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November 1, 2017 – Halloween

We had a rather laid-back Halloween at our house. We did not head out for any parties, but stayed home. A couple dozen trick-or-treaters rang our doorbell and received their treats. Asking them if they know any tricks seems to confuse them. The three who came back for a second visit received treats on their repeat visit, though not quite as much as they received the first time. There were a mixture of costumes, a couple of quite memorable wigs and one young visitor whose hockey mask didn't come off during his visit. It appears that our neighbors across the street were having a small party, with a bonfire and a few adults gathered around and the children of those parents made their way around our cul-de-sac visiting the closest neighbors. After a little while, we noticed that the fire was extinguished and the cars gone, perhaps a sign that they had planned a progressive event and moved on to the next neighborhood.

We got to see more young people in costume at work, where the preschool had parties on both Monday and Tuesday. There was a regular stream of ballerinas, pirates, and other characters at that end of the hallway and one of the teachers from the preschool brought us plates of cookies, fruit, meats and cheeses for a snack.

The place where we always notice Halloween is on West Boulevard, a residential street not far from the church. Each Halloween I remind all of the people who come to the church to be careful because there will be a lot of children on the Boulevard. As I left the church to make hospital visits around 4 pm, the flood of costumed characters was in full swing, with groups of ten or more children, some accompanied by parents working their way up and down the street. One friend who lives on the Boulevard said their plan in recent years was to prepare 1,000 snacks and when they were gone they turned out their lights. It is hard for me to imagine a thousand trick-or-treaters. I saw a couple of homes where those handing out treats were set up at the sidewalk so visitors didn't even have to walk up to the house and ring the doorbell.

As we sat in our living room last night, I tried to recall the "rules" for trick-or-treat that we had when I was a kid. I remember a few:

You can't go trick or treating before it gets dark.

Trick or treat is for children. You can do it in the 6th grade but that is all. When you are in the 7th grade, you are too old.

Some people don't do trick-or-treat. That is their choice. If the porch lights at a house are not turned on, skip that one and go on to the next.

We might have had other rules, but that is what I could remember. I could also remember that when I was a sixth grader, we took our bicycles and newspaper bags. We would park our bikes in the alley then go out with our bags and collect candy, stopping by our bikes frequently so that we could empty our paper bags into the big newspaper bags so it would appear that we didn't have much candy when we visited a

home. I think we made a pretty big haul that year, but I can't remember all of the details. I had little brothers with me and remember that they slowed me down quite a bit.

What surprises me about the way that our culture has shifted is how Halloween has become a holiday for adults these days. Clerks at the grocery store, at the bank, and even at the County offices were wearing costumes. I didn't have reason to visit my doctor's office, but I suspect that folks there also were wearing costumes. I'm pretty sure that there were plenty of decorations at professional offices all around the city. There were houses in our neighborhood that sported a lot of different decorations, many of which were homes with no children. I think that as far as we got with decorating when I was a kid was carving pumpkins and placing a candle in them.

I was quite surprised at the amount of decorations at an area care facility that I visited this week. In one hallway there were multiple inflatable decorations. The sound of the fans that kept the decorations inflated was so loud that I wondered how the residents could stand it. I guess there are some advantages to hearing loss. At one point, one of the residents unplugged a large viking ship. The decoration was definitely more frightening as it lay in a deflated pile of colored plastic on the floor than it had been when it was inflated. Several residents of the facility pointed out all of the places where I could get candy from containers that lined the halls. I'm pretty sure that that facility doesn't get very many child visitors, so the candy must have been intended for adults. Hopefully the residents got their share.

I'm not big on costumes. I wasn't as a child, either. The two most popular costumes when I was a kid were ghost, made of a sheet, and bum, being just some old clothes with lots of holes some of which were ill-fitting and perhaps a few black dots on the chin to resemble whiskers. Halloween was definitely a low budget affair in our house. As an adult, however, I do have a gorilla costume, a gift for my 50th birthday. My daughter does not like that costume, and has told me that it is too frightening to wear around children. One Halloween I put it on and sat on the front porch. I didn't see many trick-or-treaters and after a while the hot costume drove me inside where I removed it.

Today is my holiday. It is All Saints day and a good day for me to remember the many people who have been important in my life who have died. I won't be wearing a costume for this holiday, either.

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November 2, 2017 – Stewardship

In the life of the church, autumn is often a season of emphasis on stewardship. In many congregations, the focus is aimed at financial stewardship. We conduct an annual pledge drive to secure financial support for the coming budget year. In the congregation I serve, that process is fairly laid back. Envelopes are prepared for members with a

cover letter, a pledge card and a return envelope. Those envelopes are passed out before and after worship for a few weeks and those that are not picked up by members are mailed. A few members of the Department of Stewardship and Budget will come before the congregation and make an appeal for pledges. In a few weeks the stewardship drive is over and we go on with our life together. The process of forming a budget follows, using the totals of the pledges that have been made as an important part of the formula. This approach has been used for many years and each year the percentage of the budget that is supported by pledge income has slipped a little while unplugged income has become a much more important part of the budget formula. That system works for our church. We have a long history of balanced budgets and living within our means.

The concept of stewardship, however, is much broader than an annual appeal for financial support. Stewardship is the process of taking care of something. In the first chapter of Genesis, God names humans as stewards of other creatures including “the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” Our theology gives us responsibility for the care of other creatures.

Caring for others demands that we move significantly beyond our own self-interests. The moral and ethical thrust of Biblical teaching calls us to look beyond ourselves. We are called to love God and to love others. The gospels move us even farther, calling humans to self-sacrifice. “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

That is a far higher calling than running a fund drive for a nonprofit institution.

To be stewards of the church does involve making sure that financial decisions are responsible and that institutional health is maintained. Part of our stewardship is careful budgeting and generosity towards the needs and programs of the church. It involves making financial commitments. But if all we do is give money, we have fallen far short of our calling.

Being stewards of the church involves keeping our attention on the mission of the church - the work to which God is calling us. Churches can lose sight of the vision of serving others in a frenzy to maintain buildings and preserve the status quo. It takes constant attention and nurture to remain faithful to serving the needs of others, to reach out beyond the walls of the institution and beyond the ranks of current members. Churches generally do not fail because they face financial bankruptcy. They fail because they become so inwardly focused that they lose their capacity to grow. Institutional decline is often the product of individual members who put their own immediate needs and interests ahead of their obligations to serve others. When a church becomes only interested in taking care of its own members, it travels a path of decline. We are all mortal and we will not go on forever. Taking care of ourselves only is

a recipe for having fewer people to take care of each year until the institution runs out of people completely.

I am personally aware of this reality. I have officiated at the funerals of two people who were the last living members of a small rural church. When they died the church literally had no more members. It still had a nice building, but it was no longer a church.

Of course we are called to be stewards of far more than the institutional church. Our society, including our government, require constant stewardship. Democracy wanes when people put their own self interests ahead of the needs of fellow citizens. If we view government only as something that serves our interests and forget about the needs of others, democracy slides into autocracy.

Stewardship involves taking responsibility. When conflict arises, we often see people trying to duck responsibility. Blaming of others is one of the most common tactics employed when avoiding personal responsibility. "It's not my fault!" we cry, trying to deflect blame to some other person. Our faith calls us to a different position entirely. Instead of deflecting blame and pointing to others, we are called to confess our failings, repent from our mistakes, and accept the gift of new life. We don't have to go forward the way we always have done things. The grace of God is a gift that allows new directions and new possibilities.

An angry rampage directed at another person is generally not a sign of effective stewardship. To provide care for another demands that we not only accept God's grace for change in our lives, but we acknowledge that others can change as well.

We have a tendency to belittle the concept of stewardship when we reduce our thinking of stewardship to thoughts of raising money for institutional support. Responsibility for finances is required and it is important for us to conduct regular campaigns to encourage and inspire generosity in others. But money is not at the heart of our life together and being responsible for financial decisions is only part of our responsibility to others.

In our church, the conclusion of the fall stewardship drive is a special prayer offered on pledge dedication Sunday in which we give thanks to God for abundant generosity and we pray for guidance and faithfulness in the use of the resources that God has provided for our church. In a little over a week, I will need to lead that prayer in our congregation. Finding the right words is a challenge however. I want it to be about so much more than a stack of pledge cards and a church budget. I want it to be about our call to care for others in all of our lives.

It is likely that it will take more than a single prayer. Thessalonians urges us to "pray without ceasing." It is a good idea for those who wish to be stewards.

November 3, 2017 – My Advice: Study Ethics

I'm fairly sure that this journal entry is going to sound like one of my "soapboxes." I've commented on this topic before and I'll comment about it again. It is a theme in my evaluation of the state of education in our country today. I'll make no bones about it. I'm a huge fan of liberal arts education. I believe that the humanities are essential to the formation of good citizens. I believe that every student pursuing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) degrees, should be required to take courses in ethics and philosophy - at least the philosophy of science. I know that there is huge pressure on students and on parents to invest only in education that has a measurable financial return, but we as a society are not being realistic in our evaluation of the costs of focusing narrowly on science and engineering as the mark of an educated person.

We got a good look at that this week. On Tuesday, the Senate Judiciary Committee kicked off three hearings examining the relationship between social media and Russian influence in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Spokespersons for Google, Facebook and Twitter gave testimony about how their platforms were and continue to be manipulated as part of Russian political disinformation campaigns targeting U.S. voters. The tech companies, ever wary of any hint of regulation, chose to send their general counsel - their lawyers - instead of their top executives. They wanted to have tight control over what was said before policy makers. Let's be honest, the tech companies are not used to having their feet held to the fire. They aren't used to scrutiny. They are accustomed to ever increasing profits and a business model that is based on perpetual growth. They get nervous when anyone questions how they are doing business. Any business that has such incredible discrepancies between actual income and stock prices ought to be nervous, but that is a different matter.

For now the tech companies were asked how they allowed such blatant manipulation by foreign investors, some of whom represented foreign governments in their platforms. One line of questioning that demonstrated the situation of the companies was Facebook General Counsel Colin Stretch being questioned by Senator Al Franken of Minnesota. Franken pointed out that Facebook is proud of its ability to manage and coordinate millions of data points and to deliver advertising directly to consumers based on multiple data points. Stretch agreed that the company has great expertise in managing data points. Franken closed in: "You put billions of data points together all the time... you can't put together rubles and a political ad? How did you not connect those two dots?"

The companies judiciously didn't send their technology wizards to testify. They knew what might have happened had they done so. They sent, rather, their lawyers, believing that lawyers might be better able to represent their interests. They were already admitting that they need more expertise than simply STEM-educated people.

What they didn't send to represent their companies were their chief ethicists. The reason is simple. They don't employ ethicists. They believe that technology can be somehow pursued in a manner that is ethically neutral.

If I were advising a high school student on what field to enter, I would definitely suggest philosophy and ethics. It is abundantly clear that our society - and the tech companies that are leading 21st century innovation are desperately in need of philosophers and ethicists, and that need is only going to grow as time passes.

Look for a moment at another company that has garnered a huge share of headlines recently. Amazon.com is frequently touted as a unique type of business. Wall Street is almost completely baffled in its attempts to predict its quarterly earnings. The company operates on razor thin margins and it reinvests all of its earnings back into the company to produce growth. The value of its stock is based purely on continual growth within the company. It isn't like shareholders are being paid dividends, or expect to ever do so. They purchase the stock on the belief that it will be worth more in the future because of the explosive growth of the company. The company that once sold books, now sells almost every type of retail product and it makes itself the exclusive source of certain items such as self-published books, single source craft items and a lot more. Companies that depend on showrooms have a great difficulty competing with Amazon in part because Amazon doesn't need traditional stores. It is even more difficult to compete, however, because Amazon doesn't care about making money. When it does do so, as it did last quarter when it made about 19 cents per share, it makes big news in part because analysts expected it to lose 14 cents per share. Amazon's profits are tiny when compared to other companies like Google and eBay. Its entire model is completely based on growth and growth alone.

Growth, however, does not go on forever. There are real limits to resources, customers, and capital. It can be a fun ride while the growth lasts, but there will come a point when continued growth becomes impossible. The model of endless growth is illegal when it is sold to investors in its most blatant form: each investor recruits two further investors. It is called a pyramid scheme and not only is it illegal, it always fails and leaves investors with losses. Ask any of the investors who trusted Bernard Madoff with their funds based on his ability to make promises of growth that outstripped the rest of the market.

I'm not saying amazon.com is a pyramid scheme exactly. I am saying that they could use some people who are educated in ethics and the history and philosophy of business as well as those who understand the philosophy of science. They may not know they need such expertise, but the time will come when it will be abundantly clear.

That day seems to have arrived for Facebook, Twitter and Google. It may also have arrived for Uber, Lyft, and Airbnb. I'm betting that it won't be long before they will be willing to pay big salaries not only to the techies, but also to those who can give them solid advice on ethics.

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November 4, 2017 – Ted doesn't do TED

If you google my first name the first thing that comes up is the media organization TED. Known for TED talks, which are speeches by influential speakers on business, education, science, technology and creativity. The acronym stands for Technology, Entertainment, Design. The annual TED Conference, started in 1990 was preceded by several years of less-organized events. Now there are both events fully organized by the official TED group and more widespread events sanctioned by the group and hosted by local organizers. YouTube has an extensive catalogue of TED talks and NPR has a program that excerpts talks and interviews presenters called the TED Radio Hour.

I used to listen to quite a few of the talks. The slogan of the TED group is "ideas worth spreading," and there are a lot of good ideas and useful information in TED talks. I subscribed to the TED Radio Hour podcast for a couple of years.

However, my enthusiasm for TED has waned in recent months. I'm not sure why, but it probably started with my unsubscribing from the TED Radio Hour. I did so because so many of the podcasts were reruns. They simply could not produce new shows as quickly as their podcast schedule, so they would repeat shows that had been previously put out. If you subscribe that means that you keep getting podcasts that you have already heard. There is a way to simply click on to the next podcast, but because I primarily listen to podcasts when driving, this is a bit of an annoyance and I decided that there were plenty of other podcasts that didn't present that particular problem.

As a preacher, however, I also was learning the limits of TED talks to teach me much about public speaking. TED talks feature excellent speakers who are highly rehearsed for the talks that they give. For the most part the speakers are engaging and even charming. Listening to a TED talk makes you want to listen to another one. I noticed something about the talks, however. They didn't seem to motivate me to action. They were simply presentations of good ideas. I might learn something new. I might understand something better. But I rarely felt motivated to do anything specific in response to the talks.

More interesting to me as a preacher, however, was that the presenters usually gave a single talk. A few have given more than one talks and a smaller number or printers have given several. There is no TED talk presenter who was giving anywhere near 50 talks a year. As a preacher, I deliver at least one sermon each week. In addition, I address groups of people with prayers and instructions and make other presentations on a regular basis. Today is a good example. We are making a firewood delivery to the Cheyenne River Reservation. That is the main activity of the day for many of our volunteers. I will be leading a 30 minute devotion before our departure and will present

the invocation at a large banquet in the evening. The words I speak on both occasions need to be concise, to the point, engaging and inspiring. It is a challenge of most of my days.

Unlike TED presenters, I have a mixed record. People who attend our church regularly know that some of my sermons are better than others. As hard as I work at public speaking, and I do work at it a lot, I frequently experience the sensation that I could have done better. It frequently surprises me that my congregation doesn't always react to a sermon the same way that I do. I've done what I have evaluated to be a less than usual quality job only to hear from a member of the congregation that I have said exactly what they needed that day. The Holy Spirit works through our human imperfection to touch lives even when our performance is less than stellar.

Still, I rehearse my sermons every week. The transition from written to oral language requires a fairly high degree of memorization for me. I almost always go through my sermons early in the morning on Sunday to an empty church. Some weeks I have been in the sanctuary rehearsing for multiple days in a row before Sunday.

I think I might be capable of a TED talk, but I know I am not capable of giving a TED talk every week. Not only do I speak too often for the degree of polish in a TED talk, most of the people in my congregation have heard me speak a lot of times already. My setting and the challenge of oral communication is very different from the TED stage.

Part of the difference has to do with content. I do not routinely speak of Technology, Entertainment or Design when I step into the pulpit. Actually I rarely deliver sermons from the pulpit, preferring to stand in the center of the chancel in front of the communion table. That aside, my content should have a more intimate connection with the everyday lives of those who come to worship. Although I do see sermons as an opportunity to teach the Bible, they do so by making connections between the scriptures and the everyday lives of the people who are listening. Building that relationship means addressing real issues in the lives of the people that I serve. Although I try to be educated, rational, and careful with my choice of words, I understand that I am not the originator of the ideas I address. I am part of a long line of religious thinkers who are always influenced by those who have gone before. My job is not to send the people away from the church thinking about my sermon or the quality of my presentation. It is to send my people away from the church having made a significant connection with God. It doesn't matter if they remember what I say, if the scriptures and the traditions of faith are communicated to them. It isn't about me. It is about what God is doing in our world.

I'll probably continue to listen to TED talks from time to time. It is humbling and educational to listen to one who is a better speaker than I am. Still, I don't aspire to become a TED speaker. I have a sermon to deliver tomorrow. I hope it is meaningful to those who listen.

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November 5, 2017 – All Saints Sunday 2017

A few days ago, I was looking at the pictures of those whose funerals were celebrated by the pastors of our church in the past year. We were preparing for this morning's worship. It is a recent tradition in our church to show the pictures of those who have died on All Saint's Sunday, the first Sunday of November. It is not an attempt to stretch out grief or to dwell in sadness, but rather a way of acknowledging the continuing presence of those who have died in the story of our church family. The exercise always brings a tear to my eye. I have been pastor in this congregation long enough to feel deeply the loss of those who die. They are my friends.

We also read the lectionary readings for All Saints Day on this day in place of the readings for Prober 26. Our lectionary places All Saints on November 1, regardless of what day of the week and assigns texts for every Sunday. When November 1 lands on a Sunday, there are two sets of texts for that day. We choose to observe All Saints on a Sunday to involve a larger percentage of our congregation in the celebration.

I use the words celebrate and cerebration carefully because we don't often think of funerals as occasions for celebration. Although we do want to offer gratitude for the life of the one we have loved and we do want to recall the joy that person brought into this world, we are deeply aware that grief involves pain. It isn't easy to deal with the complex emotions of loss.

The Gospel for today, Matthew 5:1-12, is the familiar beatitudes from Jesus' sermon on the mount. We have heard that passage so many times that we have kind of domesticated it. It no longer shocks us if it ever did so. The words are appreciated for their poetry and rhythm, but when we pause to think of their meaning, it is strange that Jesus started the reflection with a list of blessings that don't seem to be blessings at all on first glance. The second of those blessings causes us pause: "Blessed are those who mourn." When grief overwhelmed us, our initial reaction is rarely to see it as a blessing. It doesn't feel like a blessing.

I remember the season of grief that enveloped my family a few years ago when my brother, my mother and my father-in-law all died in the span of 12 months. I wrestled heartily with my emotions. I still find it painful to go back and read my journal entries from those days. There was much about that year that I don't want to repeat. And, when I read those entries, I am well aware that there were struggles and problems I experienced that we even too painful to make it into the journal.

Being one who mourns doesn't feel like a blessing.

I suppose the same is true of some of the other beatitudes. I probably doesn't feel like a blessing to experience oneself poor in spirit or to hunger and thirst for righteousness, or to be persecuted.

Of the nine blessings, the first eight are written as if speaking of others: "blessed are those." It is only the tenth that is directed directly at the listeners to the sermon: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." The change in the the person addressed and the placement of this as the last of the blessings has a rhetorical impact. We hear it differently. Like many of the others, it doesn't seem to be a blessing at all. We do not want to be reviled or persecuted. We don't desire others to utter all kinds of evil against us falsely.

Some of the deepest blessings of this life don't seem like blessings at all.

To me, it seems that blessings take a while to be revealed. My perspective on the losses of several years ago is different from my perspective in the midst of loss and grief. When I look back, I can sense how important those people were in my life and how much my life has been influenced by their presence. I can also recognize that those who die do not become absent in my life. They are not gone.

We have such a tendency to think of the life of faith as a single generation enterprise. We speak of religion and the church as if what is most important is what is happening right now. We have a tendency to think of the church in terms of what it can provide for me in my life. But God is continually engaged in a multi-generational enterprise. From God's perspective, the present is only part of the story. These tensions are often evident when controversy or disagreement arise in the church. We have been blessed with those who remember the past and with those who can envision the future. They don't always agree on what should be done in the present. The disagreement is not a curse, it is a blessing when we can see that it is a way of reminding us that ours is not the only time in the story of the church.

Our faith didn't arise instantly in our time. It has been forged by generations of faithful people experiencing all that life has to offer in generation after generation of people who seek relationship with God. We are a part of that story, but only a part. Ours isn't to be or even to know the whole story.

It shouldn't surprise us that our emotions are mixed as we celebrate All Saints Sunday. It is a bittersweet day. Mixed emotions, however, are not a reason to avoid our memories, even the painful ones. The gospel reminds us to count our blessings, even when we can't see them as blessings. It is a challenge for us, so we practice our faith. We do this every year as we continue to learn.

November 6, 2017 – Sanctuary

At the deepest roots of our Judeo-Christian tradition is a conversation about place. The earliest stories of our people tell of the time when Abram and Sarai left the land of their parents and forebears and headed out to a new place - a place that God would show them - a place for their children and grandchildren to have as a home. Some of our teachers have said that this means that we became a people of history and not a people of place. They taught that what defines us as distinct from other people is that we are defined not by the place where we live but by the stories of our people.

The stories of our people, however, begin to be stories of significant places, almost from the beginning. You can't tell the history of our people without naming the places: the field where Sarah was buried, the place where Jacob wrestled with the angel, Mount Horeb, where Moses spoke with God, Mount Nebo, where Moses looked into the promised land and died before having entered it. And Jerusalem - the city and the temple - which from the time of David became the spiritual center of our story. It was the city of Jesus' dedication and the place of his death and burial. Despite our sense that God is in every place, specific places have come to hold great meaning for our people. Pilgrimage to sacred places has been a part of our tradition for millennia.

And we build sanctuaries - special buildings with special rooms dedicated to worship. We make the distinction between a sanctuary and a shrine. A shrine is a place set up with symbols to focus one's attention on that which is beyond the temporal. A sanctuary is a safe place for people to come together to worship. You can visit a shrine all by yourself, but a sanctuary is a gathering place.

We have created our sanctuaries with safety in mind. It has been a tradition, at least since medieval times, that weapons are left outside of the sanctuary. For those of us who visit our sanctuaries regularly, they become filled with layer upon layer of meaning and story. Our sanctuaries are the places where we baptize our children and gather to celebrate the commitments of marriage. They are the places where we hold the funerals for our loved ones. When we enter our sanctuaries, our minds are flooded with memories of other times of sharing this space with others.

Our sanctuaries are holy ground for us.

So the horror of yesterday's attack upon the sanctuary of First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs Texas overwhelms us. At least 26 people, aged from 5 to 72, were killed and 20 others were wounded in a horrific attack. This is a small congregation. Average Sunday worship attendance is around 40. We are likely to learn more in days to come, but what we now know is difficult to understand. A lone gunman got out of his car at a gas station across the street. He was wearing a bullet-proof vest and carried an assault rifle. He shot into the church building from two different locations before entering the church where more shots were fired. He exited the building and got back into his car

and sped from the scene pursued by armed civilians. His car wrecked and he was found dead in the vehicle. It isn't clear whether he died from a self-inflicted gunshot or from a shot fired by one of his pursuers.

The pastor of the church was away yesterday, attending meetings in Oklahoma. His daughter was among the victims. I can't imagine what comes next. The number of funerals that need to be conducted in the next week will demand that other pastors come to the assistance of the small congregation. How does a church recover from the loss of half its regular members? How do you return to a sanctuary desecrated by such an unholy act? These questions will need to be confronted in the days, weeks and years to come.

And those of us who live in other places will have to have some very hard conversations about the nature of our sanctuaries. The conversation has already begun in the church that I serve. Not long after the news of the killings in Texas came the first of what I assume will be multiple inquires about what we should do to protect the people who worship in our sanctuary. Some have proposed that we need to have armed security teams in place. The conversations are not limited to our church. They have been going on for several years in many different places. Our insurance company has informed us of significant legal risks of having armed guards, so I know that the conversation is occurring in other congregations of our denomination.

We recoil in horror at the thought. We are servants of the Prince of Peace. We have long discussions about the need for violence in any form in any place. At best it is a necessary evil. For many a life of pacifism is preferable to participating in the violence of the outside world. Importing guns, which are the tools of death, into our sanctuary where the gospel of abundant life is preached seems profoundly wrong.

And yet we will need to have those conversations.

We have believed that our church is safe. We are in a rather isolated location. We are not one of the mega churches attracting thousands each week. We don't think of ourselves as the kind of place that would become the target of someone's biases or anger. But that must have been true of First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs before yesterday. How could they have imagined they would become the target of such a horrible act?

I believe that a culture of vigilance does not require that we bring lethal weapons into our sanctuary. I believe that we do not have to conform to the violence of this world. I believe that guns don't solve the problem of violence. But I know that there will be another church whose sanctuary will be desecrated. We live in a violent culture.

So we need to have these conversations. And they won't be easy. Yesterday, after I learned of the shooting, I went alone into the sanctuary of our church. The doors were

unlocked to the world. I sat in a safe place to pray for the people of the church in Sutherland Springs. I gave thanks for the peace of our sanctuary. I did not feel vulnerable. I felt safe. We must be careful to maintain the safety of that place.

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November 7, 2017 - Mornings

I've long been a morning person and I have been richly rewarded for my early rising. When I was a child, my father rose early and left the house before daylight. He was a pilot who operated light aircraft in the mountains and mornings were the best time for cool calm air that allowed the planes to perform well in the rugged environment. When I rose early, there were many days when I could go with him, something that my sisters and brothers got, but in smaller doses and less frequently than I. It simply was harder for them to get up and get going in the morning. The practice of mornings has continued throughout my life. When I was a college student, rising early earned me the job of opening the library in the morning. The library wasn't busy first thing in the morning and I had quiet time for additional study and access to all of the reserve volumes that professors had designated for use in the library only. That pattern of study early in the morning worked well for me in graduate school as well.

These days I am the first to arrive at the church office each day. That first hour is quiet. The phone rarely rings. I have time to concentrate and focus.

Having lived this way for many years I have noticed that I work best in the morning. I can accomplish much more in the first four hours of the day that I can in the last four hours. When my work requires me to work into the evening, which it frequently does, I am less efficient in managing my tasks and I make more mistakes.

There are drawbacks. I am somewhat out of sync with the people that I serve. There are important tasks of my job which are not best done in the wee hours of the morning. First thing in the morning is not a good time for hospital or nursing home visits. I have a bible study group that meets at 8 am. It is more lightly attended than the bible study that meets at 9:30 am. I have boards and committees that meet at lunchtime, late afternoon, during the dinner hour and in the evening. I don't have any that meet first thing in the morning. It is much better for me to adjust my schedule to meet the needs and desires of others than to ask them to conform to my somewhat unusual schedule.

And so I reap the benefit of another advantage to the morning: solitude. There is less traffic on the road. There are fewer people in the places I go for recreation. The phone doesn't ring as often. I can enjoy the peace and quiet of the morning at my own pace.

I've wondered if the reason I am more efficient and effective in the morning has to do with the simple fact that there is no one putting pressure on me. I work at my own pace

and discover the pace that works best for me. Even when I am trying to accomplish tasks to meet a deadline, deadlines are usually at the end of the day, not the beginning. I have time to think and to work at the pace that suits me.

William Stafford's poem, "Any Morning," hints at even more important virtues of the morning:

"Any Morning"
by William Stafford

Just lying on the couch and being happy.
Only humming a little, the quiet sound in the head.
Trouble is busy elsewhere at the moment, it has
so much to do in the world.

People who might judge are mostly asleep; they can't
monitor you all the time, and sometimes they forget.
When dawn flows over the hedge you can
get up and act busy.

Little corners like this, pieces of Heaven
left lying around, can be picked up and saved.
People won't even see that you have them,
they are so light and easy to hide.

Parker Palmer suggests that we learn to pick up and save "a little piece of Heaven" so it can be later retrieved when we encounter those who judge, frown and shake their heads. I'm not sure that I am able to capture and keep the mood of the morning, but I do have a sense that there is a bit of my morning routine that does naturally allow me to feel closer to God. Just as some religions writers speak of "thin spaces," where it is easy to draw close to God, I am convinced that there are "thin times," when a life of devotion and praise is less challenging than it might be in the midst of the over scheduled, hectic nature of our daily lives.

Morning allows me to arrange my tasks and activities in a pattern that works for me. When I get into the hours of appointments and meetings, I need to conform to the needs and expectations of others. Unless there is some huge crisis, no one pays attention to what the pastor is doing at 5 am.

One of my friends who is retired has told me that one of the benefits of retirement for him is that he rarely has to be wakened by an alarm clock. He simply sleeps until he wakes. I do use an alarm clock to remind me that it is time to rise, but I don't feel the irritation towards the device that he reports. I may stop using it when I retire, but I doubt that I will stay in bed much later. When we are on vacation, I always turn off my alarm,

but usually rise in the wee hours to write my journal and do other tasks. Sometimes I go back to bed afterward for a while, sometimes I do not. I suspect that most days I'd get along just fine without the alarm. But when I retire, I have no intention of giving up my mornings.

They are little pieces of heaven.

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November 8, 2017 – Happy Birthday Mickey

Yesterday, I paid a visit to a member of our church whose birthday is today. He's 89, having been born on November 8, 1928. Just knowing his birthday tells you a bit about the man. His childhood was during the Great Depression He was just a few years too young to be a soldier during the Second World War, but he would have been old enough to be a part of the home effort and can certainly remember the key historical events of that war. He began his active working career during the post war boom. Those things are true of the other members of his age cohort. Of course they tell you a bit about who he is, but not much, really. Each human life is unique and each of us has a story that is different from others who share our age.

Among the unique characteristics of this particular man are those that have to do with where he was born and how he grew up. His father was a railroad agent in a small town in South Dakota. He began doing odd jobs for the railroad at a fairly early age and when he became an adult, working for the railroad was a natural career choice for him. He also grew up swimming in the small reservoirs behind the dams that the railroad built near their tracks to provide water for steam engines, though the transition away from steam was well underway when he began to work for the railroad.

Yesterday his room was decorated with Mickey Mouse-themed items. It has been a family tradition for them to pick up on the fact that he and Mickey Mouse are the same age. Technically, Mickey Mouse didn't appear in a publicly released film until ten days later, on November 18, 1928, but after 90 years ten days doesn't seem like too big of a difference.

Certainly the idea of Mickey Mouse preceded the release of "Steamboat Willie." Actually Walt Disney and animator Ub Iwerks had made two short animated films featuring Mickey Mouse prior to "Steamboat Willie." "Plane Crazy" and "The Gallopin' Gaucho," initially failed to find distributors. Both were picked up and released later.

Disney's first name for the mouse was Mortimer, but Walt's life Lily suggested that "Mickey" was a better choice. The rest, as they say, is history.

Mickey didn't speak in the first few short films. In his ninth short, "The Carnival Kid," Mickey Mouse said, "Hot Dog!" Disney couldn't find the right person to do the voice for Mickey, so he did it himself until about 1947, when other actors began to do the voice.

Mickey Mouse was the first animated character to have a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. That star was set on his birthday, November 18, in 1978. Mickey was 50 then. Now he's 89. Time flies when you are having fun.

Mickey is still a major attraction at Disney theme parks and the iconic Mickey ears are one of the most popular souvenirs sold in their shops.

It is fun to have the association between my friend and Mickey Mouse. I doubt if I would have paid any attention to the birthday of the cartoon character were it not for the fun association made by the family of the man I was visiting yesterday. Although he was enjoying the balloons and brightly-colored decorations, our conversation didn't dwell much on the iconic mouse. Instead we talked of his growing up in rural South Dakota and how the town of Faith appeared when he was a kid - before the days of paved streets and concrete sidewalks. Those were dustbowl days in all of the upper midwest and that part of South Dakota is pretty dry in a normal year. People trying to eek out a living farming and raising cattle on that dry ground were falling short of self sufficiency. Hard times for the folks in the country meant hard times for the folks in town as well. But when you are a kid you are less aware of those details. There were always games to play and adventures to have. They didn't have money, but no one else did, either. He doesn't remember being hungry or missing out on a bed at night. He had a loving family and good neighbors and has fond memories of his early years.

He's got a few years on me, but that detail doesn't seem important to him these days. Because I have some familiarity with where he grew up and with another town, up in North Dakota, where he served as depot agent for many of his adult years, he speaks to me as if I could remember events that occurred before I had ever visited either place. I don't bother to correct the details of our conversation. I'm happy to have him tell his stories and to imagine the events he can recall so clearly.

Unlike the famous cartoon with whom he shares a birthday, my friend hasn't appeared in movies. He isn't famous. There are no theme parks where his likeness is displayed. There are no bronze statues of him holding hands with Walt Disney. He doesn't need that kind of attention. He wants his family to know his story. It is important for him that his grandchildren appreciate the pictures and railroad memorabilia that decorate his room. His legacy lies in their lives, not in the trappings of fame and fortune. His sense of meaning comes from having lived a life of honest and meaningful work, from having served the communities in which he has lived, and from his long and loving marriage and the family they raised.

And he likes it when I come to visit. Being a part of the church has been very important in his life. He likes to tell me all of the different jobs he has held within the church and to recall the many friends he has made through the church. My presence reminds him of that community where he continues to be a treasured member.

So, happy birthday Mickey! I'm glad my friend reminded me that your day is coming.

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November 9, 2017 – Very Bad Days

I think that everyone should read Judith Viorst's children's book, "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day." In fact, I'm considering buying the digital version so I can keep it on my tablet computer for reference.

The beginning of the book gives a good flavor of how it goes:

"He could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. He went to sleep with gum in his mouth and woke up with gum in his hair. When he got out of bed, he tripped over his skateboard and by mistake dropped his sweater in the sink while the water was running. He could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

"It was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Nothing at all was right. Everything went wrong, right down to lima beans for supper and kissing on TV.

"What do you do on a day like that? Well, you may think about going to Australia. You may also be glad to find that some days are like that for other people too."

I had a conversation with someone yesterday who was having a day like Alexander's. I don't think he had watched television, so the kissing on TV probably wasn't part of his day, and I doubt that lima beans were, either, but you know what I mean. His day was good enough for a country song about your wife leaving you, your pickup trucking being repossessed and your dog dying. Only that isn't what happened to him.

His day, however, was a string of painful experiences and news. His dog did actually get sick and the veterinarian is recommending a very expensive surgery. His brother got sick, too, and he lives far enough away that he won't be able to go visit him soon. Fortunately his pickup is paid off and his fiancé didn't leave him, but there were a bunch of other bad news events in his life as well. I don't have permission to give out any of the details and don't want anyone to try to identify him from my journal entry, so it makes sense to simply say he had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

Like Alexander he needs to know "that some days are like that for other people too."

At least he needed to know that he isn't alone. We spent quite a bit of time, most of it standing outside next to his pickup with me freezing because my coat was in my car, so he could tell me about his day. Problem after problem that he encountered was very real and I could see he was in a bind, but they were problems that I could not solve. I just listened as he told me about everything that was going on. I agreed with him that the things he was reporting were very stressful and that he needed help. I helped him figure out a couple of ideas about what he might do next.

He told me that he had been thinking, before he spoke to me, of going out and spending the rest of his cash on getting stinking drunk. Fortunately he decided that such action would be a very bad idea and would make things worse. He is, after all, the son of an alcoholic who tacked most of his problems by drinking. Most of those problems got a lot worse because of his father's drinking. He gets it. When we departed he was heading for the gym to work out, a far better solution than the thought that entered his mind and he dismissed. I pointed out to him that he was already taking steps to making tomorrow better by making a good decision about what to do next.

It made me think of the All Saints Gospel reading of the beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . blessed are those who mourn . . . blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . blessed are those who are persecuted . . . blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you . . ." Jesus offers blessings to people who don't seem, at least on the surface, to be enjoying blessings. They seem to be enduring painful experiences.

Its a bit like a northerner like myself hearing Tennessee Ernie Ford say "Bless your pea-pickin' heart!" I wasn't sure that pea-pickin' was a blessing. I used to love the way he said it on television, but I never quite understood what it meant. I'm told that it was at times coupled with an insult: ". . . not the sharpest knife in the drawer, bless his little pea pickin' heart." I don't remember hearing the song or knowing the lyrics. I just remember the phrase being uttered at the end of a television show.

I wanted to say "Bless you!" to the guy with whom I was having the conversation. I couldn't quite figure out how to do that, so I offered a prayer instead, and suggested to him that when problems become so overwhelming, it helps to offer them to God. God doesn't sweep in and fix everything that is wrong, but it reminds you that you are not alone in the hard places of your life.

The real people I know in this life often have hard days. They encounter troubles that aren't easily solved. They become victims of poor decisions made by others. There is a lot in their lives that is beyond their control. They have terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days. And having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day doesn't mean that you are a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad person. In fact very good people sometimes have very bad days.

And God loves them even when they are having those very bad days.

We can certainly share that love as well. Bless their hearts, they are good people. The blessing doesn't come from the bad things that have happened. It comes from knowing they are not alone. God cares. And so do we.

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November 10, 2017 – William Penn and Container Shipping

William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, was the son of Vice Admiral William Penn, one of the chief administrators of the British Navy. In fact the grant of the land that became Pennsylvania wasn't an act of graciousness on the part of the king in response to Penn's vision of how to create a peaceful society as is sometimes reported in history books. The king has borrowed 16,000 pounds from Penn's father. The tract of land was given in satisfaction of the debt. It is strange how something that doesn't belong to someone could be "given" to satisfy a debt, but that is the way it went. Furthermore, Penn wasn't focusing on spiritual values in the selection of the site for this "towne." He was a careful and strategic thinker, who selected the plot of land closest to the deepest water and set about establishing shipping and shipbuilding businesses to bring trade to his new location. He was smart, strategic and his planning paid off with great success.

Penn not only recruited shipbuilders to his new colony, he also recruited all of the supporting professions. Boatwrights, rope makers, sailmakers, block and pull makers, trunion and treenail makers were all imported early in the development of the colony. He also recruited and invested heavily in coopers. The latter made the barrels that were fashioned to hold his ships cargoes. He also was very successful in developing capital to develop his city. The Free Society of Traders was a joint-stock company of elite english investors, who received special concessions for their investments in the colony.

At the time English ships dominated the Atlantic trade, especially in the north Atlantic where trade from the new colonies and England was booming. Penn began to encourage the creation of 50' to 60' ocean-going vessels and before long colonial ships had entered and were beginning to capture large amounts of the shipping.

Pennsylvania became a center for the manufacture of oak barrels, essential to the trade business. Exports from the new world were primarily agricultural in the early days and needed to be packaged in water-tight containers. The wood for the barrels came largely from the same trees that were used in ship building, employing shorter pieces than were required for the building of the ships. Penn stipulated that for all of his farmer-settlers one in five acres of land was to be left as forest and all oak trees suitable for shipbuilding were his personal property. He then sold those trees to shipbuilders and coopers, in whose businesses he was also heavily invested.

William Penn had some innovative ideas about the organization of society and religious pluralism, but his success in the new world was due, in large part to his business acumen and multi-faceted investments.

Coopers, who made barrels, were essential to world trade for centuries. Since Roman times, when casks and barrels began to replace pottery vessels due to their lighter weight, those who built barrels were essential to the shipping industry.

Times have changed. Barrels are no longer the primary vessels for shipping agricultural products long distance. The revolution in shipping began after the Second World War. In April 1956, a refitted oil tanker carried fifty-eight steel shipping containers from Newark to Houston. From that modes beginning, container shipping rapidly became a huge industry. That first trip was preceded by a decade of struggle trying to get the concept of a container that could be shipped by truck, rail or ship. It was the development of standardized shipping containers that allowed for the rapid expansion of global trade. By making shipping so cheap that industry could locate factories far from customers, the container paved the way for Asia to become the world's workshop and brought low-cost products from around the globe to the shores of America. It is literally true that without shipping containers, Wal-Mart could not exist.

Unlike the days of William Penn, when American coopers produced far more barrels than were produced in Europe, allowing for American shipping companies to begin to dominate the trade, these days, the majority of the world's shipping containers are not manufactured in the United States. In fact, our trade imbalance is so dramatic that excess shipping containers are piling up on the coasts of the country, driving down the price of the containers themselves. Empty containers are now trucked from the coasts to the midwest and resold as storage units. There are at least two facilities in our immediate area that offer containers for rent or sale at very reasonable costs compared to traditional buildings.

Shipping container architecture, generally based on 40' containers, has become a sub speciality of contemporary design. Using the steel containers as primary structural elements, architects have designed a wide variety of buildings. You can purchase complete homes made out of containers that can be shipped to any location that can be reached with a semi truck. Starting at around \$45,000, completed, container homes are being seen as low cost, weather resistant homes. Lower cost homes have appeared on the Internet. I have seen a one-room home office based on a 20' container, complete with a plumbed bathroom, furnishings, and delivery for under \$19,000 on eBay. Local building codes are being adapted and changed to allow the homes. Once considered to be industrial eyesores, more and more cities are allowing modified containers in existing neighborhoods.

So much for coopers. You can still buy barrels and half barrels from a variety of sellers. Usually marketed as whiskey barrels, some of these actually have been used in the whiskey business before being retired and sold as items for home decoration. It seems to me that you'd have quite a business making barrel furniture to be used in container homes. The theme wouldn't be lost on me, anyway.

For the time being, shipping is an incredibly important slice of the world economy. We're no longer packing wheat into barrels and loading the barrels onto wind-driven ships, but getting goods from one place to another provides a lot of jobs around the world.

The visionary thinking of William Penn may have been as important in the field of shipping as it was in the field of religion.

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November 11, 2017 – Life in the Clutter

I have lived my adult life on the edge of disorganization. The desk where I sit writing this journal entry is cluttered. I'm pretty sure that most of the papers in the piles on this desk have become dated and obsolete. There are a few that should be saved and filed. Most can be thrown in the recycling bin. But I need to sort them and the job of sorting seems overwhelming, so it isn't at all uncommon for me to add a layer to the piles as I go through my days. On occasion I will spend a half day sorting and get the desk clear, but that doesn't last. My desk at work is in a very similar state. When the piles threaten to fall over and cover my computer keyboard, I finally get around to thinning them out a bit. There are stacks of books on the floor in this office and my shelves are full.

It isn't that I don't appreciate cleanliness and organization. I do. It isn't that I don't know how to sort things out and get organized. I do. I just prioritize my time in such a fashion that clutter is always near at hand.

I know that part of the way I live my life has to do with the ways in which I imitate the lives of others.

When I was in elementary school, I got very good grades in penmanship. I loved the practice writing sessions, making rows of big fat even o's and lines of straight l's across the double-lined paper. Then, at some point, when I was in about the fourth grade, I began to notice that there were a lot of adult men in my life whose penmanship was horrible. Dr. Standish's signature on a prescription was an illegible set of scribbles. Dr. Harries' instructions weren't readable by my eye. My father's signature was unique, but his capital letters were far more recognizable than the lower case ones. He added frills and extra loops to his signature as well. My teacher noticed the nearly instant change in my penmanship and commented on it in my report card. My handwriting never fully recovered. I can write legibly and try to do so when illustrating a talk or teaching a class,

but my notes to myself are often hard even for me to decipher and my signature is remarkably similar to my father's with the H of Huffman embellished with extra swooshes of the pen.

When I was in graduate school, one of the best teachers of my life moved to another school at the end of my second year of study. I helped him with the chore of cleaning out his office. One wall was filled with a huge row of filing cabinets and he had to pare down the contents into only four cabinets with four drawers each. Mostly it was a process of eliminating duplicate copies. There were some files that held two dozen or more copies of the same document. He used a lot of handouts in his teaching and he had copies made in sufficient quantities that he could simply grab a pile from the file when he taught a class. As we worked, we stopped using the waste basket and soon the floor was deep with discarded papers a pile of empty file folders began to mount on the desk so high that it was falling over. Chaos reigned for nearly a week. I have very fond memories of the conversations we had as we worked.

Another teacher that I admired a great deal had an office that was completely filled with books. It was a common experience to go to the library only to find that the book I wanted was checked out to this professor. I learned, as did most of the other students, that the thing to do in such a case was to go to his office to see if you could borrow the book. In most cases, he'd point out its location - "It is the fourth book down on the second stack next to the radiator." We were amazed at his ability to find a single volume in the clutter of that office. The joke around the seminary was that when he retired he would just leave his office as it was and call it the library annex.

One of the lessons of becoming an adult was the discovery that the adults in my life didn't have their acts all together. People whom I admired, and who deserved to be admired, had problems with organization and clutter and time management. They were still worthy of being admired. To be human is to be fallible. And, to a certain extent, being human is having areas of our lives where we don't have everything figured out.

I have dear friends whose home is immaculate. They both are very efficient and effective housekeepers and they taught their children to be the same. They know a lot of time-saving tips and have developed systems that work very well for themselves. Their style is worthy of imitation. But I know that they have all kinds of messiness in their lives. I've been with them when they struggled with decisions that their children made, when their parents were facing severe illnesses, when they lost their jobs and faced a great number of different crises. They had everything together in one area of their life - housekeeping - but there were lots of places where disorder and chaos reigned.

Maturity, it turns out, is not really about filing systems or intricately maintained calendars. It is about showing up in your imperfect form over and over and over again.

I am not willing to give in to the clutter. I confess that it is among my shortcomings, but I am willing to go to work and try to develop better systems for dealing with the clutter. I know that it is, in part, a time management issue. I know that if I spent more time dealing with the clutter I could reduce it. And occasionally I make some progress. Reducing the inventory is a struggle for me, but I haven't given up. And occasionally, allowing others to see my disorganization reminds them that I'm a flawed human being, just like every other human being.

And that isn't a bad thing at all.

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November 12, 2017 – On Horseback



When I was growing up, my father had a few donkeys. We rode the donkeys, but they rarely were an effective means of transportation. We used halters, and never put a bit into our donkey's mouths. They mostly went where they wanted to go, not where we directed them. We trained a few of our colts for pack use. They would follow on a lead rider on a horse and carry supplies for back country hunters, forest service trail work

and other functions. One of our donkeys would allow a half dozen kids to climb on her back and would carry us around with a slow walk, and when we piled on too many kids, she would sit down and we'd all slide off of her back.

Our father thought that learning to ride horses was an important skill, so he paid for riding lessons for some of us. I learned to saddle a horse and a little bit about riding and I rode with friends during the summers on occasion. Mostly we rode dude horses - animals that had been tamed for trail rides with tourists who came to visit ranches in our area. They always wanted to walk in single file and wanted to follow a set trail. They were gentle and we didn't have much trouble getting bucked off.

As an adult, I've worn cowboy boots most of my life. I'm not very tall and they make me feel a bit taller, and when you get used to the feel of the boots they are comfortable. But I've been quick to joke about my boots. I'll say that the boots make me look like a cowboy, but I'm really just an old shepherd. I've also got a couple of cowboy hats that I wear from time to time.

During my college and seminary years I didn't ride a horse at all. I was focused on my academic work and didn't really have the desire to ride. We visited a ranch on occasion during those years but I declined opportunities to ride. Then, after I graduated, we were serving a church in North Dakota where there was a community trail ride to raise funds for Church World Service. I immediately signed up and arranged to borrow a horse. I had great fun on the half-day trail ride and together we raised quite a bit of money. The trail ride was on a Saturday. The next morning, I was stiff as could be, especially in my legs. I was hobbling a bit as I stood up to lead worship. The locals thought that was especially funny and I got offers to ride horses on most of my ranch visits from that time on. Often I'd take them up on the offers.

I can still get up on a horse and, if the horse is gentle, avoid offending it enough that I get bucked off. But I'm no horseman.

When our first grandson was born we went to visit the family as soon as we were able. I loved holding the little guy and was pretty good at caring for him. Like all babies, he would fuss sometimes. If I couldn't figure out what he wanted or needed, I'd talk to him in a soothing voice. I took to saying, "Don't worry little one. Grandpa will buy you a pony." That always got a reaction from his mother. Our daughter in law would exclaim, "No ponies!" It became a family joke and I've said similar things to all of our grandchildren. These days, of course, I have to be careful about what I say. I don't want to be making promises that I cannot keep. With our grandson six years old, he might not understand the nuance of the joke. That's fair. Grandpas should learn to be thoughtful in what they say.

A couple of years ago I got in a round pen with a horse when we were visiting a neighboring church that has an active horse ministry. I wasn't very effective with the

horse, but I wasn't afraid, either. I was able to express my support of the ministry and my appreciation for the volunteers who work with the horses, which was the point of the exercise.

Last week a member of our church gave me an opportunity to ride a horse. The animal was especially gentle and he had it saddled and ready to go when I arrived, so there was no work involved on my part. I mounted, somewhat awkwardly and rode the horse around the arena for a little while. The animal was very gentle and used to being ridden by inexperienced riders. It was pleasant and I didn't end up getting stiff from such a short ride.

The relationship between animals and humans is a powerful bond and there is much to be learned about life from taking care of animals. The story of horses in Native American tribes is an important part of their history and culture. The arrival of horses in North America soon transformed the culture of plains people. They became excellent horse riders and having horses gave them access to much greater territory for hunting. Horses were used as pack animals, to extend the range and speed of hunting, and in war. They also became symbols of freedom and independence. Horses were highly prized and seen as a symbol of wealth and power.

In contemporary communities, horses can be a very important part of programs to help overcome addiction, promote self esteem and teach care and nurture in relationships. The Bridger horse ministry is a powerful outreach tool of that particular congregation. My congregation has been supportive of that ministry. I believe in the good work that they are doing.

So, I'll climb on a horse from time to time. I'm always careful to thank the horse for the ride. But I'm not tempted to rent a pasture and buy a horse trailer. And I think my daughter-in-law is safe from the worry that grandpa will show up with a pony.

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November 13, 2017 – Leadership from Many Places

Liza Mundy wrote an op ed piece in the Sunday New York Times that caught my attention. The primary focus of the article was a tribute to the women who served as code breakers during the Second World War and assisted the allies in their victory. The women who served in that capacity had to overcome some pretty absurd stereotypes that were prevalent at the time. It was commonly believed that genius was a male trait and that women were better suited to tedious tasks requiring humble virtues like patience and focus. It was commonly believed that women were good at typing and filing, but couldn't be counted on for emotional stability in a crisis. They might panic if given a job such as air traffic control or piloting.

The shortage of manpower, however, forced the nation to turn to the leadership of women and in that turn the nation discovered that women were intelligent, capable, and could get the job done. Mundy is researching for a new book on World War II female code breakers. In that research she interviewed Ann Caracristi, the first female deputy director of the National Security Agency, who is now 94. Caracristi was recruited to work in the stuffy attic of a former girls' school near Washington, DC. The staff was primarily female, recruited to sort through reams of intercepted Japanese messages. Caracristi brilliantly broke a code that enabled the American military to pinpoint the location of Japanese troops.

She and her colleagues proved to the nation that women have the ability and qualities to do high-level intellectual work.

The piece got me to thinking about how the crisis of the war forced America to employ others who had been marginalized by society and in doing so to discover sources of leadership, strength and genius that it had ignored.

There are many such stories. Famous are the members who formed the 332nd Fighter Group and the 477th Bombardment Group of the United States Army Air Force. The group included pilots, navigators, bombardiers, mechanics, instructors, crew chiefs, nurses, cooks and other support personnel. It was made up exclusively of African-Americans and has been known by its more popular name as the Tuskegee Airmen. The bomber group trained in B-25 Mitchell bombers, but never served in combat. The 332nd Fighter Group, however, deployed to Italy early in 1944, and flew heavy bomber escort missions. Although the members of the Tuskegee Airmen endured significant discrimination, they served honorably and laid the foundation for the later integration of US military forces. It is no exaggeration to say that the United States entered the war with a deeply segregated military and emerged from the war as the world's greatest military power in part because of its racial integration.

In our part of the country, among the heroes of World War II are the Lakota Code Talkers. The concept of using Native American languages as military code was pioneered in World War I, employing primarily Cherokee and Choctaw tribal members. In World War II, the concept was expanded to employ members of other tribes, including Lakota soldiers. Many of those soldiers served with distinction and contributed greatly to the US victory in the war. They were not, however, formally recognized for their contributions until many years later. The Code Talkers Recognition Act of 2008 spotlighted the contributions of Lakota and other tribal code talkers and brought their heroism and contributions into the public eye. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe has the largest number of code talkers who received the Congressional Gold Medal of any tribe, including Navajo code talkers.

It is not an exaggeration to recognize that one of the factors in the Allied Victory in World War II was the incredible mobilization of all of the United States. That mobilization

included people who were formerly excluded from military service including African Americans, women and Native Americans. The inclusive nature of the United States Military during the war contrasted with the more rigidly exclusive militaries of Germany, Italy and Japan. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that part of the victory was the inclusive nature of the United States Military.

I know I'm late for a Veteran's Day tribute in my journal. Veterans day was on Saturday. But I am often slow to process my thoughts and ideas. Furthermore the United States was slow to recognize the contributions of African American, Native American and women soldiers, so perhaps it is in order to offer recognition even though it is late. As we honor all of the veterans of our nation, it is important that we do not exclude those who had been marginalized, but who came forward and served with honor and dignity and amazing capabilities.

It is a lesson that our nation has yet to learn. As our country is rocked by repeated revelations of sexual abuse among famous white males, it is becoming clear that the path to making the needed changes will depend on the leadership of women. If we are tired of sexual harassment in government the solution includes electing more women. If we want to bring an end to sexual harassment in entertainment, we need to break the glass ceiling that has made the executive offices the exclusive domain of white men. If we are tired of scandal after scandal, it is time to change the matrix of leadership.

We will only end the racism so publicly displayed in Charlottesville and other cities when we stand shoulder to shoulder with those of different races to stand up to their ways. It was true when Hitler rose to power and it is true today.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the high tech world of silicon valley. Old prejudices are finding new expression. Google engineer James Damore suggested in his infamous memo that women are shut out of top jobs in Silicon Valley because they are not "biologically" suited to the brain work of the tech industry. Fortunately he was fired for his comments. If Silicon Valley wants to succeed in the real challenges going forward, it needs to recognize that the leadership of those who have been excluded is essential to the future.

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November 14, 2017 – The Gift of Humor

Chances are you don't read my journal to gain insights into the history of Greek philosophy, so I'll try not to bore you with pages of details that are largely irrelevant to whatever is going on in the world today. The history of philosophy, however, gives quite a bit of insight into modern ideas and concepts. It is fascinating to me that most contemporary ideas have roots deep in previous generations. It isn't that we are incapable of producing new ideas and thoughts, but rather, we often are unaware of

how much our ideas and thoughts are shaped by the ideas and thoughts of others. The part of Greek philosophy that has been documented and can be researched arose in about the 6th century before the Christian Era. Pre-Socratic philosophy gave way to the school of Socrates and his disciples, followed by Plato and Aristotle. Their ideas gave rise to Hellenistic philosophy, which saw the development of many different schools of thought. Greeks, Romans, Syrians and Arabs all contributed to the schools of what have been termed Hellenistic philosophies. These philosophies were common in the areas that gave rise to Christianity and contributed to the ideas, moral teachings, and shape of the modern Christian church. Jesus spoke Aramaic, but the Gospels and letters that comprise what we call the New Testament were all conveyed in Greek. The use of the Greek language as the major conduit for Christian thought has shaped the way that we see the world and our role in it.

I have thought that had I lived in the time of the origins of Christianity, I might have been drawn to the school of academic skepticism. Skeptics argue that knowledge requires justification. It pushes for the reasons behind beliefs and cautions about accepting beliefs without understanding their background. Skeptics are quick to express their doubts and question the claims of others. In our more modern setting, I lean towards writers who express modest amounts of skepticism. Rene Descartes, for example, isn't a true skeptic, but he uses skeptical arguments in his Meditations to support his rationalist approach.

One of the schools of Hellenistic thought that seems less attractive to me is Stoicism. Stoics caution against the tendency of humans to be controlled by desire of pleasure or fear of pain. The appeal for a more rational approach to treating others fairly and participating in the natural world. They see pain as natural and necessary and often as an excellent teacher of the deeper meanings of life.

Stoicism gave rise to asceticism, a lifestyle characterized by abstinence from sensual pleasures in the pursuit of spiritual goals. Various forms of asceticism have played a part in the history of the Christian church and find expression in many of our contemporary spiritual disciplines. I practice a variety of disciplines, including centering prayer, small group study and journaling, and I am capable of being disciplined in the organization of my time and work. I am not, however, an ascetic. I have found deep meaning in giving into the delight of enjoying some of the pleasures that the world has to offer. My life is filled with joy and many pleasures.

I have enjoyed reading about those who have chosen more ascetic lifestyles. Among my heroes are Henry Nouwen and Thomas Merton, both of whom have written eloquently of the deep meanings discovered in monastic lifestyles. But I know that I am not called to follow them into the monastery.

With all of that background, what I really want to do with this morning's journal is to share a poem that left me rolling on the floor laughing. Well maybe not literally on the floor, but certainly giggling until tears were running down my cheeks.

“Bad News About My Vocation”

by Ron Koertge

I remember how the upper crust in my hometown pronounced it—care-a-mel. Which is correct, I guess, but to everybody else it was carmel.

Which led to the misconception about the order of Carmelites.

I imagined they served God by heating sugar to about 170 C, then adding milk and butter and vanilla essence while they listened to the radio.

I thought I could do that. I could wear the white shirt and pants. I knew I couldn't be good but I might be a good candy maker.

So imagine my chagrin when I learned about the vows of poverty and toil enjoined by these particular friars.

I also crossed off my list the Marshmallowites and the Applepieites, two other orders I was thinking of joining.

I'm with Koertge. Despite their obvious appeals, I probably won't be joining the Carmelites, Marshmallowites or the Applepieites. There is just too much joy available in this world to turn aside from worldly pleasures. And among the deep joys I find meaningful is the joy of laughter. I know that Koertge's poem would bring laughter to my friends who have chosen more ascetic lifestyles than I. I'm sure that anyone who reads the poem will never be able to think of a Carmelite monastery without a bit of a smile in the corner of their mouth.

In fact, I am convinced that the gift of laughter is definitely a spiritual discipline. The gift of the poet of being able to laugh uncontrollably at the absurdity of some of our ideas is definitely a spiritual gift. It makes me think that one of the problems with many of the Greek philosophers is that they simply took life too seriously.

We seem to be living in a time when we are taking many things too seriously. We agonize over the political divisions of our nation. We despair over the deadlocking of congress. We cringe at the news that comes at us each morning. I've spoken to several different counselors who have experienced a huge surge in despair among their clients. Maybe part of our problem is that we are taking ourselves and our world too seriously.

Maybe we ought to give ourselves permission to look at world events as a display of clowns whose major purpose is entertainment. After all, if you can set aside the fears of nuclear destruction of the planet, a couple of guys trading sixth grade epithets is kind of funny. "You're old!" "You're short and fat!" Obviously they're not taking their positions seriously. Maybe we shouldn't either.

I wonder if either of them would consider joining the Carmelites.

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November 15, 2017 – Joys of Memory

For whatever reason, I've been thinking that there are some parts to being old that are a lot of fun. I'm not talking about my plans to entertain myself if I ever end up in the nursing home. Those have been, for the most part secret. I've seen some pretty silly things in my time, nursing home residents releasing the birds in an aviary, switching glasses and false teeth in the rooms of others, borrowing food from another resident's tray, wearing absolutely absurd combinations of clothes. I just make a mental note of each of these things and try to remember them just in case I one day end up in a nursing home and bored. I think there are plenty of things that can be done for entertainment. I may end up not being the favorite of the staff, but I suspect that I can keep myself entertained. Who knows? Maybe they'll let me have a laptop there and I can occupy myself writing in my journal.

No, I was thinking of some of the other things about my age that amuse me. I like having memories of the old days. Back in the '70's when Bell Telephone was broken into several divisions, the company switched from renting phones to customers to allowing customers to own their own phones. We decided to buy the phones we had been renting and among those phones was a blue princess phone with a dial. That phone works to this day and we keep it in our bedroom. Our children, from time to time, would show it to their friends, who couldn't figure out how to make it work. They had only seen phones with push buttons and pushing the numbers on this phone gets no results. You have to put your finger in the ring and turn it the pre-set distance to generate the tones that make the phone system work. It works to this day. I haven't shown it to my grandchildren yet, but I'm eager to do so. They have no memory of any kind of phone except their parents' smart phones. The idea of hanging up a receiver is a foreign notion to them. A fairly large handset connected to a base by a cord with the base connected to the wall by a wire will be a strange item for them. It has no video

display on it anywhere. “How does this thing work, grandpa?” I may even regale them with stories of the old phone at the ranch that was a wooden box with a bakelite microphone and a crank, where you had to stand close to it to put your ear to the speaker while shouting into the microphone and everyone in the town of Floweree, Montana had the same party line. You could listen in on all of their conversations, but we weren’t allowed to do so. Heck, my grandchildren don’t know why I call the alert tones from my phone “ringing.”

OK, since we are on the subject of phones, here is another one. My grandchildren love, from time to time, to play at being super heroes. They have a few capes and other costume items that allow them to pretend to be Captain America or Iron Man or Wonder Woman or Wolverine or, yes, Superman. I played Superman when I was a kid. But my grandkids can’t play it the old fashioned way because there are no phone booths anywhere in their world. They don’t even know what a phone booth is. When I was growing up, I was friends whose father worked for our local telephone company. In their basement they had a kids phone. It was a phone booth complete with a pay phone. It could receive in-coming calls. We all knew the number. But if you wanted to make an out-going call, you had to deposit a dime in the kids college savings account. We didn’t make many outgoing calls, but I got pretty good at changing my clothes in the phone booth. It’s harder than it looks, especially changing pants. My grandchildren will never know the pleasure. They might hear the story.

When we got married we had a 1966 Opel Kadette car. Tiny 4 cylinder motor, four on the floor, two door, hard to get in the back seat, which had no leg room. There was a gas crisis in those days. Lines at the stations. The price had gone up to 59 cents a gallon at some stations. So much for the 29.9 signs my father had paid to have professionally painted. Our car had a 10—gallon gas tank. that gave it a 250 mile range if the wind wasn’t blowing too hard or there weren’t too many mountains to climb. We’d stop every 150 miles because that took three hours to drive. We didn’t have a credit card in those days. So when we headed to Chicago, we carried cash for the gas. 8 or 9 gas stops, with an average of \$4 or \$5 per stop. Better plan on 10 just in case. That’s \$50! WOW! That was a lot of money. I’d put \$10 in my wallet, give another \$10 to Susan for her purse and put the other \$30 in my boot for safe keeping. In those days, I couldn’t have imagined that I’d need to get more than one \$100 preauthorization to fill up the gas tank on my pickup. At least I have stories to tell my grandchildren, not that tales of driving to Chicago would entertain them. Maybe they’d be interested in knowing that we had to scrape the inside of the windshield in that car in the winter. I’d scrape my half while driving and then hand the scraper to Susan to scrape the other side. We piled blankets on our laps and wore our winter coats, hats and gloves as we drove.

Come to think of it, when I end up in the nursing home, I won’t need much more than an audience. I can fill up my time telling stores of the good old days. The young people who will be working in the nursing home in those days won’t believe me. They’ll think

I'm suffering from dementia. They'd better be nice to me, however. Otherwise I'll switch a few hearing aids.

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November 16, 2017 – Speaking of Sweet Potatoes

As you plan your Thanksgiving feast for next week, I have decided to weigh in on the topic of what seems to have become a Thanksgiving classic: the sweet potato casserole with marshmallows on the top.

Hmmm . . . where do I begin?

I guess I could start with a brief disclaimer. I'm not a fan of marshmallows. I know how popular they are for roasting over a campfire, and I'll occasionally buy a bag for others to use when we are camping or gathered around the fire. I'll even help children toast their marshmallows to a golden brown, in part to avoid screaming children with flaming marshmallows on the end of long unwieldy sticks. But when it comes to making S'mores, I prefer to just have a piece of chocolate between two graham crackers and forget about the marshmallow all together. And the left over marshmallows sit in our cupboard and turn into rocks because even when I'm on a serious browse for a snack, they aren't appealing to me.

So you have to consider the source. I'm definitely not unbiased when it comes to the recipe that calls for mashing sweet potatoes together with brown sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger and topping with marshmallows before popping it into the oven to brown the tops of the marshmallows and serving the sticky solution to your guests. If someone else has scooped out a bit, I will sometimes dig a little to get the potatoes without the marshmallows. If I need to eat it to be polite, I can do so as long as the portion isn't too big. But when I'm home alone, the sweet potatoes are cooked without the marshmallows. If you want to add something, I think sliced almonds add a bit, but the potatoes are fine by themselves with a little pepper and maybe a bit of butter. I like sweet potato fries, too, but in the interest of lowering fats, we usually bake them in the oven instead of frying them. If you get them fried just right, however, crunchy on the outside and soft in the middle, they are wonderful.

Back to the casserole. My limited research says that they originated in the New World and although the orange tubers had been around in North, Central and South America as far back as 13,000 years ago, it took a while before the taste for them was developed in Europe. Sweet potatoes were cultivated by farmers in the Andes and were especially beloved by the Incas, but when they were first brought to Europe, they were a novelty. The long shipping distances and exotic nature of sweet potatoes in Europe meant that they first caught on among well-to-do folks. By the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th centuries, however, they were considered to be a delicacy. They also were

considered to be an aphrodisiac. In 1597, in his book of New World plants, John Gerard wrote that they were eaten “to procure bodily lust, and with that greedinesse.” Maybe that is why they serve them at Thanksgiving. If they really have that effect, it is probably best to serve them at a meal that features turkey. The high levels of tryptophan in the turkey cause drowsiness. Perhaps the sleep-inducing effects of the turkey offset the aphrodisiac effects of the sweet potatoes. I have no direct evidence of these matters one way or the other. On the other hand, I do have a lot of friends who were born in July . . . just saying . . .

Marshmallows, on the other hand, got their name from being just what they sound like: mallow plants that grow in marshes. Their origins are not on this continent. Ancient Egyptian royalty ate the sap of *Althaea officinalis*, a mallow plant that grows in marshes, mixed with nuts and honey. At least from a theological lineage, we’re connected to those ancient Egyptians through Moses, who though born a slave, was raised by royalty in the house of Pharaoh and therefore probably tasted the sweet confections. Mallow sap was also used for medicine. It was said to be a treatment for sore throats, coughs and diarrhea. But it wasn’t until the 1800s, well after sweet potatoes had become popular in Europe, that French candy makers came up with the idea of whipping mallow sap with egg whites and sugar and pouring it into molds, creating fancy, and expensive confections. Today’s marshmallows don’t even have mallow sap in them. They are made with egg whites, sugar and gelatin. And they aren’t cooked in molds any more. In 1954 U.S. candy maker Alex Doumak invented the excursion process that allowed for mass production of the marshmallows that are featured in recipes for S’mores in every cub scout and brownie scout handbook.

I’m not sure who came up with the idea for putting them on top of sweet potatoes. I guess someone saw the name of the tubers and thought, “These aren’t really very sweet. They could be a lot sweeter. What do we have that we could put on top? Maple syrup? Brown sugar? Now, how about marshmallows?” Then that person brought the casserole with sweet potatoes and marshmallows to a church potluck and the rest, as they say, is history. Check out the church cookbooks in your kitchen. I’m pretty sure you can find recipes for marshmallow-topped sweet potatoes in most of them.

Now, I don’t want to mess with your family traditions, especially at Thanksgiving. So feel free to prepare and serve your favorite dishes any way that you like. In recent years my contribution to Thanksgiving dinner has focused on baking rolls, which are especially good for sandwiches with leftover turkey late in the evening. The folks with whom we frequently share our holiday meal haven’t asked me to bring sweet potatoes. If they read this journal entry, and they often do, they probably will for sure not ask me to make that particular contribution. But they’ll probably look at me as we are piling the food on our plates to see if I slide the spoon under the marshmallow topping going mostly for the orange goodness at the bottom of the pan.

After all we've still got a week before Turkey Day. I could bake a sweet potato for dinner one of those days. They're really good that way.

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November 17, 2017 – Preaching Parables

The season of Pentecost is the longest in the Christian year. It is a time when the lectionary leads us away from the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection to the activities of the church and the foundations of our beliefs. As this year draws to a close, we have been through a journey that seems familiar to me. I've been a lectionary preacher for nearly 40 years and that means That's 13 trips through the 3-year cycle. 7 of those trips have been while serving this congregation. Year A, the year which is now nearing its conclusion, takes us on this marvelous journey that follows Abraham and Sarah and their descendants into Egypt and slavery and then out of slavery and finally into the promised land. It is a powerful story with a great deal of practical learnings for people who are still, after all of these centuries and all of these tellings and retellings of the story, learning how to behave as free people. Then, I have typically turned my attention and the focus of my preaching from the Hebrew treats to the parables of Jesus, reported in the Gospel of Matthew as we end the season. The last three weeks of Year A feature three parables of judgment; The Parable of 10 Maidens, The Parable of the Talents and the Parable of the Sheep and Goats.

Maybe those of us in our generation are more challenged by parables of judgment than some other generations of the church. Maybe we don't like to think about the possibilities of punishment. Maybe we are looking for signs of God's forgiveness in stories that are remarkably free from notions of forgiveness. Whatever the causes, these parables make us squirm. We recognize in each of the parables ourselves in both the role of those who are welcomed into the joy of the Creator and in the role of those who are cast into outer darkness. We can remember times when we have been prepared and other times when we have not. We have invested God's talents freely at times and at other times hidden our talents out of fear. We have rendered help to those who are in need and we have passed by without helping. We can see ourselves on both sides of every one of these three parables.

From a practical point of view, I have to preach a sermon on Sunday about the middle parable. The parable of the ten maidens was the focus of my sermon last week and the parable of the sheep and goats is waiting for The Reign of Christ on Sunday, November 26. The parable of the talents has three characters. One receives five talents, invests them and makes five more to return 10 talents for the master. The second receives two and makes two more. The third receives one and fearfully buries it to keep from losing it and returns only 1. The two who doubled their talents are praised. The one who returns only what he was given is cast aside. The implications of the parable are fairly clear. It may not be obvious to a modern reader of the parable that a single talent is an

abundant amount of money - one's weight in gold, or perhaps enough money to live an entire lifetime of comfort. But the rest of the parable makes sense to us. We also get it that the parable is about money, but it is about much more. The gifts and talents we possess come in forms other than financial means and all that we have and all that we are come from God. We get that part. And a sermon that goes that far is easy to write and deliver. I think I delivered that kind of sermon many times earlier in my life.

But the people I serve have lives that are different from all three of the characters in the parable. I have spent considerable time recently with a person who was born with great talent and who had great promise in this life, but whose life has been consumed by addiction. His one talent is nearly exhausted. It isn't just that he fearfully held on to his talent and didn't share it or increase it. He has squandered it in a cycle of pain and temporary relief and addiction. He has dug a deep, deep hole for himself and just climbing out of it will be a minor miracle. For him to break even would be a major victory and, I believe the cause of great celebration in God's realm.

I've been with people who lived recklessly and dangerously with their talents. I know a man who was financially successful, but who began gambling with large amounts of money. Soon he was far behind and the debt was growing and he continued to obsess on the vision that he would somehow win it all back and much more. He intended to be the one with ten talents to give, but he never made it. His sense of shame and disgust with himself was overwhelming.

Another person I know had a son with a major medical emergency. He was not fully insured and his father poured all of his financial resources into giving his son the best medical care available. He drained cash from his business to the point that he struggled to make payroll., The business faltered. It failed. A dozen employees were left with no jobs and no medical benefits.

How I wish Jesus had included a few more characters in the parable. Compared to some of the people I know and serve, even the poor, fearful one who buried the single talent is a success. I know a lot of people who would celebrate to just break even in this life. But it is not to be. How do I preach the good news of Jesus to them.

It may well be that the parables of judgment are not aimed at these people. It may be that those who are comfortable and rich and well off need to hear different sermons than those who are disadvantaged and have already been cast aside by society. Perhaps there are other parables of Jesus that are more appropriate for them..

For me the struggle is real. I am in love with the Bible. I take these stories seriously. And, like generations of faithful people who have gone before me, I struggle with their meaning. Perhaps that struggle is evidence of my need to keep reading them and probing for their deepest meanings.

November 18, 2017 – Mystery Inspires Faith

Recently, I have had several opportunities to discuss the bible, religion and faith with a young man whose background is quite different than mine. Still, I recognize much of his enthusiasm, quest for knowledge and passion for religious topics. I shared similar passions and interests when I was his age. I was inspired by preachers and professors and driven to read more and more in the quest to understand the nature of religion and the role of faith in life. I dared to ask big questions and was bold enough to believe that I could find answers. I had a deep sense of right and wrong and believed that there were answers and explanations for everything.

I have often commented that when I was 25 years old I had reached the height of my intellectual powers. When I say that I am not really referring to my ability to think or reason, but rather the level of pride I possessed at that age. I thought I was brilliant. I had the grades to prove it. Valedictorian of my college class, I earned my doctorate, with distinction, just before my 25th birthday. I had learned quite a bit about the history of religion and the structures of formal theology. I knew a lot about writing and defending arguments. I wasn't very good at humility in those days. I was a bit too loud, a bit too aggressive and a bit too slow to listen. It took the tempering of years for me to become a pastor for the people I serve.

This particular young man is not as brash, bold or rude as I was at his age. But he does share a similar quest for answers and a sense that there is truth to be found. I admire this quality in him and encourage it in our discussions.

What I can't quite teach him - what he will need to learn from experience - is a deep appreciation for mystery and a love of uncertainty. He is sure of his convictions these days and that is a good thing, but if he is lucky, as I have been, life will teach him that there is much uncertainty and that deep, unsolvable mystery is genuinely beautiful. He will discover that faith is not the same as knowledge and that knowledge will take one only so far.

Unfortunately, there are some corners of the church that seem to be bent on claiming to possess the truth. They speak of their brand of religion as if it were a set of well-established rules. They claim that they know the one true way and that all others are wrong. They have turned faith into following and somehow twisted the nature of the religious life to be the quest for certainty and sameness.

Jesus gave us no gift of certainty. He walked with and shared God's love with those who had been marginalized by society. While the temple leaders were quick to judge and cast aside some people, Jesus reached out to those very people. When folks were mocked and scorned, he called them blessed. He reduced a pious young man who had

followed all of the rules to sadness by confronting him with the burden of wealth and privilege. He taught us that this life is filled with mystery and that the mystery of life inspires awe and a love of God. He turned death itself into new life for all.

When you spend time with those who have been marginalized by society, you often discover that there are many different ways to see the world. The absolutes you think you have discovered seem to fade in the face of the complexities of life.

When I was a young man, I believe in quid pro quo. I thought life had an inherent sense of justice and that one reaped what one sowed. Exchanges and transfers equaled out somehow. Good deeds brought good results. Bad deeds reaped fair punishment. I've invested too much time in jails and prisons talking to both corrections officers and inmates to hold those same convictions. I've counseled too many divorcing couples to claim that things always work out in the end. I've sat with too many victims to shout that life is fair.

Another young man, a bit older than the first, with whom I enjoy conversations, is a scientist. He is a professor of physics at the university. He mentors doctoral candidates and lectures on particle physics and participates in enormous experiments with researchers from around the world. He speaks eloquently of dark matter and dark energy and the principles of uncertainty. He is willing to live inside of imagined hypotheses and theories. He is comfortable with positing imaginary numbers and doing the math to discover whether or not his imagination is close to reality. He is confident that the universe is far too complex to be fully understood and that a meaningful life can come from studying just a bit of it and advancing human knowledge a small amount. His approach to life seems to embody more faith than that of some zealots of religion I have met.

Faith has little to do with possessing knowledge or certainty. My mother used to repeat a phrase that I'm sure she learned from someone else: "If you think you're a saint, you ain't!" The presence of certainty is frequently a sign that you simply aren't thinking big enough.

One of the roles of religion is the inspiring of awe. In generations past, enormous amounts of energy and resources were poured into the crafting of cathedrals - buildings that pushed the limits of architecture and building technology so much that just to walk through the doors created a sense of awe. These days churches are no longer the masters of the world's most expensive architecture. Larger and more impressive buildings are the province of others. But we still have God's universe to inspire awe. We still have the stories of scripture to remind us of the complexities of human nature. We still have a vision of love that reaches beyond anything that we can know or possess.

I am truly inspired by my young friends, but I do not long to return to my youth. There is much awe and beauty in this world that I was not able to see at that age. Life has even more mystery in my mid-sixties. And mystery inspires faith.

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November 19, 2017 – Cheerios

I have been told that when I was very young I seemed to have a lot of allergies. Certain foods didn't agree with me and my skin broke out in rashes from time to time. I don't remember much about those very early years. I had a few allergies in my teens and, as a young adult, I underwent a series of desensitization shots. The process of having the shots really worked for me. I don't seem to have many problems with allergies at all these days. There are some advantages to growing older, and for me, fewer allergies has been one of them.

One of my early allergies was a sensitivity to wheat and products containing wheat. I really can't remember much more than that, but I knew, from an early age, that Cheerios was my cereal. The little round cereal bits not only contained food that I could tolerate, they were just right for tiny fingers to pick up. That started a pattern with my mother of offering a handful of cheerios on the tray of the high chair to all young children - a tradition that continued through the days when our children were small.

I have quite a few different stories of cereal. In our home, cold cereal was saved for special occasions. During the winter, we had hot cereal - oatmeal in my case, often wheat cereal made from cracked wheat straight from the farm for others. Our mother had a wheat grinder and she made our flour and cereal. We'd take several large new and clean garbage cans when we went up to the farm and return with hard red winter wheat in them from which our supply of flour and cereal came. In the summer, however, when school was out, we were allowed to eat cold cereal for breakfast. It was a special treat. We didn't have much selection. Corn Flakes, perhaps the first developed cold breakfast cereal, had been around since 1901. Rice Krispies with the Snap, Crackle and Pop, had been around since 1927. Cheerios, of course and Kix, which came out in 1937.

We had a family tradition concerning the cereal Kix. We didn't have them in the house year round, but there always was a new box at Christmas. My mother would get up early on Christmas morning, which meant that we were up the instant she got out of bed, and she would make buttered Kix while we explored the contents of our Christmas stockings. Then we would have buttered Kix, a slight variation on buttered popcorn, for Christmas breakfast. I have no idea where the tradition came from, but it was ours.

Speaking of Christmas, there were three things that we knew would be in our Christmas stockings every year. Deep in the toe would be a big, beautiful orange, followed by a

can of pop. We didn't get pop very often at our house, so a can of 7-Up or Orange Crush was a real treat. Sometimes we got Root Beer. The third item would be a small box of cereal. And this box would be the sugared kind, Frosted Falkes, or Sugar Smacks or Sugar Jets or Sugar Pops. I liked Sugar Pops. Originally released in 1950, under the name Corn Pops, the name was soon changed to Sugar Pops. A bit of puffed corn and quite a bit of sugar. In those days they had a special "eat from the box" feature. If you carefully separate the perforations on the front of the box and tore the interior wax paper just right, you could pour milk right into the box and spoon out the cereal. As an adult, I have no idea why that was such a fun idea, but as kids we loved it. It was a rare treat at our house and often it would be a full year before sugared cereals appeared in our home.

There were a whole host of new sugared cereals that came out in the first decade of my life. The 1950's were a time when marketeers were coming up with all kinds of ideas. Then, in the 1960's when my younger brothers were still fairly small, there were even more. Fruit Loops, Captain Crunch, Frosty O's. There were even more by the time our kids came along. When our kids were little, the name of Sugar Smacks was changed to Honey Smacks. These days, when you wander down the cereal aisle in the grocery store there are so many choices that it is hard to know where to begin. Cheerios are still a good choice for our family. That and Special K seem to be the most common boxes in our home, with an occasional box or bag of granola as well.

Former Poet Laureate of the US wrote a marvelous poem about Cheerios that appeared in Poetry Magazine:

Cheerios

BY BILLY COLLINS

One bright morning in a restaurant in Chicago
as I waited for my eggs and toast,
I opened the Tribune only to discover
that I was the same age as Cheerios.

Indeed, I was a few months older than Cheerios
for today, the newspaper announced,
was the seventieth birthday of Cheerios
whereas mine had occurred earlier in the year.

Already I could hear them whispering
behind my stooped and threadbare back,
Why that dude's older than Cheerios
the way they used to say

Why that's as old as the hills,

only the hills are much older than Cheerios
or any American breakfast cereal,
and more noble and enduring are the hills,

I surmised as a bar of sunlight illuminated my orange juice.

I'm older than Fruit Loops and Frosty O's and Captain Crunch and even Sugar Jets and Sugar Smacks. I'm about the same age as Frosted Flakes, and like them, I'm great! OK, I don't have a tiger spokesperson, so I have to say it myself. It's not like anyone else would say that about me, except maybe my grandchildren, whose parents don't buy them sugared cereals, so it falls to grandpa to come up with a treat for them from time to time.

I have, however, been around for a while. And I still think Cheerios are the best.

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November 20, 2017 – Too Many Mothers are Dying

Our country is the richest in the world. But there are some problems that remain unsolved. It takes more than money to solve problems. It requires a collective will, coordination, cooperation and focus. And anyone who has been observing American politics over the past decade knows, cooperation isn't our strong suit at this particular point in our history.

Money isn't the only area where we are #1 in the world. We are also #1 in the developed world in maternal death. The rate of mothers dying in childbirth has been decreasing around the world. Global death rates fell by more than a third from 2000 to 2015. Virtually every country in Europe has seen steady declines in maternal mortality. Canada has been successful in decreasing the deaths of mothers in childbirth. Meanwhile the rate of mothers dying giving birth in the United States has increased dramatically since 2000. America's numbers are bad, even compared to the developing world. They are higher than Iran, Chile, Turkey, Thailand, and Vietnam. 26 out of every 100,000 women in the United States die in childbirth.

The reason has nothing to do with exotic diseases. It is not caused by a lack of scientific or technical knowledge. It is not caused by unknown viruses. It is caused by a lack of access to medical care. Not only is our country number one in wealth, we are also number one in the cost of medical care. It takes money to remain healthy in our country.

The state where the maternal mortality rate is the highest is also the state with the highest percentage of people who are uninsured. That state is Texas. Texas State Health Commissioner John Hellerstedt claims that access to health care is not the underlying problem. He says that increasing rates of chronic disease are to blame. The

numbers, however, do not bear him out. It is a simple fact that when women have access to prenatal care more have healthy outcomes. When they do not, more die.

And there is more to this story. There is a huge racial disparity in the rates of maternal deaths. The rate of maternal mortality among white women is 13 per 100,000, but among African-American women the rate is 44 per 100,000. The risks of African-American women dying in childbirth are over three times the rate of white women. Keep in mind that the mortality rate of white women is too high. 13 per 100,000 is higher than all other industrialized countries.

You'd think that the country that spends the most amount of dollars on health care would at least have a plan in place to combat this growing problem. We don't.

The Senate is set to debate a tax bill that proposes that we should end the expectation that every American citizen have health insurance. It appears that there are significant numbers of political leaders in our country who believe that health care should be dispensed on the ability to pay and that rich people deserve better health care than poor people.

I am not a medical doctor. And I am not a politician. But I've been in the homes of people who have lost a loved one to a sudden and unexpected death. I've been in the homes where grandparents are raising their grandchildren because of a tragedy. I've been with families who are planning funerals when they had expected to be celebrating new birth. I know that behind the statistics are real people who cry real tears and suffer real pain at loss.

I know that sometimes, in my journal, I outline a problem that I've discovered in the news or in the process of living in community and I offer no solutions. For the most part this is because I often do not see the solutions. I don't assume that I know what should be done about maternal mortality in our country. But I am unwilling to simply walk away from this problem.

We in the United States have already recognized that women, infants and small children are in need of special care. We have a federal program that supplements their nutrition through the mechanism of federal grants to states to support food programs. Known as WIC, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children provides significant support to expecting mothers and to infants and children. We have already learned to identify the mothers and their children. We need to expand that program to provide access to health care for the same women, infants and children. I am well aware that such a program would be expensive. We do, after all, have the most expensive system of health care in the world. And I know that there are many who think that more federal mandates are the cause of federal deficits.

Like other financial decisions, it is a matter of priorities. We find the money to do the things that are most important. If we can't recognize that women giving birth and children are not important, shame on us. And the shame is already on us because we have already allowed too many deaths and we continue to not respond as the death rates rise.

Our state has a small population. The numbers of mothers dying in childbirth are very small. Statistics lag behind the date, but in recent years we've had 3 or fewer maternal deaths. It is one of the benefits of being a place with fewer people. We could sit here in the comfort of our rural isolation and ignore what is going on in the rest of the country. Maternal morbidity is largely an urban problem in the United States. But we are all connected. We cannot live in isolation and pretend that what is going on in other states has no effect upon us. The whole concept of federal government is based on the believe that we are better off when we work together.

It is worthy of increased conversation. It is worthy of raising the topic with our leaders and representatives. It is worthy of our concerns and our prayers.

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November 21, 2017 – At the City Council

I attended part of the meeting of the City Council of Rapid City last night. It isn't something that I do very often and am a bit unfamiliar with the procedure. Like our County Commissioners, our City Council sits on an elevated platform in a slight curve facing an audience, a setting that is most conducive to speaking to the audience and less conducive to actually speaking to one another. I only attended for the opening ceremonies, a short period of general public comment and the discussion of consent items, most of which were passed without comment from Council members.

Not being familiar with the process I didn't speak formally in the meeting, though the instructions on how to do so were fairly clear and I'm sure I could have done so. The agenda item about which I was interested was unlikely to spur much debate, but Councilman John Roberts did move to have it removed from the list of Consent Items, which allowed him and other Council members to speak to the issue.

I wrote about this issue in my journal last year, so I don't think I need to go into much detail. Each year the Investment Committee of the City Council recommends Human Services Subsidy Funds for the coming year's budget. Several agencies apply for these funds and there are always more applications for funds than funds available. Instead of giving decreased allocations to all applicants, the Investment Committee has chosen to fund some applicants and deny funding to others. As was the case for the 2017 budget, the recommendation was to give no funding to the Front Porch Coalition in 2018.

Had I addressed the Mayor and Council, I might have said something like this.

I understand budgets and the shortages of funds. I have spend my entire career as a pastor of congregations that struggle with their budgets every year. I have served on the boards of directors of a half dozen local non profits. I get the fact that there are not enough funds to do everything that we can imagine. As a pastor people come to me all the time with requests which I have to deny because a lack of funds. But I don't see this issue as a funding issue and I hope you will at least consider my perspective.

Nearly two decades ago a small group of us gathered in the old theatre at Central High School to consider what we could do to respond to a cluster of teen suicides in our city. We decided that we needed to learn a lot more. We also decided that we needed to work together. We formed the Front Porch Coalition to bring suicide out of the shadows and into the light of day. The Coalition is exactly what its name implies: an alliance of community groups for combined action.

Our Coalition has made great strides. We have formed a LOSS team of dedicated volunteers who respond 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. We have trained those volunteers well and maintain a high level of competence in our responses. Our LOSS team has been recognized as the team in our nation with the best overall integration with law enforcement. Our city police and county sheriff's deputies all know about the LOSS team and are quick to call us when needed. In addition we have assembled a team of highly-qualified teachers in suicide intervention and prevention skills. The trainers of our coalition have been recognized statewide for our ability to provide high quality events led by master trainers. Our trainings are certified for Continuing Education Units (CEUs) for professional counselors, ministers and law enforcement officers. We have been recognized by the the state law enforcement academy as the preeminent source of suicide prevention and intervention training in our state. We train more law enforcement officers in these skills than any other agency in our state. We provide training for our schools - for teachers, students and parents.

But there is much work that remains to be done. Our suicide rate is over double the national rate. We have already matched the record for the highest number of suicides in our County in 2016 and we have a month and a half of a historically high suicide season left in the year. Too many people are dying. Responding to the needs of the survivors is taxing the capacity of our Coalition.

As a citizen of this city - the city where I live and work and the city that I love - it causes me pain that our Mayor and City Council no longer want to participate in our Coalition. Our County Sheriff participates. Our regional hospital participates. The Rapid City Area Schools participate. Dozens of local churches, including the one I serve, participate. Hundreds of local families and individuals participate. Local mental health providers participate. We are a broad coalition that is continually welcoming new participants.

Sadly, for the second year in a row, our Mayor and City Council have chosen not to participate.

I get the money angle. I understand budgets. I also know that budgets are a matter of priorities. The 211 Help Line Center's city subsidy was increased by more than the amount of the Front Porch Coalition request. I'm a bit sensitive about that one because I called the Help Line Center last week. Three times. Once I even tolerated being on hold for 12 minutes. I never did speak to a person. I have, however, heard the recording about all of their people helping others. I finally found the information I sought on the website, if you count, that service is not provided as information.

Money aside, I long for our Mayor and City Council to pass a resolution of support for the work of the Front Porch Coalition. I wish they would make a formal statement that they want to participate in the work of suicide prevention and intervention. I wish that every member of the City Council and the Mayor would take the time to participate in an ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) workshop. Such an experience would not only help them understand the work of the Coalition, but would give each of them skills that could be used to prevent suicides in our community.

That, however, will have to wait for another year, I guess. Fortunately our Coalition is dedicated enough to continue with or without the support of the Mayor and City Council.

We'll be back next year. And the next. We won't go away until the problem is solved.

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November 22, 2017 – Speaking of Turkeys

It seems that the presidential pardon of a turkey has become a popular event. It happened again yesterday, when President Trump pardoned Wishbone and Drumstick after some speculation that only one of the pair would be pardoned. The practice of pardoning a White House bird as an official function is recent, tracing its beginnings back to 1989 when President George H.W. Bush pardoned a turkey's life as animal rights activists protested nearby. But there were earlier actions by US presidents. Historians claim President Abraham Lincoln spared the life of a turkey back in 1863 after his son Tad befriended the bird.

Presidents receive lots of turkeys as gifts. Back in 1947, President Truman encouraged people to forego poultry and eggs on Thursdays in order to conserve supplies to send to post-war Europe. In addition to Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day fell on Thursdays that year. There was an outrage and poultry growers sent crates of live chickens to the White House as part of a "Hens for Harry" protest campaign. Individuals had been sending birds to presidents since the 19th century, but Truman was the first to receive a bird as an act of the poultry industry.

So Wishbone and Drumstick will live out their lives in the “Gobbler’s rest” enclosure on the campus of Virginia Tech University, where they will join Tater and Tot, the turkeys receiving pardons in last year’s White House Ceremony.

Compared to humans, turkeys generally have a short lifespan. The record lifespan of a turkey in captivity is 12 years and 4 months. Wild turkeys survive less than ten years and such long lives are rare. The average life of a turkey in the wild is just over 2 years for a male and just over 3 years for a female. Frankly the wild turkeys that parade through our lawn nearly every day are not that distinctive to me. I can’t recognize individuals, so I don’t know how old individual birds are.

We like stories like that. We associate with animals and feel compassion for them. We give them names and attribute human-like characteristics to them. The official White House web site gave the statistics on the two pardoned turkeys that included height, weight, wing span and date of birth. It also gave their “style of strut,” favorite music and favorite band, though it is uncertain how one would determine the favorite band of a turkey with their rather limited communications skills.

Turkeys, however, live their own lives in a manner that is very different from humans. We attribute human characteristics to them because we see the entire world from our perspective. We may not be as likely to humanize turkeys as we do our pet dogs and cats, but we have a tendency to attribute human characteristics to most of the animals that we encounter.

Perhaps one of the reasons that we are struck by the pardoning of a turkey is that we know that the lifespan of the bird is relatively short. We can observe the entire life of a turkey from hatching to death multiple times in our own lives.

We seem less likely to attribute human characteristics to plants. We don’t look for a smile on the “face” of a tree or talk about how a sunflower feels. We might comment on the blossom of a daisy looking a bit like a face, but we don’t hesitate to pick the flower out of the fear of causing pain to the plant. Of course plants come with many different lifespans, from those who grow quickly and wither in a short season to trees who live for thousands of years. There are many ways in which plants differ from ourselves. We don’t remain rooted in the same place like a tree. We don’t often imagine that plants experience emotions in the same way as humans.

There will be families who sit down to their thanksgiving meal with a Tofurky or a Vegan Whole Turkey from Vegetarian Plus. For some reason, crafting combinations of tofu and wheat proteins into the shape of a roast turkey, including making provisions for stuffing the “bird” is worth a lot of human effort. I’m not sure I understand the drive to make the non-meat alternative look like a turkey, but it has to do with tradition and the desire to make connections with other people, I assume.

We all understand that eating is a part of human survival and that our eating has an effect on the foods we eat. Some feel that it is more gentle or compassionate to forgo foods harvested from animals, but allow foods harvested from plants to be consumed. There are so many different nuances in people's eating habits that it is nearly impossible to categorize them. When we are quick to judge, we fail to understand.

So, despite the urge to anthropomorphize turkeys, and despite the call for gentleness and compassion on the harvesting of our foods, I plan to eat a bit of turkey tomorrow. It is a tradition. And, frankly, when you have turkeys in your lawn every day, you don't end up feeling particularly attached to the birds. They're messy and daily demonstrate the smallness of their brains. But our thanksgiving won't be exclusively about feasting for ourselves. It will be combined with compassion for other humans. We will be mindful of those who are less fortunate than ourselves and will find ways to share the bounty of our lives with those in need. That, too, is a Thanksgiving tradition.

I suspect that there will be turkey served at the table in the White House this thanksgiving. Despite the official and public pardons, I suspect that there are other turkeys to take the place of Wishbone and Drumstick to provide for a feast to be laid for the President and his family. I see no problem with that. Even though I've been known, on occasion, to use the term "turkey" to refer to politicians and have compared their intellectual capacities to fowl, I hope that we all can share a moment of thanksgiving and give gratitude to God for the blessings we have received.

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November 23, 2017 – Thanksgiving Baking

One day, when my mother was well into her eighties, she sat at the table in our kitchen and spoke with me as I was baking bread. While I was kneading the dough, she asked me, "Where did you learn to do that?" My answer was, "From watching you."

I don't ever remember learning to bake bread. It was something that my mother did for as long as I can remember. When we were old enough, we were allowed to scrub our hands, which often didn't pass inspection on the first try, and then join in kneading dough and forming loaves. When I went away to college, I didn't have access to a kitchen for three years. After we married, I began to bake bread again. In seminary, I would bake bread in large batches and share with friends. It is a very inexpensive way to share home and hospitality.

I know where bread comes from. In my teenage years I worked summer fallow and harvest on my uncle's and cousin's ranches. I've shoveled wheat in the truck and in the granary. I've hauled loads of wheat to the elevator. We brought wheat home from the farm and had our own flour grinder at home.

The recipe has changed a bit over the years. I used to dissolve the yeast in sugar water to “feed the yeast.” It turns out that the sugar is unnecessary. I sometimes add a bit of honey to the bread if I want a sweet flavor. A dash of salt helps as well. Sometimes I add an egg to the dough. Mostly bread is flour and water with a bit of yeast. I used to keep a sourdough starter going in the refrigerator, but the pace of my life these days means that I don’t bake regularly so I just use dry yeast.

One of the luxuries of Thanksgiving for me is rising in the morning to bake bread. It reminds me of so many other occasions in my life, all filled with family and friends and love. Being the first one out of bed in the morning and making the dough is a kind of ritual, I guess. People are always appreciative of freshly-baked bread. And when they are expressing gratitude, they are never harsh or angry. I truly believe that a bit of freshly-baked bread would ease negotiations between conflicted parties. I’ve never tried it, but I wonder if you’d get a better price in negotiations to purchase a major item, like a car, if you baked fresh bread and took it with you to give to the salesman. I like to believe it would work. I should try it some time.

I do know that kneading bread is good for my aging and sometimes arthritic hands. I don’t have much pain or problems, but it feels good to plunge my hands into the warm dough. The motion is repetitive, but a bit different with each push of the heels of my hands. The resistance from the dough is just right. It is interesting that in most cooking, I use measuring spoons and cups to get exactly the right amount of ingredients. When I’m making bread, I use a one cup measure to scoop the flour, but after I get the rough measurement in, I adjust the amount of flour by the feel of the dough, not by any precise measurement. I do the same with the temperature of the water. My hands know the right temperature. I have no need of a thermometer.

People have feasted in celebration for as long as anyone can remember. The ancients held festivals to celebrate successful harvests. American Thanksgiving as a holiday claims among its roots the three days of feasting that the Wampanoag and the Plymouth colonists shared in 1621 in celebration of the pilgrim’s first harvest and the successful negotiation of a treaty between the two peoples. The events are so shrouded in layers of storytelling that we probably don’t come close to accurate when describing that celebration. What we do know is that the treaty was successful and both parties enjoyed it for about fifty years before relations deteriorated. Many scholars agree that it was one of the longest lasting treaties ever negotiated between indigenous Americans and settlers. We also know that in the midst of the Civil War, in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln declared a national holiday of thanksgiving. The roots of the holiday weekend we celebrate these days lie in the pain, loss, and struggle of the nation’s bloodiest war.

Among the people who were present when the Wampanoag chief Massasoit and Governor William Bradford sat down to dinner was Edward Winslow, who was a writer

of journals. He documented much of the Pilgrim experience. From his notes we know that Governor Bradford sent four men on a “fowling” mission and that the Wampanoag supplied five deer for the feast. We also know that the sugar supply, brought on the Mayflower, had dwindled and so the meal did not feature pies, cakes or other desserts. It is likely that the meal featured Native American spices and cooking methods. Teaching the Pilgrims how to grow and prepare food was one of the provisions of the treaty. There was no celebration in 1622. The land was experiencing a drought and the harvest was much less than hoped for. The celebration returned in 1623 and the rest, as they say, is history.

In the early years, the settlers probably didn't have wheat flour and the kind of bread that we enjoy probably was not part of the feast. They would have been able to make cakes and fried breads out of corn flour. It is likely that their birds were stuffed with rice as wild rice was abundant in the area where the Pilgrims settled.

I don't claim that my tradition of baking for Thanksgiving has roots that are more ancient than just a few generations of my family. But it was certainly a wonderful way to start my day today. Instead of writing my journal first I kneaded the first batch of dough and left it to proof on the top of the stove. I'm about to go up to mix the second batch.

Life is good. There is much for which to be thankful. And there will be buns for turkey sandwiches among the leftovers.

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November 24, 2017 – Black Friday

Black is the darkest color. It is complete in its ability to absorb light. Of the colors it reflects the smallest amount of light. It has been described as the opposite of white, but that description can be misleading. To add to the confusion, the amount or lack of color is different if you are talking about a surface or about light itself. When talking about light, black is the absence of light. Whereas white light incorporates all of the colors of the spectrum, blackness is the absence of light. Then there is the simple matter that the term blacklight is used to refer to UV-A light, which is ultraviolet, or long-wave light. Much of the light emitted from a blacklight is not visible by the human eye. What we do sense isn't black at all, but a pinkish purple.

We use the terms black and light with a lot of different connotations. Sometimes black is a negative term, implying a sense of danger, but when referring to accounting, black is the color of success. “In the black” indicates profit instead of loss.

Black Friday is the informal name to today, the day following Thanksgiving Day, which is regarded by some as the beginning of the Christmas Season. It gets its name from the

profits of retail sales which are generally high on that day. Many people make it a day of holiday shopping.

The concept isn't quite as simple as it may sound, however. I noticed that the Salvation Army bell ringers showed up at the doors to the grocery stores before Thanksgiving this year. They were there, presumably, to capitalize on the generosity of shoppers preparing for the big meal. After all, more people go to the grocery store in the days leading up to the feast than in the days immediately after it. Then there are all of the ways in which retail stores seek to expand the black Friday experience by opening their stores on Thanksgiving Day and promoting special sales on other days as well. For online shoppers, Cyber Monday is the day for special sales. It didn't even get a color assigned in its day.

I'm no fan of black Friday. I'm not a very good shopper and I'm not much of a fan of crowds. I looked at some of the advertisements in yesterday's newspaper and decided that there really wasn't anything being offered that I couldn't live without. I'll probably forego shopping today, unless I need a quick stop at the grocery store for some item, though the house really is filled with lots of delicious food.

What I do have planned for the day is to really enjoy a day off from work. Pastors frequently are not good at disciplining ourselves to recreation. Since we work on weekends, we are a bit hit and miss when it comes to having a day of rest for ourselves. We preach sabbath, but we aren't very good at it. Many of my colleagues take Friday as their day off then plunge back into preparation on Saturday for Sunday. Several downtown churches in our community are closed on Fridays. At our church, we try to take Mondays off. The preschool operates on a five day week and is in operation on Monday, but other church activities are light. We used to have the office staffed for phone calls, deliveries and other business, but these days we close our office on Mondays as well. It is usually a day for catching up on all of the things I don't get done in the rest of the week. I run household errands, catch up on home repair and do chores. But Thanksgiving is special for most pastors. Most of us take a three-day weekend, closing our offices for Thursday, Friday and Saturday. I've got a few bits of work that have to be done over the weekend, most of which can be done by computer from home, but I plan to practice recreation as much as possible today.

We've got warm weather, so I'll probably load up a boat and head for the lake. I may take some time to work on the kayak I'm building in the garage. I might take a nap.

It is strange to me that I have developed a lifestyle that is so immersed in the work I do that I need to make special plans to suspend work. First of all, I love my work. I am not one of those people who dreads going to work. I enjoy the people I serve and the tasks I need to accomplish are varied and interesting to me. Secondly, my work is largely intellectual. I think when I am doing all sorts of different things. I often work through sermon ideas when I am not at the church. I plan church events and activities when I'm

doing other things. So telling when I am working and when I am not working isn't as easy as it might at first seem. A pastor is as much who that person is as what that person does. But I will often say that I'm not very good at sleeping. I know that there is plenty of solid scientific evidence of the value of sleeping. Getting eight hours of sleep out of every 24 helps boost creativity, improves health, and raises joy and satisfaction. I'm pretty sure that it is true that those who get sufficient sleep are more productive during their waking hours. Yet, I've never been very good at sleeping - at least at sleeping eight hours in a single block. I'd much rather sleep six or seven and then have a nap sometime during the day. And, too often, I get engaged in a project and don't take the nap.

I'm a bit the same about days off. I know that I do more when I am disciplined about recreation. I know that recreation is essential to balance in my life and to my ability to be truly present with people when I am at work.

So, for me, today doesn't seem very black at all. It seems bright and sunny and I'm looking forward to being serious about recreation. For those who recreate by going shopping, have fun. I'll catch up with you later.

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November 25, 2017 – Dog Overboard

My sister has an Australian Shepherd who sometimes travels with her. The dog is named Cody and we enjoy it when he comes to visit. He is well-mannered and gentle. And he is full of life and energy. His favorite game is fetching anything that you throw. He likes to chase a ball or a stick or any other object, is good at bringing it back and dropping it at your feet. And if you ignore him, he'll pick it up and set it on your feet or in your lap or somewhere else where it can't be ignored.

He loves the water and is a strong swimmer, so I thought he'd like a ride in the canoe yesterday. He did like going to the lake and was wading in the water before I could get the canoe unstrapped from the roof rack. When I got the boat into the water I lifted the dog in and he jumped out into the water. We climbed into the boat and paddled a few strokes out into the lake and caught up with the swimming dog and I picked him up and put him in the boat again. He was very nervous in the boat. I tried to get him to sit down, but he stayed on all fours and went from side to side in the boat, rocking it. I had to shift my weight to keep him from tipping us. Then he jumped out into the water again. I gave up on giving the dog a ride for a while and paddled around the marina. He ran out on a dock, so I paddled over and pulled him into the boat. He didn't like that one bit and jumped right out. We accepted his choice and paddled near the shore as he ran around the lake.

When we reached sections where there were cattails, he would wade or swim around them, preferring to keep on the water side of the plants where he could see us. I ended up turning the boat around at one point because it seemed like he had been in the water too long.

What was amazing, though was what he did after a swim. He'd bound up onto the shore, shake vigorously, roll in the grass wildly and then run hard back and forth along the shore. He knew instinctively how to raise his metabolism and warm up.

My family had dogs when I was a kid, but we've not been dog people in our adult lives. I really don't know much about living with dogs, but I really like this dog. He is awake and full of energy in the day and sleeps well at night. He adapts his schedule to ours. He is protective, but also content to sit on the porch or the front lawn and wait if we run an errand. He has intense eyes and always seems to be studying you. When he is around children he is gentle and playful and they love him.

He hopped up to see what was going on when we were video chatting on the computer with our daughter later in the afternoon. She knows the dog and immediately made a suggestion that she has made many times before: "You should get a dog, Dad."

I'll take that advice into consideration.

I wonder what it would take to train a dog to enjoy riding in a canoe. It would drive me nuts to have a dog that would jump out of the boat in the middle of the lake. A somewhat lightweight dog would be a must. My sister's dog is mid-sized and we had a good harness on him so I could lift him into the boat with one hand. I'm not sure that it would be possible to get a larger dog into the boat out on the water without tipping the canoe.

Not being a dog person, I don't know much about training dogs. I suppose that one takes the dog for very short rides, extending the time in the boat over time until it becomes comfortable in the boat. I also will put a foam pad down for the dog if we give it another try. I think that the slippery bottom of the canoe made him feel less secure as he slipped and slid around. A bit of indoor-outdoor carpet should do the trick.

I suspect, however, that there are breeds of dogs that are a bit more calm by nature. The Australian shepherd seems to have only two modes: completely alert and sleeping. He's not much for calmly sitting and waiting.

So, for the record, I'm not in the market for a dog. I like the dogs that family members own and I enjoy playing with them when we visit or when they visit, but I'm not eager to have the responsibility of a dog in my life right now. I spend too much time in the office and go too many places where a dog is not welcome. I do, however, like the image of a

dog sitting gently in the bottom of a canoe as I paddle on calm water off to the next adventure.

All I have to do to dispel that image, however, is to recall yesterday with the dog wildly shifting from side to side of the canoe, rocking it wildly then jumping into the water and swimming. It would be a wild job training that particular dog to get in and out of the canoe on command and stay in the canoe while we paddle.

I started our grandkids out in a rowboat. It is beamy and stable and doesn't feel like it will tip. The kids can walk around in the boat and even lean out over the gunwales. We've got very good lifejackets for our grandkids and will continue to make sure that they have good safety equipment. Maybe that would be the way to start out with a dog. I know they make dog life vests.

No, I'm not going to get a dog. But I did get to thinking.

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November 26, 2017 – Reign of Christ 2017

Today is the last Sunday of the Christian calendar, a day known as Reign of Christ or sometimes referred to as Christ the King. It is a celebration of Jesus Christ as sovereign over all of the earth. And it is one of Christianity's most misunderstood holidays. Faithful Christians are as likely to misunderstand as are those who know little of Christian faith. The problems begin with our understanding of leadership. Even our language points to misunderstandings of the holiday. Christ the King uses the name of one kind of earthly leader to speak of how Christ rules over the world. Changing the name to Reign of Christ carries almost all of the same implications - the resurrected Christ is in ultimate charge of all of creation. Even the commonly used term "Lord" is a reference to a particular type of leadership and a title that is part of the hierarchy of English feudal systems.

Our misunderstandings come from the failings and realities of earthly leadership. You don't have to look far to see examples of disastrous leadership by humans.

The world was witness to the dramatic conclusion of Former Bosnian Serb army leader Ratko Mladic, who was sentenced to life in prison Wednesday after being found guilty of genocide for atrocities committed during the Bosnian war from 1992 to 1995. Over 100,000 people were killed and another 2.2 million displaced in those years of tumult.. The former leader will be remembered by history for the communities he destroyed and the deaths he left in his wake. Any comparison of his style of leadership with the way that Christ interacts with the world is a mistake. The use of similar titles and words to describe him and the way the leadership of Christ can lead to mistaken notions of the nature of Christ.

Tens of thousands of Zimbabwe's citizens took to the streets in celebration of the resignation of Robert Mugabe, ending 37 years of authoritarian rule. Mugabe had become known as one of the world's harshest dictators. His ruling Zanu-PF party is associated with some of the worst atrocities committed by governments. An estimated 20,000 civilians died in the 1980's during a period of civil unrest. But the change in leadership may not signal a change in the style of government. The new president, Emerson Mnangagwa is a whole lot like the president he succeeded. He has been vice president to Mugabe for all but a short period when he was dismissed earlier this month. He has spoken of Mugabe as "a father, mentor, comrade-in-arms and my leader." He was known as the "crocodile" during the 1980's and may hold personal responsibilities of some of the nation's worst massacres.

You can say that ultimately Christ has more authority than Mugabe and Mnangagwa. You would be right. But to use the way that these particular leaders use their authority as an example of how Christ works in the world is to lead people away from a closer relationship with God in Christ.

Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany appeared to be one of the world's most stable leaders in terms of popularity with the people of her country, but recently she has failed to form a government to rule her country. Once touted as a pillar of the European Union and head of the continent's largest economy, she has fallen in popularity as troubles from Brexit to debt to falling currency values plague Europe's once-stable economic circumstances. Merkel is an intellectual strong woman and has often considered to be among the world's elite, but she is hardly an example of how God intends the world to be organized. To say that Germany is a reflection of God's reign on earth is to ignore both its present reality and its history.

Our own country is going through a particularly trying time in reference to leadership. Our current President, who won the electoral college, but lost the popular vote by more than 3 million votes, has never achieved the approval of half of the nation's citizens. Our legislative branch of government seems to be mired in partisan politics so much that it is incapable of passing any meaningful laws or exercising its authority in any meaningful way.

The Gospel is clear. God in Christ has an entirely different way of being in the world that that way ultimately will prove to be the world's reality. And we celebrate that reality each year with a festival on the last Sunday of the Christian calendar. But we find that we don't have the language to express the way that Christ is in charge of the world. Our language is limited to our experience and our experience with earthly leaders is not the best, to put it mildly.

Today's story is the parable of the sheep and the goats from the Gospel of Matthew. The third in a series of parables of judgement, it has been touted as part of Jesus'

preparation of his disciples for life after his death and resurrection. It is a somewhat disturbing parable in that it is very easy to see oneself as both among the “sheep” and among the “goats.” We are at the same time capable and found to do good for those in need and guilty of ignoring the needs of others. There have been times when we have responded appropriately to those in need and times when we have failed to respond. But if we look beyond our discomfort and uncertainty over our own judgment, we discover another important aspect of this parable. Christ is present in those who are in need. Using royal language and referring to God as “the King,” the parable has the King declare, “I was hungry . . . I was thirsty . . . I was a stranger . . . I was naked . . . I was sick . . . I was in prison.” Clearly the parable directs us to look not in the halls of power or the places of earthly authority for the savior of the world, but in those who are victims of the abuses of power that surround us.

It may well be that the language of victims - of the sick and imprisoned and immigrant and homeless - may give us more clues for speaking of Christ’s reign than the language of elite leadership. We celebrate the holiday each year in part because we need the practice. We never get it quite right and we still have much to learn.

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November 27, 2017 – A Time for Listening

When I was in school, several of my classes taught and honed listening skills. Although we learn to speak and listen and communicate naturally through the process of living, it is frequently the case that our communication is incomplete or even missed entirely. There are many barriers to complete communication. I remember different classes where we were paired up with classmates and we practiced active listening.

The first step in active listening is comprehending. It requires more than just receiving sounds from the other. Words are, after all, codes that must be descrambled and discernment of the intentions of the speaker is not completely automatic. Most of the time, when we speak, we are conveying not only ideas, but also emotions. We are rarely neutral about the information we communicate. We care. Active listening is discerning ideas and feelings and taking those ideas and feelings into your own consciousness.

The second step of active listening is retaining. It is an exercise in expanding memory. Primarily relying on short-term memory, the listener has to focus attention on what is being said with sufficient intensity to be able to recall the information and the feelings communicated. This requires freeing our minds from distractions. Thinking about other worries or concerns can interfere with our ability to retain the communication in which we are engaged. Focus and the ability to avoid distraction are essential.

The third step of active listening is responding. Communication is a two-way street. In active listening classes and practice sessions we would respond by re-stating that which had just been uttered by the speaker and checking to see if we had retained it accurately. Many times we didn't get it fully correct and we had to adjust our responses in conversation. After significant practice, we got better at listening, retaining and responding accurately.

Because my classmates also went through the process of learning active listening, and many of my colleagues since I have graduated received similar training, I have no idea how common is the experience of having practiced active listening skills. What I do know is that there are many examples in contemporary society where those skills do not seem to be employed.

Legislative bodies seem to be especially poor at genuine listening. From our city council to our county commissioners to our state legislature to the House and Senate of the United States, it seems to me that there is a lot of speaking and very little listening going on. Speakers often don't seem to be even responding to the words of their colleagues. They have come to make a speech and it appears that their minds are made up and they are not influenced by the words that others say.

Our society is plagued by more than just the failure of communication in our legislative bodies. It seems to me that the recent spate of sexual harassment claims and public outings of abusive behaviors of men has at its root a failure of communication. The #MeToo movement has given women courage to speak publicly about matters that they had previously believed would not be heard. In the past there were many times when women attempted to speak out and their voices were not taken seriously. There is something encouraging in the present moment's ability to listen when women speak out. I'm not sure that society is retaining the impact of what is being said, yet, and we are at best awkward in our responses, but some genuine communication is beginning to open up.

I've heard a bit of backlash in the forms of fears of some men. They worry if asking a woman for a date will be interpreted as harassment. They think back on their own histories and actions and worry that they may have crossed boundaries and that their past might come back to embarrass them. It is pretty clear that our sexual ethics have not always been based in compassion and love and the result is a messy set of relationships.

It seems to be a good time to go back to practicing the skills of active listening.

When women speak out, are we really listening to what is being said and what is being communicated beyond their words? Clearly there are some who are trying to silence or discount what is being said. When men, especially those who occupy powerful positions respond with quick denials and challenge the credibility of those who speak out, there

can be no completed communication. Even when men are willing to respond with an apology, they can be too quick with their response. Active listening demands comprehending and retaining before responding.

As a society, we need to allow these women to speak out and we need to comprehend what they are saying. That means receiving not only the ideas, but also the feelings that are being communicated. And we need to focus enough to retain what is being communicated.

Our current social situation does little to encourage such focus. We are distracted by our devices, distracted by a 24/7 news cycle, and distracted by the pace of modern living. We rarely think of one thing at a time. This moment in our shared history, however, demands that we listen and focus. Failure to do so will result in choosing sides and increasing divides.

The time will come when we need to respond as a society. We need to rethink our sexual ethics. We need to revise the way we raise our sons and daughters. We need to rebalance distorted distribution of power in relationships. But it may be too soon for that just yet. It seems that this is the moment for us to listen and comprehend. Those who have been victims of distorted relationships and unfair power distributions have demonstrated the courage to speak out. Their voices have given courage to others who have been silent for so long. It seems as if there are fresh allegations every day and new victims appearing at every turn. The sad state of our relationships is becoming evident.

Now is the time to listen. Even if you didn't take classes in active listening, it is a good time to practice the skills of really listening and focusing. I'm sure there are more voices yet to be heard.

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November 28, 2017 – Exploring Familiar Places

There is something a little strange about the weather. In the last week of November, I was paddling in open water in an open canoe yesterday. I was hot and sweating because I was overdressed for the air temperature. Even though I was paddling near the shore, I was dressed to survive immersion should the canoe capsize, an unlikely event on a day with a little wind and a bit of texture to the water, but little to cause worry for a 16-foot canoe. Having just ended a week when it barely dipped below freezing even at night, it looks likely that I will be able to paddle next Monday, which will add a month to my paddling season. My last paddle of 2016 was on November 25 and I used a warm kayak for that adventure. I can't remember ever paddling in December, January or February. My first paddle of 2017 was March 18, so it is likely that this year will be

the longest paddling season for me. I usually paddle from ice out to ice in, frequently sneaking in the water when there is a bit of ice in the lake.

I'm reluctant to put away the boats for the winter season. I am simply better at taking time to paddle when I can do so on real water. I have a very good rowing machine in my basement, but it just isn't the same. Combining solitude and a trip into nature with my exercise makes me more likely to get the exercise that I need to stay healthy.

I'm pretty sure that I saw a few buffleheads on the lake yesterday. They are quite a bit smaller than the ducks we are used to seeing and they were skittish, so I couldn't get close enough to get a photograph with the point and shoot camera I carry when paddling, but the distinctive white coloring on the males was a pretty good clue. I've never seen buffleheads in South Dakota before. It is possible that their far north nesting areas mean their migrations are later in the season than I normally paddle. It is also possible that all of the rain in the Pacific northwest in recent weeks has altered their path this year and they are farther east than usual. Maybe I am just paying more attention to the birds after having the fun of chasing a couple of rafts of coots around the lake earlier this fall.

There are many in the paddling community who hunger for new and exciting places to paddle. I have friends who have invested large amounts of money to paddle in the Nisultin or Teslin or Yukon Rivers up north. Others head to Central America to paddle in Belize or Costa Rica. River rats from the United States have traveled to China and Nepal to try their hands at exotic and remote and previously unpaddled waters. I understand the lure of such adventures and have read many books chronicling the trials and rewards of expedition paddling. Sometimes I have thought about making big trips to paddle in distant waters. I've even had the experience of making a lot of miles with a boat strapped to the top of my vehicle. I've paddled a boat that I built with my own hands in the Bay of Fundy, the Puget Sound and several of the Great Lakes.

However, there is a particular value in paddling in familiar waters. Sheridan Lake, close to my home is a rather small reservoir. I can paddle all the way around the shore of the lake in less than two hours. I can cross the lake at its widest point in 20 minutes or less. Some might say that there is little adventure and little to see in such a small lake. I, however, find it to be fascinating. It is as if there is always something new to discover.

One year a young beaver decided to leave the lodge up the creek and migrate into the lake. I saw him several times and even got a few photographs of him crossing longer stretches of water. He chose a place up a small bay to build a new lodge and I watched him all fall long as he brought branches to his new home. During the winter, when the lake was iced in, I made a couple of trips to check on him. Although I didn't see him in the winter I could see plenty of signs of his presence. In the spring when the ice went out of the lake I headed straight for his lodge to check. He, however, had used the open water as a path to abandon the lodge and return into the creek. I suspect that it was a

long and lonely winter for a beaver, who was used to having other beavers around. I don't know how unusual that behavior was for beavers, but it was the only time I've observed it.

This fall it seems to be the waterfowl. Maybe there is a continual parade of migrating birds who stop by the lake every year. Some stay for very short periods of time and I miss them because I don't happen to paddle that day. Then, on a day like yesterday, I happen to be there on the same day as a half dozen buffleheads make a short stop and I see something new. It seems as if the lake always has a surprise for me.

Some people enjoy the challenge of crafting large boats and sailing around the world. I seem to be content with a tiny boat on a little lake. If your lake is too small, try getting a smaller boat.

Years ago we lived in Chicago for four years while studying. I don't remember it as being a burden to be in the midst of a city. We visited museums and went to the symphony and walked along the lakeshore. We rode the rains and experienced the crush of city crowds. It was an adventure. But I do not long to return to the city. I am happy here in the hills and feel privileged to have deer and turkeys in my yard each day. They make fine neighbors.

Some find going to the places that make them happy to be important. I understand because I love to travel. But I also know that being happy in the place where I am is a wonderful blessing.

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November 29, 2017 – Reflections on the Life of a Pastor

Life as a pastor involves a lot of balancing acts. Congregations are complex and diverse. It has been said that being a pastor means learning to have as many different bosses as there are members of the congregation. I had to learn early in my career that I don't have the capacity to make everyone in the congregation happy. I also had to learn, through a process that took a lot more time and a lot more careful effort, not to take everything that occurs in the congregation personally. That one is hard for me, because I am personally invested in the church and committed to its future. But God did not call me into the church to be in charge. God called me into the church to serve.

One of my balancing acts has to do with the simple fact that I am finite. I am not able to do everything. I am not able to work without ceasing. I run out of time and energy. Even though I enjoy long days and long weeks working in the church, I have my limits. I have had to learn to discipline myself when it comes to recreation. I have had to learn to recognize the symbols that I am not taking enough time for myself and allowing enough time for my family. Even when I am focused on my work, it is impossible for me to get

everything done. Being a pastor involves learning to leave the office with work undone. No matter how large the church staff, there are always more things that could be done. Furthermore, there is no rigid line between being on duty and being off duty. Part of the preaching task is using one's imagination. I am often mulling my sermon when I am doing other tasks. Creative ideas come to me at all times of the day and of the night.

I have to make choices. Do I catch up with paperwork or do I make one more call? Do I finish my work on the newsletter or do I chat with a visitor who has dropped by my office? Some of those choices are relatively easy. I almost always choose face-to-face contact when it is available. I work hard to provide hospitality and that includes anyone who comes into our church building. I have learned that responding to interruptions is as important as the ability to occasionally focus on a task until it is finished.

So much of the work a pastor does is devoid of immediate feedback. We are often investing in the distant future and the effects of our work cannot be seen for a long time. I will occasionally hear from someone I worked with decades ago about how their life has been changed for the better. Far more frequent are people whom I attempt to help whose stories remain unknown by me. Give a sermon to 200 people and its effect will be different in each life. Some will tell you what meanings they received, most will not. People are quick to say, "good sermon," on their way out of the church, but that may or may not mean that it was what they needed to hear on that particular day.

One of the balancing acts with which I struggle a bit is between serving the needs of the people in my congregation and reaching out beyond the congregation. Both are important. If the church becomes too inwardly focused it loses its sense of mission. It cannot be a church if it exists only to take care of itself. Mission and outreach are at the core of my service to the church. Enabling people to become engaged in serving others is a primary task of a pastor. And I often choose to lead by example. I feel deeply called to reach out beyond the walls of my church in service to my community and the world. The choices sometimes are between working on a project for Habitat for Humanity or visiting in a nursing home. When I am visiting someone in the jail, I am not engaged in revising the policy manual.

I maintain those balances primarily by instinct. Although I listen carefully and take seriously feedback from the congregation, I also make independent choices every day. It isn't unlike parenting. There are times when what is best for a child is different than what the child asks you to do for them. While the people in my congregation are not all children and it is important that I don't treat adults as if they were children, just giving into requests and demands is not the sole calling of a pastor. There have been times in my career when I felt called to stand up to a bully and I have not regretted having done so.

I don't think that my vocation is somehow more demanding than others. There are many whose jobs are bigger than available time. There are many who have to make priority

decisions. There are many who have lots of “bosses.” I don’t write this to complain. I am a very fortunate person if for no other reason that I am able to do what I love to earn my living. Serving in the church is something for which I am deeply grateful. I love the people whom I have been called to serve. I enjoy conversations with the members of my church even when they ramble on and on. I am not as distressed by the clutter in my office or the list of tasks to be accomplished as some others might be. My days are never boring. There is always something that needs to be done.

Once in a while I am especially conscious about how someone else looks at me and the work I do. Occasionally I struggle to explain why I have made the decisions I have. I am, after all, called to work on behalf of others.

So I begin this day with great hope and high expectations. There is much to be done. May I reach the end of the day having accomplished important tasks, but may I also find time to be distracted by an interruption and to respond to genuine need when I encounter it. And may I find the strength to get up tomorrow and do it again.

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November 30, 2017 – The Scene at the Manger

We’re busy getting ready for the First Sunday of Advent at the church and there are parts of our preparations that are a lot of fun. One of the things that we do is to get out creche scenes that have been packed up for most of the year. We have many different types of scenes: large rattan figures from the Philippines, hand-carved wooden sets from Israel, clay figurines from Mexico, and many more different types of sets. Most of the sets are designed for children to engage in play. A few are for special display where tiny hands cannot reach. A family donated a new set this year. Made of wood, from Montana, it has some rather unusual characters, such as a moose and an angel dressed in traditional native garb with a feather. Surprisingly, there are no sheep in the set, something that I would expect, having grown up in sheep country in Montana.

As we looked at the sets and engaged in other preparations, I got to thinking about how our way of seeing some events is shaped by the words of the Bible. It is often true that we take a few words from the Bible and expand them into whole stories. Then other words are somewhat ignored.

There are no stories of Jesus’ birth that appear in all four of the Gospels. Mark doesn’t even have a birth narrative. John’s opening prologue sort of makes a reference to the birth of Jesus, but doesn’t describe any events. Instead it uses symbolic language about the Word becoming flesh. Matthew invests several paragraphs listing the genealogy of Joseph, who was married to Mary, the mother of Jesus. It then goes on to say that there is no genetic link between Joseph and Jesus by describing how Mary was found to be with child and how an angel intervened to prevent Joseph from divorcing Mary. About

the birth, it says little except to say it occurred. Matthew is the only Gospel to report of the visit of the Magi.

Most of the stories we tell about the birth of Jesus come from the Gospel of Luke. Luke sets the stage by describing the circumstances of the birth of John the Baptist and a meeting between Elizabeth the mother of John and Mary the mother of Jesus. It includes songs by Elizabeth and Zechariah as well as a song by Mary, all of which are used in Advent worship as responses.

One sentence from the second chapter of Luke has inspired a whole lot of Christmas images and stories: "And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." It is that sentence that has inspired the commonly held image that Jesus was born in a stable after his mother and father searched the city of Bethlehem being rejected by the keepers of public houses which were all full. It doesn't report that they asked for public accommodation, something that seems very unlikely, giving their poverty. Most likely they were staying with relatives. The word that is translated as inn is not a reference to such a place. It is the upper room of a common house. It was fairly common for family homes in the region to be built into hillsides, with two rooms. The upper room, which also features in the story of the last supper, was for sleeping. The lower room was for cooking. It also was a place where animals were kept when they needed to be brought in from the weather, which explains the presence of a manger, or simple feed box. Since the upper room had no room, probably due to other relatives visiting, the baby was born where there was a manger. The Gospel goes on to report that there were shepherds in the region out keeping watch over their flocks at night, so there were probably no animals present at the birth. The family wouldn't have been rich enough to afford a cow, and a few sheep or goats were probably out with the communal flocks and the shepherds.

But we like to tell the story of the couple's search for a place to stay. We like our creche scenes with stables and barns and lots of animals in attendance. We didn't really get those ideas from the book, we get them from generations and generations of story telling. So it doesn't bother us to have 3 kings join shepherds in the same scene, even though the wise men from the east are not identified as kings, nor is their number ever counted in the Bible. Matthew does report three gifts. And Matthew identifies the wise men as having come from the east. There is no mention of camels. But we like to have camels in our creche scenes, except for the one from Montana which substitutes a moose, though it is unlikely that anyone has ever ridden a moose and survived to tell the story.

We like to have angels that look like little children, or in some cases like adult women. None of our creche scenes has an angel that is specifically male, though the story in Luke speaks of the fear the angel inspires. We don't like frightening angels and none appear in our scenes.

Our imaginations have always been an important part of our telling the stories of our faith. We are not reduced to simply repeating ancient words. The words themselves have been translated and retranslated as our language has evolved. Even the Greek texts we have for research aren't original - they have been refined and revised over the centuries as well.

I have long believed that the actual events of any birth are beyond the capacity of language to describe. The birth of Jesus, too, must be beyond the power of our words. Our Gospels point to a reality that is much grander and much more impactful than the words can convey. So we welcome our imaginations to the descriptions and we use our imaginations to come closer to God than the words printed on the page can offer. If we are inaccurate in one or two details, at least we have poured ourselves into the quest for deeper understanding.

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