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## June 1, 2014 – Summer

Well, it is the first day of June. I remember looking forward to June as a child. June is my birth month. June is the beginning of summer. There were plenty of times in my growing up when June started with rain and cooler weather, but by the end of the month it was dependably warm and we were dressed in cutoff jeans for the rest of the summer. Our summer chores were light and we didn't have too much structure. We'd build tree houses and play in and around the river, make lunches and head off for day long fishing trips. The fishing opener was usually in May, generally around Mother's Day, but we didn't worry much about having to go fishing on the opening day of season. We had all summer and with a place on the river, we thought we pretty much had the river to ourselves. We saw plenty of other fishermen, but they weren't much competition, and we knew where you could wade the river and how to get around the various fences and other obstructions. The two miles between our place and where the Boulder joined the Yellowstone weren't very accessible by car. The best way was to walk. And there were plenty of big trout in that stretch of the river.

Summer was a definite change of pace. That change of pace continued throughout my education. In college I would switch from being a full-time student to having a full-time job during the summer. Most of my summer jobs were fairly-well defined in terms of the number of hours per week. I didn't have the kind of jobs one has to take home with oneself. I would work and then I had time to myself and my own adventures. When we went away to seminary we would return to Montana and work at a church camp during the summers. The days were much longer at camp and there was always something to do and it was hard to get a day off, but the change of pace was wonderful. And for a small town kid, three months away from Chicago deep in the mountains of Montana 43 miles from the end of the paved road and 25 miles from the nearest phone was a real treat. These days they've run the phone lines up to the camp, but they haven't improved the road much - a decent compromise in my opinion.

We noticed the change in pace that comes with summer when our children were at home. They were on academic schedules and had their summers off from their studies. I remember looking forward to summer when our children were in school. We got more time with them and we always planned at least one grand family adventure. We took trips, went camping and found plenty of adventures to share.

Summer is a little less dramatic these days. Often we take part or all of our vacation during the summer, but we've found that many of the things we like to do for vacation lend themselves to other times during the year.

The church does experience a change of pace during the summer. We have fewer meetings and some groups take a month or more off during the summer. But there is plenty of preparation that takes place over the summer and a few big events each summer. This coming week we are hosting the annual meeting of the South Dakota

Conference of the United Church of Christ. It will be hectic, with lots of furniture that needs to be moved, crowds of people who will need bits of assistance and plenty of details that need our attention. We've been preparing for months and the week is now upon us. After that, there's a break until Vacation Bible School, and we'll be taking two weeks' vacation. We'll have a new granddaughter to visit and a grandson with whom to share adventures.

So there is still a change of pace in the summer. Of course there are summer chores. Lawn mowing is a bit more predictable than snow shoveling, and in general it takes a bit more time. I need to clear about 2 hours each week for that chore. I don't really mind and I need the exercise. There are plenty of outdoor repairs that need to be accomplished. And the summer rummage sale invites a round of decluttering.

C. Tobias and H. Carste wrote a song that comes to my mind each year. I don't think I ever learned all of the words. Nat King Cole used to sing it:

Roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer  
Those days of soda and pretzels and beer  
Roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer  
Dust off the sun and moon and  
sing a song of cheer

Around here our days aren't really lazy and our weather is seldom hazy and as for crazy, I guess that is a matter of opinion. Soda and pretzels and beer are all too high in calories and filled with things that I don't need. Around here it is more water and ice tea and maybe a few burgers and brats on the grill. I guess the song doesn't really fit the way we live our lives.

The song ends with the words, "You'll wish that summer could always be here." I don't really share that sentiment. I like all of the seasons of the year around here and I don't exactly have a body type that is made for summer. Most people look at me and think, Umm . . . Eskimo. My hair color is about the same as snow these days and it never was black, but my body shape carries plenty of extra fat for the lean cold days of winter.

Still, there are a few fun things to look forward to this summer and the change of seasons and change of pace will keep us hopping. We'll get a few camping trips in and I'll get the boats out on the water.

Go ahead and roll out those lazy, crazy, hazy days. I'm ready for summer.

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## June 2, 2014 – Of Dogs and Wolves



The bond between humans and dogs is ancient and deep. My mother is from Fort Benton, Montana, so I grew up with the stories of Shep. Back in 1936, a shepherd became ill and was brought to the hospital in Fort Benton. His sheepdog followed him to town and the hospital staff noticed that he had set up vigil by the hospital door. He couldn't be persuaded to leave, so the staff of the hospital kitchen fed him a few scraps. Alas, the shepherd died and when relatives were notified, it was decided to ship the body back East to be buried by his family. As the undertaker took the casket to the railway station, the dog followed and he whined as they loaded the casket into the baggage car and shut the door. For the next five-and-a-half years until his death, the dog met every train that stopped in Fort Benton. He would go through the departing passengers looking for his owner. The weather didn't matter. Shep met every train. And there are some cold days in a Montana winter. It was an icy winter day when the old dog failed to hear the train whistle. He was on the tracks as the engine began to brake for the stop. Too late he noticed the danger and he slipped on the rails as he tried to get out of the way. The station master was heartbroken. The town decided to create a memorial. These days the statue of Shep is in Shepherd's Court in the park across from the Grand Union Hotel on Front Street.

Our daughter lives in Warrensburg, Missouri, where there is another statue of a famous

dog. Old Drum was a farm dog who was shot and killed. The farmer sued for damages and was represented by the lawyer George Vest. Vest's closing speech became famous. The ending sentence was, "The one absolutely unselfish friend that a man can have in this selfish world, the one that never deserts him and the one that never proves ungrateful or treacherous is his dog." The quote became famous and so did the dog. The people of Warrensburg erected a statue of Old Drum on the courthouse lawn along with that summation speech, "A man's best friend is his dog."

The line about a man's best friend being his dog is a lot older than the statue in Warrensburg. Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* of 1764 ends its entry on dog with: *le meilleur ami que puisse avoir l'homme.* ("it is the best friend a man can have.") Chances are Voltaire heard the phrase from someone else.

The first domesticated dogs are lost in antiquity. People and dogs have lived in close relationships for so many centuries that no one is sure how the relationship began. Historians and researchers have speculated that ancient tribes learned to work with wolves in hunting big game. Wolves have incredible skills at tracking game and locating game. They have signals of howls and yelps that communicate with one another the location of the large animals that they hunt. Humans had superior skills at making tools and with weapons became more effective at killing the animals. Exactly how that became the practice of taking dogs as pets is unclear. It is possible that humans took wolf pups and raised them to be domesticated. It is also possible that wolves that worked best with human hunters passed down their genes in such a manner that after many generations those who worked most closely with humans evolved along a different path than the wildest of their cousins.

These days, dogs are among the most valued pets of humans. Alongside the intense love that we humans have for dogs, there is an intense anger and fear of wolves. For generations wolves were hunted to near extinction. There are places where wolves are being reintroduced into the wild where the opposition is so passionate and the anger so intense that rational conversation about wolves is impossible. During the recent government shutdown, when Yellowstone National Park was temporarily closed, those who oppose the reintroduction of wolves to the park hunted and killed several wolves, leaving their bodies behind. You can get into a good argument in a southern Montana bar by bringing up the topic of wolves.

On the one hand, the actual diets of wolves include many small animals whose populations humans would like to see controlled such as mice and gophers and prairie dogs. They are extremely efficient predators, but they have a symbiotic relationship with the large animals that they hunt. Wolves that hunt buffalo or elk kill and eat the oldest and most vulnerable animals and their effect on the herd is to strengthen the overall health of the herd. They also help to keep populations in check to prevent over grazing and other threats to the herd.

It is a different matter with domesticated animals. Wolves are efficient hunters and there are documented cases of them killing calves and lambs. They can easily catch and kill a fully grown sheep. Because wolves tend to kill and cache, it looks to untrained eyes as if they kill ruthlessly and kill more than they eat. It is true that wolves will gorge and then return to the pups, where they regurgitate to feed the pups before returning to eat more. They also create caches to which they return for later feeding. To a rancher who has just lost a calf it looks like they killed just for the sport of killing. In the natural world, wolves don't eat all of the food they kill. Scavengers also are fed by the actions of wolves.

For centuries, humans have killed and consumed far more meat-producing animals than wolves, but wolves are irrationally blamed for herd loss and the destruction of game animals. There are billboards across Montana warning that there will be no hunting if wolves are allowed to remain. It isn't true, it isn't rational, but it is a widely held belief. In the 1940's and 1950's when humans killed about 10,000 caribou for each one killed by a wolf, the official policy in Canada was that wolves were the cause of the decimation of the caribou herds.

We aren't rational when it comes to our fears. And we aren't rational when it comes to our relationship with canines. Passion clouds our judgment.

Some dogs, however, do become beloved and they do become the most loyal of friends. Whatever you think about wild wolves, it seems like a good thing that their domesticated cousins share our lives with us.

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**June 3, 2014 – Down Came the Tree**



A forest is a lot more than a collection of trees. It is a living system. In a forest trees new trees are constantly springing up from the ground and the forest giants occasionally

come to the end of their lives and fall. But it isn't only the old trees that give way. There are all kinds of things that can happen to the trees in the forest. The Black Hills are a living display of the devastation that can be a part of an insect invasion. Mountain pine beetles have killed a lot of trees in the hills. The pine beetles have been especially virulent throughout the West for several years, now and there are huge areas of dead and dying trees. There are a few forest management techniques that at least slow the spread of the infestations, but there have been a lot of trees that have fallen. The dry dead trees are especially vulnerable to hot fires and the fires in turn can be a threat to living trees.

Then there are the storms. In the fall and spring especially wet snow and ice storms can break branches and bring down large and healthy trees. Last year's October blizzard brought down a lot of trees in the hills.

Historic pictures of the hills show that the number of trees in specific places varies. There have been times when the trees have been thick and other times when there have been fewer trees in the hills.

We, however, don't have responsibility for managing a whole forest. We have a half acre house lot. We can count the trees on our property and we notice each one. When the electric cooperative put a new line down the highway behind our house a number of years ago, we lost four trees that were in the utility right-of-way. There wasn't anything that could be done about it. The right-of-way had been negotiated with previous owners and it was clear that the company had the right to take out the trees. We planted new trees with mixed success. The little trees in our yard have struggled with winter storms and dry spells and pressure from the deer. We have been less than attentive in our care of them. A few, however, have survived and are thriving.

This year needs to be another year of tree planting for us. The October blizzard took out the biggest tree in our yard and broke the tops out of two additional trees. Fortunately the wind direction was just right for the giant tree to fall free from our home and we had no building damage when it came down. It was a big job to get it cut up and hauled away, but it gave me something to do while we waited for the power to be restored and the snowplows to come.

It was very clear that we had to have another tree removed from our yard. It was leaning toward our house and we were sure that the right conditions could send it crashing through the roof and do a lot of damage. With the big lean on the tree, I didn't have the skill or experience to cut it down without threatening major damage, so we turned to a professional who knew just what to do.

Yesterday was the day for the tree to come down. The entertainment value of the process was worth the cost of the tree removal. The first step was for the forester to climb the tree and attach ropes high in the tree. These provided a way for him to climb

safely and go up and down quickly. Next he came down and, with a small chainsaw went back up limbing the tree as he went. He left branches to be steps for him as he climbed, but carefully cut the branches off of the tree so that they fell in a neat pile missing the house and deck and shed. It was amazing how precisely he could make the limbs fall by choosing just where to make his cuts, getting them to fall while still attached to the tree and then making a final cut to drop the branch vertically onto the pile.

The most dramatic moment came when he cut the very top out of the tree. He had attached a rope to the top that was connected through a pulley system to a place high in the tree and then the rope ran through another pulley at the base of the tree and was anchored around a nearby tree where his assistants could control the rope. The top fell, but remained high in the air. The tree swung wildly as the top came off, but the forester just rode the moving tree until it settled down and his assistants neatly lowered the top of the tree to the ground.

Down he came, chunk by chunk of tree being cut and tipped over, then lowered to the ground. The final parts of the tree could be dropped without having ropes attached.

Soon all that was left of the tree was a pile of work for me. I cut the trunk into fireplace lengths and the branches into pieces that I could handle. By the end of the evening I was tired and much of the work was finished. Now in the next couple of days I will bring a trailer and haul a load of branches to the yard waste recycling site and a load of logs to the church where they will be split and delivered as firewood to our neighbors and partners on the Cheyenne River or Pine Ridge reservation.

In the forest the fallen trees provide rich mulch for new trees as they slowly decompose. In the natural cycle fires often are a part of the process of decomposition and renewal. In our back yard, it makes sense to haul away the branches before they dry and leave mountains of pine needles. Then we need to work the soil and prepare for the planting of new trees. There is always a lot of work to do when one is responsible for a little bit of the land.

Now we can turn our attention to planting and nurturing new trees.

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### **June 4, 2014 – Mindfulness and Mindlessness**

I have never learned very much about Yoga, Buddhist meditation, Zen, or other meditation techniques. It is not that I am not intrigued by them. I am. I have read quite a bit about mindfulness and other Buddhist practices. I think that I would enjoy Yoga and could reap its benefits. I keep meaning to take a Yoga class, but somehow I never get around to it. What little I have experienced leads me to believe that many of the disciplines and practices of Yoga would not be strange to me.

Years ago, when I was burned, I had a few days of learning to manage pain in a way that I had not previously needed to know. I worked hard on controlling my breathing and focusing on it as a way to move my mind away from the pain. I recited scripture quietly to myself and recalled the words and tunes of hymns in my mind. I used visual imagery to move away from the place of pain to a more relaxed place. The dermatologist who assisted with my recovery commented that I seems to go into a “Zen state” during debridement or changes of dressing. I don’t think that my mental state was exactly “Zen,” but it was a form of meditation that helped me on that particular journey.

Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk who has written several books that I have read. In his book “The Miracle of Mindfulness” he speaks of the discipline of being completely present in the moment - of using simple techniques to focus attention on what is going on right now. I have found these techniques to be very helpful for me. When I am completely present with grieving relatives, I am able to discern ways to craft a funeral service that addresses their particular needs as they journey through grief. I often hear positive comments about the funeral services - people frequently say kind things about the words I have said. From my point of view, however, it is not so much the words that I say, but rather the ability to listen to the people that I serve. When I am really listening, I seem to be able to find the words for the occasion. I think that quality of genuine listening is similar to the concept of mindfulness that Hanh teaches.

I have also heard the concept of mindfulness described as “presentness.” It is a process of being truly present in the moment - truly with and for the other person.

The Gospels report that Jesus had a unique capacity to be present with those who came to him. He responded to each request for healing or teaching in a unique way, tailored to the specific needs of the person who was presented to him.

But there is another aspect to spiritual practice that is, in some ways, the opposite of presentness or mindfulness. It is that state that assisted me with pain management as I recovered from burns. I might describe that state as mindlessness. At least, in my experience, I was shifting my attention from the here and now to other places and times, other experiences, other states of being. I probably was the opposite of a good listener in those moments. I did try to pay attention to the instructions the doctor was giving, but when procedures were being done, I focused my attention away from the location of the burns.

Of course a lifetime of study of the various states of the mind would be too short to really understand these processes. Those who dedicate their lives to mental exercise remain perpetual students constantly learning. So one blog post isn’t going to explain or even add much to the understanding of what we are capable of doing with our minds.

But the power of the human brain and its imagination is not to be discounted. We are capable of incredible powers of mind when we pay attention, practice a little discipline

and allow ourselves to reach beyond ourselves.

Recent learnings about the way that the human brain functions have provided better understanding of the capabilities of our minds. Some of the newer medical imaging techniques such as MRI scans reveal pictures of brain activities. In one study of Buddhist monks it was clearly observed that they were able to significantly reduce the brain activity associated with pain. My doctor's comments about a "Zen state" might not have been too far from the experiences that I was having.

Ellen Langer, professor of Psychology at Harvard University has written extensively about mindfulness and mental health. She has been able to make connections between the latest revelations of brain science and the experiences of mental health. She uses slightly different terms that I do, and speaks of there connection between mindlessness and illness and mindfulness and health. She writes about mindlessness and unhappiness. It is possible that my use of the term mindlessness is at odds with the common usage in psychology. I experience the ability to focus one's attention as the critical element. Sometimes I focus on the present, as when I am listening to grieving people. Sometimes I focus on another place or time, as when I am employing a mental discipline to reduce pain. Perhaps Ellen Langer would refer to both of these states as mindfulness. Both involve the discipline of mental focus.

It is a skill that improves with practice. When I work with teens and teach them techniques for prayer, they often have trouble being quiet even for a few seconds. However, when we meet regularly and they have an opportunity to practice, they quickly achieve a minute of silence and then the ability to quiet themselves for even longer periods of time. I have a whole series of meditation techniques and mental exercises that I practice daily.

There is much yet to be learned about how our minds work. But I am convinced that our minds and bodies and spirits work together. Learning to discipline my mind influences my health and the quality of my spiritual life.

I am yet a beginner in these things.

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## **June 5, 2014 – Hosting a Conference**

Today we begin the adventure of hosting the 144th Annual Meeting of the South Dakota Conference of the United Church of Christ. In the UCC in our corner of the world, the annual meeting is a bit like a family reunion. When it is our turn to host, we invite the neighbors to come to our place for a weekend of worship, speakers and business. The host is involved in making plans for the event, but not really in control. The other congregations and the board of directors of the conference all have their expectations and opinions about what should happen. We provide a place, prepare the space,

provide snacks, arrange for meals, and take care of other details. The actual program, including the selection of the keynote speaker, setting of the agenda and other items are handled by others. We have input into some items, but control very few. It is very much like a family reunion in terms of the participants' expectations of the event. More than the business conducted or the speakers heard, people come to the event to see one another. We have shared mission and ministries and we have worked together in a variety of different settings over the years and we enjoy getting together. As with other family reunions, there will be some new faces. Pastors come and go. Lay delegates change from year to year. Each gathering is unique.

The process of preparing for the meeting involves a lot of work. Schedules have been made and then revised. Worship leaders have been recruited and then adjustments need to be made. There are a lot of details to be managed.

Our work day will start with preparing and printing bulletins, brochures and other documents. This morning volunteers will arrive to help set up furniture. Several of our rooms need to be rearranged and reconfigured to accommodate the activities of the meeting. We are used to working together and that part of the hosting will go smoothly. Most of our out of town guests don't arrive until tomorrow, when the pace of activities accelerates. There will be plenty of last minute details that demand our attention in the next few days. We will have forgotten some things that will demand that we scramble to make adjustments.

Whatever else happens, by Monday it will be over. Our guests will be off to other adventures or on their way home. We'll put the furniture back into the arrangements we usually have and life will go on.

From one perspective, the conference meeting is a lot of work and a lot of time for a remarkably small amount of business. The majority of Saturday's schedule is devoted to three business sessions where the moderator will precede and some semblance of order will prevail. The truth is that the actual decision-making would require less than 15 minutes. Most of the "business" won't be business at all, but rather people talking who seem to need an audience. I can predict that the budget proposed will pass. Those who disagree will either keep their opinions to themselves or ask a few questions, but when the vote comes there will be no dissent. None of the elections will be contested. Voting goes quickly when there is only one candidate for each position. Most of the time will be devoted to announcements. People have things that they think are important to be said and the event provides an audience. It isn't a particularly effective way to communicate with congregations, but there will be plenty of people who want to make sure that their opinion is heard.

In our congregation we are used to a rather different lifestyle than the conference. Our annual meeting rarely takes more than an hour. It often is a place to gather information about new directions, new projects and new ministries. We elect a similar number of

people to boards and committees and vote a budget with a similar number of dollars, but the meeting is over and we are sharing coffee and refreshments between the end of worship and time for lunch. In our congregation, a “workshop” takes half a day and you need a shower when it is over, but real work is accomplished. When we were asked to plan workshops for the conference meeting, we thought of some of our big projects like splitting wood and building a house with Habitat for Humanity. The conference meeting, however, only allows an hour for a workshop and people have only an hour after the workshops to be ready for a banquet. There won’t be much wood splitting accomplished and the craft group won’t produce any quilts. Mostly we’ll accomplish what people come to the conference meeting to do: talk.

For all of the talking, there is a reasonable amount of listening. The keynote speaker will have things to share that are worth hearing. The workshops will share some information that can be used by other congregations in their life together. The worship services will inspire and challenge and even offer a few surprises. I am sure that the ceremony transferring title to church properties will move some and be remembered for years to come. Some of the conversations will be the beginnings of collaborations where congregations come together to accomplish significant work in the future.

And the gift of being able to extend hospitality is not to be taken lightly. Hospitality is a spiritual discipline that needs to be practiced over and over again. Fortunately it is one of the gifts of the spirit where our congregation excels. We’re pretty good at providing food and a welcome space for others to gather. We have some practice at inviting guests and providing for their needs. We come together well to get the work done. There have already been some good times of working together in preparation for our guests. Our building has some corners that are cleaner than our typical and some places gleam and shine a bit more in preparation for our guests. Our people will go out of their way to make our guests feel comfortable and at home. They will leave having eaten some good food and seen a glimpse of the life that we share together.

And, in the course of time, we will extend the invitation for the conference to come back. We’ll do it again and again. And between times of hosting we’ll forget the hassles and problems and remember the joy of people gathering and worshipping together.

That is as it should be.

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## June 6, 2014 – Welcome Emmala



Dear Emmala,

As was the case with your big brother, I am moved to write you a letter of welcome on the day after your birth. It will be long before you have any concept of writing and words and language. I'm fairly certain that your life will bring many different ways of storing, sorting and retrieving ideas, so if you ever read this, it might be in a format or on a device that we have not yet imagined. The topic of this letter, however, is of things that are timeless.

You are already beginning to learn of the generations of love that are your heritage. It seems to us like we have been waiting all of our lives for the moment of your birth, though we have only known specifically of your coming for a short time. As the news of your birth spread through the family yesterday the reactions were tears of joy, joy joy!

Your first name already tells the story of the unique wonder that you are. Your parents wrote in your birth announcement a wonderful bit about that name: "Although used by others, the name Emmala has no official meaning yet & no name book gives us a path. "Emma" is most often defined as entire or universal & "La" is used as an exclamation of surprise or emphasis. Although "Universal Exclamation!" or "Entirely Surprised!" are fun

mash-ups, we don't know what it means and we hope she helps define it through a life of love, happiness, grace, frivolity and adventure.”

Your second name has been around for as long as our people can remember using words. Eve is a name you share with your Aunt Rachel and with one of your great-great grandmas. It means life. In the stories of the beginnings of our people, the name is combined with the word for wind to mean “breath of life” and refer to the creative force that brought forth all life. For a thousand generations and more the name Eve celebrates the gift of life itself.

There is so much of the story of our people that is revealed in you, but it is not history that occupies our minds this day. Your birth reminds us of the beautiful surprises that await us when we look toward our future. You are a part of the story of life that stretches beyond our lives. You remind us that the wonderful love of generations past continues to live in the future that is yet unborn.

And here you are! Stunningly wonderful, incredibly, completely human. We are awestruck.

You won't have a conscious memories of these first days when we are many miles away and you are embraced in the warmth of the love of your mother, father, brother and grandmother. You probably won't remember the days of our first visit or know quite how hard it is for us to wait the ten days or so that separate us from holding you ourselves. But you will know that you were born into love, surrounded by love, embraced by love. You will discover that the circles of love extend far beyond your birth family. You were born into such a complex, confusing tangle of relationships that you may never know the names of all of your relatives. But you will always know that you are loved and treasured and valued. Even when you feel tempted to forget all of that love - even on the days when you feel a bit unloved, that love will surround you.

There are yet more miracles of love to be discovered. We do not know all that you will know of love. One of the deepest joys of this life is discovering depth upon depth of love. Your grandmother and I have been married for more than four decades and we continue to discover that there is more to love than we had previously known. Your journey of discovering love will take you to places we cannot imagine.

So I hope you will forgive the rambling blubbing of a grandfather who is becoming something of an old fool. The years and experiences may have colored my perceptions and sometimes add extra words to my stories, but they have not taken from me the incredible awe and wonder at the unfolding tale of life. Your birth left me speechless, but not for long. It reminds me how many unique surprises are yet to be revealed. It restores my hope.

Restored hope is just one of the gifts you bring to those of us who have been so eagerly

awaiting your birth. Whenever we feel tempted to be a bit cynical, whenever we allow ourselves to become annoyed at the antics of our fellow human beings, all we need to do is to recall the day of your birth to be reminded that the gift of life is far more wonderful than its trials.

In the course of time the world will show you feelings that feel pretty uncomfortable. Someday, though I pray it will not be too soon, you will discover the pain of grief, the knowledge of loss and the depths of sorrow. None of your family would want to shelter you from the realities of life. Before then, however, we will do our best to surround you with love and care and concern and nurture and other dimensions of life so that you will develop the strength to face whatever comes.

All of that lies in your future.

Today is a celebration of thanksgiving. I keep thinking, "She's here! She's really here!" I keep looking at your picture and longing to hold you in my arms. I know it won't be long and the anticipation of that moment is stronger than any of the work that I need to accomplish between now and then.

In many ways, I am an old man. I've seen a lot and experienced a lot and somethings I wonder if there are many surprises left for me. But last night I woke with the same amazed joy that I felt when your father was born and that first night that we shared with your Aunt Rachel.

I'll close this first letter to you with words I used when your brother was born: "May you dwell in love all of the days that are yours and then some. Love never dies."

Love,

Grandpa

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### **June 7, 2014 – Hospitality**

There is an art to a worship service that took me some time to learn. The initial temptation for a new preacher is to try to say too much in worship. Not every worship service has to have everything in it. The people who come to worship are moved by particular moments. Perhaps it is a song that touches deeply, perhaps it is a reading of scripture, perhaps it is the sermon, perhaps it is a prayer. Different things touch different people at different times. When I first graduated from seminary, I tried to demonstrate to the people that I had a complete theology, that I had studied the whole Bible, and that I could grasp complex ideas. The result was that I tried to pull together more than could fit. The worship services seemed crammed and over-filled even when they didn't consume too much time, which often was the case.

That tendency is exaggerated when a group of ministers get together. Even when assigned a simple piece, some pastors have a tendency to elaborate - to length and to add a few words or a bit of commentary. I'm sure that this happens at gatherings of lawyers and doctors and all sorts of other professions, but the arena with which I am most familiar is that of the clergy.

We are hosting the 144th Annual Meeting of the South Dakota Conference of the United Church of Christ this weekend. Yesterday was day one and it went fairly smoothly. The opening presenters respected the time frame and we kept to our schedule. The opening worship ran a little long, but I have known that it would do that for some time. As I worked on it, there kept being more and more little things that we needed to add in. The initial suggestions were about worship elements: we need to use two different song books, we should have the Conference Minister preach, we should have some drummers, we should add this and that. Then there were suggestions about people: invite so-and-so, and what about showcasing ministers who are new to the conference? The requests kept mounting and I tried to listen carefully. Even last night the requests kept coming in. As we gathered to run through the service a half hour before it started, I was asked to allow two additional people to speak.

Here is a quick guide to translation for non ministers so that you might understand what ministers say:

When a minister says: "Just a few words. I'll be very brief. It will be less than 5 minutes." It means: "A minimum of 12 minutes. I wanted 20 minutes, but I'll shorten from that a tad."

When a minister says: "A short prayer." It means: "I feel a need to demonstrate the correct theology after some other speaker said something with which I disagree. God bless all these people for listening to the truth - for listening to me."

When a minister says: "We are a diverse people." It means: "Most of these people aren't as smart or as well-informed as I am. I'll let them speak first so that you will see how smart I am when I speak."

The list could go on and on. One of my colleagues in another denomination put it this way: "You need a big room when you get a group of ministers together. Most churches are too small for all those egos." Another colleague who is not a member of the United Church of Christ said, "That's why the ceilings are so tall in sanctuaries - some people simply have really big heads."

I went to bed proud and happy last night, however. What I have witnessed in the last two days is a demonstration of the faithfulness and dedication of the lay members of our church. When it comes to hospitality, our congregation really shines. It has a lot of people who don't need to be the star - who are willing to pitch in and work. Furniture is

moved without commotion. Dishes are done. People are given the resources they need. Changes in schedule and venue are accommodated gracefully. We can even adjust to the weather. Last night's indoor barbecue showed no signs of tension or problem when it had to be held indoors because of the weather.

Some of the pastors who are attending the meeting may feel a need to show off their intelligence with the words they say. Some may feel a need to demonstrate their brilliance by raising their voices. I don't have to do or say anything. The people of our church make it evident how privileged I am to serve such a hard-working congregation. By the time I left the church last night, the dishes were done, the fellowship hall was cleaned and ready to go for this morning's activities. The communion service was clean and put away. The extra cookies were carefully wrapped to keep them fresh for today. Lay people checked the locks and turned off lights. The bathrooms were cleaned and fresh paper products were put out. Bulletins for tomorrow's service were printing. In short the "behinds the scenes" people had been working very hard and were doing what needed to be done to make our church a place to which our guests will be happy to return today.

I know that the church of Jesus Christ is not a competition. And I know that competition between ministers isn't particularly attractive. Still, I can't help but feel like some kind of winner when I think of how good my congregation must look to our guests. There is no conflict, no bickering, no big egos getting in the way as we set up, provide food, and respond to the needs of our guests. We have been given the gift of showing our hospitality, and when we do it is obvious that this is a spiritual discipline at which our people have had lots of practice.

Today and tomorrow will be long days. Through God's grace I am spending them with some of the best people in the world. If you can't find me, don't look at the speaker's podium. I'm more likely to be hanging out with the folks in the kitchen.

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## **June 8, 2014 – Pentecost 2014**

I grew up among reserved people. We weren't too big on public displays of emotion. I remember my parents holding hands in public, and there was an occasional kiss in front of us kids, but that was about it. There was no doubt that they loved each other. There was no doubt that they loved us. But that love didn't require loud exclamations or public show. My Great Uncle Ted was always around our house at family gatherings, and he was a big part of our family, but we knew that a simple hug would make him nervous. Handshakes were close enough for him.

Where we did express our emotions was in words. We were not a quiet family. Arguing and discussing were encouraged. We were challenged to support our arguments with facts and knowledge. There were more than a few family dinners in my home that paused for a moment while someone looked something up in an encyclopedia to make

their point. Visitors to our family who came from calmer and more sedate stock found our family gatherings to be rather loud and sometimes thought that we were angry with one another, when all that was going on was a sense of competition and a desire to win an argument.

When I first encountered a Pentecostal worship service, I felt no small amount of unease. In my opinion, people were being far too loud and the service lacked cohesion and focus. I enjoy the intellectual challenge of thinking about God in a somewhat systematic fashion. I am bothered by theological inconsistencies. I am a stickler for the precise use of language. None of those things were in evidence in the particular corner of the Pentecostal church we were visiting. It seemed to me to be uneducated and disconnected from the traditions of the church.

These days I know Pentecostal Christians who are well-educated and who have a grasp of theology, but that style of worship is not my way of being in relationship with God and the people of God.

I am aware, however, that the spirit of the people is an important dynamic and well worthy my attention. Congregations that become discouraged have trouble getting out of that rut. They can find themselves focusing more on the problems than on the opportunities. I have been at more than a few church meetings where there is little excitement or vision for the future. We go through the motions, but the passion is subdued and the mood is less than enthusiastic.

Today we celebrate the birthday of the church and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The reading of Acts 2:1-21 is always used to initiate the opening of the season of Pentecost following the seven weeks of Easter. Over the years there have been several different ways that we have shared that reading. We've read it straight. We've had readers' theatre. We've had confetti and other visual effects. We have used people who can speak different languages to imitate the experience of those first Christians gathered in that place.

It would, however, be an exaggeration to say that I fully understand that text or the events that it reports. Jesus' ministry engages me intellectually. He is able to hold his own with the Pharisees and Scribes and students of Jewish law. He employs parable and poetry and frequently quotes the words of prophets in his teaching. He presents a faith that is equal to the questions of our minds and able to be explored intellectually. The Holy Spirit, however, is much more amorphous.

Still, I believe that there is much more to the experience and expression of the Holy Spirit than a mere puff of emotion. There are some forms of Christian worship that are little more than emotional manipulation. Stir up the folks with the right combination of music and "in-your-face" preaching and someone is bound to come to tears or an outburst of emotion. People will succumb to the pressure of an altar call and do things

that they had not previously thought they would do. Later the experience may or may not be life-changing. As our Costa Rican pastor, Dorotea says, "Some people have been baptized so many times their souls are wrinkled."

Really lifting the spirits of a congregation is far more than mere emotional manipulation. Making church meaningful and engaging is a bigger pursuit than a few moments of worship. In our congregation we find that we have to work together, shoulder to shoulder, before our sense of closeness can find its expression in worship. We study and pray and work hard to discover meaningful mission and ministry that reaches beyond just offering worship services. And, on occasion, our worship is a reflection of the many lives of faith that come together to do the work of Christ.

The Spirit is so much more than emotion. It is shared experience. It is hospitality that requires practice. It is born of deep commitment.

People who visit our church often need to make multiple visits before they begin to feel a part of our community. A day working on a mission project can speed the process. Our church offers high-quality and engaging worship. We work hard at preparing and producing those experiences. But we are much more than the services we do.

If you want entertainment, there are probably other venues that offer what you are seeking. But if you want to be a part of a community of love and care that is dedicated not only to providing for each other but serving our neighbors, our church might be just the right place.

We do pay attention to the Spirit. We do care passionately about our congregation. We are willing to work hard and show deep commitment.

Pentecost is an invitation for me to take stock of the spirit of the congregation. Perhaps there are some areas that could use a little more attention. Perhaps my priorities need to be re-aligned. The work is never finished.

I am confident that you will find our congregation to be a spirited place once you get to know us.

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## **June 9, 2014 – Science and Religion**

The dialogue between religion and science has not always been an easy conversation. There have been religious authorities who have resisted the discoveries of science. Several high-profile arguments have caused some scientists, both amateur and professional, to question the judgment of religious authorities. In the early part of the 17th century Galileo came into conflict with the Roman Catholic Church for his support of Copernican astronomy. The discovery that the earth is not at the center of the universe, not even at the center of our solar system, was initially rebuffed by religious authorities whose interpretations of the stories of Creation in Genesis gave a dramatically different worldview. It was a little more complex than that. Galileo's small book, "Sidereus Nuncius" challenged the philosophy of the time. It points to errors in the understandings of Aristotle and Ptolemy. Galileo's observations of the phases of Venus, which show that it circles the sun challenged Ptolemy's geocentric model.

Some contemporary thinkers will point to that controversy as the beginnings of conflict between science and religion.

Another famous incident that focused on the differences between scientific method and some religious interpretations was the 1925 legal case "State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes," commonly known as the Scopes Monkey Trial. The State of Tennessee had passed a law making it unlawful to teach human evolution in any state-funded school. Substitute teacher John Scopes was accused of violating that law. He was found guilty and fined \$100 before the verdict was overturned on a technicality. The trial, however, garnered national publicity, in part because famous lawyers Williams Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow faced off. In fundamentalist corners of the church there are still evolution verses creation debates and people who believe that the teaching of the widely accepted theory of evolution in schools somehow undermines religious teaching. While many faithful Christians do not see the inconsistency between evolution and Creation, the legal case and the national debate is sparked continues to influence the thinking of both scientists and religious leaders.

Both arguments, it seems to me, involve both a misunderstanding of the nature of religion on the part of scientists and a misunderstanding of the nature of science by religionists. They also, in my opinion, involve no small amount of mistaken representations of Christian theology on behalf of both sides of the argument.

The reading of sacred texts as if they were science books is not only disrespectful to the texts, but also can make it difficult, if not impossible, for readers to grasp the multiple levels of truth contained in the texts. To assume that faith is only the answer to things we understand is to assign faith to an ever-diminishing role as scientific discovery expands.

I simply don't see it that way. I have no particular interest in debating the existence of God. From the first words to the very end the Christian Bible is not interested in that

discussion, either. It simply accepts the existence of God. The entire book is a testament of faith by those who believe in God. As such, God is in everything. There is no scientific observation that is not an observation of the work of God. Each new scientific discovery leads to a deeper understanding of God. Before the era of modern science, many people thought that the universe was rather small compared to what we now know. From my point of view that makes the work of God and the very nature of God much more grand and beyond our capacity to imagine than was previously understood.

When I listen to classic debates of science verses religion, I find that the God whose existence is debated is a theological construct that is very different from they way I understand God. Often in such discussions I find myself thinking, "The god you don't believe in isn't the God in which I believe." Conversely, the god espoused by some fundamentalists is such a narrow vision of the complete nature of God, that I don't recognize the Biblical God in their description. There are psalms that speak of God's conception of time being vastly different than ours, but there are some who read the accounts of Genesis as if God operates on a 24-hour day and sees time from a human perspective. Multiple places in the bible speak of the role of God in the creation of even the most distant stars, and yet it appears as if some religious thinkers can't accept the vastness of the universe and want to continue to think of god as some kind of supernatural being that only cares about one planet.

The debates are rather silly in my opinion.

One of the corners of scientific exploration that fascinates me is the discoveries in neuroscience of recent years. Our brains are amazingly complex organs and the ways in which we think, retain ideas, and assemble them into coherent thoughts is truly amazing. We still understand only a very small part of the process. New medical imaging techniques provide a less-invasive way of studying the brain and seeing how it works. There have been several studies using functional MRI to observe the processes in the brain during intense religious experiences. One study focused on the brain activities of meditating monks and discovered amazing abilities of the monks to control brain processes and functions.

Studies of the Broca's area in the brain have led to a theory that religion, like language is an inherent part of being human. Religious thoughts and expressions are part of the necessary genetic code that forms humans. To state it in religious terms, scientists have discovered that religion is not some thought developed by humans, but rather a part of our essential nature - we were born to love God. It is not what we do as much as it is who we are.

We are only beginning to learn a small amount about the even wider reality of God. And we are only beginning to understand the relationship between religious expression and human identity. There is much that remains to be discovered.

So far, however, there is nothing that leads me to the conclusion that scientific method or thought is any kind of a treat to religious practice and expression. The polarization between science and religion is artificial. The debate is not a place where I want to invest much of my time or energy. I'm for attracted by the possibilities of new discoveries.

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### **June 10, 2014 – Learning to Use Technology**

The technology in our homes and in our pockets has changed so quickly that we are still learning how to manage it. With cell phones we are constantly connected and as our cell phones become smart phones, we have added texting, e-mail and other forms of connection to the voice link that not long ago was restricted to our homes, offices and other places that were connected by wire.

There are some tremendous benefits to this technology. I have used both my home computer and my cell phone to avoid a trip to the office when I might have needed to go in in previous times. Sometimes I can answer a simple question or help another person by making a short phone call when others may have had to interrupt their activities and go in for a face-to-face meeting.

What I really like about the technology is the way it helps me stay connected with my family. We had pictures of our new granddaughter while she was still in the delivery room. Although we were working hard on preparations for the Conference Annual Meeting, I had regular updates on the progress of labor and birth as it was happening - right in my pocket. I already have pictures of the new baby to show to others - right in my pocket. I know that I can tough base with the other members of my family and check up on them. When I travel, I can give those who are awaiting my arrival regular updates on my progress.

There is much to like about the new technologies.

There are also a few things that drive me up the wall. One is the expectation that we always remain connected. I choose to disconnect from time to time. Yesterday I took a vacation from e-mail. I didn't check my e-mail at all during the day. It was a way of getting some time away from work after an intense few weeks when I was working on my day off week after week and participating in the preparations to host the Annual Meeting. With the annual meeting over and no major medical crises going on in the congregation, it seemed a good time to give everyone a day off, close the church office and get a little recreation. I had a long list of chores at home that had been deferred during the busyness of the past few weeks.

I know, however, that there are risks to not checking my e-mail. I have been chastised

by people for not responding immediately to e-mail messages. One time a couple of years ago We were working with an attorney to adjust our wills after the death of our parents and we discovered that the attorney who was doing the work charges for every e-mail. The charge was substantial. We learned not to send an e-mail to the attorney to check an appointment or conduct any trivial business. The attorney only responded to e-mails during business hours and charged the regular hourly rate for doing so. It doesn't work that way in the church. When I have taken time away from e-mail, I have delayed response to parishioners' concerns. They expect the response to be quick.

Despite taking a break from e-mail yesterday, I did carry my phone with me. I am on call for our local Survivors of Suicide response team and need to be constantly available this week. I spoke with at least four members of the congregation yesterday. Two of the conversations began with, "I'm sorry to bother you on you day off, but there was nobody at the church." The calls included legitimate concerns, but no immediate crises. One was to question the time of a meeting which had been listed in the worship bulletin incorrectly. The actual meeting was 15 minutes later than printed in the bulletin. A second call also was about something listed in the bulletin. One was to make an appointment later this week. Another was to report some changes in the progress of a chronic disease. None of the calls were for essential information that needed to be communicated immediately. But we have learned to make the call when we are thinking about it. It is seen as good practice to deal with things now and not delay until a more convenient time.

Text messages are a bit less invasive. I can ignore them for a few minutes and reply when a particular task is completed. Unlike the phone which demands instant response, text messages can wait for a reply.

There isn't anything inherently wrong with the technology. It is just that the technology has changed so fast that we haven't yet learned to manage it. I can remember when a short drive into the hills took one to places where there was no cell phone signal. Those places are getting harder and harder to find. These days, I leave my cell phone behind when I am paddling or rowing, but I can already that changing. I now have a waterproof case for my cell phone and taking it with me would allow me to paddle on the days that I am on call without having to line up a substitute first.

There is one time and place where I leave the technology behind. I leave my cell phone in my office when I am leading worship. I have never been chastised for not responding to calls or texts or e-mails during worship, although I have received calls that were missed from my siblings. You'd think that they would know that I can't answer the phone at that time on a Sunday morning.

It seems that there are plenty of other times and places that we could hold sacred. We don't need to talk on the phone during meal times. We don't need to constantly interrupt important jobs. Most phone calls can wait for a response. I have voice mail on all of my

phones. It is easy to leave a message. In fact I tell people to be prepared to leave a message when they call.

Now all I have to do is to teach them patience, so that they don't expect an immediate call back, especially when the topic is not an emergency and I am trying to take a day off.

We've still got a lot to learn about how to use these marvelous technological devices.

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### **June 11, 2014 – Politics and Debates**

I suppose that I should be more interested in politics. Political elections, causes and debates were common in the household in which I grew up. One of my brothers made a failed bid for a U.S. Senate seat. Another brother sees the world in political terms and is constantly engaged in political action, urging people to take action, trying to influence voting decisions and participating in rallies and events. It is not that I don't care, it is just that the way that we engage in politics in this country doesn't engage me as much as it does others.

With the primary season moving to its conclusion and the general election looming, I know that we will be inundated with political advertising. Here in South Dakota, the media will be filled with politics. Here in South Dakota, candidate can purchase all of the ad segments a television station has to sell for less money than a modest advertising campaign would cost in California or some other big media state. Since our candidates raise the bulk of their money out of state and since the big funders of political campaigns don't care what state the candidate comes from, South Dakota candidates have more than enough money to be extravagant with television and radio ads, robocalls, mailings, pop-up Internet ads and other media.

Part of the reason that I don't have much passion for politics is that much of political discourse in this country is boorish at best. There are virtually no real debates on the issues. Most of the discourse consists of bashing the opponent without laying out any comprehensive plan for governing at all. Negative campaigning works in American politics, though there are a few notable cases of it backfiring.

For some time I have enjoyed listening to Intelligence Squared debates from British Broadcasting. These are Oxford style debates in which teams of two presenters make formal opening statements, ask and answer questions and then make closing statements. There is a formal structure to the debate that discourages interruption, encourages careful listening and provides equal time. The moderator keeps the debate on time. More interestingly, the audience is polled before the debate and then polled again near the end of the debate so that the impact of the debate can be seen in the number of votes that are changed by listening to the debate. The process is distinctly

British and decidedly civil.

The range of topics for Intelligence Squared debates is very wide and not always political. There are debates about historic decisions and what might have happened had the decision been otherwise as well as a wide variety of contemporary topics.

The popularity of the debates in the United States has produced a new series of debates along the same lines here in the United States. I haven't listened to too many of the US debates, but our local public broadcasting station is now broadcasting the debates. The time slot doesn't happen to be a time when I can listen to the radio on a regular basis, but I can always listen to the programs on podcast.

My big hope is that such structured debate might catch on in the United States. I have said on many occasions that at least once a year our state legislators should be required to listen to a high school debate so that they could learn a little about the process of debate. A good debate does not require interruptions. It does not require shouting. It does not require inflammatory rhetoric. Debating is not the art of keeping your mind closed and never changing your opinion. It is the process of carefully listening and weighing both sides of an argument. It involves getting to know the other side of the debate as intimately as your side.

American politics seem to be much more focused on a winner take all attitude and too often are simply a matter of the person with the person who spends the most lavishly wins.

We need to be about the process of learning how to engage in civil discourse in this country. Quite frankly a politician who is disciplined in their discourse is a rare commodity in today's American political scene.

The two party system tends to present an either-or scenario. Real politics are more subtle and involve the art of compromise - a skill that is not encouraged. Compromise is often portrayed as weakness in the contemporary political arena. Real life is more complex and more subtle. There are often more than two options.

But I suspect that what I like most about the British Intelligence Squared debates is that the art of debate itself is raised to such a high level that the topics reach far beyond conventional politics. Which author was greater, Emily Bronte or Jane Austin? How about Milton vs Shakespeare? As the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo approaches, what is the proper assessment of Napoleon's life and legacy? Military genius or blundering nonentity who created his own enduring myth? The range of topics goes on and on.

Actually, I can be as passionate about literature, philosophy, history and other topics as I am about politics - often more so.

I suppose that it has always been the case that American politics have been extremely polarized. The period of time leading up to the Civil War certainly was not a season of political tolerance and compromise. And there has always been a fair amount of shouting and inflammatory rhetoric in the halls of congress. Still, I long for a more measured and calm debate - an appeal to intelligence and rational thought - that is conspicuously missing from much of contemporary political speech.

Intelligence Squared debates are now being held in the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Australia, the United States, Israel, Nigeria and Greece. We often think of Greece as the birthplace of democracy, but seldom think of contemporary Greek politics as places of rational thought and argument. Perhaps these debates can serve to teach us more about how to engage in political speech in ways that add to the common knowledge and understanding rather than the crude attempts at manipulation of public opinion that mark the political scene these days.

Who knows, the right debate might just help me to change my mind.

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### **June 12, 2014 – Get Ready, Sports Fans**

Well Cubs fans, it looks like we're in for another long season. At 26 wins to 37 losses, our team is now officially 11 and a half games behind the Central division leaders, Milwaukee. Last night's 4 - 2 loss to the Pirates continued the slump that feels pretty familiar to dedicated Cubs fans. With the amateur draft completed, there is still a little time to make adjustments to the roster through trades before the July 31 deadline, but looks to be another long season. As has been the case in so many years past, Cubs fans have to look for a few dramatic plays. It was pretty cool the way Joh Baker caught a foul popup, threw to Darwin Barney, who fired off to third base, catching Starling Marte straying off the bag. Actually that wasn't as dramatic as Chris Coghlan's great leap for Andrew McCutchen's long drive. Too bad it ticked off his glove for a home run.

As all good Cubs fans know, anybody can cheer for the winners. It takes perseverance and dedication to stay with your team when the streak of losing seasons stretches longer than your lifetime. Cubs fans have a special bond born of the resilience that comes from never being on top of the game.

Let me tell you, however, friends and neighbors, while baseball may make the headlines in Chicago, home fo two professional teams, it isn't the big game in the rest of the world. Checking headlines from England, Australia, South Africa and Costa Rica this morning, the rest of the world is hyped about football and I don't mean American football, but the game we call soccer.

After a lot of preparation and hype, and even a little bit of controversy, Brazil is set to

host the World Cup. The opener is this evening with Brazil hosting Croatia. The tournament will last a month as 32 nations compete for a place in the final to be held in Rio on July 13. Tonight's match up will be preceded by a ceremony in Sao Paulo that pays tribute to the game and the people of the countries that compete. It is a big deal.

When you read the headlines from outside of the United States you understand that in much of the world the USA is often on the wrong side of the joke when it comes to sport. The Superbowl isn't seen as that super when you consider there is only one country in the world that has professional American rules football teams. The World Series hardly seems like a "world" series when the competing teams all come from the same country.

The World Cup, on the other hand, is preceded by a lengthy process during which the field is pared to just 32 countries. The game is played all around the world.

Many believe that the host country, Brazil is favorite to win the World Cup for a sixth time. Spain, however, will be a strong competitor, coming off four major tournament wins in a row including the European Championships two years ago. Other seeded teams are Colombia, Uruguay, Switzerland, Argentina, Germany and Belgium.

I probably pick all of my sports favorites with the same set of criteria, but my favorite team for the World Cup, Costa Rica, doesn't look like they are starting from a very strong position. The team has recently plagued by injuries and has suffered a few high-profile losses leading up to the Cup. Key forward Alvaro Saborio broke his foot during training for the Cup. Bryan Oviedo also will miss the tournament through injury. But at least they qualified and will get to play. Costa Rica's opener will be Saturday when they go up against Uruguay. Then almost a week later, on Friday June 20, they are playing Italy. England is the fourth team in their group.

The hot topic in Brazil in the days leading up to the opening ceremony is which coaches will ban the players from having sex. Mexico, Chile, Spain and Bosnia prohibit players from having sex during the tournament, according to one guide to the event. Brazil, on the other hand, has no such rule. It comes as no surprise that France also sets no similar rule for its players. Costa Rica's coach, Jorge Luis Pinto plans to keep his players isolated and focused during the first round of the tournament. He did say, however, "I can assure, with no doubts, they will be able to 'enjoy themselves' just as soon as they qualify for the next round.

The tournament begins with eight groups of four teams each. The USA team is in group G with Germany, Portugal and Ghana. The first game for team USA is Monday when they are matched with Ghana. They then play Portugal on Sunday, June 22.

I'm not much for television and we will be camping during the first two weeks of the tournament, so I'll get my news from the Internet and mostly after the games have been

completed. And I'll be getting my news from web sites outside of the USA. Soccer doesn't make the front page of the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune or the Rapid City Journal very often.

I still have my vuvuzela from when South Africa hosted the World Cup. It hasn't become a popular sound in my home and I doubt if it would be welcome in our camper as we vacation. I'll leave it at home. And at nearly \$90 for an official Costa Rica soccer jersey, I don't think I'll be ordering one of those to support Los Ticos. The design of the balls has been a bit controversial with its unusual black, red, green and blue swooshes in the place of the traditional ball design. There is a specific design for each match and at \$179.99 each, I won't be displaying a commemorative ball in my home, either. I guess I'll just wave my Costa Rica flag and count on the team to make the noise in Brazil.

I'll probably continue to pay attention to the Cups throughout the tournament as well. After all there are some things that simply demand loyalty in this world.

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### **June 13, 2014 – Making the Miles**

In 2007, we loaded a kayak onto the roof of our pickup camper and drove 1805 miles from Rapid City, South Dakota to Hartford Connecticut in 2 1/2 days. We simply put in long days of driving with minimal breaks. The goal was to get our pickup and camper to the east coast for the meeting of the General Synod of the United Church of Christ. Susan was a delegate and I was representing the Association of United Church Educators at the meeting. Our thought was that the occasion offered us the opportunity to get our camper to the East Coast for a vacation. After the meeting, we visited Mystic Seaport in Connecticut for the Wooden Boat Show, then we drove to Maine, where we visited friends and made the pilgrimage to the Old Town Canoe outlet store. Now with two kayaks on the roof of the truck, we drove up to the border of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia and paddled in the Bay of Fundy along the way. We came home at a more leisurely pace, driving across Quebec and Ontario on our way home.

The hard driving, however, is not our usual vacation pace. It makes sense from time to time when we really have to make the miles, but we much prefer shorter days and we like to travel at 65 mph or less with our camper. Most of the time we avoid the Interstate highways and explore the back roads.

The next few days will be intense with a bit of hard driving for me. I'm going to Hastings, NE tomorrow to teach a seminar tomorrow evening and Saturday, then I drive home on Saturday after the seminar to be in Church on Sunday morning. That's just under 900 miles. Then Sunday we hope to get to my sister's place on our way toward our son and daughter in law's home in Olympia, WA after church. That makes a total of about 1300 miles in three days. By the time we get to Olympia, I'll have put in over 2,000 miles in 4 1/2 days. To be fair, 900 miles of it will be in a little car with a light load. And the balance

will all be done in daylight hours. We have our camper so we will be able to adjust stopping points if we get too tired or encounter harsh weather or find ourselves in need of an unanticipated repair.

No one makes us do this. We are doing it because we want to. I love to teach and the lure of our grandchildren is very strong. And I don't mind a good road trip from time to time. It gives me time to clear my head and to allow my thoughts to wander.

Our mobility would have amazed our grandparents. Our grandparents were born in the days before automobiles were common. They lived to see the airline age when people routinely traveled thousands of miles in the same day. But they never took traveling for granted. Big distances amazed them.

When my mother was in high school, there was a terrible car accident on the gravel road between Great Falls and Fort Benton, Montana. The rumor in town was that the car had been traveling over 60 miles per hour at the time of the accident. That is a mile a minute! The speed was amazing to the folks at that time. I don't know what they'd think about us driving 75 miles down the Interstate and considering the practice routine.

It leads me to believe that our grandchildren will find our modes of travel to be nearly as incomprehensible. They will probably question the need to drive cars. With driverless cars already operating in experimental projects and the California legislature considering legislation to make them legal, we can see the day when some form of automobile autopilot will drive our cars more safely than we can. The role of the driver will be to program the computer and monitor the systems. People may even get used to taking a nap as they roll down the highway.

I suspect that future generations will be surprised that we pull a camper around the country. You mean they took a whole house with them? What did they need that for?

NASA recently unveiled its futuristic warp drive starship. Like the science fiction television of our childhood, the UEV-47 is theoretically capable of traveling faster than the speed of light, making interplanetary travel a reality. Of course it is all pretty theoretical and the space ship is little more than a lot of imagination and some really great drawings. Still, the future may hold much different modes of transportation that we imagine.

When settlers first came to the plains, travel at the rate of 25 miles per day was considered to be a pretty quick pace. Once the railroad got in place, travel was greatly sped up. The trains that crossed the plains averaged nearly 45 miles per hour. Still, even those folks would have found it pretty amazing that I could cram 900 miles of travel and 10 hours of lectures into two days. And I am not traveling by airplane, which would shorten the travel time considerably.

Just as our modes of travel are beyond the imaginations of previous generations, so the modes of travel of the future are beyond our imaginations. And when we do imagine, we often get things a bit wrong. When I was a kid, I believed that we would all have flying cars within my lifetime. That doesn't seem likely now. The Terrafugia flying car is now available for investors and for people to reserve a manufacturing position. The expected cost is coming in around \$300,000 per copy. The jet powered version is expected to require at least 12 years more development and research and who knows what the price of that plane will be. The bottom line is that I don't expect to find one of those within my budget anytime soon.

Still, I've nothing to complain about. I have a comfortable way to put the miles behind me and get on with my life. Nebraska today, Montana Sunday, and the West Coast by Tuesday. Not bad. Not bad at all.

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### **June 14, 2014 – On Campus**

The settlers who founded the community of Hastings, Nebraska, came to the area with ideas of what was needed to form a community. Many of the settlers came from other communities in the United States and knew the history of how some of the first settlers from Europe to the United States quickly formed educational institutions that trained leaders for the future of their communities. With those notions in their mind, they began the process of forming a college almost as soon as they got their town organized.

Some of those early settlers were graduates of church-related colleges and they decided that a Christian, liberal arts college would provide the best kind of well-rounded education for the young people of their community. They approached the Presbytery of Kearney and received support. The result was the founding of Hastings College, the only Presbyterian college in Nebraska.

These days Hastings College has a proud heritage of high-quality education. It has a high rate of placing students in graduate education programs, and among its alumni are an astronaut, a successful college football coach, a children's author, and the mayor of a major US city. The college has received all kinds of awards and honors and CBS Moneywatch recently named Hastings College number 23 out of 600 colleges as having the best professors.

Small liberal arts colleges struggle these days. There has been a recent emphasis on considering college in terms of short term payoff. Colleges and universities are touting the starting salaries of their graduates as a selling point. "Measure the cost of tuition against potential earnings," students and parents are told.

The problem is that education is about more than money. And education is a lifetime investment, not just about that first job out of college. In a world where few can sustain

the same career throughout their working life, flexibility and the ability to continue education are skills that can make the difference between success and failure. Liberal arts colleges have more to offer than might appear on first glance.

Of course I am biased. I graduated from a church-related liberal arts college. So did our son. Our family has benefitted greatly from education that was focused on the process of learning rather than on a specific career field. Learning for the sake of learning instills a love of learning that continues throughout a lifetime. Throughout my life I have had more options than others because of the quality of my education. When I have reached turning points in my career I have had the skills to gain additional skills and learning to meet the needs of a changing profession in a changing world.

I don't think it was possible, in the days when I was a college student, for me to accurately imagine the things that I would be doing 40 years down the road. I knew I wanted to be a minister, but in those days of typing my papers on a manual typewriter I didn't realize how much time I would spend working with computers or how much I would need to be able to troubleshoot a computer network. I didn't even imagine what a computer network would be. These days when we have computer problems that require hiring a technician, it frustrates me that the technician has to repeat work that I have already done because his or her training has provided only a set of repeatable steps that must be followed in sequence in order for anything to be done. It is so obvious to me that the technician will outlive his or her training. A few technological advances and the technician's education becomes obsolete.

There is so much more to education than acquiring specific information or mastering specific skills. At the heart of education is the development of critical thinking skills, a style of problem-solving, and the ability to continue to engage in research and learning.

One of the results of my particular education is that it instilled in me a love of the process of teaching and learning. It strikes me as a bit silly, but I really enjoy being on a campus, if even for just a couple of days. I park my car on the edge of the campus just for the pleasure of walking across the campus to the classroom building where I am teaching. It is summer break and the campus doesn't have the students who were here a month ago when I was here, but the mood and the feel of the campus remains.

The founders of Hastings College might be impressed by the modern campus. The brick buildings are substantial and are built to coordinate with each other. The tall steeped chapel looks like it would fit into a New England community. The sprawling athletic complex is truly impressive. Most folks zipping across Nebraska on Interstate 80 never realize what is here just 25 miles from that freeway. Classrooms are equipped with computers and projectors and sound systems that make it easy to employ some of the most modern technologies in teaching and learning. I haven't found any chalk boards, but the classrooms that I have used have had walls of white marker boards that allow a place for writing notes and references for students to follow.

Yesterday I arrived at my classroom early and took a few minutes to leaf through a few copies of the campus arts and literary magazine. The quality of the printing and binding far exceeds anything that we were able to do in my college years. Computer page layout, modern scanning devices and full color printing are things that we simply didn't have. But I can remember the passion for art and poetry and storytelling that were a part of my college education. And I can see the promise in the talents and gifts of the students who contributed to these modern publications.

I am grateful that there are many different options for college education for students. I know some students for whom a very focused education is appropriate. But I am also grateful for the liberal arts colleges that teach about life and living as well as a specific career field.

Hastings College is about the same age as the church that I serve. Nearly a third of the way through its second century of service, it seems clear that the college will have an important roll and much to contribute in the centuries to come.

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### **June 15, 2014 – Trinity Sunday 2014**

Most of the holidays in the church center around events in the life of Jesus. Last week we celebrated Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Today, however, we have a holiday that is dedicated to a theological concept. The trinity is not directly mentioned in the Bible, though the three aspects of God - Creator, Christ and Spirit are all explored in biblical texts. The idea of talking about God as trinity grew up with the church and was forged in some of the great historic councils in which creeds and testimonies of faith were drafted. As the church made its transition from a new and somewhat countercultural religion to the religion of the mainstream of Roman culture, there was a drive to have some standardization of belief. The theology of the trinity emerged as a way to think and talk about God.

It has been tripping up Christians ever since it was introduced. For some, outside of the faith, it seems as if Christians believe in more than one God. Christians, of course, are quick to point out that there is only one God and that the different aspects are not expressions of multiple Gods, but of the same God. Jesus is God. God is Spirit. The Spirit is Jesus. Even a very dedicated and faithful believer and understand how the trinity can be a bit of an intellectual challenge.

During the course of my life as a Christian I have endured a number of very boring discussions about the trinity. Although I enjoy the challenge of the intellectual side of our faith and find that thinking about God is a wonderful way to spend my time, there are some arguments that seem to me to lack much passion. I find it difficult to get much excitement in a perfectly balanced discussion. I've encountered lots of faithful Christians

whose theology of the trinity doesn't shine with textbook accuracy. You can get me excited about mission and ministry. You can get me excited about sacraments. But I don't remember ever being very excited about the perfect trinitarian formula.

Maybe that is why Trinity Sunday doesn't rank up there among the most memorable of Christian festivals and holidays. It is a date on the calendar - the Sunday after Pentecost - when we read some familiar texts and then get on with the longest season of the church year.

The texts for Trinity Sunday, however, are all wonderful and beloved readings. I can get passionate about explaining the first creation story of the book of Genesis. I took a course in the Genesis creation narratives when I was in seminary that was a delight in its careful analysis of each detail of translation from the Hebrew into English. The history of that particular narrative and its role in the story of our people is a wonderful story. Even the many ways in which contemporary Christians have abused the text by reading it as a science text book, applying our very human sense of time, and distorting the role of the text in the story of our people are worthy of a bit of explanation and are often opportunities for additional teaching about the text.

Psalm 8 is wonderful and poetic and expresses a feeling that I have known as I look out into the vastness of the universe. The farewell of the first letter to the Corinthians reminds us to greet one another warmly and to remember that we are loved by God's faithful people who have gone before. And the great commission from Matthew calls to all Christians and reminds us that we have been sent forth to make disciples of others.

One of the realities of much of our teaching about the Trinity is that we have often made the concept too difficult. We have come up with many long and wordy explanations of the idea. It is, on the one hand, a very complex idea. The concept of the trinity didn't emerge in a single generation. The church has been wrestling with the concept for many generations. The nuances of interpretation have been honed by many formal presentations and late-night theological arguments.

But there is also a side to the concept that is very simple. God is so invested in relationship that God is relationship at the very core of God's being.

God exists to be in relationship.

Even before anything else exists, God is already an expression of love.

The practical implication of the theology of the trinity is that we do not exist alone. Nothing exists without God. Everything that we think, do or say has an effect on something other than ourselves. We are all connected to all of the other parts of this marvelous creation.

In recognition and celebration of our place in the church year, I brought up both Pentecost and Trinity texts as part of the seminar I taught in Hastings over the past couple of days. Yesterday I invited the students to participate in a round-robin telling of the beginning of the book of Genesis. They mdd faces and said that they didn't know the text well enough to tell the story, but they were remarkably accurate as we went around the room and shared the story that our people have been telling for millennia. After the seventh day and the telling of God resting from the work of creation, the next speaker started by saint that he needed to add some details that had been left out. He then began to offer some of the details from the 2nd story of Creation - the one that uses the names Adam and Eve - that follows the first one in the book. Others began to remind him that he was telling a different story. It was an amazing moment as I simply pointed out to them that this way of talking about creation was as old as the biblical texts themselves. Our people have been telling multiple stories about creation for as long as we have been taling about the topic.

There is one God.

There are lots of ways to think and talk about God.

***A couple of notes to regular readers of this blog:***

First of all, just in case you missed it, Costa Rica pulled off a major upset with their 3 - 1 victory over Uruguay in World Cup competition. It sure would have been fun to have been in downtown San Jose with the crowd watching on the big screens.

Secondly, we will be traveling for the next two weeks. Although I plan to write the blog every day I know we will be in some places where I won't have Internet access. If you miss the blog one day, check back on another. I'll finally get them all posted. But don't worry if the blog doesn't appear on schedule.

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**June 16, 2014 – At the Ranch**

The sound of the rain on the roof of our camper was a pleasant way to go to sleep last night. It wasn't a big storm, just a little spring rain. We had driven through showers for much of the last 75 or so miles, but it looked like it was clearing up as the sun slipped behind the Crazy Mountains. There is something about being back in the country where I grew up that brings back all kinds of memories. We are at Jarrett's Duck Creek Ranch, which is in the Yellowstone Valley and not in the high country, but the sound of the rain on the roof reminded me of early summer nights up at camp, where the cabins had no insulation in the roofs and no interior ceilings so the sound of the rain was easy to hear.

This is the kind of country where no one complains about rain. The rivers and creeks are all running full and there is still plenty of snow in the mountains, but it hasn't rained

all that much in this country. They are irrigating heavily in the hay fields now, hoping to finish the alfalfa enough to be in the field putting up hay within a couple of weeks or so. If the water holds they'll get two cuttings this summer. Either way, they count on that first cutting to have a decent yield and good nutrition to see the sheep and cattle through the winter. On our way into the ranch the mud puddles in the road were mostly the product of the irrigation, not of the showers.

But after we arrived and set up and went inside for a little snack and a short visit, the rain started and continued for a while as we drifted off to sleep with the music of the rain on the roof. I was tired after the events of the the day and the week that preceded it and was soon sleeping. I don't know if it rained for a long time, but my sense is that it was just a shower that passed. The night was quiet and the next thing I remember is the birdsong of this morning. There are a lot of trees here along the creek, many of them are old cottonwoods with massive trunks and branches and spreads that provide lots of shade on the lush grass growing below. The trees also provide shelter for all kinds of song birds who commute from the southland to spend their summers at the ranch.

It always takes us a while to shift gears into vacation mode. We knew that we wanted to make a few miles yesterday in order to get to the ranch. My sister is leaving this morning to head to Portland to visit her kids. We wanted to sneak in a short visit with her and the way to do that was to push a little bit yesterday to make over 400 miles after church. It took us a while to finish loading the camper and get on the road, so it was about 2 pm when we left home and nearly 9:30 when we arrived at the ranch. But there is an advantage to heading west. We have gained a half hour or so of evening light. We set up the camper in the dusk and I didn't have to navigate the gravel roads and find the place in the dark.

As we drove we talked about church mostly. We were bouncing around ideas for crafts and songs for Vacation Bible School. We know that taking a vacation requires us to be ready to dive right back in as soon as we return and we've had our eyes on things that happen after our vacation as we prepared to leave. As our vacation progresses, we won't be thinking about work quite as much, but it takes a few days to move our minds out of our usual work mode.

Our plan today is to start to slow down a bit. We can take a more leisurely pace getting ready to leave. There may even be a chance to walk around the ranch, take a look at the lambs and take a picture or two before we hitch up the camper and head on up the road. And today's journey will be up. The first climb is the Bozeman pass about 50 miles or so to the west. Then it is up over Pipestone where we cross the continental divide just east of Butte. There are two more passes in the Idaho panhandle before we head out into the big wheat country of eastern Washington. We don't have a specific destination in mind for our camping place tonight, but the farther we go today the shorter tomorrow will be. If we make it to the edge of the Cascades, we are assured of a beautiful campsite and a short drive tomorrow.

It seems as if the season of grief through which we have been passing at church has been paralleled by a fair amount of grief in my home country. As we visited last night there were stories of the death of a neighbor who had been in this country as long as any of us could remember. He suffered a stroke a while back and passed away peacefully in the local hospital, but he will be deeply missed by the folks who live around here. Good neighbors make the world seem a bit safer and the work seem a little lighter. And here on the ranch, everyone is waiting for the return of the hired man who has been back in North Dakota for the burial of his wife, who died suddenly of an aneurism. They got her to the hospital and from there to a bigger hospital in Billings, but she didn't survive long enough for surgeons to repair the problem. The whole ranch is going to seem different without her and it will take a while for the hired hand to learn a new routine for his life and work.

But life goes on. The deer are feeding in the meadows. The cattle and sheep are grazing in their pastures. There is no small amount of old machinery in need of repair and preparation for haying which will soon be on the ranch. Old machine and old vehicles are being spruced up to last another year. There isn't enough profit in the ranching business for new equipment this year.

But this is ranch country and next year is always going to be better. And the rain on the roof last night was definitely a good sign.

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## **June 17, 2014 – Heading West**

Last night we were looking at a map of the State of Washington with the scenic roads highlighted. We noted that we have driven most of those roads. Although we have never lived in Washington, we did live for 10 years in Idaho, a neighboring state. For most of my adult life, I have had a family member who lived in Washington. My brother lived on Whidbey Island for many years and later in Everett. Now our son and daughter-in-law have made their home in Olympia. Over the years, we have crisscrossed the state from East to West on Highway 12, Interstate 90, US 2 and State Route 20, also known as the North Cascades route. We have explored part of the Columbia gorge and basin, driven around the Cascades and made the run around the Olympic Peninsula. It is a place of amazing natural beauty and many different climates and types of scenery.

We noticed another thing about that map, however. Much of the center of the state had no officially designated scenic highways. We decided that high plains desert just isn't viewed by many people as scenic. Last night we camped in Moses Lake. It is the second time in as many years that we have spent the night in this place. I knew that the lake had been deepened and broadened by the Columbia Basin project, and I had assumed that it had gained its name from the Biblical Moses, perhaps because the lake had originally been shallow, like many of the other pothole lakes in the area. There

might have been times, before the building of the Columbia basin dams, when one could walk through the lake. The wind certainly blows here at times. That story, however, seems to be untrue.

The official history of this place notes that the original name of the community was Neppel, after the town in Germany from which one of the settlers had come. Early attempts at different ways of developing industry for the town were not successful. They attempted to harvest jackrabbits and export them as gourmet food. They attempted to harvest carp from the river and send them to urban markets. They attempted to set up elaborate irrigation schemes to increase crop yields. People seemed to be leaving the town as quickly as they arrived. In 1938, the 300 or so residents of the town decided to take action and incorporate their village. They renamed the town Moses Lake in honor of Chief Moses of the Sinkiuse tribe. Moses lived in the 2nd half of the 19th century and had been forced to negotiate the moving of his tribe several times under pressure from settlers and the government. In the 1880's the tribe traded the Columbia Basin for a reservation in the north, stretching from Lake Chelan to the Canadian border. Later they were forced onto what is now the Colville Indian Reservation.

Life changed in the area with the construction of the Grand Coulee Dam in 1941 and Larson Air Force Base a year later. The air base later closed, but Boeing Aircraft still uses the facility as a test and evaluation center for its commercial aircraft. The community has over 21,000 residents these days.

Like many reservoirs, Lake Moses isn't all that impressive at first look. It is about 3 miles long and a mile wide, but has several different fingers, so it has quite a bit of shoreline. The land farther away from the lake is mostly irrigated wheat land and open prairie, so the trees around the lake make it seem inviting and pleasant. I'm sure it is a bit of a refuge on hot summer days.

I'm pretty sure that there is a lot more to explore in this area of Washington, even if the people who made the map don't find this part of the state scenic. Perhaps some day we'll take the time to do some more exploring. Today, however, we are aware, as we start our day, that we are only about 2 hours' drive from our son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren. We should be there to share lunch with the family.

Over the years I have had a lot of road trips that ended with the excitement of reunion with family. Having been raised in Montana, with much of my extended family within the state, our move to Chicago a year after we married was a real adventure for me. I didn't have any experience with city living and I had a few fears about the dangers of the city. I loved our studies in Chicago and we had a good time living in the city, but each trip to Montana had a sense of returning to the place I belonged. I would relax as we drove west and as the country opened up and there were fewer and fewer people I began to feel more and more at home.

We never again lived in Montana after our Chicago days. We lived in North Dakota, Idaho and South Dakota and Montana has always been a destination for visiting family and friends. These days, however, with fewer member of my family living in Montana, it is often a really large state that must be crossed in order for us to visit family on the West coast. With lots of distance to cover, we have a tendency to take direct and familiar routes, but we like to explore new roads and sometimes we take the backroads on our adventures and check out new territory. Both Washington and Montana have several different routes to cross the state. Because we travel at a slower speed with the camper, we don't lose as much time traveling more obscure routes as would be the case if we were traveling at 75 mph.

Today, however, we've got the GPS set for "quickest route" and we're headed for those grandchildren with no small amount of excitement and anticipation. It's going to be a great day!

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### **June 18, 2014 – Gratitude**

At our son and daughter-in-law's house the table grace routine is for each person to name things for which they are thankful. It is a very moving ritual for me. I am incredibly fortunate and there is no shortage of things for which I am grateful. Because we live in two different states, our time together is limited. We are lucky to live in the era of computers and video conferencing, but there is no substitute for being together face to face. Yesterday was my first opportunity to hold our new granddaughter in my own arms. There is nothing like that feeling. No matter how often I get to hold babies at the church and in other areas of my life, the experience never gets old. And with a grandchild, I can linger. I spent a fair amount of time yesterday just holding Emmala while she was sleeping. The warm little body cuddled on my chest is such a miracle that I sit there in amazement watching the smallest of movements and listening to her tiny sounds.

Our grandson is delightful. We played with a toy digger in the yard and explored some of the new toys that we had brought in our camper. We played with his trains in the evening and he made up a running narrative, telling a story about the trains as we pushed them around the tracks.

Perhaps the greatest delight of visiting our kids is seeing what a wonderful family they are building. They have formed a very good partnership that is adjusting to the new member of the family well. Watching our son in his role as father is a joy beyond description.

There is much for which to be grateful.

Vacation means changing our schedule and shifting some of our routines. We have a

wonderful life when we are at home and it isn't like I need to get out of some kind of rut, but it is fun to sleep until the daylight wakes me and not worry about chasing the clock in the same way that I do when we are at home. Our camper gives us our own space and we have plenty of luxuries in this camper that we didn't have in our previous one. We are parked in a grove of cedar and Douglas firs that is quiet and filled with birds. It is really nice the way that the trees deaden the sounds of the world. We are only about a mile from a major Interstate highway, but the place where we are camping is lovely and quiet. It seems to be an island of nature in the midst of a region of urban sprawl and development.

As we drove in from Tacoma to Olympia yesterday I was reminded how the Pacific northwest has become continual city along the eastern shores of the Puget Sound. From Bellingham to Olympia the highway is six lanes of continual urban traffic. The land is expensive and filled with all kinds of commercial development. People out here don't speak in terms of miles when they are talking about taking a trip. They speak in terms of time. Seattle-Tacoma Airport is less than 55 miles from their home. Portland (OR) International is over 100 miles. But they see them as being about the same in terms of the time and hassle of travel. On the other hand, we think very little of taking a trip of 400 or 500 miles for a one or two day meeting. They think in terms of flying to most destinations that are farther away than the airport. It is a different way of life and most of the people in the world live in urban areas.

While I love to visit this part of the world, it gives me appreciation for the place where I do live. I like the open spaces and relaxed driving that characterized most of our trip. I can drive in city traffic and am willing to do so when necessary, but I prefer open country and wide spaces.

The good thing about the next few days is that they are focused on being, not on doing. Of course there is no small amount of work in a busy and growing family. We can help provide care for the children, assist with meals and even do a few repairs around the house. But mostly our role as grandparents is as supporters of the busy and exciting life of our children and grandchildren. They accept and love us for who we are and allow us to just be. It is another thing to add to the list of things I'm thankful for.

A big black bird is raising a ruckus outside of the camper as I write. I'm not the best at identifying birds, but I think it is a raven - it seems too big to be a crow. The raven is a key character in the stories of the indigenous people of this region, just like the coyote is a big player in the stories of the plains. In the stories of the Haida, Raven is not just a trickster and complex character, he is also a reflection of the people that he sees. The stories teach about how to live a good life and have respect for others with whom we share the world. Most of the time Raven teaches humans by showing them what not to do, so I'm not giving too much stock to this morning's raven, but it is another reminder that there is so much in this world for which I am grateful.

I think our children have got it right. Thanksgiving isn't just a holiday or a season - it is a meaningful activity for every day. Pausing at mealtime to offer thanks is more than a meaningful ritual of repetition and practicing faith - it is a way of reminding ourselves that we are constantly showered with blessings. There are reasons to give thanks every day.

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### **June 19, 2014 – Among the Cedars**

In the books of Chronicles and Kings, the temple built by Solomon is described in various ways, including the process of obtaining building materials and craftsmen to build the temple, the architectural description of the shape and size of the building, and many of its features. No expense was spared in constructing the building, including the Hekhal, or Holy Place. Probably the most prominent feature of that place was the extensive use of gold. If you read an English translation of the bible, the word gold is used so often that it gives a deep sense of the extravagance of the construction.

But it is another building material that catches my attention when I read the descriptions of the temple. I guess I have more experience with wood construction, but in a building that was largely a masonry project, the mention of wood at all is a bit of a surprise. In the Hekhal, before the gold is installed, there is extensive use of cedar.

Cedar is mentioned in several places in the Bible. The cedars of Lebanon are renowned for their size and strength in construction of many different things. Outside of the bible, sources speak of the cedars being used for building ships, palaces and other notable buildings. *Cedrus libani* is a species of cedar native to the mountains of the Mediterranean region. The trees grow up to 130 feet in height and can have trunks as large as 8 feet in diameter. These massive trees are magnificent to see growing in their natural state. Variations of the trees are found throughout the mountainous regions of the Mideast. Turkey also has giant cedar groves.

Cedar trees grow in various locations in the United States and Canada. Western red cedar is the variety with which I am most familiar. In most places of the pacific northwest where western red cedar trees are found, the groves also feature two other forest giants, Douglas fir and western hemlock.

Cedar is a gorgeous wood. It smells lovely when it is growing and after the trees have been harvested, the boards retain a distinctive odor which is often used to line closets or in other ways to keep moths out of clothing and other precious items.

It is a great wood for building boats. When cut into thin planks, cedar can be molded into complex shapes, including the complex curves that make a boat glide through the water. I have made canoes and kayaks out of cedar and love working with the wood.

Most of my life I have lived in dryer climates than the places that grow the giant cedars. In our country we grow small, twisted junipers. The trees are related to the giant cedars, but the junipers don't gain the great height and they twist and turn as they grow so that it is difficult to harvest boards from the trees and the boards that we can make are filled with knots and strange grain patterns. Juniper is good for fence posts because it is slow to rot and will last a long time, but it is probably the wrong wood for extensive boat building.

Like other forest products, part of the value of the great trees, however, is not just the uses to which we can put the wood when the tree is cut down. The value of the mixed wood temperate rain forests in the Pacific northwest gives us all kinds of reasons to be careful in our management of this resource and keep the forests healthy for future generations. Despite our desire for the precious wood, we need to limit our use so that the forests can remain healthy.

During our visits to the northwest, we have appreciated the opportunities to walk in the forests of giants and appreciate the joy of simply being among the magnificent trees. We have seen fallen trees that are nurseries for new trees, with dozens, even hundreds of small new trees growing from the fallen trunk of a tree that provides nourishment for the new trees as it slowly decomposes in the damp environment.

One of the little-noted properties of cedar wood are its acoustical properties. The wood is an excellent absorber of sound. Unlike some surfaces that reflect sound and provide for reverberation, the relatively soft wood of cedar trees absorbs the sound. I once read an article that claimed that the most acoustically isolated location in the United States is the middle of the rainforest on the Olympic Peninsula here in Washington. In that place, there is virtually no human produced noise that can be recorded unless hikers or others come into the area. The sounds of aircraft flying overhead, highways carrying lots of cars and trucks and ocean-going ships are all absorbed by the forest and cannot be heard or measured by sensitive sound recording instruments.

Those qualities are especially appreciated in the densely populated urban corridor around Seattle. There are a lot of people in a small area and most of them drive cars to get to and from their jobs. Seattle is home to Boeing, builder of some of the largest commercial jets in the world. Although the production of the jumbos is north of Seattle in Everett, Boeing field is still close to downtown Seattle and sees considerable air traffic. Overhead the planes from Seattle-Tacoma International Airport fill the skies with sound.

Groves of trees provide a significant sound barrier to enable people to live and work and recreate in a quieter atmosphere. When we first visited Olympia, we were surprised and delighted to find a hospital in the middle of a large grove of Cedar, hemlock and Douglas fir trees. Even with the helicopters that bring patients to the hospital's trauma center, the sounds are relatively quiet on the hospital grounds. It makes for a good place for healing and recovery.

I will continue to make boats out of cedar. The boat production of my lifetime will be far less than a single tree. Still, it is important for me to remember that I contribute to the consumption of this valuable resource. As we make decisions about the future of the forest and the role of humans in its management, I hope that we can learn ways to sustain these magnificent forests for future generations.

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## **June 20, 2014 – Children in Today's World**

There has been a lot said and written about the differences in the way children are being raised in our world of devices and technologies. I've read articles about the new generation of children who constantly have devices in their hands; spend most of their waking hours looking at television, computers and other devices with video displays; and inhabit a world of virtual reality through their video games. I am no expert in child development, but I do spend a lot of time observing and enjoying the children in our church and community. What I know is that it is very possible for parents to be intentional about their children's access to media and make wise choices in the midst of an ever-changing world.

When our children were young, they were aware that they didn't have as much exposure to television as some of their peers. Sometimes they saw it as a kind of deprivation. "So and so gets to watch television whenever he wants," we'd hear. But we had convictions about what was appropriate and our children watched much less television than others. They had limits on what movies they were allowed to watch and, for the most part, we didn't use the television as a babysitter, but rather watched programs with them and discussed what they were seeing.

We worked hard to provide an environment that was rich with other activities and events. We went to the park, provided indoor and outdoor toys, played games and encouraged learning. We were busy like other parents, but we did make intentional time for our children. Though we both had careers and our own work, we arranged our work lives so that one of us could be home with our children.

But that was a different time and the world is changing.

Most of the parents in our church have two full time jobs and their family requires childcare for many hours every day. They work hard to provide a loving and supportive environment for their children and make careful choices about childcare, but they fill their children's lives with activities and have family schedules that are very full. Even on weekends, when the parents have more time off from work, the children are going full time from lessons to games and other organized activities.

And today's children are getting plenty of screen time. They have hand-held video

games. They ride in cars that have video displays that play movies and other entertainments. Their homes have large screen televisions that are connected to the Internet and an endless supply of videos and movies and programs. Their parents relax in front of their home entertainment systems and the children see how important computers and other devices are to the parents. They want to play with those devices as much as possible.

In the midst of all of this are a few families who are very intentional about their children. They make decisions not to fill their home with excessive devices and video displays. It is possible to make conscious decisions without being a luddite. There are ways to use computers and tablets and cell phones without having them dominate your life and time. These parents choose other activities, games and projects for their children. And they work hard to spend as much time with their children as they are able. This means that their children aren't over-enrolled in games and programs and other activities.

At the age of three our grandson does get to watch a little television. He might watch an episode of "Bob the Builder" without commercials some days. But he doesn't watch television every day. He has a room filled with creative toys and is allowed to set up his train tracks all around the room and to play with his cars. He is allowed to draw and cut and paste at his desk and there are lots of other activities that allow for free play and imagination. He has opportunities to play outdoors each day and most days there are times to play with other children. His parents made the decision to open a home day care so that his mother could be at home and he could grow up with more contact with her. When his father gets home from work, family is the center of his attention.

I realize that I am terribly biased, and make no apologies for thinking that our grandchildren are the most wonderful in the world. But the result of intentional parenting is a child who is delightful, creative and really fun to be with.

Yesterday we went to a park with a play structure. Our grandson played on the structure for a while and observed what the other children were doing. Most of the other children were older and they did not invite him to join their games. He had no trouble entertaining himself with the slides and going up and down the structure. After a while, however, he sought out games that kept his grandparents engaged. For those games, no equipment was needed. There was a crawl into the bushes to explore the spaces under the low branches and kind of modified hide and seek game. There were stories to tell from his imagination about the things he was thinking. He was clearly at home in his world and didn't need equipment or devices to have a good time.

Having grown up in the outdoors playing with sticks and climbing trees it seemed so natural for me to be playing with my grandson in this way. I didn't have to know the names of the characters in the television programs or follow the stories on the screen. Instead we made up our own narrative and characters and entertained ourselves with simple games and wordplay.

I suppose there will always be children whose parents don't have enough time and who are raised with a bit too much technology and not enough contact. But in the midst of this complex society are plenty of children who are raised intentionally with parents who are doing a wonderful job in their role as nurturers and guides for young ones.

Being with our grandchildren, I feel less need to complain about the things that are wrong with our changing world and find more joy in appreciating the wonderful people who are growing up to provide a new generation in this fascinating world.

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### **June 21, 2014 – Love Transcends Distance**

Our children have a wonderful next door neighbor. He is a few years older than I and fully retired. He is cheerful and friendly and quick to help his neighbors. We have met him on several occasions and it seems very good to us that our children and grandchildren have such a caring neighbor. He and I have brief conversations whenever I visit our kids. On a couple of occasions in the past couple of days we have spoken about the great distances that separate our families. He also has children and grandchildren that live a long way from him and his wife. They travel to visit them and enjoy every visit, but the times between visits seem a bit long.

We are very lucky to live in the time that we do. In our family histories are stories of previous generations that set forth to new places and had very little contact with their parents. When my mother's grandparents set forth from their families to go west to Montana territory that was the last time they ever saw them face to face. They wrote letters, but they had moved too far for visits. We have the luxury of travel. We can cover big distances when we want to make a visit. If we needed to get here more quickly, we could fly. We also have easy access to unlimited long distance calling, so we can have a conversation whenever we want. And we have video conferencing with our computers that allows us to see what is going on in real time. These technological innovations were unknown to previous generations.

Still, there are families who stay in the same community. After my mother's grandparents arrived in Montana, the family put down roots. My mother could walk to the homes of either set of grandparents when she was a girl. The oldest of her sisters stayed in the same community. Except for one, the others moved to other towns, but stayed in the same state. The family farm is now being cared for by the fifth and sixth generations. We have similar families in our church, who have the joy of multiple generations living in close proximity to each other.

When we were called into the ministry we knew that we wouldn't have control over the locations where we served. God's call invites an openness to moving to new places and meeting new people. We have sought to be faithful to that call. On two occasions that

has meant moving our family long distances. It meant that our children were raised hundreds of miles from their grandparents. We raised independent children who had experience with moving and going to new places. Both chose colleges that were in different states than our residence. Both bought their first homes in other places. Like many families all around the world, we have ended up with big distances between us. Sometimes, when we are feeling a bit lonely for our children we will comment, "at least they are on the same continent." Our daughter did live in England for two years. We got to visit her there one time during those years and she was able to make the trip home twice, so we weren't exactly deprived of time being face to face.

We raise our children to be independent people who make their own choices and seek their own paths in life. Part of what makes them so fascinating to us is that they aren't the same as us. They don't make the same decisions that we have made. They find their own ways in this world. Often that means that we find ourselves with distances separating us.

It is a dilemma that is as old as the oldest stories of our Bible. Although we often read the opening chapters of Genesis as the beginning, there are stories in the Bible that are even older than those. One of the most ancient texts begins, "A wandering Aramean was my father." It tells part of the story of Sarai and Abram, who left the land of their parents and forebears and their growing up years. Their departure into an unknown land was a big event in the history of our people. The development of our faith required hands on knowledge of the fact that God is not attached to any one place. When people travel, the same God goes with them and remains with them in the new place as well as being God of the place that they have left. It seems like a simple idea to us today, but it was a whole new concept for our ancient forebears. Once they discovered that God was the same no matter where they went, they were freed to pursue new lives and form new communities. The stories of the Bible are connected to the adventures of our people as they traveled to distant countries and made their homes there then picked up and traveled to yet more new places. Their journeys make up a substantial portion of our biblical history.

It took several generations for our people to learn that love is greater than the distances that separate us. The concept, however, is central to our faith. We do not have to be in the same place to be bound together in God's love. We do not have to be in the same place to share our lives.

There are times when we feel a bit sad about the distances of our family. We keep wanting to have our children together in the same place at the same time and that isn't always easy to arrange. I guess that we can feel lucky to have a family with only two children. That way we occupy only three states. If we had more, we'd probably be even more spread out.

On the other hand, I do feel fortunate that we have somehow succeeded in staying so

close despite the distances that separate us. I know families who live in much closer physical distance whose lives are filled with tension and dysfunction.

So we enjoy the time that we have together and we plan for the next time. We use the tools that we have to remain in contact. And we celebrate the simple fact that love transcends all distances.

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## **June 22, 2014 – Wedding Anniversary 2014**

There are a lot of stories in the bible in which the number 40 figures prominently. It rains for 40 days and 40 nights when Noah and the animals are on the ark. The people of Israel wander in the desert for 40 years after they make a golden calf and flirt with idolatry. Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness and faces temptation as he discerns God's call for his life. the number 40 is identified as "a good and long time."

The number 41 gets less press.

There are plenty of biblical characters who live to be more than 40 years old. The stories of Abraham and Sarah mostly come from the years after they were 40. But we don't have many specific stories about what happens in the 41st year. It is short of the jubilee. It is greater than 40 but less than a lot of other numbers.

I remember 41 years ago today very well. It was our wedding day. We were young. In today's culture, we might be considered too young for marriage. We thought that we were being very mature and making wise decisions, but looking back, we had a lot of growing up to do and were mostly lucky in the decisions that we made. Maturity wasn't really part of the picture for us in those days. Still, it proved to be a very good decision for us. Sometimes growing up together can be a very good thing.

Back then, 41 years seemed to us to be a very long time. It was a couple of lifetimes. We knew a few couples who had been married that long, but they were the ages of our grandparents. I don't think I spent much time thinking about what life would be like 41 years later.

I think we both intended to have children and raise a family, but we were in no hurry to have children right away. We were interested in completing our educations. As it turned out, we spent the first five years of our marriage being students. Those years were a time of wonderful experiences, forging lifelong relationships and growing together. We studied together, read many of the same books and explored our theologies and understandings of God and the world together. We lived in tiny, cramped apartments and didn't have much money or many possessions and were as happy as we could be.

These days, I am glad not to be living in a student apartment in Chicago, but I can see

that the days will come when we will make the move to a senior apartment and once again pare down our possessions. But that is an adventure for another day and we've got quite a few adventures in us.

I suppose that to young couples getting married these days we are quite old. They probably aren't thinking about what it means to have been married for 41 years. But if I thought that they would listen, I would like to tell them that it is indeed a very wonderful thing. Not only is growing up together a blessing, so is growing old together.

I guess if you had asked me back then I might have at least thought that Susan would be a wonderful grandmother, but I didn't think about what it would be like to be grandparents together at all back in those days. She was such a wonderful mother that I had great confidence by the time that our children were raised and launched and on their own that being grandparents together would be a wonderful adventure. But thinking about things before they occur is rarely as rich and meaningful as experiencing them first hand.

One of the lessons that this life has taught me is that counting numbers and measuring time is only one way of evaluating things. There are plenty of good things that don't last 41 years. You can't evaluate the quality of a relationship by counting the years. You can't measure joy by counting days. There are many marriages that are rich and meaningful and bring forth futures that last different amounts of time. It is no sign of God's disfavor to be granted a different number of years.

Had you told me, when we first married, that we could only have 15 years or any other number, I think I would have gone for it anyway. Total commitment doesn't demand a measuring stick. The bottom line, however, is that we are very lucky to have been given these years. And it is incumbent upon on us to treasure and value the gift of time that we have been given.

From the perspective of this day, I'd be happy for another 41, though I am well aware of the statistics and know that is unlikely to occur.

Of course this life has given more meaning than marriage. We have had meaningful work and careers that have been challenging and rewarding. We have watched our children grow into their adult lives and become married themselves. We have grandchildren whose life adventures are fascinating and joyful. We have been blessed with good friends whose company brings us delight. Since those early student apartments, we have always had a place to call home and food enough for meals each day. Our lives have not been scarred by war or major tragedies. We have known grief and loss, but they have been things that we could bear together.

One thing is clear to me. 41 isn't just another year. No year is just another year. It is a treasure to be savored and experienced and enjoyed and valued. It is filled with unique

experiences and precious moments. It is worthy of our attention and love and commitment. And, like all of the other years of our marriage, the span between 41 and 42 will bring surprises. We can't see or predict the future. There are new adventures that await. It is a good season of our lives and a good year to be together.

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### **June 23, 2014 – Beauty All Around**

One of the great gifts of this life is the ability to walk. I am aware that there are special tools such as wheelchairs for those who are not able to walk, but for most of us, we have this wonderful ability to be mobile and to see things that cannot be seen by other modes of transportation. Yesterday I went with my son and grandson to Tumwater Park. Not far from the State Capitol Building, the park encompasses part of the grounds of the old Olympia brewery.



I am certainly no expert in beer, but there was a time when each region developed its own beers and successful companies bottled and canned that beer for distribution within the region. The advent of a more fully developed national transportation system meant that a few brands became national brands and over the years the regional beers began to disappear. These days there are a number of local breweries who make special craft beers. Often these so-called micro-breweries don't bottle or can their product, but only distribute it locally. The national companies continue to market their

product with expensive advertising campaigns and sell their product at grocery stores and convenience stores throughout the land.



The Olympia brewery once was a very successful regional business. At one point, however, it was acquired by Anheuser Bush, the company that makes Budweiser beer. They operated the brewery for a short time and then removed much of the equipment and shut down the facility. Olympia beer is still brewed by the company for the local market and is made available seasonally in other markets, but is no longer brewed in Olympia, Washington.

The original brewery building is on the national register of historic buildings. It now stand without windows and is slowly deteriorating, lacking the funds for major renovation or restoration. The big modern brewery building also stands vacant and unused. Some of the grounds have been acquired by a real estate development company, but so far, no development has taken place. The land alongside the river, including the two falls of the Tumwater river has ben acquired by the city and developed into a park with bridges and trails. It is a great place to take walk. On our short walk yesterday we saw Great blue herons, ducks and seagulls. The water roared down the upper and lower falls, and the trails provided several vantage points for viewing. Even though the day was very warm, the shaded walk near the water was cool and pleasant. There were plenty of people out enjoying their Sunday, but it was easy to find space to be alone with all of the trails. Our grandson especially enjoyed walking through the underbrush. There are some advantages to being short. He could find all sorts of interesting places around the bases of trees and under some of the greenery.



Of course there was time to stop and throw rocks in the river. At a quiet backwater, there was mud and even a little stream that was perfect for splashing. The walk gave his father and I an opportunity to talk and catch up with the events of his busy and very interesting life.

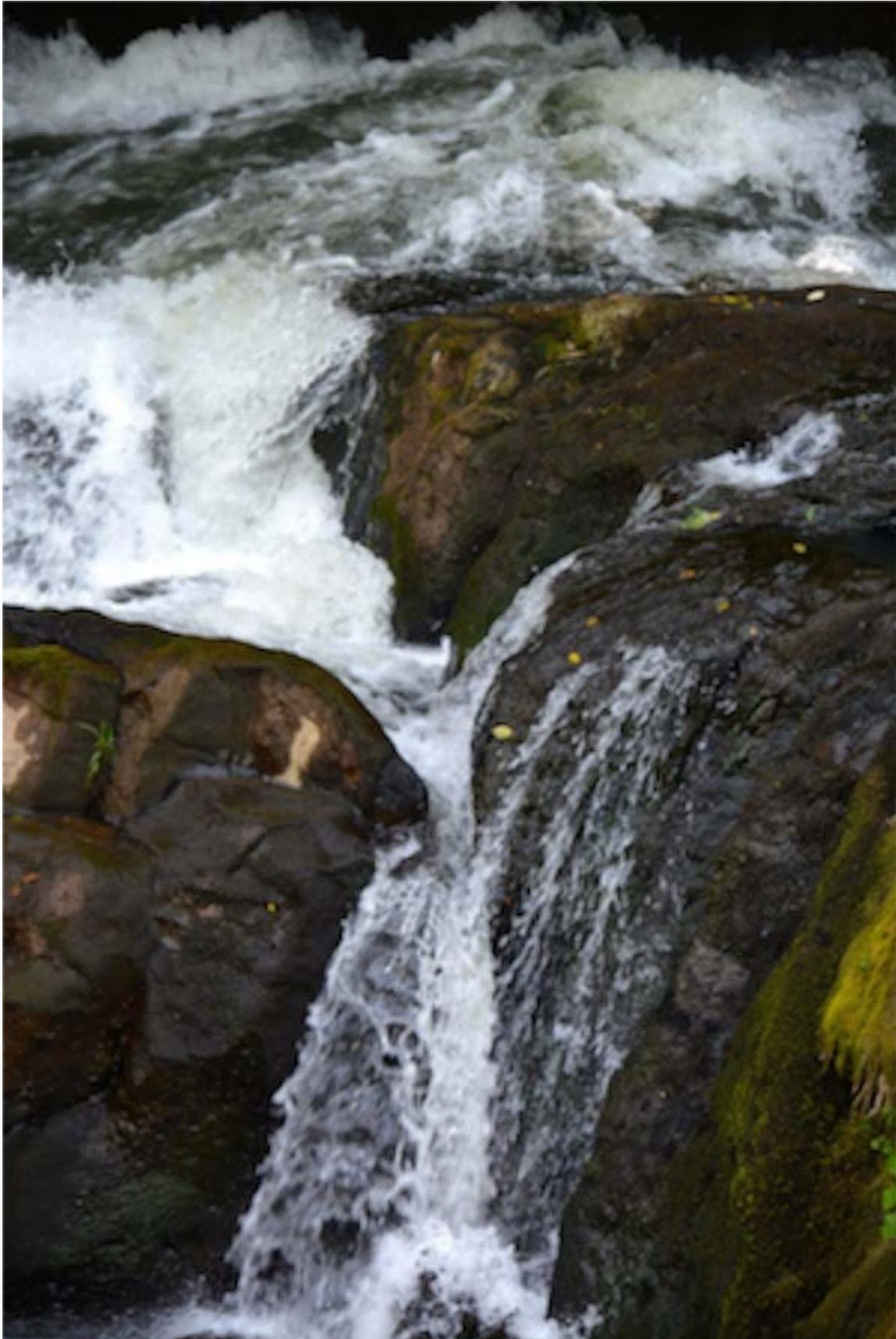
Often, when I am in South Dakota and thinking about the Pacific northwest, I remember the busy freeways and the crush of people. I forget the incredible natural beauty that is not far away at all. A short drive and a short walk can take you into places of spectacular natural beauty. Yesterday was clear, so the great snow-covered Mt. Rainier was clearly visible from many places as we explored the area. It reminded me of last year when we took a drive up to Mt. Rainier National Park and drove up onto the mountain itself and walked around taking pictures and marveling at the beauty.

Like the place where we live, the area around Olympia is very diverse. There are mountains and temperate rain forests. There is the Puget Sound with all of its fishing and boating and exciting activities. And the ocean itself is not too far away. Much of Washington has gravel beaches and the ocean is pretty cold year around, but one is reminded of the rich resource that it is and the great beauty that it provides. It is not a mystery that even today most of the people in the world live along the coastlines.

For those of us who live in the hills and mountains and plains it is good to visit from time to time to be reminded that there is beauty in every part of this world.

I am sure that the developers will come up with some ideas for the land that once was home to a brewery and one day we will visit to find shops or restaurants or apartments or a combination of all of those things. I hope that they will respect the beautiful setting and leave enough open space for the people who live and work in the area to enjoy the outdoors.

As we were riding in the car, our grandson was talking about the weather. He said that he knew all about rain. And he knew about snow. "But I don't know much about dry weather." He really is a child of the temperate rainforest that surrounds Olympia. They don't get to know much about dry weather. It is clear that in addition to having his grandparents come from the hills to visit, he will need to visit us in the hills and take excursions into the badlands and out on the open prairies so that he can learn about dry weather. Although this spring and early summer hasn't been a dry season for us, we do get to know about dry weather in the place where we live.



Dr. Seuss, in one of his children's books exclaimed, "Oh! The places you'll go and the things you'll see!" Our lives have been rich with places to go and things to see.

Most of the time, great beauty is just a few steps away when we are willing to take a walk.

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### **June 24, 2014 – On the Water**

The waters of the South Puget Sound have been a source of food for people for a long time. The land around the sound was a good place to live many generations before European settlers discovered it. Clams and oysters are relatively easy to harvest and the indigenous people who fished the waters were able to do so from open boats. The relatively protected waters and the abundance of massive trees along the shore meant that dugout canoes were among the most popular of working craft for many years. As more and more settlers came to the Puget Sound, they brought with them different boatbuilding techniques and boat designs. It was natural for boatbuilding to develop as one of the area's industries. Ships to cross the Pacific began to emerge from some of the larger boatyards and some of the area cities became home to sailmakers and chandlers and riggers and other specialized services.



Like many other ports around the nation, the role of the port of Olympia has changed with the times. Olympia lies at the southern end of the Puget Sound and never had the deepest or busiest of Puget Sound ports. However, the area between the city of Olympia and what is now known as Boston Harbor became a place for logs that were cut in the surrounding forests to be unloaded from trains and moved on the water. At one location, trestles were built out over the water so that the train cars could dump logs directly into the sound where they were gathered to gather in giant rafts and pushed and pulled by tugboats to sawmills elsewhere on the sound. The rate of cutting the trees has slowed and the methods of handling the logs have changed, but there is still a significant industry of loading logs onto ships for journeys to sawmills.

As is true with many other places alongside quiet waters, recreational boating developed alongside the working boats. Recreational craft were initially small, designed for day outings and picnics. Rowing craft and small sailboats are still common all around the Puget Sound. Olympia has also become home to some significant yachts, both motor yachts and sailing craft. The San Juan Islands and the inland passages to Alaska are very popular destinations for recreational vessels to explore and the Puget Sound makes a great home base for those craft and a place for preparations and fitting out for longer journeys for craft that have come up the coast from California headed for the adventures of British Columbia and Alaska.

The Sound is also home to a number of people who live full time aboard boats of various sizes and configurations and spend seasons of their lives in port anchored or moored.

The City of Olympia has provided public access to the sound at several locations. When I am visiting I usually paddle from Boston Harbor or from Percival Landing. Percival Landing is right in downtown Olympia, a short distance from the Washington State Capitol Building. There is ample free parking and a series of ramps and docks that rise and fall with the tides making it easy to launch and retrieve my kayak at any water level. My rowboat is a bit beamy to fit through the gates and roll down the ramps at Percival Landing, so I usually launch it from Boston Harbor. It is a little bit farther to drive, but still a very convenient place for a bit of recreational rowing.



Compared to the reservoirs where I am used to paddling in the Hills, the waters of the South Puget Sound seem big to me. There is often a light chop on the surface of the water and the boats that use the waters are much bigger than those I encounter on the lakes of South Dakota. From my little kayak on the surface of the water it is eight or ten feet to where the rubber bumpers start on the tug boats that are waiting at Olympia Harbor. The deck is several feet higher and the wheelhouse towers over me like a multiple-story building. Even the private yachts and sailboats are large by the standards of our tiny waters. I paddled along the row of slips reading the names of the boats off of their sterns. The choices of names range from whimsical to adventurous. Boats that are named from characters in fiction are common. So are those with made-up and hybrid names. Some of the names of the boats tell stories. One large multi-million dollar motor yacht is named "Knot Hers," and it may hint of a painful divorce or at least a tense relationship with different attitudes and priorities about boats. Another, named "Dulcinea," hints of the romance of the sea and chasing adventures.

It is also fun to note the home ports of the boats. The majority are from Olympia, of course, but there are boats in the slips from Portland, Seattle, Port Angeles, Port Townsend, Anacortes, and San Francisco. I imagine painting the transom of a small row boat with the home port Rapid City and then leaving it tied up at the dock for people to wonder what route my trip took getting from home to these waters. I do name my boats,

but don't put the home port on them. I've paddled "Little Awk," "Wee Lassie," "Prospector," and "Paha Sapa" and rowed "Mister E" in the Sound over the years. Paddling here often inspires me to think of making other boats and I've been imagining a triple kayak with room for grandchildren in the middle cockpit as I paddle on this vacation.



There is something deep in human nature that predisposes us to be attracted to the sea. There are no sailors in my family for many generations. We have been farmers and merchants and professionals, but I know of no stories of ancestors who were mariners. Yet in my generation, I have a cousin who settled in Belize and built a large wooden sailing boat from which he runs charters and explores the Caribbean and I find myself inexplicably drawn to paddle in the waters wherever I find myself.

I won't be outfitting a ship for a trip to Alaska soon, but I do enjoy paddling amongst the boats that will soon be heading for distant ports.

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### **June 25, 2014 – An Old Tractor**

The first vehicle that I was allowed to drive independently was an old Jeep that we kept as an airport car. The steering was very loose and the brakes took several pumps before there was anything there. It used quite a bit of oil and I felt very responsible

checking the oil before each trip around the airport and adding oil as needed. The clutch was getting a bit worn, but basically it was a vehicle and I felt very grown up driving it around the perimeter of the airport to check all of the lights and replace bulbs that were needed. I don't remember ever seeing the jeep go anywhere off of the airport.

After learning to drive the jeep, I was allowed to drive an 8N Ford tractor that was a general utility tractor around the yard. I learned to back up trailers with that tractor and used a blade on the back to smooth gravel on the roads and yard. I also pulled a mower with the tractor and learned to unhook one implement and hook up the next one.

I have a fair amount of nostalgia for the equipment that we had around the place as I was growing up, but I have no desire to have that kind of equipment these days. A jeep that you couldn't drive over 35 miles per hour doesn't seem like much of a vehicle these days. A tractor that has less power than the neighbor's lawn mower isn't exactly a demonstration of raw power.



The campground where we are staying has an old Ford tractor of about the same vintage of the one I drove in those years when I was too young for a driver's license. In a way it is remarkable that it starts and runs 70 years into its career. The rubber is shot and there is an old foam pad for a seat cushion. The original didn't have a seat cushion, just a metal seat. But it has an electric starter and they get it going every day to pull a four wheel wagon with hay bales around the streets of the campground for the nightly hay ride.

The hay ride doesn't hold much appeal for me, but for kids that have grown up in the city, it is a grand part of a camping adventure. It was, however, a hit with our three-year-old grandson. He liked sitting in the seat of the tractor and on the hay bales when the unit was parked. Getting to ride around the campground on the trailer was a real treat. He waved to me as he went by and had a big smile on his face.



Maybe that is what those old Ford tractors do best these days - make people happy. I know I enjoyed driving one when I was a kid, and the life of this particular tractor seems to be pulling the hay ride around the campground. Let's see, if it makes less than a quarter a mile a day and is driven only during the busy summer season, it should last them a long time in that role. They could use it for a few other small jobs from time to time as well, if needed.

I'm not ready to retire, and I'm not quite sure what it would be like to be retired, but it seems to me that it might be a bit like that old tractor. You stick around and do a little light work from time to time, but don't have much pressure to perform. You do the things that are fun and make you look like a hero to the young folks and have more time for resting than is the case in my present state.

It is a little like being a grandfather. I get to do all kinds of fun things with my grandkids. People don't mind if grandpa gets down on the floor and plays with his grandson, or if I go out in the yard and play his games. They smile when I chase him as he rides his Strider bike and seem to enjoy seeing me take delight in the things he likes. Other folks smile when I climb on the playground equipment and squeeze through the tubes, tunnels and slides.

There is really no "down side" to being a grandpa. It is all good. My son is a very responsible young man with a good job and he takes very good care of his family. He figures out how to set limits and when to say, "no." He and his wife are careful parents who are doing a wonderful job raising their family. So I don't have to worry. I don't have to solve all of the problems. I get to just be with my grandson and have a good time.

Like that old Ford Tractor, someone else mows the lawn at his house.



It is a very pleasant experience.

The night before last, when he was getting ready for bed, our grandson asked me to read him stories. I love reading. I loved reading to our children when they were little. I love reading to my grandson. He explained his choice of who to read by saying to his grandma, "I think that grownups who are men that have beards are the best story readers."

There is no one else in his life who has a beard. His other grandpa doesn't. His dad doesn't. I am in a category of one in his life. And it is a great category to be in.

I read "The Cat in the Hat," and "The Cat in the Hat Comes Back" and "Go Dog, Go!" - three great classics with wonderful rhymes and great rhythm that were made to be read out loud. And the endings of each are fun and surprising.

So here is what I think: I think that grownups who are men that have beards are among the luckiest people in the world. And I am indeed fortunate to have such a wonderful grandson with whom to share stories.

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### **June 26, 2014 – The Things We Pass On**

Our daughter-in-law operates a licensed home day care. The day care is taking a summer break this year with the new baby in the house. They will resume caring for other children in their home in September. Their life is busy, with dad working full time. One day a week he commutes to the corporate offices in Renton. The other days he has an office just a few blocks from home from which he works. Depending on meetings and other activities, he is often able to come home for lunch, or take a break to help with appointments or other home events. In addition to the home day care, mom continues her private practice as a marriage and family counselor, seeing her clients on Saturdays. The house is a very small three bedroom house, so there isn't a lot of space.

It is, however, a rich learning environment for children. The house is filled with learning toys and books, all neatly arranged and handy for play. The living room is the main play space. There is enough wooden railroad track to make a very big layout and train layouts have to be put away after play, so making the track layouts is part of the game. There is also ramp for playing with hot wheels cars, though the small cars are stored during day care and not out for general use with the visiting children. There are stacking toys and balls for indoor use. The back yard is fenced and has a sandbox as well as a small cement area for playing with larger toys.

Each child has a bedroom equipped with their own clothes and toys. The rooms have been lovingly painted and decorated with cheerful themes. Elliot has a train on one wall of his room and his bed is a race car. He has a small desk and a set of bookshelves.

Emmala has a mural with animals.

It is a wonderful place for grandparents to visit. There are plenty of toys to play with the children. There are lots of stories to read. There is indoor and outdoor space to explore and the children are at home and secure in their world.

A regular part of their lives, however, are adventures away from home. The day care is kept to just a few additional children, so that all can be loaded into car seats and transported in a single vehicle. They take short outings to area parks, the children's museum, the library, and other nearby locations. Even the presence of a new baby hasn't kept the family at home. During our visit, we have been to three different park playgrounds, made a visit to the farmers market and a local fresh fish market. Elliot has had a sleep-over at our camper, and the whole family came out for a hay ride and supper at the campground.

When I was a child, I remember thinking that we had a really big house. We had lots of children in our family, so a big house seemed in order. We had lots of toys and books as well. In reality, the house in which I grew up was about the same size as the house where just two of us live these days. We always shared rooms with siblings in that house and I guess we were a bit more crowded than it seemed to me at the time. For most of my growing up years, we had a train board, where we played with our building toys and trains that sat just above our beds during the day and raised up to the ceiling on a pulley system at night. Our desks were built into our clothes closets, with our clothes hanging above the place reserved for homework.

Today's families often live with a huge luxury of space and that is nice, but I can see no problems with our son's family living in a comparably small house. They have the things that they need and their family is comfortable. The environment is rich for the children who are growing up a delightful and wonderful young people.

The thing that we had in our space when I was growing up that is mostly missing from our son and daughter-in-law's house, however, was the keepsake furniture that had been handed down for generations. In our house today is a cabinet that belonged to my great grandparents, clocks that are in their fourth and fifth generations, a chest of drawers and bed that has been in the homes of four generations of the family and other items. Because my mother and Susan's father lived near us at the ends of their lives, we had some responsibility for caring for their favorite furnishings at the end of their lives. We have a storage unit filled with furniture waiting for use by a new generation.

I am even more aware of this because my sister has just moved from Portland, Oregon, where she lived most of her adult life back to our home town. The dilemma of the move was what to do with the piano that was in our grandparents house and then in our house when we were kids. It is a lovely Kimball with a burl wood cabinet that is really beautiful. It has been lovingly maintained and regularly tuned. And right now it is in a

storage unit that costs \$40 per month. Storage rent will exceed the cash value of the piano in less than a year. And it is in a distant city where none of us live. From a financial point of view, it makes no sense at all. From an emotional point of view, we need a few months to figure things out. "Maybe one of the grandchildren might want it one day," we think. But I know that the piano is never going to be moved to my side of the family.

I know that some of the treasures of many generations need to have their pictures taken and then be passed on to other owners outside of the family. It is, however, a hard decision for people like us who come from many generations who passed things on.

The most important legacies we have, however, are not objects at all. The love of reading that was in my grandparents is present in our grandchildren's home. The love that we felt growing up surrounds our grandchildren and will be around for generations. When we visit our son and daughter-in-law or our daughter and son-in-law, we are aware that the next generation is doing a good job of sifting and sorting, keeping the things that are most important and leaving behind the things that are not as important.

I find hope in the fact that they are better at it than we.

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## June 27, 2014 – In the Rain



I am listening to the rain on the roof of the camper as I write this morning. It rained most of the night. They don't call it a temperate rain forest for no reason. Those giant trees take a lot of water. When we lived in Boise, Idaho, where a tall tree is 50 or 60 feet high, we used to travel to Portland, Oregon often. Our Conference Office was in Portland and my sister and her family lived in Portland as well. I used to say to my kids when we would get into the trees that soar well over 100 feet tall, "See those things? They call them trees. That's what happens in a place where it rains." It was a deliberate exaggeration, of course. My kids knew what trees were. But they were growing up in a place that claimed, "360 sunny days each year." And the claim was nearly true. With an average rainfall of 11 inches, there were several years when we saw 7 inches or less of precipitation, most of which fell as snow. What makes the Snake River plain a lush area with lots of fruit and other agricultural output are the extensive irrigation systems that have been installed by generations of hard working people. The moisture to grow the crops comes from the rivers that are fed by melting snow in the mountains.

Back in Idaho, they love to argue about water. We had an irrigation canal in our back yard, but we could never get permission to take a little of that water for our lawn and garden. In fact there is a federal court house in Twin Falls, Idaho that is completely devoted to water rights disputes. Armies of lawyers and paralegals and clerks and others earn their living by arguing the cases of those who have water and want to protect it, or don't have water and want to get some. Those arguments will continue for generations. It is good job security for the lawyers.

I've never lived in a place where there is lots of rain. I've always lived in places that would be termed "semi-arid." We learn to conserve our water and use it carefully and we appreciate every rain shower. When we began our ministry in North Dakota, one rancher advised Susan, "Every time you pray, pray for rain." It was good advice. We learned also to never complain about rain, even when it came at inconvenient times, such as in the middle of wheat harvest or when the hay was down in the fields.

Our visits to places that get a lot of rain have tended to be during the dryer parts of the year. We've seen some of the great downpours that occur in Costa Rica, and we've been in our share of rain showers in the Pacific Northwest, but we haven't spent weeks and weeks when it rained every day. I know that seasonal affective disorder, an emotional illness that comes from too many gray days in a row, can be a serious affliction for those who live in this part of the world. Almost everyone here takes some form of vitamin D supplement "just in case." Perhaps the rain would get to me after a while. I like to do all kinds of outdoor activities and many of them are more pleasant when it isn't raining. On the other hand, I suspect that I would acquire some good rain gear if I lived here. One of the products of my visits to this part of the world is a wonderful rain jacket that breathes and isn't too warm. I can put it on, pull the hood over my cap and go for a walk in the rain without getting uncomfortable. I suspect that after a few more visits I will end up owning a good pair of rain boots, though my hiking boots are waterproof and serve to keep my feet warm and dry when I venture out on rainy days. It is fun to walk in the woods in the rain. The canopy overhead catches part of the rain, so that there are places where you can stand and be sheltered by the trees. In other places, the rain collects and then falls in streams instead of droplets. The rivulets cross the ground and form small waterfalls when they encounter rocks and drops. And you get to meet creatures that we don't know in our more arid home. Banana slugs, for example, don't visit our yard at home. Here they are not hard to find, even on a dry day. Just turn over a few rocks, and you'll find them in moist places.

People have been living in this part of the world and thriving despite all of the rain for tens of thousands of years. They have adapted clothing and gear and homes that keep them comfortable even in the rain. A few days ago, after a brief shower, our son commented that he hadn't realized that it had rained. I said, "That may be the sort of thing that only we tourists notice. For those of you who live here, small showers probably occur and you don't even know it is raining. You have to be from a dry place to recognize rain when it is a light mist and only lasts for a few minutes." It is true that the locals don't slow down for the rain. They don't bother with umbrellas unless it is really pouring and they just go on with their lives in the rain with no disruption.

One of the joys of traveling is all of the different places that one can visit. The rain reminds us that this is a different place than our home. So do the trees. And, of course the magnificent water of the Puget Sound reminds us that we are in a coastal place. It is not our home - at least in this stage of our lives - but it is a wonderful place to visit.

And with grandchildren growing up in this place, we have all the incentive we need to visit often.

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### **June 28, 2014 – Nearing the End of Vacation**

Occasionally I will have conversations with my colleagues about how best to take a vacation. It is typical for clergy to have four weeks of vacation each year. The rationale is that because we work every weekend, there is a need for a bit more vacation than is the case in other occupations. It has also been argued that the nature of the pastoral ministry requires faithful dedication to the spiritual practice of restoration. You don't maintain spiritual maturity with a diet of work only. Whatever the reasons, it is important for those of us who work in the ministry to occasionally remind ourselves that this tradition is a big blessing and one of the ways that congregations support pastors in a very generous way. There are plenty of people who go through their entire working lives with only a couple of weeks of vacation each year.

With this generous amount of vacation, the question of how to best manage the time is always a bit of a quandary. When we began our pastoral ministry, our predecessor always took the month of August as vacation. The congregation simply shut down during that time. They didn't hold regular worship services, pastoral emergencies were handled by special arrangement with other clergy in the community, and most of the members of the congregation also took a vacation from church during that time. It was an agricultural community, harvest was usually in full swing, and the system worked for them.

I couldn't understand how a church could maintain its health by simply taking a month off each year. The spiritual needs of the congregation didn't go away during that month. The commandment about the Sabbath and the discipline of rest isn't for only part of the year. So we made plans in that congregation to have guests come to lead worship when we were on vacation and coverage during our absence. Church leaders had some doubts about the associated costs, but it turned out that attendance went up and the costs were easily handled by increased income.

The dilemma, however, was how best to take our vacation. Arranging for pulpit supply was a challenge in a rural and isolated North Dakota community. There weren't a lot of extra pastors around to provide coverage. It seemed to work best if we didn't take all of our vacation in one block. When our children were preschoolers, we often took a bit of vacation right after Christmas. The church was in a slow phase and working out coverage wasn't too difficult. Then we would take more vacation in the summer, often right after the Conference Annual meeting or summer camp or some event for which we were already traveling.

Some colleagues advised against splitting vacation. They maintained that it takes a good week to release the stress of the job. You can't just turn off the worries and concerns that you carry every day. Then it takes another week to re-enter the work mode and if you take less than four weeks of vacation, you don't really get the vacation. We did experiment with taking our vacation in a single block. The vacations were wonderful. But the time between them was long and we often didn't work at peak efficiency. It is true, however, that I find myself doing bits of work as I begin and end a vacation. The distinction between work and vacation isn't quite the same as it is with some other kinds of work. I suspect that this problem exists for all professionals and others whose jobs don't end by the clock.

As our children grew, we went through a variety of different ways of taking vacation, adjusting to their schedules and the activities and events of their lives. Some years we even took our vacation in small pieces, only a week at a time. That didn't work well for really getting the rest and recreation that we need to maintain a high level of presentness and availability when we are on the job.

For us in this life phase, taking our vacation in two-week blocks seems to work well. The congregation is busy and there is always work to be done and there are parts of our jobs that can't be done by someone else. A couple of weeks of break enables us to get away and to return refreshed.

The truth is that for the most part we have to do our jobs whether or not we are taking vacation. Outside of worship and the handling of being on call and pastoral emergencies, we pretty much have to do the rest of our jobs before and after our vacation. The work doesn't go away simply because we are out of town.

And there never isn't a Sunday when I am not thinking about the congregation and how worship is going. I know that we have excellent leadership when I am gone, but I want things to go well and I want visitors to have a positive experience and I want our members to receive the restoration of worship each week.

So my emotional energy is starting to turn back towards Rapid City even though we have a few days remaining here in Olympia. I am really enjoying being with our family and playing with our grandchildren and treasure every moment that we have, but I know that I still have roots and work to do in Rapid City. I don't think that my personality allows me to ever completely disengage from my work.

There is another blog and more that could be written about sabbatical. I probably have written too much about that topic already, since I started blogging during a sabbatical and have continued with it through a second one now. The 2011 sabbatical, divided into three different months, didn't work very well as a sabbatical. I wouldn't recommend that to someone else. We ended up doing a lot of regular work, including leading worship on two of our sabbatical weeks. The year was an unusual one for us to begin with. I had

lost a brother to a sudden heart attack the year before, then we lost my mother and Susan's father in a short period of time. We also had major life events with the birth of our first grandchild and the marriage of our daughter. Whew! we would have been exhausted if we hadn't taken a sabbatical.

There is a reason why the commandment is to be aware of the need of rest and recreation every week, not just when one is on vacation. And there is a reason why the concept of jubilee is different from Sabbath in the bible. Both are important.

For us, this vacation has been wonderful. And the fact that I've been thinking about returning to work is probably a good sign.

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### **June 29, 2014 – Committed Faith**

I suppose that every generation has its complaints about how life goes and how other people behave. One of the things that I often hear when people are grumbling is a sort of general complaint about the lack of commitment to religion, specifically Christianity in our time. There is a kind of myth that there was a time in the history of the United States when a larger percentage of the people were more active in church life and the country had a greater majority of the population that was Christian.

There certainly have been areas of the country and moments in our history when there were large numbers of deeply committed Christians gathered in the same vicinity. The Massachusetts Bay Colony, for example, was founded by a group of people who wanted to live out their particular the of Protestant Christianity with great intention. They had little tolerance for those whose faith was different from their own. They shared a vision of the establishment of a new place where there was not distinction between religion and government and they applied the same principles to the organization of their religious life as they did to the organization of their political life. Those who had different views (and even those who read different translations of the Bible) were encouraged to leave the colony and find a home elsewhere.

The pollsters tell us that the general trend in the United States is toward more religious diversity and also towards an increasing number of people who claim no religious affiliation.

But I suspect that in reality deeply committed Christians have never really been the majority, even when the title "Christian" was claimed by the majority. Our faith, at its deepest, seems to have often been the perspective of a minority.

Of course, at its founding, Christianity was a minority religion. Jesus spent most of his ministry with small groups of people. There are stories of large crowds - at one point over 5,000 - but the majority of the stories of Jesus ministry are about the things he did

with a small band of disciples, reaching out to individuals with a healing touch. After Jesus' death and resurrection, his disciples were a distinct religious minority. They constituted a small sect in the midst of a minority religion. As Christianity began to spread through the missions of Paul and others, the churches founded tended to be small. Christians met in homes and other places. In many locations, Christianity was banned and those who practiced the faith were persecuted. In the midst of these harsh conditions, individual Christians lived their faith with purpose and meaning. It was not necessary for them to become among the majority for them to practice their faith. It seems that in every generation, from the very beginning, small numbers of people were willing to devote their entire lives to the practice of Christianity and sharing it with others.

In the time of Constantine, when Christianity became not only an approved religion in the Roman empire, but the preferred religious practice, the faith made some significant compromises as it became mainstream. Whereas early Christians were deeply committed to economic justice and principles of fair distribution of material resources, this aspect of Jesus teaching was downplayed as Christianity became the religion of rich and powerful people who often were less than fair or kind in their dealings with those of lower economic status. Despite the teachings of the Apostolic Church about having no distinctions of class or culture - no Jew nor Greek, no slave nor free - the church maintained some very rigid distinctions as it became mainstream.

Throughout its history the church has struggled with maintaining its historic roots and commitments. It seems that every time the church becomes mainstream it makes compromises about the faith. The version of Christianity that has the most appeal to the masses is one of lower commitment, less sacrifice, and less radical change than was practiced by the saints and martyrs of old.

There are aspects of Christianity that are counter-cultural. At some point every person who practices the faith has to make decisions about how serious he or she is about the practice and how deep a commitment will be made. Those who choose a total commitment, with no thought of personal gain, living only for others, choosing poverty and deep discipline are few and far between - even when Christianity is a mainstream religion.

It has never been easy to be a deeply committed Christian. Our time is not somehow more difficult to choose that path than other moments of history. The social and governmental pressures that make a life of faith difficult are not somehow more intense today than they have been in other times. After all, we are not living under Roman persecution. This is not the time of bloody crusades or forced conversions. There are fewer pressures on those who choose to live lives of committed faithfulness in this generation than has been the case in many other times. And our country is not a place of deep religious persecution. Those who choose to live lives of faith are able to do so openly in our society. They might not blend in well with the mainstream, but they are not

forced by governmental authorities to practice other faiths or to engage in practices that are antithetical to their core convictions.

There has always been a cost to deeply committed faith and that cost continues in our time. Our church's statement of faith speaks of "the costs and joys of discipleship." We often don't emphasize the costs when we are inviting new members to become a part of our community. We sometimes are reluctant to teach that the deeper the commitment, the higher the cost and also the deeper the joys that one finds. We are timid about asking people to invest deeply in their faith whether we are talking about asking for financial contributions or commitments of time.

The truth is that the deepest forms of our faith require deep commitment. You don't achieve a Christian life without investing. That might not appeal to the mainstream, but it is a life worth sharing with others.

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### **June 30, 2014 – Playing is Serious Business**

A three-year-old has an amazing capacity for repetition. If he finds a fun game or project, he is willing to do it over and over again well beyond the point of boredom of his parents. One of the luxuries of being grandparents is that we are able to spend a bit more time on the projects of a three-year-old without having to impose the structure and schedule of the busy life of a growing family in this complex world. His parents have another child for which to care and they have schedules and appointments and all sorts of other things that take their time and require them to be mindful of the clock.

Yesterday, a simple puddle provided more than half an hour's entertainment for our grandson. He discovered the puddle while riding his strider bike and would have splashed through it over and over until he was thoroughly wet from top to bottom. I suggested that he might want to go get his boots from the camper, a suggestion that he took up right away. Returning with his boots, which made riding the Strider difficult, he proceeded to walk into the puddle and stomp his feet and splash. Having no deadlines in that part of our day, we simply watched . . . and watched . . . and watched. After a while we got bored and began to suggest other activities, each of which was rejected in favor of a few minutes splashing in the puddle. We finally came up with a game that distracted him into another trip back to the camper, dry socks and pants and other adventures.

The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once wrote, "Purity of heart is to will one thing." A preschooler is fully capable of willing one thing at a time. His parents (and grandparents) are distracted by many thoughts and problems and ideas. We think about the books and magazines we are reading. We think about our jobs. We think about the schedule of other activities for the day. We think about how wet he is getting, about running the washer to make sure he has clean clothes, about bath time, nap time, meal

time. He just think about how fun it is to stomp you feet in a puddle and watch the water splash.

Our wills are no match for his. It is that whole purity of heart business. We often lose the focus of what is most important to us. We often have many things that seem to us to be important. We rarely can approach the focus of the three-year-old.

His three-week-old sister is even more focused. What she seems to think about all the time is eating. She seems to have only about four modes: "I am sleeping." "I need my diaper changed." "I need a cuddle." "I'm hungry." Only in her mind, there is very little difference between any of her awake modes. "I need my diaper changed" means, "I'm uncomfortable - fix it and then feed me." "I need a cuddle" means "And oh by the way, feed me." And she knows the difference between grandpa's gnarly finger tip and the source of her food - that trick only works for a few minutes.

There is some truth to the notion of the purity of children. They face the world openly and honestly.

Hanging out with our grandchildren has meant that we have been in a lot of places where we can observe other children. We went to park playgrounds multiple times. The other children at the campground gather at the track for bike and scooter riding and at the playground. We made one trip to a shopping mall that had a play area for children. Wow! There are a lot of kids whose parents are at the mall. There was a birthday party and a play date.



Observing all of those children gave us the opportunity to observe a bit of their parents' behavior as well. We've seen a lot of excellent parenting. We watched one attentive dad at the shopping mall, who was reminding his son of the need to be aware of the other children and share. At one point the child started to throw a bit of a temper tantrum and block a crawling tunnel. Dad was on top of the situation right away, removing the child from the play space and talking to him about how he could get back to playing. He spoke of the positive things of good behavior and within a minute or two the preschooler was back in the mix of things and treating the other children with dignity and respect in the process. He remembered how to share and to play with other children. His father rewarded him with praise for his good behavior.

We have also had the opportunity to observe some pretty poor parenting behavior as well. There's no need to tell those stories in this blog, but suffice it to say that it is a wonder that some public places where children are taken aren't filled with more violence and tragedy - parents are that inattentive to their children. They just deposit them and then go on with their lives, leaving the children to fend for themselves. By the time they are six or seven they are seriously dangerous to younger children, and seriously rude to adults. I'm sure their parents complain about their behavior. They will often yell at the children from across the room or across the park, but never get up to make a real response to the misbehaving child.

I am reminded of what genuinely difficult work it is to nurture small children. And I am also reminded that some people have a natural ability for the task and others have to work harder. For some caring for children is less instinctual. The role of those who care for children is critical to the functioning of our society. Neglect the children and you neglect the future. All of us need to be reminded from time to time how difficult the job of being good parents is and how important that job is to our society.

How grateful I am for the hard work and love of caring parents. The results of their efforts really show and have a huge impact on the lives of us all.

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