction we were going. My brothers and I learned to keep track of where we were.

Maps were an important part of our household. We had sectional maps, designed for use by pilots, topographical maps showing elevations and details of mountain areas, highway maps of all the places we had visited, atlases and globes throughout our house.

As a result of growing up in this environment, I've always had a decent sense of direction. I'm generally aware of which way I am heading and I'm pretty good at figuring out where things are. That skill has been helpful to me as a pastor. I've served churches in rural areas where knowing how to find a home out in the country was an important skill.

Of course, giving directions is an acquired skill as well. I remember one time, early in my ministry when I asked an elder for directions to a home. "Just head north of town to the Johnson place and turn east on the county road." I politely informed the person giving directions that I didn't know where the Johnson place was. "It's that big place that used to belong to Larsons." Being new to the country, I didn't know either the Johnsons or the Larsons. I laugh every time I recall that exchange. After living in the area for seven years I was probably giving directions like that as well.

There have been sometimes when my sense of direction has failed me. Of course, it is easier to keep track of direction on a sunny day when you have the angle of the sun as a major point of reference. Cloudy days and blizzards can confuse directional awareness. Driving in a ground blizzard can be especially confusing because of the moving snow. However, if you concentrate on wind direction, it helps to keep you oriented.

In the days when we lived in Chicago, I got pretty good at getting around the city. The city is built on a grid with eight blocks to the mile and despite a few diagonal streets, it's easy to get a sense of the layout of the city. The numbering system is consistent, making addresses easy to find. There was one place in Chicago where I consistently got confused. Back in the seventies, the anchor department store in downtown was Marshall Field and Company. The huge store occupied a half of a block, and we'd ride the elevators up and down navigating within the store. Then, when we had finished our

shopping we'd head for an exit, which may or may not have been the same one by which we entered. After an hour of wandering in the store, I would exit the building thinking I knew where I was and head the wrong direction. It happened several times and each time it took me a few blocks of walking to regain my sense of which way was north, south, east, and west.

It reminded me of a family we knew back home whose property was condemned for highway construction. They decided to have their home moved and when it was situated in its new address it had been turned around 180 degrees, so it faced exactly the opposite direction from its previous location. The owner would get into his car in the garage, back out of the driveway and head the wrong direction morning after morning. It took several weeks for him to adjust.

I was thinking about directions and situational awareness yesterday as we drove to a new location to drop off firewood. The house was located between two towns on a US highway. The general direction of the highway was east west, but the area where the home was located the road was taking a turn and we were traveling from northwest to southeast. Our directions said to look for the house on the east side of the road. It really was mostly on the north side of the road, but we knew that it would be on our left regardless of the direction of the highway at the moment. We found the house without much confusion and got the wood delivered.

I wonder of youth growing up in the age of GPS and every structure having an official address, will be able to find places that they never have been without the use of their devices. There are still quite a few places in rural and isolated locations that don't have addresses recognized by the GPS database. You can use Google Maps to get a visual sense of how the roads and landmarks lie before heading out, but a sense of direction and the ability to look for landmarks is a useful skill when trying to get to some locations.

George Michelsen Foy, in his book "Finding North" explains that navigation and the brain's memory centers are inextricably linked. He warns that losing our navigation skills can influence our ability to recall memories. I am not fully educated on the exact nature of the link, but it makes sense that some of the skills that are essential to our human nature require practice to be fully functional. We need to practice navigation to have a sense of direction. We need to practice recall to have accurate memories.

Despite the wonderful electronic devices, we have to aid our navigation, I think we would do well to practice situational awareness and teach it to our children. It may be a key part of what makes us human.

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January 15, 2017 – The Twenties

Years ago, when I was serving as an intern at Union Church of Hinsdale, Illinois, I remember having multiple conversations with parents and church leaders about their concerns for the teen years of the youth in the church. There was a sense that these years were particularly difficult to traverse. Teens were growing into new responsibilities and new freedoms and with those responsibilities and freedoms came risks. Some of the decisions that teens faced had life-long consequences. High on the lists of concerns were driving and the risks inherent in allowing inexperienced drivers out onto the freeways and other areas. There was also talk about teenage drinking, which though illegal was common. The risks of dating and sexual explorations were also of great concern to families of teens. In those days there was less known about drug use among teens, but both illegal drugs and prescription drugs were being abused by teens and adults alike.

It seemed as if the world was fraught with danger for teens. “If you can only get them to 20 or 21,” was a comment that I often heard. We designed church programs to reach out to teens, involved them in mission trips and camps and outings and other activities that appealed to them and offered safe alternatives to some of the pressures of society outside of the church.

Of course, we couldn't insulate people from what was going on in the world. I knew of teen deaths from accidents and suicide, of lives plagued by addictions and plans destroyed by unplanned pregnancies. I counseled heartbroken teens who paid high emotional costs for decisions made in their teenage years.

Our teens are still at risk. They are given huge responsibilities and allowed last amounts of freedom, and they make decisions that can have life-altering consequences. One thing that has changed, over the course of my career, however, is that we have less access to our teens. While most of the teens with whom I worked early in my career had very strong support of their parents for participation in church activities, today's teens are far busier, and church is often presented as one among many choices. In many cases, other activities simply take precedence over participation in church. Parents often say they want their teens involved in the church and then support their involvement in activities that conflict with church. We have had to be more creative in our planning. We can no longer count on teens being available on Wednesday evenings, or even on Sunday mornings. Regular church attendance from teens is rare. Scheduling a simple confirmation class is a logistical nightmare.

Lately I have been aware of the worry and anguish that remains with parents as their young adults navigate their twenties. That old concept of just getting your kids through their teenage years has fallen by the wayside. The twenties seem like a perilous minefield for young adults.

Yesterday we attended the funeral of a son of a colleague who died by suicide at the age of 25. At the luncheon that followed the service we sat at table with friends who had lost their son to suicide at the age of 24. Later that afternoon I visited with a 24-year-old who is preparing to be transferred from our hospital to a specialty rehabilitation hospital as he seeks to adjust to his new life as a spinal cord injury victim. An accident has left him paralyzed from the waist down.

Those are just three examples from one day of my life. I've spent time with people in their twenties who have experienced the breakup of relationships that are every bit as painful as a divorce, but without the legal paperwork and the social recognition that comes with a divorce. I've spent time with people in their twenties who are so severely addicted to substances that jail seemed like a good alternative that gave them a better chance of remaining alive than life on the outside.

It isn't right for me to tell others' stories and a list of the things I have witnessed isn't the point of this blog. What is clear is that the decade of their twenties is a difficult and challenging time for many young adults and the dangers that they face are real.

Unfortunately, participation in church in that age range is very low and the lack of involvement is generally accepted by society. Parents who themselves are very involved in the church often excuse the behavior of their children, noting that they will come back to the church when they are settled in career and family. That may be true, but it certainly seems that the need for a loving and supporting community of faith is as critical for those in their twenties as it will be for them later in their lives.

People in their twenties have a lot to offer to the church as well. Their honesty, creativity, energy, and enthusiasm are all valuable in a multi-generational community. When we can cross age boundaries and engage in serious connection with people whose age is different from ours, community grows in amazing and wonderful ways.

Despite the pain experienced by the people with whom I met yesterday, I know that what brought us together in mutual care and support is the institutional church. Our faith and our participation in a community of faith gives us the context and the opportunity to join together, to support and love one another, to be honest about the realities of this life and to move forward into new realities that unfold when our lives take us into places that we never imagined we would have to go. Healing doesn't erase the pain and grief that occur, but when we share that pain and grief, we learn to live with it and to continue the journeys of our lives.

Maybe every decade presents special challenges. Maybe we all are "at risk."

Certainly, we are all in this together. Our calling is to form a community of care that is present for everyone at every age and stage of life.

January 16, 2017 – New Car Improvements

For the first five years of our marriage, we drove a 1966 Opel Kadett. The small, two-door car was manufactured in Germany and was sold at a price comparable to the much more popular Volkswagen beetle. They were imported by General Motors and service was generally available at Buick dealerships. The car was inexpensive to purchase and operate for the most part. What I remember about the car is that it was hard to keep properly aligned and it was hard on tires. It also had a very inefficient heater and, in the winter, when it got below 0, we would have to scrape ice off of the inside of the windshield to see where we were going.

Compared to today's prices, tires were inexpensive. In the days before steel-belted radial tires, I used to feel like I was getting pretty good tire wear if I could make a set of tires last 10,000 miles. Times have changed. These days we expect to get 50,000 miles out of a set of tires, and on our cars, we often get 70,000 or more miles. Most of that change is due to the technology of the tires themselves. There have also been some minor improvements in the materials from which valve stems are manufactured. Valve stem failure, which was more common years ago, is relatively rare these days.

In those days, our car was driven relatively few miles for much of the year. As students, we didn't need to drive to get to class or to our jobs. We walked most places that we went. When we wanted to go downtown in Chicago, we rode the train. The car was mostly for trips to visit our family. Chicago to Susan's Parents' home in Billings, Montana was about 1250 miles, and it was another 80 to my folks' place. Two of the three summers that we spent in Chicago, we worked in Montana. One year we drove home for Christmas. Each of those trips required preparation. I would check the air pressure in all four tires, which usually required a little more air to be right. I inspected the tires for tread wear. I usually changed the oil and sometimes even performed a minor tune-up to get ready for the trip. Our last trip away from Chicago, I was trying to get by with some marginal tires and ended up purchasing two tires during the trip just to make it to our destination. By then, I had given up on the speedometer, so I don't know exactly how many miles were on the car, but it was coming to the end of its service life. After we began our first job out of graduate school, we traded the car in on another. I knew I wasn't getting anything for my trade, but at least I was getting rid of the car and moving on. The dealer later told me that the car was left as an abandoned vehicle less than 100 miles from where he sold it.

We have much more reliable transportation these days. But one still has to pay attention to some of the details when one is driving. A few luxury vehicles had tire pressure monitors installed back in the eighties and nineties. All vehicles produced after September 2007 are required to have tire pressure monitoring systems here in the US. The technology has since been made mandatory in other countries as well. If you own a

newer car, you are probably aware of the yellow warning light that sort of looks like a cross section of a tire with an exclamation point in the middle. Tire Pressure Monitoring Systems (TPMS) are made up of battery-operated transmitters that are incorporated into the valve stems on the tires and a receiver in the car's computer that relays information to the dashboard warning light. The system is made to alert drivers of either excessive pressure or low pressure. It is a safety feature when it works.

For those of us who usually purchase used vehicles and then like to keep our cars for a while flaws in the system are common. The batteries in the sensors are designed to last for 5 - 7 years. Our "new" car is 6 years old. However, we haven't yet experienced a battery failure. What we do have is one sensor (and there is no way to tell which) that sends the low-pressure signal at about one pound PSI less than the amount recommended by the manufacturer. That means that the light will come on when it gets cold outside. The easiest solution is to fill the tires to a couple of pounds more than recommended. This isn't dangerous and generally keeps the light on the dashboard off. More expensive cars have more sophisticated systems that will tell you which tire is registering low, but ours isn't so equipped. The problem is that most of the time when the light comes on there is nothing wrong. A quick look at all four tires shows that none have dangerously low pressure. When it is cold and nasty outside, the tendency is to ignore the problem until the car is at home in the garage where it is easier to check tire pressures. Since the light comes on so often, we've gotten accomplished at ignoring it. One wonders if such a system really increases safety.

It does, however, increase price. The retail price for a set of four sensors for our car is about \$275. The tires must be taken off the rims to install the sensors, so installation isn't a do-it-yourself project. While that cost is significantly less at the time of original manufacture due to volume and the order in which the car is put together, it is another maintenance cost that is added a few years down the road.

I'll probably pay the price and have the sensors replaced when the dashboard light becomes a nuisance, but there is always that "in between" time when one tries to defer the expense. We may have reached that place with this car.

Modern cars are nice. I'm not wanting to return to that old Opel. But there are days when I look back and recall fondly a car that was so simple that I could do all the work myself and that provided reliable transportation for a couple of hundred dollars a year.

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January 17, 2017 – Education that Listens to the Soul

Attending college in the early 1970's was a very fortunate experience for me. US colleges and universities were undergoing a lot of changes in a relatively short period of time. The dormitory where I lived for my freshman year was all male. Women were

allowed short visits in common areas during limited parts of the day. There was a curfew, and the building was locked overnight. Two years later, when I was a junior, I was living in a coeducational dormitory. That is just one of the changes the college was experiencing. At my first orientation meeting as I began my college career, we were required to declare a major field of study and were assigned academic advisors related to that field. Although majors could be changed, we were advised that doing so might extend the amount of time required to earn our degree. I graduated under an independent studies program that allowed a customized plan of courses. Although my plan included sufficient courses for a traditional academic major as well as two minors, that was not technically required of independent study students.

This period of change provided significant freedoms for us as students. With those freedoms came increased responsibilities as well. We were challenged to define not only what we would study, but why we wanted to pursue courses and educational activities. By the time I graduated from college, I had a clear-cut plan of the next steps in my life. Although my course led me directly to graduate school, I knew that there were abundant jobs available for college graduates should I choose to enter the workforce upon graduation. Many of my peers had already lined up their employment by graduation day.

My vocation is one that requires a careful balance between the evaluation by external officials and careful internal processes. Ministers must meet specific requirements for ordination and continued standing in the church. There are courses that are required. There are continuing education activities that must be completed. We are held accountable not only to our congregations, but also to the Committee on Ministry of our Association or Conference. At the same time, we have been taught to be attentive to our inner lives and are held accountable for personal patterns of devotion, study, and spiritual practice.

That balance is not well maintained in contemporary higher education. Sarah Bradley and Alan Webb, creators of a program called “Open Masters” note that many students take a “zombie walk” through college or grad school:

“That feeling of, ‘I don’t really know why I’m here but it’s what I’m supposed to do.’ It’s shocking that we would spend so many resources as a society putting people through a multi-year experience that they themselves don’t understand the reason for. Not only that, but thousands of students, faculty, teachers, and administrators report that the culture of schools and universities has become ‘toxic’ or even ‘soul crushing’. I have heard from far too many parents that, rather than forming whole humans, institutions of learning are sapping the love for exploration and creativity from their children.”

The high costs of college and graduate school have contributed to huge pressures on students to justify that cost. Academic programs have become focused on specific job

placements. There has been a push to justify education in terms of future earning potential. There is pressure on students and academic institutions to make courses of study fit into specific time frames. There is little time allowed in a contemporary college education for self-examination and evaluation. Students are on a treadmill of satisfying expectations that come from external sources.

Learning is not just a matter of going through the motions, however. It isn't just reading the right books and being able to give the right answers on examinations. True learning is a spiritual quest for meaning and purpose. And that quest requires time for reflection and self-examination as well as examination and feedback from others. Just as each semester has a finals week in which academic performance is evaluated, students should also be encouraged to participate in spiritual exercises that ask the questions about the purpose of their education and the meaning of life.

The founders of the Open Master's community developed an inner inventory called "The Wayfinder Kit." It was designed just for their own community, but it is now being picked up with gusto by first-year college students and their advisors, parents, counselors, and friends.

One of the teachers who has provided opportunities for people to discover the purpose of their lives during their education is Parker Palmer, who wrote, "We have an inner teacher who wants to lay a claim on our lives." Learning to listen to the voice within us is a critical part of becoming a truly educated person. Instead of being entirely motivated by external expectations and standards, individual can learn to discern the wisdom that comes from within. Interestingly, this process is not best undertaken as a solitary venture. We discover the inner best when we are engaged in community. Other people invite, amplify and help us to discern the wisdom of our inner quest for truth.

Forming community is essential to a well-rounded education. The hyper-competitive environment of some top tier universities and colleges can threaten community, however.

My theological seminary experience was based on forming community. We began our graduate studies with three intensive courses, where the entire incoming class all studied the same subject all day long with a balance of directed reading and formal discussion. We found ourselves drawn together in most of our waking hours, informally discussing our studies over meals and late into the evenings. Communal learning enabled us to sift through huge amounts of very technical and challenging reading. We discussed as we read. We listened to others' interpretations. We formed our own positions and thoughts. The community was essential to the process.

These days, theological seminaries are largely commuter schools where students come for brief periods followed by long stretches of individual study. The environment is entirely different. I'm in no position to judge the quality of education, but I am able to be

grateful for the educational experiences I was able to have. I pray that teachers will continue to educate a new generation to live and lead with integrity. Those leaders require learning communities that listen to the soul.

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January 18, 2017 – The Semicolon

It is easy to find a lot of tattoos in our town. Yelp, the online consumer ratings listing, shows 15 tattoo parlors in our town. Most of those businesses offer body piercing as another way of making individual decorations. I have no tattoos and I am not inclined to change that, but I have many friends who sport tattoos and find permanent body art to be meaningful for them. I never know exactly how to respond to someone who is sporting tattoos. It seems to me that part of the reason to get a tattoo is for others to be able to look at them. On the other hand, I was taught that it is rude to stare, and I certainly want to retain the ability to look beyond surface decorations and care about the inner person. Sometimes it can be easiest to comment on a tattoo and allow the person to talk about their choices of tattoos and the meanings they see in them.

If you look closely, you'll discover that there are more and more people who are sporting small semicolon tattoos. I've seen them behind ears, on ankles, wrists, arms, and fingers. It is a simple punctuation mark, the one with a dot above a comma:

;

It is not the mark of deeply committed grammar nerds, though that is a an appealing notion for someone like me who likes to use proper spelling, punctuation and complete sentences in text messages. There is a serious message behind the semicolon tattoos.

The mark represents mental health struggles and the importance of suicide prevention. Amy Bleuel struggled with depression, mental illness and suicide attempts and lost her father to suicide. She decided to turn the semicolon into a symbol of hope and love for those who are struggling. In 2013, she started project semicolon, which is described as "a faith-based non-profit movement dedicated to presenting hope and love to those who are struggling with depression, suicide, addiction and self-injury." The movement initially asked people to draw a semicolon on their wrist to show support.

The semicolon was chosen on purpose. A semicolon is the symbol chosen by an author when a sentence could be completed, but the author continues not to stop, but to continue. It is a pause between two phrases that are linked together. A semicolon means, "This is not the end. I am choosing to continue."

The movement quickly grew beyond Bleuel's tribute to her father. It has become popular with musicians and has spread on social media. It has become an international symbol.

Each person is their own author, and the sentence is a life. Life involves struggle and pain; it also involves victory and life.

It seems to me that at least some of those who get the tattoo are doing so as a way of starting conversation with others. They want others to ask about the tattoo. They want to talk with others about the things that are most important to them. A tattoo isn't something that one takes lightly. It is a permanent mark - the result of a decision to make a change that will last.

As I said, I'm not inclined to get a tattoo, but I am delighted with anything that encourages more discussion and conversation. Mental illness carries with it such a stigma in our society that people often do not talk about it. Those who suffer from depression and other mental illnesses fear that they will be viewed as flawed or morally less than others. They have suffered enough that they have learned to fear additional suffering that can come from the stigma of mental illness.

It is time to lay aside the stigma.

It is time to understand that there are a lot of our friends and neighbors who experience an inner darkness. It is not the result of bad decisions, though decisions can be affected by mental illness. Mental illness is just that: an illness. It is not chosen, and it cannot be overcome by strength of will, intellect or ego. It is a real illness that requires real treatment. Like other illnesses, it is not perfectly understood and there are forms of mental illnesses that are difficult to treat. Too often in our society the illness goes untreated. Too often it has fatal results.

I still don't know the proper etiquette when it comes to strangers who are sporting tattoos. But it seems to me that people can choose to have their tattoos in places where they would be private, underneath their clothes and shared with only intimate friends. For those who have public tattoos that are clearly visible to all, I've decided that perhaps they want me to see them. In that case, I've decided to comment whenever I notice a semicolon tattoo. I am fully supportive of the efforts to increase conversation around issues of mental illness and suicide prevention. If talking to a stranger can serve to support those conversations, I'm all in favor of doing so. If a tattoo can connect even one person with needed services in a time of crisis, I'm all in favor of it.

Upworthy writer Parker Molloy recently wrote:

"I recently decided to get a semicolon tattoo. Not because it's trendy (though, it certainly seems to be now), but because it's a reminder of the things I've overcome in my life. I've dealt with anxiety, depression, and gender dysphoria for the better part of my life, and at times, that led me down a path that included self-harm and suicide attempts. But here I am, years later, finally fitting the pieces of my life together in a way I never thought they

could before. The semicolon (and the message that goes along with it) is a reminder that I've faced dark times, but I'm still here."

When you see a semicolon tattoo, I invite you to say a prayer of thanks that there is one more person who is still here.

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January 19, 2017 – Rising Early

I am a morning person. I like to rise early. I find that I can accomplish more in the first few hours of the day than I do during the rest of the day. This means, in general, that my days are a tad longer than some people. That makes sense. My vocation isn't one where the work can be measured in hours. My agreement with the church I serve is in terms of the duties performed, not the time it takes to do those things. There are many parts of my job that cannot be predicted. When people are in pain or grief, time takes on a whole new meaning. I frequently leave for a call to someone without knowing how much time will be required. Even meetings take different amounts of time depending on the conversation that is required.

Mornings are a bit more predictable than the rest of my day. I rise and write my blog first thing. I scan a few news headlines and read a bit. I invest time in prayer and meditation. Before I shower and eat my breakfast, I've put in an hour or more of concentration and focus. I find it easy to focus in the early morning hours. My mind is alert and ready for action after a night's rest.

Recently I read in Doug Abrams' delightful book about the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu that both world leaders are early risers. His holiness the Dalai Lama rises at 3 am every morning to meditate and pray. In the book, Abrams reports that he was teasing Archbishop Desmond Tutu for his practice of sleeping in until 4 am. The two have this wonderfully close relationship of mutual respect and enjoy a lot of laughter and teasing when they are together. Both receive request after request for prayer from people around the world. Their prayer lists are long. It takes time to focus on each individual and give the attention that is required. Mornings are devoted to these spiritual practices for both leaders.

They aren't alone among spiritual leaders. Elsewhere I have read that Mother Teresa was an early riser. This is also true of Pope Francis. In the early days of his papacy, he surprised officials of the Vatican and in the city of Rome with his early visits to places of faith and religious practice.

There is nothing unique or special about my practices. After all the Dalai Lama rises at 3 am; Desmond Tutu sleeps in until 4 am; I stay in bed until 4:30. It isn't fair to compare my relative obscurity to the greatness of those spiritual leaders.

It is however simply practical for me. I need uninterrupted time to focus on certain spiritual practices and I get that uninterrupted time when I rise early.

There is a Chinese proverb that says, “No one who can rise before dawn 360 days a year fails to make his family rich.” I’m not much for Chinese proverbs and I don’t find that one particularly inspiring. I’ve no aspirations when it comes to wealth. I don’t want to be counted among the rich of the world. I do, however rise before dawn 360 days a year. In fact, I’ve risen before dawn every day for a decade or more. You can check the publication times of my blog. And that doesn’t reflect my rising time, just the time of day that I publish the blog. But I have made it my practice to rise before the sun year-round.

Then, of course, there is the quote, often associated with Benjamin Franklin: “Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.” Although the quote is found in the 1735 edition of Poor Richard’s Almanack, it did not originate with Franklin. The proverb had been around for centuries. A version of it was published in The Book of St. Albans in 1486. That version doesn’t seem to say anything about wealth, however: “As the olde englysshe prouerbe sayth in this wyse. Who soo woll ryse erly shall be holy helthy & zely.” I’m not exactly sure what zely means, but I think it is a reference to enthusiasm and zest for life.

I prefer the following quote by H. Jackson Brown Jr., author of “Life’s Little Instruction Book”:

“Don't say you don't have enough time. You have exactly the same number of hours per day that were given to Helen Keller, Pasteur, Michaelangelo, Mother Teresa, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Jefferson, and Albert Einstein.”

Here is a bit of trivia about early risers: We tend to have long lives. The shortest-lived of the people listed in Brown’s quote was da Vinci who was 67 when he died. Pasteur and Einstein died in their seventies. The rest all lived into their late eighties.

Here is another bit of trivia about us early risers: We often go to bed fairly early as well. It is reported that the Dalai Lama, that favors 3 am riser, often goes to bed around 7 pm, which gives him a full eight hours of sleep. I’m not likely to retire quite that early, but I’ll sneak in a nap on my lunch break if time allows.

I’d hate to put too much emphasis on the connections between rising early and spiritual health. I know people who do not rise early but who are, nonetheless, disciplined, and purposeful in their living. There are more than a few very effective ministers who don’t keep early morning office hours. I have a colleague who claims that the reason he was attracted to the ministry is that ministers don’t have meetings before 11 am. That isn’t true in my case. I have 8 or 8:30 meetings three mornings a week. And I have 6:30 am

meetings twice a month. But my early meetings are in part a reflection of the fact that I like to be up and going, and I schedule my life to reflect my preferences.

For me rising early is a meaningful discipline. I seem to have good company in that practice. Others will choose different paths. Fortunately, we don't have to all be the same.

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January 20, 2017 – Delayed MLK Essay

It has taken me several days to write a blog for Martin Luther King Day. I know that the holiday was Monday and today is Friday, but sometimes I need to mull ideas for a few days before I am ready to write about them.

2017 marks the 50th anniversary of the sermon that Martin Luther King gave at Riverside Church in New York City. It wasn't a mistake that he chose that space to make the dramatic speech. Riverside is a congregation of our United Church of Christ. It was a decade before that congregation called William Sloane Coffin to be its Senior Minister, but Riverside was already a place known for its keen interest in the social gospel and taking Jesus' teachings out into the community.

In that famous sermon, Dr. King named three evils that stood in contrast to and opposition to the kingdom of God: racism, materialism, and militarism. His opposition to the Vietnam War was not popular with all his supporters. But Dr. King wasn't interested in popularity. He was interested in being faithful to the gospel.

I think Dr. King would have been inspired by the preaching of Father Michael Pfleger who spoke so passionately about the need for the people of faith to be on the right side of history as he addressed the crowd in Ebenezer Baptist Church commemorating Martin Luther King Day this week.

The public image of Dr. King has been sanitized. People don't seem to remember how controversial he was in his day and how many detractors he had. Genuinely celebrating Dr. King involves becoming immersed in ideas that are counter cultural, because Dr. King was immersed in the Bible.

If you take Matthew 25 seriously, as I do, it is very specific about the need for us to show our compassion for the poor, the orphan, the needy, the widow and the stranger. We, who follow Jesus, are called not just to talk about love, but show our love by loving God's children, starting with those who are most vulnerable. Jesus showed his love to the outcast and those who were marginalized by society. And he asked us to go and do likewise. Jesus shunned the trappings of power and wealth. Jesus came to heal.

Disciples of Jesus are called to follow and that means, like Jesus, we may sometimes end up in places that aren't popular and that call from us more than a bit of courage of conviction.

Dr. King would have been outspoken and controversial in this time had he lived. He would have said things that made people squirm just like he did when he was alive. He would not have been afraid to speak out when he saw injustice. He would not sit be silently as people try to shut the door on the homeless and the refugee, cut healthcare to tens of millions of people, deny housing programs and education programs and food for the hungry.

If we would honor Dr. King, the day will come when we, too are asked to stand up and speak out.

It isn't a role that comes to me naturally. I'm no politician. I don't see my role as addressing crowds or rallies or members of the press. I've been called to speak to a congregation, not to speak for that congregation. That role is sufficient for me, but I know that it means that I am called to speak to that congregation of the costs and the joys of discipleship. And there will be costs. And there will be those who do not like to pay the costs.

Dr. King said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." When it comes to justice Christians are called to take a stand and to be on the right side of that arc. If we want that moral arc to bend towards justice, then moral men and women will have to stand up, reach out, hold hands, and say to each other, "We are in this together. Your life matters. God loves you."

Those evils that Dr. King warned us about so many years ago - racism, materialism, and militarism - continue to be rampant in our society. Racism is still with us, and its evil has expanded beyond racism against African Americans and Native Americans. Racism is now vocally and visually extended to Muslims, refugees, Hispanics, and others.

Materialism is still with us. We live in the richest nation in the history of the planet and 20 percent of the children of our nation are living in poverty. The richest among us do not want to share and they call upon government to decrease their taxes and allow them to keep more of their wealth.

Militarism is still with us. US drones have killed innocents as well as enemies in seven countries. Dr. King taught us that a nation that spends more on its military than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. We love our country. We don't wish spiritual death for it. We must mend our broken ways and shift our priorities to redeem the soul of our nation.

It is popular to say that we don't have money for sick babies, that we don't have money to support our elders, that we don't have money to provide for the sick, that we don't have money for schools. But in our fear and lack of courage, we find a nearly unlimited budget for wars even when those wars neither make us safe nor provide for peace.

This world and this nation that we love needs spiritual healing. Dr. King was a prophetic preacher of healing for our nation. As we celebrate his birthday, no tribute could be better than to return to the Gospel: "Let us love one another, for love is God."

Let us love not only in the privacy of our homes and the familiarity of our churches. Let us love in our public lives and in our politics. Let us love with the laws of our government and the programs we enact to help people.

May the legacy of love bloom in all our lives and all of our actions. This would be the most fitting tribute for Dr. King that I can imagine.

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January 21, 2017 – Not Interested in Magical Thinking

There is a kind of magical thinking that I don't understand. I suppose it should come as no surprise to me that other people think in different ways from the way I think. I've been in the business of working with other people for my whole life and I've often found that the way that I see things is very different from the way others see them. Perhaps I'm a bit less surprised when I encounter magical thinking than once was the case, but I still find myself unable to understand certain ways of thinking.

I'm sure I have previously reported in my blog that I had a brother who always believed that he would win the lottery. He bought lottery tickets every week and when the prizes were especially big, he would buy several. The practice didn't interfere with his life or responsibilities, the amount of money spent was well within the range of normal recreation. I, however, could never understand his thinking. I take a look at the odds, and it seems to me that there is no value to be gained from purchasing a lottery ticket. I assume that I will not win and therefore I get no return for the money spent. He, on the other hand, found a kind of hope in the purchase. It made him feel that one day he would become rich.

He didn't ever win big. A heart attack ended his life prematurely and he died without ever cashing in on a big lottery win. That reinforces my thinking in a way. Why spend money chasing a victory that will not come?

I've also seen that kind of thinking stretched to the extreme. I've been called to counsel in a situation where gambling became an addiction that maxed out credit card debt and threatened a family's financial stability. I once met a man who emptied out his family's

savings on the belief that if he risked big at the gambling tables, he would win big. The family was left bankrupt. I really can't understand how he rationalized such behavior.

It isn't just these extremes that employ magical thinking, however. People can get caught up in their attachments to simplistic thinking when tackling difficult problems. If only we had a different (choose one: Mayor, Governor, President) my problems would go away. From my perspective, politics seems like a very difficult process of negotiation and compromise and solutions rarely come easily. Pursuing one extreme or the other ends up emphasizing divisions and alienating people from the process. One of the reasons that political power swings from one side to the other is that people are unwilling to do the hard work of seeking compromise. From my point of view, solutions rarely come from one side winning or losing. Political solutions come from reaching across the aisle and working with those with whom you disagree. Obstructionism isn't a solution. It is a tactic that works best when used only in limited situations.

I wonder what it is in the human mind that gets us into thinking that solutions are easy.

I can remember a time in my life when I was trying to establish my career and new to the business of being a father, when I would allow my mind to drift off into fantasy on occasion. As I lay down to sleep, I might imagine myself as the owner of a new vehicle or perhaps with enough money to make large cash purchases. In those fantasies, I didn't bother to imagine what I would have to do to get the money, or what it might cost my family in terms of my absence. It was just a fantasy, and I didn't have to work out all of the details.

After a while, however, such fantasies didn't entertain me. I found that thinking of more practical situations was, in fact, a better way for me to invest my energies. I could spend a few minutes solving a small problem, like making a small home repair, and I would be much more satisfied than spending an equal amount of time imagining some magical solution. Soon thoughts of living in a home where things didn't break or having a budget without any limits simply didn't entertain me.

I suppose you might say that I lost my ability to dream big, but I don't believe that is the case. I still can imagine a world at peace with justice for all. I still can dream of education and health care being available to all people. I just don't think that these things will come from simplistic notions or easy solutions.

Having said all of that I confess that I have witnessed surprising miracles in my life. I have seen people with illnesses defy the odds and recover. I have been with those who suffered grave harm and yet did not become bitter. I have seen peace emerge from what seemed like irreconcilable differences. I know that the Holy Spirit works in ways that we don't understand and intercedes when we don't have the ability to know what we want.

What I have experienced, however, is that miracles aren't about fulfilling our wish lists. Having the biggest prayer chain or asking for the most outrageous miracle doesn't change reality. Often the miracle comes from understanding what is truly important rather than getting what we want.

I've been checking news sites over the past few days for reports of the rescue efforts at the Rigopiano Hotel in Italy. The hotel was buried in an earthquake-caused snow avalanche. So far, rescue workers have succeeded in recovering nine people alive. Four were rescued after being buried by snow for three days. There have been reports that rescue workers have heard even more voices. While fifteen people remain missing, it seems possible that there might be more survivors. Rescue workers have heard human voices.

The road was blocked. Avalanches continue and risks to rescue workers are high. But teams of people are working hard, putting in long days of physically grueling work. That's how I see this world working. Miracles are more likely to come from hard work than from wishful thinking.

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January 22, 2017 – Seeing Abundance

Some folks in South Dakota are having a hard winter. Yesterday we delivered firewood to one of our partners. The road to his place was plowed, but on the way there, we had driven through some deep cuts in huge snow drifts. He told us that he was basically snowed in for three weeks. They'd plow the road, and it would drift back in. They'd dig it out and it would drift back in. But yesterday was warm and the snow was melting to create mud everywhere. When we arrived, it took some careful maneuvering to get trailers turned around and get to the wood area, which was down to just a few pieces of wood, mostly frozen to the ground. We left a healthy pile of wood ready to be used.

Meanwhile the pile back at the church is shrinking and there has been conversation about whether we have enough. We know that we will need to make at least one more delivery to one of our partners and we don't know what emergency calls we will receive. One of the advantages about being a member of a congregation and having been around for a while is that I don't have to worry. I know that there are plenty of other people who will worry and some of them are pretty good at the job.

From my point of view, running out of split wood wouldn't be the worst thing that could happen. It would mean that we put all the wood where it belongs. We don't need any firewood in our church yard. We just stack it there so that it will be ready for others' use. If we deliver it all it means that we've gotten it to people who need it. And, if worse comes to worse, we've got dry firewood in the yard that isn't yet split. A couple of

splitting parties where we load the wood directly into trailers for delivery would get us on the road again.

There is a deeper matter of faith operating, though. Do we trust God's abundance?

The Woodchuck program is based on the deep generosity that is present in this world. We do not have a budget. We do not hold meetings. We simply take what is offered to us and use it to provide firewood for people who need it. People have been extremely generous. So far, we've had all the wood that we could process. We've had generous members with trucks and trailers to haul wood all around the area. Yesterday's delivery was nearly 250 miles round trip, and all of the fuel was donated.

I'm not worried about running out of wood.

In the long story of God's people, it seems that there have always been a few folks who worried about scarcity. When Moses led the people of Israel in the wilderness God provided quail in the evening and manna in the morning so that the people would have enough to eat. They were instructed to take only what they needed, but some people took more than was needed and attempted to keep the extra for the future. It spoiled and became infested with worms. The feeding system worked for 40 years once the people became adjusted to simply taking what they needed and only what they needed.

It is a basic Biblical principle: Sharing by all means scarcity for none. The converse is also true, when some decide not to share, then scarcity occurs. We live in the richest nation in the history of the world and yet 48.8 million Americans - including 13 million children - experience hunger each year. We've even invented a term for the situation. Food insecurity. It means that the household lacks the means to get enough nutritious food on a regular basis.

Meanwhile I live in a home that always has a full pantry. From time to time, we clean food out of our refrigerator and cupboards that has become old or stale. It becomes compost for our garden, but it also is a symbol of the abundance with which we live. Having such abundance in a country with so much need is a clear call to share what we are able.

Sharing doesn't eliminate the huge social problems and inequities of our society. I've read the book "Toxic Charity." I know that it is possible to do harm when one is intending to do good. I know that really helping people involves enabling them to gain the skills and tools to care for themselves.

On the other hand, I often say, "You really can't do much harm by giving someone firewood to heat their home." I mean it. We don't know how to create jobs programs. We don't know how to eliminate poverty. We can't rebalance the wealth between counties

outside of the reservations and those on the reservations. There are many skills that require agencies that are far bigger and well-resourced than our church.

We can deliver firewood.

And God has been incredibly generous with our program. My partner for yesterday's trip has been on 10 firewood deliveries this year. My record isn't as good. I've missed deliveries because of the complexity of my schedule. But I've helped when I was able. And it has been enough. Our people have shown up as others were digging the last few sticks of usable firewood out of the snow drifts. We have taken wood to people for whom it really makes a difference. And we have received the gratitude of those whom we serve. Those of us who do this work are acutely aware what a blessing it is to be called to this ministry.

I love complex ideas and the pursuit of philosophical thought. But sometimes it is good to go with what is simple and obvious. We have excess wood in the hills. People are trying to get rid of it. We have neighbors who struggle to keep their homes warm in the cold of winter. We are in the right place - between these two needs.

Delivering firewood just makes sense. It warms homes. It warms hearts. We have enough.

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January 23, 2017 – A Bit of Politics

I've been known to joke with members of my congregation that it is a well-known principle that you shouldn't turn to your minister for financial advice, or for legal advice, or for medical advice - not that they will fail to give you advice, it is just that ministers are no more qualified outside of their area of expertise than anyone else.

I guess that political advice falls into the same category. When it comes to telling people how to vote, I think it is best that I keep my political opinions to myself and trust the people I serve to vote their own consciences. It is amusing to me, however, how often people interpret my quietness on political subjects to be agreement with them. I've had members of my congregation who voted for different candidates in the recent presidential election start into conversation with what seems to be the assumption that I completely agree with them. Trust me, they can't both be right in that assumption. I voted - and passionately - in favor of a candidate. I just prefer not to make that fact a barrier in relationships with the people I serve.

This is particularly important when I am speaking to people who are outside of the church. Too many people who aren't familiar with congregational polity and the way we organize ourselves in the United Church of Christ assume that I am somehow

empowered to speak on behalf of my congregation. I am not. It is often better for me to avoid speaking than for people to assume that I somehow can represent the opinions of the diverse group of people that make up our church. Give us a political issue, and we can split the church right down the middle. I prefer not to have the church split, however. It is practical to be a congregation that welcomes people of all political stripes, parties and opinions.

So, I am not, at least at this time, going to blog about our newly inaugurated President. However, since many commentators have noted similarities between President Trump and President Andrew Jackson - a comparison that seems to be embraced by many of President Trump's inner circle - I thought that it might be interesting to look at Old Hickory. Or perhaps more specifically about what happened after he had completed his terms as president and was succeeded by his first term Secretary of State and second term vice president Martin Van Buren.

Inaugurations were later in the year in those days. Van Buren was sworn in to his first and only term on March 4, 1837. His presidency was marked by a major recession that came to be known as the Panic of 1837. The story sounds remarkably contemporary:

The real estate market collapsed, banks failed like duckpins, and homeless people died in the streets. After the economic expansion of 1834-36, during which the prices of land, cotton and slaves rose sharply, the bottom fell out of most of the markets. The Bank of England ran short of cash reserves, forcing it to raise its interest rates and major banks in the United States were forced to follow suit. The price of commodities dropped like a lead balloon. In the month before the inauguration, the price of cotton dropped 25%.

Pundits and publishers were quick to blame Andrew Jackson. His veto of the bill that would have rechartered the Second Banks of the United States, which was our nation's central bank and fiscal agent at the time, combined with the federal policy of allowing only gold or silver coin as payment for western lands to result in a crash in real estate prices. The entire nation felt the effects of the panic. Within two months the losses from bank failures topped \$100 million. Out of 850 banks in the United States 343 closed entirely, 62 failed partially and the system of State banks received a shock from which it never fully recovered.

The publishing industry took a severe blow in the recession that followed.

The trigger for the panic, however, wasn't monetary policy or interest rates or bank or federal currency requirements for the sale of public lands. The trigger event was what came to be known as the Flour riot of 1837. Jackson's attempts to shore up the American economy resulted in rampant rising costs to purchase food. The price of flour rose from \$5.62 to \$12 per barrel. pork went from \$13 to \$24.50. Coal, the preferred fuel for homes reached \$10 per ton. Rent went up so fast that homelessness was increasing

at an alarming rate. Efforts were underway to organize tenants to refuse to leave their residences when their leases expired.

Then in the February before Van Buren took the oath of office, a rumor circulated that there was only three- or four-weeks supply of flour on hand. This rumor was picked up by newspapers who reported that vast supplies were being hoarded by wealthy merchants for the purpose of driving up prices. On February 10 circulars were posed throughout New York city reading: "The voice of the people shall be heard and will prevail. The people will meet in the park, rain or shine at four o'clock Monday afternoon to inquire into the cause of the present unexampled distress, and to devise a suitable remedy. All friends of humanity, determined to resist monopolists and extortioners, are invited to attend."

On February 12, a crowd of four to five thousand gathered to hear a series of speakers rail against currency policies, high rents and the high cost of flour. One speaker said that Hart & Co. had 53,000 barrels of flour in their store. The crowd attacked the Hart warehouse and began to roll barrels out into the street. By the time the National Guard arrived 500 to 600 barrels of flour had been taken from the warehouse and a thousand bushels of wheat had been destroyed. About 40 people were arrested. The next day New York City Council passed a law adding 192 police officers to the ranks.

The damage had been done. The panic had begun. The rest, as they say, is history.

We live in a different time. What happened then is different from what is happening now. Still, it seems appropriate that those who are drawing all the comparisons might at least take time to become familiar with the history of our nation's 7th and 8th presidents.

And that, my friends, is enough politics from the past for today.

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January 24, 2017 – Projects and Deadlines

I've got a project in my garage that has been moving very slowly. Over two years ago now, I started to build a new expedition kayak. It is all wood. The process is like building a strip-planked canoe, only after assembling the kayak's hull over forms, you start over with a deck. The deck and the hull must mate perfectly. In addition, I decided to ornament the deck with some fancy curves and bends of the strips. I've got both the hull and the deck built, but there is a lot of finish work needed on the deck before I am ready to connect the two halves with fiberglass tape. Fiberglass is the most difficult part of the project for me, with toxic fumes and the need to be precise in a very tiny space. I spend almost as much time thinking about the next step in the process as I do

completing the current one at this phase of construction. I have woodwork to finish before I start with the fiberglass.

Right now, it is easy to use winter cold as an excuse. My garage is not insulated, and it is not heated, though I do have a kerosene space heater that will bring the temperature up to a comfortable level on all but the coldest days.

I have a new reason to be pushing for completion. I built a rowboat in honor of the birth of our first grandchild. I started this boat on the birth of our second grandchild. She will turn 3 years old in June. And there is a third grandchild on the way, expected to arrive in early May. I'm not saying that I will build a new boat for every grandchild - or at least that I will complete the boat by the time the child is ready to go out and play in boats with grandpa. Perhaps it would be more meaningful if I built a boat for the child when the child becomes old enough to want a boat of his or her own. And not every child is going to be interested in boats.

There is no pressure from the outside to build boats in any order or to follow any time frame in their construction. That is a good thing. It is the way I need my hobbies to be. I have plenty of deadlines in my life.

There is a sermon to preach every Sunday. Worship happens on schedule whether I am fully prepared. The feeling of not being fully prepared is so intense for me that I really work to be prepared, and when I fall short, I am my worst critic.

I have regularly scheduled meetings for which I must be prepared. And those meetings often result in tasks that I must complete. I have real deadlines with real consequences in my life.

And there are always important interruptions in my work. If there is someone who is hospitalized, visiting that person takes precedence over studying for a sermon. If there is a funeral that is needed, it has its own pace and own deadline that interrupts the normal flow of my week. If someone needs counsel or comfort or care, those prayers must be put to the front of the line.

Sometimes that results in routine tasks getting bunched up and deadlines looming in ways that might not have otherwise occurred. This week it is the process of cleaning out a storeroom. The room that has been used for storage for 20 years needs to be fully emptied by the end of this week to be ready to begin its remodeling into a family assist bathroom. Of course, there are some things stored in the room that can be recycled or thrown away. Other things need to find new homes within a building that is very short on storage spaces. That means that virtually every other storage space in the building must be sorted and cleaned to clear away as much as can be recycled and thrown away to make space for items moved from the room that needs to be emptied. Our church is

almost all on one level, but there are storage areas in the choir loft and in the basement and that means a lot of going up and down stairs in the process.

It was work that I had intended to have completed a month ago. Now we are up against the deadline and the work will get done, but it seems a bit intimidating now.

I've been around enough to know that complaining and making excuses isn't productive in the life of the church. We knew that we would be coming up against this problem and deadline when our congregation voted on the projects we wanted to undertake. I remember faithful members of the congregation raising questions about storage space when we were discussing the projects in that congregational meeting.

All of that, of course, has nothing to do with the boat that is slowly taking shape in my garage. It is just that having all the different projects in my life that are short of completion can be a bit overwhelming. I'm working hard to keep them from becoming immobilizing. As I grow older, I know that some tasks take a bit longer as I move a bit slower. The trick, however, is to keep moving.

So, I'm starting today with a small promise to myself. It is one of the ways that I keep myself motivated for the tasks of this life. If I put in a few extra hours during the week so that I have the storage room completely emptied by Friday; and if I keep up with the usual business of church life so that I'm ready with my sermon by Friday; there should be time on Saturday to work on the boat in my garage. Using that project as a reward is just the kind of thing that motivates me.

Now, if I can only be prepared for the interruptions that will inevitably be a part of the week. . .

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January 25, 2017 – A Little Weather to Endure

We got a little snow yesterday. I'll need to allow an extra half hour to 45 minutes to clear the driveway before heading into work this morning. Attendance at some of the activities at the church was a bit lighter as one would expect in our congregation. But life went on as usual. The preschool met. Parents came and picked up their children. We ran our usual errands and got on with our work.

When we headed home after it had been snowing all day, I was mildly concerned about our little car, which has low profile tires and not very much ground clearance. I decided to follow Susan in our other car just in case she ran into a problem. I thought that there might be some drifts or piles that would be a challenge. I need not have been worried. There was no issue with the drive home. The snowplows had been out working, All was as one might expect it to be.

We are settling into winter around here. A little snow doesn't disrupt as much as was the case at the beginning of the season. We're getting used to it. There are a few places where there is plenty of ice that will take a while to melt once we get the warm days.

It amuses me which activities proceed, and which are cancelled. I think it says more about the people who are involved than about the actual conditions. Snow days are fun. It can be sort of nice to not have to go to a meeting or follow your routine. I like a day off now and then. But if we let a couple of inches of snow keep us from our lives, we'd never get anything done in this country.

I know that for some of our neighbors this has been a long and hard winter. I've been out on enough firewood deliveries and have driven between the walls of snow piled up on the edges of roads and seen the yards buried with hardly enough room to turn a car around. I've heard tales of the winds that drift in the driveways day after day leaving people unable to get out. There are lots of people who live in rural and isolated places across South Dakota and there are lots of driveways that require a tractor to clear the drifts.

I am, however, not experiencing this winter as anything particularly out of the usual. I can remember when the snow piles were deeper. I can remember when the temperatures were lower. Maybe it is my age or stage in life, but I'm not willing to let the weather dictate what we do. I'm planning on all of the activities I normally schedule for a Wednesday today. But there will be a phone call or two checking to see if we've cancelled anything. I'll be polite and encourage people to use their own judgment when it comes to driving. There are slippery roads out there, and we don't want people to be injured.

I worry a bit about some of our younger folks. I see teens heading off to school who don't have a coat in the car. I encounter people at the grocery store who simply aren't dressed for the weather. They expect their cars to run well and endure the rush between heated cars and heated buildings. I prefer to dress for the weather. If I were to need to walk, I'm prepared. My parka is a bit heavy and bulky, but it keeps me warm. My car has a sleeping bag in the back just in case I were to slide into the ditch and have to wait for help. I take a few precautions, but I don't worry about myself. I am just a little surprised by short pants and flip flops in this weather.

Yesterday we were busy moving things in the church and I spent a few hours in the afternoon hauling boxes and moving shelves around. By the time I got home I was tired. After dinner I decided to try out a new to me program that allows me to watch PBS television shows on my computer when I want to watch them. I watched the first part of a three-part series called "Chasing Shackleton." It is a documentary about a modern expedition that re-created Sir Ernest Shackleton's Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1914. The modern adventurers built a replica of the converted wooden lifeboat with which

Shackleton sailed from Elephant Island to South Georgia Island - a journey of 720 nautical miles in some of the harshest weather and roughest seas on the planet. Upon arrival at the island, Shackleton's crew had to cross the mountains in brutal conditions to get to a station where they could call for help.

Of course, the modern re-creators didn't take all of the risks that Shackleton took with his five companions. They had a VHF radio and a locator beacon that worked most of the trip. They had a safety boat that followed and offered the possibility of rescue and that provided the dramatic video that I was able to watch of the tiny ship being tossed about by the gigantic waves. Still, it was about as wild an adventure as I could imagine. The modern expedition tried to replicate the original journey as closely as possible, eating the same limited menu, enduring the same cramped and uncomfortable quarters, wearing period clothing, which was constantly sodden from the water that leaked through the hatch each time they sought a bit of fresh air. At all times two of the six had to be out on the open deck to steer the ship. They all took their turns at being drenched by each wave and then returned to the respite of crowded and uncomfortable quarters and the prospect of sea sickness and the need to bail constantly.

The television program made the need to put on warm clothes and shovel a bit of snow seem mild by comparison. It is obvious that humans are capable of enduring hardships much harsher than the conditions we face.

Life goes on. We are blessed to be in this place. And we know that warm days are coming.

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January 26, 2017 – Timeless Values

In the introduction to the book "Canoes: A Natural History in North America," authors Mark Neuzil and Roman Sims remind us that in a world of incredible change there are some things that remain the same. Throughout history every culture that has grown up near a large body of water has developed some kind of boat that might be called a canoe. Long and slender and easy to propel with a simple paddle, the shape of a modern canoe doesn't vary much from the earliest dugouts made from logs. And people have been building such boats for a very long time. There is archeological evidence that tools used to hollow out logs existed as long as 20,000 years ago.

There is something more remarkable than the mere fact that canoes have existed for a long time: If you were to take a person from one of those ancient cultures, that person would be confounded by most of today's technological innovations. Such a person wouldn't know how to use a water tap or drive a car or make sense of a computer. That person wouldn't know how to cross a street safely or obtain food in an urban setting. But if you were to take the most advanced carbon fiber and Kevlar canoe with the most

modern paddle available and showed it to that ancient person, that person would be able to paddle the canoe successfully. The most contemporary version of the canoe, using the most modern materials is still recognizable as a human-powered boat that invites one to journey across the surface of the water.

Once, at a reading session at Vassar College, writer John McPhee was asked, "Of all the educational institutions you went to when you were younger, which one had the greatest influence on the work you do now?" He answered with the name of the summer camp he attended when he was six years old: Keewaydin, near Middlebury, Vermont. It was the place he learned to paddle a canoe - and not just paddle, but to upset and turn back over, to fall out and re-enter, to swim underneath an overturned canoe and discover the air trapped underneath.

In a world of constant change there are things that remain unchanged.

I'm with John McPhee. The things I learned at summer camp remain powerful and valuable tools for my everyday life. Those lessons, moreover, are valuable to the children just born and will be valuable to those born centuries from now.

My summer camp was Mimanagish, in a deep valley high in the Abasroka mountains in south-central Montana, not far from the northern border of Yellowstone Park. There were no canoes in that camp. The river that rushes by isn't navigable except perhaps short sections and only then by an advanced kayaker with a very nimble creek boat and a lot of experience with class VI paddling. In the days I attended camp, there were no thoughts of boating there.

I did learn, very early on, the value of community. The camp was filled with jobs that were too big for an individual. The camp generally had about 60 campers but could accommodate over 100. Even the smaller number generated a lot of dirty dishes. In the days before there was a dishwasher, we divided those dishes into three sections: silverware, dishes, and pots & pans. There were three workstations where three teams of people worked to clean the dishes after every meal. There wouldn't be enough time for an individual to wash all those dishes before time to serve the next meal, but we all learned to work together and generally had our job finished in 15 minutes or so. In those days the cookstove consumed about half a cord of firewood a week. We didn't have a chainsaw or a power splitter. A two-man crosscut saw and a splitting maul were the tools that were used. A team worked after each meal for 15 minutes cutting and splitting wood. I remember when I couldn't wait until I was tall enough to take one end of the crosscut saw. My arms ached after just a few minutes of cutting, but it beat the job of hauling and stacking the pieces of split wood in my mind. I was 12 the summer I learned to swing a splitting maul - taught in part by hours spent watching others at the task - some much more skilled than others.

Our community ate and worked together. We worshiped together. It was at summer camp where I first read from the bible out loud in front of a group of people. It was there where I learned table graces that I still use with groups today. I can remember sensing the movement of the Holy Spirit sharing communion around a campfire and declaring God's glory lying on the grass in the meadow looking up at the stars on a dark, moonless night.

Working and worshiping together are things that will benefit generations millennia from now.

It was at summer camp that I learned the value of community. "It is not good that the human should be alone," is a truth that our people have been sharing for at least 4,000 years. Camp was, for me, an excellent way to learn to live in community. I met people who were very different from me. I remember being assigned to a cabin of boys who were strangers to me and having to form with them a "family group" that did chores together and participated in small group study each day.

I've probably learned a thing or two in other settings than summer camp, and I am grateful that I have been able to participate in other educational institutions and settings. I am confident, however, that there are some values and human experiences that are timeless and that must be passed down from generation to generation. Some things abide forever and are true in each generation.

And, as scripture teaches, "the greatest of these is love."

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January 27, 2017 – Tools for Living

DSM-5 is the common name for a manual used in the diagnosis of mental illnesses. Its full name is Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition. It is the 2013 update to the American Psychiatric Association's classification and diagnostic tool. It isn't a book for casual reading. It really isn't a book for reading at all. It is a reference volume - a tool for professionals to use in providing classification for behaviors and disorders that they observe. It is also a tool for helping those who suffer from mental disorders to find treatment and help coping with their problems.

Fortunately, I think, most parents don't have access to DSM-5. It would frighten most people from the essential tasks of parenting. The manual is filled with possible causes of mental disorders, many of which point to problems in parent-child relationships as significant factors in mental illness. Of course, parents are not the sole cause of psychological illnesses. Genetics and psychobiology are major parts of disorders. The connection between the brain and behavior is not fully understood.

Despite significant research, despite advanced imaging and diagnostic tools, the bottom line is that even in this era of modern science, we simply do not understand why some people have personalities that inhibit their ability to function normally in social settings. People who suffer from personality disorders have traits that cause them to feel and behave in socially distressing ways. Their personalities limit their ability to function in relationships and other areas of life such as school or work.

Reading through DSM-5 would be distressing for most parents. There is a whole list of disorders that have, among their causes, mismatches in parent-child relationships. From the manual it would be easy to conclude that children's personalities can be disturbed by excessive pampering and by excessive criticism. Finding the right balance appears to be a narrow pathway. It is almost as if anything a parent does has potential negative consequences in the later life of the child.

Parents, however, have been raising children for millennia without the aid of diagnostic manuals. Most of us got ourselves into the role without extensive training or research into the job. We discovered ourselves to be in the midst of parenting and most often proceeding by instinct and improvising most of the way.

We have felt fortunate to have come from strong families where we were loved unconditionally, challenged to grow, and learn, and launched into life with many of the basic skills and traits that have given us a firm foundation. We were also fortunate to have had some life experiences before we had children. Both of us had worked in the CTS Lab Preschool and were mentored by some talented teachers. We had learned the skills of sharing experiences and talking through challenges before we found ourselves to be parents. Now, as grandparents, we are deeply appreciative our children's wisdom and thoughtfulness in parenting.

Last night we were privileged to have a delightful conversation with our children and grandchildren. It is gratifying to witness how thoughtful and intentional our son and daughter-in-law are in their role as parents. It is inspiring to talk with them about their self-awareness as they face the challenges of raising children.

It is important to remember, however, that education and experience, while helpful parenting tools, are not guarantees that things won't go wrong. I've spent enough time with families upon which illness and tragedy have descended to know that these things happen to all kinds of people. Really strong families with really good parents experience deep tragedies and experience significant illnesses.

It can, however, be useful to have the vocabulary to talk about what is happening when illness strikes. You don't have to purchase DSM-5 to have an understanding of what is going on. Careful use of the Internet can yield a lot of information. I say "careful use" because there is also a lot of disinformation and inaccurate information available in the Internet. I've had several experiences of thinking I was researching a specific medical

treatment and ended up in some infomercial trying to sell an un-tested and decidedly un-scientific approach to treatment. The scientific and technical databases such as PubMed, produced by the US National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health, can be overwhelming and a bit too technical for the average consumer. More helpful to me have been sites such as the Mayo Clinic's web site and MedlinePlus - the more consumer-oriented web site of the National Library of Medicine.

Being informed and aware, however, are not all that is required to be good parents and grandparents. Often the most important aspects of these roles have more to do with our being than our doing. It is who we are more than what we do that enables strong relationships with our families.

I take my roles in life seriously, and I'm sure that you do too. And I know that I tend to be a bit over analytical and look for complexity in my relationships and in my approach to life. I am grateful to have developed skills for life-long learning. It is important, however, for me to put aside the manuals and to turn away from the computer and allow myself to just be. Laughing at my grandson's jokes, reveling in my granddaughter's laughter, enjoying life in a loving family.

Lynn Ungar's poems might be just as useful as tools for parents and grandparents as are diagnostic manuals and websites. She reminds me of my place in the world:

Camas Lilies
by Lynn Ungar

Consider the lilies of the field,
the blue banks of camas opening
into acres of sky along the road.
Would the longing to lie down
and be washed by that beauty
abate if you knew their usefulness,
how the native ground their bulbs
for flour, how the settlers' hogs
uprooted them, grunting in gleeful
oblivion as the flowers fell?

And you—what of your rushed
and useful life? Imagine setting it all down—
papers, plans, appointments, everything—
leaving only a note: "Gone
to the fields to be lovely. Be back
when I'm through blooming."

Even now, unneeded and uneaten,

the camas lilies gaze out above the grass
from their tender blue eyes.
Even in sleep your life will shine.
Make no mistake. Of course
your work will always matter.
Yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

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January 28, 2017 – Speaking of Canoes

When it comes to canoes, my preferred material is wood. Wood is the oldest material used to make canoes. Dugout boats, made from a single log date back thousands of years. While no canoes of that age have ever been found, tools that are related to the construction of canoes have been found that are 20,000 years old. There are forms of dugout canoes in the history of nearly every culture that lived near large bodies of water. They have been extensively used on every continent except Antarctica.

When European settlers first came to North America, they encountered a major technological improvement in canoe construction: the use of tree barks, commonly birch bark, to skin canoes. This technique made the boats lighter, gave much more control to their shape, and also resulted in shorter building times. The bark boats were faster than those used by the Europeans and the newcomers were quick to adopt the new technology. Meanwhile, in the far north, people were refining the designs of skin-covered boats that set the standard in individual watercraft.

In the 19th Century, canoe building took a turn towards a variety of techniques for building all wood boats without bark or animal skin. The availability of machined wood allowed for the use of long and very thin planks over steam-bent ribs. Joints between the wood were sealed in various ways including overlapping the wood, milling the edges into tongue-and-groove, and other techniques. As canoe production shifted from individual boats to factory produced boats canvas was used both as an outer skin and as a sealant between layers of thin wooden veneers.

The latter half of the 18th Century saw an explosion in the production of canoes for recreational use. Prior to that time, the boats had been purely utilitarian. Although ownership of a particularly well-crafted boat could be seen as a sign of power or wealth, there really wasn't much of a market in boats. They weren't often exchanged as trade goods. If someone wanted a canoe, the way to get one was to make one out of materials that were readily available to harvest from the forest.

Recreational canoeing gave rise to the selling of canoes. An entirely new era of canoeing opened. By the end of the 19th Century canoes were being manufactured in factories and sold as a commodity to be used for recreation. The American Canoe

Association, founded in 1880, was dedicated to recreational canoeing. The era was one of many clubs, fraternal organizations, and associations. Common people were beginning to have a small amount of leisure time as the end of the century approached.

That time was also what has been referred to as the era of the robber barons. The end of the 19th Century provided conditions for a small number of industrialists to make huge profits at the expense of cheap labor. A few of these ultra-rich businessmen acquired their wealth from manufacturing, but most from extraction of resources such as iron and copper, fur, and timber. Others became rich from financial transactions alone. These very few extremely wealthy individuals began to invest a portion of their wealth in luxury yachts, and a few became involved in high-end yacht racing a spectacle reserved for those with a huge amount of cash.

Thus rose the term “poor man’s yacht” to describe canoes. The name stuck and many of us involved in canoeing today like that way of referring to our boats. The problem with that designation is that recreational canoeing has never really been the sport of poor people. At least since the founding of the American Canoe Association, it has been reserved for middle and upper middle-class people. In 1882 a Rushton Princess cruising canoe sold for \$120 complete with a sailing rig. Compare that price to the wages of a skilled laborer. A carpenter earned an average of \$2.25 per day at that time. That meant that the workers in Rushton’s factories could not afford to own the boats that they were making.

I like to make a show of building my own boats. I am quick to say that the reason I made my first canoe was that I couldn’t afford to buy a factory-made canoe. That is partially true. The canoes and kayaks I build are constructed for under 25% of the cost of a similar boat built by someone else. Still, I have invested a portion of my family’s resources in a fleet of boats that includes factory boats as well as homemade models. I have employed a fair amount of “horse trading” in obtaining boats and all except one of my purchased boats was well used before I purchased it. That boat was purchased as a bare hull, and I completed the outfitting myself. Had I purchased a fully outfitted boat it would have nearly doubled the cost.

But I am not a poor man. And my “yachts” won’t be found in the homes of poor people.

Like many other things, it is a matter of perspective. As hobbies go, canoes aren’t the most expensive items. All my boats together are worth considerably less than a high-end snowmobile or an off-road vehicle. In no year have I ever spent as much on canoeing as the cost of a week at a luxury ski resort.

I own a couple of boats that reflect pre-20th century technologies, but most of my boats are made of materials and techniques that belong to the 20th century. My preferred method of construction is to build the boat of narrow strips of cedar or other soft wood and cover the wooden construction with a single layer of fiberglass cloth set in epoxy

resin. The result is a beautiful and very useable boat, but not a purist's version of ancient technology.

What is old about my boats is their shape. My favorite canoe is a replica of an early 19th century design that itself was based on a type of bark canoe that had been employed for millennia.

Paddling, building, reading, and dreaming about canoes represents a slice of my time. It is, admittedly a selfish pleasure. But the boats have provided balance to a life dedicated to serving others and give me energy for the work I do.

I've always been good at justifying my behavior.

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January 29, 2017 – Feeling Inadequate to my Task

Recent weeks have been trying for a lot of people. There is a distinctly unsettled mood in our nation since the election of our new president. It isn't just discussions about politics that seem unsettled. It is as if all our conversations are a bit strained because we fear the reactions of others. It is as if someone just changed the rules in the middle of the game. As a preacher, I have long considered it my job to be open and accepting to political differences and to provide care and concern for those whose party affiliations and opinions differ from my own. I have sought carefully to build communities of people who are drawn together by faith and not by a common ideology. I have struggled to provide leadership to people who have many topics upon which they disagree. I am proud of the diversity of opinion and idea that is a hallmark of our congregation.

I am not, however, apolitical, at least in the traditional definition of that term. One who is apolitical is one who has "no interest or involvement in political affairs." It has also been defined as "having an aversion to politics or political affairs," and even "having no political significance." I do have interest in political affairs. I am, however, very careful about my involvement in politics. There are so many opportunities for misinterpretation when a pastor speaks politically. One thing that I seek to avoid is projecting the impression that I speak for the people I serve. Since the people I serve have a wide variety of opinions and political positions it is not reasonable that I could speak on their behalf. I encourage them to speak for themselves.

It is my job, however, to bring connection between the religious truths expressed in the Bible and the realities of contemporary life. My goal as a pastor is to enable my people to live by Biblical principles and to have their lives guided by faith. When politics are the dominant topic of conversation and the constant stream of news on the internet, television, and newspapers, it is difficult to make those connections without at least acknowledging the reality of political divisions and differences.

I am unsettled as I write my blog and as I prepare my sermons these days.

Today's focus text is Matthew 5:1-12: the beatitudes. Depending on how you count and how the text is divided into paragraphs, it is a list of between eight and ten blessings that Matthew reports as part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Luke reports a shorter list accompanied with a sort of list of parallel curses. Both texts present an alternative way of looking at the world and what it means to be blessed than was the dominant view of political leaders in Jesus' day.

The Roman cultural and political viewpoint held that acquiring wealth in all forms was a sign of merit and those who were poor were cursed; that showing emotions was a sign of weakness; that one had to be bold and stand up to opposition; that might makes right; that showing mercy is a sign of weakness; that outward bravado was more important than inner character; that the warrior culture was superior to all other approaches to life; and that persecution was a sign that one was in the wrong.

Jesus preached a different story. It was one that, upon first look, seemed implausible. Mourning doesn't feel like a blessing any more than being persecuted. Furthermore, Jesus' preaching was based on the traditions and scriptures of our people that preceded his time on earth. Our other texts for today also point to a perspective that stands in stark contrast to the prevailing politics of "might makes right." The prophet Micah declares: "what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Psalm 15 speaks of those who are allowed to dwell with God as those who do not lend money at interest, and who do not take a bribe, who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors.

Perhaps it would be a cheap shot to start drawing parallels between these texts and the behavior of political and business leaders, but the texts are clearly calling the faithful to a different way of living, acting, doing business and leading.

The Sermon on the Mount reaches beyond the simple description of blessedness. It speaks directly of the role of the faithful to live out those blessings. We are called to go far beyond reciting the words, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they are comforted." We are called to be the comfort that they require - to be the blessing that Jesus describes.

When I read the beatitudes of Jesus, something that I have done out loud every day for the past week, I am struck by the rhythm of the words. Even in translation to contemporary English they flow easily and have a pace and tonality that is easy to maintain. They are a public speaker's delight.

That rhythm and tonality is something for which I strive in my preaching. I am aware, however, that it has been missing in recent weeks. I just can't quite get into the groove. I know from experience that one of the solutions to this is to invest extra time in preparation: to study harder, practice more and invest more time. I also know that the Holy Spirit cannot be manipulated, and spirit-filled preaching is not the result of hard work, but rather bringing an openness to God's presence in the moment. It is not what I say, but God's working through me that I seek.

And now it is Sunday Morning once again. In a few hours I will once again stand before my people and pray that the words I speak will be spoken with love and respect.

When I was installed into this call, the people who were present promised to pray for me. I know that they are faithful in that task. It is a good thing. I need their prayers as much this morning as I have any other day of my life. These are unsettling times.

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January 30, 2017 – Developing Compassion

We humans are, at our core, made for relationship. This is literally true of our origins. It takes two parents to produce an infant. We come from relationship. The first nine months of human development occur within another human being. The relationship between mother and child is essential to human survival. Without relationships with others, we simply do not exist. The drive to form relationships is one of the strongest elements of human existence. We exist for community.

Personally, it is impossible for me to tell my own story without telling the stories of others. By the time I was born, there were already three sisters in my family. I didn't even get my mother "all to myself" when I was in utero. She was busy raising her other children, dealing with all the realities of a busy and complex family. Because my parents started their family by adopting two girls, there never was an "only child" experience in our family until my youngest brother was the only one left living at home for a short period of time as we transitioned to our adult lives.

As such, I believe that compassion is an essential skill. Some ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of another is required to be fully human. To state it in a different way, life's deepest joy comes from developing the ability to focus our thoughts on the needs of others. If you would be truly joyful in this life, abandon yourself absorption and pay attention to those who are around you.

Too often we think that our joy in life is determined by factors beyond our control. We want to acquire possessions in the belief that such will make us happy. We seek wealth believing that we can purchase happiness. Study after study, however, reveals that these external items are not the true source of joy. At the beginning of my career as a

pastor, when I was serving as an intern, I read parts of a landmark study by psychologists Philip Brickman, Dan Coates, and Ronnie Janoff-Bulman in which they found that lottery winners were not significantly happier than those who had been paralyzed in an accident. The external factors in the lives of those in the study did not significantly alter their ability to experience joy. Psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky suggests that about 50% of happiness is determined by factors such as genes or temperament. The other half is determined by circumstances over which we have control. The three factors with the greatest influence on happiness are the ability to reframe one's situation more positively, expressing gratitude, and choosing kindness and generosity. It is directly observable, using scientific method, that human beings are happier when we focus our attention on the needs and concerns of others.

My life has been remarkably free from pain, but in 2001, I did suffer burns on my hands, arms, chest and face. These turned out to be not life-threatening and for the most part were only 2nd degree burns, but the accident occurred 80 miles from a trauma center and my treatment involved a ride in an ambulance before the process of debridement could begin. During the time it took to make the trip, I was experiencing significant discomfort despite a morpheme injection that was partially clouding my judgment. Because there were burns relatively close to my eyes, a cooling cloth had been placed over my eyes for the trip, so I could not see as I rode along. My care was managed by compassionate and very competent professionals, and I recovered with no long-term effects of the accident.

What I remember, however, is the conversation with the ambulance attendant as I lay on the gurney. The accident had occurred in my hometown. The attendant had been a kindergartener when I had moved from that town. I had not kept up with him and I was surprised to discover that he now as an adult with a family of his own. He told me about his children as we made the journey. It gave my mind an alternate to focusing on the the pain and my concern about my burns. I was surprised when we pulled into the bay at the trauma center. The trip seemed to have taken less time than I expected. My life was not in danger, but my pain was decreased by the simple technique of focusing my attention on another person instead of being caught up with myself and my own concerns.

Many times, since that day I have used that simple technique of meditation to treat moments of pain. I since undergone dental surgery and other minor medical procedures with anesthesia for the initial procedure, but no need for follow-up pain medication. When I begin to experience pain, I start through my prayer list of concerns for other persons. It is amazing to me how effective this is as a technique for managing pain.

Granted, there are many whose pain is far more intense, more persistent, and more life-interrupting than any experience I have had. I'm not advocating the abandonment of pain-relieving medications when they are needed. But I know that genuine concern and

compassion for others is a very potent medicine that is a great factor in promoting healing.

It isn't hard to find others who need our compassion. When our son was very young, he needed orthopedic surgery. The anesthesia made him sick, so in addition to the two casts on his feet and legs, we were dealing with a tiny child with an upset stomach who was difficult to console. As we struggled to care for our child in the hospital that night, we became aware of children who were in the hospital with conditions that were much more severe than our child. It was easy to find children and parents who needed prayers and support. There is always someone whose suffering is greater than our own.

If you would be truly happy, learn to care deeply for others.

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January 31, 2017 – Spring Fever (In the Winter)

I have always enjoyed living in a part of the world where we experience winter. I don't mind shoveling snow and find it to be a nice alternative to mowing the lawn. I like winter sports and if I am properly dressed enjoy a walk outside in the winter. For most of my life I've lived in places where the wind blows and have learned to cope with it without distress. There are, however, some years in my life where I have noticed a tendency towards spring fever.

These days, we don't receive printed seed catalogues at our home. But the Internet means that you can browse the major seed companies year-round on the computer. Let's be realistic. It is the end of January in South Dakota. There have been plenty of years since we've lived here when planting outdoors before the end of May is risky behavior.

Back in 1981 we were living in North Dakota when our son was born. He arrived in mid-March and the experience was so wonderful and overpowering that it seemed as if the whole world had been changed. North Dakota was treating us to some wonderfully warm spring days from time to time. I prematurely set out the tomato plants that I had grown from seed in the kitchen window, and they were frozen. Later, I purchased a few tomato plants from a local store and set them out too soon. I was on my third set of tomato plants by the time I had success. Looking back, my behavior was silly. I knew about North Dakota's weather. I simply allowed my emotions to override my common sense. Fortunately, in the case of tomato plants, it wasn't a very expensive blunder.

I'm older these days, but perhaps not much wiser. This year we are anticipating the birth of a new grandchild in early May. We are planning to take vacation to be there to help with our other grandchildren and greet the new one. Today, on the last day of January, I rose to write my blog and the paper on top of the pile on my desk is a print-out from an

online campground directory, showing campgrounds in the area where we will be staying. On Saturday, I had a bit of free time and headed over to where we store our camper to check it out. I even began a short list of tasks that need to be accomplished to get it ready to make the trip.

I'm not unaware of the weather where I live. I know that February and March can be months with plenty of severe winter weather. I know it is too soon to put away parkas and snow shovels. There is still quite a bit of ice around. But a few days of 50-degree weather really put me in a spring fever mood. I've been running around wearing only a small vest instead of a jacket.

Perhaps I'm just becoming an old fool.

When we lived in North Dakota, most of the members of our congregations were involved in one way or another in ranching or in providing services to ranchers. As a result, they didn't wear their dress-up clothes very often. Many of the people didn't have fancy dress coats. Their winter gear consisted of insulated coveralls and canvas parkas that could take the severe weather and be laundered at home. When there was a funeral, they would dress up, and have the insulated coveralls and parka in the car but would go to the church wearing just their dress clothes. I don't know how many committal services at which I officiated that the only person wearing a proper dress overcoat was the funeral director. The rest of us stood around in our suit jackets, pretending not to be cold. As soon as we felt it was polite, we rushed to our cars and back to the church to get our hands wrapped around a hot cup of coffee.

I'm not quite as out of season as the guy at the tire shop who was wearing shorts last week. I'm not a big fan of shorts in the first place, but you don't see me wearing them in the winter. I'm surprised at how many men in our community do. This time of year, you hope that they have a pair of insulated coveralls stashed in the trunk of their car just in case.

I've decided that I need a bit of reasonable discipline for my spring fever this year. Given that we are going to travel in early May and that the typical time for planting outdoors in our neck of the woods is Memorial Day weekend, I'm resolving not to plant much in the garden before we leave for our trip. We'll have a late garden this year, focusing on things that like the warm weather, like tomatoes. I'll allow myself to prepare the garden as weather permits and to do some fresh planting in my wildflower beds, but I need to focus on things that have a short growing season for the garden. It seems simple and at least for a few months I'll be able to distract myself with doing a bit of research into what kinds of things promise the best results inside of that discipline.

The discipline seems easy with snow in the forecast for this week. The challenge will come if we have a beautiful and warm April and I find myself mowing the lawn before

we leave on our May trip. I know myself well enough to know that I'm prone to the excesses of spring fever.

That is one of the joys of living in a place that is so graciously appointed with four seasons. Living in anticipation is a delightful mood with which to face the chores of the day. Daydreaming about harvesting beans is a pleasant mental exercise while shoveling snow.

And, for an old fool, it is quite entertaining.

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