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## June 1, 2017 – Crowded Places

There are simply more people out here than there are at home. The campground has campers parked closer together than is the case at home. The left turn onto the street is more difficult and requires more time than would be the case at home. All of the four-way intersections seem to have traffic from all four directions all the time. The Interstate is abuzz with traffic 24 hours a day.

We've lived in places that are crowded before. We lived in Chicago for four years. We lived in Boise, Idaho for a decade. It isn't impossible to live in a place with all of these people. It is, however different than our usual. I don't have trouble driving around or getting things done. I do quite a bit of running errands as part of my grandpa duties. I am, however, more aware of the density of people than I would be at home.

Monday, at the end of the three-day weekend, the traffic was pouring into Seattle, 60 miles south of here. The Interstate through town was full of cars and moving quite a bit slower than normal. I heard on the radio that traffic approaching Seattle from the East was also backed up. The Cascade mountains rise east of town and Snoqualmie Pass is about 3,000 feet above the city with some steep climbing. The radio report said that traffic was backed up to Ellensburg, which is a hundred miles from the city on the other side of the pass. One report said travelers should expect that trip to take at least an hour longer than usual. It takes a lot of cars - and a lot of people - to back traffic up for a hundred miles.

People who live out here get used to it. And there are a lot of people here who enjoy the fact that this town is far enough away from Seattle to be not as crowded as the urban core. They speak of their town as a small town and appreciate its relative size. What is different about this area from home is that the small towns run right into one another. There is an Interstate exit nearly every mile in some sections. Residents of Mount Vernon think nothing of going to Burlington to shop because it is effectively the same city. Cross a bridge and you are there. They will also get into their cars and drive 40 miles south to Lynnwood to shop in one of the Seattle area's mega shopping malls. I understand driving to shop. When we lived in North Dakota, we had to drive more than 150 miles one way to get to any shopping mall. But it is different when we are home. You have to drive more than 300 miles to find a larger town than our town regardless of the direction you are headed. Out here there more cities and towns in every direction.

The urban density falls off when you get to the Puget Sound. There's still open space on the water.

Urban living is the way of the future. As the earth's population continues to grow, people continue to pack themselves into urban areas. We are not evenly spread out across the globe and most people live near a coastal area on all of the planet's continents. Our American cities are much smaller than some of the mega-cities that exist on other

continents. New York, with 8.4 million people is over twice the size of Los Angeles with just under 4 million. Chicago is short of 3 million. Those are large cities. Tokyo, however, has nearly 38 million. Delhi has 25 million. Shanghai has 23 million. The largest city in the Americas is Mexico City with nearly 21 million people. That's a lot of people.

The mega cities of the world are growing. More and more people on the planet means that more and more people are living in dense urban areas. The lifestyle I know and love is foreign to the majority of the world's people. They live their entire lives without experiencing the wide open spaces that I take for granted.

I have friends who have lived in cities for most of their lives. They get nervous when they travel to rural and isolated areas. I've been asked, "What if your car breaks down?" Of course, from my point of view, such an event would be far more desirable in a rural and isolated location than in the midst of city traffic. Out in the country the next person driving along the road would stop to help. In the city, you're pretty much left to your own resources. If your car breaks down and your cell phone battery is dead, you've got a real problem.

People face and deal with those kinds of problems every day, however. They learn the skills required to thrive in areas of high population. They know how to choose between a lot of different services. They can find the help they need from what appears to us outsiders to be too many choices.

As I write this morning, I am aware of the sound of cars on the Interstate across the river from our campsite. I am also aware of the birdsong in the trees right next to our camper. It is amazing how nature thrives in the midst of human density. Here in the Pacific Northwest, there are giant trees and dense forests that absorb and muffle the sound. There are places in the midst of the urban sprawl that feel private and separated from the human neighbors. There are plenty of birds and other animals that live in the midst of all the people.

It isn't, however, like home where the deer and turkeys come into the yard every day and I have a sense that my animal neighbors are more numerous than my human ones.

All of these people packed into small areas may be the way of the future, but I'm not sure it is the way of my future. I'll miss the grandchildren when I go back home, but I will enjoy the quiet and relative isolation of the place I live.

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## June 2, 2017 – Great Literature

We have a kind of standing joke about the children's book "Go, Dog. Go!" by P.D. Eastman. I say it is a nearly perfect book. I tell my family it is one of the great works of literature - a book that has everything and meets every criteria for a great book. My first encounter with the book came shortly after the book came out. My younger brother belonged to the Dr. Seuss Early Reader Club and received books in the mail on a regular basis. I was already reading and could read every book quickly - on the same day it arrived. I didn't think too much about the book except that it was easy for an eight-year-old to read. I was, after all, a third-grader and read chapter books to myself.

When the book next came around, we had children of our own and I fell in love with the book in an entirely different way. First of all, the story has a lot in a few words. There is work and play and some fantastic ideas, like a house boat. There are several chase scenes and a bit of suspense. There is romance ("Do you like my hat?") and a surprise ending. It is a fantastic piece of literature, really. To top it off, it is really fun to read out-loud. You can do different voices for the dogs' discussion of hats. You can read quietly when it is time to sleep and loudly when it is time to get up. You can read fast when the dogs in cars are going fast. You can read in a high voice when the dogs are up on top and a low voice when the dogs are down under. It is fairly easy to memorize enough of the book to know what is coming before comes.

Besides, I read that book hundreds of times when our children were little. I've read it dozens of times to our grandchildren. We have a copy at home and our grandchildren have their own copy, so it is one of the books that we read over Skype when we are not able to be with our grandchildren face to face. The kids are really good at turning the pages at just the right moment without prompting.

I know the book. And I love to read it with children.

Last night my grandson read it to me. He probably didn't notice the huge smile on my face or the tear in the corner of my eye. It was pure delight.

I know. He is a kindergartener who keeps a reading log for school. The goal is to read five nights out of every week and record the books that have been read. He easily succeeds and has been reading every night since we arrived. We brought books for our camper which are new to him that he adds to the list when he sleeps over with us. Reading in the evening is a tradition that his parents keep with careful discipline.

But he is also a boy whose father is a librarian and keeps track of children's literature and reserves books regularly when he discovers new ones. In addition to the weekly trip to the library in which the children return books and get new ones, their father brings home a couple of books each week that they had not yet discovered.

He could have chosen from a shelf full of books - even a library full of books. He chose *Go, Dog. Go!* last night. It probably was a bit of laziness. He knew the story. He was pretty sure it would be an easy read for him.

It won out over *One Fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish* (again!).

The best literature allows us to become a part of the story. And it doesn't have to be about us in order for us to imagine our participation. After all, our grandson has never driven a car. He has never dove into the water from a springboard on a house on a boat. He has never attended a party in the top of a tree. He has never slept in a bed with dozens of others. His life is quite a bit removed from the fantastic story in which dogs are red and blue and green and yellow. But he can imagine the action. He can see himself in the story.

I know his sisters will also be able to find themselves in the stories of literature.

Yesterday, when their father came home from work, he had a new story for the family to share. It was Adam Rubin's "*Dragons Love Tacos.*" The two oldest children immediately took the book to the brother's bunk where they poured over the pictures. The kindergartener said he would read the book to his sister, but the printed words were a bit difficult. Instead they studied the pictures and talked about what they saw. A few minutes later, exploring the unusual quiet in the room, I crept up stairs to discover the almost three-year-old on her brother's bunk, quietly "reading" stories to herself. She has such a "me too!" attitude that she imitates nearly everything he does. I suspect that she will learn to read from her brother as much as from any teacher.

At its heart, great literature invites an attitude of "me too!" When we see ourselves in the story, and understand that what happens to others also happens to us, we begin to understand that there are some great universal stories with which we can relate even if our lives are far different from those depicted in the story. After all, we don't live in a world that has any real dragons. They are simply a bit of shared imagination that can be a lot of fun. Of course, I got to read the story later in the evening. I learned that it is definitely not a good idea to feed dragons spicy salsa. The children don't like spicy salsa, either.

Even with a librarian in the family, I am sticking to my original evaluation. *Go, Dog. Go!* is a great work of literature. It was definitely the best book we read last night.

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## June 3, 2017 – Lived Moments into Meaning

I reached graduate school near the end of the life of Martin Heidegger, but his influence was very apparent in our school. The German philosopher was a critic of traditional metaphysics and has been dubbed by some as the father of phenomenology. His impact on the school I attended was fairly direct, as the German theologian, Paul Tillich was deeply influenced by the thinking of Heidegger and he had found his way to the University of Chicago and the federated theological faculty late in his career. The psychologist Rollo May, also influenced by Heidegger's thought, made an impact on some of my primary teachers, mostly through the books he wrote, but also through personal contact when May was a student at Union Theological Seminary. His ideas are currently experiencing a bit of a resurgence in the thoughts of contemporary postmodern thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard.

Serious academic study of phenomenology has focused on the structures of consciousness and human experience. One of the essential processes of human nature is taking lived experiences and drawing meaning from those experiences that helps to shape future experiences. We learn to love by being loved. There have been many studies about how shared experiences produce common values and meanings in the lives of diverse people. Multiple authors have written, for example, about how the Great Depression produced people with values of thriftiness, service and sacrifice for others. Part of our identity comes from the experiences that we have had.

In recent years, there has been a great deal of study of how traumatic experiences shape the lives and value systems of those who experience trauma and how other experiences can aid or hinder the processing of traumatic experience.

I have been especially interested in the work of researchers who are exploring writing as a way to process experience into meaning. Back in graduate school, one of our professors had us write about our experiences with a specific formula: 1) describe the experience with as much detail as possible, including feelings; 2) go through the description and identify the elements that are consistent or divergent from other experiences; 3) Draw conclusions or describe universal meanings that come from the experience; 4) create an artistic expression that reflects the meanings you have discovered. We wrote those phenomenological reports multiple times in the the course of a semester of study. I am sure that going though the process so many times has had a deep influence on the way I think and process my own experiences.

I was intrigued by the work back in the 1980's of psychologist James Pennebaker. In his initial study, he asked students to spend 15 minutes writing about the biggest trauma of their lives, or if they hadn't experienced a trauma, their most difficult time. He had the students repeat the exercise four times over the course of a semester. He also established a control group who were instructed to do descriptive writing in the same block of time. They were asked to describe a tree or their dorm room or some other

common item. Then he used University Health Services records to determine the number of times students were treated for illness. The result was that those who had written about trauma or difficult experiences were significantly less likely to need health services. They demonstrated better overall health than the students in the control group. His work did not establish a cause/effect relationship but it gave rise to a host of other academic studies of the relationship between the experience of writing and the functioning of the human immune system. The field of study that has arisen is known as psychoneuroimmunology.

Scientists have now discovered a link between expressive writing and better health outcomes in a host of different illnesses and diseases including cancer, heart disease and clinical depression.

It has long been accepted that physical and psychological health are closely related. Scientists have observed that there are multiple factors that have an impact on overall health outcomes. While these observations don't always result in repeatable treatment options, they are worthy of additional study in our search for deeper understanding of the ways our bodies work and ways in which health can be promoted.

As a student of a student of a student of Martin Heidegger, I am interested in how phenomenology, or the processing of experiences, affects our lives. As a writer, who specializes in the art of personal essay, I am delighted to discover studies that point towards the positive effects of writing. As an observer of contemporary society who is aware that some of our technology discourages traditional writing and is creating new ways of using language that is adaptable to shorter and more concise forms of communication, I am aware that the art of writing is undergoing a major shift in our time.

Sending a string of emojis in a text message probably doesn't have the same therapeutic value as sitting down and writing a personal essay for 15 minutes a day. I doubt if Pennebaker would have observed similar results if the assignment had been to spend 15 minutes sending tweeting about your most traumatic or difficult experience, rather than writing. At least some of our contemporary communications technology presents significant challenge to the process of translating our experiences into meanings to live by.

I undertook the discipline of writing a 1,000 word essay each day a decade ago as spiritual discipline. I felt that I could deepen my understanding of my spirituality by writing about it. The process has become an important part of my life. This summer will mark ten years of writing every day without exception. That is a lot of words - over 3.6 million and growing everyday. My journal archives now are available on this website with a daily essay each day since July 16, 2007. I do not have any information as to whether or not all of this writing has led to better health, though I have been blessed with good health. I do know that I have discovered some deep and important meanings as I have engaged in the discipline.

At a bare minimum, the process has allowed me to use some pretty big words. After all it is fairly challenging to work psychoneuroimmunology into regular conversation. People will roll their eyes if you drop the word phenomenology. Here in the blog the words creep into my vocabulary and delight me.

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## **June 4, 2017 – Pentecost, 2017**

We have a granddaughter whose birthday is tomorrow. This year, as she turns three, we decided to be with her to celebrate on the actual day. This is the first time in her life that we have been able to be with her, and we enjoyed her party with friends yesterday and are looking forward to a more relaxed family celebration today and tomorrow. Then we'll be heading for home and our work in the hills. It has been a wonderful vacation and we have enjoyed it thoroughly, but every thing we do in this life carries with it mixed feelings.

Today is Pentecost. It is a significant celebration in the wider church - a day to remember the birth of our community and the importance of the unseen in the life of our faith. It is a day that I love to celebrate with the congregation that I serve. Over the years we have had some wonderful and exciting moments as we have sought to celebrate this significant moment in the story of our community. It is one of those days in the life of the church that I prefer to celebrate with the congregation and, over the years, I have had a tendency to try to be home for the day.

For those of us in the South Dakota Conference, it frequently presents a challenge because our annual Conference is set for the first weekend in June, making it a regular occurrence for a conflict between that meeting and the celebration of Pentecost in our home congregations. So even if we had been in South Dakota, we would have had a decision to make about where we would be on this morning. I'm comfortable with our choice and I know that our congregation will have a meaningful celebration without us. I have confidence in those who have been chosen to lead.

Still, there is a bit of longing for the community at home.

There is a lot of talk about theology, belief and doctrine when people speak of church. Denominations are frequently delineated by what they preach and what their members believe. The historic divisions within the church are frequently described in terms of differences of doctrine. Heaven knows I have frequently focused on theology and doctrine and belief. I've engaged in frequent and long discussions about consistency of thought and belief and the importance of honesty in faith and practice. Readers of this blog know that I can go on and on about some nuance of theology.



There is, however, something far more important in our life as a congregation that sometime escapes our conversations when discussing our life together. We are a community. We are a group of people who enjoy being together. We have celebrated births together. We have wept together when death has occurred in our community. We have supported each other in times of crisis and pain. We know and understand the members of our community. We miss each other when we are apart.

We live our faith in the sharing of meals, the exchange of childcare, conversations about everyday life, the visits in times of crisis and the everyday practices of community.

Pentecost is the recognition of the birth of that community. The reason for the choosing of this particular day over others is that the book of Acts reports a significant event in the life of the early Christian Community that took place 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus. So, 50 days after Easter we celebrate the birth of the Christian church. It isn't a precise anniversary, counted in terms of the number of days the way we celebrate birthdays. It can land anywhere between May 10 and June 13, depending on when Easter occurs each year.

More important than the date is the recognition that we don't live our faith in isolation. As the saying goes, "You can't be the body of Christ all by yourself."

On this trip we have made the casual acquaintance of some of the mothers who wait with their Kindergarteners at the bus stop each morning and return to meet the bus each afternoon. Those mothers have formed friendships this year and have invited each other into their homes for lunches and extended conversation. One of those moms reported that the friendships are something new to her. One day as we were waiting for the bus she reported that she was thinking of doing some volunteer work at the school and, when her child entered first grade next year looking for a part time job in the community. She said that one of the barriers for either of those activities, however, was that she couldn't think of three personal references who had known her for more than 18 months.

I found her report to be both surprising and a bit frightening. I can't imagine having been so isolated. I have neighbors that I have known for a couple of decades. I have friendships that have been going on since the 1970's. There are people in the church with whom I've traveled to other countries. There are members of our community with whom I've shared drives of hundreds of miles across our state to attend meetings. I have colleagues who serve other churches with whom I've met weekly for years. When I need to fill out of professional profile or undergo a background check there are plenty of people who are willing to serve as references for me. I simply can't imagine being in a position where I didn't have folks who know me. I grieve for that woman's sense of isolation and the life she must have lived to be in this position.

Too many people are caught up in lifestyles that do not support the formation of community. They live in close proximity to other people without getting to know them. They stand on the street corners with other people without speaking to them. They go through life with minimal contact with others.

I'm glad that I have a sense of community that results in my feeling pulled in different directions at significant moments. The feeling of wanting to be here and also wanting to be at home are a positive sign that I belong. I know I'll miss these grandchildren terribly when I return home. I also know that returning home is the right thing to do.

Pentecost, for me, is about the community of faith of which I am a member far more than it is about doctrine or theology.

Happy Pentecost!

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## **June 5, 2017 – Facing Human Frailty**

Last evening, I hopped on my bike and followed our grandson as he rode his bike around the neighborhood. Later, I shadowed my granddaughter as she took off on her pedal less Strider Bike down a small hill. Bolstered by an adult-sized bicycle with 18 speeds, it wasn't difficult for me to keep up with those short legs that were spinning furiously keeping the tiny bikes in motion. I was, however, well aware at the difference in exertion that was being invested by my grandchildren. They simply have more energy than I do. Thinking about the day yesterday, I was well aware of the differences between energy levels in a single generation. I watched as our son and daughter-in-law cruised through the evening as parents of three small children, dividing chores, balancing the demands of meal planning and preparation with making sure that homework was finished and organized and clothes were clean and put away and children were bathed and prepared for the next day. This balancing act will become even more demanding of their energy when our daughter-in-law returns to work part time in July. Over the next month they will be working out the art of being parents of three small children without the additional assistance of visiting grandparents. I am confident that they will shine in their new duties and responsibilities.

As we prepared for bed that evening, my wife and I were aware that we had only hosted our grandchildren two at a time and then only on evenings when there was no school the next day. Still, being responsible for the little ones was tiring for us. We are aware that we don't have the energy, stamina and endurance that were part of our lives decades ago when we had tiny children of our own. As we sipped a cup of tea my wife massaged her sore and swollen knee and I exercised my painful trigger thumb and we were far more aware of the frailties of our bodies than was the case when we were younger.

Neither of us is what you would call disabled. We have the normal aches and pains of a couple of 60-somethings, but we have enjoyed the fortune of good health and have few limitations on our activities. We are blessed when compared with many our age. Still, we see the signs that we are aging and we know that the future will hold more physical limits for us. The bottom line is that we are aging and we are not as strong or as capable of physical work as once was the case.

I am reminded by the observations of Paul in the second letter to the Corinthians: “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.” Later in that same chapter he offers powerful hope: “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day.”

The frailty that we are beginning to experience as we age is part of a natural process that has been experienced by every generation of humans on this earth. It is our nature to experience the limits of our bodies. My grandson might think that his grandpa can do anything, but it is an illusion that he will grow out of. He will discover that I have limits and that I can't even do things that once were easy for me.

The frailty of our human bodies is a major Biblical theme. It is Sarah's frail body that gives birth to Isaac, the bleeding woman's frail body that pursues Jesus for healing, and Paul's frail body that travels the Roman Empire and surrounding territories sharing the message of a person with a frail body: Jesus of Nazareth. There are many other examples of physical frailty leading to religious depth throughout the scriptures. The prophets teach us that Israel's success is not dependent upon physical strength, military might or political strongmen. Only when Israel pursues righteousness and justice does it discover a meaningful way of life.

I do not write these words as consolation for old people who are facing the inevitable decline of physical strength and abilities. I am convinced that it is at the point of facing and acknowledging our limitations that we discover the power and strength of God.

Watching our children raise their children, I am aware that one of the roles of parents is setting boundaries. “You must stop and wait for an adult before crossing the street.” “One minute more and then it will be time to get ready for bed.” “Hold my hand. You cannot run in the parking lot.” Furthermore, I know how much the children need and will one day grow to appreciate those boundaries. Life is not a series of limitless opportunities. It takes place within healthy boundaries. Our freedom does not extend to the point where it infringes on the freedoms of others. Children must be raised with meaningful and consistent limits and boundaries to become responsible and happy adults.

The story of our people is one of recognizing the power of limits to make us free. Ten commandments direct us towards behaviors that make us more free than we would be were we to ignore them. The law and the prophets teach us the ways of living lives that are meaningful and connected to God and to the community of other people.

Despite my grandchildren's present opinions of my powers, I am not superman. I possess no super powers other than a bit of patience born of experience and a deep love of family. I still have the advantage of size over our young grandchildren, but I can see that advantage quickly fading as they grow by leaps and bounds. I can tell by examining our grandson's kindergarten work that comes home in his backpack that he will soon be solving math problems that confound me.

As I age, I pray that my increasing limits will be seen and recognized by our grandchildren so that they, too can be illustrations of meaningful boundaries in which human life flourishes. My grandchildren do not need to think of me as all-powerful. I'd much prefer for them to know me as human.

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## **June 6, 2017 – Departure**

Today is the day to hit the road. We'll see our grandson off to school and our son off to work, hitch up our trailer and head east. The plan is to clear a couple of the five mountain passes that lie between us and home today.

It is never easy to say good bye. There have already been a few tears in anticipation. It was harder to say good night to the kids last night. We lingered before heading back to our camper. There have already been some preparations. This is the longest we've lived in our camper in a single location since we've owned an RV. We've been parked in the same campground for three weeks. We've gotten to know some of our neighbors in this campground. On one side, our neighbors are full-time RVers who have had their camper in the same spot since before we arrived and will have it in the same spot for another month at least. In the last year, they have tended to stay a long time in each location, visiting Arizona; Branson, Missouri; and this park in Mount Vernon, Washington.

We have jobs and a home to return to in South Dakota. We have friends and obligations to meet. It really doesn't make sense for us to stay here even though the pull of family and especially those grandchildren is strong.

It has been a momentous visit. Our newest granddaughter is two weeks old today. Our other granddaughter is now three years old. Our grandson has the rest of this week and one week more of kindergarten before summer break and becoming a first grader. Our son is returning to his usual round of meetings after having a little break caused by the

birth of a daughter and the fifth week of the month, which is slower in terms of meetings than other weeks. Life goes on.

This afternoon our daughter-in-law will have to take her two daughters to the bus stop to meet their brother and walk home responsible for three children. The family will assume the activities of its new routine without the extra hands of a couple of additional adults. Of course they will get along fine without us. Fathers and mothers have taken care of multiple children at the same time for generation after generation. They will work out their routines, shift their nap schedules, learn to be up and dressed for their activities and get on with their lives. They will learn how much time it takes to get three children buckled into car seats and how to cross streets with three children safely in hand. They'll sink into bed exhausted after putting three children into bed and then get up the next morning and start all over again.

And we'll put in 2 1/2 days of driving and be back at our jobs with all of the responsibilities and activities that are part of a busy congregation. We'll greet people that we have missed and get in touch with all of the activities and events that took place in our absence. We'll get back into our routines of volunteer work and the normal chores of caring for home and garden.

We'll find times to turn on the computer and Skype with our family here in Washington as often as we can, just like we do with our daughter in Japan. We'll develop ways of maintaining strong family relationships over the big distances that are the realities of our lives.

But first, we must say good bye this morning.

One of the advantages of being the grandparents is that we have been around for a while. We've been through other good byes. Last night over dinner in anticipation of this morning we spoke of other difficult good byes. One year, when our children were school aged, we visited my sister for a week after Christmas. Our daughter was so sad at the departure that she cried for the entire first leg of our flight home. We recalled that trip as we spoke. We also spoke of the year that we dropped our son off for his first year of college. The drive home was as long as we will be making in the next few days. It wasn't easy to leave our son on his own so far from home.

Of course those were hard times, but they were also times of doing the right things. Our careers and family continued to blossom in our home in ways that we couldn't have done so if we had failed to return from a visit to my sister. Our son thrived in college, went on to graduate school, married and fashioned a career and family. Saying good bye to him as he began his college education was absolutely the right thing to do. Doing the hard thing is often the right thing.

We know our grandchildren are safe and loved and nurtured in a wonderful home with very competent parents. We know that this is their home and that it is not our home. Along with the sadness of saying good bye is the joy of knowing that we have strong connections that cannot be diminished by distance.

The oldest stories of our people tell of Abram and Sarai heading out from the home of their fathers and mothers and previous generations of our people to discover a new home - one that God would show them - one where they could prosper and where future generations would be numerous and successful. We don't know how that parting took place. We don't know how tearful the departure might have been. What we do know is that our identity as a people was forged in the process of leaving one place and traveling to another. We are a people whose history is stronger than any single place. Along the way there have been many places of meaning and significance, but we have always been a people on a journey.

So today our journey continues. This part of our journey takes us back home and away from the home of our son and his family. How fortunate we are to live in a time and have the resources to make these trips. How fortunate we are to have a home to which we return. How fortunate to know we'll be back one day.

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## **June 7, 2017 – Huckleberry Milkshakes**

We had lunch with our son in a diner in Mount Vernon on Monday. The diner, recently opened, was preparing for grand opening celebrations. One of the things they will have as a part of their celebrations is what the owners are calling "super shakes." I'm not sure what is in their super shakes, but I doubt if what they have to offer will be the best milkshakes I've ever tasted. It is a moot point, since we have now left Mount Vernon and won't return for some time. I don't know if I will have the opportunity to taste their milkshakes on my next trip to that area.

Let me be clear. In my opinion, what makes a good milkshake is attention to the basics. I am not talking about fluff. The fast food restaurants can add all of the fake whipped cream and maraschino cherries they want. Those things don't contribute to a truly great milkshake. If you want a great milkshake, you need high quality ice cream and real whole milk. There are no substitutes for these ingredients. In fact, you can make a nearly perfect two-ingredient milkshake if you are careful in choosing those two ingredients. I know a place in Oregon that uses Tillamook Dairy Ice Cream and milk and makes a really great milkshake. Their chocolate and vanilla milkshakes are second to none.

The next step however, involves two schools of thought. An old-fashioned soda fountain, like the one that was in Cole's Drug Store when I was a kid, uses flavored

syrups to make the different flavors. All of their milkshakes started with vanilla ice cream and whole milk. Then the flavors were added using scoops to measure the syrup. They didn't have a lot of flavors, but chocolate, cherry, strawberry and caramel were usually available. A word of caution. You have to watch both cherry and strawberry syrups. Artificial flavoring in those two varieties can destroy a milkshake. This was especially true decades ago when the available artificial strawberry and cherry flavors were the same flavors that were used in cough syrups. To get a truly great milkshake the syrup has to be the thick stuff, with chunks of real fruit. If they can pump it with one of those devices instead of dipping it out with a scoop, the syrup is probably inferior and not worthy of a great milkshake.

The second school of thought when it comes to milkshakes is to eschew syrups entirely. In place of the syrups, flavored ice cream is used. If you get just the right ice cream with just the right flavor you've got it made. In this case, the ice cream has to be flavored with real syrup that has real fruit, in the case of fruit syrups. Selecting your ice cream needs to be done with care and may require a bit of experimentation. In my case, I've got six decades of research under my belt and I definitely have my options. More about that later.

Being a Montana kid, I happen to believe that the absolutely best flavor for a milkshake is Huckleberry. And I am talking about real huckleberries here. You can't fool me with those second-rate blueberries that are domesticated and, when compared to a real huckleberry, nearly flavorless. From late July to early September the high country erupts with natural flavor. For obvious reasons the best huckleberry spots must be kept secret, but they involve a fair amount of walking. Don't expect to be able to drive up to the best berries. And every self-respecting huckleberry patch is known first of all to the bears. If you are smart, you'll learn whether it is a grizzly or a black bear that frequents an individual patch before you start to harvest. Both can yield a blessing of berries, but you've got to be bear smart.

Making huckleberry syrup is an art and there are only a few small places that I would trust. You can buy huckleberry syrup in Montana and Idaho if you know what you are doing. I won't get into the dispute over which state produces the best huckleberries and I know that huckleberries are the state fruit of Idaho. I lived in that state for a decade. And both have some very respectable huckleberry patches. A brief word for Oregonians. Despite your pride, which is admirable, it takes altitude to produce a good huckleberry. Sorry folks, I know you've got some huckleberry patches, and your state, which is beautiful, has a few peaks that are high enough to produce the fruit, but most of your mountains just don't get up high enough for the real flavor. Having said that much, I have my biases on where to get the best huckleberry syrup.

All of that is fine and good if all you want is pancakes. But when it comes to milkshakes, I'm simply going to quickly narrow the field. In the entire world, there are two places for travelers to get first rate huckleberry milkshakes. One of those places is St. Regis,

Montana. They have what I call true Glacier Park style huckleberry syrup. The exact patches and how the berries are harvested is a secret, but they get enough berries to last year round and you can pull off of the Interstate and have a huckleberry milkshake and a burger that are second to none.

Well, almost.

You see, they use syrup to make their shakes in St. Regis. And you have to be sure to ask them not to add whipped cream. That canned junk isn't real cream. I don't care what the label says. And if the huckleberry syrup is made right, which it is in St. Regis, you don't need any extra sweetener.

Here is the bottom line. The world's best huckleberry ice cream comes from a concrete block and stucco building in Livingston, Montana. Wilcoxson's Ice Cream Co. is truly the absolutely best huckleberry ice cream available anywhere. Two scoops of Wilcoxson's huckleberry and the right amount of milk in a blender is about as close to heaven as you can get in this life.

And there you have it. For someone who lives in Rapid City, South Dakota, it is about 400 miles to Wilcoxson's Ice Cream. It is almost another 400 to St. Regis. And the answer is yes, it is worth the drive. We stayed in St. Regis last night.

Who knows? There may be a second huckleberry milkshake in this trip before I get home.

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## **June 8, 2017 – The River**

My home town, Rapid City, is a place shaped by water. If you talk to any long-time resident of our community, you will encounter stories of the flood of 1972. Tomorrow will be the anniversary of the flood. 45 years ago tomorrow night Canyon Lake became clogged with debris from the runoff of nearly 15 inches of rain that fell onto already saturated soils of the hills. The dam failed, sending a wall of water through the center of the city, killing 238 and leaving over 3,000 people injured. More than 1335 homes were destroyed along with 5,000 automobiles. If you were present during the flood or visited the city shortly afterward, the scenes of destruction are permanently etched in your mind. I have heard countless stories of the night of the flood and of the impact of the trauma that continues to play out four and a half decades later. I was not a resident of Rapid City in those days, but visited shortly after the flood and witnessed some of its destruction. Added to those memories are the stories of so many people who survived the flood and have told me of the events of the night of June 9 and how those events impacted their lives.



The weather will be a bit different this year. With near-record high temperatures and little chance of precipitation, it is shaping up to be a hot and long summer in the hills.

Rapid Creek, the stream that flows through Rapid City hardly comes off as one of the major waterways of the country. It is tiny compared to the river that is rushing by the place where I grew up and where I am visiting on this last morning of our vacation. The Boulder River is running about one inch over the official flood stage, which is no problem to the residents who live alongside the river and have seen water much higher. Nonetheless the water is rushing by with a foam of whitewater and enough force that you can hear the rocks rolling under the rushing water. Trees and other debris have washed up along the sides of the river.

And we have seen a lot of other rivers on this trip. The Skagit, which runs through Mount Vernon, Washington, varied by more than four feet during our visit as the snows rapidly melted from the Cascades and the water rushed to the sea. We spent much of yesterday following the path of the Clarks Fork River in western Montana, which was running full and fast. Even the Gallatin, Madison, and Jefferson Rivers, which join at Three Forks, Montana to form the headwaters of the Missouri were all running above flood stage. The warm weather has accelerated the snow melt in the high country and there is plenty of water in the rivers right now.

A geologist can tell you how the power of water has shaped the land. At the end of the most recent ice age, huge walls of ice melted forming inland seas and lakes, some of which were dammed by the receding glaciers. The water left its mark on the land in terms of sedimentary rocks, paths of erosion, and deeply carved channels.

Growing up alongside a particular river, I knew of the power of the water. I could see the rocks that were rolled round and smooth alongside the river bed. I watched as giant cottonwood trees fell after having their roots washed bare by the water. I went to sleep to the music of the rushing river in my ears.

I also grew up with a fascination of the water. We fished and played in the river. I learned to respect its power and to explore its pools. We fashioned boats out of whatever materials were available and some of them proved to be less than sea worthy in the rush of the river. I was an adult before I learned about paddling canoes and kayaks in whitewater and I am still very cautious and careful with my limited abilities to read and handle the river. Still, I love rivers and lakes and the other places where water molecules gather. I travel with boats on my truck and have particular boats that have ridden thousands and thousands of miles to ply waters distant from our home. One of the boats that accompanied us on this trip has been in both the Atlantic and the Pacific from the Bay of Fundy to the Puget Sound. It has been paddled in three of the Great Lakes and in Rivers as great as the Yellowstone and Missouri and Columbia.

Like the landscape of Rapid City, my life has been shaped by rivers and I am deeply aware of that influence as I spend a few final hours in the place where I grew up. I call this place home, though I lived here fewer years than I have lived in my current home in the Black Hills. Somehow seventeen years pass more slowly when you are only 17 years old than they do when you've collected a few decades of experience. The impact of this place on who I am cannot be denied even though I know few of the current residents of this place and as we drove around town last night, saw entire neighborhoods that didn't exist when I was living in this town.

Even the river has continued to change. Our place is on the inside of a curve and the river has been steadily moving away from our buildings. The rush of flood water is eroding the far bank and throwing the river into a curve downstream that is carrying away the soil of the neighbor's place. Nearly a quarter of a small downstream plot of land has been taken by the river that continues to wash away at the land. It is the way of the river and if you look at the steep hills back away from the stream, you realize that its path has been much wider than the current riverbed over the centuries.

So today I say a prayer of gratitude for waters and for the rivers that continue to shape my life. And once again I am soothed by the sound of the river.

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## **June 9, 2017 – Back to Work**

It is a familiar feeling for me to dive right back into work upon return from a vacation. I have a committal service at Black Hills National Cemetery this morning, with a luncheon with the family to follow. I meet this afternoon with a family to plan a funeral set for Monday. Around the edges we need to get out a bulletin for Sunday's worship, deal with a hot building and a broken air conditioner, make a hospital visit, put out our regular communications and get to work on our monthly newsletter, which publishes only two issues in the three summer months.

And there will be phone messages, email, and a host of other items demanding my attention. I checked email most of the days that I was gone on vacation and dealt with much of the immediate crises by phone, text message and email.

The church continues to do its work whether or not I am in my office. I'm pleased with the ways that others chipped in to make sure that the work got done and people received the services that they need. It is not, however, "a well-oiled machine." It never will be. It is a human institution that is influenced by the personality of every member. Each new member who joins the church affects its life. Each member who is lost to death or moving or other reasons changes the personality of the church. We have a lot of habits and disciplines, but nothing about the church is fixed forever. We are a growing, changing and living institution. That is the way we should be.

When someone is gone we miss that person.

When I am at the church, I often serve as the coordinator of the action and when I am gone there is a certain amount of coordination that falls behind. I once had a colleague that described a one-month pastor's vacation this way: Two months of preparation during which an entire extra month of work has to be done to get ready to be gone. One week of detaching from the intensity of long work weeks and demanding schedules. Two weeks of vacation. One week of preparing for return to work, checking messages and making preparations for the things that must be done immediately upon return. And, finally, two months of recovery during which an entire extra month of work has to be accomplished to catch up from all of the things that didn't get done during the vacation.

To be fair, clergy are as prone as any other person to complain about their lack of vacations and how much they sacrifice for their jobs. And there are very few professionals who receive the standard four weeks per year vacation that is the standard for clergy. In defense of that standard, there are very few other jobs where the worker is expected to be on site and working every weekend and the standard work week for clergy certainly is not 40 hours per week.

Having said all of that, I am extremely grateful for the three weeks of vacation that we were able to take. We had a wonderful time with our son and his family. Our timing was right to be present for the birth of a new granddaughter, and to spend time with our other grandchildren. We towed our camper a little over 2,400 miles with no problems. Our travels were safe and hassle-free and we had time to relax a little bit. Though we probably didn't get much extra sleep, it was our own choice to take the style of vacation that we did and we don't regret it one bit.

I am also aware of how much extra work the people of the church did to make our vacation possible. Worship leadership was provided by dedicated and faithful leaders. Hospital calls were made with care and compassion. Families were supported. Our office staff went above and beyond to keep the institution running smoothly, enduring a broken down air conditioner that allowed temperatures to soar in the office and make working conditions challenging. Volunteers stepped up to get work done and provide for the needs of those we serve. The level of support for us and our work is very high and we are grateful for such dedication and faithfulness.

Time, however, marches on. The days have passed and it is time to get back to work. Hopefully the refreshment of vacation will provide a little extra boost of energy for the extra tasks of the next week. Hopefully the joy of being with family will sustain me as I dive into situations where I need to be especially attentive to the needs and concerns of others. I am, after all, returning to a job that I love and work that is deeply meaningful.

Life is good. That doesn't mean that it is always easy.

As I was driving yesterday I recalled a trip that we took early in our career. We been serving for five years in a rural parish in North Dakota and negotiated a little extra study time at Pacific Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California. We drove to Washington and visited and camped our way down to the San Francisco Bay area. After our study time, we drove across the California and Nevada desert and back home to North Dakota. We had a two-year-old with us and made the entire trip in a car that was not equipped with air conditioning. There were some hot and tiring days driving with windows down and enduring the wind noise mile after mile. The two-year-old was entertained in part by playing the same cassette tape over and over again. I had every word of that tape memorized. I can still recite the lyrics. It was a good trip, but I was grateful to have air conditioning and a comfortable ride for our most recent vacation.

Times and circumstances change, but we continue to build memories. Those memories sustain us as we go forward.

Now, off to work!

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## **June 10, 2017 – Words that Last**

Yesterday I officiated at a committal service for a former United States District Judge. Understandably the crowd that gathered had a high percentage of lawyers and judges. The talk at the reception that followed the committal included plenty of references to cases argued, moments in the judge's chambers, stories of briefs submitted and objections denied. Although there were many people present whom I have previously met and know by name, it isn't exactly my usual community of people. I commented to my wife as we walked away from the reception that there were men in the room whose shirts cost more than the suit I was wearing. It undoubtedly was true. I'm more at home in a crowd of ranchers in jeans and boots than a room full of lawyers and judges in tailored suits.

Nonetheless, we were drawn together by our common humanity. We all knew that a very distinguished and accomplished man had died. The journeys of this life all come to the same conclusion. We will all one day die from this life. And when death occurs there is grief for those who continue living. This period of separation includes pain that is genuine and a search for meaning in the midst of loss.

One of the attorneys present at the committal asked me for a copy of the service and I will email him the service. I remembered, as I found his business card in my pocket when I changed my clothes in the evening, that he has asked for and obtained copies of other funeral services at which I have officiated. I don't know what he does with the services. Perhaps he reads through them several times to spark his memories of the

person he has known and respected. Perhaps he refers to them from time to time to remember a service that was particularly meaningful to him. It really doesn't matter to me. I'm glad to share the words I have chosen and I am honored that he asks for a copy. In my imagination, however, there is a file in this lawyer's office that contains funeral services, eulogies and meditations. I imagine that the services I have given him are all together, perhaps with a few choice services by other ministers, and that once in a while he sifts through the file to find a quote or a meaningful statement that he can use in his work.

I like the image of an attorney who is inspired by the words of a preacher and who occasionally finds those words meaningful enough to quote.

The law, by its very nature, is very careful with language. There is no shortage of jargon and special use of language associated with the profession, but the intent is to create words that carry similar meaning in different times and places. The belief that carefully-worded documents can guide our nation lies at the very foundation of our society. We give special reverence to our Constitution and its words. Officials from police to the President swear to uphold the laws and constitution. The order of our society is based on the assumption that we can achieve common meaning from a set of words.

I share the passion for language and respect for the power of words that are at the heart of the practice of the law. Even though my use of words is much different, I understand why attorneys are so careful in their choices of words. I do, however, make a distinction that I don't believe is common in the practice of the law. I am convinced that oral language and written language function in unique ways. Just because a document is well-written does not mean that it will communicate clearly when read out loud. And, as I discover each time I transcribe one of my sermons, words that communicate well when spoken often are awkward and imprecise when written. When I speak I am conscious of rhythm and pace. I often repeat a phrase for emphasis. I imply long run-on sentences. I overuse series and lists.

It is easy for me to provide a copy of a funeral meditation because I always work from a written manuscript at weddings and funerals. These occasions are once-in-a-lifetime experiences for those involved. The words I use are very important. Misspeaking can interfere with the process of grief or joy. I choose my words carefully. But I do not write the same way that I do when I am writing for publication. Yesterday's meditation had to be very brief. Black Hills National Cemetery only allows 30 minutes for a service. That service generally includes the firing of a salute, the playing of taps, and a flag-folding ceremony. That means that I have, at the most, 15 minutes for my portion of the ceremony. When the crowd is large and takes time to assemble and disburse, my time is often limited even further. I knew I had to be brief yesterday. Each word needed to carry a lot of meaning and spark a lot of memories. Still, the meditation that I wrote and used has a short list that is repeated three times, a couple of phrases that are said twice, and a particular rhythm that makes it word when spoken aloud. I didn't begin my

career knowing how to write such meditations. I produced some that were too brief and others that were too long. I missed important points and I overstated points that were less important. It has taken years of critical examination and conscious work to be able to craft words that touch those who mourn in ways that help with their journeys of grief.

Much of what a preacher says is for the moment. We speak and the words are either remembered or forgotten, but seldom remain for any amount of time after they are used. Somehow it makes me happy to imagine a file in a lawyer's office. Perhaps when he retires and moves out of the office he'll pause as he sorts his files and read the words that were meaningful to him yesterday. I pray they will hold meaning for him years from now as well.

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## **June 11, 2017 – Being Fair to the Text**

When I was a seminarian I took a class taught by one of my favorite professors that focused on the very beginning of the book of Genesis. We invested a semester unpacking the two creation stories that begin the Hebrew Bible in its current configuration. Genesis 1:1-24a and Genesis 2:4b-25 constitute two stories that can be read as separate literary units. Although the texts are complimentary, they have some contrasts in detail and the contrasts in content are matched with contrasts in language usage and style. Traditional literary analysis of the ancient texts often points to differences in literary style as evidence of multiple sources for the texts. There are a lot of books and articles that generally conclude that there are a minimum of four sources for Old Testament texts that were merged into the canon we now read as a single text. Our class, however, did not focus on these particular issues as much as it focused on a detailed analysis of the specific words that appear in the text. We translated from the original Hebrew word by word and looked to each to examine its meaning in the original context as well as in a contemporary setting.

As a result of the study and the work we invested, these stories of God's actions in creation are beloved by me. I enjoy returning to them again and again. At the same time, I have been very careful about how I preach those familiar texts for the simple reason that they have been so terribly abused by some Christians. Creationists read those texts, and often only the first of them, as a kind of refutation of the scientific method, claiming that they stand in stark contrast and direct opposition to theories of natural selection and evolution. Some of their arguments read as if the proponents of this interpretation have not even read the rest of the book of Genesis with care, let alone the entire biblical narrative.

Genesis and the other books of the Hebrew canon make no claim to be scientific texts. They are statements of faith that have been made for the purpose of drawing the community together and declaring a radical monotheism in the context of a region

where polytheism was the norm. Genesis 1:1-2:4a emerged as a consistent written document in the midst of the Babylonian exile, when there were many cultural forces pressuring the exiles to convert to a different set of beliefs and embrace a set of origin stories that were removed from the history and traditions of the people of Israel.

Often when people seek to discover truth on the surface they miss the deeper truth that lies within the texts. The bible makes no specific claim to be an accurate measurement of time or dating of the origins of the universe. Although the Genesis 1:1-2:4a creation account speaks of days, there is no evidence that these days are measured by the human method of counting the 24 hours of a single revolution of the earth. These texts were honored and loved and treasured by our people for thousands of years before there was an understanding of the nature of the solar system and the vastness of distances and of time in the universe. Claiming that God is constrained by human measurements of time is completely foreign to the faith of our forebears.

The text does not demand a denial of the discoveries of modern science in order for the faithful to treasure its meaning and value for our lives.

This is, however, a complex and subtle argument. It is very difficult to condense several months of intense language study into a sermon suitable for Sunday worship. The subtle and beautiful nature of the text demands more time and energy than is generally devoted to a single week's worship.

So the first thing we do is to read the text and trust the text to be heard and interpreted by our people. As is always true in worship the reading of the text takes precedence over the sermon. It doesn't mean that interpretation isn't important. It is. However, the goal is to immerse our people in the words of scripture, not enforce upon them a specific dogma or interpretation of that text. It is this commitment to the text that makes me bristle when others rush to conclusions not supported by the text and try to enforce them as the only acceptable interpretation.

What I am saying is that my resistance to some forms of creationism is not primarily that it is bad science. It is also bad theology, uniformed by generations of faithful study of the text. It arises from the same parts of the church that have resisted academic preparation and the standards of educated clergy that are so important in other parts of the church. I do not question the faith of a minister who attended two years of an unaccredited bible college in preparation for their role, but I do argue that the four-year undergraduate degree plus a three-year masters program that is the standard for ordination in my tradition offers the possibility of a better understanding of the role of the minister and the nature of our faith. Being a disciple is a matter of discipline and those who seek shortcuts in preparation often lack information and preparation for the work that they do.

I don't however, mean to criticize my colleagues. I understand that there are multiple paths to the ministry and that the one I have taken is not the only route. I know that

there is a big difference between academic achievement and mature faith. At the same time, I love these texts and I am frustrated when I witness the abuse that they suffer when people claim to expose their meaning without having taken the time to study them.

I am aware of the responsibility that falls on my shoulders each time I interpret these texts and of the importance of taking that responsibility seriously. What I say makes a difference and I approach the pulpit with fear and trembling. And that, dear friends, is how it should be.

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## **June 12, 2017 – Healing in Nature**

I've never paddled in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in northern Minnesota. I've read a lot of accounts of those who have paddled there. Many years ago I discovered the books of Sigurd Olson, who wrote of the Boundary Waters and of Quetico-Superior country in Ontario. For more than twenty years, from his mid fifties to his mid seventies the great teacher Parker Palmer has made a pilgrimage to the area every year. He writes so poetically about the beauty that is in the area that it seems so inviting.

I've been close to the Boundary Waters. We stopped in Ely, Minnesota when we drove the great circle route around Lake Superior. I had a trailer full of canoes and kayaks that we had used on several different day paddles during our Superior adventure. Canoeing in the Boundary Waters takes preparation, however. Reservations are required and must be made months in advance.

The popularity of the area is so great that it has become a problem for some. Sue Leaf, in her book *Portage*, speaks of the disillusionment she and her husband felt with the Boundary Area over its busyness, full camping places and constant traffic of other paddlers. They began to seek out other places to paddle that could be undertaken without so much advance planning. They sought places where one could linger in response to weather or the beauty of the moment or the success of the fishing rather than having to keep to the tight itinerary that is required of Boundary Waters visitors.

I am a great believer in the power of wild places to nourish our souls. I have been blessed to have visited some pretty remote locations and enjoy the beauty of nature in places where there is little evidence of human development. I grew up at the edge of what is now officially designated as the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness - nearly a million acres of high forested land on the Montana-Wyoming border. We knew how to hike into regions where we wouldn't see any other hikers for a three or four day backpack trip.



I also know that there are some places of great natural beauty that have become so populated with visitors that the crowding threatens the natural beauty we have come to see. I remember visiting the Grand Canyon and having a hard time capturing photographs that showed the rim without having people in my pictures. Having grown up near to Yellowstone National Park, I have very little patience for the traffic jams that form in the Old Faithful area. Fortunately you can still get away from the crowds in Yellowstone if you are willing to park the car, get out and walk. I have heard that the crowds in Yosemite National Park are so dense that even serious hikers can find little solitude.

As the population of our world increases, the management of wilderness becomes a delicate act of balancing the need for equal access with the need for preservation of the wilderness. Sometimes we lose our balance in the public management of the lands that we share.

One of the great blessings of the wilderness areas that I have visited is that I not only am able to experience the beauty first hand, but I can return in my imagination. The healing qualities of nature are so great that I can close my eyes and see myself hiking through stands of timber or paddling across the mirror-smooth water of a quiet lake. My usual workday pace is often so intense that a brief moment of quiet is required to refresh my energies for what is to follow. Taking a short trip in my imagination offers healing and restoration that is similar to the process of venturing into the natural beauty of wild places.

I am encouraged by these adventures of imagination. I know that the blessing of being able to travel to remote places is not forever. As I near another birthday I can feel some of the aches and pains that are a part of aging. I am not as strong as I once was. My hands don't grip with the same strength. Hefting a full-size canoe up onto the roof of my car takes an extra deep breath and careful thought that I don't remember being a part of the process a few years ago. My hikes cover fewer miles per day than once was the case and I stop to catch my breath more often when climbing a steep trail. I can sense what is happening. I know that the day will come when I will have to learn to deal with my own human limitations.

Part of what is so refreshing and restoring about natural beauty, however, is that nature is constantly changing. Each return to a place of beauty is another lesson in the power of nature to deal with change. I remember our first visit to Yellowstone National Park after wildfires burned over huge areas in 1988 and 1989. I was struck by the transformation. Entire hillsides were bared by fire that consumed all of the trees. Vistas opened up in unexpected places. More importantly, life was rising from the ashes. A hillside that we had been told had burned so hot it "sterilized the soil" was bright green with new growth. Each trip to the park since that time has offered the gift of witnessing resurrection. Nature is remarkably competent at healing scars and bringing forth new life in the path of destruction.

None of us knows for sure what lies beyond the end of this life. I've read plenty of descriptions of heaven as a kind of gated community in the sky that is often described in terms that seem to me to be infinitely boring - being surrounded by people who are so similar to each other that there can be no conflict or disagreement. Frankly such descriptions don't seem very heavily to me. Nor am I attracted by images of spirit separated from the physical realm. My experience of this life is of spirit and matter so infused that they are inseparable. It seems to me that observing the natural process of healing is one of the best illustrations of heaven that I can imagine. New life constantly springing forth, surprises at every turn.

For now, I will continue to see the wild places and find my spirit renewed by the beauty and power of the natural world.

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### **June 13, 2017 – Well Adjusted**

Here is the report of a conversation we received from our daughter-in-law:

Mom (to Dad): "We did it. First three years of our daughter's life. We have provided her the foundation for the rest of her life. We are successful."

Dad (to Mom): "And she's well adjusted."

Dad to 3-year-old: "Are you well adjusted, Miss EM?"

3 year-old: "No."

Dad: "What can we do to help you be well adjusted?"

3 year-old: "Peanut butter."

Dad: "Well then I will get that for you now."

Of course the story is greatly amusing to us as grandparents. It is especially touching because we've just returned from three weeks with that part of our family and we have our own stories and can almost hear the individual voices in the conversation. The responses are quite typical for the people involved.

It is also easy for us to revel in these stories because the three-year-old is, in fact, well adjusted. She is at home in her world and engaged in exploring and learning and discovering. She is comfortable with her role in the family and has adjusted to the

presence of a new baby sister quite well. Watching her grow to this point has been a joy and we are full of anticipation for her future.

There is a kind of smugness that can fall on parents and grandparents when things go well in a family. I can remember our early years as parents. Our first child was a good sleeper. After he was born he quickly began stretching out the time between feedings at night and before long we were getting 4, 5 and even 6 or more hours of uninterrupted sleep. Of course we attributed the situation to superior parenting. We had been intentional about establishing bedtime routines and providing a healthy bedroom for our son. We looked to other parents of infants and could almost always find some difference between their parenting style and ours and often attributed any problems they had with their children to the decisions and actions of the parents. We tried not to say much to others, but between ourselves we were feeling quite smug.

Then, when our son was 2 1/2 years old his sister came along. I think she may have slept all the way through the night once when she was six. OK, that is a bit of an exaggeration, but she pushed us right to the edge of complete exhaustion night after night. I can remember multiple occasions where I would wake my wife simply because I had run out of ideas to soothe the crying baby and needed a few minutes of respite. She suffered from frequent ear infections and we couldn't discern why she was having so many problems.

Both of those children, so very different in their infancies, turned into wonderful, kind, loving and interesting adults.

I know, however, a lot of stories of families who have had deep struggles with illnesses far more severe than anything we have experienced. Kind, loving, engaged and competent parents can find themselves face to face with children who have serious problems and face a struggle to just survive. Some don't make it. I've sat with parents adjusting to the news of the death of a child by suicide. I've agonized with parents over what is the best response to a child's addictions. I've witnessed very strong families suffering deeply over the situation in which they find their child.

Whatever thoughts I may have had about "superior parenting," I now know that the good fortune experienced by our family was just that: good fortune. While we were intentional and invested a lot of ourselves in being parents, we were not the cause of the results of that process. We were the recipients of good fortune. Furthermore, our family is not somehow more immune to problems in the future than any other family. Illnesses can occur to us. We might be asked to face hard times.

A child facing an illness is no less wonderful, no less a miracle than any other child. Parents of children who have disabilities or who suffer chronic illnesses don't want to trade in their children for others. They love completely and fully and they endure the trials and pain out of love for their children.

It would be so easy if all of life's problems could be solved with a spoonful of peanut butter. The world, however, doesn't work that way.

Each of us experiences some form of disability. If we are not currently aware of any disability, it lies in our future. Age will take its toll. A fall or another injury can make it challenging to walk. A disease can change our way of thinking. Problems with memory, aches and pains, and decreasing strength are normal parts of aging. A friend of mine who uses a wheelchair for mobility refers to people like me as "the temporarily abled." It is an accurate way of thinking.

In a similar way, we all face mental and emotional challenges. Things can change quickly. A bit of chronic pain can lead to depression where none previously was noted. The loss of a loved one can change everything in a person's outlook and attitude. A seemingly trivial event can become a trigger for a latent disease that was previously undetected. We human beings are fragile and vulnerable and when we allow our vulnerabilities to show it can be both refreshing and terrifying.

The conversation with which this blog post begins is not really about smugness at all. It was, until I reported it here, a private conversation between two parents who are working hard to raise their children. What I hear in the words is a sense of relief. We are accomplished at imagining disasters which might befall. We worry more than is helpful at times. We work so hard at providing for our families and helping our children grow and when we reach a milestone there is a sense of relief that disaster did not occur.

In the meantime, if you do not have any nut allergies, I'm recommending a spoonful of peanut butter from time to time. I may even include a bit of it in my breakfast today. After all, I really would like to be well adjusted.

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## **June 14, 2017 – A Wallet Full of Cards**

It is probably fair to say that I've never been one to travel light. I think about all kinds of possible contingencies and carry with me more than is needed most of the time. When I pack my clothes for a trip, I count the number of days and then throw in an extra pair of socks for good measure. We enjoy traveling with our camper which is equipped with everything including the kitchen sink, bathroom sink, and a spare bedroom for guests. I just drove to the west coast and back with a boat that never saw the water on this particular trip. I would have had one had I found time to use it, but that opportunity didn't present itself.

I do, however, have some wonderful minimalists in my circle of acquaintances. I have friends who never check a suitcase, preferring to limit what they take on a trip to items

allowed in carry-on luggage. I am impressed and even inspired by friends' ability to clear the clutter from their lives, getting rid of extra dishes and silverware, cleaning out all of their cupboards and drawers and reducing the amount of possessions they have. My son the librarian has wisely instructed me on the difference between an archive, which focuses on collecting, and a library, which focuses on circulation. "If you want a functional library, focus on what you actually use." If you have seen my basement bookshelves you would understand what sage advice this is.

Yesterday, as I took a few minutes to consider the clutter and collections with which I have surrounded myself, I took a moment to examine my wallet. It is, simply, thicker than I would like it to be and the cause is not an excess of cash that I carry with me. I've got cards. And I'm not talking about credit cards, though there is a card for our checking account and another credit card. And then there is the pre-authorized card for fuel purchases that gives me a discount at gas stations and allows the company to withdraw funds from my checking account. I understand that I need to carry my driver's license. An ID is important. Then there are four different cards for insurance: health insurance, dental coverage, prescription coverage and emergency medical evacuation. I could probably have a separate wallet with all of the company loyalty cards that have been issued to me. I have them for hardware stores and big box lumber yards and restaurants and the grocery store. I have a card that gives a free loaf of bread when I've collected enough stamps and stamp cards for two different coffee shops. There is a card they ask for when you make a purchase at the drug store and I don't even know whether or not there is a benefit from the points I have earned. I just have the card. The list goes on and on and I've decided that I am going to quit carrying all of those cards. I'll probably miss some potential savings, but I've got to draw the line somewhere. Some of the merchant cards allow you to register at the checkout with your phone number. Of course there is the problem of the proliferation of phone numbers - let's see is it our home number or my wife's cell number or my cell number? Oh yes, the office supply store is the church's number so the church can earn the bonus points.

I think when it comes to customer loyalty, I'm pretty good. I tend to shop in the same stores over and over again. When I find something I like, I'm likely to return to purchase the same item when needed. But there is something about a customer loyalty card that sort of bothers me. The fact that they make me keep track of the card seems to say, "We want your loyalty, but we can't be bothered with remembering your name. You'll have to show us a card." Why does the business think that keeping track of their customers is the job of the customers? I'm convinced, furthermore, that most of those loyalty cards are more about the company obtaining your address, phone number and email for advertising purposes. That results in an excess of mail that needs to be tossed in the garbage can. Not only is my wallet too full, so is my garbage can. Who knew that saving money could be so wasteful?

I have a friend who I occasionally tease about his capacity to spend a couple of hours and consume a bunch of gasoline driving around town to save a few pennies. It really

bothers him to have paid anything more than the bottom price for any item and he'll spend a lot of time and invest significant energy in making sure he's found the best price. Meanwhile, I just make the purchase and get it over with, figuring that my time and the hassle of going from store to store offsets the slightly higher price. I'm willing to pay for convenience at times. I do have my limits, however. I used to say that I'd pay double the price for a gallon of milk to avoid another trip to town. Now that there is a convenience store that is near our home and our children are raised and our milk consumption has decreased significantly, I stopped by that convenience store recently. Double the price is fairly accurate and no, I didn't buy their milk.

So I'm still walking around with a fat wallet. I'm not sure that I have a solution, but I'd sure like to find one. I wonder if I have to actually have to have my AAA card to gain its benefits. Would it work if I had a picture of it on my phone that clearly showed the number and expiration date? Of course that assumes that I would always have my phone with me, which is probably the case, but an idea that would have been very strange a couple of decades ago.

One thing for sure. Even though I respect my son's advice on culling books from my home library, I'm pretty sure he wouldn't approve of me going out without my library card.

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## **June 15, 2017 – Birthday**

One of the things about living in a large family is that there are plenty of birthdays to celebrate. And, in our family, the birthdays were sort of spread out across the calendar, so we pretty much had the opportunity to celebrate all year long. Our parents' birthdays lurked near major holidays, so they were easy for us to remember. Mother was born on July 3, and we joked that the whole nation set off fireworks to celebrate her birthday. Over the years there were a lot of different attempts at celebration cakes, some more successful than others. Here's a tip: sparklers drip inedible chunks of metal that burn their way into the cake and make it more difficult to eat. I don't think those bits are very healthy, either, but we all survived.

The next birthday after July 3, was the sister closest to me in age. Her birthday is August 17. For most of the year she is two years older than me, but for a short time in the summer, her age is just one digit higher than mine. This seems unimportant these days, but it was a big deal when we were much younger.

Then another sister's birthday comes along on September 3. I used to think it was a most unfortunate date for a birthday because it can, on occasion, land on the first day of school. That wouldn't be my choice for a birthday, but you need something upbeat and a bit of cake to get through that first week anyway.

Christmas vacation was a boon for birthdays at our house. I have a brother who was born on Christmas Eve. That, I was led to believe was the reason that in our home, we opened Christmas presents on Christmas day and not on Christmas Eve as some other families did. That never seemed to be much of a problem for me, as a day of cake followed by a day of presents isn't a bad layout. I did, however, think that my brother's date was unfortunate because he got his two big holidays back-to-back and had to wait a whole year before he was the focus of gift-receiving attention again.

The cake kept coming at our house because our father's birthday was December 28. In addition to the cake someone always got dad a bag of orange slice candies which got passed around the dinner table. Two sweets in the same meal! Not bad.

I have brothers with birthdays on January 9 and January 17, the latter shared with Benjamin Franklin's birthday. Lots of cake is good in January. It gets cold outside and you need the extra energy. Besides the winter doldrums are likely to set in along with a bit of cabin fever when you have that many kids in the same house. One of the neat things about my brother Dan's birthday on January 17 was that it lined up the ages of the youngest five children in two-year increments. We'd be 4,6,8,10 and 12 for six months until my birthday. Half of the year we'd like up that way, which still makes it easy to remember how old my siblings are.

Our Uncle Ted, who always celebrated his birthdays at our house had a ground hog day birthday, so there was more cake on February 2.

Then, in the middle of June, after the longest dearth of birthdays in the calendar came my special day. It sort of messed up the age reporting routine, and I had to get used to a couple of months of having my age reported as younger than my actual age, but for the most part June 15 is a great day to have a birthday. School is out for summer vacation. Fishing season is open. You can get by wearing cut-off pants and t shirts. And, of course there is cake.

We had it pretty good in the cake department when I was a kid.

There are a few birthdays that I remember. When I turned six I got my first 2-wheel bike. It was a momentous day for me. I already knew how to ride a bike, but our household had only girls' bikes until that day. I got the first one with a bar across the top. I thought I had it made, even though starting and stopping was more difficult than on my sisters' bikes.

I got my driver's license on my 15th birthday. I flew solo in an airplane on my 16th birthday. that turned out to be a great spring and summer. My flight instructor was my father and we spent many early mornings together as he taught me to fly. After my first solo, the flights began to get bigger with solo cross-country trips and opportunities to be

trusted with an incredible piece of machinery. I earned my pilot's license when I was 17, but missed my birthday. On my 18th birthday I upgraded my driver's license to a commercial truck license.

There have been many memorable birthdays.

I don't think 64 is going to be one that is noted by special accomplishments. I should be able to finish and submit a chapter for a book that I've been working on for at least six months. I should make some progress on a couple of long-range projects at church. I have a couple of meetings. Life goes on.

64 is the square of 8, the cube of 4 and the sixth power of 2. In some computer programs it is the size in bits of certain data types. Windows is proud of its 64-bit version which supports vastly larger amounts of memory than the older 32-bit version.

64 isn't an often-mentioned number in the Bible.

For a short time in American history 64 designated "almost retired." People of my age were generally seen as focused less on work and more on what they would do after retirement. Fortunately, from my point of view, retirement ages aren't quite so solidly fixed for my generation as they were for the previous one and I'll be permitted to work for a bit longer before stepping aside to allow new leadership to emerge in the trip.

Nonetheless today is my birthday, as is evidenced by the number of posts on my Facebook home page. It's a day worth noting.

There are more to come.

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## **June 16, 2017 – Moderating Technologies**

Not long ago I listened to a podcast that told part of the story of a couple of freelance Internet content editors. Many Internet companies employ human editors to view materials posted by subscribers to determine whether or not that content meets the provider's standards. Providers have a responsibility to remove content that is illegal or that promotes illegal activity and to report crimes to appropriate law enforcement officials. In most cases, pictures or videos or text that is offensive, racist, sexist, or contains sexual content or violence is also flagged and may be removed. Despite the high tech nature of the Internet and the reliance upon algorithms to produce software, most Internet companies still rely on human beings to make decisions about what is and what is not acceptable. The companies use standards and guidelines which vary company by company. The people interviewed for the podcast were paid 4 cents per item viewed and assessed. That means that if they were able to assess six items per



minute allowing ten seconds per assessment they could make \$14.40 per hour without breaks. Their work is free lance, so there are no benefits, simply a payment for the work from which social security and taxes must be paid before arriving at true take home pay.

It takes a lot of discipline to make more than minimum wage in the job. Furthermore, the people hired for these jobs are, for the most part, college-educated and have ended up in their position because of a need for flexible hours.

We are being protected by some of the lowest paid employees of these high tech companies.

The freelance editors are sometimes given other tasks than maintaining content standards. For example, they might be asked to sort pictures looking for a particular item or quality. These pictures might be used in advertising or for other purposes that are not revealed to the editors. One person spent hours and hours looking a pictures of feet to determine whether or not all of the feet in the pictures were bare. The editor was never told the reason for this rating of pictures. It was just 4 cents per image, next image, please.

We are so enamored with technology that we forget that engineering and technology can't solve all of our human problems. It takes real people, making real decisions to address some of the most important problems of society. Tech companies have come to the realization that they need to have some kind of process to keep their web sites somewhat free of material that is abusive, criminal and offensive. Writing even more complex algorithms so far has not provide the protections that they need.

Despite the rhetoric that is popular today about encouraging youth to choose their career paths carefully and focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics in order to be successful, I believe that the next generation is as much in need of philosophers, historians, ethicists and theologians as has been the case in previous generations. This is not a dig on engineers. They know their jobs and they do them well. But to assume that all we need is engineers offers a bleak world indeed.

In the last six months or so, I have had more and more conversations with people who are seeking community. They describe feeling alone and isolated from others. They seem to be unaware that there are others, perhaps quite close to them, who share their concerns and opinions. They fear offering their ideas in public because they are aware that there are those who disagree and fear conflict that may arise from differences of opinion. The tone of rhetoric in our country has been more harsh since the election of 2016, and fear of that harshness has left people feeling lonely and isolated.

Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and LinkedIn and Flickr, and Google and Friendster are all called social networks, and they do enable a certain level of connection between people. They do not, however, completely fill the need for

community. Community occurs at a level of deeper personal connection that is afforded by technology. It takes more than an asymmetrical conversation over the computer to feel genuinely connected.

We humans still need face to face conversation with other humans.

Again, this is not to dismiss technology. There are some important connections and ways of pursuing relationships that technology gives us. I am deeply appreciative of the ways technology enables me to stay connected with those whom I love. I read stories to my grandchildren over Skype. I love to FaceTime with my daughter who lives in Japan. I am very dependent upon technology to connect with friends who live around the world. My Facebook page lit up yesterday with birthday greetings from friends. I'm grateful for the technology and its ability to enhance our lives.

My computer, however, is no substitute for a hug.

The technology doesn't show compassion when I'm hurting. It doesn't perceive loneliness.

Siri is fine for asking directions, but she's programmed to say, "I'm not capable of love."

I've written before about my belief that there are major ethical issues related to technologies that demonstrate the need for philosophers and ethicists to participate in their development. Technology, despite the claims of some engineers, is not morally neutral. There are decisions that are a part of every stage of technology, from sourcing materials through selecting packaging that have significant impact on our world and its future. It isn't possible to develop technologies that don't have an impact on human societies. Ethical questions need to be raised in the development of new technologies.

I'm paying attention to the ways in which technologies are used to advance and also to inhibit the formation of genuine community. There can be an important role for technologies in the formation and organization of communities, but technologies can also inhibit and obstruct the formation of community. How we use the tools that are offered by the engineers and developers can make a significant difference, but it is also abundantly clear that just because we are able to do something does not necessarily mean we should do it.

I don't possess the right qualities to serve as a content editor for a social network, but I have a lot to say about how those people should be selected, trained and supported.

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## June 17, 2017 – Still Trying to Grow Up

Sometimes I think that I possess a bit of maturity - that life and experience have progressed to a point where I don't make the same mistakes I made when I was younger - that I have some wisdom when it comes to the decisions that people face - that I might even have some advice that is of value to others.

Sometimes I wonder if I know anything at all.

Yesterday was a day of not feeling too wise. Fairly early in the day someone asked for advice in dealing with a problem at work. I listened carefully to what she had to say and I could see the dilemma in which she found herself and even understand some of the reasons for the conflict with her supervisor. But I didn't have any advice to give her. I did not see a way out of her dilemma that wouldn't create additional tensions in her workplace. I reflected back the things that she told me so that she would know that I was listening, and I admitted that I didn't have any advice to offer. She seemed pleased with my listening and told me that she was feeling better about the situation, but she left without a clear plan of action. Later in the day she called my phone when I was in a meeting and unable to answer and she left a message basically stating that things had gotten worse during the day and that her attempts to resolve the situation had not worked out.

There is a family with whom I have been working for several years that is just not making it. Despite carefully planned support, their circumstances continue to deteriorate. I have tried to help where I can, but have never had the ability to "fix" all of the things that are going on. I have bought groceries, tanks of gas, and helped with utility bills. I have left my home on evenings when I would have preferred to stay at home to go and visit and help. I have allowed the family to use my personal cell phone as a point of contact and they have shared that number with others, which has been a problem on occasion. This week the problem is a utility bill that is far beyond my means to correct. Even if I were to put a payment on the bill, it would not change the fact that they have fallen so far behind that service will be suspended. This isn't the first time they have found themselves in this situation in the time I have known them. I was honest with them about what I could and what I could not do. They, out of desperation, have been persistent, calling me and leaving text messages on my phone. I don't know what is the right thing to do.

This is a change, in recent years, poverty now includes access to a cell phone. One day this week I spoke with some men in our community who are homeless as they waited for a community institution to open up to distribute food assistance. As we spoke, one of the men rummaged through his backpack until he found his cell phone and checked his messages. He sent a couple of texts while we were talking. I know how much my cell phone service costs and wonder about a situation in which having a cell phone is so important that it literally comes before food in the financial priorities of the

individual. Of course I don't know the whole story and I understand how having a phone can increase safety and it isn't fair for me to criticize someone whose circumstances I don't know.

Still, I don't feel very wise.

A wise man, Walt Whitman, wrote in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*:

*"This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown, or to any man or number of men — go freely with powerful uneducated persons, and with the young, and with the mothers of families — re-examine all you have been told in school or church or in any book, and dismiss whatever insults your own soul; and your very flesh shall be a great poem, and have the richest fluency, not only in its words, but in the silent lines of its lips and face, and between the lashes of your eyes, and in every motion and joint of your body."*

I love these words and I love his attitude and I know that I don't always heed his advice. I know that "give alms to everyone that asks," doesn't mean to satisfy every financial need. I know that if I were to divide my available funds into smaller amounts and give tiny gifts I could give a lot more gifts than I do. I also know that I am probably capable of giving more than I do.

As often as I have read these words, I'm sure that I don't fully understand them. I know of some "powerful uneducated persons," but I don't seem to feel inclined to go freely with them. I'm more attracted to the young and the mothers of families, who are not powerful.

And I'm no good at the advice to "argue not concerning God." I love the intensity of a good theological argument and often engage others on the subject of God far beyond their desire to pursue the conversation. In fact, I don't know how one could take Whitman's advice to "re-examine all you have been told in school or church or in any book" without arguing concerning God. After all many of my books and years of my schooling were devoted to the study of God.

There is so much that I have yet to learn. I certainly don't have my act together. I don't think my flesh has become a poem. If it has, it seems closer to ee cummings than Walt Whitman. It was cummings who wrote, "it takes courage to grow up and become who you really are." and "the most wasted of all days is one without laughter."

God grant me the courage to grow up and the grace to keep laughing at myself.

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## June 18, 2017 – Moving Forward while Looking Back



The lake where I paddle and row the most isn't one of the world's big lakes. At somewhere around 375 acres, it is fairly small. There are bigger reservoirs in the hills. Pactola reservoir, which isn't far from Sheridan Lake is over a square mile in area and it is stretched out more than Sheridan Lake, giving it some distances to cover. I, however, don't need a big lake. Even though the lake has two large boat ramps and plenty of slips for boats and there are times when it is filled with boat traffic, it is easy to get some time when you feel like you have the lake to yourself simply by getting up and getting on the lake early in the morning. For the most part the water skiers don't get out before 8 am and it is easy for me to go to the lake, have my fun and be off of the lake well before that time. A piece of trivia is that the site of Sheridan Lake was once the site of a town that was the first county seat of Pennington County. At one time, there were people who imagined that it, not Rapid City, would be the center of activity for the county.

I learned the trick about getting out on the lake early many years ago when I was living in Idaho. Our Association had a church camp on the shore of Payette Lake near McCall. The lake is large, but there are a lot of recreational boaters on the south half of it. It is lined with cabins and expensive homes and has several marinas filled with boats. But if

I got up early, before the campers wake up bell, I could slip into the lake in a canoe and paddle peacefully and enjoy the natural beauty uninterrupted.

It was on Payette Lake that the idea of owning a boat first came to me. I enjoyed working with the camp to build up its boating and water sports programs. When I arrived, the camp had three old fiberglass canoes, a paddleboat that leaked and the remnants of a small sail boat that was beamy and stable, but didn't sail very well. A decade later, we had a half dozen royalex canoes, a fleet of windsurf boards and sails, two catamaran sailboats and two monohull sailboats. It also had a fully developed water sports camp that included water safety, ACA accredited canoe instructors, CPR certification for every participating camper, sailing instruction and a whitewater raft trip at the end of the camp.

In those days I didn't have much discretionary money, so I decided to build a canoe. It turned out to be a fun project and the resulting canoe has provided a lot of pleasure paddling over the years. It also started me down the road of building boats, something that continues to this day. There is a partially finished boat in my garage right now and a rack full of boats in storage.

Along the way I sort of learned how to row, but wasn't very interested in the sport until recently. When our grandson was born six years ago, I decided to build a rowing craft. I thought that a more stable boat that didn't have much risk of tipping would be more acceptable to his parents for his first over-water adventures. I didn't want to build a clunky, hard to row craft, however, and settled on the plans for a Chester Yawl. I've been very pleased with the results.

This summer I've been doing more rowing in place of my usual paddling in canoes and kayaks. Once the weather warmed up, my craft of choice has been the yawl. I think it is a metaphor for the phase of life where I discover myself right now.

The boat displaces quite a bit of water, about twice that of a sleek canoe. It is not, however, slow. Two nine-foot oars in the water move the boat quite nicely and provide a lot of leverage for the rower. The boat has a skeg at the back which makes it track straight in the water and it is easy to steer. Rowing provides more whole body exercise and it makes a good workout for an aging and somewhat out of shape body.

At first I didn't like the idea of looking at the back of the boat while going forward. There is a trick to looking over your shoulder to make sure you are going where you want. Sometimes, I took some meandering paths towards my destination. With practice, however, I find I can be very precise in my rowing and make the boat go exactly where I want it to go.

It seems like this is a good time in our country to have a few rowers. We're not flashy and we're not the center of attention. We don't sport the bright colors, loud stereos of

boats worth much more money. We don't make a big splash and you can't hear us coming from miles away. We are, however, moving forward without forgetting where we have been. In fact we use the view of where we have been as a gauge of where we are going. It seems to me that we have plenty of folks in our country who are blindly forging ahead without much awareness of where they have been.

A commonly known quote about history that has been repeated so many times, it is difficult to determine who said it first, seems to be relevant here. Edmund Burke said, "Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it." George Santayana's version of the quote is, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., responded with, "I've got news for Mr. Santayana: we're doomed to repeat the past no matter what. That's what it is to be alive."

Whatever the imagery or symbolism, I find that I rather enjoy facing the stern of my small boat as I pull on the oars and propel it around the lake. It gives me a different perspective on the beautiful setting.

One day I suppose I'll focus even more intently on the past. I may even write memoirs at some point in the future. In the meantime, I want to keep moving forward. I just have so many good memories that looking back is a pleasant experience indeed.

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## **June 19, 2017 – Reading about Adventures**

When I was in my thirties, I followed extreme adventures by reading and occasionally going to movies. I was in good physical shape in those days and an active downhill and cross country skier as well as enjoying water sports in the summer. I was, however, moderate in my own undertakings. I had two small children and responsibilities that seemed to make it imprudent for me to get too carried away. I also was not the best at any of the physical activities. I was a rather average skier and not up to the extreme slopes pictured in the Warren Miller films that were shown at the annual pre-season ski pass sale for our local mountain. Furthermore, I have always had a sense of caution and a penchant for safety that kept me from some of the risks that others took.

One of the local heroes in our town was Dave Shippee, who was an adventure photographer and had published several very dramatic pictures in the Idaho Statesman and other publications. David was selected to participate in an expedition to be the first to explore the upper Yangtze River in China by raft. The expedition, led by Ken Warren, was well-funded and well-supplied to cover this high-altitude region previously unexplored by western visitors. Our local newspaper covered the preparations and the expedition extensively.

David fell ill at the very beginning of the expedition. During the two weeks that the team traveled from Hong Kong to the headwaters of the Yangtze, David ended up separated from the rest of the team, recuperating from pneumonia and altitude sickness. He was able to catch a bus and re-join the expedition on July 28. Three days later the team set off on a 540-mile wilderness section of the river, hoping to make the distance in 8 to 10 days without resupply. On August 3, David died of altitude sickness and other complications. The expedition had a medical doctor who was able to treat David with antibiotics and iv fluids, but the only effective treatment for altitude sickness is to get the patient to a lower altitude and the team's emergency radio failed to give them the necessary contact to arrange for a helicopter evacuation. Shippee was buried deep in the wilderness alongside the river.

There have been a lot of books and articles written about the expedition and what went wrong over the years. There were problems with leadership, morale, and decision-making on that expedition. Every expedition that involves tragedy is subject to a lot of second guessing after the fact. The Book "Riding the Dragon's Back, the Great Race to Run the Wild Yangtze, by Richard Bangs with Christian Kallen is one of the most complete records of the trip.

The memories of that tragedy decades ago was rekindled recently as I read Todd Balt's "The Last River: The Tragic Race for Shangri-la." It was the account, published in 2000, of the 1998 American whitewater paddling team that traveled deep into the Tsangpo Gorge in Tibet to run the Yarning Tsangpo, sometimes identified as the last truly wild river to be run. The circumstances of the expedition were different from the Yangtze expedition, but it also saw the tragic death of one of the expedition members. Twelve days into the expedition's on-river experience one of the members launched off of an eight-foot waterfall and flipped. He and his kayak were swept into the center of the river that was running very high and were swept downstream, never to be seen again.

Adventurers take risks all the time. I read about tragic mountaineering expeditions every year. Everest, Denali, K2, Annapurna - all of these great mountains and many others have claimed their share climbers. The results for the unprepared and untrained are disastrous. The high country is unforgiving. These great mountains also, however, claim experienced and well trained. Their expeditions involve real risk and one of the consequences is death.

I'm not sure I fully understand the dynamics of those who seek these extreme adventures. I have never had the opportunity to tackle one of these really big challenges and I don't think I would choose to do so if I did have the opportunity, though my decision might have been quite different when I was much younger. Nonetheless there is something about the spirit of the extreme adventurers which draws me to their stories. I find myself drawn to the books about extreme adventures each time I head into a bookstore or a library. Part of the adventure of living is enhanced by vicariously sharing



the experiences of others through the stories that they tell and the reports that they make from their adventures.

Through words written by others I have ventured to places that I will never see in person. I have witnessed risk-taking that I would never undertake on my own. I have sensed the dynamics of expedition leadership and making decisions under extreme conditions. I have witnessed triumph and tragedy.

Ever since I learned to read, books have been one of the important tools of my recreational life. The good news about books is that they allow me to participate in extreme sports even when my physical conditioning and financial resources restrict my activities. I am still in fairly good shape. I can pick up a 17' Canoe, flip it up over my shoulders and carry it across a portage. I can load it onto the top of my car by myself. I can paddle the distances I desire to go. But I am aware that my limitations increase as I age. I'm a bit more likely to use a trailer to get my boats to the water than once was the case. I find myself a bit less eager to make a long carry and I own sets of wheels to help me transport my boats over longer distances. I can imagine the day when I'll need help with the process of loading and carrying my boats.

But I am still able to manage the extreme expeditions by reading - something that I believe will continue for many years. The risk level is acceptable and physical exertion are acceptable.

Still, it is good to get out and participate in small adventures first hand.

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## **June 20, 2017 – Seeking Cooler Weather and Other Trivia**

Here's a bit of aeronautical trivia from a private pilot: As temperatures rise, the air becomes less dense. Air is also less dense as altitude increases. Combine the two factors and when it is hot and high, an airplane produces far less lift than when it is cold and the altitude is lower. This is especially noticeable in a light airplane. When we lived in Idaho we were involved in a partnership in a 4-passenger single-engine airplane. I loved to take the plane up into the Idaho mountains. But I knew that we didn't have the performance for high altitude when the temperatures rose. As a result our summer flying mostly took place early in the morning. We would get up early and fly up to Smiley Creek or Stanley or some other high-altitude airport for breakfast, returning before the heat of the day.

Phoenix, Arizona is forecast to have another scorcher today with temperatures predicted to reach 120 degrees, just a couple of degrees shy of the all time record of 122 records on June 26, 1990. While Phoenix is relatively low at only 1,086 feet, the mountains rise firmly quickly in the area. Flagstaff, about 150 miles to the north, sits at

nearly 7,000 feet. Put those realities together and the altitude density at Phoenix moved out of the safe operating range of the regional jets that are common all across the United States. More than 40 flights heading out of Phoenix were cancelled yesterday and more cancellations are expected today. The Bombardier CRJ airline, the most common regional jet has a maximum operating temperature of 118 degrees.

All of this is to say that I'm not a real big fan of very hot temperatures. Our temperature is forecast to near 90 degrees today, which is about 15 degrees above my best operating temperature. Just like an airplane, I slow down and my performance is sluggish when it gets too hot.

I've always thought of myself as more of a northern person, preferring cooler temperatures. Of course there are some temperature extremes in the cold direction that can make life downright uncomfortable. When temperatures creep below -20f, you need to cover all exposed skin. By -30 you need to plan carefully to make sure that mechanical devices are working. At -40 it is basically time to stay indoors. Your car probably won't start anyway.

Perhaps it is my penchant for colder temperatures that contributes to my life-long fascination with Canada. Growing up in Montana, Canada was pretty close for us and we would make an occasional foray into Alberta, usually crossing the border near Lethbridge and heading up to Calgary. From our point of view, Calgary was a big and exciting city with all kinds of attractions, not the least of which is the Calgary Zoo.

Canada seems a bit farther away here in South Dakota with North Dakota standing between us and our northern neighbors, but we still manage to make a visit to Canada from time to time and have enjoyed our many trips to the north country.

Now Canada has something other than cooler temperatures to attract us. I've long been envious of their dollar and 2 dollar coins. We in the US seem to have a preference for paper money. I grew up in Montana in a time when silver dollars were in common circulation. I keep a few Sacagawea dollars around, but they really aren't common and sometimes I'll encounter a clerk in a store that isn't familiar with the coin. You almost never receive a dollar coin for change around here. But up in Canada the dollar and 2 dollar coins, known as "loonies" and "toonies," are the preferred way of making change. Toonies are especially attractive coins with the center a different metal than the surrounding silver ring.

The new tonnie, released to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Canada, are spectacular. They picture a canoe on a northern lake with the northern lights shining above. In the daytime, the sky in the scene is green and blue over the gold lake, canoe and trees. At night, the green glows in the dark, just like the Northern Lights. It is almost worth a trip to Canada just to get my hands on one of those coins. I'm no coin collector, but I recognize something special when I see it.

Actually, it isn't Canada's first coin to glow in the dark. In 2012, the Canadian Mint issued a limited-circulation quarter with a dinosaur whose skeleton glowed in the dark. I read about these coins, but have never seen one. Because it was never put into general circulation, however, it didn't garner much attention. The new toonie, however, is here to stay.

Not to get too sentimental, but Canada already has a Prime Minister who shows up at canoe races ready to paddle and has a deep respect for all things that have to do with canoes. It already has incredible national parks and provincial parks where you can find a camping spot without making a reservation. It already has cooler temperatures. Now they've got money that has the rest of the world drooling.

No wonder the Royal Canadian Mint produces coins for 75 countries around the world. They really do know how to make spectacular money.

Even the paper money in Canada is special, with \$5, \$10, \$20, \$50 and \$100 bills each sporting different colors that make them easy to distinguish in your wallet or when exchanged in a transaction. Canadian printed money is printed on polymer, not paper. They are far more water resistant than US money, last much longer, and have security features that make forgeries much more difficult. OK Canada's bank notes aren't quite as cool as Australia's which have transparent panels, but they're pretty neat.

It's the coins that distinguish Canada, however.

Right now might be a good time to pick up a toonie. The exchange rate is very favorable for US citizens. \$2 in Canada is about the same as \$1.50 in the US.

I'm planning to stay in Rapid City today, but if I were heading out on a long trip, I'd sure rather be heading for Canada than Phoenix.

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## **June 21, 2017 – Bricks and Mortar**

Many years ago, I had a conversation with a Conference Minister who was talking about the process of matching pastors with congregations. This was near the end of the War in Vietnam and some congregations had experienced conflict related to the war and opposition to the war. Outspoken pastors were occasionally asked to leave the congregations they served. The conflict wasn't just a matter of disagreement between pastors and congregations. There was significant conflict within congregations and changing pastors rarely resulted in less problems for the congregation. The Conference Minister with whom I was talking said that churches who had experienced troubles with what he called "idea" pastors, might do well with a "bricks and mortar" pastor next. His

generalizations didn't make much sense to me at the time. It seemed to me that few problems could be solved by making an addition to the church building.

Now, after the passage of time, I think I have a clearer understanding of what he meant. His generalizations didn't mean that there were only two types of pastors. Neither did he mean that pastors only focused on new ideas or church buildings. He did recognize, however, that ministry could focus on building up the institutional church as well as offer prophetic ideas and suggestions that pushed the boundaries of faith.

Back then, I had little interest in being a "bricks and mortar" pastor. I wanted to engage congregations in deepening and exploring their faith, in Bible study and serious discussions of theology, and in discovering ways in which their faith empowered their participation in the wider society. I had little concern for the building up of the institution.

How things change. My track record as a pastor has involved major construction in every church that I have served. Each congregation that I have served has installed a new roof on their church building, most have engaged in bathroom remodeling projects. One congregation purchased additional land and raised funds for a major building remodel including new entrances, elevator, new bathrooms and more. In addition to investing in buildings and grounds, the congregations I have served have undertaken revisions of constitutions, restructuring of committees and boards and other projects that provided for more efficient administration. I have overseen balanced budgets and financial growth. Somehow I have been a "bricks and mortar" pastor despite my deep love for conversation, theology, and ideas.

At its heart, Christianity is about faith and people, not about the building up of institutions. Often when we examine the church, we discover great abuses of power and wealth every time the church achieves any amount of either. We are truest to our faith when we operate as small communities of love and care. In the church bigger isn't always better and often just the reverse is true.

To the extent that we are about building community and not institutions, the span of my career at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st Centuries, has been, from a wider perspective, definitely not about building up the institution. Membership in Christian congregations is on the decline and membership in mainline congregations, like the ones I have served, is declining more quickly than other churches. We've seen the shrinking of conference and national settings of the church in dramatic fashion as income decreases. If you are judging by institutional size, the church hasn't been a whopping success in recent years. If bigger isn't better, we're heading in the right direction, because we definitely aren't getting bigger.

Part of responding to God's call has always been going to places where you did not expect to go. Jonah ends up in Nineveh despite having headed out for Tarshish. And part of what seems to be my calling is to not always be going in the same direction as

others - often not in the same direction as the majority. When I was on the Board of Directors of our Conference there were three or four key votes when a decision was made with only one dissenting vote and that vote was mine. I tried hard to serve with integrity and to listen carefully to the others, but I felt obligated to cast my vote in the best interests of the people I represented when I served on that board. My positions weren't always popular, but I don't regret having taken them.

Somehow, leaving the institution in a place of stability and strength seems to be an important part of the work that I do. What I enjoy most about the work I do is responding to people in crisis, visiting in the hospital, helping with funerals, serving those with critical needs. I get a certain rush from the phone call in the middle of the night and enjoy opportunities to witness to faith in the midst of struggle. What I spend most of my time doing is keeping things flowing at the church, answering email and phone calls, meeting with contractors and engineers, getting bids for projects and overseeing the creation of contracts and arrangements. Where I spend the bulk of my time is not with the tasks that are the most fun. I have responsibilities, however, and the church does not exist to provide fun for me. Furthermore I am called to serve the church, not pursue what gives me the most pleasure.

Because keeping the institutional church faithful to the budget adopted by the congregation is one of the responsibilities I take seriously, I know how we spend our money. I know that salaries are the most expensive investment the church makes and that my salary is the most expensive item in the church budget. It is my job to make sure that expense pays off for the church. I hope and pray that I can be a good investment.

I would, however, like to change the image from my friend's description of "bricks and mortar." Rather than being a "bricks and mortar" pastor, I'd prefer to be an "organ pipe" pastor. Organ pipes represent art and music and design. They are objects of beauty and hold the ability to speak clearly. Organ pipes, unlike church buildings, last 500 years and more. I have no illusions about my role in the larger picture of the history of the church, but wouldn't it be nice if something that I have contributed would have value that would last long into the future?

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June 22, 2017 – Forty-Four



Numerologists say that palindromic numbers are happy numbers. The double-digit numbers that are palindromic are obvious: 11, 22, 33, 44, etc. When it comes to highways, 44 isn't one to designate the long highways. US highway 44 runs from New York to Massachusetts and Interstate 44 starts in Texas and ends in Missouri. Neither are transcontinental highways. It is said that the Vicks cough syrup company tried 43 formulas before coming up with the one that they have stuck with for so many years: Formula 44. Depending on which calendar you use, 44 BCE is accepted as the year that Julius Caesar was assassinated by a group of senators, among them his naval commander, Decimus Brutus. Marcus Antony gave the eulogy, starting with "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears . . ." AD 44 was the year of the death of Herod Agrippa of Judea. And +44 is the international dialing code for the United Kingdom, a bit of trivia I know because our daughter lived there for a couple of years. She's been promoted to +81 now that she is living in Japan, though between she lived in Missouri where Interstate 44 enters in the southwest corner from Oklahoma City and ends at St. Louis.

44 plus 20 is 64 which is my age today. Since I was 20 years and one week old when I was married, that means that today is our 44th wedding anniversary. It has been a marvelous adventure. Without a doubt, I would sign up for another 44 years, for which I'll have to live to the ripe old age of 108 and I think an insurance actuarial table would say the odds are against that. When I officiate at weddings these days, I almost always mention to the couple that one of the sweetest joys of life is the joy of growing old together. I'm not sure that I'm old enough to know that for sure yet, but it certainly seems like it. Having grown up together, we seem to be the right partners for growing old together as well.

And so I will write a bit about sunrises. I do love sunrises. And today is just one day after the earliest sunrise of the year, which occurs on June 21 in the northern hemisphere, making June 21 the longest day of the year. That also means that the nights are short around this time of year a fact that seems consistent with my memories of June 22, 1973. I used to be able to tell you where we were and what we did to celebrate our anniversary every year. On our fifth anniversary we were in France, a rather romantic location. Nine months after our seventh wedding anniversary our son was born. But the years have been enough that some blend together in my memory and I'd have to go back and consult calendars, journals and notes to remember exactly where we were on each wedding anniversary. I digress from the topic of sunrises, however.

The drama and color of sunrises has to do with the location and view as well as the cloud cover. A layer of clouds on the eastern horizon gave a bit of a delay in the first sighting of the sun this morning and things weren't quite as dramatic as some days. My preferred location to watch sunrises is on the surface of the lake in a small boat. The reflections are dramatic and the view spectacular. That means getting out of the house by about 4:30 at this time of the year which is why I have more photographs of sunrises that were taken in the spring and fall than in the middle of summer. Because of the width of time zones, there can be quite a bit of variation in the time of sunrise. For ten years we lived in Boise, Idaho, also in Mountain Time Zone, but 50 minutes later than Rapid City when it comes to sunrise and sunset. We moved from North Dakota, where the days are 5 minutes or so longer because of the northern location, to Idaho. The moves to and from Idaho took place in the summer and we pretty much shifted our lifestyle for those ten years, rising later and staying up later in the evening, then returning to our old schedule when we arrived back in the Dakotas.

The key word in that paragraph above is "we." That is the way we've lived our lives since June 22, 1973 - as a couple. We've done so many things together, including moving from Montana to Chicago to North Dakota to Idaho and to South Dakota. We've raised children together and cared for our parents together. We've vacationed together and worked together. We went to school together and since our ordinations in 1978 have always served the same church together. We are very good at sharing the same bar of soap and the same tube of toothpaste, though we no longer share the same

computer and rarely use the same car to get to and from work. Truth be told, we operate at different parts of the day. Susan is the sunset person in our family, often staying up as long after I go to bed as I rise before she gets up in the morning. It isn't uncommon for me to arrive at and depart from the office a couple of hours before she does.

Which is a definite benefit now that we've reached the point in our lives when we are facing the sunset more than the sunrise. The years behind are probably greater than the years ahead if you only count the passage of time. However, as we have discovered, the joyful layering of memory upon memory makes each year sweeter than the one before and each anniversary more precious than we imagined possible. Our celebrations may be more muted, but our joy is increasing.

44 years is as much the product of good fortune as it is of any special quality or ability. A particularly destructive form of cancer denied my parents the experience of as many years. My mother was a widow for almost as many years as she was married. I've been blessed to be married for more than two-thirds of my life.

Whether viewing a sunrise or a sunset, the view from where I now am is decidedly sweet. I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the blessing of such a wonderful partner and for the years that we have been granted.

Here's to whatever number of years lie ahead!

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## **June 23, 2017 – Soul Force**

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the leader of the Indian independence movement against British rule. Employing nonviolent civil disobedience, Gandhi led India to independence and inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world. His life and work were important factors in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King referred to the leadership of Gandhi early in his career. From the early days of the Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to Gandhi as "the guiding light of our technique of nonviolent social change." Early in 1959, King and his wife made a five-week tour of India that had a profound influence on his understanding of nonviolent resistance and the way in which the Civil Rights movement in America was to proceed.

One of Gandhi's concepts that King took to heart is that of Satyagraha, sometimes translated as soul-force. The concept is much older than Gandhi, and may not have even originated on the Indian sub continent. It is certainly present in the thinking of many world religions and in the teachings of Jesus.



There is, in this universe, a type of power that isn't the type of power associated with politics or world affairs. It isn't the kind of power we talk about when we talk about destruction or physical force. It isn't the power of defeat or domination or control. There is a deeper, older, truer sort of power that is about being and creating, integrity and presence. Those who possess political and military power often don't recognize this other form of power. Herod believed he possessed more power than Jesus because he had the ability to order the execution of Jesus. Often a temporal victory in this life is seen as a demonstration of power. The power of soul-force doesn't always appear to be victorious in a single moment or even a single generation. It doesn't show up in the records of winners and losers because it isn't about creating losers. It isn't about lording over another or celebrating another's downfall.

As I struggle to write about soul-force, I find myself with a string of things that it is not without being clear about what it is. The language of poetry and metaphor may be stronger to speak of soul-force than my preferred modes of expression, rhetoric and prose.

The Gospel of John starts out with a poetic prologue in which this power is referred to as "The Word." There is a connection between soul-force and language, though it is not dependent on any particular language. The power of carefully chosen words to build up without tearing down is part of the power of soul force. The English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton wrote, "The pen is mightier than the sword." What he understood is that effective communication works better than direct violence. Politicians have long understood this reality and sought to use the power of language to consolidate their power.

On a deeper level, however, soul-force is about much more than words. Clearly silence speaks more clearly than a barrage of words in many instances.

Like God, the power of God is impossible to capture. Each time we think we know God, there is more to be revealed. When we find the right words to speak of God, we are aware that God is so much more than we can say, more than we can even imagine.

What I am beginning to understand at this point in my life is that the best way to discover this power - to know soul-force - is to live in community. There are those who believe that being religious has to do with developing the right sense of reverence. They speak of the disciplines of devotion, of study and quiet prayer. These indeed are important in our spiritual growth, Such piety, however, is something that is achieved alone and what we are able to do alone is insufficient in the quest to know God. I have come closest to understanding God in those moments when I realize that the thought I have is a part of a great line of thought that has been stirring for many generations. The deepest form of spirituality and of spiritual truth only comes when we find ourselves as a part of a community. Community its not just a gathering of people in one time and one place, but rather an understanding of human connections that transcend time and place.

The conclusions of any temporal moment are never the whole story. Often it is only after the awards banquet that those who leave with the trophies realize how much they need the ones whose names were not called. In simple, but profound terms, we are all in this together. Paul put it this way in the first letter to the Corinthians, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” (1Corinthians 12:26)

One of the blessings of my life is that I am allowed to spend some of my time with those whom society has labeled losers. I sit in the park and listen to the stories of those who are homeless. I visit inmates in the jail who have been isolated as a result of poor choices and bad mistakes. Those with insufficient resources often seek me out. I do not have solutions for the problems I hear. Most of the time I can't even figure out how to help a little bit. Often I feel powerless to change the situation. I have learned, however, that God continues to appear in the places where we least expect to sense the holy presence. There is a profound form of prayer that takes no words, but is discovered in the presence of those who are left on the margins of society.

Today I have no presidents, prime ministers, generals, senators or governors on my agenda, just a prisoner and a single mother trying to scrape together enough resources to keep her family together. My time will not be wasted.

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## **June 24, 2017 – Obsessions**

Looking back, I see many times in my life when I have become obsessed with something. When I was in my early teens, I was obsessed with kites for quite a while. I kept making tiger and bigger kites partly for the feel of the pull of the kite in the wind. Eventually I designed a tetrahedron that was nine feet for each of the pyramid sides. The airfoil surfaces were covered with cotton fabric stiffened with airplane dope. The kite itself was pretty impressive. The problem came with finding line strong enough to fly it. My first attempts resulted in snapped lines as soon as a few feet of line were played out. Heavier line was just that: heavier, in fact too heavy to fly the kite. I finally found something that worked, a type of plastic twine, but the pull on the kite was so strong that I had to anchor it on a car bumper and play out the line little by little. It didn't really flay all that well.

That particular obsession gave way to other projects that included a phase of modifying bikes and making go carts with bicycle wheels. We had access to our father's shop and learned to look in the city dump for parts. I remember one time when our father came into the shop to see what we were doing he ended up helping us weld a roll cage, fix a seatbelt and order the use of an old crash helmet that he had before we road tested the go cart on fish hatchery hill. Good thing he did, when I failed to negotiate the second

curve the resulting trip through the ditch and into a fence could have hurt a lot worse than it did.

As I got older, some of my obsessions cost more money. Kite fever returned to me as an adult and I have a rather large collection of kites that fly with single, dual and quad lines. I'm not as much into kites these days as was the case a couple of decades ago, but I still get them out to fly from time to time. I've got a couple of parafoil kites that have no sticks and pack into relatively small packages that I carry with me when we are on vacation.

My obsession with things that fly resulted in investing a significant amount of our family's money in renting and owning airplanes over the years. Although I haven't been an active pilot for many years now, our kids have fond memories of flying on family vacations.

Although I'm not as much into vehicles as others, there have been a couple of times when obtaining a particular vehicle has turned into a bit of an obsession. I'd think and plan and figure out how to be able to afford a particular vehicle, looking at plenty that I could not afford along the way.

Obsessions aren't all bad. There are some famous people who have turned their obsessions into their life's work. Take Elon Musk for example. His obsession with computers and the Internet led him to found PayPal, which he sold for \$80 million. That money has funded his obsession with electric cars and space exploration both of which have resulted in some pretty dramatic contributions to the world.

My obsessions haven't tended to result in such significant profits, but you might say that my obsession with theology and things religious led to my life's work. I really am pursuing my passions in my everyday work and that work has provided for my family. There have been some times when it was a struggle to keep up with all that is going on at work, but I've never felt myself stuck in a job that I hated, as has happened with some other people. I've known folks whose jobs are simply a way to fund their other obsessions. Mine has always been a way of following the things about which I care the most.

Churches and families are, by their very nature, pretty compatible.

It might be fair to describe my family as an obsession as well. I certainly have invested a lot of time and energy in being a husband, father and grandfather and those roles are something that has brought me a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction over the years. One of the things about being a father is that I get to witness the obsessions of our children. Being a ballet dad wasn't one of the least expensive adventures of my life, but I certainly got a lot of joy out of the investment. I still smile when I see that row of ballet

costumes in an upstairs closet and one of my favorite photographs is of our daughter in ballet costume and toe slippers.

Lego bricks might also be seen as an obsession that has spread out over at least three generations of our family. A while back I spent several evenings sorting our son's lego bricks by color and shape so that I could make up building kits from his stock for our grandson. And each time we get together there is a little time for grandfather, father and son to build with legos. I smile to see our grandson pouring over the lego catalogues in a manner that is so similar to that of his father when he was that age. I remember when his father would save up so he could purchase a particular set just like he does. I haven't kept track of the total amount of family investment in Lego sets over the years, but it is significant.

Life presents us with many tangents, some of which become passions and even what might be labeled by others obsessions. I'm pretty sure that a simple preacher who has a trailer rack with five canoes and five kayaks has crossed the line into obsession. Still, I've got the plans for a tandem kayak that I unroll to stir my imagination from time to time and wouldn't a triple kayak be something for a grandfather of three grandchildren?

Elon Musk may have made a lot more money than I, but I don't think he's had more fun.

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## **June 25, 2017 – Meeting God's Children**

I met a young couple. She didn't talk much, but he told me part of their story. They had had an apartment and were getting by until she was robbed while carrying their rent money. He had felt terrible. He thought he was supposed to be able to protect her, but he could not. The loss of the money pushed them over the edge into a spiral where there simply wasn't enough money to get by. He tried borrowing money from family and friends. After all, he reasoned, he had helped others out when they had asked him. They fell short. First the electricity was shut off, a couple of weeks later they were forced to leave their apartment. They stayed with relatives for a couple of nights, but that didn't work out. They tried to sell their possessions, but mostly things didn't sell. They were forced to leave some things with friends, but they doubt that they will ever see those items again. They found themselves on the street and there they got robbed again. A bag with clothing and other items was stolen, though they never saw the thief. He still had a job. He was getting twenty, sometimes thirty hours a week at a fast-food restaurant. He was in fear of losing that job - he'd missed work several times in the midst of his housing crisis, but so far he still had the job, though it was nearly two weeks before the next paycheck. His paycheck mostly goes towards food. The only way they have found to get it cashed without a big fee is to have the money put onto a prepaid card at Walmart.

When I met them, they were sitting in a park, eating cold Vienna sausage out of the can - food they had gotten at a local charity. He said they had spent the entire night walking around town, afraid to lie down. They had sat for a while on benches in parks and then when they thought someone else noticed them, they'd get up and walk on. They just walked and talked and now they were really tired and soon he would have to go to work and worry about what she would do while he was at work. "I just wish I could get her a bed to sleep on!" he said.

I met another couple. They had been walking from the place where their ride dropped them off to his aunt's house, a distance of three or four miles. She began to feel faint. He thought it was probably from a lack of water, so he ran into a gas station to buy a bottle of water with what was nearly the last of their money. When he came out, she had fainted. Someone had already called the ambulance, which, when it came, transported her to the hospital, but wouldn't give him a ride. The hospital was another mile beyond the aunt's house, so it took him a while to catch up with her. By the time he got there, they had transfused a unit of blood and were running tests to figure out where she was bleeding. He sat with her all that day and through the night. It was the middle of the afternoon, more than 24 hours after she was admitted to the hospital, when I caught up with them. I made a comment about his needing to stay healthy and asked him if he had been eating and drinking plenty of water. He told me he had no money for food. He'd had a few bites from her meals, but that was all. I inquired about his aunt, to see if she might offer some food. He said he didn't want to leave his wife's side.

I attended a lovely wedding. After the ceremony there was a table full of appetizers and a long line at the bar for drinks. When the photographer had finished with the formal pictures we all went into a dining room for a sit-down dinner for about 150 people. There was a delicious meal served buffet style, with plenty of extra for those who wanted seconds. There was a table with water and lemonade and coffee and those supplies were replenished every time they started to get low. There was a table filled with cake and candies. No one left that room hungry. The wedding was held at a resort where there are dozens and dozens of luxury rooms with private baths and access to hot tubs and saunas. I don't think that anyone who attended the wedding was worrying about whether or not they had a bed to sleep in that night.

I spoke with a lot of other people this week, but somehow the stories of the three couples stand out in my mind. They do not know each other. They do not even know the stories of the other couples. About the only thing they have in common is that they have met me and they were all in the same city in the same week.

I wish I had a happy ending for today's blog post. I tried to make an appropriate gift to each of the couples, but in none of the cases was my gift sufficient to significantly change their circumstances. The couple in the wedding is the only one of the three whose on-going story I will know. It is unlikely that I will have an on-going relationship with any of the others. Life goes on, but it is more comfortable for some than for others.

Once again today, I will rise in front of the people I serve and proclaim the Gospel. I will try to interpret the words of Jesus in ways that offer meaning to their lives. None of the couples will be present to hear my words. The listening and sharing we did during the week will be their only contact with me.

Nonetheless I hope that something of the love of God was visible to each of those couples this week in some way. Each of them is precious in God's sight, but I'm not sure that they know it.

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## **June 26, 2017 – Truth and Lies**

Last week I listened to a TED talk by Carrie Poppy. She told the story of visiting a bookstore and reading about paranormal experiences. Not long afterwards, while staying in a small house that belonged to a friend she began to feel odd. She felt pressure on her chest. She began to have auditory hallucinations. She wasn't a believer in ghosts, but there was something that seemed inherently evil about her experiences. She convinced herself that there was a demon in that house and that the demon had targeted her specifically. She blogged about the experience and some of the readers of her blog doubted her interpretations of the events. She challenged the skeptics to suggest an alternative explanation. One of them wrote, "Ever hear of carbon monoxide poisoning?" She googled carbon monoxide poisoning and found that what she was experiencing seemed to match the symptoms perfectly. A quick call to the gas company revealed that indeed the structure had a significant leak and that she was in danger of dying from her exposure.

Her beliefs nearly led to her death. Sometimes skepticism can be life-saving.

I have a colleague with whom I love to talk and listen who has, in recent months, been arguing that we live in a "post truth" society. He cites examples from all over the political spectrum of lies and half truths that are circulated as the truth. Stories get reported that are not based in fact at all, but rather on what someone thinks might be true, wishes might be true, or imagines. In many cases there are specific political goals of those who circulate those untruths. His argument is that everything is a matter of perspective.

There is, however, a danger in assuming that there no longer is such a thing as objective truth. We become able to accept the most outrageous lies as normal and there are real consequences. Had Carrie Poppy persisted in her belief of demon possession, she would have died. Her death would still have been caused by carbon monoxide poisoning, but she would have died without learning the truth.

We live in an uncertain world. There are a lot of dynamics in the universe that affect our everyday lives and predicting the future is, in many ways, challenging if not impossible. In this uncertain world, people grasp for perspectives that give them a sense of control. This can lead to accepting explanations for the world that are blatantly false.

One could argue that embracing half-truths and outright falsehoods is a product of laziness. I have made that argument with my colleague. People simply don't take the time to do research. It isn't difficult to discover facts when one uses the Internet responsibly. You can check out the sources of a particular story. But people rarely go to the trouble. Instead they repost the story on Facebook or pass it on to dozens of friends. I have received emails containing untrue information that are posted like chain letters with promises for those who pass on the item and threats to those who break the chain. A few moments of research reveals that the promises and threats are as fictitious as the story.

One ought to be careful before passing on anything received as an email or read in a social media post.

There is more than a small amount of science denial that goes on in our society these days. People question the safety of vaccines and GMOs. They question the fact of climate change. They assume positions that stand in direct contrast to scientific consensus. Ignoring the consensus of the majority of scientists does more than hinder scientific progress. It threatens the lives of people. Failing to mitigate global climate change will literally result in unnecessary deaths.

Furthermore, the development of an anti-science bias can result in governmental policies that are unfair and unjust. A population can quickly normalize the most outrageous behaviors and ideas and accept the most unjust and inhumane practices from its government as was clearly demonstrated by the rise of Nazism in 20th Century Germany and the Cambodian genocide, to name just two examples from recent history.

Part of the tragedy of Nigeria's kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls was that some Nigerians believed that the news was a government hoax. Even after the kidnappings were found to be real, Nigerians persisted in not believing the reports that some of the girls were alive despite video showing this to be true. Nearly 300 schoolgirls were kidnapped and the people were somehow lulled into accepting it without protest.

Fake news has real consequences.

So I don't accept my friend's analysis. We don't live in a post-truth society. Objective truth still exists. Scientific consensus still matters. Hard research leads to a clearer understanding. We are capable of critical thinking and discerning the difference between fact and fiction. Furthermore there is true nobility in standing up for the truth. It

may not be popular, but there are moments when standing for the truth is essential for the survival of a just and meaningful society.

Deborah Lipstadt published a book about Holocaust deniers entitled “Denying the Holocaust.” She was sued for libel by Holocaust denier David Irving. She could have ignored the case, it would have cost a small amount to simply pay off her detractor and get on with her life. Instead she chose to fight the case. She won the case. Standing up for truth in the face of lies is worth the time and the effort. Lipstadt’s story was made into a film, “Denial.”

We must never “normalize” lies. It is our obligation to stand up for the truth. History has demonstrated over and over again the costs of embracing lies and the failure to stand up for truth.

There are no “alternate facts.” Truth is not just a matter of perspective. It is possible to gain different perspectives and reach a reasonable consensus. We do not live in a post truth world and believing that we do can lead to great suffering.

At a bare minimum, we shouldn’t lose the battle between truth and lies by being lazy. Take time to check out that story before you repeat it or pass it on.

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## **June 27, 2017 – Idols and Heroes**

I’ve written about heroes and idols before, but here is a bit more on the subject. There seem to be a lot of motivational speakers giving TED talks and addressing people in other forums who speak about attempting the impossible. Of course if something were truly impossible there would be a 100% chance of failure, but more engaging are the stories of people who do things that are very difficult and then call the task either impossible or nearly impossible. There is no doubt that people accomplish extraordinary tasks and perform feats that many others would fail if they were to attempt them. The result is that upon accomplishing these feats they demonstrate more about what others cannot do than what others can accomplish.

For example consider Colin O’Brady. The Explorer’s Grand Slam is one of the most formidable tests of endurance: climb the highest peak on each continent, known as the seven summits. In addition reach the North Pole and the South Pole. At the end of 2015, only 45 people had ever completed the feat, and many had taken a lifetime to do so. Only two had completed the Explorer’s Grand Slam in under a year. Colin O’Brady completed the challenge in 139 days and at age 31 was the youngest person to have completed it. As you might imagine the project was a massive test of physical and psychological ability and durability. In addition, it was an amazing logistical feat, requiring a huge amount of financial and logistical support.



It is an amazing feat and I do not want to detract anything from the well-earned attention that O'Brady has received. As a recent college graduate, O'Brady had suffered near fatal burns in a tragic accident. He had been told by doctors that he might never walk again. He beat the odds and pushed the envelope in ways that will be difficult for others to best. In addition, he linked his adventure to the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, a charity that promotes physical activity and set the goal of raising a million dollars for the cause.

It is important to note that O'Brady, as incredible as his feat was - and it was truly incredible - is not an example of what very many people can do. At my age, I'm well aware that there are many athletic feats that are the province of younger people. Don't look to me to become a world-class gymnast. Consider the simple fact that most professional athletes retire when they are half the age I am today. Beyond me, however, there are many children in the world today who will never earn enough money to visit seven continents, let alone pull off a fully equipped and supported expedition on each of them. To a certain extent, mountaineering is the pursuit of the wealthy - or at least of those who have abilities to raise significant outside financial support. O'Brady is more likely someone who shows people what they can never achieve than one who is an example of what can be realistically accomplished.

Or consider James Lawrence, sometimes called the "Iron Cowboy." In 2015, Lawrence completed 50 Ironman-distance triathlons in 50 states on 50 consecutive days. It is an incredible record. On a couple of occasions I've kept up a steady pace, working without a day off for long periods of time, but even 14 or 15 days without a day off leaves me exhausted. I'm pretty sure that 50 days would leave me physically ill. Not that I am anyone's example of physical endurance. But consider this from another perspective, Lawrence invested at least 50 days in a row during which he was free from having to do a job to earn a living to support his family. You don't make money running ironman triathlons. OK, he, too raised a lot of money for charity by accomplishing his feat. But think of all of the children in this world who will never be able to afford to even visit 50 states in a lifetime, let alone in under two months. The costs of travel alone are beyond the means of many people.

Like many other sports icons, I consider O'Brady and Lawrence to be idols. They have accomplished great feats, but in doing so show us more of what we cannot do than of what we are able to do.

There are, however, heroes - and some of them work in sports. I know a river guide in Idaho who goes around with duct-taped equipment and clothing that he paid for himself. He can take a teen that is afraid of the water and give that person a trip down the middle fork of the Payette river, turning the raft so that person never gets splashed in the face. The ride is so much fun that the same teen might be seen floating on a calm section of the water, buoyed by a life jacket and enjoying the experience. That same

river rat spends his winters teaching children to ski. He is a hero. He shows youth what they can accomplish and how to accomplish those things. His name isn't in any record books and he isn't famous.

Or consider a single mom I know who is working full time while raising two children on her own with virtually no support from their father or extended family. She puts her kids to bed at night and more than once has fallen asleep on the floor in the hallway because by the end of the day she doesn't even have enough energy to make it to her bed. She won't be going on any expeditions because every penny is invested in food and clothing for her children. She hasn't raised any millions for charities because she puts every minute of her life into survival. She is a hero to her children and a shining light to everyone who meets her. In my mind her feat is no less inspirational than completing the Explorer's Grand Slam. And when 139 days are over, she keeps going for another 139 days and another and another after that. The newspaper won't be interviewing her for an article on how it feels to have endured such a challenge.

There are heroes in the world who show others what they can do. Their endeavors deserve our support.

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## **June 28, 2017 – Hot Dog**

It is that time of the year when we prefer to do most of our cooking outdoors. Just a bit of background might be in order here. When was growing up, our family spent our summers at our cabins by the river. The cabins had once been an auto court - not a motel exactly, because they did not have plumbing in the individual cabins. There was an old shower house that needed to be replaced soon after the property was acquired at a Sheriff's auction following failure to have the property tax paid for years. We had a stove with an over in the "main cabin," but most of the time we cooked our suppers outside on an open fire. There was plenty of firewood as we worked to clean up the property. In addition to downed branches from multiple cottonwood trees, we had a fair amount of lumber from the cabins, which were constantly in need of repairs minor and major. New roofs, new windows, new shutters, new doors - you name it, we gained a fair amount of skill at fixing things up over the years.

Cooking over an open fire offers a fair amount of menu choices, and with a really good cast iron skillet, a dutch oven and a fair amount of aluminum foil, you can make some really complete menus. My favorite, by far, as a kid was hot dogs cooked individually on willow sticks, corn on the cob, boiled in a big pot, and watermelon, cooled in the river. It doesn't get much better than that.

These days, we've upgraded. Living right next to a national forest, open fires are banned during much of the summer and I've developed a taste for charcoal and

hardwood smoke. Unlike most of our neighbors, we haven't made the switch to propane as our cooking fuel. It probably would be cheaper, less messy, and better for my health than breathing the smoke, but I'm old enough to be a bit set in my ways. I have several good dutch ovens and anything that needs to be browned, like biscuits, cobblers, and pies (Yes I can bake a pie on the grill), work better with hot coals placed on the top of the oven. I don't know what the equivalent would be with a gas grill.

Last night was a bit of a bust. High winds and a bit of rain from a thunderstorm roared through our neck of the woods just when I was planning to light the charcoal. The winds cooled the house nicely, so I decided to stay dry and cook the chicken that had been marinating in barbecue sauce under the broiler in the oven. It wasn't a bad dinner, chicken, potato salad and watermelon, but the chicken didn't have the smoky flavor.

I didn't set out to write about chicken, however. My question is, "What has happened to hot dogs these days?"

First of all, do they really expect me to pay \$10 for a package of 6 hot dogs? OK, most places aren't that expensive, but putting only 5 or six hot dogs in the package has become the norm, it seems. Everybody knows buns come in packages of 8. How do you get the buns and dogs to come out even? Yes, I know you can make toasted peanut butter sandwiches in hot dog buns, but that is beside the point.

So on my first point, I suppose you have to lean towards Nathan's Famous Skinless Beef Franks because they come in packages of 8. But the store where I shop most of the time rarely has them in stock. I'm not sure if any store in our town keeps them on hand all summer long. And besides, frankly, they are bland. I don't mean to be a snob, but hot dogs are supposed to have some flavor. They are, after all, the modern version of traditional German sausages like wienerwurst and frankfurters and bratwurst. Seasonings make all the difference, and no, I don't think that sugar or corn sweeteners are spices.

I know that there are less than 400 Jews in South Dakota, the fewest of any state in the country. And the statistics report that the Jewish population in South Dakota is shrinking. Still, that doesn't stop us from having two Bagel Shops across the street from one another duking it out for business every day. And the grocery stores all stock bagels. Would it be too much to ask for them to keep Hebrew National Franks in the cooler? Those people know what a bit of garlic and spice do to make a hot dog taste good. And, yes, I do know about Oscar Mayer, and yes, their flavor is smoky, but they are a bit too sweet for me and, really, could you call it a hot dog if the thing got any smaller. You might as well line up a couple of Vienna sausages in a bun. I've done that, but I don't recommend it.

There are dozens of store brand hot dogs available, some in remarkably huge packages. But a hot dog should have some snap to it. I'm not sure what ingredients

they use to make those rubbery and soft versions. And if you read the ingredients, you have to ask yourself, “Is coriander a traditional hot dog spice?”

We do eat turkey and chicken hot dogs from time to time, but they share the texture problem with the store brands and, frankly, I think it is the beef that is the flavor I crave in a hot dog.

And while we are talking about flavor, I’ll say this much for condiments: I’m not a purist here. I do like barbecue sauce and I’m not a big fan of ketchup (too sweet). Mustard and pickle relish are the real winners here. Chopped onions are ok, but for my money you should save the avocados for tacos. Seriously, guacamole on a hot dog? Here’s the deal, if you bury the dog in a bun and condiments, you can’t really taste it.

Here’s what you do. Keep the fire hot and the grill fairly close to the coals. Keep the dog moving so it browns evenly and cook it until it just splits with the heat. Take it off and blow on it just enough to cool it so it doesn’t burn. Then take a bite of the dog without a bun or anything else. You’ll be able to tell whether or not you’ve got a good one.

I’m sure glad it’s still June. That gives me another three months for cooking outdoors. And maybe I’ll find some really good hot dogs before the summer is over.

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## June 29, 2017 – An Able Boatbuilder



The cover of the July/August issue of Wooden Boat has a photograph of a beautiful power boat built by Harry Hammond. The article inside of the magazine tells the remarkable story of Mr. Hammond’s construction and launching of the boat. He purchased the plans for the boat 45 years ago, though he didn’t start the process of construction until much later. Still he worked on the boat for 16 years before it was completed and launched.

I’m pretty used to reading articles about boats and the efforts of those who build them. Amateur boat builders accomplish some amazing feats. Most issues of the Wooden Boat carry stories of people who invest multiple years of their lives in the process of construction of their dream boat. This issue has another article about a California architect who spent 25 years building a wooden sailboat and another article of a son launching a boat that his father had begun. The articles about the dedication of boat builders are inspirational to me. It is one of the reasons that I have subscribed to the magazine for decades. I have no intention of building a big boat. I’m not going to sail around the world in a boat I made with my own hands. I enjoy building canoes and

kayaks and I even built a rowboat a few years back, but I have no plans for tackling a decades-long project that costs multiple thousands of dollars. My ambitions are a bit smaller. Still, I enjoy reading the stories of others and the work that they have accomplished. And I enjoy looking at pictures of the craft they have built. Over the years I have learned a lot from the magazine's articles about technical details and I pour over each issue from cover to cover, even reading the classified ads at the end of each issue even though I have no intention of buying the boats advertised there.

Harry Hammond is not only a skilled and dedicated boat builder who crafted an amazing and beautiful boat. He is also a gifted writer who tells the story of the boat's construction well in the six-page magazine article. There are some details about the construction of the boat, the construction of the temporary building structure that he made in which to complete his work, and the processes of lofting, building forms, planking the hull and crafting the cabin and other details.

The details are interesting, but there is something more fascinating to me in the article. It is Harry's personal story that I've been mulling in my mind ever since reading it. In 1992, a pancreatic illness struck Mr. Hammond out of the blue. He spent a decade in and out of hospitals. He endured multiple surgeries. He spent long periods in Boston hospitals, separated from his wife and children. His decades-long illness rendered him financially, physically and emotionally flattened. He became disabled and unable to earn his living. His illness forced him to learn to live in a meager social security income. It was only after becoming completely disabled that he began his 16 year-long boatbuilding project.

Seeing the pictures of his beautiful boat stand as a stark reminder to me - and to anyone else who will look and read the story - of the capabilities of one that society has labeled "disabled." The title simply doesn't fit the reality Mr. Hammond may have been laid low by a terrible disease. He may have been left unable to work regular hours and hold a traditional job. He may have had years without any days that produced 8 hours of productive work. But he wasn't without abilities. He had creativity and stamina enough to complete a beautiful boat. It may have taken him many years longer than a person without his limitations, but he accomplished the task.

All too often we use the label "disabled" to write off a person. We see someone who is different from ourselves and assume that they have no abilities at all. We discover that someone needs assistance or long-term care and decide that they no longer will be able to contribute to society. We fail to work with those who have experienced disabilities to discover their hopes and dreams and visions.

For many years I have served on the human rights committee of a local institution that provides services to people living with disabilities. The agency provides all kind of support services, from housing, transportation and employment to daily care and community living assistance. The persons served by the agency have a wide variety of

disabilities. Some were born with conditions that limited their development. Others were the victims of accidents or illnesses that robbed them of some of their functions and abilities. A few years back, the agency underwent a change in name that was largely symbolic, but which encourages those of us who are involved to think differently about the agency and what it does. It used to be called Black Hills Workshop. The name was appropriate in the days when the primary service offered by the agency was a day care facility in which persons with disabilities could engage in crafts, projects and other activities that occupied their time - often as a respite for care givers or to enable other family members to have employment to support the family. The days of sheltered workshops have passed, however. The new name of the agency is Black Hills Works. It is a subtle change. The focus is now on discovering appropriate and meaningful work for everyone. Many people can have employment that provides income to them if care is taken to discover what work they can do. Others can engage in meaningful expression. Black Hills Works has a variety of enterprises from a down town art studio and gallery to a bakery to industries that recycle computers that provide employment for people in our community. It sounds simplistic, but when we focus on the abled half of the word instead of the dis part of it, we discover that disabled people can accomplish all kinds of things.

Social workers and employers may see Harry Hammond as disabled, but the readers of Wooden Boat have a view of a very abled man who is a creative and productive artist and builder. I know I think of him in terms of his abilities, not his disabilities.

As I age, I hope others will be able to see me in a similar light.

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## **June 30, 2017 – The Power of an Apology**

The day before yesterday, I was expecting a package to be delivered. I had checked the online package tracking and heard that the package was “out for delivery” in our community. The day passed without a delivery. I knew that the package delivery services can get busy and their days often run beyond normal business hours, but I didn't worry because there was a meeting at the church. That meant that the building was unlocked from 7 am until after 9 pm yesterday. There was a church staff member present during all of those hours. So, yesterday morning I checked the online tracking to see what had happened. Imagine my surprise to read. “The receiving business was closed at the time of the first delivery attempt. A second delivery attempt will be made.” This information was entered into the delivery company's tracking information at 4:49 pm. I know for a fact that the church was staffed at that time, Furthermore when I checked to be sure, one member of our staff reported that she had been standing by the front door waiting for others to arrive for a meeting at that time.

Furthermore, there was no notice of an attempted delivery posted on the building. I checked every door yesterday.

It is obvious that no attempt to deliver the package was made on that day.

Yesterday, I noted that the package was once again "Out for Delivery" at 6 a.m. Our building was unlocked at 7 a.m. and remained so with a staff member present until 5:05 pm, when I decided to leave the building and drive around the neighborhood to see if I could find the delivery vehicle. I succeeded and followed it to its next stop where I asked the driver for my package. I asked him what had happened the previous day. He reported that a few weeks ago he had stopped to deliver a package and there were workers in the parking lot working on a shed who said that I was out of town and that there were no Wednesday evening meetings or activities in the summer. Their report to the driver wasn't accurate. Although we don't have our regular choir rehearsals or youth group meetings, there are frequently events in the evening at the church during the summer. Still, the driver simply assumed that if he didn't make it to the building by 3 pm - the normal end of office hours in the summer - the delivery would be missed.

In other words the driver as much as told me that he didn't attempt a delivery, just entered a missed delivery into his computer. I assume that if I hadn't found his truck and followed him yesterday afternoon he would have done the same thing again.

Package deliveries from that company have been a problem for us for several years. We used to have a retired couple living across the street from the church and left a standing order for deliveries to be made to their home as a solution to the problem of the delivery company not making deliveries during normal business hours. I have registered numerous complaints with the company. I have informed them that the two other national delivery companies are able to make deliveries during normal business hours without any problems.

Here is the thing that left me steaming for a little while and upset enough to make this the topic of my blog this morning: During my interchange with the driver, he never once said, "I'm sorry." He offered no apology for the missed delivery. He didn't even apologize for having decided not to attempt delivery and then reporting it as caused by the business being closed. His behavior is completely consistent with what I have experienced with other companies in a wide variety of different services. I believe that employees are trained to never apologize.

Several years ago I paid a bill and the payment was credited to the wrong account. After several months of showing my cancelled check to the billing agent, the issues was finally resolved. It was acknowledged that the clerk who received the check posted the payment to the wrong account despite the correct account number being written on the face of the check. Again, there was no apology. In its place the agent told me several times, in a stern voice, that the problem could have been resolved with a phone call and

that my coming into the business was completely unnecessary. It felt as if I were being reprimanded for their mistake.

We see things differently in the church. We understand that apologies are good for healthy relationships. They are good for us. We include confession in our liturgy. We acknowledge that we all fall short of the ideal. We all commit sins. We all make mistakes. And confessing is a valuable tool in healing relationships. Acknowledging failures, making apologies and resolving to do better next time are normal human processes.

A society that fails to acknowledge mistakes fails to promote healthy relationships.

There is no question that we live in a time of pretty harsh language. This morning the BBC, The Washington Post and the New York Times are all reporting on both Democrats and Republicans who are expressing disgust at a vulgar tweet issued by the President of the United States. White House staff members defended the president saying that he was simply fighting back and defending himself. I guess they hadn't consulted the First Lady who has launched an anti cyberbullying campaign.

I'm sure that unfair and mean statements have been made from all kinds of different political positions. No one party has a corner on meanness and verbal abuse. But the current level of rhetoric makes Harry Truman's chastising of a newspaper critic for writing a bad review of his daughter's music concert seem very tame by comparison.

We haven't been very successful at teaching our people to apologize for mistakes. Despite the process of confession and reconciliation in the liturgy, we Christians haven't made much of an impression on the national tone of conversation.

To you I say publicly, I'm sorry I haven't done a better job of teaching about confession in my own congregation. I resolve to do better. And to the package delivery person, "I'm not personally mad at you and I don't intend to hold this weeks actions against you."

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