

**March 2017
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March 1, 2017 – Ash Wednesday, 2017

Despite having grown up in a family that operated airplanes for a living, I continue to have a bit of amazement every time that I fly. Commercial airline service allows me to spend half a day or more with my family in Washington State and return home to sleep in my own bed the same night. The reality of this particular mode of travel, however, is that sometimes my body and mind don't keep up with the pace of my travels. My sleep patterns are a bit different and I find it a challenge to adjust to the quick pace of change. From the excitement of moving our son's family to their new home to leading Ash Wednesday worship is a fairly dramatic change, but today is Ash Wednesday, I am back at home, and there is work to be done.

As I have mentioned in previous blogs, I have grown to appreciate Lent more as I have aged. Contrary to the thoughts of austerity and deprivation that I once used to associate with the season, I find that lent is a time to refocus my life, to return to the disciplines that are important to me, and to lay aside some of the distractions that so easily become incorporated into my lifestyle. It is a time to decide what is most important in my life.

Having just completed a trip to support part of my family and being allowed some time to be with my grandchildren is a reminder to me of how important family is to me. I have been blessed with wonderful family experiences in my family of origin as well as in the family we formed with our own children. Now, at the phase of being the family elders, we are grateful for our grandchildren and for the strong families our children are forming.

Central to my life also are the relationships formed in the church community. I am especially grateful for those in the church who provide such excellent leadership to our caring ministries. We'll be off to deliver more firewood this weekend and the organization for the delivery has been directed by volunteers. Our entire firewood ministry is the product of dedicated volunteers who are very generous with their resources, time and equipment.

These critical relationships all are based on my relationship with God. That relationship is nurtured by prayer and worship. My private spiritual disciplines are important to my life. I try to make prayer, study and contemplation a priority each day. Lent affords me an opportunity for just a little more focus and just a little more time for prayer.

Christianity is not, however, a do-it-yourself project. It is faith that is formed in community and sustained in community. Worship lies at the heart of my faith. This is a bit of a challenge for me because, as a worship leader, I am not always as worshipful as might be desired in the arenas of public worship. I have lots of details upon which to focus. I manage the sound system. I am keeping track of the time. I am concerned with the choir, the liturgist, and I keep scanning the congregation to make sure that what we are offering is engaging the folk that we serve. In the midst of all of those important

roles, I sometimes forget that my most important role is to simply be one of the community - to be a member of the congregation come to the church to share in the restorative power of worship. It is not what I do or say that makes worship meaningful. It is the movement of the Holy Spirit in our community that empowers our time together.

Family, ministry, private devotion, public worship - these elements are the core of the Lenten experience for me. Six weeks of focus on the things that are most important.

Because Ash Wednesday falls on the first day of the month this year, counting the weeks is easy. It will be mid-April when Easter rolls around. In those six weeks, we travel the complete range of human emotions. In recognizing Jesus' complete humanity, even unto death, we began to understand how fully he embraced our experience. There is joy and triumph, sadness and tragedy. Jesus knew anger and frustration as well as compassion and caring. The Lenten journey is one that offers all of the emotions of human life. We learn to grieve and also learn that grief is not the end. We learn the depth of loss that is a part of our human experience and also learn that we are not defined by loss alone. Lent is a season of tears, but also the season that leads to endurance and courage.

Courage is a commodity that appears to be in short supply in public life these days. Again and again we see our leaders confuse bravado with genuine courage. Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the capacity to face fears head on instead of avoiding them. The negative feelings of lent are not to be avoided, but rather fully experienced. Endurance and courage come only to those who are willing to face directly into the fullness of our lives. This means that we may have to endure any number of things that don't, at the time, seem at all pleasant to us. We may have to experience suffering for the sake of the future. We may need to face the reality of loss and grief in order to understand the power of resurrection in our lives.

Welcome to Lent. Welcome to a season with as many opportunities as challenges. May your Lent bring you richness of meaning and depth of experience that transcends the temporary nature of pain and sorrow and sadness. May you discover the peace that does not force grief to leave, but rather learns to live with grief as a partner in processing the meanings of this life. May this Lent be a time of renewal for you and for the communities in which you participate.

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March 2, 2017 – Lent

The number 40 appears in many different places and contexts in the bible. The great flood in Genesis consists of rain for forty days and forty nights. Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights on two separate occasions. Moses and the people of Israel wander in the desert for forty years before entering the promised land. Spies explored

the land of Israel for forty days. Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights in the desert and forty days is the time observed between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension. There are 146 scriptural references to the number 40.

Some of those references may be inspired by earlier references. Certainly Jesus' early Jewish followers would have been familiar with the stories of Moses and might have been tempted to make comparisons between Jesus and Moses. The number 40 carries an association with testing. Both Moses and Jesus underwent testing before God in their 40-day times of spiritual preparation.

40 days of Lent is an annual opportunity for Christians.

40 days is enough time to lose 6 to 10 pounds on a carefully planned diet. 40 days is enough to develop new habits of time management. 40 days of immobilization is sufficient time for a simple bone fracture to heal enough to be released from a cast.

Spiritual disciplines, however, are not easily contained in specific amounts of time. Part of every spiritual discipline is an understanding that God's time and our human perception of time are not the same thing. The patience required between a prayer and an understanding of God's answer can be longer or shorter than 40 days.

Our measurements of time are only one way of experiencing the wider reality that is time. The number of months in a year, the number of days in a month, the number of hours in a day, the number of minutes in an hour and the number of seconds in a minute are all products of human systems of measurement. Both careful observation of the movement of the planets in the solar system and a fair amount of plain and simple human politics were involved in the evolution of the system that we follow. Because of the revolutions of the planet with half a day facing the sun and half a day facing away, virtually all human cultures have developed a system of counting days. The passage of seasons is also noted by many cultures, especially those who live some distance from the equator.

Those of us who live in the hills are gaining about 3 minutes of additional sunlight each day during this time of the year. Easter will be 2 hours and 19 minutes longer than yesterday, the first day of Lent. The days are literally lengthening during the season whose name means "to lengthen."

This leaves us with the challenge of investing the time that we are being given this year. Lent holds the promise of growing in our relationships with each other, of forming a stronger and more supportive community. It holds the promise of growing closer to God and understanding the reality of the human condition - of life and death - in a deeper and more meaningful way.

To realize the potential of this season, of course, we must be willing to exercise a bit of discipline. Disciples are, after all, those who practice disciplines. For me Lent offers the opportunity to explore new disciplines. I'm aware that I have a tendency to spend a bit too much time in front of the computer screen. I now use my computer to watch entertainment programs as well as to do my work. Although I don't spend anywhere near as much time in front of the screen as an average American, I know how sitting and watching is nowhere near as good for me as getting up and acting. I plan to be more aware and more careful about how I invest my time. There are plenty of other engaging and meaningful projects that I want to pursue.

One of the things I will do with the time is to lengthen the amount of time I invest in simply being quiet. I try to take the opportunity offered by delays in schedule to focus my attention and to pray. When I have to wait in a line at a store or for a particular event, nothing is gained by expressing my frustration. Instead, I hope to teach myself to see such delays as a gift of time to focus my attention on others. On my prayer list are those who are spending a lot of time waiting in doctor's offices and those who are keeping vigil at the bedside of an ailing loved one. Sharing their sense of waiting can deepen my connections with them.

There are many other spiritual disciplines that I wish to develop, but I know that I can't accomplish everything in on Lenten season. It has taken decades for me to develop a noticeable increase in my patience. Learning to be slow to anger and quick to forgive is a multiple-year adventure, not the product of a single short season.

From some perspectives forty days is a long time. From others it is a very short time. Perhaps one of the gifts of this particular 40 day period is the opportunity to shift my perspective. I know that most seasons, including Lent, seem a bit longer at the beginning than they do when they are over.

So we have begun Lent for this year. I am eager for the season in ways that I have not always been. I am open to the sorrows and tears of the season as well as the promise of resurrection that lies at its conclusion. In the meantime, there is a journey and I intend to be attentive to the journey, paying attention to the experiences and adventures that it has to offer.

I pray that your lent will be a season rich in meaning as well.

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March 3, 2017 – Family

I grew up in a family that took the business of being a family seriously. My parents made family a priority. We ate our meals together every day and our father insisted on an hour at the dinner table so there was time to talk as well as time to eat. One of the things that

I learned from our father that I repeated to our children many times is “You can’t resign from your family.”

Another value of our family, however, was independence. We were raised to go out into the world and discover our own place. One of my sisters was an Air Force wife and traveled around the United States as her husband served at different bases. Another sister lived in Montana, Minnesota, Oregon and Missouri during the early years of her married life. I moved off to Chicago to attend graduate school and one of my brothers headed to Los Angeles to seek his fame and fortune. I don’t think he found either on that particular trip, but he had a lot of experiences along the way.

As a result we grew up with this deep sense of closeness as a family, but became adults who lived in all kinds of different places and developed our own communities along the way. My profession comes with a ready-made community at each call, so I have always had lots of friend and an extensive support network wherever I have lived.

We have grown apart as adults. It doesn’t surprise me that I have different ideas about politics and religion than some of my siblings. It doesn’t surprise me that we like different books and have different interpretations of the events of the world. But I am a bit surprised at the way that we have learned to go weeks and in some cases months without talking with one another. We live our own lives. We enjoy the times when we get together, but between these times, we each have our separate lives and get along without one another very well.

I don’t know what I expected, but I guess that I thought that when we became adults we would want to live close to each other and see each other as often as possible. As it has turned out, our family remains spread over three or four states and when vacation time comes around we are more likely to head for our grandchildren than our siblings.

And there are differences that we weren’t aware of when we were children. I jokingly say that I was 50 years old before I found out that I had grown up in a dysfunctional family. It is only a joke. Our was not a dysfunctional family, but there are significant differences between us siblings that I did not know about when we were growing up.

Still, there are some very precious moments for us as adults and we have some good times together. One of my sisters arrived at our home last night for a visit and it was like it is with other good friends, we picked up our conversations as if we had not been apart at all. There is a definite joy of being together. Fortunately for me, my sister and my wife get along very well and enjoy each other’s presence.

Having my sister visit brings to mind all of the changes that we have gone through since we were children together. We grew up, we pursued our educations and our careers. We married and, in the case of my siblings there have been divorces and other marriages. I have a brother who was married to his wife for 12 years, then they were

divorced for 12 years and now they are married again. And she isn't his first wife. One of the big experiences that we have shared is the experience of the death of our parents and assuming our place as the elders of our family. The sister who is visiting was here when our mother died and our mother had lived with her and with us during the final years of her life.

There are plenty of reasons for us to be close. We have a lot of shared experiences. There are a lot of stories that can be shared with a certain type of shorthand that doesn't require beginning at the beginning. We can assume that the other knows a large part of our story. And that kind of storytelling results in a wonderful collection of jokes that probably are way more interesting and exciting to us than they are to others. Our vocabulary of puns and silly memories keeps us entertained at the same time that it makes our children roll their eyes if they happen to be around for our conversations.

I have no way knowing how things will be for our children. As they have become adults, they too have lived far from each other. At the present time our daughter is in Japan and our son in Washington. They remain very close to each other, talking by video conference every week and checking up on one another. Last year they were together with each other for a visit when we weren't around and it made me feel really good at how they were making being with each other a priority in their lives.

Based on my experience with my siblings, I sincerely hope that our children will continue to make time to nurture their relationship with each other. The thing about a sibling is that you have been in each other's lives for all of your lives. My sister was not quite 2 years old when I was born, so she can barely remember life before me and I've had her in my life for all of it. It is indeed a special relationship and a very precious part of my life.

The days that we have together will be busy. We still have our lives and work. But in the midst of the busy days we will have some great conversations and continue to build on the relationships that we have been nurturing for all of our lives.

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March 4, 2017 – These Hands

Who knows why a particular poem starts to resonate and then becomes beloved? Our people have treasured poetry for thousands of years and the poets of our tradition have been critical players, speaking truth to justice when other forms of communication had proven to be ineffective. The more I study the Bible, the more I realize the critical nature of poetry in shaping our people. Isaiah and Jeremiah are prophets, to be sure, but they are also poets and it is their poetry that we remember and quote. It is their poetry that calls every generation to lives of justice and equity and freedom.

One of the poems that stays in my head and my heart is Psalm 90. I think that I was attracted to it in part because of its great opening lines: "Lord, thou has been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God." It has a wonderful commentary on our mortality: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be forescore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away." It speaks of true wisdom: "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." It is, perhaps the closing lines of the poem that I roll over and over in my head the most these days: "Establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it."

I frequently read that psalm at funerals. When I am with those who are coming close to the end of living, I often am aware of their hands. I hold their hands. I touch their fingers with my own. Hands are so much to me the instruments of living that they seem to tell stories of who we are and where we have been.

These days my hands have bumps on all of the knuckles and they aren't as flexible as they were when I was younger. I suspect that they also aren't as strong as once was the case. I can't snap my fingers loudly like I used to do and some days my hands ache as I flex them. As far as arthritis goes, I'm very fortunate. I know lots of people who experience a lot more pain than I. Often just warming my hands up is sufficient for them to relax and for me to think of things other than a dull pain.

My hands have been cut and burned and poked and skinned and experienced all kinds of injuries from which they always seem to be able to recover. I've smashed the finger tips until the skin underneath the nails turns black and the nails fall off and each time they have grown back. I've gotten grease and dirt so deeply embedded in them that it takes a brush and "20 Mule Team Borax" or "Go-Jo" to get them clean. As I look at them now, I think I can detect just a bit of ash under the thumbnail of my right hand from administering ashes on Wednesday.

I have always had deep respect for those who can make things with their hands. My grandfather was a good framing carpenter. He could cut and piece together wood to make a strong and stable structure. My Uncle Ted, whose name I carry was a very skilled sheet metal worker. He had also worked as a machinist, but his creativity really showed in the many things he made by forming precise bends in sheet metal that allowed him to make all kinds of wonderful and useful items. My father was an excellent mechanic and could repair airplanes. He was missing parts of some of his fingers from encounters with a power tool, but he definitely wasn't disabled from those accidents. My mother was a knitter whose hands were always busy. My sister is a weaver who makes beautiful cloth.

My hands build boats. Thanks to liberal applications of sandpaper and wood filler my boats are fairly reasonable craft to paddle. Some of them might even be described as pretty. Of course I do lots of other things with my hands. I'm a reasonably competent cook. I can cut and chop and prepare many different kinds of food. My hands have put in countless hours holding books and turning pages. They even have some skill at finding the right keys on a keyboard. Sometimes they even find the right notes on the piano.

I think, however, the most important work that hands have ever done is to hold a child with that intense tenderness that says in a way that words will never be able to, "You are loved. You are safe. You can trust."

It is one of the great benefits of the job that I have. People trust me to hold their children. It is a trust that I understand as a sacred relationship. Keeping those little ones safe and secure is as important as any other thing that I have ever done with my hands. And then I am privileged to touch their faces with water and pray prayers of blessing. I know as I do so that the real blessing in the room is the child, not the words I am saying. I know that the little one is experiencing the feeling of my touch far more than sensing the meaning of my words. The words, after all, are ancient. Virtually anyone could memorize them and say them. The sacred trust given to the ordained is the trust of holding the child.

Of course there are those who by birth or by accident do not have hands and they can be fully human and wonderful ministers. Still, I am grateful for these hands. They have served me well. And, when I use them to hold the hand of another there is a connection that is precious and empowering.

"Establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it."

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March 5, 2017 – The First Sunday of Lent

As a child growing up you really don't think about your family's economic status. I knew that my parents were hard working and that they owned a business that served our community. I knew that I had friends who seemed to have similar lives and that our family fit into our town. I don't think that we were rich or poor. We were simply another family who worked hard to make a living like others.

I don't remember ever going hungry. As far as I know, we always had sufficient food in our home. We had a deep freeze in our basement and my father hunted each fall to fill it up with meat. We had an account at the grocery store and we would go to the shop whenever we were asked to pick up something for our mother. We had a big table in our

home and there was always room for a guest. We were encouraged to invite our friends to share meals with us and there were often other guests as well. If a minister was visiting our church from another town, he was always invited to eat at our house. If a salesman showed up at my father's shop around noon, he'd probably join us for our noontime dinner.

As an older teen and on occasions as an adult, I have engaged in short-term fasts in an attempt to deepen my spiritual life. After 24 hours with no food, my stomach will grumble and I'll have an urge to eat. That is, I guess, as close to hunger as I have ever come. These days we have a well-stocked pantry in our home and I know we can stop by the grocery store to get anything that we might need. We garden a bit in the summer, but don't come anywhere close to producing a significant portion of the food we eat.

Over the years I have read a host of news stories about people who have experienced starvation. Most of the crises that result in multiple casualties from starvation have a connection to political upheaval and war. I've seen a few pretty hungry faces on people who have stopped by the church for assistance and those who are eating at the Rescue Mission. I've met some people traveling through our area who have gone for a while without a good meal.

It would be a mistake, however, to say that I have any real understanding of the nature of hunger and starvation. I've always lived at a significant distance from such suffering and deprivation.

As a result, I read the launching stories of the season of Lent, about Jesus fasting and temptation in the wilderness from a particular perspective and I tend to think of his situation in a metaphorical sense more often than connecting with the real sense of physical hunger that may well have been present. The temptation to turn stones into bread seems to me to be easy to resist. Jesus has already experienced fasting and he knows how to obtain food when it is needed. There is a remembrance of the time when the people of Israel found manna in the wilderness as they journeyed with Moses. When I read the stories of Jesus, I don't expect him to give into the temptation and I don't find the tempter's offer to be very appealing at all. It just doesn't seem to me like Jesus has much trouble refusing the offers that are made.

I find it much harder to resist the temptation to eat more than I need and to take more than my own share in my real life. I take just one more cookie or eat a second portion at a meal far too often and with very little thought. And, as they say, I have the figure to prove the point. I struggle with my weight and have done so for most of my adult life. I know the health facts. I understand how diet and exercise are critical to maintaining the kind of energy that allows one to work effectively. As I once told my doctor, "I'm not overweight because of a lack of information."

I've never thought that turning stones into bread is the way that the world works. I don't often fall prey to magical thinking, but I'm not immune to the temptation of gluttony. I know that adequate food will be provided, still I take more than I should on numerous occasions. My very real struggle with the temptation to overeat seems more difficult in my life than the story of Jesus' temptation as reported in the Gospels.

My faith, however, teaches me that Jesus' immersion into human life and nature was so complete that there is an absolute understanding of the nature of human temptation. The story in the Gospel may not report all of the details or emotional struggles, but the humanity of Jesus is real and the experience of human temptation was real as well.

Remembering this is part of our tradition as we start the season of Lent. We know that maintaining some of our spiritual disciplines can challenge us. Even the short period of forty days is a challenge for us. We might give up a particular food for Lent with little struggle, but truly changing our lifestyle to avoid overconsumption probably takes more than one Lenten experience.

In the life of the church, the seasons come around every year. Lent isn't just a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but rather a discipline that requires repetition. Each year's Lenten season is a fresh invitation and an opportunity to dig deeper as we freshly experience the life of faith. Over the course of my life there have been years when I have resisted the Lenten disciplines. I eagerly anticipate Easter and want to rush to the end of the season. As I have grown, I have also grown to appreciate the disciplines of the season.

On this first Sunday of Lent in the year 2017, I pray that I will take time to observe the season in as much of its richness as possible. May the journey bring fresh meaning to many.

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March 6, 2017 – Enjoying the Dog



I often write about topics about which I know very little, so today will be no difference. I am enjoying a visit from my sister very much. We probably don't spend enough time together as adult siblings, but when we do, we have plenty to talk about. One thing that is making this visit particularly fun is that her dog is also visiting our home. Cody is an Australian Shepherd with boundless energy and a very high desire to please his adult companions. And he has a special talent for pursuing relationship with each person he meets.

We haven't had dogs as pets in our adult lives. There was always a pet dog in my childhood home and my wife's family had a dog as well, but somehow we never got into

having a dog after we married. In our early years, we were living in apartments in Chicago where pets weren't very practical. Later, when we had children, they got into fish and cats and we never had a dog. Still, I find that I like dogs very much and I understand those who choose to have a dog as a pet. Our children both have dogs now that they are grown and living on their own.

An Australian Shepherd is, I think, a bit of a misname. The breed was developed as a ranch dog in the United States and I don't know whether or not it has any genuine Australian connections. At any rate, the breed is popular among western stockmen and Aussies are prized as stock dogs and often seen in herding dog competitions. They are a medium sized dog with a lot of drive and energy. An Australian shepherd needs a job to do or it will probably figure out some way to get in trouble.

My sister's dog loves to play any type of fetching game. He'll go for a ball if one is around, but is happy with a stick or twig that can be found in the yard. He will run after the object and return it to be thrown again with endless patience, or at least with more patience than I have for doing the same task over and over again. My sister has brought a couple of soft indoor toys and he is continually bringing them and laying them at my feet to get me to play with him. If I ignore him, he'll pick up the object and place it in my lap. It is easy to see how humans become attached to such playful and energetic companions.

It is also easy to see how such an animal would be a very good therapy dog. I recently read an article about the use of therapy dogs on college campuses to help students de-stress. The article focused on a program at the University of California at Davis where the dogs visit during the week before final exams. Students are given the opportunity to pet and relax with the dogs. The article reported that students found the contact with the animals to help in relieving stress and assisting with increased performance on exams.

I can imagine my sister's dog performing such a service. He certainly can provide a distraction from any worries that one is carrying. His persistence and calm demeanor invite even the most focused person to take a break and play with the dog.

Part of what is so inviting about the animal is his ability to totally focus on the game. When the ball is on the ground and I have yet to throw it, he stares at it without flinching or blinking. His lowered head seems to say, "I'm serious about this game." He can often catch a ball in the air and I suspect that he'd be great with a frisbee, though I haven't tried that with him yet. When he is playing with me it seems as if he is ignoring everything else in the world. I suspect that he could be distracted by a deer or a flock of turkeys wandering into the yard. He has shown considerable interest in both, but so far we haven't been outside playing when other animals have come into our yard.

I suspect that another value that a dog brings to a family is the invitation to get out and exercise with the animal. Because dogs love to go on walks and get exercise, they

encourage their owners to get up and get going with them. Were we to have a dog I'm sure that I would have to alter my lifestyle to make time for exercising with the animal. It would undoubtedly provide some health benefits for me.

In case you are wondering, I have no intention of going out and adopting a dog anytime soon. I enjoy the freedom to pick up and travel and visit our families who have pets without adding another responsibility to the mix. But I do enjoy the animals when they visit and I suspect that there are a lot of other people who share my feelings. Just because we aren't at the moment pet owners doesn't mean that we don't enjoy pets.

Today promises to be a good day to get out and spend some time enjoying the visit from our animal friend. Although the temperature will probably drop throughout the day, it is starting out warm and windy and we have a less intensive work schedule on Mondays than on other days of the week. We might find time to head for the lake to check out the ice or take a walk in the woods. I'm fairly certain that whatever adventure I come up with Cody will be eager to participate.

We are fortunate to live in a world with animal companions who are willing to share our lives and offer their unconditional love and loyalty. They have an ability to bring out the best in us and for that I am grateful. The dog has the ability to bring a smile to my face.

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March 7, 2017 – Windy Day

Monday is trash day in our neighborhood. The recycling truck comes in the morning and usually the garbage truck arrives in the early afternoon. Most of the folks on our street put out their garbage cans on Sunday evening, but a few of us wait until Monday morning. Yesterday's entertainment for those of us who were home during the day involved watching garbage cans as they blew down the street. I went after ours several times before finally giving up and deciding it was just too windy to have them out and put them away behind our house where they are protected from the wind. Fortunately, my wife noticed that ours wasn't out just before the garbage truck arrived and took it back and it was emptied.

I don't have a wind gauge, but I heard reports of sustained winds in the 35mph range with gusts up to 60 mph. That's pretty windy. The winds were higher on the west side of the hills. In Wyoming there were reports of gusts exceeding 70 mph and several semi trucks were blown over. Add a little snow, which was falling around Cheyenne, and the roads became invisible. Both Interstate 80 and Interstate 25 experienced closures during the day.

I grew up in windy country. The eastern slopes of the Rockies in Montana are known for high winds and our town often experienced winds that exceeded 50 mph. The joke in

our town was to check the television station to see if the winds were at zero. We had cable television in our town with a channel that showed weather instruments. Whenever the winds got too high, the wind gauge would break and the television would show winds at zero mph. Zero meant that it was really blowing. One storm brought winds high enough to cause damage to tractors parked on a gravel lot by picking up the sand and gravel and blasting the paint off of the fronts of the tractors.

A Piper Super Cub will fly at just over 40 mph, which means that when the wind is blowing 50 mph the airplane can actually fly backward if faced into the wind and flown slowly.

You learn to adjust to the wind. You recognize its sounds, but they don't keep you awake at night. Yesterday I was aware that the sound of the wind in the pine trees that we have in the hills is different from the sound of the wind in cottonwood trees at the river bottom. The pine trees have an almost soothing sound. High winds in cottonwood trees results in a lot of creaking and growing. An old stand of cottonwoods isn't a safe place in high winds. Big branches can fall from high up and cause a lot of damage.

Still, I woke several times during the night to listen to the wind. It has gone down a lot. I'm guessing that the windspeed is under 10 mph this morning. It isn't dead calm, but not at all like yesterday. The weather service is predicting that the wind will pick up to 25 to 35 mph later this morning.

It seems appropriate to have a bit of weather to talk about as we will have a celebration of life service this morning for a man who was a meteorologist for much of his active career. I can remember several conversations about the weather that I had with him over the years. He knew what he was talking about and had an ability to understand and describe the bigger patterns of weather.

We lived for a decade in Boise, Idaho, which is a city where the wind doesn't blow that often and when it does, it doesn't reach high speeds. I used to joke about our wimpy trees that would lose branches when the wind gusted to 25 mph. What I didn't realize until I had lived there for a while is that you can miss the wind. Living in Montana and later in Chicago and North Dakota - all places with plenty of wind - I thought of the wind as a nuisance. When I lived in Boise, I found that I missed the wind, especially when an inversion would trap stale air and smog in the valley where the city is located. You could see the smudge of polluted air as you approached the city on the highway.

The wind connects all of us. The air we breathe has been in another part of the globe a short time ago. Air pollution in one place spreads out to cover the globe. All humans benefit from a single city improving its air quality.

So I'm not going to complain about the wind. It is a fact of life and something with which we need to learn to live. Actually most weeks the wind isn't strong enough to create a

problem with the trash cans. I've learned to securely bag all of our trash so that when the can does blow over it is easy to pick up the trash and get it back into the can.

I've been around long enough, however, to pay attention to high wind warnings. If I am able, I am willing to adjust travel plans when the wind is really high. I don't stay home when it is windy, and I know that you can drive most vehicles safely in the wind as long as you exercise caution, but when the visibility is low and the winds are gusting it doesn't hurt to consider alternatives to going out and fighting the weather. As they say, Mother Nature is a strong force and not one with which to trifle.

One thing about it, we'll have plenty to talk about today with all of the wind we've had. Folks who were in Cheyenne Wyoming yesterday can boast about the 71 mph wind gusts. They'll be topped by folks from Bordeaux, where the winds were clocked at 83 mph. Here in Rapid City, in the shelter of the hills, we had it comparatively calm.

Hold on to your hats, folks!

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March 8, 2017 – Challenges of Serving

People form all different kinds of relationships with the church. Some start slowly and gradually become more involved as time passes. Some dive right in with lots of enthusiasm and energy, becoming active as soon as they start to participate. Some make a long-term commitment, demonstrating their faithfulness to the organization as well as their faith in God. Some come, participate for a while and then disappear. I am often asked why a particular member is no longer participating. I rarely know the reason. Even when I have spent a lot of time and energy trying to follow up with those who were once active and have moved on, I rarely know the reasons for their change in relationship. Sometimes those who have become inactive feel guilty about it and don't want to be reminded of that by a visit from the pastor. Sometimes people just aren't comfortable talking about their reasons with me.

Being pastor to people with all different kinds of relationships to the church can be a bit tricky. I've been asked to officiate at funerals of persons who were members of the church in name, but whom I barely recognized and about whom I knew almost nothing. I've also officiated at funerals of church members who have become so close to me that it is difficult to keep the tears at bay and speak clearly.

As I struggle to serve the people of the church to which I have been called, I am struck by the ways in which Jesus was able to meet so many different people from so many different backgrounds and walks of life and to minister to each with just the thing that particular individual needed. The list of those whose lives were touched by Jesus is stunning in its sheer volume as well as in the diversity of the players: a woman at a samaritan well, the Gerasene demoniac, Zacchaeus, the woman who touched the hem

of his garment, the guests at the wedding in Cana, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Jairus' daughter, the mother of Peter, the man lowered through the roof, the paralytic at the Bethesda Pool, ten lepers, numerous blind people - these are just a few examples. The list goes on and on.

Each received a different response. Each was served in a different way.

As one seeking to be a disciple of Jesus, I find many principles that guide my work. Jesus seemed to cross all of the boundaries. He reached out to others who had been ignored by the crowds and sometimes even pushed away by those closest to him. He was not deterred by differences in religion or political position. He crossed the boundaries of wealth and class and status. Both Matthew and Mark report occasions where there were crowds of people and great numbers who were lame, blind, crippled, couldn't speak and had health challenges. They also report that he healed many. Interestingly they don't report that he healed all. Part of the full humanity of Jesus was that he experienced limits just as the rest of us.

I try to the best of my ability to serve those in need without distinction. My preparation and caring should be equal regardless of the size of a funeral or how well I knew the deceased. My service to those who are grieving should be the same whether or not I had a previous relationship with the ones who are grieving. Whether someone is a member of the church or a former member or has never joined should not be a factor in how much care is provided. We say, as a part of our liturgy every week, "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!" We need to live out that assertion in our every day life as a congregation.

Having said it and truly believing it, however, does not make it easy. This week is a clear example. I officiated at a funeral yesterday. I had a week to prepare for that funeral and the deceased was a person I've known for decades. The widow and I have worked together on dozens of projects. We see each other multiple times each week. I also have a funeral today. I found out I was going to officiate at today's funeral late on Monday afternoon. The deceased is someone I barely knew. I have not met the grieving family members face-to-face yet. I had little time to do research and prepare the funeral meditation because the day between finding out about the funeral and officiating was mostly filled with another funeral. I was not able to attend the viewing last night because I had to attend an important meeting of a community organization that had been scheduled for over a month.

Prior experience helps a bit. I've officiated at enough funerals to have a fairly clear idea of which prayers fit with which circumstances. I know some general thoughts that are helpful to those who are grieving. I made phone calls to the immediate relatives and have a sense of how they were feeling Monday evening. I have practiced speaking clearly and I have a written manuscript that I prepared to guide me as I officiate. I have

enough experience with funerals to know some things to avoid and some things that are meaningful and effective.

Still, I wonder if I am really offering what is needed to the family.

Making things even more challenging is the simple fact that I probably will have no ongoing relationship with the grieving family members. They will return to their own communities and connections. Unlike the widow in yesterday's funeral, who I will continue to see and serve, the family of today's funeral are people I may never again meet.

I am reminded that I am not able to serve all of the needs alone. This isn't about me. There are connections that can be made with other congregations and other ministers. There are others who can provide support to those who grieve. There are others who serve.

One thing I will say to the family is true of me as well: "You are not alone."

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March 9, 2017 – Lenten Journey

The season of Lent has a rich and varied history, but it has long been linked to Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The Gospel accounts are consistent in their report that Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days. Mark adds that he was with the wild animals. Matthew and Luke go into detail about the nature of the temptations. The wilderness is a non-specific location, but there were plenty of places in the arid country surrounding the towns and cities of Israel in those days.

We live in a time of shrinking wilderness. It takes some effort to find a place that is truly wild. Access is often limited. Here in Western South Dakota we have an officially designated wilderness. Since 1980, Black Elk Wilderness has been designated by Congress as wilderness to be maintained and preserved in as close to its natural state as possible. Managed by the U.S. Forest Service the tract of land is easily accessible by walking. The wilderness is over 10,000 acres and contains South Dakota's highest peak. It is close enough to public roads that it can be used for day hikes when the weather permits. The hike to the top of Black Elk peak (formerly called Harney peak) is an easy half-day adventure.

The area of Black Elk Wilderness was, in the traditions of Lakota people, a place for seeking visions. Realizing the full potential of the area probably requires taking a few steps off of the trails and exploring areas away from the stream of day hikers and picnickers. There is plenty of space in the wilderness area to be alone if one has a bit of mountaineering skill. There are some stunning rock formations. Giant boulders and

needles combine with weathered knobs display the hard granite that emerged through layers of sandstone and limestone hundreds of millions years ago.

I have long treasured the wilderness as a place of self-reflection, contemplation and reconnection with God and creation. But I confess that I've never spent 40 days alone in the wilderness. I've never spent 40 days alone.

One does not, however, need to have access to officially designated wilderness to experience the wild side. A walk in a forested area can be disorienting enough to become lost if you aren't careful. Landscapes such as the Dakota badlands can be very wild. As a small town boy with limited experience in cities, I have often felt more lost and confused in urban areas than out in nature. And then there are the emotional landscapes of our lives that bring us face to face with circumstances and problems for which we have no solutions. The journey of grief can be a 40 day and longer journey into a wilderness of sorts.

We all have our wildernesses. Finding the courage to confront them can be a challenge. Heading into the wilderness can result in becoming disoriented and even lost. Getting lost, however, might not be the worst thing that can happen. I've been lost in the woods on occasion. The trick to being lost is to avoid panic. If you remember some general principles such as the fact that water runs down hill and the sun will indicate directions you can usually find a way to return to the familiar. Getting lost in grief or other emotional journeys might be even more difficult. Sometimes we need the assistance of another person to find our way. Sometimes we need another just to reassure us that we haven't lost our mind as we have wandered.

David Wagoner has a poem about being lost that ends this way: "You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows where you are. You must let it find you."

When I am disoriented pausing to take a deep breath and then being careful to listen can be the most important part of recovering.

The image of Jesus wandering in the wilderness for 40 days carries with it a sense that he might have experienced being lost and disoriented. Knowing that others have felt what we are feeling can be a huge help when we are lost. Knowing that one can be lost and then found again is deeply meaningful. You don't have to stay lost forever.

Like a vacation in the wilderness of the mountains, Lent can be an invitation to explore places where one has never before ventured. In our lives of prayer and study we are invited to think of things in new ways and to imagine a different possibility for the lives we live. Perhaps God is calling me to change directions and to serve in ways that are different from my past. Perhaps God is calling our community to new ministries and new missions. Discerning new directions requires effort and investments of time. 40 days of Lent can be a gift of time to evaluate, ponder, consider, and discern.

Too often we think of Lent as an obligation - a season of dark colors and dark thoughts, of somber songs and self-imposed deprivation. Perhaps we need a new image for the season. What if Lent is a wilderness vacation?

Jesus' active ministry was filled with people and activities. He often had to struggle to find any peace and quiet, being constantly aware of the needs of others. The gospels report crowds and an almost constant stream of those seeking healing and restoration. Mark and Luke both report that Jesus rose early and went off to a lonely place where he would pray. But soon the crowds would be pressing in on him and the demands would become evident. It seems likely that some of the skills of prayer and solitude that Jesus was able to employ in the midst of a very busy life were honed in his 40-day sojourn at the beginning of his ministry.

We, too, could use a bit of practice to hone the skills of quiet contemplation and prayer. We, too, could use the opportunity to sort out our thoughts.

Lent is that gift.

May we savor the wilderness to which we have been called.

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March 10, 2017 – Waiting for Spring

Well, it could be worse. It's about 18 degrees outside and there's just a skiff of snow on the ground - less than an inch. Not bad for the tenth of March. I've seen worse. We've been spoiled by a few 70 degree days and the spring fever was really starting to set in. Those of us who live in the hills, however, know that wintry weather can persist. It doesn't take too long of a memory to recall the Mother's Day blizzard in 2015. 11 inches of snow on May 11 - enough to force use to cancel worship, something that I don't like to do.

I can't remember a snow day from my childhood years. When the weather turned rough, there were some days that the school buses didn't run. There were more days when the kids who rode the bus were sent home early and a few days when the storm rolled in mid day and the busses had to be cancelled when the kids who rode the buses had to stay in their "snow homes" in town until the weather improved.

From the time I was 11, I had a paper route and the only times we got a day off was when the papers didn't arrive from the printing press 80 miles away. In my early years, the papers came on the train, which traveled regardless of the weather, though was sometimes delayed. The train didn't stop in our town. The papers were pushed out of the for as it slowed, which meant that they might be anywhere along a 1/4 mile stretch

of track. The best bet was to arrive at the train station early so you could be outside and watching the train when it went by to see where the bundles of papers landed. The train was supposed to arrive at 5:42 am, so we tried to be at the depot by 5:30.

When it was colder than -30, we would get a ride and help from our father on the paper route. It was pure luxury. All you had to do was run up to the houses from the car driving down the street. That sure beat a double paper bag over your shoulders with 110 newspapers in it. We rode our bikes year round. I wasn't bad at keeping my bike up even when the streets were slippery.

These are just the kind of stories that really bore my kids and probably aren't the right ones to use this morning as I address a couple of groups of teens. I remember how I felt when my father would go on and on about how hard it was to get to school when he was a kid and they rode a horse to the country school. I did, however, see a picture from his home town, Minnewaukan, in Bensen County, yesterday. It showed a truck almost completely buried in a snow drift. It really is a bit harsher than the weather around here.

For you trivia buffs, it is still the law in North Dakota that if a student rides a horse to school, the school is required to provide shelter, hay and water for the animal during the school day. I don't think that responsibility is creating much of a burden on school districts these days.

Regardless, I'm getting ready for the end of winter. The Farmer's Almanac called for a milder than typical winter and I seem to remember that it also called for an early spring. Of course a skiff of snow on March 10 is hardly a sign of a late spring. We already know that the Almanac got it wrong with its prediction of dryer than normal weather for California. All the same, I don't know if it is a sign of age or what, but I really do feel like a little spring weather wouldn't hurt a thing. I'm ready for winter to loosen its grip on us.

Looking back, some of my worst cases of spring fever have occurred in the years when there have been babies on their way in our family. Our son was born on the ides of March and the year he came, I froze two sets of tomato plants by setting them out too soon after he was born, but before the frost was gone from our country. Our grandson was born in early February in 2011 and I was ready for winter to be over right away. New life seems to invite thoughts of milder weather.

Still, I've no urge to spend my winters in a place that doesn't have winter. When it comes to chores, I actually prefer shoveling snow to mowing the lawn. Of course our driveway is a lot smaller than our yard, so most of the time it is a smaller job to shovel. In my defense, there are days when I need to shovel multiple times a day and I rarely have to mow the lawn more than once a week.

The saying is that when March comes in like a lion, it goes out like a lamb, and March certainly started with a clod snap and snow on the ground around here, so perhaps there will be some respite by the end of the month. As usual, we'll take what we get and even though we do like to complain about the weather, there really isn't much we can do about it except to keep the boots and coats handy so we can bundle up as needed. I won't be putting the snow shovel away for the summer just yet.

When I was beginning my career as a pastor, I used to go down to the cafe where the farmers and others gathered in the winter for a cup of coffee and a bit of conversation. The biggest topic was the weather. As far as I could figure whatever weather we were having was "unusual for this time of year." I never experienced "usual" weather during the seven winters I lived there, according to the coffee crowd.

So perhaps we're just experiencing some "unusual weather" this morning and spring is just around the corner. At least we can always hope so.

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March 11, 2017 – Addressing Trauma

Yesterday I addressed two life skills classes of students who are detained at Western South Dakota Juvenile Services Center. I serve as chaplain to the employees of WSDJSC and have gotten to know the team of compassionate and concerned teachers, corrections officers and administrators who work together to serve our community by serving the youth who have been sentenced by the courts to detention.

One of the topics I covered in my presentation was youth suicide prevention. as part of my conversation, I asked the youth about their own experiences with suicide and other experiences with death. Most of the students had multiple experiences with the death of a family member or close friend. Some had multiple suicides in their families.

One of the things that researchers have discovered is that suicides cluster in families for reasons that are not completely clear. Statistically one who has experienced the suicide of a family member or close friend is more at risk of dying by suicide. Having multiple experiences with suicide can make an individual's risk double.

It was clear from my conversations that many of the youth already do not expect to live long lives. Several stated that they expect to die in their twenties. They have known of so many others who have died of the results of car accidents and drug abuse, of suicide or have been victims of violent crimes. Death of young people is ingrained in their understanding of the world and experiences of their communities.

I was reminded once again that youth who become involved in crimes are part of larger family systems. Often they are the victims of dysfunctional families. When all they see

around themselves is abuse and violence, it is hard to escape a sense that those things are normal. If you have a chronic alcoholic living in your home, you begin to expect alcoholic behavior from everyone - including yourself. The cycles of crime, abuse and violence repeat themselves until some action is taken to disrupt the cycles and to demonstrate to the involved individuals that there are alternative choices that can be made and alternative options for the future.

As a society, we find ourselves with few alternatives to incarceration of individuals who commit certain crimes, but we cannot escape the limits of locking people up when it comes to solving deep seated problems. Building more jails and filling them up with more individuals doesn't solve our problems. In some cases, social problems become worse with high rates of incarceration. When people are locked up, they are not productive citizens and the burden on fellow citizens to pay for the costs of prisons increases. Chronic employment is often the result of incarceration because even after a perpetrator has served a sentence, it is nearly impossible to obtain many jobs with a criminal record. The result is a poverty cycle. Children of those who have been jailed are more likely themselves to end up in jail. Other family members are more likely to be involved in crime as a way of surviving entrenched poverty.

I don't have the answers to these complex social problems. I am not, however, inclined to give up on these youth. Despite what they currently think, some of them have long lives ahead. They have the possibility of making different choices in the future. Their brains are not yet fully developed. With the right treatment and care it is possible that they can become contributing members of society.

I suspect that one of the keys to providing more appropriate treatment for juvenile offenders will be learning more about trauma, its effects and treatment. Roughly one third of the youth with whom I spoke yesterday had witnessed a traumatic death. The deaths were the results of suicide, accidents, drug overdose and murder. The things these youth have seen were clearly traumatic. It is as if they are witnesses to war. Unlike those who have been involved in wars, however, the wider society is not on the lookout for post-traumatic stress disorder. While incarcerated youth have access to counselors and psychiatric services, I wonder if the therapies available to them are adequate to treat the effects of the trauma they have witnessed.

Human memories are sensory experiences. We don't just remember trauma as narratives stories that can be told. We remember them with definite physical responses that involve pain and disruption of everyday life. Those who have experienced trauma can have disrupted sleep patterns, periods of confused or irrational thought and a loss of a general sense of safety. They can doubt that goodness exists in the world and lose hope for the future.

While much research into cognitive functions has been completed, we are still at a very elementary level in terms of understanding how to treat trauma victims. Some chemical

treatments are available including medications for depression and mood disorders. Cognitive or talk therapy has proven to be effective when combined with pharmacological treatments. Additional research is currently being conducted and there is some evidence that more whole-body experiences such as yoga and eye movement therapy may offer additional hope for victims of trauma.

In our society, however, we don't invest in the latest, cutting edge therapies for people who are incarcerated for crimes. In many cases they have been the cause of trauma in the lives of others. We make a firm distinction between the perpetrator and the victim and in doing so sometimes fail to address the cycles of violence that continue despite our attempts to prevent future violence.

My tool for addressing the youth yesterday was to talk to them. Words are the stock and trade of my profession. I know, however, that words are limited in their ability to address major issues such as trauma. A presentation by a Chaplain, no matter how well prepared and well meaning has a very small impact. I have no illusions about having made a major difference.

Perhaps the most important part of yesterday's experience was that it continued to open my eyes to the very real needs in our community. What I do in response to the experiences of the day matters far more than what I said.

There is yet much work that needs to be done.

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March 12, 2017 – Born and Raised Christian

A few days ago I was having a casual conversation with some people who I have not known for long. They knew that I am a minister and were asking general questions about my life and work. One asked me, "Were you born and raised a Christian?" to which my answer was, "Yes." Then the person corrected herself, "I don't mean born. I guess no one is born Christian." The conversation proceeded and we went on to other topics, but later I got to thinking about the comments that she had made. I guess that her understanding of Christianity is that it requires a conscious decision - that one has to make a commitment in order to be a Christian. It is an old conversation that members of the church have been having for hundreds of years. Some Christian congregations believe that one has to have reached the "age of decision" in order to be a member of the church. The age isn't specific in terms of number of years, but the concept is that one has to be old enough to make an intellectual assent and know the consequences of his or her behavior in order to make a commitment of the church. On the other hand, there are congregations where an infant is considered to be a member of the church from the very beginning.

I come from the part of the tradition that leans towards the latter side of that argument. We baptize infants in the belief that the promises of the Gospel apply not just to us, but to our children as well. We believe that there is no age that is too young to be a Christian and that raising our children in the faith and family of the church gives them the experience they need to make their own choices and decisions as they grow into maturity. In our tradition, the rite of confirmation is the place where a young person makes a personal commitment to the church and having grown up as a member of the church is the appropriate preparation for that rite.

Of course these ideas and a recognition of these subtle distinctions between different Christians is a bit complex for casual conversation. The setting of our conversation last week didn't give us enough time for a lot of detail.

Throughout my career as a pastor I have not been very concerned with determining who is and who is not a Christian. I know that such distinctions are important to some, but they haven't been a real big deal for me. I have attempted to treat every person I meet with respect and love and care without making distinctions about their beliefs or commitments. I understand that there are other religions and beliefs in the world and I make every effort to be respectful of those other beliefs and the people who practice different religions. I have studied and attempt to understand the beliefs of other religions. At the same time, I make no apologies for being a Christian and I never hesitate to present myself as such.

So, the answer is "Yes, I was born and raised a Christian." My parents were Christian and involved in the church. I was baptized when I was an infant and I have no memory of that occasion. I do, however, have my baptismal certificate, which my mother kept for me until I was an adult. I have framed it and display it on my office wall along with my diplomas, certificate of ordination and other documents that represent milestones of my life in the church. I grew up attending worship and church school and summer camp without there being any particular discussion of whether or not I chose to participate. It is what the members of our family did.

Beyond that, I believe that I am Christian as much because of having been chosen as by the conscious choices that I have made. Yes, I have made choices and commitments. But it is equally true that I have been chosen. My ordination paper, written when I was 25 years old, speaks of being a "chosen chooser." In that paper I discussed my journey towards the ministry as a process of growing into a sense of the fact that Jesus and the church have claims on my life as much as I claim the title Christian.

Anyone who has watched much football on TV has seen the cameras zoom in on someone holding a sign that says, "John 3:16." It seems to be a favorite expression of public faith. It is a verse that many Christians have memorized: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish

but may have eternal life.” It is an important verse and I’m glad that it has come to have so much meaning for so many people. It might be meaningful, however, to make a sign that says, “John 3:17.” Not as many people are familiar with that verse: “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Christians sometimes squirm at the thought of universal salvation - that God seeks in love to save all humanity. At least in certain parts of the church there are people who sound as if making a distinction between who is saved and who is not saved is a big deal. Often in those parts of our tradition, people speak as if a particular intellectual assent is required. You must believe in order to be saved, and by believe they mean you must agree with a particular idea and say a particular set of words fully meaning them.

Without criticizing those believers, I don’t think that God requires us to agree in order to be recipients of God’s love. There are no conditions on God’s love. I’ve participated in life in the church with adults who have cognitive disabilities. They might not have the right words, or have the ability to pass any kind of test, but they certainly are part of the faith and family of the Christian church.

Not only was I born and raised a Christian, I believe that I will be Christian to the end of my life whether or not I am able to retain my mental capacities. If I suffer dementia or experience a brain injury I know that I will still be loved, even if I don’t have the right words to say or the right ideas in my head.

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March 13, 2017 – A Younger Generation

Yesterday I was intrigued by a conversation with a man who is about the same age as our son. He is a brilliant young professor who combines his duties as a teacher with the business of serious scientific research. As someone whose field is scientific research, his perspective is quite different from mine. My field is the humanities and although I recognize the beauty and precision of mathematics, I am not attuned to the subtleties of its advanced expressions. In trying to understand the work that he does I often simply assume that the mathematics are correct rather than investigate them myself.

I don’t know whether or not the discoveries of his lifetime will advance humanity. Certainly there have been dangers and disasters produced by science and engineering. Huge hydroelectric and flood prevention dams have unintended consequences and pose unintended dangers to humans. The rapid depletion of fossil fuels and their effects on global climate conditions probably were not foreseen by the early developers of the technologies that are dependent upon them. We humans often seek to improve our life without being able to see all of the consequences of our behavior. It is possible that the

enterprises of my friend and his colleagues may result in making some problems worse rather than solving them.

Still, it is undeniable that my conversations with him leave me hopeful about the future. He brings such brilliance and energy to his work that I am energized by listening to him speak of it. I think that one of the great joys of my particular age is that of deeply caring about those who are to follow. Those who are a generation younger than I are helping to remake the world and in many cases are helping to solve problems that my generation unwittingly created.

Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson described the task of people at my stage of life as he choice between generativity and stagnation. I would rather not choose stagnation, but I know that generativity is challenging and requires serious work. It is more than just being creative. It is more than just measuring my own output. It is beyond counting the number of words I write or speak - it is making sure that the words I write and speak are meaningful and communicate ideas that are worth the reader's or hearer's time.

I am convinced that for me generativity involves actively engaging those who are a part of a different generation. Looking to the rising generation, engaging them in meaningful conversation, and perhaps even offering a bit my own perspective and knowledge is a powerful experience. When we connect, both generations are better for the experience.

The educator-philosopher Parker Palmer addressed a group of young adults half his own age and said,

“I feel like I’m standing somewhere down the curvature of the earth, while you’re close to the top of that curve looking at a horizon I can’t see. But I need to know what you’re seeing. Whatever’s on that horizon is coming at me, as well. So please let me know what you see, and when you do, please speak loudly and clearly so I can understand what you’re saying!”

I really like his image. I’ve not experienced the aging of my life as leading me “over the hill,” but I do understand the image of “standing farther down the curvature of the earth.” I’ve never been one for tropical weather, so I don’t envision myself near the equator yet, but I may be unable to see as far towards the horizon as those whose perspective is more polar.

I also resonate with Palmer’s invitation to younger people to “speak loudly and clearly.” I don’t think that my hearing is failing me yet, but there are times when I don’t understand all that folks who are younger than me are saying. I get the concept of social media, for example, but I don’t engage it as fully as those a few decades younger. When it comes to Facebook or Twitter, I sort of lurk, reading much more than I contribute. I haven’t even bothered to sign up for Snapchat yet, though I have an elementary understanding of how it works. I know that I am not keeping up with all of the new media and different

forms of communication. This poses a problem for those of a different generation in terms of communicating with me. Communication, however, is a two way street. While the challenge for me is to listen more carefully and to learn how to use new forms of communication more effectively, the challenge for those younger than me is to speak loudly and clearly so that their message can be heard by those of us who are older.

I think that one of the challenges to my generativity, and one that seems to draw me to stagnation, is the burden of unloading all of the stuff that I've collected over the years. I have a lot of stuff that one was useful to me but now weighs me down. The easiest of my stuff to give away to decrease my burden is the matter of physical possessions. Yes my garage is crammed with things that should end up on a rummage sale or otherwise recycled. Yes, I have retained too many possessions. Far more burdensome, however, is my collection of psychological junk. I've got a plethora of long-time convictions about what gives my life meaning that no longer serve me well. One of those notions is my believe that what gives meaning to my life is my work. As I complete my fourth decade as a minister I occasionally wonder who I will be when I no longer mount a pulpit once a week. My sense of self is so connected with being the officiant at weddings and funeral services and baptisms and other occasions of public worship that I am, frankly, frightened at the prospect of turning my work over to another.

I know the work I do for my salary is only one form of generativity. Embracing the future requires me to understand other ways of forming meaning. The desire to hang on comes from a sense of scarcity and fear. May I shed that sense of scarcity. May I abandon that fear. May I once again learn to give myself with a sense of abundance and generosity. I think these lessons are best learned in relationship with those who are younger than myself.

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March 14, 2017 – East Coast Snowstorm

The Washington Post ran an article this morning with a checklist for east coasters who are preparing for a major blizzard. It advised readers to check off each item as they prepared for the snow and ice that is supposed to deliver more sleet and snow to the Northeast throughout the day. Area schools are closing and the federal government has a late start set for the day's activities.

Here are the items the Post recommends that people have in their homes. I've added a bit of commentary.

Water - the Post recommends a gallon per person per day. Of course no one knows how many days folks might be snowed in. They probably would have to get at least a little bit thirsty before they started drinking the water out of the water heater and toilet tanks.

Food - always good to have on hand. Non-perishables are always good to have, though a power outage might make for a quick dash through the remaining food in the refrigerator. Once when we had a multiple-day outage we moved the food from the refrigerator to our deep freezer. With all of the frozen food there, things stayed cool until the power was restored.

Heating and cooking - the post recommends an alternative source, such as a wood-burning stove or fireplace. Using a grill for cooking means cooking outside if it is to be done safely. One hopes that the folks have made sure their smoke and carbon-monoxide alarms have fresh batteries.

Warm clothing - that's a good suggestion. Warm bedding doesn't hurt, either.

Pet supplies - once the dog gets hungry, no one is going to be happy until he gets fed.

Medication - the Post recommends a week's supply. They must not use the same mail-order pharmacy required by my insurance company. That company never lets me get lower than a 90-day supply. It is amazing how much medicine they waste in an attempt to lower prices.

Hygiene items - not a good time to run out of toilet paper. Of course if you lose water service, you're going to have problems flushing the toilet. Enough said.

Batteries - have you got spares for all of your flashlights and a radio? Do you have a plan to charge your cell phone?

The Post article goes on with advice about shoveling snow and using salt to melt ice. There is also the advice to life windshield wipers so they won't be frozen to the windshield. Strangely it doesn't mention having a full tank of gas. You get the picture. The newspaper (and now this blog) has devoted a significant amount of space to items that are simply common sense. You shouldn't need your newspaper to figure these things out. Hopefully Washington DC residents read the article yesterday because if they waited until today, the storm might make going to the store to stock up a bit of a problem, and if all of your neighbors got there before you, the store is probably out of toilet paper anyway.

I have a fairly well-stocked backpack full of emergency supplies that I go through a couple of times each year. It contains items I might need were I to need to spend the night in the car due to a breakdown or getting trapped in a blizzard. It has food and a small stove for cooking, warm socks, emergency blankets, flashlight with spare batteries and other items. I also keep a sleeping bag in the car during the winter. The only item I have to grab when heading out is a couple of containers of water. Leaving water in the car during the winter doesn't work very well around here.

We try to keep our home stocked with necessary items so we are prepared. So far we haven't experienced any significant deprivation during the blizzards that have come in the years we've lived in this home. I don't think we've ever had the power out for more than three or four days, and when that happened, we had water pressure for the entire time.

What was fun about those times, was working with our neighbors. Once, we had a great community meal. We all contributed things and a neighbor who has a gas stove, cooked and hosted the event. Other times we've all gotten together and shovel out whichever neighbor was careless and got stuck in the street in just the right place to block the snowplow. I've run my snowblower to clear other's drives as well as my own and neighbors who have snowplows have even plowed our street during some storms when the city plows were busy in other places. If someone runs out of firewood, there's plenty at the neighbors to get them through.

I hope those folks on the east coast have stocked up for the blizzard and I hope that none of them suffer too much. I know that harsh weather can catch folks by surprise and cause a lot of suffering. The weather can be strong beyond imagination and we've become overly dependent upon our modern gadgets, not all of which work perfectly when conditions aren't ideal. These days we usually have fairly accurate weather forecasts and ample warning of approaching storms.

It isn't just Washington DC that will be affected. There'll probably be a lot more snow north of DC. Public schools in New York City and Boston are closed today. They may see 10 to 16 inches of snow, which is enough to get your attention.

Travel is disrupted around the region. More than 5,000 flights have already been cancelled and part of the New York above ground train system is not running. There were disruptions in Chicago yesterday and at Philadelphia International Airport only a few planes were making it out early this morning. Snow, sleet and freezing rain are making getting around difficult.

Spring blizzards are the stuff of which stories are made. Whenever the weather gets bad around here we love to sit around and tell stories of previous blizzards. Perhaps those east coasters can do the same. Then, if they get bored, they can read articles on the Internet about how to survive. There'll be no shortage of them today.

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March 15, 2017 – Seasons of Change

I have been mulling a conversation that I had yesterday. The story is not mine to tell, and the details are not the topic of today's blog, but the conversation was with someone

who has frequently experienced severe depression. there have been numerous suicide attempts and yesterday's conversation with the individual wasn't the first in which the topic of suicide has come up. Fortunately I was able to leave the conversation with the person in a safe place where the eyes of others would help to prevent an immediate impulsive act.

This is a very smart person, who seems to be quite self-aware and who can be persuaded with logic if the argument makes sense. I can't quite figure out whether I should describe the individual as fragile, which is how it often seems, or resilient, because somehow despite many negative experiences and poor personal decisions, the person is still here.

It isn't the only conversation of the type that I have had recently. Just last week I was making presentations at Western South Dakota Juvenile Services Center to youth who seemed to have a very narrow view of their futures and a limited perspective.

It has already been a tough year for South Dakota. In Sioux Falls, our state's largest city, the suicide rate in January was approximately three times recent months. Here in Rapid City, we also saw a spike in suicides in January. And South Dakota already has a suicide rate that is 2 1/2 times the national average, making us one of the top ten states in suicides per capita for many years running.

It seems to be a part of our human nature that despite the fact that our experiences teach us that life is full of change and unexpected surprises, we somehow don't have much capacity to envision the change that is possible. At any given moment in our lives, we have a strong tendency to believe that who we are today is somehow our final self - the person we'll always be. We think that the many changes that we have experienced are somehow the product of the past rather than ongoing processes that continue throughout all of our lives.

Regardless of our age, it is a mistake to think that change is somehow confined to our past - the mistakes of headstrong youth. Fundamentally, we are creatures of change and today is just one point in a process of continuing change that we call life.

From my perspective, being decades older than the people with whom I began today's blog post, it seems very unlikely that the places in which they find themselves - no matter how tough the circumstances - are the final places of their lives. WSDJSC only holds youth to the age of 20. There are no inmates in the facility who are older than that age. At the age of twenty most of us have a whole lot of living ahead. In my own personal case the years between twenty and twenty-five were very productive and I accomplished a great deal. That is no prediction of what will happen to other youth, just a simple acknowledgement that for most humans brain development continues well into the twenties and those who are in their teens cannot fully understand what capabilities they will develop.

Today is our son's 36th birthday. I am deeply aware of the many changes that are taking place in his life. He moved his family to a new town last month. He started a new job this month. He and his wife are anticipating the birth of their third child this year. There is no doubt that when he looks back a year from now he will be aware of the significant and life-altering changes that occurred this year. Fortunately, he is wonderful about sharing his thoughts and reactions with his parents and we are able to experience many of those changes as they occur. We, too will be shaped and changed by the events of this year.

I have often thought that if I were to have been a teacher, I would have liked to teach junior high youth. In my experience with youth work in the church, junior high youth are changing so rapidly that every day is a surprise. I've had a youth begin a week at camp as a rather obnoxious and difficult person and end that same week as one of my favorite campers. One thing about junior high youth - don't rush to judgment because they will change faster than you can evaluate them. Who they are today is not who they will be in a week or a month.

Of course, that is true of all of us. Even when we have fallen into ruts and formed routines for our lives, circumstances change. A new disease, an accident, a change in employment, a change in one's family - we are constantly being shaped and moulded into who we are becoming. That tendency we have to imagine that who we are today is our final self is simply a mistaken perception. Who we are today is just one more step in a process of continuing change.

Even when we die, we do not stop changing. As our bodies are transformed back into the elements of the earth and nurture new life that is emerging, memories of our lives are changed by the stories that are told and the people who tell the stories. Our understandings of those who have gone before shift and change with the circumstances of the present.

One of the joys of my vocation is that I am often invited to witness the seasons of change in the lives of others. It isn't just the kids who come to summer camp. I get to witness the changes in the lives of elders who are moving from one place to another. I get to see dramatic changes in middle life of those who participate in the church.

Life isn't static. May we all be open to the seasons of change that form our identities.

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March 16, 2017 – Roads

I remember when the Interstate highways first were being constructed in my home state. There were some sections that had been constructed around the city to the East

of where we lived and later a few sections built. For a while we would go from two lane to four lane divided highway and back to two lane several times as we drove east from our town. Heading west, we had to go 30 miles before we got to a short stretch of divided highway which soon gave way to two-lane road over the Bozeman pass. The old highway through our town was US 10 and I had grown up and moved away before Interstate 90 finally made its way around the town where I grew up. Ours was the last town in our state to be bypassed by the Interstate 90, which still had to slow down for a narrow pass through the town of Moscow, Idaho for several years before that Interstate was a freeway from coast to coast.

We knew the stories of the history of some of the roads in our area. Highway 10 west of town followed the route of the Bozeman trail, active during the Civil War connecting the gold rush territory in Western Montana to the Oregon Trail which passed through Wyoming south of our state. The Bozeman trail followed the Bridger trail that had preceded it. It was roughly the route that Captain William Clark took on the eastward return of the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery expedition from the headwaters of the Missouri River to the Yellowstone River near the site of present-day Livingston, Montana. Our town's name, Big Timber, came from that expedition. The travelers, weary of their overland trek from the West Coast, were finally able to make dugout canoes from the Cottonwood trees that grew in the area of our town and completed the rest of their journey on the water.

Although we were taught in our classes that people like Jim Bridger, John Bozeman and John Jacobs were pioneers who scouted and blazed new trails, the routes that they took were hardly new when they plotted their trails. Our town was located in Crow territory that had been invaded, on occasion by Arapahoe, Cheyenne and Lakota as they expanded their buffalo hunting territory. Their routes followed the paths that had been made by buffalo and other animals and had been used for centuries by various tribes who followed the buffalo.

Where Interstate 90 now makes its way over the Bozeman pass and then snakes through the canyon next to Rocky Creek to the outskirts of the city of Bozeman, there has been a trail for hundreds and probably thousands of years. The first humans who ever made their way across the mountains there probably followed trails that were left behind by deer and elk.

Even on those occasions when I am out in the high country exploring territory where I don't see other humans and it seems as if I might be the first one to ever go to this place, I follow trails. Most of my backpacking experiences involved following established trails, many of which are maintained by the US Forest service. In the late 1960's and 1970's the forest service used helicopters to fly in wooden bridges to help with particularly difficult creek crossings and steep gorges. You'll be hiking along a wilderness path deep in the mountains and come across a very handy bridge that makes the journey a whole lot easier than it was before the bridge was placed.

Essayist Robert Moor published a book last year in which he reflects on the trails that we follow. He is especially fond of footpaths and the routes that we follow to travel from one point to another. "We are the inheritors of that line but also its pioneers," he writes. "Every step we push forward into the unknown, following the path, and leaving a trail." Reading his words reminds me of an old mantra that we used to use as a guide when backcountry hiking: "Leave nothing behind but footprints." As a canoeist, I treasure the ability to travel without even leaving footprints behind, but I know that any substantial journey by canoe involves portages and even deep in the wilderness the portage trails are well-established.

In the center of our town 8th street, which is also known as Highway 16 and Mount Rushmore Road, is a main thoroughfare leading from down town out towards the famous carved mountain. It is lined with shops and restaurants and hotels that cater to the tourists who come to visit our area. During the first couple of weeks of August each year it fills with motorcycles. This spring, however, it is the domain of orange construction cones, excavators and front end loaders and a host of construction workers who are digging trenches, laying pipe and preparing the area to receive new concrete for the road surface. The construction creates minor traffic delays and causes me to think about what route to take when heading east from our church. Not every cross street is convenient when trying to get to the other side of the construction area. The project is the final phase of a much larger reconstruction of the entire street that has been going on for a few years.

I suppose it will be very nice when the project is finished. The places where water used to pool whenever it rained hard will have adequate drainage, the signs will be easy to read, the markings on the road will make it simple to stay in your lane and the traffic will flow. But I know, from experience, that it will not last forever. Millions of dollars spent on constructing new roads results in surfaces that must be maintained and the deterioration begins as soon as the work is finished. New construction will require digging up areas. Traffic and snow plowing and other activities will erode the surface of the road. The day will come when repair is needed.

Our roads are like that. We follow the trails of our lives, rarely going where no one has gone before and when we have passed the trail remains. It requires other travelers to remain a trail however.

Since life is a journey, it is fascinating to think about the paths we follow.

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March 17, 2017 – Rummage Sale

It is rummage sale week at our church. The building is crammed with clothes and shoes and golf clubs and salt and pepper shakers and cups and glasses and pots and pans and toys and hats and underwear and knickknacks and candles and silverware and beauty products and books and neckties and artificial flowers and balls and Christmas decorations and chests of drawers and jewelry and recliners and beds and television sets and children's clothes and coffee pots and telephones and printers and water bottles and prom dresses and notebooks and socks and rain coats and garden tools and irons and ironing boards and hammers and baseball bats and skis and luggage and fans and flashlights and any number of other items that are far too numerous to list in a single sentence, which already has become far too long to read on just one breath.

Even more amazing than the display of merchandise, which is truly impressive, is the display of dedication and selflessness of the volunteers who have been working long and hard days all week long, carrying and arranging and setting up and shifting and pricing and folding and organizing all of the things that will be on sale. There will be a line of shoppers this morning and the frenzy of the early hours of the sale will be impressive as it is every year. People will be heading to their cars with bags and boxes and items that need to be strapped to roof racks for the journey home. They will be smiling at the bargains that they have struck. They will have gathered the things that were most appealing to them. And the Women's Fellowship, sponsors and organizers of the sale, will have made a significant amount of money which it invests in the church and in a dozen or more worthy projects of mission and outreach.

And early afternoon tomorrow, the things that haven't been sold will have been boxed up for delivery to other charities and the floor will have been vacuumed and the tables will have been put away and different tables set up for our coffee hour and the sanctuary will be arranged for a concert and for worship on Sunday morning and all across our city people will be sitting down and putting up their feet more than a little bit tired from all of the effort and hard work.

Then, in August, they'll do it all again.

Two rummage sales a year is the norm for our congregation and thousands of dollars of ministries are funded by the generosity of members who donate merchandise and the generosity of members who give of their time and their labor.

It is a truly amazing phenomenon. There are many things that the church does very well that does not require the leadership of a pastor. The rummage sale is one of those things. My job is to offer a bit of encouragement, to lend a hand where I am able, and to stay out of the way and allow the magic to unfold. I don't normally believe in magic, but there is a certain amount of magic involved in the rummage sale process.

I can't help but thinking, however, as I wander through the church looking at all of the items that have been donated, how we have come to a place in our community where we keep so much stuff that we can fill up the church with such things twice a year and still have enough to fuel more giant rummage sales.

My, we have a lot of stuff!

Some of it, of course is good stuff. It is the kind of stuff that other people want to have. It is the kind of stuff that other people will pay hard-earned money to obtain. It also may be the kind of stuff that later people will wonder why they have it and how they might get rid of it. You sort of can't escape wondering how much of the stuff has been on previous rummage sales.

Do you suppose that we primarily sell the same stuff to ourselves over and over again. I know that the members of the church not only provide the merchandise to sell. They are also customers who purchase the items that are donated. At least most of them go home with new stuff and not the same stuff that they brought.

It might be more humorous if my own home wasn't filled with too much stuff. I remember when we were about the business of collecting things. When we were first setting up housekeeping we were rather short of furniture and there were some kitchen gadgets that we didn't have. We enjoyed going to sales and finding bargains. Somewhere along the line, however, we began to feel that we have enough stuff. And then, all too suddenly, it began to feel like we have too much stuff. We have stuff that we haven't used in years. We have stuff that we will probably never use.

We should have done a better job of collecting things to donate to the rummage sale this year. The problem, however, is that we haven't sorted through our stuff. We've got so much stuff that it isn't immediately clear what we should keep and what we should get into the hands of others.

Multiply that by the number of households in our church and I'm thinking that rummage sales are sure to be a hit for decades to come.

It is good to see things get into the hands of people who want those things at reasonable prices that make things affordable. It is good to see people who have too many things get rid of some of their possessions. It is good to raise money for mission. It is good to build community by working together side-by-side and sharing the fellowship of the church. It is good to welcome so many visitors into our building. It is good to have a sale.

Still, by tomorrow we'll be thinking that it is good to have it finished for now.

March 18, 2017 - Wearing of the Green

Throughout my career I have felt the an important part of my ministry is outreach into the wider community. In addition to my work serving the people of my congregation, I have always assumed roles in the wider community that allow me to serve. In my first parish, I drove a school bus and was a volunteer ambulance driver. Both positions gave me expanded contact with people in the community who were not members of the congregation I served. I have served on community agency boards and arts agencies and a wide variety of other roles in the community. Two things I am currently doing allow me to continue that process with distinct communities. I serve on the Human Rights Committee at Black Hills Works, an agency that provides a wide range of services to people with disabilities from housing to employment to transportation and other supports. I am also a Sheriff's chaplain, serving those who serve our community as law enforcement officers and corrections officials.

It is always fascinating to me to learn how others see me and my role as a pastor in the community. Yesterday, I had a number of conversations with folks who are not members of my congregation about St. Patrick's Day. Patrick, as most people know, is the patron saint of Ireland. He was a fifth-century missionary who became a bishop in Ireland. He lived before the great schism, so Catholic and Orthodox traditions both venerate him, as well as those on both sides of the Protestant reformation. It is appropriate for Christians of all denominations and backgrounds to recognize his contributions to Christianity and to the nation of Ireland.

In the traditions of the church, Saints are recognized on the day of their death, which is viewed as the day that a human becomes reunited with God in God's realm. Saint Patrick's day is March 17, and is recognized as a day of solemn remembrance in the church. The day has also become a very important cultural holiday. Most of the trappings of the day reflect that wider cultural context. Wearing green clothing, drinking beer some of which is dyed green, parades, and other things probably are more of a celebration of Irish culture than of the saint himself. Some of the symbols of the day are of mixed heritage. Shamrocks, with their three-part leaves, are said to have been used by Patrick to illustrate the concept of the trinity. Whether this legend is based in an actual event, is unclear, but the plant is bright green and certainly does make a good model for a conversation about the holy trinity.

Another legend is that St. Patrick drove all of the snakes out of Ireland, driving them into the sea after they began attacking him during a 40-day fast upon a hill. The legend seems to have no basis in fact. Ireland, like New Zealand, Iceland, Greenland and Antarctica, has no evidence of every having had any snakes. I suppose it is easier to banish snakes from a place that already has none.

Yesterday, in the community, there were several conversations about wearing green for St. Patrick's day. I wasn't wearing any visible green, except when I was performing my

Sheriff's duties. The official badge of the Pennington County Sheriff has green on the seal in its center, a fact that I pointed out to several folks who threatened to pinch me. Some seemed surprised that I wasn't more excited about the day and wearing something more visibly green.

I'm not opposed to recognizing the contributions of St. Patrick. He was a man who contributed much. He also became, after the Protestant Reformation, a symbol of the catholic heritage of Ireland. Catholics, as you know aren't the only people of Ireland, and there have been many troubles, including much violence stemming from the divisions between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland.

I have English ancestors and perhaps a few Scots as well. I'm not as certain about Irish, but I suspect that if I do have Irish forebears, they would be, like the English and Scots, protestant and more likely to celebrate William III of England, and also was King of Scotland, and Ireland and who defended the rights of Protestants to practice their religion. Also known as William of Orange, his story is celebrated on July 12, celebrating the glorious revolution in 1688 which began the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland. The flag of Ireland has three stripes: one green representing Ireland's Catholic heritage, one orange representing its Protestant peoples and a center of white, representing eternal peace between the two. As a show of colors I prefer the white.

That, however, is a fairly complex argument for a simple exchange over why I wasn't wearing green yesterday. It would have been far easier had I chosen to wear the whole tricolor flag. Perhaps next year.

I've also been fascinated, in my conversations with people out in the community, about assumptions that people make about my observances of Lent. As a minister it is generally expected that I have given up something specific for the season. I've spoken with those who have given up chocolate, sugary foods, Facebook, alcohol, and even coffee for the season. I haven't defined my spiritual disciplines in terms of specific sacrifices this year, but rather in terms of taking on a few extra minutes for quiet meditation. I suppose that could be seen as cutting back in the amount of time I spend in front of a computer, but I really haven't given up as much as expanding a discipline of quiet meditation in each day.

It seems, however, that the expectations of giving up something are so strong that I have begun to think in terms of what I might give up next year to have a specific answer to the question when it is asked. I'm not opposed to giving things up, but I prefer to think of the season in terms of permanent changes rather than temporary deprivations.

One of the roles I play in the community is being myself. Rather than perpetuate the assumptions people make about who a minister is, I prefer to just be myself and let them learn from my presence about my life and calling.

The answer I gave yesterday, when asked about green, was that people don't know the color of my underwear and I certainly have no intention of showing them. A little mystery isn't a bad thing.

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March 19, 2017 – First Paddle of 2017



I have fairly strong political opinions, but I frequently keep them to myself. With the supercharged political atmosphere since the recent Presidential election in the US, I'm thinking of making myself a sign that says, "Preach on!" and carrying it to whatever political rally happens to be going on. It should leave people scratching their heads as to what it means. I could put "1 Corinthians 15:51" on the other side of the sign and hold it up at sporting events. I doesn't quite have the ring of John 3:16, but I'm sure it would be appreciated by parents of young children.

If you really want to hold a protest rally, nothing beats a flock of geese. A dozen birds can sound like 50 and a hundred cannot be ignored.

I was mostly stirring up the birds yesterday when I took my first paddle of the 2017 season. I'm always a bit eager and this year is no exception. I headed out to the lake early yesterday convinced that the recent run of warm temperatures had combined with high winds to take the ice out of the water. I was wrong. There wasn't very much open water at all at the lake. I'd hauled my kayak out to the lake, however, and I decided to go ahead and launch and paddle what little water there was. It took less than ten minutes to paddle from one end of the open water along the shore to the other. I had to repeat the process several times and even then got more exercise from carrying the boat to and from the lakeshore and car rack. Sigh . . . spring is coming. Patience is required.

Meanwhile the Canadian geese reception committee was forming pods on the shore and in the water, with a few lead spokesmen venturing onto the ice to announce their opinions. As I launched the boat, the prevailing opinion among the geese was that the open water in the lake was their territory, thank you very much. Some were just mumbling "back, back, back, back," while others were more vociferous, honking, "stop, Stop, STOP, STOP!" It is the manner of geese not to be shy or quiet when they have an opinion.



I was trying to paddle early because of other obligations during the day, so the light was low and the temperature was chilly. It did not dampen the spirits of the geese, however.

I don't believe in chasing wildlife and I wasn't intentionally pursuing the swimming geese, but as I paddled, they decided to abandon the water ahead of my boat. Even in the short little plastic kayak that I use when ice threatens, I can paddle more quickly than a goose swims. They, however, fly and with a great deal of splashing quickly accelerate to flight speed. Geese almost always fly away from the boat in the same direction that I am paddling, but quickly achieve the distance of separation that they want and so glide back down to the surface of the water.

Yesterday, however, there were a lot of geese and not much water. Most chose the option of standing on the ice and providing their commentary from that vantage point.

If you look at a goose, you quickly realize that there is quite a bit of bird and that not much of that physical size is devoted to skull. Their brains are tiny. So, I don't think that the geese actually know that the ice where they were standing wouldn't support my weight. Even if I power paddled my boat directly into the ice as far as I could go, I wouldn't encounter ice that is thick enough to support me anywhere on the edges of the lake ice. That ice, however, will hold a goose. It will hold a hundred geese if they spread out a little, and spreading out comes naturally to geese. Maybe they do so because each individual is so loud.

At any rate, the geese on the ice are perfectly safe from any imagined pursuit. People, and birds, however, rarely raise loud protest in a rational manner. Despite their safety, the geese must honk at my presence anywhere near them.

Strolling around their ice pulpits the geese preachers continued their vociferous ways as I paddled around the small area of open water. Down by the marina, the geese were a bit more spread out. Over at the northwest corner of the lake they were fairly dense, gathered in groups of a dozen or more. My paddling path and direction was fairly obvious as I paddled from one end to the other and back again. They, however, felt it necessary to make constant comment about my direction and progress and announce it to other birds who were far away on the other side of the lake.

Were I wanting to harvest a goose for food, it would be no problem finding them. I am not a hunter, however, and carry no weapons, and it isn't the right season for that activity anyway, so the geese were safe. I actually think that they realized that detail as they never got very far away from my yellow boat playing in the water and plowing through the edge of the skim ice. They weren't raising their fuss for my benefit, either, as far as I know. The geese were raising the ruckus for geese reasons not to entertain me, as entertaining as their presence was to me.

I don't know much about raising geese. We raised chickens when I was a boy and it isn't my favorite pastime. I've had no urge to raise chickens in my adult life. But if one did have a flock of geese in your yard, I'm fairly certain it would annoy the neighbors to

no end. A large flock of geese taken to a political rally would certainly raise the noise level and get a person noticed.

It might be as effective as some of the other tactics that are employed at rallies.

At least I think that the next time I get the urge to attend a rally, I'll go load up the boat and consider paddling instead. After all, I've never gotten around to making my sign.

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March 20, 2017 – Centering

Many spiritual traditions have a practice that is similar to what is called “centering prayer” in Christianity. The practice dates back to the contemplative prayer of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, who practiced a monastic lifestyle in the early centuries of Christianity. The form of centering prayer that I practice is heavily influenced by the writings of Thomas Merton and the Trappist Monks of St. Joseph’s Abbey in the 1970’s. It is a discipline of silencing the busyness of thought and clearing one’s mind of peripheral thoughts. I try to devote at least one half hour block to the practice, generally on Sunday afternoons.

The practice has been mildly controversial in some corners of Christianity. As opposed to focused prayer, such as Lectio Divina, taught by Benedictines, centering prayer does not offer a specific focus for one’s mind. Instead it uses silence to allow a deeper connection to God by clearing one’s mind of the ideas and thoughts that normally clutter our thinking. Like any other prayer discipline, it requires practice and regular time. The controversy has to do with the lack of specific focus. Some faithful Christians believe that contemplating scripture, or having one’s devotions led by specific ideas, is more productive than clearing one’s mind. For me personally, I appreciate both types of devotional activity, and am not exclusively devoted to either style.

I suppose that one of the dangers of centering prayer is that there will be times when one is really centered on one’s own thoughts, needs, desires, and ideas. I haven’t experienced it that way, however. Quite the opposite is the effect that seems to occur for me. After a few minutes of releasing specific thoughts from my consciousness, I begin to think not about myself, but about others. In my practice, when an idea comes to my mind, I allow it to rise to consciousness, focus on it briefly and then dismiss the thought for the present. Sometimes there is a change of thoughts that range from tasks that need to be accomplished to concerns for people with specific needs who occupy my thoughts. Going through those thoughts can be meaningful and help me later when I am prioritizing my time and energies. In the context of centering prayer, however, there is a process of letting go and trusting God to provide what is needed. Instead of seeing myself as a center of activity where everything depends on what I say, do or think, I

diminish my focus on myself as the agent of activity. Centering prayer is the opposite of placing myself at the center. It is placing God at the center.

The earth does not revolve around myself. My needs and my greed are not the most important concerns. In the flowing history of the events of the world, my part is tiny and most meaningful when envisioned in relationship to the events of others. Life itself is infinitely larger than my ego. I can expand my connections best by realizing this truth.

One thing that I am learning through the process of centering prayer is that there is a very human tendency to view time in a very skewed fashion. We tend to think that the time of our lives is somehow more important than other times. It is as if we believe all of history pivots on our moments. Events of the past lead up to our moment. The future is shaped by our time. As I practice centering however, I begin to understand that time ebbs and flows like the waters of the globe. Our time is part of a wider river of human history, deeply influenced by the times and events of others. Life on this planet did not begin with us and will not end when our time on this earth is past.

Part of the liberation of centering prayer is something that I cannot describe in this blog. I can only point to it in a very crude manner because the tools of the blog are words. I am a lover of language. I not only write but I read to learn of the nature of this world. But words are not the same as reality. They are tools we use to describe bits of reality. As such they are limited. Our stories can be powerful, but they are not the same as the experiences that they report. Telling and hearing stories is a very good way of processing reality, but the stories do not constitute objective reality itself. Thus language always keeps a certain distance from reality. Words can point to the truth, but they are never the whole truth in and of themselves.

As I settle into the practice of centering, my prayer becomes less and less about words. I do think words as I connect with loved ones and friends. I do think words as I clear my mind. Then, when my practice begins to flow freely, my prayer is less a matter of words and more a matter of listening to other signals and signs from God. As I write this paragraph, I am deeply aware of how inadequate words are to describe so much of reality. Words are the wrong tool to speak of experiencing the absence of words.

In the routine of my week, Sunday mornings are the height of language. In our public worship, I express words that have been carefully chosen. I have prayed and thought and studied and prepared to craft a few words to share with the congregation that hopefully will lead us into a deeper connection with God. I hone my sermons throughout the week. I practice my sermons early on Sunday morning and then deliver them to the congregation. When I am finished I need to take a break from words. A silent half hour on Sunday afternoon provides a much-needed change of pace. Silence, however, is not the same thing as wordlessness. Most of the time I think in words even in my silence. Centering involves releasing even the words.

I am grateful for the opportunity of Sunday afternoon quiet.

Note: I am adding a couple of pictures to yesterday's blog. When I published it yesterday, I forgot to include the images. If you'd like you can scroll down and see the pictures I added this morning.

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March 21, 2017 – Paddling Again



I went to paddle with the geese again yesterday. There was a bit more open water and I could cover some more distance until I got to places where the wind had blown the ice against the shore so tightly that I could not pass. I like to check out the changing conditions at the lake and I enjoy paddling. It is the one form of exercise that I keep up with. I'm disciplined about some aspects of my life and terribly undisciplined about other aspects. Exercise is a bit of a challenge for me. But I do like to paddle.

There is, of course, more to it than just the exercise. Getting out into the world does something very important for my spirit and is a key factor in maintaining endurance for the work I do. This week is not uncommon for me. There were a few work tasks that I needed to do on Saturday. Helping with the rummage sale clean up at noon and hosting

a concert in the evening is a natural part of the flow of work in a busy congregation. Monday is the day that I call my day off, but I spent a couple of hours at the church yesterday, meeting with volunteers and a plumber about a small remodeling project and assembling a piece of kit furniture to help organize some of our sound equipment. I know that people in all kinds of vocations end up doing similar things. My father frequently ended up at his shop for a while on a day off. People who work more regular jobs often give blocks of their spare time to volunteer at the church. I'm no different. I'm not only employed by the church, I am also a member and I want its programs and projects to succeed. Giving a little time is part of that membership. Our church is dependent upon the generosity of members not only in their financial gifts, but also in their gifts of time. Participating in that generosity is one aspect of leadership.

Since that is the way I work and since there are some long days like today, I need to have ways to develop endurance for the work that I do. Today's first meeting begins at 8:30 am and the last will end around 8:30 pm. I'll be in the building an hour before that first meeting and may stay a while after the last one to get things set for a similarly long day on Wednesday. Sustaining that style of working over the long haul requires that I take time for quiet and contemplation and that I make time for the things that give me energy. Being outside on the lake with a paddle in my hands gives me energy.

As an aside, since I had this conversation with my sister yesterday, paddling on a lake full of ice is not the least bit dangerous. Since the middle of the lake is filled with ice, I paddle around the edges. I was never more than a few steps from the shore and never paddled in water over my head. If I were to capsize, which is unlikely, I would simply stand up and walk out of the water. The paddling is gentle and there is virtually no risk of rolling the boat because there isn't room to even put the boat on its edge.

My regular contacts with the natural world remind me of a poem by Mary Oliver.

"Mindful"
by Mary Oliver

Every day
I see or hear
something
that more or less

kills me
with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle

In the haystack
of light.

It is what I was born for—
to look, to listen,

to lose myself
inside this soft world—
to instruct myself
over and over

in joy,
and acclamation.
Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant—
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.
Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help

but grow wise
with such teachings
as these—
the untrimmable light

of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

“Like a needle in the haystack of light” - it is a fitting description of how I feel when I venture alone into the natural world. The lake where I paddle isn't one of the big lakes of the world. Still I feel tiny sitting in my boat on its surface. I'm bigger than a goose, but I don't sit much taller than they stand. When they are on the ice, and I am in my boat, we are mostly eye-to-eye. I understand that I don't exactly view the lake from a goose's point of view. Their range of vision is different from my own. But it is a different perspective than that of walking along the shore. My little boat is sensitive to the movement of the water. My paddle slides on the surface of the ice. Even a hard tap with the paddle won't break through any more than just light skim ice. The ice that wouldn't hold my body weight were I to stand on it is still thick enough to feel solid to the touch of my paddle. The eagle soaring high overhead probably has a very good view of me, but I

have to strain to see the detail of his wing feathers. I feel small in the scope of the world, but I definitely feel that I am a part of this magnificent beauty.

I have enjoyed times of playing in the surf with my boats or steering them through whitewater, but there is a different pleasure of paddling on calm waters. I don't have to think about technique. The boat is nimble and goes where I want it. Even on its edge the boat feels completely stable. Small kayaks are less boats that you climb aboard and more like specialized clothing that you wear. My boat fits me and turns with the swivel of my hips and stays perfectly aligned when I lean one way or another.

If Mary Oliver can offer prayers made out of grass, certainly I can offer prayers made of droplets of water.

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March 22, 1017 – Wilderness

I have read a lot of books about the value of wilderness. From the stark black and white photographs of Ansel Adams to the poems of Wendell Berry, from descriptions of canoe trips in the barren lands of northern Canada to the stories of trekkers in Nepal, there are countless stories of encounters with the wilderness that transform lives. I grew up with an appreciation for the wilderness. The other side of the river from the church camp I attended in my childhood and youth is the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness; 944,000 acres of federal wilderness spanning the border of Montana and Wyoming. Although the official wilderness designation wasn't made until after I was an adult, the land was roadless and wild and access then as now was by walking.

Lent is a season of awareness of the wilderness. The 40 days of Lent are a symbolic connection with the 40 days that Jesus fasted and prayed in the wilderness before beginning his ministry. That particular sojourn into the wilderness has a symbolic connection with the 40 years that the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness between the Exodus from Egypt and their entrance into the promised land. Wilderness as a place of testing, refinement and purification of the soul is a major biblical theme.

But you don't have to travel to distant and remote locations to experience the wilderness. In the days when I lived in Chicago, I used to go to the shore of Lake Michigan and face east with the full expanse of the water in front of me and the city behind me and out of sight. Had you asked me in those days, I would have reported that the true wilderness, from my point of view, was the city. I was a small town boy, unused to the ways of the city and seriously lacking in street smarts. The maze of locks and barred windows and security measures and crowds was a mystery to me. I never felt fully at home in the city. It was its own kind of wilderness on my journey toward my adult life.

I met Chicago natives for whom the North Dakota Badlands or the mountains of Montana seemed wild and dangerous, but from my point of view those places were infinitely safer and easier to navigate than the Chicago neighborhoods just outside of the University of Chicago Campus.

This week has been a reminder to those of us who live in the hills that you don't have to travel to come face to face with the wilderness. Yesterday was a day of fog and freezing rain. Driving home last night I could barely see the edge of the road. Driving slowly, I couldn't see the lights of the corner store until I was at the intersection where it stands. The trees were encased with a layer of ice so thick that it didn't easily break off of the branches. Today the forecast is for sunny skies and temperatures in the 70's - a variation of nearly 40 degrees in temperature. Our place will literally look like a different place in just a few hours. Those who have forsythia in their yards will be able to watch the bright yellow blossoms emerge from the ice today. The challenges of simply predicting the weather in the hills give living in this place a sense of wildness.

As a reader I am struck by different attitudes towards wilderness. For many, wilderness is a kind of test - something that must be endured on the way to promise. The sojourn of the people of Israel is seen as a wilderness that must be crossed and put behind before they can enter the promised land. Others see the wilderness as a worthy destination in and of itself. Nicholas Kristof wrote, "The wilderness is healing, a therapy for the soul." Mark Udall wrote, "Personally, wilderness helps me get back in touch with natural rhythms, helps me reflect and, in the process, restore my creativity."

Other writers describe the wilderness as a commodity that can be exchanged. Wild places, to them, are to be exploited for resources such as minerals, fuel and timber. The wilderness exists as a source of the things that they want. The differences in approach to wilderness are, of course, the subject of much political wrangling and controversy. Experts have wrangled at achieving some kind of balance between remoteness and access and between preservation and development from the beginnings of human expansion into the wider world.

Still other writers describe the wilderness as both judgment and the source of peace. Anne Frank wrote, "I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness; I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too. I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more."

Henry Thoreau's vision, "In wildness is the salvation of the world," carries a similar sentiment. Rather than a test, that which is wild offers a healing solution to the problems of urban living and human crowding.

However stated, wilderness has a profound effect on humans and our quality of life. We are who we are because we are shaped by the wilderness that surrounds us.

Each year the season of Lent affords us the opportunity to reflect on the wild places of our lives, not only the physical wilderness of remote places, but also the emotional wilderness of grief and loneliness and doubt and fear. We are challenged to face the wildernesses of our lives and enter into them on a spiritual journey questing after truth and meaning for our lives. In my experience the answers that come from facing the wilderness do not always come easily or quickly. Often it takes discipline and time to discover the depth of meaning and direction that are granted.

May we overcome our fears and walk in the wilderness of our lives this season.

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March 23, 2017 – In This Together

One of the tasks I pursued yesterday was delivering information on our community's Palm Parade to colleagues in other churches around town. The Palm Parade is a very simple affair. After commenting on the number of churches that line Kansas City Street in our city's down town, we decided to gather several churches on Palm Sunday and walk down the street waving our palms. The church that is at the eastern edge of the area with churches has a lovely prayer park where the group could gather, hear the Gospel story and sing a song. The parade was such a success that this year we've expanded the invitation to include other congregations. Everyone is welcome to participate, so I delivered posters to a wider circle of congregations than last year's efforts.

The process gives me an opportunity for short conversations with my colleagues and I appreciate the connections. Much of the time we go about our ministries focusing on the needs of our congregations without a lot of thought about what our colleagues are facing. Sometimes we fall into a kind of competitive mode in which other congregations are somehow seen as opposed to the work we do. In some ways our community is over-churched. The expansion in the number of congregations and para-church organizations in the past twenty years is striking, with the number of congregations rising at a far more rapid pace than the population. This means that there are more churches and more of them are smaller. Like other communities, we have a few large congregations. In our town the title of largest and fastest growing changes fairly quickly with some of the congregations following a kind of boom and bust cycle. We also have a smattering of mid-sized congregations. Some, like the one I serve, are historic churches. Ours was the first Christian congregation organized in our city and has been around as long as there has been a Rapid City. Ours also is a stable congregation, having been roughly the same size with a few ups and downs for more than 50 years.

Because of the stability of our congregation, I have the luxury of not having to worry about competition from other congregations. Although there is a bit of church swapping

and families moving from one congregation to another, this process isn't a threat to our congregation. It is easy to understand that some individuals will have several different stops on their spiritual journeys and we are grateful to be their church home for whatever period of time we can serve their needs. When someone leaves our church we pray that they will find a congregation and a place to continue to grow in their faith. And we are the recipients of new members who have been nurtured by other congregations in their paths.

A short conversation with a colleague is a good reminder that we are all in the same business - the business of serving the spiritual needs of our community. There are times when the days get long and the work is difficult when being a pastor can seem a bit like a lonely profession. Much of the work that occupies my time is of a confidential nature. I spend a lot of time listening to stories that are not mine to tell. Because I am very careful about sharing my work, there are times when I convince myself that no one could understand what I am experiencing.

Speaking with my colleagues reminds me that I am not alone.

One colleague who is new to our town and whom I met for the first time yesterday invited me into his office and we chatted about our community and the challenges of ministry in this place for nearly an hour. I'm sure he appreciated the perspective of one who has been around for a while and I appreciated the perspective of someone who is looking at our community with a fresh set of eyes and experience honed in other places.

In other congregations, I had only a brief interchange with an office administrator who is well trained in greeting the public. I'm sure that in some churches the posters I delivered ended up in the garbage can before receiving any serious consideration. I know that a similar phenomena occurs in our church when someone stops by cold promoting some particular event that doesn't fit into our schedule.

Today has a different flavor. It is one of the things that I enjoy about my job - each new day offers new possibilities. It may be weeks and even months before I have an opportunity to go visiting other churches again. I do have a weekly bible study with colleagues of other denominations that provides regular contact, but that can become routine and while helpful, doesn't open me to all of the different ministries and leaders who help form our community.

The three synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke - all report of a time when Jesus disciples reported to him that there were others out there helping people. Jesus instructed his disciples to not hinder their good works, saying, "whoever is not against us is for us." That is a refreshing attitude in what has become a hyper-competitive atmosphere among religious leaders. Other churches are not our enemies. They are doing the work to which they are called and in a real sense they are "for us." It is

something that the members of our congregations understand intuitively. Usually the animosity between congregations is fueled by the leaders of the congregations.

My adventures yesterday are a good reminder of the good works that are being done by other Christian leaders in our community. I hope that they have sensed my appreciation for what they do. I trust that we will be able to continue to build partnerships and shared ministries to serve our community.

In just a few weeks it will be Palm Sunday and we'll have the joy of all joining together for a short walk through our city's center proclaiming our faith and being reminded that we are all in this together.

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March 24, 2017 – Long Distance Communications

Global climate change has been the subject of more than a little political talk in the past decade. Some politicians have claimed that the science of climate change is flawed, but their loud expressions have done little to change the basic facts about what is occurring. I really don't understand the politics that motivate people to deny the results of scientific exploration, but I'm sure that it has to do with money - the usual motivator in political debate. It is still possible for some companies to make large short-term profits at the expense of long term goals by exploiting certain fuels as if their use had no consequences. It is a problem that we humans have found over and over again. When companies or individuals are allowed to extract huge profits by not paying the full costs of their enterprises there can be great personal wealth at great cost for the wider society. Consider Superfund pollution clean up. Had the original enterprises been forced to clean up their own mess, they would not have found profit in their industry.

However, as I said, I am no expert on politics and I don't fully understand the motivations of others.

There has been a great deal of news about how air pollution is becoming a huge problem in the cities of China. Despite strong efforts by the government to reduce emissions of smog-forming chemicals from power plants, steel factories and automobiles, extremely polluted air is threatening the health of people in many urban areas. A new study suggests that climate change may be a factor in the excessive pollution. Changing weather patterns linked to rising global temperatures have resulted in a dearth of wind across northern China. When the wind doesn't move as had once been the case, the pollution lingers. Severe pollution has been blamed for millions of premature deaths. The situation will almost certainly force Chinese leaders to close steel factories and coal-fired power plants. Those actions will, in turn, affect the prices paid by consumers around the world for certain products.

One of my book groups is reading an excellent book by Miroslav Volf: "Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World." I haven't finished the entire book yet and am not in a position to offer a complete review, but it is clear from what I have read that we live in an increasingly connected world. What we do - the decisions we make about our lives and transportation and the goods we consume - makes a difference in the lives of others who live far away and whom we might not otherwise ever know. We are all connected on this planet and the actions of one affect the many.

In 2007 I decided that I would like to have an expedition kayak for exploring the waters of the Puget Sound where our son and daughter-in-law live. Not wanting to invest the \$2,000 to \$4,000 required for a factory-made boat, I read up on the topic and fashioned a homemade skin-on-frame boat. The framework of my boat is Black Hills Spruce, cut from two planks given to me by a friend. The covering is aircraft-grade Dacron. Original sea trials were in Sheridan Lake, followed by a trip to the Puget Sound that October.

My research into skin-on-frame boats and Greenland paddles led me to online and long-distance relationships with others who paddle and Qajaq USA and the Greenland Kayaking Association (Qaannat Kattuffiat). Through that association I learned two stories worth repeating today.

John Pedersen is a native Greenlander who pursues a subsistence lifestyle for his family. He uses traditional weapons and tools to hunt various prey to feed himself and his family. Those of us living in temperate zones can't quite imagine how people who not long ago were had polar ice to give them access to food sources. With the melting of the ice they need to travel farther and farther and animals are harder and harder to find. Harvesting food is more difficult than can be remembered by even the oldest members of the community.

You can argue the politics of climate change. You might even argue the science of climate change. It is different to read the story of a person who is directly affected.

Kilii Yuyan is a member of the Inupiat people who live on the North Slope of Alaska. Seeing the ravages of consumer culture and rampant alcoholism and drug abuse on others, he has been very intentional to pursue traditional ways for himself and his family. The traditional lifestyle is very dependent upon the ocean and the animals that live there. One might think that increasing water levels would benefit them and their hunting, but there is an unforeseen problem. As the pack ice melts the polar bears are forced to change their territories. The result is that more and more polar bears are coming into regular contact with human communities and posing a threat to traditional hunters who often have to transport food long distances with little or no defense against a polar bear attack. The people stand very close to losing their very existence. Their day-to-day life is being threatened by the changes in the climate.

These are just two stories of others who share my passion for traditional boats. But they demonstrate clearly to me that the decisions I make in my everyday life about what vehicles to drive, how to heat my house and which foods to eat have a direct impact on the lives of others. We can ignore our connections to those who live in distant places, but it doesn't change the fact that they are people just like us and our behaviors have a direct effect on their day-to-day living.

I do not have the solutions. I do not know the answers.

I do know that we who care about the lives of others cannot continue to ignore them. I know that whether it is air pollution in China, long travels to find food in Greenland or polar bear attacks in Alaska, our sisters and brothers are struggling. And we are all in this together.

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March 25, 2017 – Chronic Mental Illness

Earlier this week I was visiting with a friend who has a child whose life has been disrupted by schizoaffective disorder. The disorder is a combination of the symptoms of schizophrenia and mood disorder. It sometimes involves periods of depression, but also can involve manic episodes. The symptoms seem to cycle, with times of improvement followed by times of severe symptoms. There have been episodes of delusions, hallucinations, high energy and depression. As would be the case of any family with a child struggling with a chronic disease, they have sought to find the best treatment available. They have consulted with psychiatrists and behavioral therapists. They have endured periods of hospitalization. There have been medications that seemed to help for a while and then were less helpful. There have been counselors who have connected and others who have not. The adjustment to the reality that this is a condition that can't be cured - that it is something their child will live with for the rest of his life - has been difficult. Ongoing research can at times seem very hopeful, but so far nothing has been discovered that approximates a cure for those who suffer from this disease.

Like other families coping with chronic illness in the family they have made some big adjustments in their lives. The on-going care of their son has had to become a priority as it has affected the employment of the parents and of a sibling. A larger portion of the family's resources have had to be devoted to providing care. Sometimes full-time around-the-clock care is required and that can be expensive if provided by professionals. When the family provides the care it is exhausting and interferes with other activities.

Knowing that you have a child whose illness may continue beyond the span of your own life means that you have to make special retirement and estate plans. There may be

needs that continue for many years after the death of the parents and they seek to provide for those needs as best as they are able.

On top of all of that the stigma that is attached to mental illness in our country can be oppressive. In many ways the illness is the biggest thing that is going on in their lives, but there are many places where conversation about mental illness is not welcome. Furthermore the stigma carries with it some false assumptions that are made about mental illness. Mental illness is a disease not a moral failing. It is not caused by poor parenting skills. It is not caused by the household environment. However, some people, who have not experienced mental illness or who are misinformed continue to perpetrate old ideas about its origins. For decades upon decades people have tried to cover up mental illnesses. Hiding the illnesses and often those who suffer from them has resulted in grave misunderstandings. Those who suffer from mental illness have frequently been locked up because of society's failure to understand their illnesses. Incarceration is not an effective treatment for an illness, but it has been the result of a failure to understand certain behaviors and an inability to provide adequate treatment.

Here is the thing, however. My friend has found that whenever he talks about their struggles with illness and their search for effective treatment others come up and thank him and then tell the stories of their own family members who suffered from chronic and severe mental illnesses.

Mental illness is far more common than most people believe. Schizoaffective disorder, the illness from which our friend's child suffers, is common. More than 200,000 new cases are diagnosed every year. It occurs at about the same rate as childhood diabetes. It is more common than uterine cancer. It is far more common than rare diseases such as Lou Gehrig's disease.

Common though it may be we are reluctant to talk of it.

The reluctance to talk has resulted in less support for research into effective treatment for the disorder. Researchers are making great strides in understanding brain chemistry and structure. The more that is learned, and the more advanced diagnostic tools that are developed, the closer we come to providing treatments that allow sufferers to resume normal activities. In some ways, however, brain science is in its infancy. Brain scans yield more detailed information but so far have not yet become effective in the diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder. The difficulty in diagnosing the disorder is part of the problem of effective treatment. Because the symptoms can include symptoms of bipolar disorder including feelings of euphoria, racing thoughts and risky behavior, treatment of those symptoms alone can leave the sufferer with untreated hallucinations and delusions which can cause major disruptions in everyday life.

Medical treatments can be effective in altering brain chemistry, but science is only beginning to understand the nuances and complexities of brain chemistry in healthy

brains, let alone those suffering from disease. There is some limited evidence that certain medicines, especially certain psychoactive drugs can make symptoms worse rather than ease them. Some mood stabilizers and some antipsychotic medications and antidepressants have proven to be effective in some cases. Those medications combined with cognitive behavioral therapy seem to be among the best treatments known so far.

Family education and self-management strategies seem to be critical to living with the disease over the long term. Because the disorder affects entire family systems, engaging multiple family members in managing the disease seems to be more effective than isolating the victim from family relationships. The disorder affects more than just the primary victim - it is a family system disease.

Although I have not been directly affected by an immediate family member suffering from the disease, I have decided that my voice is needed to raise awareness among the people I serve. Chances are there are victims in my congregation about whose struggles I do not know. Even more important is educating those who have not been directly affected so that their energies can be enlisted in seeking effective treatment.

Much work remains as we struggle to find care for those who suffer from mental illness. I, for one, will not be silent as the suffering continues.

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March 26, 2017 – Psalm 23

The power of poetry to touch us at the deepest level is often illustrated in the life of the church. We know the stories of the prophets whose words guided the transformation of Israel when it strayed from justice. Our scriptures are filled with poetry and over the generations a few great poems have come to have deep meaning in the story of our people.

Certainly one of the most beloved poems of our people is Psalm 23. It appears in our cycle of readings on the 4th Sunday of Easter. It is read in conjunction with a reading from the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John where Jesus speaks of himself as the “good shepherd.” Jesus certainly was familiar with the Psalms and Psalm 23 was likely as beloved in his time as it is in ours. The image of God as our shepherd and we as the members of God’s flock has been reassuring and helpful for people for millennia.

There is a second time when the Psalm shows up in our cycle of readings. Unlike other scriptures which appear only once in the three-year cycle of readings, Psalm 23 is read twice each year. The other annual reading of the Psalm is on the fourth Sunday of Lent. The Lenten reading of the Psalm provides a connection with thoughts of suffering and death, giving deep meaning to its phrase, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the

shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and they staff they comfort me.”

Despite the exhortations of a few prosperity preachers, Christianity is not, at its core, a religion that focuses on good times only. Our faith does not act as some kind of protection against hard times or grief or loss. It is, rather, a faith that supports believers in the midst of trials and troubles. We are not promised escape from the valley of the shadow of death, but rather God’s presence in those times when we face the reality of our own mortality.

My experience as a pastor has frequently taken me to places of suffering, loss, trial and disappointment. Rabbi Harold Kushner’s bestselling book, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People,” is just one of the many expressions of the question, “Why?” I have not spent much of my life wrestling with this particular question, however. I know that it is true that every life has its trials. Every person experiences grief. Loss is real. Pain is real. Avoiding those aspects of life isn’t really possible, and if it were, the result would be a life that isn’t fully lived.

The appearance of Psalm 23 in the middle of Lent is a powerful experience for me each year. It isn’t just that God is our good shepherd. God is a shepherd who enters fully into human experience. God experiences grief and loss. God mourns with those who mourn. God weeps at the pain and tragedy of our human experience.

In short, we are not left alone, even in life’s loneliest moments.

There are plenty of sermons that have already been published that offer detailed examinations of Psalm 23. I rarely use the Psalm as my focus text. Today my sermon will focus on the story of the recovery of sight of the man born blind, reported in John 9. The Psalm will be a part of our worship in the form of the Call to Worship and the anthem sung by the choir.

I’m not convinced that great poetry requires interpretation. Perhaps allowing the words of the Psalm to stand on their own is the best approach. After all, is there anything that needs to be added?

It is one of my pet peeves. It often seems to me that artists do not appreciate the power of their own art. Storytellers to give elaborate introductions to their stories, musicians who spend too much time explaining their music, and visual artists who go on and on about the creative process frequently seem to distract from the value of their art. I don’t attend concerts to hear lectures on the power of music. I trust the power of the music, but at times it seems that others do not.

Of course there are many different ways to read scripture. Sometimes I read scripture for the purpose of studying. I get out the texts in their original languages, read

translator's notes and commentaries. I consider how a particular passage has been interpreted by others in the tradition. I consider the discoveries of archaeologists and what we know of the context of the original speaking of the words. I weigh the process of transmission through oral and written channels that brought the words to us. There is great value in careful study of scripture. As a lifelong student, I am continually honing my study skills.

There are other times when I read scripture devotionally. I pray the scriptures, allowing the words to connect with the experiences of my life. I allow the words to inspire me. I read scripture silently and out loud as a part of my personal devotions.

Still other times I focus on the power of proclaiming the scripture to others. I practice the art of reading out loud in tones that allow others to connect with the words. I know that hearing is not the same thing as reading and that there are nuances of inflection and timing that are critical to effective communication.

There is a time for each mode of reading.

There is a value in repetition - of reading the same words multiple times and allowing for new insights to emerge.

I am grateful for this psalm. I am grateful to the teachers who encouraged me to memorize it when I was a child. It is a text that is available to me in those times when I am not able to open a physical book and read.

“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.”

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March 27, 2017 – Taking Bumps

I don't fly much these days. Recently when I boarded an airliner to go visit our children I realized that it had been more than a year since I'd made a trip in an airplane. Not long ago I served on a board that involved at least four trips by airline each year. For a short while I served on a group that met monthly in an Eastern City for a short period of time. These days I don't have reasons to be anything like a frequent flyer.

There are parts of traveling by air that I do not miss in the least. I'm not much for waiting in line and the procedures that place the appearance of security over common sense seem so unnecessary. (Since someone tried to smuggle explosives onto an airliner in his shoes, we'll x-ray everyone's shoes, which would not detect plastic explosives instead of swabbing them for explosive residue, which could be done without removing them. - Remove you belt before going through the body scanner even though the body

scanner will clearly show a belt buckle without a problem.) I've never been a fan of rules for the sake of rules.

However, I do miss flying. I love the acceleration as the plane heads down the runway. I like the feeling of rising into the air and the view from up above. I enjoy the view of the clouds. I even enjoy the familiar sounds and sights of the various parts of the airplane working.

Growing up in an aviation family, I never thought that my adult life would be quite as ground-bound as it is. I assumed that I would always have access to an airplane and that I would fly on most of my trips. I didn't have to think about the finances of flying when I was growing up. Airplanes were simply a part of our life. I learned to fly for the cost of the fuel for the plane, without thoughts of insurance, maintenance, and other factors. I didn't really pay attention to the simple reality that in order to be a safe pilot, one has to be a frequent pilot, flying consistently and practicing skills on a regular basis. It was only when I was an adult, with children of my own that the realities of aviation - and its impracticalities for a hobby flyer - became evident. Each major repair bill meant that additional partners were needed and my fraction of ownership got smaller. The airplane wasn't always available when I had time. When I had time the weather didn't always cooperate.

There are, however, some advantages to having grown up around airplanes. When I do fly or when I talk to others about flying, I don't have the fear of turbulence that plagues many travelers. I understand the notion of flying through a mass of air that itself is in motion. A little buffeting from side to side or even a few ups and down don't give me a queasy feeling in my stomach. It may be that I am simply fortunate to have been exempted from motion sickness, but more importantly, there is no fear factor for me. I've read hundreds and hundreds of aviation accident reports. I know that mild turbulence rarely is the cause of injury.

Modern airlines these days usually can avoid most of the turbulence simply by flying higher. If the air is rough at the assigned altitude a request for another flight level usually solves the problem. It wasn't that way for the airplanes we flew when I was growing up. We flew light aircraft, with relatively low service ceilings in the mountains. A 150 hp piper super cub has a published service ceiling of 19,000 feet, but that is under optimal conditions. Besides, it couldn't achieve that altitude if you had to carry the extra weight of oxygen which is required for flight above 12,000 feet. Add to that mix that we flew cubs for fire patrol over Yellowstone National Park and the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. Granite Peak is 12,800 feet. Since we couldn't fly over that peak, we flew around it. Any wind at all and there is air going up on one side of the mountain and air going down on the other side. You have to know and understand these air movements to operate a small airplane safely in that environment. A few bumps is par for the course in that kind of flying.

My father inspired confidence in me. I never was afraid when I was flying with him, even when things got bumpy. He taught me to always be thinking of safety. We'd name every creek and drainage as we flew over the mountains so I would develop situational awareness and know where we were. We'd talk about emergency landing options should we experience a major mechanical failure. We studied the weather and the winds and the effects of mountain wave turbulence.

My attitude was one of respect for the weather, but not one of avoidance. Some pilots learn to climb above the rough air. Others learn to fly through it. It may explain why I have a tendency to wade into disagreements in the life of the church while others try to rise above them and seek calm. A little rough going seems to be a small price to pay for the future of the church. The nitty gritty of everyday life can require energy for those of us who participate in it, but it can be much more interesting and meaningful than always trying to avoid conflict and placing one's position above that of others.

Jesus was consistent in his reaching out to people that his disciples advised him to avoid. He spoke to the woman at the Samaritan well. He stopped to speak with the man born blind. He weighed in on the arguments of the Pharisees about who to blame. He ate lunch with Zacchaeus. He spoke with the woman washing his feet with her tears.

I don't fly too much these days. But I'm not afraid of taking a few bumps.

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March 28, 2017 – Quit Complaining



Years ago, when I lived in North Dakota, it seemed to me like there was no kind of weather that would make the gang gathered in the coffee shop happy. It was always too cold, too warm, too dry or too wet. I realize that complaining is a satisfying mode of communication in certain situations and the dynamic certainly played out. The same voices complained about politics incessantly, whether their party was winning or losing. And most of the time their party was winning, but the victories seemed to prove to be poor solutions to the complaining.

These days, I worry that I'm becoming like one of those guys squeezed around the tables at the City Cafe. For much of the month of March I've been pining for spring weather. I got tired of winter and shoveling snow and scraping ice of the windshield of the car and I was ready for emerging flowers and budding trees and blossoming plants. I've still got the spring fever thing going hard, but yesterday's mostly sunny skies following Sunday's spits of rain without any accumulation left me wishing for some serious moisture. The hills are dry and we could use some refreshing. Our best mode for replenishing the soil moisture is a good spring blizzard. I'd certainly complain about having to shovel heavy snow off my driveway and the inconvenience of another blizzard might get me to sounding off about the weather in general, but it really would help get the garden ready for planting and strengthen the health of the trees.

Of course we have no control over the weather. And yesterday morning was a time when it was hard to complain much.

I set off for the lake in the predawn glow before the sun was visible on the horizon. Paddling the sunrise is my favorite time of the day. I had a wooden kayak that I had made. The ice is fully out of the lake and I can paddle without the fear of scratching my boat against the ice. The boat I was paddling is far from new. I built it back in 1999. I built it cheap, out of fence grade cedar that required a lot of cutting out knots and scarfing joints in the wood strips. The shape of the boat, however, is just right and it has been in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans off of the United States and Canada. I've paddled it in several of the great lakes and taken it down the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers as well as a lot of small lakes and reservoirs. It has plenty of scratches and dings and I've repaired it frequently. It is due to have the cockpit coaming rebuilt one of these years when I find the time.

It wasn't the boat that commanded my attention, however. As the light began to creep over the lake, I was struck by the glory of the sky. The ribbons of clouds were reflected in more vibrant colors on the surface of the water. I love to paddle flat water on a calm day. The lack of wind leaves the lake surface glassy, like a mirror and even in the places where a gentle breeze ruffles the surface of the water, the colors in the reflection are less muted than they are in the sky. On days like that I often take a lot of pictures in part because the pictures fail to capture the beauty that my eye is seeing.

Mist was rising from the lake and the geese were paired up and spread out on the lake. A few ducks have arrived and they are keeping close to the shore for the most part, looking for food among the shoreline weeds.

It was a nearly perfect day for paddling. I paused several times to simply sit on the surface of the water and just take it all in. Aside from a few geese calls and an occasional car passing by on the highway the lake was quiet. It will be months before the recreational boaters are spending much time at the lake. The docks are still pulled up onto the shore and there are no boats being stored not he water yet. I usually get the lake to myself when I paddle early, but when the campground is empty it seems like I have the entire area to myself.

There is something particularly refreshing about the perspective of sitting on the water's surface. My little boat doesn't draw much draft. The bottom of my seat is within an inch of the surface of the water. Sitting with my legs stretched out in front of me my line of sight is less than a yard above the water's surface.

There are no insects braving the frosty mornings yet but I saw a couple of fish rise. Most likely I was seeing northern pike coming up from the depths to grab a smaller fish swimming close to the surface. There is a whole world underneath the surface of the

lake that I can only imagine. The reflection makes it impossible to see beneath the surface. Instead it looks like an upside-down image of the shoreline with trees and hills extending deeply below me as well as those that rise above my position. The sensation is one of floating on the air, suspended gently in the middle of the sky and clouds surrounded by trees and hills. My words to describe the sensation are as far from the reality as the pictures I capture with my camera.

The day continued with its usual business. I had friends to meet, chores to do and spend a considerable block of time collecting numbers for our income tax report forms. It not only is the season for spring blizzards, it is also the season for annual tax reports - something that could keep the gang at the cafe complaining for weeks.

Living with the luxury of the lake so close at hand, however, invites me to quit complaining and to just sit and enjoy. I am indeed fortunate.

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March 29, 2017 – Missed Meeting

I missed a meeting last night. It isn't the first time this has happened to me. I don't have a good excuse. At the end of a usual day, with the usual obligations I came home and sat in a chair listening to a podcast. I hadn't thought about the meeting during the day even though it was on my calendar. I turned off the sound on my cell phone to take a call on the house phone and so missed the alarm I had set reminding me about the meeting. By the time I remembered the meeting it was too late. I'll begin my morning at the office by writing an apology for missing the meeting.

The meeting wasn't super important. It wasn't a meeting of the church, but rather of a community organization in which I participate. I'm sure that the decisions made at the meeting didn't come down to a single vote. I'm sure the other members of the group provided the leadership needed.

Still, I'm a bit ashamed of myself. I know better. I dislike it when others forget meetings of boards and committees. I'm not pleased with what seems to me to be a much more casual approach to such obligations.

As I mulled over my mistake last night, it tipped off a host of self doubts that come to me from time to time. I know I'm getting older. I know that a younger person might bring more energy and a fresh perspective to my work. I know that the time is coming when it will be the right thing for me to step aside and allow someone else to assume my responsibilities.

On the other hand, I enjoy the work I do and most of the time I'm pretty good at it. Furthermore, we live in a moment of history where experience is not particularly valued.

We read daily reports of “wonderkids” making their millions and running tech companies and leading innovation. There aren’t very many arenas in our society where age and experience is valued.

Ideally we would have a balance in our society where elders work alongside younger workers, where the contributions of each age are honored and valued. Diversity builds strength and learning to work together and be inspired by each other makes for stronger institutions. Elders need the energy, fresh ideas and idealism of youth. Youth can benefit from the experience and wisdom of their elders.

Sadly, our society doesn’t provide many opportunities for the mix. The meeting I missed yesterday did not need me for my age. The youngest member of that board is in his mid 50s. There are plenty of folks in their 60s who participate. Whether it is by design or default, we tend to divide up by age in a whole lot of our activities.

I’ve had some wonderful intergenerational experiences over the years. I participated in at least two mission trips that had teens, twenties, thirties, forties, fifties, sixties and seventies. The broad range of ages made the experience deeply meaningful for all of the participants. Simply watching the interchange between teens and adults who were not their parents or grandparents was a powerful experience.

Knowing this, I understand that my self doubt and instinct to pull back is wrong. I have much to contribute and that will continue to be the case for many years to come. I do, however, know that sharing leadership with those who are younger is also an important part of the work that I do. I know that they will not see things from my perspective. I know that they will not do the work the way that I do. I know that I will have to occasionally bite my tongue and be silent with criticisms that come to my mind. Still their contributions are important to me personally and to the health of the enterprises we tackle together.

I also know that I’m not the only one feeling stretched by the demands of my life. There are younger leaders in our church who miss meetings and events from time to time because it is impossible to be two places at the same time. They have to choose between conflicting obligations. Their priorities don’t always put the church first. Yesterday I had a brief exchange with a younger member of our church at her place of work. She was warm and polite, but also obviously in a rush to get her work done. I reflected how she must feel after a day at that job as she heads to the church for one more meeting.

Part of working together and forging the future of the church is going to involve learning to cut each other some slack. We need to understand that our leaders are busy people with many obligations and that absence from a meeting isn’t always a sign of a lack of commitment. We need to be careful in planning our meetings so that they stay focused and honor the gift of time that is being given. I’ve invested quite a bit of energy in recent

years in figuring ways to have less meetings and how to make the meetings we have more meaningful. I've learned that young leaders are often very efficient at running meetings and getting participants off to their next obligations in a reasonable amount of time. I've learned to imitate some of their behaviors.

And, along the way, I am learning to cut myself some slack as well. I don't intend to become a person who misses meetings on a regular basis. I do, however, hope that I can forgive myself for my mistake and move on. After all, the other members of the board don't need to have their lives cluttered with excessive emails from my over a missed meeting. A simple apology is in order. Then we need to move on with the business of the board.

As today with its meetings that start at 8:30 a.m. and will continue past 8:00 p.m. is a good example, life goes on. There will be plenty of opportunities to attend other meetings.

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March 30, 2017 – Working with Numbers

I opened up my regular utility bill from the city yesterday. I have the bill paid by automatic deduction from my checking account, so receiving the bill demands no action on my part, but I am always interested in the amount of water we use (generally under 500 cubic feet per month) and the amount it costs. I also keep a current copy of the utility bill in the glove compartment of my pickup so that I can use it for a free dump at the city landfill if needed.

Anyway, I noticed that my city utility bill has both an account number and a customer number. My account number is higher than 9 million. My customer number is higher than 70 million. Not bad for a city of 70,000 people! Obviously the system that assigns account numbers and customer numbers aren't based on counting the number of customers. For what it is worth, the city utility bill also has my water meter number on it. I don't think the city really has over 78 million water meters, either.

Computers, of course, don't mind the big digit numbers. There could be all kinds of information encoded in the numbers including dates, geographical regions of the city, and who knows what other information is part of the accounting process. The four digits of my address don't appear in any of the numbers. And, after all, the longest of these is still one digit shorter than my social security number.

Long account numbers are part and parcel of business these days. I don't have many bills that I pay by personal check, but I do notice that when I do, copying the account number accurately onto the check is a more difficult process than making out the check for the right amount. And it hasn't been that long since we paid all of our bills by making

out individual checks. And, yes, my checking account number has one more digit than my social security number and that number follows the bank routing number that has a long string of numbers as well. The debt card that goes with our checking account has another long number that is unique and different from all of the other numbers. Our bank has changed that number several times over the years as part of its regular security improvements. And the first thing that occurs when credit card fraud is suspected is that you are reissued a new card with a new number.

The temptation with all of the long numbers is to find some place to store them. Some account numbers, like those associated with automatic bill pay are entered into my computer. I don't have to remember them, the computer, in connection with the computers of the vendors retains the account numbers and the payment information. After carefully entering the information, I don't have to re-enter it each month. This, of course, creates a vulnerability to hacking - information about my bank account and the businesses where I spend money is being stored in cyberspace. Hopefully the encrypting works and the numbers are secure, but there is a level of trust that is required to do business this way.

I have read that President Andrew Jackson didn't trust banks and didn't like the idea of paper money. He wanted the currency of the country to be based on actual deposits of gold and silver which would be physically exchanged in transactions. At the time of his election to his first term as President in 1828, the Federal Government's official bank was the Second Bank of the United States, charter in 1816 for a period of 20 years. Nicholas Biddle of Philadelphia was the head of the bank. Biddle was an astute politician as well as an able banker. But he failed to persuade the President to back the renewal of the bank's charter. The charter was not renewed in 1836. The US government funds that had been invested in the bank were transferred to state financial institutions. The action caused the failure of the US National Bank. The bank's paper currency which had previously been the most stable in the country, failed with the bank. The result was a series of financial crises, beginning in 1837. The recession that followed lasted well into the mid 1840s. Profits, prices and wages went down and unemployment went up. People literally starved to death at the height of the crisis.

Many books have been written about the failures of the Jackson presidency, including his racist attitude toward Native Americans and the forced removal of Indian Tribes from their ancestral lands to Oklahoma over what has been called the Trail of Tears. I'm certainly no historian, but it is clear that the country emerged from the financial crisis that followed his failed banking policies was deep and took years for recovery. What has emerged as the decades that followed is a banking system that is far more complex with a Federal Reserve Bank and a host of private banks that are considered "too big to fail." The federal government has a role to play in regulating the banking industry and made huge investments in financial institutions to shore up the industry in the wake of the 2008 bank crisis. There is no lack of debate about the level of regulation that is necessary to keep our nation on a strong financial footing.

Money which is now counted in the trillions when it comes to the federal budget, is not a commodity based on physical assets only. It is based on the trust that people have for the numbers generated by a complex industry. The numbers are the product of human imaginations and creativity just as are the account numbers on my utility bill. The numbers aren't based on counting anything. The supply of money in the financial system is manipulated just like the rates of interest charged by a complex system of federal regulators. The system works because we choose to participate in it. And, just like the account, customer and meter numbers on my utility bill, I am able to participate in the system even though I don't fully understand it.

At least as of this morning, the water is still flowing from the faucets in my home and I can count on the amount of my bill being drafted from my checking account on April 18.

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March 31, 2017 – Of Honey and Cheerios

Decades ago I underwent allergy testing and that was followed up by a long series of desensitization shots. The treatment was very effective in my case. I have very little problems with seasonal allergies these days and I attribute the freedom from the sneezing, eye irritation and congestion to the work of the allergist who tested and treated me. One of the things that the allergist suggested was that I incorporate local honey into my diet as a way of continuing the desensitization process. Honey contains small amounts of pollen from the plants to which I am allergic and would help my system develop proper immunities. I know that this theory is not universally accepted, but the treatment had been successful and I was inclined to follow instructions from that doctor. Ever since those days I have sought out sources of local honey. I try to avoid refined sugar as much as possible in my food and use honey as my primary sweetener.

As someone who is a modest consumer of honey, I have been paying attention to the decline in bee populations that has dramatically affected honey producers in the past decade. Western honey bees have declined radically over the past few years. Since World War II the number of managed Western honey bee colonies in the US has declined from around six million to less than 3 million.

There are at least three threats to honey bee populations. Parasitic mites cause increased vulnerabilities to disease in the bees. Pesticides routinely used in contemporary agriculture have disrupted bee behavior and shortened bee life spans. A condition known as colony collapse disorder causes bees to abandon their hive with the queen and a few nurse bees left behind. Some scientists have suspected links between pesticide use and colony collapse, but the condition isn't fully understood.

So, I have been concerned by the bees.

I was encouraged by another food that has a connection to childhood allergies. When I was a child I had what today would probably be labeled a gluten intolerance. What my mother recognized was that wheat cereals seemed to leave me upset and colicky. So the cereal of choice for my childhood was Cheerios. The oat cereal seemed to agree with me better than others. I've been a life-long fan of Cheerios. We keep them in our house and although I rarely eat cereal for breakfast, I'll occasionally go for a bowl for supper and sometimes simply snack on the cereal. I thought General Mills, owners of the Cheerios brand, had a great idea when they came out with honey nut Cheerios and I've purchased more than a few boxes of the cereal over the years.

With my love of both honey and Cheerios, I was encouraged when General Mills came up with a campaign that involved placing 1.5 billion packages of wildflower seeds in boxes of cereal. The intent was for those who purchased the cereal to plant the wildflower seeds to provide habitat for honey bees. It seemed like a great idea. I have two areas in my yard where I plant wildflower seeds every year and am rewarded with lots of color.

However, I'm not too sure about the seeds in the Cheerios box. I haven't yet purchased a box with the seeds, but a recent article in the Washington Post suggests that I should think twice before planting the seeds. Kathryn Turner, an evolutionary biologist and postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Bioagricultural Sciences and Pest Management at Colorado State University, has raised questions about the seeds in the packet. Listed among the plant varieties in the seed package are Chinese Forget-Me-Nots, which are noxious and invasive weeds in the US. The plants are banned in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Turner also raised questions about California poppies, which are good in their intended territories, but not native and considered to be an invasive pest plant in southeastern states.

I'm sure the good people at Cheerios were trying to do a good thing. I'm also sure that the seed packets contain similar varieties of seeds to those in the packets I purchase at local stores each spring to add to my yard. If there are invasive species in the free seeds, I'm likely to have been planting invasive species for years in my own backyard.

General Mills has done a lot more than give away seeds to support bees. The company has invested \$4 million in partnership with the Xerces Society, which works to preserve pollinators such as butterflies and bees. The company has worked with farms that supply ingredients to Cheerios to create large-scale projects to expand honey bee habitat.

Once again we discover that the world in which we live is very complex. Our best efforts often have unintended consequences because we don't fully understand the complex interactions between various species of plants and animals. The application of pesticides to increase food production was done with the best of intentions. Farmers

want to feed hungry people. Increased production means more food. Cheerios lovers want to support honey bees. Increased wildflower habitat seems to be a reasonable solution. As is often the case, more study is needed.

Meanwhile the honey bee populations continues in serious decline. The crisis seems to demand quick action.

Free packets of wildflower seeds are not going to solve the honey bees' problems. They aren't likely to destroy the mix of plants across the nation, either. Big box home improvement stores probably distribute far more seeds nationwide than Cheerios could. The impact of the tiny packet of seeds might be mostly that of raising awareness which is an important task. Educating the general public to these issues is part of searching for solutions.

For now, I plan to put a teaspoon of honey into my morning tea. I may even buy a box of honey nut Cheerios sometime in the weeks to come. I'll probably plant a few packets of wildflower mixture in the yard this spring. But I'll also try to keep up with my reading and learning and do my best to avoid too many unintended consequences. Its a complex world in which we live.

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