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July 1, 2017 – Titles

I've never worked in a large corporation. The church I serve right now has only two full-time and six part-time employees. I interned in a larger church with more employees, and I've had some interesting summer jobs and part-time positions throughout my life, but most have been with small organizations. When asked my job title, I've referred to myself as "minister" or "pastor" for the most part. For a while I preferred the title "pastor and teacher" because it denoted the two promises of my ordination vows and acknowledged the specialized education I'd undertaken to be a certified teacher as well as an ordained pastor. These days, my business cards have the title "senior minister" on them. Senior minister used to be the preferred title in mainline congregations for pastors who were serving churches that had more than one minister. It has been tradition to refer to the positions as "senior" "associate" and sometimes "assistant."

A few years ago, I noticed that several of my colleagues were using the title "lead pastor" to designate that they headed a congregation with multiple staff. At first I thought that this title was a way of establishing a sense of status in congregations where there was little tradition of educated clergy so a lead pastor had other staff members who worked for the institution, none of which were seminary educated. However, the title has caught on and now I see it being used more frequently. In fact I have a couple of colleagues who use the title lead pastor even though they are serving congregations where they also happen to be the only pastor.

The place in our church that seems to get carried away with titles is our national setting. The employees of our church's Cleveland offices seem to have titles that are too long for a single line on their business cards. During the 1990's when the size of the staff in Cleveland was shrinking, it was common for a single person to have taken the place of two or more staff members. Their title might be a combination of the titles of several different positions. But now that the staff has stabilized somewhat the long job titles continue. Here are a few examples of real job titles from our national offices:

- Coordinator for Congregational Assessment, Support and Advancement (CASA)
- Minister for Chaplains and Ministers in Specialized Settings
- Executive for Administration & Communications and Temporary JWM Manager
- Minister for Committee on Ministry Resources and Conference Support
- Minister and Generational Ministries Curator, Youth and Adults
- Global Ministries Child and Elder Sponsorship Program Manager
- Team Leader, Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization

You get the picture. Frankly, I'm not sure what a "generational ministers curator" does. And that is only part of that person's title. My son is a librarian, so I have been educated about the difference between circulating and archival libraries and I believe that curators are the ones who take care of the archives. I'm assuming that curating generations would be different than curating documents, but that is just a guess.

It isn't just the church, however. There are some pretty incredible job titles out there when you get to looking.

Google has employed a "Captain of Moonshots" since around 2010. The current holder of the position has just the right name: Astro Teller. Yup, that's his real name. He must have great business cards.

The big Wall Street firm Berkshire Hathaway has a "Director of Chaos." I'm not sure what that person does, but just from the job title it makes me think that I might be good at that job, though probably not as good at it as my three year-old granddaughter would be.

I noticed from an advertisement recently that the minimum wage employees who ask you which vegetables you want on your Subway sandwich are officially known as "sandwich artists." It seems only fair. After all the retail clerk at the Apple retail store is called a "genius" - an apparent reference to the ability to make you think you'll be smarter if you buy a more expensive cell phone.

The Make-A-Wish Foundation calls its public relations managers "Magic Messengers." I guess you have to believe in magic to work there, but the foundation also needs some serious fund-raisers. I suppose those people have to be interviewed by the CEO of the corporation, whose official job title is "Fairy Godmother of Wishes." I'm not sure I could say, "Oh Dear Fairy Godmother, I wish I could have this job!" with a straight face. I'm probably not a good candidate for positions in that particular organization.

Our son, the one who is a librarian, was a medical librarian before he became director of a community library. For a short time while working for the hospital corporation his position carried the additional authorization, "Six Sigma Black Belt Certification." It is a widely-used certification program for quality and process management employed in large corporations. I asked if he got to wear a special uniform, or at least a special belt, being a certified black belt. I thought a custom sweat band might be about right. However, they dressed "business casual" in that particular office, which I think meant that he didn't wear a tie every day.

High tech companies seem to enjoy adding the words, "ninja" "rockstar" and "guru" to rather mundane jobs like "database entry" or "coding." I guess having an exciting title helps to offset what is likely a rather boring job. From my point of view they seem to take adults who have specialized skills and treat them like infants who might be enticed by fancy titles rather than fair compensation and reasonable benefits.

American Express has advertised for the position of "scrum master." From what I can gather the job has to do with developing software, though it may be more of a project manager position.

Jobs like “growth hacker” and “full stack developer” are real jobs that offer high pay, but I haven’t a clue what the people who have those jobs actually do.

Fancy titles might make a resume look more impressive, however. Let’s see, when I was a kid my dad used to pay me 50 cents to sweep the feed warehouse - “storage facilities manager.” And I spent a summer tipping garbage cans into the back of a truck - “sanitation engineer.” And when I checked fence for my cousin - “ranch properties boundary inspector.”

Hmm . . . maybe I should order some new business cards . . . "Master of Liturgical Development and Pastoral Services Distribution."

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July 2, 2017 – Grocery Shopping

I went grocery shopping yesterday. It seems like a very normal thing to do. We eat. We need food. We buy food. I prefer to go shopping in the morning because it seems like there are smaller crowds and the store is better stocked. But yesterday, we wanted to go to the farmer’s market first and it opens a bit later, so I saved the trip to the grocery store for the afternoon. With a holiday weekend in full swing the place was full of customers. I’ve learned that attitude makes all the difference in the world when the store is busy like that. If I relax and accept the fact that the store will be full, getting around will be awkward and I’ll need to be more patient, the shopping goes much more smoothly than if I get irritated at other shoppers and rant on and on about the store displays that interrupt the flow of traffic and the insensitivity of people who leave their carts in places that block others from doing their shopping.

It gives a good opportunity to watch other people, something I enjoy. I was able to witness a superb performance by a mother with five children in tow. Two of them were preschoolers. One was an infant in a car seat that took up more space in the grocery cart than the groceries. She had a paper list and a handful of coupons and was very systematic in her approach. She was also very specific in her instructions to the children. “You need to hold on to the cart and not let go.” “Open the refrigerator door and your sister will get the jug of milk.” “It is fun to look at those, but we need to keep moving, so stay together.”

There was a gentleman, probably a decade or so older than me, who was looking totally lost. He was standing with his cart, looking left and right and unsure of which direction to turn. He looked so lost, I felt like asking him if I could help. The problem is that I am also confused by the arrangement of the store. He probably was looking for something that I would have no idea where to find. Who knows why that store has tea in two locations in two different aisles? I decided that a conversation with a stranger who didn’t know his way around the store probably wouldn’t be helpful.

There was a middle-aged man who appeared as if he might not be the primary shopper for his family. His cart was parked sideways in front of a meat cooler, blocking the flow of other shoppers while he sorted through steaks and loaded up a pile of them in his cart. Then he added some chicken and other meats. It was obvious that this wasn't going to be a small barbecue. It also seemed that he wasn't purchasing the groceries for the whole meal - no ingredients for potato salad, no watermelon, just meat, meat and more meat.

There was a person in the checkout line ahead of me who had a basket instead of a cart. There were just a few items, some bread, a jar of peanut butter and the largest bottle of shampoo I've ever seen. I instinctively looked at his head, and there wasn't much hair there at all. I'm guessing the shampoo was either for someone else or it was going to last him a long time.

The staff in the grocery store were a bit harried. I turned around and nearly collided with a store employee rushing through the crowd who hadn't anticipated my move. Another employee was stocking shelves and had parked a large cart of boxes in such a manner that I had to turn around go back down the aisle, go up the adjacent aisle and approach from the other side to get the item I wanted.

Most of the people in the store weren't having as much fun as I. I knew that the store would be full of people stocking up for camping trips and July 4 barbecues and a few, just like me, who were wanting to get a week's shopping done on Saturday so the rest of the week would be free for other activities. I did manage to forget two rather important items so will have to stop by the store again on Monday, but it probably won't be so busy then.

I remember the first time I went into Mercado Central in San Jose, Costa Rica. Although I can understand and speak a few words, I do not speak or understand Spanish. The aisles were narrow, the place seemed dark and it was filled with all kinds of booths and stalls and small merchants. There were lots of unfamiliar smells and sounds. Everyone seemed to be talking at the top of their voices and the location of items seemed to be completely random. It was a bit disorienting to figure out which way to go. I kept wondering how they would get all of the people out if there were a fire. And I was a bit worried about getting separated from others in our group. Somewhere in that maze of shops and vendors and shoppers I began to do a bit of people watching. I noticed that there were quite a few people who were completely at home and relaxed in that setting. They weren't hassled or harried. They simply stepped aside to let others pass, waited their turn and proceeded in a direction that made it appear they knew where they were going.

We learn to adjust to our own circumstances. I'm thinking that a modern American supermarket, with 15 or more brands of pickle relish and a whole section of barbecue

sauces, and tiny ethnic food sections might be very strange to someone who was used to shopping in outdoor markets. We seem to go for impulse bins and aisle-end displays and even “specials” that block the aisles and present challenges to walking. And we Americans love BIG shopping carts - or at least the stores where we shop do.

Still, we eat, we need food, we figure out how to buy more.

I find myself dreaming of a larger garden. Do you suppose it would annoy the neighbors if I started raising chickens?

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July 3, 2017 – Miracles

So I want to talk about miracles this morning. Sometimes people ask me if I believe in miracles. I do. When you think about it, that fact that we exist - our very being - is a miracle. One of the theories about the origins of the universe states that the universe began as in incredibly hot, dense point roughly 13.7 billion years ago. Somehow in the vastness of the space of the universe and the incredible expanse of time, we happen to occupy a little bit of this particular life-sustaining planet at precisely this moment in the history of time when our planet is rich with life - and teeming with human life. We not only exist, but we have companions to talk with, to think about and to speculate about the nature of time and space.

Just being is an incredible miracle. It is, from my point of view, one of the primary miracles of God. God infused the universe with the capacity for life and we are one of the products of that capacity. We don't exist because of any merit or capacities that we have developed. We exist because the conditions for our existence is just right.

Of course the ancients didn't know about the vast expanse of the universe or the length of time from the perspective of the stars. So they left behind words speaking of the miracle of existence in terms that were different than the ones we might use in our scientific era. They were, however, amazed at the fact that God so loved the world that we were given the capacity to exist. They wrote poetically about God's love being so deep that God came into this life and stood alongside us.

I could go on and on, but the point I wanted to make is that I do believe in miracles.

The problem with some humans, however, is that their expectations of miracles are incredibly small. Too often, when people are talking about miracles they are thinking very narrowly. Quite frankly, often they are thinking primarily of themselves. I want a miraculous healing for so-and-so because I will miss him/her if she/he dies. I want a miracle to occur that will change my employment status/housing/marital situation/problems.

People are rarely looking at the big picture when they are talking about miracles. And that is a problem, because God's miracles often occur on a really big scale.

Another point of perspective on the nature of our universe. 5 years or so ago, the Voyager I spacecraft made it to the outer edges of our solar system. It was traveling at about 17km/second at the time. that's about 37,800 miles per hour. At that rate of speed it will take it about 70,000 years to reach Alpha Centauri, the closest star system to the solar system. Beyond Alpha Centauri of course are more than 500 star systems in our galaxy and Hubble reveals an estimated 100 billion galaxies in the universe, but that number is expected to at least double as telescope technology improves. Some astronomers use the number 2 trillion. The truth is that we don't know. It is a really big number.

God, who is present in all of the universe, is a bit bigger than was envisioned by our desert nomad ancestors a few thousand years ago.

Miracles are, after all, about revealing God, not about solving my individual problems. It is a point that has been missed by much of human religion - we think of God as smaller in order to be able to explain and to understand God. The miracles, however, don't reveal how small God is, but rather how Big God is.

This is not to say that no one can be healed. We know so little about the nature of healing that there are all kinds of healing that we cannot explain. Being able to understand or explain isn't required for the miraculous to emerge.

Over the years there have been more than a few Christians who have attempted to control miracles, which is silly. If you can control it, it certainly is not a miracle. That hasn't stopped snake handlers and miracle workers from putting up their tents and luring the donations out of the pockets of the curious with claims that aren't in the least about the power of God and are merely slights of hand when it comes down to the truth of the matter.

So there are a lot of things that have been called miracles that I don't believe are miracles at all.

But I do believe in miracles.

I've held newborn infants and watched them grow into adults with children of their own. I've watched couples make ending promises of their love and then keep those promises despite all odds and the pressures of our less-than-family-friendly society. I've sat with grieving people and witnessed the power of love that is stronger than death. I do believe in miracles.

I just don't want people to waste their time and energy and prayers on tiny events that are so far short of miraculous that they miss the everyday miracles that are going on in our midst.

We exist.

We are capable of love.

God's spirit dwells within us.

These are miracles every one of them.

The miracles in which I believe do not demand the suspension of critical thinking. They are not closed to the possibilities opened up by scientific discovery. They do not fade if someone fails to embrace a particular dogma or say the right words. The miracles in which I believe aren't subject to being altered by any sort of intellectual assent. You don't have to believe in any particular way to be a witness to the miraculous in this universe.

Ponder the size and scope of the universe. Reflect on the vast expanse of time. Study the mathematical precision of the motions of sub atomic particles. Behold the process of life evolving. Miracles occur every day.

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July 4, 2017 – July 4th Fireworks

Happy 4th of July. It is a good day to celebrate the concept of independence from a colonial power and the rise of the American democratic experiment. As nations go, 241 years old isn't a lot and the shortness of our history may be a contributing factor in the intensity of our celebrations, though we seem to do things up a bit more than our neighbor to the north who just reached their 150th anniversary, with events and activities that seem a bit muted compared to our usual. Thousands of red-shirted Winnipeggers filled Portage and Main to create a giant maple leaf in the city's historic intersection on Canada Day. One estimate was that 3,600 people participated. You can find pictures of it on the internet. Canadians in general eschew crowds and I'm thinking it was fairly uncomfortable for the folks in the middle - probably enough human contact to last for a lifetime. Canada Day, to be fair, isn't the same thing as Independence day. It is the celebration of the British North America Act, which united the British provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario into the Dominion of Canada. I once read a history of Canada that reported that the decision of what to call the new union was a matter of some discussion. Technically it is a confederation of states, and some argued that it should be called a kingdom because of its relationship to the British Monarchy. Their neighbors to the south (that's us) however, haven't been too keen on kingdoms and the British foreign office said, "The Americans won't like a kingdom on their border. Call it something else, or there will be bad relations with the

Americans.” I believe that the name dominion comes from a biblical source. Psalm 72:8 says “May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from River to the ends of the earth!” Christians have interpreted the “he” in that Psalm to be a reference to Jesus Christ.

Ah, but this blog isn’t about Canada. It is about the US Independence Day Celebration. I was just going to mention that there were a few fireworks displays to celebrate Canada Day, but nowhere near the amount of sales of fireworks to individuals to use in private displays of blowing things up. One of the things that I will enjoy about the 4th is that we soon won’t have pop-up ads for fireworks on every news story of the website of our local newspaper.

I spent a bit of my hard-earned money on fireworks for a couple of years of my life. I’m pretty sure that the fireworks stands used 12 as the minimum age for purchasing fireworks without parental supervision when I was growing up. I bought a few packages of firecrackers and launched a few tin cans into the air. By the time I was 14, I was spending summers at my cousin’s ranch and didn’t get to town and didn’t have my paycheck until the end of the summer, so I pretty much gave up fireworks.

There has been speculation that there was some connection between me and a cherry bomb that blew up in a garbage can under the bleachers at a high school football game, but no evidence linking the event to me has ever been produced, and none is likely to surface five decades later.

I was completely innocent of the incident with a similar device in the bathroom of my freshman dorm when I was in college. I was in the shower and poked my head out to see what had happened. The amount of toothpaste that another student had squeezed onto the mirror during the event was impressive. I have my theories of who planted that explosion, but again, the evidence seemed to have been lost or destroyed.

Since those days, I’ve been happy to leave fireworks in the hands of professionals. Over the years I’ve seen some pretty impressive displays, some of the largest of which were the fireworks displays over Mount Rushmore that have since been suspended because of fire danger in the national forest. We really enjoyed being a part of the crowds that gathered for the big displays a few years ago.

One of the fireworks displays that I’ve never seen, except for the YouTube videos which seem to keep popping up, is the annual - yes, it really is annual - display put on by the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Every year they blow up mannequins on the Mall in Washington DC to show Americans that you should not launch professional fireworks from the top of your head and that it isn’t a good idea to manufacture your own fireworks at home. This year the burning dress on the little girl mannequin is pretty scary, though the sparkler is really big and is ignited by a blowtorch. Putting sunglasses on the mannequin holding the giant sparkler was a nice touch, though. Presumably eye

protection is a good idea. Or maybe the mannequin just wanted to look cool when she set her friend's dress on fire.

The styrofoam-headed mannequin who is posed looking down into a professional aerial firework is a pretty dramatic display. Good advice. Don't look directly into a large professional firework when you are lighting it. It literally blew the head off of the mannequin. Another lesson from another display is don't hold a firework on top of your head when you ignite it. That mannequin lost both of his hands as well. Rather gristly even though the mannequins are made out of styrofoam.

The warning from the Consumer Product Safety Council says, "Always insure a clear flight path for fireworks devices. In this demonstration they fired a bottle rocket directly into the face of a mannequin. They actually fired two of the bottle rockets. The first hits the shoulder of the mannequin. The second hits him right in the forehead and sticks there. They had to rig up wires to get the bottle rockets to hit exactly where they wanted. Bottle rockets don't generally go in a straight path.

But I missed the demonstrations, so I'll probably watch the city fireworks from a safe distance to celebrate this evening. I'm not feeling much of an urge to light the fireworks myself. I'll leave that to the experts at the Consumer Products Safety Commission.

You do have to admit, however, that setting up the mannequin displays is a pretty cool job. If I were a bit younger - say 12 or 13 . . .

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July 5, 2017 – More about Fireworks



As we waited for the fireworks to begin last night, we talked about other memorable nights of watching fireworks. The fireworks were set to start at dusk which is a rather uncertain time. I had googled, “what time is dusk in Rapid City South Dakota tonight?” and the answer was 9:15. At 9:15, it wasn’t really dark enough for the fireworks to show off their best. The fireworks started promptly at 10 pm, which was a good time for a good show. Meanwhile, the weather was just right, not too hot, not too cold, not too windy, not too buggy. We had brought some portable chairs and were quite comfortable sitting and waiting. There were a few folks gathered in the back yard of the church, but not very many, and it is a big space.

I first attempted to photograph fireworks back in the late 1970’s. I had a decent single lens reflex camera and instructions from a well qualified and experienced photographer. The setting was Rockefeller Chapel on the University of Chicago Campus. I don’t know if they still do it, but back then, fireworks were set off from the tower each spring to celebrate the end of the school year. I hadn’t seen really large fireworks displays before and was impressed by the show. The photographic technique was to choose a section of sky and aim the camera mounted securely on a tripod. Focus was set on infinity. Then I would manually open the shutter, keeping the lens cap on. When a burst occurred in my area of the sky, I would remove the lens cap and after a few seconds close the shutter. It was a rather random process. With the shutter open, I couldn’t see

through the viewfinder in the camera, so framing the pictures was purely a matter of luck. The results were pretty good.

I used Kodak Tri-X film for nearly all of my photographs in those days. The black-and-white film had a lot of range in allowable processing. I could process for longer or shorter periods of time to make up for under- or over-exposed photographs. We would essentially shift the processing times to make the film behave as a faster film, allowing us to use shorter shutter speeds and smaller apertures. I was guessing about exposure and processing, but, as I said, I got a few pictures that I liked.

It wasn't just that I was making pictures with black-and-white film in those days. The fireworks themselves were largely monochromatic - mostly white or yellow bursts against the black night sky.

During the summer of 1978, we had the good fortune of being in Toulouse, France on July 14, known to English-speaking world as Bastille Day. In France, the day is celebrated as French National Day. It was the first time I had seen a fireworks display choreographed to music. They had set up large speakers and broadcast music as the display was set off. We were across the Garonne River, so we had the reflections of the bursts as well as the music. I was duly impressed. Although I was traveling with a camera, I didn't attempt to photograph the fireworks in that setting, but we have some good memories.

Since those days, we've seen some pretty impressive displays including some really big shows at Mount Rushmore. Fireworks are no longer a part of the monument's July 4 observances, but for a few years the celebration included an impressive display late on July 3. It probably never was a very good idea, given the sometimes tinder-dry conditions in the forest combined with the problems of putting such a big crowd into a place with a limited number of entrances and exits. Later studies showed that the fireworks had contributed to the contamination of water in the area as well. However, for the few years that they put on the shows, they were impressive and the crowds were equally impressive. We'd take a picnic supper and lawn chairs and camp out at the monument all afternoon as we waited for the display. It was a good time to visit with friends and to watch all of the people who had gathered.

Among my favorite memories of July 4 celebrations are of the years we lived in a small town in rural North Dakota. There is a small reservoir at the edge of town and a city park by the lake. The whole town would gather for a big barbecue and ice cream social sponsored by the downtown merchants. Everyone brought blankets and lawn furniture and set it up in the park. The cowboy band, a group of volunteers who loved to play instruments would play, mostly marches and other common music. I played in the band for most of the years we lived in the town. If we had someone else who had a musical act, perhaps they'd do a set as well. Then there would be a short fireworks display, put on by the town's volunteer firefighters. This wasn't a big budget event. The "free"

barbecue cost more than the fireworks display. There wasn't a line item in the city budget for the expense, just a few donations from the folks in town. The gathering was much more about getting together with friends and neighbors than about being the biggest or best display.

These days, of course, you can watch some pretty impressive fireworks on television. The fireworks on the national mall in Washington DC and the Boston Pops Fireworks Spectacular are almost always available on television. I have a bit of a tradition of watching the Sydney Harbor fireworks on New Year's Eve over the Internet in recent years. With the time zones, the display is generally on about 5 am here in the US.

Last night's celebration was a bit muted for us. We stayed away from the most popular fireworks watching points in order to avoid crowds and traffic. Still, it was a pleasant evening and I took a few photographs. There was a sense of sharing a celebration with the rest of our country and there aren't too many things that bring us together these days.

Happy Birthday, USA.

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July 6, 2017 – Reunions

I've never been a big fan of reunions. I've had some wonderful experiences in my life, but it seems that after those experiences the time has come to move on with my life. I have no opposition to reunions and I can see the benefits of reconnecting with old friends, but the important friendships of my life have endured despite separation. I have a few friendships from my high school days, others from my college years and still others from graduate school. Some of those friendships are easy and we can pick up a conversation as if we haven't been separated even though it has been decades since we were together.

I think that for me nostalgia isn't easily triggered. I enjoyed many parts of my past, but the present is compelling and the future is hopeful.

The Internet and specifically Facebook makes it easy to recall the past and reconnect with people you once knew. I am not active on Facebook. In fact I keep getting notices from Facebook that it has been many weeks since I've updated my profile. But I also get bits and pieces of information by looking at the site from time to time. I belong to a group that posts pictures from the past of my home town and another one that links graduates from my high school. I have a couple of classmates who post to those sites on a regular basis, some of them nearly daily. I keep wondering what they do with the rest of their lives that gives them so much time for Facebook.

I'm sure that I would enjoy conversations with old friends, but I've never been one to make trips back for reunions. I attended part of one high school reunion once because I was in town for other reasons. I've never attended a college reunion, though they have a homecoming every year. I'm not sure if my seminary class has ever held a reunion, but I've not been tempted to go to one.

My mother was a bit like me. She never attended a high school reunion until her 50th. But after that she made it a priority to attend every year until health prevented her from traveling. Maybe I'll be like her. I'm not that far away from 50th reunions and I'm sure my friends will let me know what is going on. I'm not one of the people whose address has been lost. I've got friends who will be working hard to organize reunions and will make sure that I'm invited.

Having said that, my school years, wonderful and meaningful as they were, are only a small slice of my life. I only spent three years in high school. Granted I spent them with mostly the same kids with whom I attended elementary school, which means that many of us were classmates for 11 years, but a lot has happened since those days. I was only in college for 4 years and in seminary for an additional 4. After graduation, we served in our first call for 7 years and our second for 10. We have been back to both of those places to visit and to attend special events in the lives of the churches.

Reunions, however, are a big deal to some people. I can tell you the names of some of the classmates who are already planning for our high school reunion even though it is 4 years away. They probably were the ones who were thinking of graduation on the first day of our freshman year.

As it has turned out, I've never been asked to be a graduation speaker. That detail doesn't surprise me. I've lots of classmates who are more successful in the eyes of others and have achieved more fame. There is no shortage of people who can be asked to give a speech at a graduation ceremony. Furthermore, I suspect that were I asked, I wouldn't say some of the things that are common at such events.

I wouldn't say, "These are the best days of your life." They weren't for me and I sincerely hope that graduates will go on to learn more, accomplish more, and look back on their years as important parts of their preparation, but far from the whole story. I wouldn't talk about sky-high dreams and hopes for outlandish success, although I believe that dreaming is an important human endeavor. Instead I would talk about making mistakes and developing the art of the apology. I would share a few stories of how much learning from mistakes can make all the difference in the world. I wouldn't urge graduates to go out and get their slice of the pie or use any other language that might hint at entitlement. Success often comes through luck more than it does as a result of some kind of "earning." Those who end up with a lot of money are often the same one who started out with a lot of privilege.

All in all, I probably wouldn't be a very good choice as a commencement speaker. Having said that, there are, each year, a few very good commencement speeches that are delivered. I often read them. This year, I was impressed with the speech Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, John Roberts, gave to the eighth-grade class of his son at Cardigan Mountain School in New Hampshire. He didn't wish the students good luck.

"From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly so that you will come to know the value of justice. I hope that you will suffer betrayal because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. Sorry to say, but I hope you will be lonely from time to time so that you don't take friends for granted. I wish you bad luck, again, from time to time so that you will be conscious of the role of chance in life and understand that your success is not completely deserved and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either."

If a few more people made speeches like that, I might be more tempted to attend reunions.

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July 7, 2017 – A Weekly Walk

After I got back from our vacation at the end of May and the beginning of June, I decided that I would walk to a Wednesday morning Bible Study each week. I need the exercise, and I have a little bit more time in the summer. So, I've been walking down to Trinity Lutheran Church each Wednesday morning. I leave our church around 8 am, which gives me a half hour to walk the distance of just over a mile. Then I walk back home after the Bible study, which gives me about 2 1/2 miles total for the morning. The weather has been lovely, if a bit hot, so it hasn't been a hassle at all. I'm even learning where the shade is along the route.

Life seems to give me some excellent opportunities and these Wednesday morning walks are one of those great opportunities. One of the surprises about my walk is that each time I've walked, I've struck up conversations with people who are living homeless in Rapid City. I'm sure that I wouldn't have the same opportunities for conversation in the winter, but in the summer, people are out and about, looking for the things they need to survive. There are some downtown places that give out food, some other places where you can drop in for a while during the day, other places that have resources such as clothing, blankets, and other needed items. And, during the summer, one has to be aware of the places where you can fill up a water bottle. If you have money for the least expensive item on the menu, a fast food restaurant offers restrooms and a chance to sit in an air-conditioned place for a while. A drink with free refills will work for two or more people to have those opportunities.

I'm not sure why people have chosen to speak with me. Some have asked me if I had some money I could share for meals or other things that they need. Most haven't asked me for anything, just given me a warm greeting and sometimes inquiring about where I'm going or what I do in the community. Several have told me their stories, or part of their stories. I've found out the journey that they have taken that has left them on the street. I've learned about what they are doing to change their conditions. I even know some things about where they sleep, when they sleep, and where they put some of their possessions, such as blankets and clothing when they are not sleeping.

It is a pretty rough lifestyle. Their possessions are frequently stolen and having cash makes them vulnerable to being victims of crime. The people who have spoken to me, however, have mostly been couples. They introduce their mate as either their wife/husband or tell me that they are engaged. In some couples the woman is more talkative and the man doesn't say much, in some couples it is the other way around.

So far, and this is not a scientific sample, as I've only been walking for a few weeks, women are more likely to ask me for money. I think that it takes a lot of courage to make the ask and it is a very hard thing to do. I imagine that the couples are talking between themselves about who should make the ask before they approach me, but that may not be accurate. Since I haven't been preparing for my walks, I haven't had any money with me to give out, so I have not given money to anyone. I have, however, told people which churches give out food and where they can go to get access to a washing machine and a shower. I have, however, been thinking of finding out the average cost of a breakfast in one of the downtown fast food restaurants and carrying a few dollar bills that I would be willing to give away. I'm not sure that it is a good idea.

Now that I have been paying attention, I'm also aware of the number of cigarette butts that are in certain locations, indicating that they are finding money for cigarettes. According to the TobaccoFreeKids South Dakota website the current price of a pack of cigarettes is \$6.23. That is probably more than a breakfast at Hardees would cost. And, it isn't just cigarette butts that I've discovered. It appears that the preferred alcohol choice is vodka, based on my brief observations. Life on the street is tough. And it is expensive. And some of the things that cost money are things that I have no inclination to buy.

I suspect that any regular police officer who has a bit of people skills would have already learned everything that I've discovered on my walks and more. There may be some things that people are willing to share with me that they wouldn't share with a uniformed officer, but it doesn't take a great deal of skill or some special power to get to know more about our neighbors in our town.

I've been told that the number of homeless people living on the streets in our town goes up in the summer because the price of motels goes up so dramatically in our tourist-based economy. Some of the people I've met may be able to swing a weekly or monthly

rental during part of the year, but can't afford summer prices. I've met several individuals who told me about their employment, so not all of the homeless people are unemployed, though many are, I suspect.

I talked to some people who were changing a tire on their minivan. The tire looked like it had suffered some distance of being driven on when flat. The wheel was bent and useless as well as the tire shredded. There were marks on the pavement that showed where they had driven. In the care were at least three people who were using crutches. The man changing the tire seemed to know what he was doing and he had a spare that was holding air that he was putting on the car. I didn't ask, but from the appearance of things, I think it is very possible that the man changing the tire hadn't been riding in the vehicle, but those in the car had driven until they found someone who could change their tire.

There are more stories that I don't know and more that I will never know than the few that I have collected in a few weeks of walking. It has, however, been a good exercise for me to get to know my community and the people who live in it better than was the case a few months ago.

It is amazing what one can learn by going for a walk.

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July 8, 2017 – Change

I think that the church has always experienced generational struggles. It isn't easy to see new people come into an institution that one has loved and supported and found meaningful for a long time. New people bring change and they often don't understand the reasons why things are the way that they are. They don't always respect the wisdom of experience. Those who are new to the institution find themselves frustrated with the inflexibility of the established members. This phenomenon is not unique to churches. Other institutions, such as service clubs, are experiencing the same type of challenge in attracting new members. Like many mainline churches, they are experiencing decline.

I remember an incident from my early childhood. In fact, I remember it more from the stories I was told than by any direct memory of the incident. My mother, as a young member of the congregation, volunteered to help with a fund-raising dinner. She was asked to set the tables and did so. As she did, an elder came along and moved all of her place settings and re-did the work she had just finished. She was angered by this and for many years refused to volunteer for that particular event. This was more than a half century ago. These days her son is part of the old guard.

We form important and intimate relationships within the church and we appreciate the gathering of like-minded people. We have figured out how to make our place in the

institution and we rarely think about making room for new people. Basically we project an image of: "You're welcome as long as you do things our way."

Change, however, is inevitable. The institutional church is constantly changing whether we like it or not. Our inability to fully involve new members results in decline due to the natural span of lives and energies. As pastor of a mid-sized congregation, I officiate at a lot of funerals. I cannot ignore the changes in the institution over the years.

One of the questions that I am regularly asked by our members is, "What are we doing to attract new members?" The answer is that we are doing quite a lot. And much of what we are doing is successful. We have a steady stream of visitors and we are pretty good at turning visitors into regular participants. What we are not doing well is retaining those new members. It is very common for younger families to become involved in the congregation and participate energetically only to fade and disappear within a few years. When that occurs I am amazed at how many of our members don't seem to notice. I've had far too many conversations with long-term members who don't even know the names of people who have been participating in the church for a couple of years. If someone doesn't participate in the same projects or isn't involved in the same activities, they are almost invisible to some of our members. Granted this is not true of all of our members. We have many people who are outgoing and who make a point of greeting and welcoming new members.

We also have those who are quick to give jobs to new members and then expect them to do the jobs the way they have always been done. I remember the story my mother told about setting tables.

What those of us who live our lives in the middle of the institution sometimes forget is that the change that is brought by visitors and new members is desperately needed. We need to change. We have not always been perfect - that is at the core of our gospel. We have been guilty of exclusive ways. We have not always lived out the gospel that we preach.

We also have a lot to give to a new generation of people, who having experienced some of what the institutional church has to offer have turned to book clubs, yoga classes, and other places in search of community and spiritual connection. We are a community of inherited practices and beliefs that connect us with the past. We are an intergenerational community with participants of all ages. Our traditions offer a particular resilience, not easily found in the face of tragedy and loss.

Traditions, however, need to always be understood as living entities. We are not only linked and bonded with the past - we are also connected to the future. Even as we defend our ancient traditions, we must be able to see that new traditions are forming. And the traditions we hold dear are always subject to fresh interpretation. We do not look the same to outsiders as we look to ourselves.

As a leader, I have to continually remind myself that the little arguments we have with ourselves are signs of growth. If we have difficulty recruiting volunteers for something we've been doing for years, it may be time to ask ourselves what things are truly our priorities. If we disagree about how best to pursue a particular project, it may be a sign that we are in the process of changing. Sometimes we even find the courage to ask ourselves some very fundamental questions about priorities and what is really most important in our life together.

One of the realities of having served the same congregation for many years is that I have become part of the "old guard." This is not a bad thing in and of itself as long as I remain open to new ideas and new ways of doing things. But I need to be constantly aware of how this looks to visitors and newcomers. Investing time and energy in listening carefully to their perspectives, cares and concerns is critical.

The day will come when it will be time for me to step aside and allow the control and power to be transferred to new leaders. My old soon must become one of supporting and encouraging new leadership to emerge.

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "I am the rest between two notes which are somehow always in discord." I think that describes my role in the church as well. The new and the old are equally important in the music of the church's life. Sometimes, we need to provide the rest that allows us to appreciate both notes.

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July 9, 2017 – Law Enforcement Chaplain

This morning I have an early flight out of Rapid City that connects in Dallas to a flight to Norfolk, Virginia. With the way that time zones line up, it wasn't possible for me to leave after church and make it in at a reasonable hour, so I have to miss church in order to make a 9 a.m. session tomorrow morning in Virginia. I'll be in Norfolk all week participating in the International Conference of Police Chaplains. I have been a member of the ICPC for a couple of years and recognized by the organization as a qualified chaplain. I have attended a regional training seminar and by the end of the week will have met all of the qualifications for certification by the International Body.

I didn't set out to add another credential to my resume. At my age, I am unlikely to need much of a resume. The jobs I have held and the credentials I already possess are sufficient to get me a job as a pastor of a small congregation or an interim minister. And most of my colleagues who are my age are seriously planning for retirement, not adding credentials at this stage of their life.

My interest in law enforcement chaplaincy goes back a long time, but I decided a few years ago to become more involved for several reasons. One reason was the simple call to serve the community. I saw a need and I responded to it. It seemed, looking in from the outside, that most of the volunteer chaplains in our local law enforcement group were from more fundamentalist churches - mostly churches without a heritage of educated clergy. I felt that a mainline representation was in order if for no other reason that we represent the congregations of many law enforcement officers. It seemed like something that I could do.

There are some other aspects to chaplaincy which interest me. One is the commitment of chaplains and specifically the ICPC to the concept of religious pluralism. While we are encouraged as chaplains to be open and up front about our own faith, we are also specifically trained to demonstrate respect for all people and their beliefs. We are not in the business of converting people from one form of belief or faith to another, but rather to serve those people as they are. The ministry of a chaplain is not a preaching ministry. It is a witness to faith by doing, caring and loving. While I am confident and secure in my Christian faith, I have deep respect for other faiths and an appreciation of the commitment of the ICPC to honor religious pluralism.

Another interest of mine is more difficult to express. I am aware that in many communities, ours included, that there is some kind of institutional racism that persists. Although great efforts have been made to eliminate racial preferences and biases from our community institutions, the simple fact remains that the population of our jail, for example, is disproportionately Native American. This is not caused by overt racism on the part of law enforcement officers or command staff. I have met and worked with these people and I have deep respect for them and have not seen instances of overt racism in their decisions or approach. In fact, our officers are far better trained in culture, practices and history than the general population and far less likely to make any kind of racist comment or joke than their peers who work in different settings. I simply do not see signs of racial bias in the workplace when I am working with law enforcement officers. The population of our officers, moreover, is more diverse than most workplaces in our community. Yet across the nation, statistics continue to illustrate disproportionate law enforcement. Victims of officer-involved shootings are far more likely to be African-American than any other race. But these statistics are not caused by the racial bias of the individuals involved. Juries have consistently failed to bring convictions against officers for their actions. I think that the juries are seeing what I have experienced. These are good people who are genuinely dedicated to community service. They make snap judgments in the heat of the moment.

The racism that is inherent in our system goes much deeper than the personality of the individuals involved.

So I have been an observer and I have been granted the privilege of observing from within our law enforcement agencies. The Pennington County Sheriff's Office is a large

law enforcement agency for South Dakota. We have a large piece of territory and in addition to providing the usual services of patrol, serving warrants, transport we provide law enforcement for small communities within the county; administer Rapid City's drug and alcohol detox, treatment and holding facility; assist with patrol of federal lands, including National Forest access roads; and provide incarceration services to other counties, the State of South Dakota and the federal government. Western South Dakota Juvenile Services Center, operated by the Pennington County Sheriff, where I serve as chaplain, is one of only three facilities in the nation that provide incarceration for juveniles convicted of federal crimes.

As chaplain, I offer prayers and support and engage in a ministry of presence - just being there and being on call for those who are serving. I offer prayers at special occasions ranging from retirement parties to funerals to ceremonies. I also pray with officers as requested. I participate in critical incident diffusing and debriefing sessions. I call on officers who are injured or in the hospital. And I participate in a wide variety of other activities and events, including a fair amount of serving treats and special meals to law enforcement officers. The chaplains' signature event each year is a Christmas party for all of the employees of the Pennington County Sheriff's Office.

So this week I will be focusing on law enforcement chaplaincy and I hope to focus my blogs on what I am learning at the International Conference. I also plan to fit in a bit of travelogue as well. After all Norfolk, Virginia, is a great place for someone who is enamored with boats to visit.

Now, I've got a plane to catch!

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July 10, 2017 – On the Waterfront



Humans have lived along the Atlantic Coast, near the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, for more than 10,000 years. There is little recorded history, however, of the movements of tribes in the region prior to European settlement. In 1584, an expedition led by Sir Walter Raleigh sought a suitable place to establish a permanent English settlement in North America. Two of his ships landed on Roanoke Island. One of his commanders, Arthur Barlowe, kept a journal that reports that the region was inhabited by a tribe called Chesepian. He noted that they had a nearby city called Skicoak, but the exact location of the city has never been determined.

It was nearly 23 years later when the Jamestown settlers arrived at Cape Henry, which is now called Virginia Beach, they reported that the Chesepian tribe had been wiped out by Chief Powhatan of the Powhatan Confederacy.

This region of the coast quickly became the center of English settlement on the continent. At least four cities were founded in the Virginia Colony in the early years of the 17th Century. From the beginnings of settlement, and likely much before, water has been an important factor in the history of the area. The shifting tides create challenging

currents at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. The James River is navigable upstream to provide shelter for ocean-going boats. Right at the mouth of the James is a smaller river, the Elizabeth, which also gives access to the country. Early settlers used boats as their primary means of transportation. The area became a hub of supply for ships headed to other points along the Atlantic Coast.

Ships and naval activities form an important part of the story of Norfolk, on the coast where the James and Elizabeth Rivers empty into the Atlantic. From the time of the establishment of the U.S. Navy, Norfolk has been a center of naval shipbuilding and repair. All of that shipbuilding makes the city a fascinating place for a boatbuilder, even though the tiny craft I make are a far cry from the huge ships that occupy the region's dry docks and other naval facilities.



Downtown Norfolk is right on the waterfront and the hotel where I am staying is right next to the water, so as soon as I got checked in, the first thing I did was take a walk along the boardwalk. The three-masted tall ship American Rover is tied up next to the dock a short distance from where water taxis come and go, discharging pedestrians bound for activities in downtown Norfolk. American Rover now sails around the harbor for private parties and tourist tours.

The Waterside Marina is also a popular docking area for visiting yachts from up and down the Atlantic seaboard. I walked by multi-million dollar yachts tied up right along the boardwalk. In addition, all kinds of vessels, from jet skis to giant tugboats ply the waters within easy view of my motel room.

The focus of this meeting is continuing education. My schedule this week includes 14 classes relating to the work of law enforcement chaplains, and I'll be at the restoration desk early this morning to add two more classes that I can also fit into the week. 12-hour days won't leave a lot of extra time for exploring the waterfront, but I've already gone through the schedule and noted several more opportunities for walking and exploring. This evening there is a social event for Chaplains at the Nauticus Museum, a short walk from the hotel. Also known as the National Maritime Center, this facility includes the U.S.S. Wisconsin, one of the largest and last battleships ever built by the U.S. Navy. You can bet that I'll be at the doors when they open for our group and will remain as long as they allow us to explore the displays. The close proximity of the museum affords the possibility of a return visit later in the week if time allows.



I don't need a museum to entertain me in this location, however, just walking alongside the water and watching the coming and going of all of the boats and ships is enough to keep me entertained for hours. And around the edges of the meeting, whenever i have time, I'm enjoying reading Stan Grayson's new biography of Joshua Slocum, "A Man for All Oceans." Slocum, the first to sail solo around the globe, was, in addition to his skills as a sailor and commander of large crews, a good writer and his book, "Sailing Alone Around the World: A Voyage Beyond Imagination" has been continuously in print since its first publication in 1899. The stories of the adventures of Slocum keep my imagination stirring and being in a place where the boats come and go stirs me to do what I suspect people have been doing ever since the first tall ships appeared on the horizon - journey in my imagination to distant places, carried by the wind and the waves.

I do plan to do some serious writing about the work of chaplains and the theology of service, but there are plenty of other things to occupy my mind and my imagination during the week to come. I know it will pass quickly. As luck would have it, my hotel room is on the right side of the building for me. The view includes multiple submersible dry docks, two of which currently have giant naval vessels raised out of the water for repairs and maintenance. The giant cranes and other machinery give perspective to the scale of these huge ships.

As long as people have been on this planet, they have been drawn to the oceans. I've read that 80% of the world's population live in coastal areas. So even those of us who live at the center of our continents, can feel the lure of the sea and the call of open water. When we take time to visit, we are as enthralled as those who live here.

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July 11, 2017 – ICPC Day One



The International Conference of Police Chaplains is truly international. The opening ceremonies featured the presentations of the flags and the national anthems of seven nations. Of course there are a lot more countries in the world and most of the participants are from the United States, but the acknowledgement that we have representatives from the six other nations was a reminder that the work we do transcends national boundaries and cultural lines.

From the research I have done, I am confident that the ICPC is the organization that sets the standard for education and continuing education of law enforcement chaplains. My choice of the organization for my training wasn't arbitrary. Having said that, the same thing that I have discovered in other settings is true in this one as well. Just because someone is competent or even very good at their job doesn't mean that they are able to teach about it well. It is early in the event and far too soon for me to draw conclusions, but based on my first day's experience, the results are definitely mixed.

I took an advanced class where the teacher was ill-prepared. The outline in the class powerpoint was well-done and contained much useful information. The class handouts

were excellent, but the teacher wasn't even familiar with the class outline (which had, I learned later, been developed by another instructor). I came to learn, but it was definitely disappointing to have such a poorly presented class.

I also took a class that was designed for beginners. Since I am earning my basic certification with the organization, I am required to take 12 basic classes to earn that certification. The material in the class wasn't very challenging, frankly. I've enough experience and professional training to have considered almost every item discussed. However the instructor was familiar with the material, had a passion for the topic, and was clearly qualified to teach. I didn't feel like my time was wasted.

I am, however, withholding judgment about the classes. I have four classes tomorrow and more on Thursday and Friday and so I'm remaining open.

What has been meaningful has been the networking and gathering with other law enforcement chaplains. I started my day by inviting a colleague who I had not previously met to breakfast. Our conversation was joyful and engaging. I learned about how his experiences in Virginia are different from and similar to mine. We had no shortage of topics to keep us engaged. By the time we had walked back to the convention center, there was a group of six of us, talking animatedly about what we do.

I've made a point of sitting next to strangers at each session so far and have benefitted from each conversation. People who know me from church probably don't see this side of my personality, but I don't mind being alone and I'm fairly shy in settings like this one. I prefer to sit back and listen a lot, allowing others to take the lead in conversation. I'm sure that this is not dissimilar to other professional gatherings. There are a few who are seeking the limelight and who want to be recognized in class sessions. Those who speak up aren't always the ones with the best ideas. I've found that sitting quietly and listening a lot will give a perspective that is helpful. Before long instead of having a whole bunch of surface conversations, I find myself engaged in meaningful conversation. I'm not the one who will meet 300 new people at this meeting. But I suspect that I will make a few solid connections that will be helpful and meaningful after the event is concluded.

The evening was a "Mixer" held at one of the places that I very much wanted to visit as part of this trip. The Nauticus Museum was opened exclusively to our group for three hours. There were plenty of hors d'oeuvres - enough that I felt no need to have any other food for my evening meal.

There are some very impressive displays in the museum, and its most prized acquisition isn't inside because the building would be far too small. Right next to the museum, tied up with its bow pointing toward downtown Norfolk is the Battleship Wisconsin, a WWII-era ship with gigantic guns mounted all around her decks. I suppose that if you worked in one of the downtown high rise buildings and had an office where the view out your

window included looking straight into those big guns you'd get used to it, but for a small town kid with no real experience in large ships, it is indeed impressive.

The museum would be a great tour if you had time to spend looking at all of the displays, which include significant displays on weather, the actual bridge of a battleship, a lot of different armaments and ordinances, marine life and the Chesapeake Bay, history of naval battles and much, much more. Having it as a site for a social event was pretty good, but there were a lot of people there who seemed to be more interested in the food than in the museum. There was a large ship model right behind the carving station for the prime rib. I couldn't get close to the model to get a look. The prime rib tasted pretty good, though.

I think my favorite thing about the museum were the models. There are quite a few exquisitely crafted model ships in display cases that allow you to get close enough to examine the details. Building models is a long-standing naval tradition. Sailors on long journeys in the age of sail had many days when their duties were light depending on winds and weather. Carving was an art that was examined by many and among the things that were carved by the seamen were models of the ships they sailed and other ships they had seen.

Day one was full and I ended up feeling like the time I'm spending here is well-invested. And now its time to begin day two. . .

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July 12, 2017 – Evening Sail

Before I arrive in Norfolk, I had intended to write about law enforcement chaplaincy every day for a week. The professional networking combined with the classes I am taking have my mind focused pretty well on grown and learning as a chaplain. There are theological, philosophical, and practical reasons for my interest in this area of ministry and I am grateful to be here and participating in this program. And I did take four classes yesterday which were, well . . . , mixed. Some were better than others. One was so poorly taught as to be irresponsible for such an important gathering. One was so well-presented and heartfelt that it alone was worth the investment in this entire week.

But what is really on my mind this morning as I turn to write my blog is the experience I had in the last two hours of the evening. I won't forget about chaplaincy, but I think it is important for my readers to know that I'm also having a bit of fun.



The three-masted topsail schooner American Rover is a 135' long (overall) steel-hulled schooner that was designed to be reminiscent of the grand days of navigation by sail. For millennia sail was the way in which most goods and people were transported around the world. It was only at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries that power boating began to overtake sail and change the way we traveled on the seas. American Rover reminds everyone who looks at her of the glory days of American sail, when schooners plied the Chesapeake and both the Atlantic and Pacific fleets. Records for speed and distance continued to be set by elegantly-designed and crafted ships. More and more canvas was turned to the wind as designers reached for longer and longer hulls and greater mast height.

American Rover is not an old ship. Her construction was begun in Panama City Florida in 1981. Although her design by Merritt Walter, is classic, her construction is quite modern. Her steel hull was welded together with precision and floated up to the Willoughby area of Norfolk, Virginia where she was outfitted, being put into service in 1986. Auxiliary power is provided by two diesel motors installed vertically on her centerline and a diesel generator which, in addition to running her electrical systems, powers hydraulic pumps to turn her rudder. Designed to carry 5,000 square feet of sail, she is capable of a top speed of 11.5 knots (a little over 13 mph). Displacing 105 tons, she is Coast Guard Certified for up to 129 passengers.

Her home berth is within sight of my motel room here in Norfolk, so when I discovered that I had a couple of hours of free time at the end of the day yesterday, I went online and booked a ticket for a two-hour sunset cruise. I eagerly walked down the boardwalk and was among the first passengers to board. The crew was welcoming and allowed me to examine the ship from top to bottom, including going below deck into her spacious main salon and back to her classy rear cabin.



I wanted to be on deck, as far forward as possible for the cruise, however, and found a bench near the halyards for the foresail so I could watch the action when the crew raised the sail. There was a brisk breeze of nearly 20 mph, so I picked a great evening for a sail. After we motored a short distance from the dock, the crew raised five sails. The ship was crewed by a captain and five or six deckhands, so topsails were not raised for our two-hour cruise. All the same it was thrilling to watch the canvas take shape and listen to the wind as it filled out the tanbark sheets. The boat accelerated to over 5 knots and I leaned over the rail to watch the bow wake spread.

With all that weight of the big ship and moderate winds, the boat barely heeled as we headed down the Elizabeth River on a port tack. We had a good view of many harbor attractions as we sailed between Norfolk and Portsmouth. Even the majestic American Rover was dwarfed by the gigantic vessels of the U.S. Navy and the huge container ships being loaded and unloaded. The 1,000-foot ships that carry coal exported to China from the huge coal loading facility near the mouth of the river were sitting high in the water as they began to be loaded. Each ship will carry the equivalent of a coal train 5 miles long when it leaves port.

The fresh breeze and the setting sun provided perfect weather for our cruise and the time flew. Soon I noticed the crew assembling along the rail and reading the lines to come about and we were in our turn to a starboard tack and heading back towards the direction from which we had come. It was nearly dark when the crew dropped sails and we heard the engines start for a gentle slip alongside the dock. The gangplank was put back in place and it was time to return to land with a few pictures and lots of memories of a wonderful evening.



The American Rover was built expressly for the tourist trade and she is serving nobly in that capacity. I am, after all, a tourist in this city. When we have guests in our town, we usually try to fit in a ride on the 1880's steam-powered train, a small reminder of the transportation of the era. Although I wasn't riding on a 19th-century ship last night, I was traveling in the sale of the 1880's once again as we hoisted sail and smelled the salt breeze. She is the largest sailboat in my very limited sailing experience. She is ably crewed and offers a safe and beautiful cruise. The weather was perfect and the journey a wonderful cap to a long, but rich day.

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July 13, 2017 – Discussing Ethics Again

I've taken two courses on ethics at this meeting of the International Conference of Police Chaplains. One is the basic course that is mandatory for recognition by ICPC as a qualified chaplain, the other an advance course that considers some broader and more complex ethical issues. In both classes there were some moments of disagreement and intense discussion. From my perspective, the discussions lacked some of the basic foundational material that would be present in a collegiate ethics course. Ethical discussions are not new. The history of philosophy is filled with different perspectives and opinions. We should not expect full agreement, but some knowledge of those historic arguments can provide a framework for contemporary discussions.

The term "situational ethics" came up in both classes, and in one a definition of the term was attempted. For some this is a "red flag." They believe that introducing discretion and opinion into ethical decision-making quickly becomes a matter of "everyone does what he or she thinks is best" and an opportunity for individuals to justify any behavior, no matter how outrageous or socially harmful. Dictionary (or in these days Wikipedia) definitions don't do justice to the complex development of the historic ethical argument that when making ethical decisions, the context of an act must be part of the consideration as to whether or not that act is deemed to be ethical. There is a huge difference between saying that ethical decisions need to consider the broader ramifications and context of the action and saying that all behaviors are ethical.

To put it another way, situational ethics make sense only within established boundaries. If there are no absolutes, it becomes impossible to argue that there are any behaviors which are not ethical. Few would take this position.

The conversation is especially interesting when one considers that the discussions are about behavior within the law enforcement community. With a few exceptions, law enforcement takes place within rigid boundaries. Some have described it as a "black and white" way of looking at the world with no gray areas. A behavior is either right or wrong and an officer has to determine which as quickly and accurately as possible. Figuring out who is the criminal and who is the victim is an assessment that must be made in order for a law enforcement officer to seize control of a situation. Sometimes it is clear to the officer and sometimes it requires investigation to draw a conclusion. Law enforcement agencies have teams of highly-trained investigators who attempt to gather as much evidence as possible about the facts of a case. Law enforcement officers are trained to separate facts from opinion and to verify information received.

The work of law enforcement demands attention to detail and policy. Agency policies define proper behavior. These policies are remarkably specific. For example, our Sheriff's office has a part of its uniform policy that allows short pants to be worn by certain deputies under certain circumstances. The policy is specific about the color and brand of shorts. It also specifies which shirt will be worn when shorts are allowed, which

shoes should be worn, and even how high socks should extend above the top of the shoes. Since the shirt is the only item of clothing issued and paid for by the department, the cost of the rest of the clothing is assumed by the deputy. In most cases this requires purchasing special clothing specific to the uniform. Dress inappropriately and the permission to wear shorts can be withdrawn by a supervisor.

The point is that the policy was written to eliminate individual discretion. A supervisor should have no problem determining whether or not the deputy is appropriately dressed. Understand the rules and follow the rules. The policy was an attempt to imagine all of the possible choices that could be made and set boundaries within which choices can be made. By my quick evaluation of the policy there are only two companies that make shorts that comply with the policy and their products look nearly the same. You would have to check the label to know for sure. The only item left for situational ethics is the choice between those two brands. That is all the discretion left to the deputy. Actually in this case, there is more discretion in the choice of shoes than in the brand of shorts. However, there is no discretion in the choice of color. Shoes must be black, black or black.

The department has policies that attempt to provide specific guidance on behaviors other than the choice of clothing. Gratuities and gifts cannot be accepted. Discounts must be offered to the general public and not limited to the behavior of the deputy. The appearance of any bias in law enforcement undermines the credibility of the process.

No policy manual, however, can describe every scenario or situation. And if it did, it would be impossible to learn and retain all of the policy information. As it is our department is continually teaching and re-teaching its policies. Daily public reading of policies at shift briefings is common behavior in the Sheriff's office. The integrity, honesty, character and judgment of the individuals involved are essential to the process of fair law enforcement.

As repetitive and occasionally boring as these discussions are, they are essential to every profession. In our denomination, ministers are required to engage in recurrent boundary training as a requirement of retaining their standing as ministers. Essentially, we have submitted to the discipline of discussing professional ethics on a regular basis so that we have given thought to our choices and behaviors before situations arise that require quick decisions. We acknowledge that context is important, but we also are clear in establishing boundaries. Ministers don't operate in the same black and white environment as law enforcement officers. We don't have as many policies and procedures to define our behavior. More discretion is left to judgment. As a result on-going assessment of integrity, character and judgement is essential.

All of that said, there have been some critical and tragic breaches of ministerial ethics despite the discipline of our profession. There are circumstances that require intervention and action to prevent further damage by unethical ministers. The same

occurs with police officers. There are times when investigations must be undertaken and discipline administered. Those who enforce laws also have been known to violate them.

And even though I have studied the history of philosophy and ethics, I need to continue to submit to regular discussions of ethics and hold myself to the highest standards of behavior. Even though it seems like the topic has been talked to death in the last couple of days, I know I will be discussing it again for as long as I continue in the practice of ministry.

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July 14, 2017 – The Banquet

Today is the last day of ICPC. I have two more classes, a shuttle ride to the airport, a flight to Dallas and a flight to Rapid City. I'm scheduled to be in Rapid City by 8:30 this evening. It is one of the wonders of traveling across several time zones that you can add a couple of hours to a day, giving time for more activities when you are traveling west. It has been a good conference, all in all, and the continuing education events have been a good investment. Still, I'm glad to see the event come to its end.

For the most part, I've enjoyed being with other law enforcement chaplains, though like any other organization, we do have our quirks. This is my first time attending the Annual Training Seminar, so I probably noticed more of those quirks than members who have attended for many years.

I've been around the church long enough to know that when you get a large group of ministers together, there can be some long ceremonies and events. We used to have a joke about a particular colleague that you didn't want to ever have him deliver a benediction, especially if he might disagree with the main speaker. If so, the benediction, in place of the usual one or two sentences, would stretch into a theological diatribe and you'd wonder if it would ever get over. The majority of American Christian congregations are small, and most ministers rarely address a crowd of more than a hundred. Get together a large group, like this week's gathering, with plenary sessions of several hundred, and everyone wants to get in front of the microphone. And when they do, they'd prefer to have about 20 minutes to speak.

I'm much newer to law enforcement chaplaincy than I am to the church, but I've been around enough to know that there is a particular type of love of ceremony in that arena as well. They enjoy opportunities to wear dress uniforms, present flags, salute, and pin honors and awards on their colleagues.

The combination of those two dynamics provided an incredible display at last night's ICPC banquet. With all of the family members and guests, I estimate that there were

around 700 people in the hall. After we were served our dinner, slightly better than the usual rubber chicken, but still with the cater's penchant for sauces and rich desserts, there were a series of recognitions and thank you speeches, followed by a couple of songs from the choir, and then it was time for the awards. The presentation of newly earned credentials went fairly smoothly, but when the highest honors were presented, there was a need for a speech about each individual. We'd already heard a lot of resumes and lists of honors read as the speakers were presented for each class all week long. These were longer, with letters of endorsement from supervisors read in their entirety. Just like a church meeting, after a while, the standing ovations are dealt out to every award recipient if for no other reason that the audience is really tired on sitting and standing for a few moments is a brief respite from the cramps in the legs and feet.

Then we got to the installation of officers, complete with emotional speeches by outgoing and incoming presidents, and, of course, more ceremonies and swearing-in. Combine the usual law enforcement oath with a few lines from pastoral ordination vows, throw in a laying on of hands and a prayer or two and you get the picture. We'd been in the room for three and a half hours before we got to the evening's speaker.

People complain about opera that it takes a lot of time. There are some very long operas that have been written and are regularly produced. A production of Mozart's famous comic opera, *The Marriage of Figaro* takes about 3 1/2 hours. But at least with that opera the audience gets two intermissions. And unlike the opera, last night's banquet sported a majority of Southern Baptists, so there was no alcohol in sight to dull the sensations.

I don't mean to be impolite, but I finally gave up. Having seated myself strategically near the door (a lesson I learned from observing cops), I slipped out of the room while the evening speaker was still going on and on with yet another joke. I think he was just getting warmed up for the main event. I don't know how long the banquet lasted. I vaguely remember that there was quite a bit of noise in the hallway an hour or so after I climbed into bed.

Unlike some of the chaplains with whom I spoke over the past week, this event isn't the high point of my life. Quite frankly, when I get a vacation, I'm most likely to head for my grandchildren, who aren't big on speeches, banquets, uniforms or regalia. If I can't be with my grandchildren or children, I'm likely to be found alone in a canoe on a lake where no one is preaching sermons, giving long prayers or making speeches of any kind. I don't find pleasure in going on and on.

Virtually every organization to which I belong has at least one speech during each event where the speaker laments the lack of young members and asks what can be done to get more young members involved. The leadership on the podium at such events tends to be people my age. Based on what I heard last night, the average length of

membership of those receiving awards and being installed in offices must be over 25 years. There weren't any young people called to the podium. I bet the keynote speaker has at least 15 years on me and I'm not what you'd call a spring chicken. What I am saying is that I'm pretty sure that having to endure a four-hour plus banquet might not be the best introduction to the organization for the younger people who were in attendance. I'm just guessing here.

At least they ought to figure out how to sneak in a couple of intermissions.

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July 15, 2017 – Traveling

I don't travel as much as once was the case. For a period of time I served on a couple of national committees and was doing quite a bit of consulting with Christian educators across the nation and racked up quite a few airline miles. These days, I'm not serving in those particular capacities and am able to stay at home more. Still, when I do travel, there are parts of the process that continue to amaze me. Yesterday I ate breakfast and lunch in Virginia, had supper in Texas and went to bed in my own home in South Dakota. That's a lot of ground covered in a relatively short amount of time.

Travel comes with a certain amount of hassle. I did wait in line at airport security. I did have to spend quite a bit of time sitting in waiting areas at airports. I did pay more for the food I ate than I would normally pay. Still, it is pretty amazing to be able to attend two classes with dozens of colleagues from all across the country in the morning and be home the same evening.

And, like I said, I don't travel very much.

While i was traveling yesterday, I read most of a book. I also got out my computer and checked the news. Among the articles I read was a BBC story about Curt von Bradinski. He is a mechanical engineer and co-founder of a San Francisco-based tech company, where he works full time. Nothing remarkable so far. But von Bradinski lives in Los Angeles. And he makes the trip between home and work five days a week. He rises at 5 am, makes a 15-minute drive to Bob Hope airport in Burbank, flies from Burbank to Oakland, gets in a second car and drives from Oakland to San Francisco, arriving at his office by 8:30 am. Then at 5 pm, he leaves the office, drives to Oakland, flies to Burbank and drives home, arriving home three hours later. His flying is with a commuter airline that offers unlimited trips for \$2,300 per month. The company offers security-screened passengers a bypass of the main terminal and usual security checks.

You can do the math. In addition to the financial cost of airplane travel and maintaining two cars for commuting, he's spending six hours every day going to and from work. He says that the travel provides him with uninterrupted time to do work that he could not

accomplish either at home or at his office. Still, for much of the year, he is not a home during daylight five days a week. If he were to get eight hours of sleep a night, which I suspect he does not, that is only an hour and a half at home when he is not sleeping, and some of that time has to be invested in showering, dressing and other routine activities. It is definitely not my idea of a meaningful life.

I do, however, enjoy periodic meetings that allow me to gather with colleagues from around the country and air travel makes that possible. Furthermore, having grown up in a family of pilots, I enjoy getting on an airplane from time to time.

My travel yesterday took at least two hours more than scheduled. The weather has been hot across the nation and Texas isn't a cool place in the summer. The airplane that took me from Dallas to Rapid City was refueled just before we boarded. The cool fuel was pumped into the hot wings of the airplane sitting in the direct sunlight. After it was filled, the fuel continued to heat up, expanding as it did so. Soon liquid jet fuel was leaking through the air vents in the fuel tanks. A fuel leak is taken seriously on an airplane, so mechanics were called to inspect the plane twice before we were finally cleared for takeoff. Tourist-class airline seats aren't all that comfortable to begin with, so adding two hours of sitting in the cramped space on to a flight of over two ours in the first place, after having already made a three-hour trip that same afternoon tried my patience just a bit. My fellow travelers, however, were, for the most part, gracious and aside from a few comments, handled the delay pretty well.

I'm pretty sure that there are days when Mr. von Bradinski's travel doesn't go completely smoothly. As reliable as is the TBM single-engine executive plane on which he flies, mechanical delays do occur. Traffic on the ground and in the air can cause delays. I've driven in Berkeley and I've driven across the Oakland Bay Bridge. I know that there can be delays - some sufficient enough to make Mr. von Bradinski miss his flight. Even though I'm sure the airline will wait a little bit for a \$27,600 a year customer, there must be limits. After all, other passengers on the plane are paying a lot for their trip as well. Then there is the weather which is known for causing delays in travel, especially air travel. There must be days when that commute does not go smoothly at all. I bet Mr. von Bradinski has a "plan B" for the nights when he doesn't get home and has to remain overnight in San Francisco or Oakland.

The cost of his travel alone means that such a lifestyle isn't for everyone. Just his airline travel, without considering the costs of two commuter cars, is more than a minimum-wage worker earns. Mr. von Bradinski lives at a level of luxury that is unimaginable for a lot of the other people in his community.

So it is good to be back at home. I've got a lot o work that needs to be done today. Tomorrow is another busy day and next week is Vacation Bible School at our church, which means no days off and being at the church every evening of the week. I'm

starting the week a little bit tired from travel. But I'm not complaining. My commute to work is shorter than the drive to the airport. The trip home isn't bad, either.

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July 16, 2017 – God Loves Diversity

Here's a bit of trivia for Sunday morning: There are approximately 4,740 species of frogs around the world. The reason that the number is approximate is that scientists are still occasionally discovering new species and, sadly, from time to time a species goes extinct, although that, too, is hard to determine for certain because years can go by without anyone seeing a particular species and then it is rediscovered. Around 120 species of amphibians have disappeared since 1980. Amphibians include frogs, toads and salamanders, so there is even more diversity there. You get the picture. The world in which we live is rich with variation and diversity. The globe loves lots of different species and variations within sub species.

Jesus told his disciples, "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" Many rooms, many people, and a place for you.

Later, in the book of Acts, we read: "Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language."

The Creator loves diversity and many different species.
The Christ prepares space for diversity and many different people.
The Spirit addresses diversity and speaks to each in their own language.

Creator, Christ, Spirit - Holy Trinity - all in love with great diversity.

Maybe we aren't supposed to all be the same. Maybe our discomfort with those who are different is misplaced.

This morning our worship will include the reading of the story of Jacob and Esau and the exchange of their birthright. The story has many more details, but basically, in that culture at that time, the first-born son received the bulk of the inheritance. It might not have been fair but it was the way of those times. Esau and Jacob were twins, so they were the same age, but Esau had been born first, so he was in line for the inheritance. At one point Esau agrees to give his inheritance to his brother. It probably wasn't a legally binding action, and there is more to the story than the moment when he traded his birthright for a bowl of stew, but the basic story has been part of the traditions of our

people for generations. It provides the set-up for other Jacob and Esau stories that follow in the biblical narrative.

The whole story takes place in the context of a promise that God made to their grandfather Abraham that his lineage would become a great nation with many people. Thus the inheritance is more than the property and wealth of the father, but also the promise - a place in the lineage that is moving forward to the day when the people will be a mighty nation. The promise is not fulfilled in a single generation, but rather something that takes place over many, many generations.

Our Bible is filled with stories of how this lineage - this line of generations becomes more and more complex. Naomi goes to a foreign country and her sons marry foreign wives. Then her sons die and it appears that the family line has reached a dead end, but Naomi's foreign-born daughter-in-law refuses to leave her said and later becomes a mother and the lineage continues even though the genetic chain was broken.

God's love of diversity is played out in the very genealogies that are recorded in our scriptures. Our story is complex and filled with all kinds of unexpected twists and turns.

All of this leaves us a bit uncomfortable with some of the trends towards polarization in our current situation. We keep being divided into segments and labeled in terms of our differences. Republican or Democrat? Watch Fox news or another channel? What color is your skin? Where were you born? What language do you speak? What religious affiliations do you claim? What kind of clothes do you wear? Do you live in a Marijuana-legal state or does your state ban the substance? The list goes on and on and on. All too often we think of these differences as an invitation to choose sides and declare our allegiance to specific ideas or ways of living.

God, however, isn't distressed with all of this. God loves diversity. In God's eyes, disagreement is acceptable. Difference is desired. We don't have to all be the same.

How one thinks of this diversity can make a big difference in how one relates to others. There are Christians who believe that the commandment to go forth to all nations with Jesus' teaching is all about converting others to our faith - they see their responsibility to turn those who are not Christian into Christians. Others of us believe that our calling is to show love and compassion to all we meet and trust God to reveal what God chooses to reveal to others. We do not need to convert others to our way of life, our way of thinking, or our set of beliefs. The goal is not to make everyone belong to the same religion.

This difference has been apparent within Christianity for as long as Christianity has existed on the planet. I don't expect it to disappear in our time. Like Abraham, having received God's promise, we are naive to think that things will be all resolved in just the short span of our lives. God operates on a much bigger time frame.

So back to Jacob and Esau. As the story unfolds, the reality is that God isn't constrained by the conventions of human inheritance law. After a lot of soul-searching Jacob finally realizes that reconciliation with his brother is the most important thing and the stories of both become important in the telling of the story of the lineage of our people. Sometimes it seems as if we have also inherited the ability to struggle over our lineage.

God, however, loves us all with no exceptions. That is the heart of the story.

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July 17, 2017 – Not Close to Perfection

Yesterday afternoon, I engaged in a simple exercise with a small group of friends. Using a journal as our guide, we spent some time thinking about our values and then about how we actually invest our time. Each of us discovered that there was some discrepancy between our stated values and the way we actually spend our time. The question for our discussion was, "Is how we spend our time a reflection of our actual values?" In other words, are our true values expressed in our actions rather than in what we say and think? It was a topic for some very reflective discussion.

I think that many of us have a vision of perfection - our version of a life well lived. But the realities of life force us to make compromises. Sometimes the pressures of life become so intense that just surviving is all we are capable of accomplishing. As was mentioned in the conversation yesterday, sometimes just muddling through life is all we can manage.

It is one thing to purchase local foods and spend hours cooking healthy and delicious meals while engaging in conversation with close friends. It is something different for a single mom to be working three jobs and barely finding enough energy to listen to her children when she gets home and gets them fed before collapsing to sleep on the sofa because she doesn't have the energy to go into her bedroom. Living a life that is consistent with one's values is, in some sense, a luxury of a certain amount of income. When you are struggling to make ends meet, sometimes you have to compromise on some of your ideals.

Reflecting on yesterday's conversation has intensified what has already been a struggle for me with Psalm 101. Proclaimed by the Revised Standard Version as "A Psalm of David," it spells out a vision of a perfect life: "I will give heed to the way that is blameless."

"I will walk with integrity of heart
within my house;

I will not set before my eyes
anything that is base.”

And the psalm goes on with a litany of the evil that will be destroyed and the good that will be embraced by the psalmist.

My first problem with the psalm is its attribution. Is it really a Psalm of David? And if so, how can David claim a way that is blameless or integrity of heart? The king who abused his power and turned his philandering into murder hardly can claim to have live a life of perfection. His friend Nathan had to carry the news of God’s judgement to him because he was so out of touch with the ways of God at one point in his life.

David was a mighty king and will be forever remembered. But he was hardly blameless.

Does the Psalm set a standard that is simply too high for real humans to achieve?

I seriously attempt to live a good life and to reflect my values in my decisions and actions. But I have given up on perfection. That last line isn’t even original. It is from a poem by Kilian McDonnell. The 94-year-old Benedictine monk is a leader in interfaith dialogue and didn’t begin writing poetry until he was 75. Here is the poem from which I got the line:

“Perfection, Perfection”
I have had it with perfection.
I have packed my bags,
I am out of here.
Gone.
As certain as rain
will make you wet,
perfection will do you
in.
It droppeth not as dew
upon the summer grass
to give liberty and green
joy.
Perfection straineth out
the quality of mercy,
withers rapture at its
birth.
Before the battle is half begun,
cold probity thinks
it can’t be won, concedes the
war.
I’ve handed in my notice,

given back my keys,
signed my severance check, I
quit.

Hints I could have taken:
Even the perfect chiseled form of
Michelangelo's radiant David
squints,
the Venus de Milo
has no arms,
the Liberty Bell is
cracked.

I'm with McDonnell. And I love his wicket sense of humor.

I simply have accepted that even though I work hard to live out the values in which I believe, I will make mistakes and fall short and be in need of confession again and again. Among the skills I continue to cultivate is the art of apology.

Omid Safi writes about what he calls "the theology of cracked spaces." Life is not a smooth, linear climb to the mountaintop of success, but often a messy, series of falling flat on one's face, bouncing back, and falling slightly less awkwardly the next time and the next and the next. Our relationships with each other and with God are a series of events which require healing and reconciliation. And it occurs over and over and over again.

I was introduced to the Japanese art of kintsukuroi by Safi. In that art, cups, chalices, mugs and dishes that are cracked are repaired with gold or silver. The practice is interwoven with the philosophy of wabi-wabi, which is the art of finding beauty in broken things or old things.

My heroes Desmond Tutu and Henri Nouwen both have written about wounded healers. We are all wounded healers. Imperfect, cracked, full of mistakes and very human, nonetheless we seek to bring healing to the wounds of others.

We live our imperfect lives in an imperfect world.

I guess that is part of the reason for Psalm 101. It helps us to envision a better world. It gives us a goal toward which to strive. Even though the goal is unattainable in this life, it is a standard by which we can compare our own efforts.

But I know, even as I read the psalm, that it won't be I who destroys "all the wicked in the land." I know that I cannot isolate myself from those who are imperfect and surround myself only with a community of those who walk "in the way the is blameless."

I take consolation in knowing that my real friends also struggle with the gaps and mistakes of real living.

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July 18, 2017 – At the Lake



One of the things that people ask me a lot at this time of the year is, “Have you been paddling this summer?” Those who know me, even a little bit, know that I love to go out in a boat on the lake. Most summers I have a canoe on the roof of my car most of the time so I’m ready to head to the lake at a moment’s notice. There is a subtle difference this year, however. I’ve been trying to row as much as possible in place of the paddling of canoes. I have a small row boat, that I built over the winter of 2011-12 and named for our grandson. The “Mr. E” (pun intended) is a small yawl that can be car topped, but getting it up and down is a bit of a hassle, so most of the time I keep it on a trailer ready to head for the lake.

I’ve already blogged about the difference between rowing and paddling this year, so I won’t go into that, except to say that for many people the distinction isn’t very important.

Whether I have two oars or a single paddle or whether I'm facing the bow or the stern, what they recognize is that I am in a boat that is powered around the lake by my own efforts and not by a motor. I haven't got anything against motor boats, it is just that I don't own one and haven't found a need to own one. And I need the exercise, so having an activity that is vigorous that I enjoy so much is a good fit.

Anyway, I really haven't been on the lake as much as I want, but that may be something that is nearly impossible. I have been out many times and enjoy getting on the lake as much as possible.

We do an evening Vacation Bible School at our church and so I was able to get out on the lake yesterday morning and still carry out my responsibilities for the day. My boat is light weight enough to make launching a very simple task compared to some boats so I can get on the water quickly. I keep my oar leathers soft and supple with a bit of grease, but they still creak a bit when I pull hard. Maneuvering around the docks and other boats used to be a bit of a challenge when I first started rowing, but these days I don't have to think about which way to plant each oar to get my boat to go the direction I want.

Similarly, a quick glance over my shoulder enables me to line up my boat and a few strokes gives me a gentle wake that is a visual clue to rowing in the right direction. I probably don't row an exactly straight line, but I can definitely make the boat go where I want it to go and I don't run into things.

Mostly I enjoy just being on the water, watching and listening to the rest of the world.

There is a pair of bald eagles who have been having a fairly successful run of fishing at the lake this summer. I am not sure where their nest is, as I see one or both of them in the trees, but they've been fishing all around the lake this summer and I haven't yet figured out where they head when they aren't fishing. An eagle's dive for a fish is really impressive. They circle high above the water and when they make their dive it ends with a splash. At the last minute before entering the water they turn around with their talons down and their head up. The transition from a high-speed dive to lifting the fish out of the water requires a bit of effort and there is usually a bit of splashing as they take off. Sometimes I wonder, briefly, if they will have to drop the fish to be able to fly, but I've never seen one drop a fish.

Eagles are big birds. And they've been catching some very respectable-sized fish.

Getting to watch one successful fish catch is reward enough for me any day.

Around the edges of the lake the little ducks are big enough to be feeding alongside their parents. Ducks are omnivorous, so they eat both plants and small animals. They will eat insects from the surface of the water, but mostly, they are foraging for food

under the surface. There are tiny mollusks and tasty plants in the shallows. When the ducks put their heads down to forage, their tails stick straight up. It is a comical sight and I can often see a dozen or more duck bottoms sticking up at the same time.

The geese are still around, but they tend to spread out a lot at this time of the year. I don't notice them as much as I do earlier in the spring or later in the fall. I think that many of the geese I see at the lake are transient birds, heading north in the spring and south in the fall and stopping by to eat and refresh themselves for their trips. There are geese who nest at the lake and I've seen them with strings of goslings, but it certainly seems like there are fewer geese on the lake now than was the case a couple of months ago.

I can tell when I've reached the other side of the lake and am drawing close to the shore by the sound of the red-winged blackbird in the cattails. They provide the background music for the entire lake, at least in the early morning before the water skiers and wake boarders are up and about.

The lake has a different mood every day, so rowing or paddling is never boring, even though it is a fairly small lake and I've explore every inch of the shoreline.

So the answer is "yes." I've been to the take quite a bit this summer. And I'm eager to go again as soon as possible.

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July 19, 2017 – Silver Lining



I've posted plenty of pictures of sunrises in my blog over the years. Many of them have been taken from Sheridan Lake, which gives a good reflection of whatever is happening in the sky. But ours is a place of beautiful sunsets as well. Last night I was so moved by the beauty of the evening that I stopped and climbed on the roof of my car to take a picture of the sun setting behind the clouds. Pictures never really do justice to sunrises and sunsets, which are absolutely more beautiful than the camera's representation of them.

I was able to take the picture because I was able to leave the church a little bit early. Others were taking responsibility for the last few moments of Vacation Bible School and handling the locking of the building for the night. I slipped out of the parking lot while the children and their parents were enjoying their evening snack and headed home to do a bit of preparation for the activities of today.

I had just settled on top of the bed with a book when my phone rang. I knew from the ring tone that the call would mean that I would need to get up and go out one more time. I have programmed my phone with a distinctive ring for the members of our suicide first responders team. I wasn't on call last night, but the team runs short of people in the summer when lots of folks are traveling and sometimes they just start calling down the list until a team can be formed. It took me about five minutes to get out the door and

another ten to drive to our meeting place. From there another few minutes drive meant that we arrived on scene about a half hour after the initial call.

Thirty minutes is a kind of sweet spot for this kind of response. It gives just enough time for the shock and disbelief to give way to a kind of numbness. It gives investigators enough time to complete their work of evidence gathering. It means we arrive while all of the law enforcement officers are on scene but after they have completed their initial interviews so that we will be allowed to speak with the survivors.

But these calls are never fun.

As we diffused the incident after we had provided care for the survivors, we spent a few minutes trying to figure out what is going on in our town. The past week has been especially tough with a near-record number of calls and responses to suicides in our community. Although that was preceded by a few calm weeks, the overall picture for the year points to the possibility that we will set yet another record for the number of suicides in our community.

When we get especially busy handling calls and the follow-up that is required we have less time to analyze what is occurring. Our energy is consumed with simply dealing with each situation.

My second trip home for the night occurred in the kind of darkness that occurs during the wee hours when there is not much traffic. There were occasional flashes of lightning on the horizon, but other than that, it was impossible to assess the sky condition beyond the fact that there were few stars visible. I slowed my car as I passed near the place where I had stopped earlier. This time it was for a deer crossing the road. I've noticed that the big bucks, with their antlers coming out of velvet, are moving around quite a bit these days. I've seen several in places where I don't expect to see them. It is the nature of the deer in our neighborhood. You learn to be cautious. You also learn that if you drive around this country often enough, an incident with a deer isn't a matter of "if," but rather of "when."

I was lucky once again last night. I saw the deer in time to slow the car and avoid a collision. But it was a reminder of what can happen on a dark night when I'm returning home a bit tired from the activities of the day.

My evening was a cakewalk compared with the difficult path walked by the survivors who were struggling to discover some bit of meaning in the midst of the grief and horror and disbelief of what has happened in their lives. The death of a loved one by suicide comes as a shock. When your day begins, you have no idea that it would end the way that it does. There is nothing you can do to prepare yourself for the experiences that unfold. Trauma overwhelms. Emotions become unpredictable. Images sear themselves

into your brain and the memories that flood you are often deeply painful. Victims frequently report a sense of “going crazy,” or “loosing my mind.”

It can be a bit of help to have been through similar experiences with others. Members of our team can offer a bit of perspective based on experience. We have learned to be patient and to trust the people we serve with their grief. We also work hard to connect people with support services in our community as early in the process of grief as possible. We know that those who receive help and support are a bit less likely to experience additional traumatic experiences as they take the journey of grief.

Calls like last night's, however, never become routine. I hope they never do. Each person's experience is unique and there are no categories to contain that experience. Each person deserves individual attention and care.

Of course after responding to such a call it takes a while to get myself calmed down so that I can sleep. More minutes of lost sleep that won't be recovered in the days to come. But when I remember the evening, I have a gift of an image that is filled with beauty and glory. The sunset I witnessed is a memory worth treasuring. Amidst the darkness of this life there are clouds with a silver lining.

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July 20, 2017 – Vacation Bible School

Last night we passed the mid point in our annual Vacation Bible School. Three days have passed, two remain. Attendance was up again last night, which means, in part, that some of the children will receive only part of the benefits of the program because they were unable to attend all five sessions. We have learned to live with this reality. While we certainly would like it if families made participation in church a priority and got their children to all five evenings' program, we know that the families of our congregation are complex and that they have a lot of other things going on in their lives. We've learned to celebrate the participation of the children whether they come for one or two nights or are able to come every evening for the whole week.

Vacation Bible School gives us the opportunity for extended contact and teaching even when a child only attends one night. By sharing a meal, stories and songs, group building time, mission projects, crafts and games, a child receives about four times the contact of a single day's participation in our Sunday School program. Because the stories and themes are coordinated throughout all of the activities of the evening, there is reinforcement to the teaching. One night of Vacation Bible School is roughly equivalent to a month's participation in Sunday School. Because of the cumulative effects of review and reinforcement, a student who participates in all five nights receives instruction equivalent to almost a half of a year's worth of Sunday School programs.

It is important for us to remember this as we work on providing the best Vacation Bible School program that we are able. We are given a great gift and a great trust when people bring their children to our program. Despite our occasional frustration at the lack of participation, we have a great opportunity for Christian teaching and learning in our program.

We have known for a long time that concentrated periods of community building and teaching are important for the life of the church and for the growth of our children. There have been many studies about the positive effects of church camp on the lives of the participants. One simple study is to ask ministers who are actively serving congregations about the impact of camp on their spiritual journeys. A surprising number of ministers discovered their vocation through participation in summer camps. One week at camp can be a life-changing event.

Of course Christian Education is not just about producing ministers for the perpetuation of the institutional church. More important than the impact on the nurturing of the call to ministry are the life lessons that participants take into the world with them. The children in our program are participating in hands on mission that will make them more sensitive to the needs of their neighbors. Their gifts of fruit and toothbrushes to help local ministries will be appreciated. More important, their awareness of the work done by these organizations will make it more likely that they will support these and other programs as they mature into their adult lives.

Being familiar with bible stories, knowing songs of faith, and simply remembering that the church is a place of extravagant welcome all open new possibilities for the children as they grow into their adult lives.

Like much of the work we do in the church, the results of our efforts are often long away and occur in places where we do not observe. If a participant is somehow moved to help another person years from now, we may have played a small role in helping to form that person's character, but we will never know for sure the impact of our work.

Providing programs for children is often a thankless task. The professional ministers and volunteers who craft those programs don't occupy the most visible roles in our church community. Christian Education is not one of the major themes of the church budget. Its small line item is dwarfed by other programs and priorities. Churches, like other institutions, often spend more maintaining the building and keeping existing programs than investing in the future.

It would be a mistake, however, to measure the value of Christian Education by counting the number of dollars spent. It is a business of relationships. The friendships formed, the adult mentors encountered, the life-enriching stories learned - these are all literally priceless.

It wouldn't be fair to compare the impact of Vacation Bible School with other on-going programs of the church. Does it have more impact than weekly worship? Does it teach more than mission or fellowship groups? The questions are meaningless, because those programs work together. When a child has participated in Vacation Bible School, worship becomes more meaningful to that child and they are able to gain more from participation. When a youngster engages in hands-on mission in Vacation Bible School, that person is better able to understand their need to participate in other mission programs and projects over a lifetime.

I see Vacation Bible School as an investment. It might not be an investment in our own institution. Some children who are participating this week will never become active members of our particular congregation. Their impact on the world will occur in different ways in different places. Perhaps one will become a leader in a different congregation. Perhaps another will give time and energy to support an important community project. We make the investment without being able to predict the results.

So as we look at the final couple of days of Vacation Bible School, we can find the energy to overcome our tiredness and the motivation to keep the program going and the projects moving forward because we believe in the future. We also believe that the children who participate in the program are valuable and worthy of our best efforts as teachers and guides in the faith.

Some of our Sunday-only participants in our church won't even notice all that has gone into our Vacation Bible School program. Hopefully, however, they will learn enough to provide their support for the program to continue. It might be one of the most important programs we offer.

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July 21, 2017 – Time

It seems like I am hearing from a lot of people that they are "pressed for time" or "short of time." It is a common theme in many conversations that I have with people of all different ages. A retiree commented to me this week about the lack of time in retirement. A young adult told me that there is never enough time. A parent of preschool children said, "I have no time for myself." A mid-career person inquiring about a volunteer program asked, "Where would I get the time?"

On the one hand it seems like time is a commodity that is dispensed free of charge in equal amounts. We all have 24 hours in a day. If we assume 8 hours for sleep, that leaves 16 hours a day or 112 hours a week. Assuming a 40 hour work week that leaves 72 hours each week for discretionary activities. Of course there are some very basic tasks like eating and bathing and providing care for children that consume some of

those hours. But each of us has, at least in theory about the same amount of time each week.

Of course, the number of weeks in a lifetime varies widely. People have much different spans of life and some experience more pain, illness, accidents, or other events than others. So there is at least a sense in which the distribution of time is unequal. Not everyone gets the same amount.

Then, of course, is the issue of the quality of time. Although a high-quality timepiece can measure even seconds, minutes and hours, we all have had the experience that in our perception time invested in different activities has a different feel. 15 minutes holding a newborn baby feels qualitatively different than 15 minutes waiting in line at the bank. You can measure the same amount of time, but how it feels can be vastly different depending on the experience or activity.

I tell people that I usually carry two different ways of telling what time it is. On my wrist, most of the time, I wear a watch. My choice is a watch that has a dial with numbers 1 through 12 and hands for seconds, minutes and hours. I learned to read such a device when I was a child and I've been looking at that kind of timepiece throughout my life. The second device is my cell phone, which has a digital clock that displays the time. I am fond of saying that I use my watch to tell me about what time it is and my cell phone to tell me exactly what time it is. There are lots of times in my life when knowing about what time it is is enough. If I have an upcoming meeting, just seeing that it is not yet the top of the hour is enough information. If I am anticipating a drive across town, I don't know for sure how many minutes it will take, so I make a rough estimate.

I use my phone for an alarm clock. When I ask it to remind me of a meeting, it will remind me at exactly the interval before the meeting I specify.

But I don't really live my life in "exactly." It is more like, "about." After nearly 40 years as an ordained minister, I can't tell you exactly how much time it takes to make a hospital call. I might say, "about 15 minutes," but I once spent more than four hours with a family in a hospital room as together we witnessed a very serious struggle between life and death. I know, from experience that I usually think that I can make more calls in a day than I do. I end up spending a few more minutes here, a few more minutes there, and pretty soon the day is finished and my list of people to call has quite a few people whose visits will have to wait for another day. Just this week I stopped by the jail to make an appointment to visit an inmate. The clerk, who knows me, asked me, "How much time do you need?" I responded, "It won't take more than half an hour." She responded, "I'll put you down for an hour."

Over the past month, with very comfortable weather in Rapid City, I have decided to walk to meetings and activities, when they are reasonably close to the church. According to the application on my phone, which is much more into "exact" than I am,

I've been averaging between three and four miles a day of walking and six or seven flights of stairs climbed. The thing about this is that not long ago, I was driving to and from the same meetings, and I haven't noticed that I have any less time in my days because I walk. You would think that the fact that I walk so much slower than I drive I would have to adjust my day for the amount of time it takes to walk. I do start out for meetings a bit earlier, but I have discovered that I can do a lot of thinking and forming ideas while I am walking and that some tasks, writing this blog for example, take less time if I am doing quite a bit of walking.

Still, I don't really understand time. There are definitely occasions when I wish that a day had just a few more hours, but I'd probably invest them in sleeping if that were the case. Looking back, it seems as if the years went by much faster than I expected when I was younger. But I'm not one who wishes that this was a different era of my own life. I like being the age that I am. I loved being a father of young children, but being a grandpa is one of the best of life's experiences and I wouldn't want to go back.

So I think about time as I walk along. But I don't really understand it.

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July 22, 2017 – Thinking of Sleep

Have you ever thought about how smoke alarms save lives? There is a lot of evidence to back the use of smoke alarms. That loud, annoying noise that you hear when the alarm is tested is effective in rousing people from sleep so that they can escape a burning building. The reason they work is that of the five senses, hearing remains the most intact during sleep. There is likely an evolutionary reason for this. Primitive peoples were vulnerable to nocturnal predators. They learned to listen for danger even as they were on the edges of sleep. Dr. Chris Winter, a neurologist and the author of "The Sleep Solution," has been helping people, including many professional athletes, develop better sleep habits for at least 20 years. In his book he cites a recent study in which scientists would play a series of words - like "run," "swim" or "jump" - and observed that people's brains were processing the words in their sleep. Human brains pay attention to sounds.

In contrast to our sense of hearing, our brain doesn't process much scent-related input as we sleep. Even though scents are great memory triggers and can carry strong psychological associations. The smell of smoke, which is quite easily identified as a danger signal by humans, often will not disrupt a soundly sleeping individual. Hence the effectiveness of smoke alarms to save lives.

I got to thinking about human senses and sleep last night as I was nodding off, which isn't my best time for rational thought. The day had been incredibly smoky. Smoke from fires in Montana blanketed the hills with a thick haze. It irritated my eyes and generally

made the day, especially the afternoon, miserable to go outside. However, the wind picked up in the late afternoon and cleared out some of the smoke. By the time to go to bed, I opened up the bedroom windows and as I lay there in the dark was no longer aware of the smoke that had been bothersome for much of the day. It was a long day for me, which started with a 6:15 am meeting and continued through the closing ceremonies for Vacation Bible School after supper in the evening. I was very tired as I climbed into my bed. The fact that the smoke was not bothering me was a relief.

Still, I had trouble settling into sleep last night. Children who live in our neighborhood were allowed to stay up a bit later than usual, and I had headed to bed a bit earlier than usual. I could hear the children playing outside as I lay down. There was nothing out of line or unusual about the sound. The kids were having a good time jumping on a trampoline, which makes a bit of noise and were laughing together. The sound I was hearing was completely normal and carried no sense of alarm. Still, I found myself focusing on the sounds of the children, imagining in my mind what they were doing and remembering how much I loved summer evenings when I was young.

While my brain was completely able to let go of the smell of smoke that lingered in the evening air, it could not, for a little while, let go of processing the sounds of our neighborhood.

I often find myself waking in the night to sounds. I hear my neighbor who often comes home in the wee hours of the morning. The sound of his car tires on the gravel driveway and the raising of his garage door can stir me from sleep. His love of loud music can keep me awake when I am trying to sleep. I also hear the singing of the coyotes, which is somehow soothing and lulls me to sleep like a lullaby and frequently wake to bird sounds as a clue that it is time to get out of bed. I guess that is a clear demonstration of how our brains get ahead of our senses. From an evolutionary standpoint, I should be alert to the coyotes, who are predators, and not alert to the birds, which pose no threat at all. I seem to have it all backwards. The bottom line, however, is that my brain continues to process sounds even as I am trying to sleep.

Sleep is a complex neurological state and we don't have much control over it. We sleep when we are tired and we wake to a wide variety of different stimuli. I've never been very good at sleeping. For much of my adult life, I convinced myself that I simply don't need as much sleep as some people. I've always been an early riser and I am at my most productive in the morning hours, so I simply get up and get going when sleep fades. I'm pretty good at napping, so I give myself the gift of a bit of sleep in the middle of the day when needed, depending on my schedule of meetings and activities. Usually, I'm pretty good at getting to sleep quickly. Then, a few hours later, I find myself lying awake in bed, thinking all kinds of thoughts that don't seem to aid in returning to sleep.

Dr. Winter, the sleep expert, wrote that "routine lets the brain know what's coming." He advises developing a specific routine for going to sleep each night. His advice doesn't

go very far with me. My life has a few routines, but the length of my days and the shortness of my nights is far from routine. For all of my professional life, I have had to develop and maintain the ability to rise from sleep and go to work when a crisis occurs. My phone, which connects me to events in the community is on the headboard of my bed and several times each month I receive a call that prompts me to get up unexpectedly to respond to a crisis. I have to be wide awake enough to assemble a response team and drive safely - usually to an unfamiliar address - the be present to serve people in crisis.

So I still haven't got the sleep thing down, even after years of practice. I guess it concerns me enough that I occasionally read a book or article about the subject. But so far it hasn't gotten me to do much to alter my lifestyle. After all, I've found that exhaustion is a pretty good recipe for sleep.

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July 23, 2017 – I am Well

One of the questions that I am asked nearly every day is, "How are you?" My most common answer is, "I am well." I've been giving that answer for many years. It has seemed to me that it is a bit more accurate than "I am good." Technically, good is better grammar. Good is an adjective, which can be applied to the subject of the sentence, I. Well is an adverb, which is used to modify a verb. It works when it is applied to an action verb, like run. I run well makes sense. It is less clear when applied to a verb of being, such as "am." It almost implies that the speaker thinks that there are different states of being, some better than others. Conversational language, however, often takes liberties with the technical rules of grammar.

In my usage, however, I intend to reference my health. Well-being is a way that we think of a kind of physical and mental health that is a positive blessing. Somehow, the simple phrase conveys a sense that my health is good, which is what I am intending to say. I don't know how it is received by the person who asked the question. Perhaps it seems a bit strange simply because it isn't the most common answer given to that standard question.

The thing is, however, most of the people who ask me that question genuinely want to know how I am. They aren't just asking a polite question to make conversation. They are people who genuinely care about my health and well-being. As a result I try to offer a polite answer that is slightly different from the usual.

The truth is that I enjoy excellent health, have been blessed with a good life, and generally have a positive attitude towards life. I'm a pretty upbeat person. I also want to be an honest person. And honestly, like every one else, some days are better than others. Some seasons are more challenging than others. It might be possible to

respond to the question, “How are you?” with a lengthy discussion of a lot of different factors and topics. That probably isn’t what the questioner meant with the question. Most of the time it isn’t appropriate for me to tell the whole story of my complex life in on conversation.

The deep truth is that I am a complex and often confusing mix of emotions and perceptions. I am way less than perfect. I make mistakes. I sometimes say things that I regret. I shortchange my personal disciplines. I often feel short of time and rushed. But I have also learned, through the hard experiences of many years of living, that it isn’t always about me. There is much more to this world than just my reaction to it. I have a friend who says that the reason that we develop wrinkles as we age is that our ego shrivels up. The line always brings a smile to my face. I kind of like the image. I’m not sure that it is fully accurate, but I do think that me ego gets in the way a bit less than it did when I was younger. When I was in my twenties, I was pretty full of myself. I wanted to be a significant player in every conversation. I rushed to speak when silence might have been the better part. These days I’m learning a little bit. I am a better listener. I don’t feel a need to get my “two cents” worth in every conversation.

That doesn’t mean that I keep my opinions to myself. This blog is testament to my continuing need to express myself in words. Parker Palmer, who has written nine books and hundreds of periodical articles, says, “If all the sentences I’ve published were laid end-to-end, they’d almost equal the longest sentence James Joyce wrote.” It is a joking way of saying that he is wordy, but not the wordiest of writers. I’ll place myself in that camp as well. Not that my words have ever achieved the kind of audience that Parker Palmer or James Joyce command, just that I’m not a stranger to using a lot of words. Psychologist Erik Erikson wrote that adults face a choice between “generativity” and “stagnation.” We can choose to continue to create and offer what we know as useful, and maybe even important, learning from our mistakes and trying freshly to contribute to the world or we can sit back and rest on what we have already accomplished. Given the choice, I continue to make an attempt at generativity.. Erikson, however, would probably say it is time for me to move on to the next stage of psychosocial development, “Integrity” vs. “despair.” That, however, is an entirely different blog post.

It surprises me that I still haven’t figured out how to answer that simple question, “How are you?” Perhaps the truth is that I’m still trying to figure out how I am. I still am working on who I am. I know that I am more than the work I do, but defining myself in terms of what I do for a living has been a very important part of my understanding of myself. I am a pastor. I love the work I do. But I am also aging and I know that the day will come when I will no longer be able to do the work that I love so much. When that time comes will I find the grace to step aside and allow someone else to do the job? Will I begin to describe myself in terms of what I’ve already done instead of the current moment? I’ll only know the answer to those questions when I get there, I suppose. For now the more relevant question is, “What do I want to give myself to?” I still am drawn to giving myself to preaching and teaching, to serving others and offering pastoral care.

How am I? I am well, thank you very much!

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July 24, 2017 – In the Garden

The Gospel reading for yesterday was Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43. It is one of Jesus' parables about wheat and weeds. In this parable, the principal character sows good wheat seed in his field, but it has a twist: "while every body was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away."

I can associate with the man who sowed the good wheat seeds. My garden is continually a mess of weeds. I hadn't really suspected my enemies of planting the weeds, but it provides an interesting twist on the parable. I guess if you want to do someone harm, planting weeds in their garden is a bit less violent than stalking them with a knife or gun. Still it seems like a dirty trick.

I don't think my weed problem is caused by other people. I'm unaware of having enemies who wish to do me harm, and if I did, I suspect that they might find more effective ways of spending their time than sneaking around in the night with bags of weed seeds. Just getting the weed seeds would be a challenge, because they aren't commercially available and aren't sold at Runnings or Tractor Supply or the hardware stores.

I do have a neighbor who has a patch of Canada thistles that seem to go untreated and they are probably a good source of seed for the thistles that I see growing in my lawn on that side of my house. But thistles aren't the problem in my garden. Creeping jenny is a problem.

Probably the biggest source of weed seeds in my garden are the weeds that I didn't pull last year. And this year I was gone at just the wrong time in terms of weed control and I have to confess that the weeds have gotten ahead of me once again, which doesn't bode well for next year.

Despite the weeds, however, the Sunflowers have risen and are the tallest plants in the garden. They'll do just fine. And I've got some squash that are big enough to spread out and keep the weeds at bay. The tomatoes are thriving and I've kept the weeds back from those plants so they are producing well. We've got lots of green tomatoes and will have ripe ones before long. The weather is just right for the tomatoes. they like the warm temperatures.

Still, the plan employed in the parable doesn't seem like it would make for successful gardening in our country. In the parable, the man who planted the wheat is asked by his

servants about weeding the plot of land. He gives them instructions to let the weeds be, “for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.” Then he adds, “Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

That isn't a good strategy for my garden. The weeds would simply choke out most of the plants I intended to grow and all that would be there in the fall would be weeds. I don't keep ahead of the weeds, but it seems to me that pulling a few of them is a good idea.

I know, the parable is really about gardening tips. I get it. Just in case there is any doubt, Verses 36-43 provide an explanation about the parable. We can trust God to make judgements between good and evil. We don't need to be the ones to try to get rid of those who we think don't fit in.

I was thinking about the parable last night as I went out to do a little watering in the garden. I didn't know that I would wake to a thundershower and brief, but heavy rain this morning. I frowned at the weeds, but I didn't have enough energy to pull them last night. It had been a long day after a long week and I was in no mood for gardening at the time.

Actually, I'm not much of a gardener. I have visions of being self-sufficient and growing our own food. I like the idea of using some of our yard for food crops. And I really like fresh tomatoes. But the truth is that successful gardeners give more time and energy to the process than I.

Every few years I attend a conference where someone is touting the benefits of gardening. At one such workshop, the presenter said that every minister should have a garden. The sights, sounds and smells of the garden promote relaxation and reduce stress. The food grown in the garden is the most nutritional food you can eat. Gardening is a way to practice mindfulness.

It is good in theory. And I know there are some gardeners who have just the right attitude about their gardens. But I don't garden because I think it reduces my stress. The weeds drive me crazy. The constant battle with the deer over the plants is not my favorite. I like the deer, but they are particularly good at poking their noses through the fence to steal the leaves of my sunflowers. I haven't really monitored it, but I suspect that my blood pressure goes up when I look at all of the undone work in my garden. A real gardener would spend more time and would enjoy weeding more than I.

So my garden isn't working as a stress reducer. And it doesn't make for a good parable about God's reign of love. And it doesn't produce very much food. Still I seem to feel the call to plant a garden every year and each year we have a few small successes. I guess the main thing about my garden is that it is one of the areas of life where I allow myself to be imperfect. I know that there are others with much finer gardens, but that doesn't

bother me. I'm willing to allow that mess of weeds to constitute my garden and I putter at it from time to time.

Like all gardeners and farmers, I'm already thinking about next year and how much better it will be. Hope springs eternal - especially in the garden.

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July 25, 2017 – Incredible Power

I grew up north of Yellowstone National Park. My father's business involved regular flights over the park, checking for smoke plumes that indicated fires. I was fortunate enough to have flown on fire patrol with him several times and enjoyed both the flying and the spectacular views of the park. The rising steam from the hot springs at Mammoth and Norris as well as the geyser basin that includes Old Faithful were easily visible from the air. The spectacular upper and lower falls of the Yellowstone River are gorgeous as you fly over. I was only six years old when a massive earthquake shook the entire region. The Yellowstone Park earthquake, also known as the Hebgen Lake earthquake, was the strongest and deadliest earthquake to hit Montana in recorded history. New geysers and cracks formed in the park. Buildings were damaged and destroyed. The quake forced the closure of Old Faithful Lodge for repairs. Buildings on the campus of Montana State University in Bozeman sustained quake damage.

We are told by scholars, however, that the event was relatively minor compared with what is possible in the region. These days, scientists refer to the Yellowstone supervolcano. It is one of the most studied seismic regions of the world. The supervolcano has produced three supereruptions in the past 2.1 million years. The first produced 2,500 times the amount of ash produced by the 1980 Mount St. Helens eruption. Scientists predict that a large scale eruption of Yellowstone would spread ash all over both the North and South American continents. Virtually all of the organic matter, including plants and animals would die in such an eruption. Evacuation would be nearly impossible on a short order because of the number of people involved. Once the eruption begins, water supplies, ground transportation and electricity systems would all fail.

Across the world there are three areas known as supervolcanoes: Yellowstone, Campi Flegrei (near Naples, Italy), and Toba (in Indonesia). Eruptions of supervolcanoes don't happen all that often. Toba last erupted 75,000 years ago. Yellowstone's last eruption was 640,000 years ago. Campi Flegrei, also known as the Phlegraean Fields, erupted in 1538, but much of the ash from that eruption landed on oceans rather than on dry land. Some scientists believe that earlier eruptions for Campi Flegrei may have contributed to the extinction of Neanderthals in Europe.

Despite the discoveries of modern science and the extensive seismometers and other detection devices used to study volcanoes, scientists still have no idea where we are in terms of the life cycles of volcanoes. Recent eruptions at Mount St. Helens and Eyjafjallajökull gave some warning, but scientists are uncertain about when the next eruptions will occur.

Scientists do have enough understanding of the processes of volcanoes, however, to know that it is not a matter of “if” these volcanoes will erupt, but rather “when” those eruptions will occur. Knowing that there will be a gigantic volcanic event sometime in the next 50 million years doesn’t have much of an impact on how we live our lives in the present.

We live in a world with massive forces that are simply beyond our control. And our planet is just one tiny part of a massive universe with incredible energy and motion that we are only beginning to understand.

I have lived most of my life well within the impact zone of the Yellowstone supervolcano, and the presence of the forces deep within the earth underneath where I live does not come to my consciousness very often. From time to time I read an article about supervolcanoes, or feel the slight tremor of a minor earthquake, or ponder and wonder at the intensity of a hot springs or other sign of geothermal activity. For the most part, however, I live without any awareness of what is going on deep beneath the earth’s surface.

We are a part of something that is much bigger than the relatively short spans of our own lives. Events that seem to us to be momentous are fairly minor on a global scale and nearly undetectable on a universal scale. And yet, here we are, citizens on this planet with a growing awareness of the universe. At least in this one place, on this one planet, the universe has a degree of self awareness. We peer out at the universe from our precarious perch on this relatively minor planet and we ponder the meaning of it all. It is a very big thought for a very small presence.

Wondering what it all means is part of our identity. And when it comes to understanding the meaning of the universe, we are at a very elementary stage. The great accelerations in our ability to use computers to extend mathematical theory has given us a certain perspective. Scientists are now looking for dark matter and dark energy, the existence of which is projected by mathematical models of how various bodies move within the universe. We are making some significant discoveries, but each discovery enables us to comprehend how little we really really understand.

Our religious tradition reminds us that we have long pondered the nature of the universe and felt ourselves inadequate to obtain full comprehension. Last Sunday’s Psalm says, in part, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it.” We live with an awareness that there is much more to be learned, much more to understand,

than our capabilities. The Psalmist concludes that despite a lack of full understanding, the reality of God is inescapable. God's eternal presence exists beyond the farthest reaches of our imaginations. No matter how much we learn, or how much scientific knowledge we acquire, there is still and unknown that is forever beyond our grasp.

Still, we experience God in relationship with us. It is one of the great paradoxes of the universe. God, who is beyond the most distant star in the universe is also close and intimately engaged in our human lives.

So I won't be spending much of my energy worrying about the next supervolcano eruption. But I will continue to ponder the presence of God in the vastness of this incredible and fascinating universe.

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July 26, 2017 – Contemplating the Coming Eclipse

August 21 lands on a Monday this year. Monday is my day off and I'm thinking of taking a little drive. I could take highway 79 south to where it joins 385 outside of Hot Springs and continue south through Chadron to Alliance. It is a drive of about 2 and a half hours. I would be in the path of the total solar eclipse. Web sites like GreatAmericanEclipse.com proclaim it as "easily the most spectacular sight in nature." It might be worth a little bit of effort to see such a sight.

On the other hand, I suspect that there are a lot of people who already have the idea. The path of total eclipse is about 60 or 70 miles wide and goes right across the nation from Salem, Oregon to Summerville, South Carolina. I suspect, however, that I'm not the only one who has had the idea of trying to avoid the Interstates. Imagine the traffic congestion of 20 Woodstock festivals occurring simultaneously across the nation. Large numbers of visitors will overwhelm lodging and other resources in the path of totality. During the two minutes of totality traffic is predicted to stop on the highways. Estimates range between 1.85 million and 7.4 million people will travel to see the eclipse. Add that number to the estimated 12.25 million people who live in the path of totality and there could be some crowds.

I'm not much for crowds. And a crowd in the middle of rural Nebraska could pose a bit of a problem with finding a restroom.

So I went to a website that has advice on viewing the eclipse. It says to "arrive to your viewing location at least one (and preferably two) days in advance. Hmm. . . I work on Sundays, so getting there a day in advance is a bit of a problem, not to mention that there are no motels in the area where I plan to go. Pulling our camper would make it difficult if I get stuck in traffic. My idea was more one of pack a lunch and head out. The same website suggests that viewers rest satellite phones because cell phone systems

might be overwhelmed and stop working. That's out. I don't have a budget for this project, other than a tank of gas.

Well, it probably takes more than a tank of gas. We'd need viewing glasses (\$10) and perhaps a map of the eclipse (\$10) just in case we have to adjust our location due to weather. You can't see the eclipse through clouds.

Another option for us would be to head over to the corner of Wyoming. It is predicted to be one of the states with a low number of visitors for the eclipse. Somewhere between 48,000 and 192,000 people are predicted to travel to Wyoming for the event. Even the low estimate, however, 48,000 people, is a big crowd in these parts. Nebraska is predicted to see between 116,000 and 466,000 visitors. That's like the Sturgis motorcycle rally. And I know what the rally feels like.

The 200-person town of Glenco, Wyoming, about 200 miles north of Denver, is expecting to host 20,000 people at its viewing area at the town airport and at least an additional 30,000 at the neighboring Glenco State Park, where all of the campsites have been reserved for the days around the eclipse. The town of Glenco has been planning for the event for three years according to town clerk, Brenda Hagen.

On the other hand, I suspect that most of the visitors to Nebraska will flock to the Omaha and Lincoln areas on the other end of the state where the Interstates run and there are lots of amenities. Boise, Idaho, where we used to live is in the path of totality and I bet they'll see their motels filling up.

So, I'm contemplating my options. I've viewed partial eclipses in the past, but have never been in the path of totality. On those occasions, I made inboxes, similar to a pinhole camera with which to view the shadow of the moon coming across the face of the sun. In one case we were close enough to the path of totality to notice the decrease in light in the area.

It will take some effort and a bit of luck to view the total eclipse. Totality only lasts a few minutes, You have to be in the right place at the right time. Weather, as I have said, can impact whether or not you will see totality.

A total eclipse of the sun isn't all that rare. One occurs about every 18 months. But it is not visible at every point on the earth, so many occur in places that are distant from where I happen to be. This particular eclipse is a rare opportunity for easy viewing for many who live in the United States because of the path it takes over populated areas.

It might be a good idea to make plans pretty soon. I'm sure that as the date draws closer the hype will increase and there will be a lot of others who have the same idea that I do. I've heard of ranches in rural Oregon that are renting out parking spaces in their pastures already. If those folks don't also rent a few porta potties there could be

some uncomfortable people assembled to watch. And it is possible that viewing glasses will become a bit hard to come by in the final days before the eclipse.

Then there is the factor that talking about the eclipse might encourage more people to travel to see the eclipse. Consider the fact that five or six people read my blog every day. Some of them live in places of totality, like Boise and Idaho Falls. But some of them decide to imitate my plans. That could be another car load of viewers. Let me know if you're planning to make the trip. We could coordinate our lunch plans and have a potluck.

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July 27, 2017 – Life Goes On

A few blocks from our church is a house that I frequently see when I am walking. I don't know if the house is occupied, but it is in a sad state of disrepair. It needs new shingles on the roof and the paint is peeling from the siding. In the yard, there are some bare spots where nothing is growing and several areas where the grass has gone dormant due to lack of water. The most striking feature of the yard are a couple of very large cottonwood trees that despite having lost some rather large branches still appear to be thriving and giving glorious shade to the yard. Under those trees there are some green plants growing - probably a mixture of weeds and other plants.

In stark contrast to that yard, I visited the home of members of the church yesterday where gardening is obviously a passion of the homeowners. There were many different flower beds, brightly colored with a wide variety of different flowers. There was a lush vegetable garden with no weeds in sight. The lawn was neatly trimmed and carefully watered. There were many mature trees that gave shade and comfort even on a hot day.

My yard is somewhere between those two. We have some green grass that has been watered, some healthy plants in the vegetable garden, some areas of the lawn that are nearly dormant due to the drought conditions, and some trees that are healthy and give shade. We also have some weeds and the overall yard isn't as good looking as it has been some years simply because of the times of the year when we traveled and were away from our home and the suddenness of the dry weather's onset this summer.

In our back yard, our wildflower beds aren't as productive and lovely as they have been some years. The grass has invaded and grown tall and there are fewer wildflowers than have been present some other years. It is clear to me that the time has come to do some serious digging and removing of grass in the beds this fall and replanting of the wildflowers next spring in order for them to have the appearance that I desire.

All around the wildflower beds, even at a distance of ten feet or more there are lots and lots of pink to purple coneflowers. I'm sure that the seed for these plants came from the wildflower beds, but some of it has been spread by birds or the wind to distribute the plants outside of the range where they have grown in previous years. These plants are incredibly hardy and drought resistant and seem to be thriving even though other plants in their immediate vicinity aren't doing well. Since the grass outside of the beds has been mowed and is starting to go dormant, I don't need to mow in the area right now and the coneflowers are the tallest plants around.

These perennial plants are native to our region and can be found growing wild in areas of the forest and meadows where the grasses are not mowed. The plant is also known as Echinacea and is valued by the indigenous people of this area as a medicinal plant. It is used in tinctures and teas and both the leaves and flower pedal are edible. The name echinacea comes from the Greek word "echinos." It is the word for hedgehog and is a reference to the spiny appearance of the center cone of the flower. Not long after the blossoms appear, the pedals begin to droop giving the center of the flower a more prominent look as it stands out.

Some of my favorite plants are ones that grow wild in untended areas. I probably am drawn to such plants in part because I'm not the kind of dedicated gardener who will ever have a beautiful yard like the one I visited yesterday. I admire the garden, and I appreciate the work that has gone into it, but I know that the owner spends a lot more time keeping the gardens and flower beds than I am willing to invest. One of the plants I grow every year in my garden are sunflowers. They are nearly maintenance free. If I forget to water one evening, they will survive. If the weeds get ahead of me, they will climb above the weeds and thrive. One can pretty much plant and ignore sunflowers. Furthermore, depending on how thorough the birds are at eating the seeds in the fall, they will reseed themselves naturally and there will be plenty for the next year. In years when we get a sudden early frost, it is easy to harvest plenty of seeds for the next year. I just take the big heads and shake them over a bucket.

In every yard - from the most unattended to the most carefully landscaped - there are plants that grow and thrive. When we hike in the high country, we are almost always struck by the sheer beauty of the wildflowers that grow naturally and flourish without very many humans to witness their glory. It is this resilience of nature from coneflowers to giant trees that amazes and inspires me.

A phrase that is often repeated and frequently not helpful is "life goes on." I've heard that phrase said at funerals where the loss was sudden and traumatic and at the moment it seems to the grieving people that life can't possibly go on, and if it does it will never be the same. The use of that phrase in that setting can be hurtful. But there is a basic truth in the words. Life does triumph - even in the bleakest of circumstances. Life goes on even when the garden isn't tended. It is in the nature of this planet for life to continue and to propagate.

I find hope in unattended garden as surely as I find it in the one that is so carefully nurtured. I find beauty in both places. Who knows, the next owner of the property might be someone who is looking for a big project and has a green thumb for nurturing new gardens.

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July 28, 2017 – Lunch with the Cops

I had lunch with some of my law enforcement friends yesterday. It seemed that we had a lot to talk about as we munched on pizza and shared a short amount of down time.

Chief on everyone's minds was a grass fire south of town that spread to buildings and trapped a woman in one of the houses. She died in the fire. the home was totally destroyed along with all of its contents. It belonged to a couple both of whom are employed at our City-County Alcohol Services Center and are known to most in the law enforcement community. Folks have organized a clothing drive and are putting together a fund-raising lunch and bake sale for next Thursday to help to support the family. Everyone I spoke with was planning to participate in the sign of community support for a family dealing with tragic loss.

The same day as the fire, the Search and Rescue Team unveiled their new truck. The truck replaces "Rescue One," a multi-purpose extraction vehicle that often is going to the remote corners of our county to help with vehicle accidents. The old truck had served for more than 20 years and was worn out and less than reliable - not a feature that is desirable in a rescue vehicle. The new truck cost \$177,000 - a fair bit of money for a group of volunteers to raise in independent fund-raising activities. Somehow, the community came up with sufficient generosity to replace the truck with another that should be good for another 25 years or more.

There was plenty of talk at lunch about the spike in the number of deaths by suicide in our county in the last two weeks. One officer with whom i sat at lunch and I have been out on two separate suicide responses in the last eight days. One of the investigators at the table has eight or nine active suicide cases on his desk right now. Several of us were curious about the results for an autopsy that was conducted this afternoon in a case where the means of death is not completely clear at the moment. A couple of hours after our lunch ended, we found out that we have to wait longer for results of lab tests that will be performed over the next couple of weeks.

Meanwhile several of us were going over what we knew and doing a bit of diffusing of last night's call. Our conversations started with, "When did you get to bed?" or "How much sleep did you get last night," but quickly turned to concern for the people we were

helping in the wee hours last night. The situation and circumstances would be nearly impossible for us to imagine, except we were there and we know what happened.

As is the way with cops, there was a fair amount of teasing and laughter around the table. It is one of the ways that the stress is relieved and camaraderie is celebrated. Jokes about how much food someone was eating or a small tear in a pair of slacks were repeated around the table. One person who had had an especially short night last night leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes for a couple of seconds. Immediately someone pulled out a mirror and held it to his lips to check to make sure he was breathing. "A lot of good you guys are!" he exclaimed, "Can any of you remember what phone number to call if there had been an emergency?" "Don't worry," someone retorted. We would have tazed you to make sure you were really dead before we called the undertaker." "Besides," said another, "I spent all last night filling out reports. That's the last thing I want to do this afternoon."

Cop humor might seem a bit crude and a bit harsh to those who aren't a part of the culture. What I know, however, is that these are tremendously dedicated professionals who really do care about the people and the community they serve. I've seen one of the biggest, strongest, most intimidating officers in our community gently hand a 4 year-old to her mother and then turn his back so no one would notice that he was crying. I've sat with officers for an hour or more after an intense call as they second guessed every word they said, looking for a way they might have made things easier for the people with whom they were working. I've heard one of our officers say, after booking an offender into the jail, "Poor kid. You should see the home where he was raised!"

I know that police officers don't have the best public image these days. I know that there are some officers who have committed previous crimes and have become part of a system of institutionalized racism.

I also know a lot of police officers who are genuinely good people who believe that a life of public service is a noble calling worthy of continual training and conscientious application of the highest of moral values.

One of the officers with whom I shared lunch yesterday is just a few days short of his first wedding anniversary. I asked him how he is adjusting to family life. He responded, "Best decision I ever made!" Another showed me the latest pictures of his nearly three-year old daughter.

I'm not sure what has happened in our society that we somehow look at people as categories and labels instead of individuals, but I know that when you get to know people as individuals, each with their own ideas and dreams and visions, each with their own identities and moral convictions - when you really get to know them, you discover that we share a basic humanity and even though we could find many subjects upon

which we disagree, what we have in common is far more vital than the differences that threaten to divide us.

I recommend having lunch with cops on a regular basis.

One more thing: although eating with prisoners is not allowed in our corrections facilities, I have been privileged to visit at meal times. The folks who get arrested by the cops are also unique individuals worthy of our concern and care.

We're all in this together. We do best when we remember this basic truth.

Some day, perhaps, I should try having lunch with a member of the United States Senate. . .

. . . that's probably taking things a bit too far!

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July 29, 2017 – Endurance Under Pressure

Wendy Hinman is not just a writer. She is also an adventurer. She and her ship-designer husband took 7 year, 34,000 mile voyage on a 31-foot boat. She wrote that the boat fit their budget, but not her husband's large frame. Sailing is generally a form of travel that doesn't go at a fast pace. Much of the time the boat is going just a little bit faster than an energetic walk. But that doesn't mean that the life of a sailor is boring or relaxed. She does a good job, in her books, of describing the worries, tensions, and trials of ocean adventuring in small craft. I was amazed at how expertly and engagingly she was able to tell the story of the trip her husband's family took long before she even met them. They circumnavigated the globe as a family of four aboard a small vessel. Along the way, almost everything that could go wrong did. The engine broke down multiple times and eventually failed completely. Sails ripped and were repaired and ripped again and finally were worn out. The boat gathered so many barnacles that its progress was slowed and the family traveled thousands of miles without being able to haul the boat out of the water to properly clean and paint the bottom. The toilet failed again and again. They ended up using the "bucket and chuck it" method for much of the trip. They were shipwrecked in Fiji and had to completely rebuild their boat after having sold much of their equipment in a salvage effort. Their stove failed. Their final long passage took much longer than anticipated and they nearly ran out of food. Food rations were so short that the entire family lost weight. Storms battered the little ship so violently that sleep between watches was impossible. A mast spreader broke threatening to bring down the entire rig. Lack of sleep, lack of food and incredibly difficult decisions made in the midst of terrible conditions caused friction and disagreement within the family. The list goes on and on. But somehow they persisted and made it all of the way around the world. They triumphed in the midst of adversity.

I was thinking of Hinman's book yesterday as I drove home wearily after a very long day at the end of a very long week. In the middle of the afternoon I was getting a briefing from an assistant coroner at the scene of a completed suicide. It was the second such conversation I'd had this week. The officer had just come from the scene of a fatal fire, the second such incident to make our newspaper in the week. Our little community and its law enforcement officers have been nearly overwhelmed in recent weeks with a record number of deaths by suicide. The drought conditions have left the landscape parched and dry and little fires become big very quickly. Two kids and a lighter sparked a grass fire that nearly leveled a small rural community and left one dead. In a tiny office on the third floor of our public safety building, a coroner is fielding call after call from people about the backlog of death certificates caused by the mountain of work that has piled up on people working 12-hour shifts. I spoke with an officer who had to skip meals and rush all day long and barely made a court appearance 9 1/2 hours into his shift because he was completing an arrest for methamphetamine possession.

I keep asking, "What is going on in our town?" I privately am thinking what a lot of the others involved are thinking, "How much longer can we take this without a break?" We are stretched thin and even though the people working in our community are incredibly well-trained professionals with superb work ethics who are willing to go the extra mile, we are less than a week away from the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, one of the biggest events each year in terms of law enforcement demand.

One comment I overheard yesterday was along the lines of, "When this gets over, we all need a beach vacation."

Of course, ours isn't the first generation of faithful people to feel overwhelmed. The bible, especially the Psalms, is filled with the laments of people who have seen trouble after trouble and feel as if they are nearly at the breaking point. Psalm 121 opens with "I lift my eyes to the hills, from whence does my help come?" Although we find great comfort in the hills of our home, the author of that psalm has looked up into the hills surrounding his town and discovered them to be covered with enemies and is genuinely perplexed about where to turn. The author of psalm 137 is so angry that it contains an allegory about the destruction of babies. Psalm 90 declares, "The years of our life are threescore and ten, or even by reason of strength fourscore; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away."

Being overwhelmed by the realities of this life is a common biblical theme, not that you'll find a lot of sermons about it on an average Sunday.

But we do not give up.

I was just preparing to draw a hot tub for a soak after a very long and trying day last night when my phone rang again and the answering service directed me to a distraught

parent in search of resources to support a group of teens devastated by the loss of a classmate. I listened, discussed resources and laid a plan for a professional intervention while making yet another list of items for my “to do” list. At the very point in the day when I felt that I couldn’t take on one more thing, I found the energy to keep going.

I went to sleep thinking of a passage from 2 Corinthians: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

Life and death. We carry both. And God’s gift of life has the final victory. Thanks be to God.

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July 30, 2017 – Finding Balance

For several years now I have begun my day by coming up with a topic for a daily essay. I sometimes have a list of several potential topics and, at other times, have exhausted my lists. Not every topic that shows up on a list ends up being the focus of an essay. The topics change with my mood and the experiences that play out in other parts of my day. Sometimes I go back and re-read some of my essays. Sometimes I go for a long time without looking back at what I have written.

It seems to me, without doing any research at all, that I’ve posted several blogs in a row with a bit of a downbeat tone. My life has placed me in contact with quite a few families in crisis in the past week and I’ve been pretty tired when writing some of my blogs. My life, however, isn’t sad. I’m not experiencing depression. I am frustrated and sometimes overwhelmed with the tragedy in our community, but I count myself among the fortunate ones.

Last night we were honored and privileged to participate in a wedding. The couple were young, highly educated, dynamic people and the group of friends and relatives they gathered for the occasion were truly impressive. At the dinner following the ceremony I was engaged in several deeply interesting conversations. I am frequently impressed by the unique congregations that gather for weddings. A new couple brings together a new group of people - a group that would not have gathered had the couple not chosen to marry. It is amazing how quickly one can find common interests in a group of strangers.

Last night I had a wonderful conversation about canoe building with an uncle of the bride. He has taken some very dramatic kayak adventures in some of the worlds most extreme weather. I enjoyed hearing about some of his adventures and could have talked to him for many more hours had we the opportunity. I struck up a brief conversation with someone who had attended theological seminary in Chicago, where

we did our seminary degrees. Chicago has changed a lot in the years since we graduated and so has the process of theological education. I would have enjoyed an opportunity to learn more from conversations with that person.

There is so much in my life that is exciting and interesting. I hope that my blog posts don't come off as too much complaining. The reality, however, is that I use my blog as a journal - writing is one of my ways of working through the complex issues of life and thinking about life's experiences as I try to integrate all of the various experiences into a coherent whole. I'm well aware that the volunteer who responds to suicide calls is the same person that sits in budget meetings and the same person who preaches sermons and baptizes babies. That same person fetches paper towel and toilet tissue to replenish supplies in the church bathrooms and gets out the vacuum cleaner to clean up spills in the fellowship hall and hallways of the church. It is the same one who splits wood with the woodchucks and prepares worship notes for lay readers. I know that my vocation gives me incredible variety in terms of the tasks to be accomplished.

I have learned over the years that there are parts of my job that demand a lot of energy. There are certain where I have to put my own needs on the back burner while I focus on the needs of others. Sometimes I find myself exhausted after a day in which there was minimal physical work. Emotional exercise can be as tiring as running a marathon. Like a marathon runner, I need to work out and build up my endurance through careful life choices.

There are, however, other activities that are a part of my job that give me energy. I find some of the things I do enable me to feel better and stronger after completing a particular task or project. I genuinely enjoy being with people and engaging with their experiences. Just writing that sentence, however, surprises me because I don't really think of myself as one who deals well with crowds. Every week's sermon makes me nervous. I have to get my courage up before making phone calls. When I have a day off from work I am very happy to simply go for a paddle or a walk by myself. I can be completely happy working in my garage all day with no conversations with others. Perhaps those activities are fun to me precisely because I have access to an incredible community of fascinating people. Quiet days to myself are a very rare commodity and appreciated because they stand out. Too many of them in a row might be a problem. I don't know because I've never had the experience.

In all things, learning to find a balance is essential. I need times of intense relationship with others. I have developed a set of skills for meeting new people. I know how to walk into the midst of a crisis and assess what is most needed. I also make a daily discipline of sitting quietly with no distractions. Every day is a different balance of crisis and calm, of people and alone, of intense activity and reflection. And when the days get off balance because of the demands of real life, I have to learn to balance the weeks. And sometimes an entire week can have its focus off-center which demands a correction

later in the month. It is possible that even entire years need to be balanced by years with different themes and moods.

Balance, furthermore, is a learned skill. Babies aren't born with the skill of riding a bike. It has to be developed through practice and muscle training. Achieving emotional balance also requires practice. Going from crisis to crisis is not an automatic skill and didn't come naturally to me. I'm still learning.

The bottom line is that my life is good. I am not an unhappy person. and I am fortunate to live in this community and serve these people.

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July 31, 2017 – The Right Way to Spell Macaroon

I did not grow up in the center of French cuisine. There wasn't a copy of Julia Child's "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" on the shelf in our kitchen. The most prominent book on the shelf was "The Betty Crocker Cookbook" and it was flanked by two or three church cookbooks and a wooden box full of recipe cards obtained primarily from family and friends. We were well fed and my mother had gained quite a few cooking skills by the time we came along. There are several stories about my mother and cooking.

As she told it (Dad had a slightly different version), when they were first married, she made chicken and dumplings one day. My father tasted it and enjoyed it and had a second helping. Then he commented. "That was really good. It was almost as good as the dumplings my mother makes." The challenge was on. My mother tried recipe after recipe and a few private variations in the dumplings in an attempt to make them just right. Dumplings are fairly simple, so the options for variation are a bit limited, but over the next couple of years, she tried everything she could imagine. Each time the response was, "Good. Very good. Almost as good as my mother's." My mother started to look for an opportunity to get with my grandmother to obtain her recipe. When they finally did pay a visit, grandma responded, "I've never made dumplings!"

Another time they were eating dinner as guests at their friends' home and were served pie for dessert. My father exclaimed, "This is wonderful! I've never tasted this before. What do you call it?" Mother responded by only baking pie for Thanksgiving for years after that episode.

Dad was, however, really impressed and proud of mother's cooking skills. When we were teens, he especially enjoyed her made-from-scratch German chocolate cake. If she would bake one for a bake sale he would rush down and pay top dollar for the cake. He thought he was paying her a compliment. She found it embarrassing that he'd buy the cake before anyone else could taste it. "They'll think it isn't fit for public consumption!"

Suffice it to say that I was a mature adult before I knew the difference between a macaroon and a macaron. I do like macaroons. I call them cookies, but they may technically be tiny cakes. The coconut confections are very good, especially when cooked just right. I've tasted a few that were just too sugary. My favorite recipe has unsweetened coconut, sweetened condensed milk, vanilla, a dash of salt and egg whites. Now that you can buy egg whites in a carton already separated, the recipe is very simple. They need to be baked just the right amount of time to create the signature crunchy-on-the-outside, soft-on-the-inside texture.

In my opinion, if you want a good coconut macaroon, you can do no better than the ones available every day at the Wheat Montana home bakery in Three Forks, Montana. Of course that is a pretty good drive from here to pick up a half dozen cookies. On the other hand, my family has adjusted to the reality that I won't drive by the place without stopping.

The elitists, however, don't want to be associated with such a lowly confection.

They insist that the term Macaroon is "incorrect." The "correct" term is Macaron (mah-kah-ron). It is a French word with Italian roots. The Italian maccherone is related to the word macaroni. My mother made macaroni and cheese with Velveta cheese. She made a lot of things with Velveta cheese, but that is an entirely different story. Anyway as I was saying, the purists insist that the word should be spelled with only one o and that the coconut confections that I enjoy so much aren't the same thing as a true French or Italian Macaron.

Macarons are meringue-based confections with a light and soft texture and made in many different colors. The little cakes are most frequently iced and are, on occasion, filled with sweet cremes, jams or frostings in the center. According to one article I read they are very popular when many are formed in tiers for wedding cakes. On wedding cake was constructed of over 500 Macarons.

From the perspective of one raised on the Betty Crocker Cookbook, it seems like a lot of work when a real cupcake would give you enough bites to really taste as opposed to those tiny one-bite wonders. I'm just saying . . .

I suppose that a sommelier would be able to recommend just the right wine to be paired with a macaron. A coffee snob would know just the right roast and grind to recommend to compliment the delicate flavors. In my opinion it doesn't matter what they choose or serve. It would be no match for a big glass of cold milk and a coconut macaroon from Wheat Montana. Then again, I don't think anyone is going to accuse me of being an oenophile. I had to look up the word to figure out how to spell it.

Nonetheless I do enjoy eating foods that are new to me and experimenting with the recipes I prepare. We've pretty much gotten past the use of cookbooks with the Internet being such a ready and convenient source of recipes when needed. The row of cookbooks on the shelf in our kitchen has been thinned considerably, though "Joy of Cooking" is the book that remains between the church cookbooks at the staple book we reach for when we are looking for a recipe that we made a few decades ago. It is easy to find the good recipes - they are all stained with the remains of spills. There is a light dusting of flour on some of the good pages.

So I'm content to let others have their fancy dinners and serve macrons for dessert. (Leave an s out of that word and they'll tease you for decades.) All this talk has me thinking of a lunch of macaroni and cheese followed by a coconut macaroon with a glass of milk.

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