

**October 2017
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October 1, 2017 – Volunteers

We had a fun morning yesterday, working on a volunteer project at church. There were 11 people present, so the work went quickly and we accomplished quite a bit. I love working in that kind of setting, surrounded by people who are willing to get to work and get things done, but who also care about each other and have time to talk and share the news of their lives. It is sometimes surprising what significant conversations we are able to have even with the machinery running and people going every which way to get the work done.

It isn't always like that. There have been days when only a couple of volunteers showed up. Sometimes key members of the group feel like they are overburdened and don't get enough support. Ups and downs in participation are part of the reality of working in voluntary organizations. Sometimes it feels like we are competing with all kinds of other commitments and even other organizations that rely on volunteers to keep them going.

Later in the day, I was working on polishing off this month's schedule of volunteers for another organization. It has been frustrating work over the past couple of weeks, with some people difficult to contact, others not responding to phone messages, and a bit of arm twisting to get the schedule covered. It has also resulted in my needing to put in a few more hours than I had planned just to make sure that the schedule is covered.

There has definitely been a shift in volunteerism over the span of my career as a pastor. Part of what is going on is that families are a lot busier than once was the case. Two career families are the norm and there are plenty of families where there are extra jobs added just to meet the demands of living in expensive times during an extended period of wage stagnation. Just keeping their heads above water is a continual effort for some of the families we serve and finding time for volunteering is difficult.

There are also the pressures of programs for children and youth. Many of those programs rely on volunteers and exert more pressure on parents than we feel we are able to use. Parents are routinely told that their child cannot participate in sports programs unless the family meets a minimum number of volunteer hours. We would never make such a requirement. We want children to participate in our programs and we would never tell a child that she or he cannot participate because of a lack of volunteer hours. Parents and families know this is true. When they are put in a bind because of short time, they choose volunteering in the other program over volunteering in the church simply because that is the way to work things out.

As a result, churches are moving to more and more programs and projects that are dependent upon paid staff. That creates its own set of problems with increasing budgets and shifting of outreach budgets to support of local programs. We all working with limited resources. The balance of volunteers and programs run with funded staff is, at times, a delicate one.

In addition, it is a bit of a balancing act for church leaders. My style has always been to lead by example. Because I expect members of the congregation to be generous and volunteer their time, I feel it is essential for me to volunteer as well. I try to be active in community organizations, but I also try to maintain a high level of volunteer activity within the church. Yesterday's project is a good example. It is not part of what is required of me because I am the minister of the church. Another minister could allow the program to run itself without participating and that would be accepted. But I enjoy being with the people I serve and I enjoy rolling up my sleeves and working alongside the dedicated volunteers of the church. I try to give at least a portion of my "time off" back to the church with volunteer work. After all, I am not only the pastor of the church, I am a member of the church as well.

We pastors go through regular recurrent boundary training during which we discuss a large number of ethical topics. Among those topics is the boundary between our personal and professional lives. It is, in theory, a fairly easy distinction. Pastors need time away from work just like other people. We need to spend time with our families and we need to support our children and grandchildren. I get that. But being a pastor is more than a 9 to 5 job. We have been called to the work we do for who we are as much as for what tasks we can accomplish. Our jobs are not simply a matter of accomplishing a list of tasks. They are a matter of personal integrity.

That's why I sometimes chuckle over job descriptions for pastors. Recently, at a meeting of our church, someone suggested that I make a list of everything I do so that my successor would know what is involved in the job. I'm not sure I'm even capable of making the list. My tasks vary a great deal. For example, last Monday, my day off, the church fire alarm system malfunctioned. After giving a few instructions over the phone, I ended up making two trips to town to the church to assist with getting appropriate repairs to the system and resetting codes in the controls. A third trip was required early on Tuesday morning. The system is being repaired and it may be many years before such action is required. If I had not been in town, someone else would have figured out how to get things fixed, but it was helpful for me to know where keys are kept and what codes are used for the system. That's just a small example. When I think of the things I do, the tasks are numerous and varied. I don't do the same things week to week, or even year to year. Another pastor would do the job differently from the way I do it and the tasks would be different.

All along the way, however, we are dependent upon volunteers and how we attract, support and thank volunteers is an essential part of the work of ministry. I'm fortunate to be surrounded by such dedicated people.

October 2, 2017 – Seeking Purpose

Recently I was speaking with a friend who is going through a minor career crisis. Perhaps it is wrong to call it a crisis, even. He is unhappy in his job and seeking an alternative way of earning his living. As opposed to what he might have done when he was younger, however, he is unwilling to just quit his job without having a plan for what comes next. Although there is a part of him that would like nothing more than a couple of months with no daily obligations, he is not willing to take the financial risk of just quitting his job. So, at the moment, he is discretely exploring other options while continuing to work at his job. I don't think there is anything unusual in his circumstances. People frequently find themselves caught in the cycle of work. What fascinates me about this particular friend is that he frequently thinks about the wider philosophical questions that surround our quest for a meaningful life.

He spoke of the expanding universe and the incredibly immense distances that science has revealed. "I'm just a speck!" he declared, on a planet that is tiny from the perspective of the vastness of the universe. We are in a typical galaxy that is just one in a universe of a hundred billion. "How could the creator of all of this even notice me?"

It struck me, as he was speaking, how much he sounded like Psalm 8: "When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?"

There is something deep within us that drives us to strive for purpose and meaning in our lives. For my friend, a job is important. He has earned his own way in his life since his teenage years. But he is also seeking his purpose. He wants work with meaning. He wants to make a difference with the few years that are left of his one life.

If you were to consult a lot of the self-help and life coaching books that are popular these days, you might come to the conclusion that the quest for meaning is a solitary pilgrimage. First you have to discover who you really are and then discover your one true purpose. I'm sure these books are helpful to many people, but they fall short of offering what my friend is seeking.

He understands that life is not a singular path with only one option that is available. He understands that some choices are ours to make and others are thrust upon us. When you reach a fork in the road and have to make a decision, to go left or right, the decision is only part of the process. What you do afterward and the subsequent choices are also important. And, sometimes, when you look back, you realize you could have made life work had you made the other choice. Life presents many paths and not a singular one.

More than all of that, my friend wisely recognizes that human life is not a solitary adventure. We desire community. We thrive when we share the journey with others. Meaning is found in relationships with others.

I suspect that the vocational quests of people my age, as complex as they are, are not as complex as the decisions that face younger generations of people. There are many careers that are not paths at all. There are jobs that exist today that will not exist in the future. It is likely that most people who are just starting their careers today will have many more job changes and career diversions than was the case for us. There will be so many new and different jobs - jobs that do not at present exist - available to them that training for a life-long career will not be as important as the ability to adapt and learn in the midst of one's career.

My friend and I were talking about how many things are so different today than was the case when we began working. A mechanic used to need to know how to diagnose and repair problems. These days a mechanic needs to know how to operate a computer and replace components. The job still involves turning a wrench and using tools, but the tools themselves are much different than was the case a few decades ago. It is equally true of my vocation. I spend a great deal of time managing computer systems that did not exist when I was studying for the ministry. I use a tablet computer to display my worship notes. I use a smart phone to schedule my appointments. I use Google and Wikipedia to fact check a sermon as I prepare it. Outside of my devotional reading, I use an electronic version of the bible when studying, calling up different translations and following footnotes with the device instead of turning to my trusty Oxford printed edition. I have rows of commentaries in my study that I haven't opened in years because I can access them online much quicker and more easily.

It isn't just that the world is changing. We are changing with it.

And so, as we face the final years of our active working and begin to contemplate retirement the question of meaning and purpose in our work returns. While we don't want to spend our time looking back, it is natural to ask if what we've done has been meaningful and filled with purpose. And it is natural for us to seek meaning and purpose in the work that we pursue in this phase of our lives.

So my friend is left with a substantial dilemma. The right path is not clear. The instinct to just start walking is dampened by experience. But doing nothing and accepting the status quo isn't right either. I'm praying that one of his inquiries reveals a new option for him.

In the meantime, I know how important community is. I want to be part of his community so he knows that whatever decisions he makes he won't be left alone.

October 3, 2017 – Living in a Stream of Constant News

I did something this morning that I don't remember doing before. I use my telephone as an alarm clock. I like a gentle, soft alarm that doesn't disturb my partner. I can set the phone for a quiet alarm that wakes me. I'm quick at silencing the alarm and the disruption for my partner is limited. For years, I used a watch to wake myself, but that watch was broken and the one I have now does not have an alarm. Anyway, after I silenced the alarm, I rolled over and, while still in bed, I scanned the headlines in the news. Like I said, I don't think I've ever done that before.

Yesterday, after I had risen and gone to my study, I began to look at the horrible headlines coming out of Las Vegas. The death toll was still rising as officials worked the scene of the crime. The reports of the number of weapons found in the hotel room continued to climb. Bits of fake news circulated with actual facts. Even though I don't subscribe to any feeds from extreme right-wing sites, I did read a blurb that the police were searching for Marilou Danley, who might be related to the shooter. It later turned out that several alt-right sites had identified the shooter as Geary Danley who was NOT the gunman. In the confusion and in the attempt to follow every possible lead, some law enforcement officers headed off in the wrong direction. Authorities have since identified the gunman as Stephen Paddock, who was later found dead in a hotel room. His motives are unknown at this time and from what I can read this morning, little is known of the reasons behind the largest mass shooting in our history.

I am generally slow to respond to big tragedies. It seems to me that there are so many pundits and so many who are eager to write or say their opinions that I cannot add meaning to the situation by writing in my blog. Silence is often a more responsible way of dealing with grief and tragedy. I speak, but try to think through what I have to say first.

I probably will have some comments on the shooting and on how such incidents are a uniquely American phenomena in a world filled with violence. But that isn't the point of today's journal post.

I am alarmed at my own behavior this morning.

I am alive. I am uninjured. I have been given the gift of another day. I should be rising from sleep with gratitude in my heart and my mind focused on what I might accomplish with this gift of time that I have been granted. Instead, I started my day with a glowing screen, inches away from my face, following links that proclaim a parade of tragedy and horror. It isn't that I shouldn't have concern for those who loved Tom Petty, who died at the age 66, or for Puerto Ricans who are worried about the fabric of their society being ripped apart, or the latest weapons count in the Las Vegas shootings or the European Union's position on the succession vote in Catalonia.

Not long ago I vowed to write my journal before reading the news headlines. This morning I couldn't even wait to get out of bed before reading them.

It is more than the overwhelming tragedy of yesterday's news.

I have found myself living in a nearly constant state of increased agitation in recent months. It is impossible to escape the agitation of my colleagues and fellow citizens as we witness the incredible fast pace of ups and downs of national politics. We don't have time to process one event before the next one hits.

It doesn't seem like it was only four days ago that HHS Secretary tom Price resigned amid criticism for taking charter flights when other transportation options were readily available. It might have been three weeks ago. You certainly won't find front-page headlines about it in any newspaper today. But I remember when we had time to process a governmental scandal before the next one arose. The pace of events and the rapidity with which we hear of events is overwhelming.

I have watched the video of the Las Vegas shootings several times. I followed a link to an analysis of the number of shotes fired per second. There even was one link that compared the rate of gunfire to that of the Orlando shootings a little over a year ago. If I understand these stories correctly, the rate of gunfire was the most rapid in such an attack to date. That, combined with the fact that the shots were coming from above so that ducking provided no cover to the victims increased the carnage.

I feel like the shots are coming more quickly in more ways than just gunfire from automatic weapons (or weapons that had been modified - I don't think that we know exactly what was used). the past few months have been a cavalcade of events that are coming at us so fast that we don't have time to process what is going on. We are living in a state of constant agitation and there is no way to avoid being overwhelmed.

I am not advocating becoming uninformed. It is not responsible to turn a blind eye to the painful truths of our world, even when the suffering of the world breaks our hearts. I am not even advocating laying aside our devices, though I have shown sufficient signs of being addicted that I know I need to change my behavior when it comes to my telephone.

When we become overwhelmed, we become consumers of the world. Our constant addiction to the news headlines prevents us from becoming fully engaged and taking action. Part of the solution is to choose one problem and take action. Despite the tendency of the world to go on to the next crisis, today I will focus on one thing where my action can make a different. I will make a visit and leave my cell phone behind. I will listen attentively and lovingly without fearing falling behind.

And, I'm turning off some of the notifications on my phone. It will still be there in case there is a call from someone in need, but I'm turning off the feature that displays headlines on the screen each time it is used.

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October 4, 2017 – We are All Survivors

Over the past couple of decades, I have devoted a substantial amount of time to working with survivors. In the business of suicide prevention, we have a saying, "postvention is prevention." What it means is that those who have lost a loved one to suicide are themselves more likely to die by suicide. Working with those who remain after a suicide death and making sure that they have access to support and counseling is one way to prevent further suicides. Suicide survivors have unique challenges. Suicide grief is different than many other types of grief. It isn't just that there is the trauma of sudden and unexpected loss, which is present. It isn't just that there are many unanswered and unanswerable questions, which there are. It isn't just that society places a large stigma on mental illness in general and suicide in particular, which it does. There is a unique combination of factors that are present when a suicide occurs that makes recovery especially challenging. I say to those who are grieving repeatedly, "This is not something you will get over, but you can get through it."

With the large and growing number of suicides in our country and acknowledging the fact that the suicide rate in our end of South Dakota runs about 2 1/2 times the national average, there is a sense in which we all are survivors. Almost everyone in the hills knows someone who has died by suicide or someone who has lost a loved one to suicide. Survivors have unique characteristics in addition to the fact that their risk of dying by suicide is increased. They tend to always have a few regrets when thinking about the past. It isn't that they are condemned to live in regret, but they know that regret is real and painful. Losing a loved one to suicide is one of life's most painful experiences. Loss, sadness, and loneliness are experienced by all who lose a loved one. Suicide survivors also experience guilt, confusion, rejection, shame, anger and stigma. They are at a higher risk of developing post traumatic stress syndrome and clinical depression. They perceive less support from the wider community.

I could go on and on about suicide survivors, but there are other things I want to say in this post. One additional note. Suicide survivors are far more common than most people think. They are far more common than most survivors think. It is estimated that 85% of people in the United States will know someone personally who has died by suicide according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. We survivors are the majority, but being a survivor makes one think one is alone.

There is another reason for the sense that everyone in our country is a survivor. As we read the headlines about the senseless killing of 59 persons, the wounding of more

than 500, the stories about meticulous planning and an arsenal of weapons in a motel room, we all experience grief and loss. Each mass shooting is different from the previous one. The rules are constantly revised. Nowhere seems safe to us anymore.

Candlelight vigils were organized around the country. In our city, people gathered in the memorial park band shell. One of the organizers of the event, Emily Tupac, said, "I feel like my whole life has been defined by this type of violence."

As I spoke via Skype with our son, daughter-in-law and their children last night, I was well aware that we adults were speaking in code about the incident because we didn't want to be discussing the gory details in front of the children. We earnestly do not want this type of violence to define the lives of our grandchildren. It is, however, impossible to shield children from the force of a 24/7 news cycle. Even in homes where there is little television and limited access to computers as is the case with our grandchildren, the children go to school with other children and hear from schoolyard conversations about what is being displayed constantly on televisions around the community. We need to have the courage to discuss the real world with our children, even as we desire to shield them from the pain and trauma.

We are all survivors now.

Although I have many strongly-held opinions, I do not, in general, seek to make political statements in my journal. However, it is becoming apparent that labeling something as "political" or "inappropriate" is increasingly becoming a way of attempting to silence ideas to which one is opposed. The situation in which we find ourselves is political and political silence will not provide a solution.

As condolences and comfort comes in the form of email from friends around the world, it is easy to note that mass shootings and extensive gun violence are uniquely American problems. These situations aren't occurring in many other countries around the world.

I also was disgusted by the statement of our senior Senator who seemed to blame victims for not taking appropriate cover. Perhaps all senators are more responsive to those who donate to their campaigns than those they are elected to represent and this particular Senator is well funded by the National Rifle Association, but his response was insensitive and misguided. Whatever position you take about access to assault weapons, you have to understand that while bullets are raining from above with a sniper equipped with a weapon modified to fire automatically at dozens of rounds per second, there isn't time for rational reflection. It was all over before those in the crowd were able to even know the source of the gunfire. I'm sorry, Senator Thune, but you've got it wrong this time. It wasn't the victims' fault. And just because you don't seem to personally feel the pain of grief, you, too are a survivor. History will long record these events as distinguishing marks of the time when you occupied a leadership position. You are defined by this violence as much as anyone else.

I do not have solutions. I am making no policy proposals. I am trying to understand. And, at the moment, I take small consolation in the knowledge that survivors are often irrational and make statements that they later regret. It is the best explanation I can find for our Senator's words.

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October 5, 2017 – The Miracle of Walking

Sometimes, I will be walking somewhere and it comes to me what a miracle it is to be able to walk. My feet and legs seem to automatically know what to do. I can walk without concentrating on the task. It feels good to walk.

I love watching children learn to walk. Most first learn to pull themselves up on a piece of furniture or some other object. They will raise their hands, lose balance and then slap their hands back on the object as they regain. They fall down repeatedly before they are able to stand independently. After mastering standing they venture a step or two. Eager parents offer assistance and soon they are able to walk while holding a finger in each hand. Then it is walking with just one finger. Then there are a few halting steps. For many children, crawling is much faster at first and if they fall down after taking a few steps, they revert to crawling for a while to get where they want to go. Slowly, but surely, they advance in their skills and before long walking is second nature to them.

It is important to remember that it is learned behavior. Those who work with children who have physical disabilities that make walking much more difficult never forget this simple fact. There is a long learning curve for some children. Others never are able to walk.

My friend Ben, who is my age, faced real challenges learning to walk. He was born with cerebral palsy. He finally mastered the task while a student at a special boarding school for children with disabilities. His gate is a bit uneven and sometimes it seems as if he is lunging forward instead of just taking a first step. Stairs and uneven ground present challenges for him and require more concentration and focus than they do for those of us who find walking to be more natural and easier. But Ben gets where he is going. We often walk together as we talk. He knows he can place his hand on my shoulder when needed, but that need is rare.

Sometimes I think about Ben when I am walking down the steep part of the hill from our church. There is a way to avoid the very steep part by going around another way and that is the way we would go if Ben were with me, but when I am alone I frequently just cut across the lawn and down a steep path to get to the street below. Which way I come back up often depends on how far I have walked and how tired I am when I return.

Walking is a blessing, of that I am certain.

Not that those who cannot walk are cursed. I have another friend whose back was injured when he was five years old and who has used a wheelchair for his mobility ever since. He has made his life a blessing for himself and for others. He has a custom wheelchair that is light enough for him to pick up with one hand. He can self transfer from his chair to his 4-wheel-drive pickup and then place the chair in the back of the truck. He can repeat the process for getting out of the truck. He has a special wakeboard for waterspouts and an adaptive device for playing in the snow. He can ski bumps and steeps better than many folks who have no physical disabilities. He doesn't garner pity. Still, being with him reminds me that walking is a blessing for me.

Last night at a church family event, a few of us were sitting at a table watching the children play. One small child, who was recently just beginning to walk, has slots of confidence about her walking now. She was running with another child and laughing. In a flash, as her mother's back was turned, she climbed up on a chair and onto a table. She was standing in the middle of the table so quickly it amazed me.

Before I could react, another mother, who was walking by, calmly caught her and lifted her back to the floor. The look on her face was precious. She was so amazed to be swept from the top of the table back to the floor so quickly that at first, I don't think she realized how she got there. She didn't fall. She wasn't hurt and we were left laughing at her reaction to what had happened. Thinking about it this morning, I realize that I am as amazed at her ability to run and climb as at any other part of the evening. A human body is amazingly complex. To get all of its parts working together so that one can pull up one's entire weight with one's hands and arms and then go from lying to standing in just a couple of seconds requires a lot of different muscles to work in the right order. I knew that little one when she couldn't even roll over on her own. Now she not only walks and gets up wherever she wants, she is self aware. "I climb!" she proudly declares.

I try to celebrate walking by doing it. I've never tested the accuracy of the device, but my phone has an application that measures how much I walk each day. I'm not sure how it knows when I am walking and when I am driving, but it gets it pretty close. According to that source, I walked 4.8 miles yesterday and climbed 9 floors of steps. At one point I estimated that I walk just a bit faster than 3 miles per hour. So despite the fact that I thought the day was really busy, I had over an hour of just walking in my day. That is time that I often use to clear my thoughts.

Many spiritual leaders speak of walking prayer. The first letter to the Thessalonians advises us to "pray without ceasing." It also advises us to "rejoice always." Maybe I can do both - walk and rejoice - at the same time.

October 6, 2017 – Life in a Small Town

This afternoon when our work here is done, we're going to drive up north to Hettinger, North Dakota. We lived in that town for seven years, including the years of the births of our children. In those days, we'd drive down to Rapid City for a doctor's visit, or to shop at Target, or to visit the mall, or to catch a movie, or to go Skiing at Terry Peak or camping in the cool of the hills. There was a time, a few decades ago, when I knew that road like the back of my own hand. I've driven it in snow and rain and blowing dust. I've driven it at night and in the day and in the fog. I've felt the wind blowing on the side of the car as I headed on that road strong enough to make me keep both hands on the steering wheel for a long time. I used to know the Highway Patrol officer by name. And he knew that the guy in the blue Ford Pinto was a preacher. For the record, since I brought it up, he never did write me a ticket, though he promised to do so some day a couple of times.

I don't know that road so well these days. I don't go up there very often. I see my friends from up there when they come down here.

About the only time I go up there any more is for funerals. The truth is that I know more people in the cemetery than I know in town any more.

That's why we are heading up there today. Tomorrow is the funeral for a man who was in the eighth grade when we moved there. He died all too soon. The kids in your youth group are supposed to out live you. He was only 52.

And he wasn't the first of the kids in that beginning-of-our-career youth group to die. Or the second . . .

I remember driving youth of that church down from Reeder to a retreat at Placerville Camp. He was in the back seat of the car. We got to the hills at about dark. When we were finally settled in at the camp, he said to me, "I can't believe the way you drive!" I asked him what he meant. He said I drove so incredibly slowly when we were out on the open prairie and so very fast once we got to the winding roads in the hills. He was a kid of the prairie. I was a kid of the mountains. I guess we do things differently.

His story is interesting in part because he is one of those who stayed in the little town. The main street is empty now. You could stand in the middle of main street with the dust blowing from the high school to the grain elevator and you'd be the only one who would be annoyed by the relentless wind. The Oil and Gas company is closed. The bank is closed. The machine shop is closed. The grocery store is closed. About the only thing that is left is the senior citizens center and the bar and the bar isn't the same since the old bartender died a few years ago.

But he stayed in town. He was the moderator of the church. He served a stint on the City Council - both positions taken because nobody else would do it.

Once we asked a group of people from that town what the best thing about living in the town was. "It's a great place to raise kids!" one mother chimed in. A little while later, we asked what the worst thing about that town was. "It's a tough place to grow up," said the son of the woman who had spoken earlier.

The man whose life we celebrate tomorrow knew that better than most people. Some of his peers - some of the kids in the youth group - got out of that small town in the middle of nowhere. Well, not exactly the middle of nowhere - we used to tell people that it was right between Bucyrus and Gascoyne. And if you know where either of those are, you're probably from there. Kids from that youth group live in several cities around North Dakota and one lives in Canada. Another taught English in several different countries in Europe for several years before returning to the state, but not to the small town. One is an assistant North Dakota Attorney General who was honored by the State Legislature for subduing a man who pulled a pistol after guilty verdicts were read in his case.

But the guy whose funeral is the reason for this trip never got famous. He never made the headlines in the paper. He never left town. And there isn't much town to leave these days.

Next summer, it will be 40 years since we moved to North Dakota. I thought I was so mature in those days and I was, in fact, so young and inexperienced. I thought we had an amazing youth ministry in those churches, but the stories of those who were members of that group aren't exactly a catalogue of the saints of the church. I'm thinking the majority of them don't even attend church regularly as adults. We did some good work there, but it is hard to evaluate it from the perspective of all these years later.

But it is my job - my calling - to bring hope to those who are grieving, even when I'm grieving right along with them. I'm not confident of the words I've written for the service. They'll probably be revisited several times this evening and maybe again tomorrow morning. I know that those who have remained are among the most resilient people in the world. I know that they understand hope in ways that escape some of the rest of us. I know that love never dies. And I know that God's gift of resurrection is offered to all of God's children.

In the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus calls his disciples friends. I guess that's where we'll start. Farewell, friend.

And then, as we always do in that little church, we'll end the service by singing, "God be with you till we meet again."

October 7, 2017 – In North Dakota



I grew up with geographical biases. I suppose most parts of the world have their own jokes that make fun of others. These are usually untrue and unkind, but persist despite the fact that people know that is true. In Montana, when I was going up, we told North Dakota jokes. In most of them, North Dakotans are portrayed as not as intelligent and the land of North Dakota is described as boring. Here is an example:

Did you know North Dakota was the first of the states to complete its Interstate Highway system?

How'd they do that?

It was easy. One bridge and one interchange. They didn't even have to make any curves. It is straight shot all the way across.

or

Did you hear about the guy who had a house that was in North Dakota right next to the Montana line? They surveyed the land and discovered that his house was really in Montana. "That's great!" he said. "I don't know if I could have survived another North Dakota winter!"

or

Did you hear about the guy who moved from Montana to North Dakota and raised the average IQ in both states?

The Interstates in North Dakota, both I 94 and I 29 are much more interesting than that. There are some beautiful vistas. The winters in North Dakota can be severe, but it does depend on where you are in the state. And the people are intelligent and highly educated. That's the thing about that kind of joke. They perpetuate stereotypes that are not accurate.

I was reminded of how North Dakota challenged my biases when we moved to the state. The southwest corner of the state, where we lived is full of rolling hills. There are some stunning vistas and some very beautiful places. The creek bottoms are full of trees and some of the homesteads have shelter belts that are mini forests.

Hunting season is a big deal in that part of the world. Yesterday, when we turned the corner at Reva, which is not one of the biggest towns in the northwestern part of South Dakota, the school yard was filled with a cluster of high-end fifth wheel trailers. You won't see campers parked in Reva at any other time of the year, not even for the annual turtle races. It is a kind of hunter's campground for those seeking deer in the slim buttes.

Of course with hunters all over the hills as we drove north yesterday, it was also fun to see a couple of really big bucks in places where there were no hunters in sight.

We at dinner at the local cafe in Hettinger, North Dakota and the folks at the table next to ours were a group of pheasant hunters, talking about their day traveling to Hettinger. Some had flown into Bismarck, rented a car and driven down. Today is the pheasant opener here. We were very lucky to find a motel room. The motels are all full, and people are stirring even though it is not yet 5 am when I'm writing this. The hunters are just excited. You can't go out until daylight and sunrise is about 7 here, so they could sleep another hour and miss nothing.

I grew up in prime antelope, deer and elk hunting range in Montana. People also hunted mountain goats in the mountains near town. In those days, you were required to have a bear license with you if you were hunting any other big game, because bears were attracted to hunting camps in their late autumn feeding frenzies when they will eat nearly anything.

What I didn't know, growing up, was that the area in the southwest corner of North Dakota had a bit of history that was different from some other parts of the region. It was among the last areas of the west to be opened up to settlement. Homesteaders arrived with the railroad in 1907. The railroad didn't get to Reeder, 17 miles west, until the next year. This little corner was the place of the last buffalo hunts before over hunting and government policies drove the buffalo to the verge of extinction. I guess I should call them bison, as they aren't really buffalo, but American Bison, but we never called them that in Montana. But I'm in North Dakota, now where the educated folks at North Dakota State University have Thundar the Bison as their mascot. "Those folks over in Fargo may call them bison, but out here in the national grasslands, we call them buffalo."

Having lived in both states, I am deeply aware that there is a cultural divide between the east and west in both places. Both states have two time zones, with the dividing line being the Missouri River, with a few exceptions. In North Dakota, that makes for some strangeness about time because the Northwestern corner of the state is in Central time and the southwestern corner is in Mountain time, meaning that there are places west of where we are that have a more eastern time zone. I know it is a bit confusing. Just remember that all Indian Reservations in North Dakota run on Central Time, so the portion of Standing Rock that is in North Dakota is in Central Time and the portion that is in South Dakota is in Mountain Time. No wonder we make jokes about Indian time.

The east-west divide is in part due to the fact that the most densely populated parts of the states are in the East. I don't know whether or not it is true, but I was told that the reason that the Dakota Territory wasn't divided east and west is that if you took the western portion of both states, there has never been enough population to meet the minimum for statehood.

If you look at how the highways and railroads run, however, it makes sense for the eastern and western halves of the states to be connected.

Now that I've lived in the hills longer than I've lived anywhere else in my life, I have new biases. I think the hills are the most beautiful part of both Dakotas. Biases are rarely accurate. I have to admit that this country we're visiting today is

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October 8, 2017 – A Kind of Homecoming

My paternal grandfather was born in Minnewaukan, North Dakota. He lived there well into his adulthood, when moved from there to Billings, Montana. From Billings, he moved to Red Lodge and then back to Billings. Three places in a lifetime.

My father was also born in Minnewaukan and moved to Billings. From there, he lived in California, Oklahoma and then to Big Timber, Montana. Five places in a lifetime.

I was born in Big Timber, moved to Billings, then to Chicago, North Dakota, Idaho and South Dakota. Six places and counting.

Our son was born in Hettinger, North Dakota, moved to Idaho and South Dakota with us and then to Forest Grove, Oregon, Los Angeles California, Portland, Oregon, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. In Washington, he's lived in Tacoma, Olympia, and Mount Vernon. 10 places and he is still a young man.

We are just one family, but it certainly seems to me that we are a part of a general trend in the world. We are becoming more mobile. We travel more and we move around more. I don't know if it is good or bad. It is just the way that things are in our world today.

Yesterday, however, I had a strong sense of how much the places of our lives shape us. We lived in Hettinger, North Dakota for seven years and while there also served a church in Reeder, North Dakota. Being in both towns was a little trip down nostalgia lane for us. We drove around the towns to see familiar sights, walked down main street to peer in the store fronts, and met and spoke with friends. There are many things that are familiar and similar to the way things were when we lived there.

A lot has changed. As you drive into our old home town, it is obvious that more than 40 windmills are planted on the hills north of town. Those giant electricity-producing machines are new and they are adorned with lights that change the appearance of the skyline. Many of the businesses on main street have changed. There is no longer a hardware store or a cafe on main street. There is a new Dollar General store on the edge of town.

Of course we have changed, too. I'm older, whiter and wider than the days we lived there. We have had a lot of different experiences that we lacked in those days. Our children were younger than our grandchildren are now when we moved from that town.

But there was a connection that was obvious to me as I stepped into that familiar pulpit. I had a sense that I know these people, I know how to be their minister, I know how to preach to them. And I think we did a fair piece of ministry, officiating at that funeral yesterday. People appreciated what we had to say.

Of course you can never go back in life. The church is no longer functioning as an active congregation. The building is maintained only because it now belongs to a funeral home and is used as a community chapel. The parsonage, where we lived, has been sold and the money distributed to support other ministries. There isn't really a job for a UCC minister in that place any more. And we have changed too. We love the work we

do here in South Dakota and feel a commitment to the people we serve in this place. Just freeing my schedule to make the trip up north was a struggle. I've got plenty to do here where I live.

But there is a sense that although we've moved on with our lives and we are firmly planted in another place, the old home town is a part of our identity. I think that even the way I speak was changed by the experience of living there. In those days I had only just begun to pull my face out of my notes when I preached a sermon. I was just learning the art of giving a prepared sermon without notes. I was just discovering how to get my timing and phrasing down in a manner that made it possible for me to remember what I was saying and to use speaking words that matched the way that people speak in conversation with one another. Sermons in general, and funerals in particular, are dependent on the ability of the preacher to listen to the people being served. Most of the funerals I lead contain a lot of phrases and words that I have heard from the grieving family, and, when possible, from the person who has died. I am giving people an opportunity to remember experiences of their lives with the feelings intact. When grief leaves you fractured and broken, reconnecting with a time when you were happy and whole is part of the healing process. Familiar words and phrases are part of the slow journey of recovering from brokenness.

I only know how to speak that way because those people made a deep impression on me when I was in my twenties. Now that I am in my sixties, that impression remains.

Some of my friends here in South Dakota say that my pronunciation changes when I speak of North Dakota. I know I pronounce the word "North" differently when I refer to that state than when I am speaking of a general direction, but for the most part the change is subconscious. I don't really think about it, I just fall into a pattern of speech that is a part of that place. Whatever the process is, it is more a part of my identity than it is a part of my set of ideas at this point. It isn't as much something that I do as something that I am.

Each of the places of our lives shapes us and leaves permanent marks on our souls. I know that I am a better pastor for having lived in the places where I have lived. Perhaps, in addition, I've left a small mark on the places where I have been. Each trip I make to the former places of my life I run into people whose names I cannot remember who have no problem remembering mine. We may have touched more lives than we know.

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October 9, 2017 – Native American Day, 2017

The concept of land ownership and borders was different on the plains before the coming of settlers. Primary among the people who came to the hills were Lakota,

Dakota and Nakota, also known as the Great Sioux Nation. They called themselves “tiospaye,” meaning extended family, and were semi nomadic. They lived and ranged all over the Rocky Mountain region and out into the plains, including areas of present day Wisconsin and Minnesota as well as the plains and hills of the Dakotas.

They welcomed, sometimes warmly and sometimes reluctantly, visitors from many other indigenous nations who came to the hills for ceremonies and observances. As many as 27 different nations consider the hills to be sacred and visited them from time to time. Chief among the visitors were Arapaho, Crow, Cheyenne, and Shoshone.

The hills were a tourist destination long before European settlers arrived. Things changed significantly, however, when Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer led a United States Army expedition into the hills in 1874. They discovered gold in the hills and the news quickly circulated around the country. The resulting gold rush brought such an influx into the territory that prior treaties guaranteeing the land to the Lakota people were breached and the U.S. Army was later brought in to try to keep the peace, but failed to staunch the flow of people into the hills. The seizure of the hills was ruled to have been illegal by the United States Supreme Court, but a final settlement has never been reached, with the original court-ordered settlement amount remaining in trust and refused by the tribes involved. Their insistence that they want the land returned in place of a cash settlement has been confidently held.

I’ve lived in the hills for more than 22 years now, and I still am not sure of my exact status. I’m not a native. I wasn’t born here. I’m not a tourist. I remain when the weather gets cold. I must be an immigrant.

We continue to play host to a lot of tourists, keeping the traditions of native people from centuries ago. The total population of the Black Hills is estimated to be 178,694, but in 2015, we hosted the 75th annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally and welcomed over a million guests to the region in a two-week time period.

We’re pretty much a tourist area. Tourists come to see Mount Rushmore, Crazy Horse Mountain, Wind Cave National Park, Badlands National Park and many other parts of the hills. Custer State Park is a real gem for wildlife viewing and dramatic natural scenes.

It is difficult to measure the exact impact of tourists because those of us who live here use the same roads and infrastructure. Exactly what capacity is the cost of hosting tourists is hard to measure. The income side is a bit easier to count. The National Park Service estimates that nearly 3.8 visitors spend about \$230 million each year. Translating that into a meaningful estimate of profits, however, is a challenge because of the difficulty in measuring the costs.

Suffice it to say that this is tourist country.

One tourist that we never welcomed to the hills, however, was the Spaniard who led Europe's first landing party in the Americas, Christopher Columbus. In much of the United States, today is set aside as a holiday in honor of the explorer. The federal holiday is observed by twenty four states as a state holiday. Twenty five states do not have official state holidays on the second Monday in October. Our state officially observes Native American Day today. California, Nevada and Tennessee observe Native American Day on the fourth Friday in September. It is a bit confusing, to say the least.

At any rate today is a holiday and will be marked by special celebrations throughout the hills. One of the best places to observe the holiday is at the Crazy Horse Memorial mountain carving site. Programs and displays featuring artists, storytellers and activities for children are featured. There are singers and dancers and the Crazy Horse Foundation will name the Educator of the Year award recipient.

The first Native American Day celebration at Crazy Horse Memorial was held in 1990, the year declared by Governor George S. Mickelson as "Year of Reconciliation." Gov. Mickelson said in his speech that year, "We can't turn back the clock. We can only turn to the future together. What we can do as leaders, both Native American and white, is teach others that we can change attitudes."

Like many other holidays, the observance of Native American Day in the hills is, for many, simply another day off. As one whose regular day off is Monday, I don't feel the impact of holidays very much. I do, however, try to observe Native American Day by setting aside a bit of time to experience and appreciate the hills by going for a hike or paddle. Today's cool weather with a bit of snow in the high country doesn't make extended outdoor activity very inviting, but I've got a kayak loaded on the car and plan to paddle after the day warms up a bit. Kayaks, while the traditional craft of indigenous people along northern coasts, aren't a craft of any of the plains tribes. They didn't go in for boating very much at all, though bull boats were used on the Missouri River. And the lake where I will paddle isn't a natural lake. There are no natural lakes in the hills. It is a reservoir, the result of a dam built in 1939. Still, it gives me a way of making intimate contact with the land and sensing its sacredness. When you live in a sacred place and stand on holy ground every day, sometimes you have to discipline yourself to remember just how fortunate you really are.

So, Happy Native American Day. May your day include a moment to reflect on the people who were here before you arrived and their contributions to the culture we enjoy today. May you renew your dedication to reconciliation with all people.

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October 10, 2017 – Fall Paddle



After all it is October. There is nothing surprising about the dusting of snow on the highest hills. We've had major blizzards bury us in snow earlier in the year than this. That is life. The seasons come and go. And, frankly, it is something that I enjoy about living in this part of the world. I've never been too good at the hottest of weather and seem to be more comfortable when things cool down a bit. And we still get some pretty wonderful days in the fall around here. I've seen a forecast that says we might make it above 70 degrees tomorrow. That's not bad for nearly the middle of October.

I was lazy yesterday, lounging around the house and lingering over my newspaper. I didn't get to the lake until it was nearly 9 am. Still, I had the lake to myself. I thought that there might be one or two other hearty paddlers out given that it was a holiday and people have more time. But the docks are nearly empty. Only a few boats remain to be removed to winter storage. The docks at the north launch have been pulled up onto the ramp, so it is a little bit more of a challenge to launch and retrieve the bigger boats. Of course with my little kayak, I don't need a ramp or any special facilities. I just carry it down to the water, hop in and paddle off.

I thought that I might have over dressed for the day, with several layers topped by a set of dry pants and a paddling top, but there was enough of a breeze to make me feel grateful for the layers. There weren't many critters out and about. The geese seem to have left for their southern wintering areas, though there was plenty of evidence that they have been around. There were a couple of ducks, but they seemed to be transient and ready to head off to warmer places. The grasses are dried out and golden. The campground is nearly empty. The primary sounds were the wind in the trees and the dip of my paddle in the water.

I haven't kept any records, but it feels as if I didn't paddle quite as much this year as in some previous years. I still could have several good days of paddling left, however. With proper clothing and a warm kayak, I can paddle until ice takes over the lake. I usually am able to paddle with some ice in the lake at both ends of the season and I was early to get in the water last spring.

I read magazine articles by and about people who live in southern climes where they paddle year round. While that seems attractive on the surface, at least in the winter when I'm spending more time inside and have to use the rowing machine to keep up with my exercise, it does have its drawbacks. I haven't yet heard how those particular people weathered the recent hurricanes that have swept through the various coastal areas of the U.S., but several of them seemed to be in the paths of the destructive storms. You don't get in as much recreational paddling when you're occupied with storm clean-up. They also endure heat and insects during most of the summer that makes the place they live seem less ideal, not to mention that bit about having to mow the lawn all year around. Here we get a break from lawn and garden duties every year. We've picked the last of the tomatoes and the garden is ready to be put to bed for the winter. A half day's work and we can forget about it until next year. So, for now, I'm very happy to live where I do and have the variety of weather that comes with a more northern climate.

As I paddled yesterday I once again had the opportunity to reflect on how very fortunate I am to be able to live in the hills and have such easy access to places that aren't too filled with other people. I love working with people and I enjoy relationships, but sometimes, especially when I've been involved in a series of intense situations, it is good to get away from other people for a few brief moments to reflect. Those moments almost always help me return to an attitude of gratitude. There is so much for which I am thankful in my life and it is important for me to remember my thanks on a regular basis.

Thanksgiving is a mood that we associate with autumn. Yesterday was, after all, the Canadian Thanksgiving holiday. We wait until the end of November for our holiday, but the season of harvest has long been a time that has inspired festivals of gratitude among people.

I'm not Canadian, but there are a couple of things that are attractive about the Canadian holiday. Chief among them is that there is no such thing as "Black Friday" in Canada. Perhaps the closest to a shopping holiday that exists in the country is Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, when many people go shopping. Here in the United States the day after Thanksgiving is some kind of frenzy that makes no sense at all to me. I try my best to avoid going to any stores on that day, leaving all of the scuffling for imagined bargains to others. I'd prefer for holiday weekends to be holidays for those who work in retail stores as well. They deserve a day off as much as anyone else.

Actually, I prefer the concept of a season of thanksgiving over a single day anyway. So I started my thanksgiving with a gentle paddle on a bright sunny day yesterday. I was breathing fresh air and had a sense of having a whole lake to myself. Perhaps I can maintain that feeling of gratitude for many days.

Thanks be to God!

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October 11, 2017 – Thinking of Mark Zuckerberg

Note: I frequently am inspired by something I read and turn that inspiration into a blog post. Today's post was definitely influenced by reading Max Read's article, "Does Even Mark Zuckerberg Know What Facebook Is?" published in the October edition of New York Magazine. The article can be found at: <http://nymag.com/selectall/2017/10/does-even-mark-zuckerberg-know-what-facebook-is.html>.

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

I'm sorry I missed you when you paid your visit to South Dakota last July. I know that you hardly had time to visit with me as your visit was part of your attempt to visit all of the states you had not visited during the year. Your trip was planned for two stops in our State. You hosted a live webcast from deep underground in the Sanford Deep Underground Laboratory and you paid a visit to a cattle ranch near Piedmont, conveniently on the way from the airport in Rapid City to the lab. But I know that on your visits to some of the states, you did visit churches and I wish your visit would have given you time to visit our church, though I do understand that we hardly have done anything to make you notice us.



Had you stopped by to talk religion, however, I would have been delighted to speak with you. And, for the record, had you stopped by to talk religion, your footwear would have been well suited for the visit, which it was not for your visit to the cattle ranch. Don't know if you stepped into it at the ranch or not, but you have to be careful with shoes like that or you'll get it on your socks.

If we had talked, I would have tried to honor your Jewish roots. I know that you don't really participate in Jewish ceremonies much these days, but you were born into an historic and honorable faith, one that I admire even though I myself am Christian. We could have had a conversation about Jeremiah. He, like you, lived at a time of enormous social upheaval and tried to be both a prophet warning of impending doom and a pastor, offering hope and solace to people who were experiencing grief and loss. Jeremiah would be a good topic for us to discuss in the light of your business and its role in American politics.

Like you, Jeremiah, found himself at the center of public debate and in the midst of a significant amount of controversy. His people were already kind of on the outs with the leaders of the synagogue and the government. Three centuries before his birth the priests of his family had cast the attention of the then-new King of Israel, Solomon, and had ended up getting banished to Anathoth. From their vantage point removed from Jerusalem they could witness everything going on in the city without being in the mix of the folks there, sort of like some Silicon Valley types do today when looking at Washington, D.C. Jeremiah, however, spoke up enough and raised enough political attention, that he couldn't remain removed from the actions of the government.

You'd probably understand that. I know your company has been formally asked to testify in front of the Senate Intelligence Committee in November. Unlike Jeremiah, called up before government leaders, of course, you won't be at the hearing. You'll be able to send others from your company for the official testimony. You and your COO Sheryl Sandberg will be announcing Facebook profits to shareholders on the same day. It is a bit of irony that may be lost on members of the Senate, but certainly would not be lost on old Jeremiah. He wasn't too keen on the notion of profits in the first place and he was really critical on the role of profits that distracted Israel from what was most important. When profits become more important than people, Israel has always fallen back into the ways of idolatry. That second commandment has been a tough one for Israel ever since Moses brought it down from the mountain.

Had you been interested in hearing about my Christian faith, I think I would have liked to tell you a story that three of our Gospels tell about Jesus. You probably know the story: In Matthew's version, a rich young man asks Jesus what actions bring eternal life. First Jesus asks him to obey the commandments. The man, obviously a faithful Jew, reports that he observes all of them. Jesus tells him that he needs to do one more thing: "Go, sell all your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." The story reports that the man became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth.

I would tell you that story because I genuinely believe that you want to be a good man and you want your company to be a good company. I genuinely believe that you want to do what is right. Somewhere, perhaps in that 6,000 word manifesto you wrote about

Facebook, or perhaps in an interview, I've heard that you said, "I don't see why the interests of business and the interests of humanity are not aligned."

Let me tell you why. Your business is not interested in humanity. Facebook is in the business of gathering the most amount of data on your users to sell to advertisers for the most amount of money. Your company is very good at this. Some have estimated that if all of the data your company has collected were printed out it would amount to 200 pages per user. And your company has 2 billion users. That's a lot of data that you didn't buy. You didn't offer compensation to those who provided it. But it is data that you sell to advertisers every day.

Your business's interests are not even aligned with the best interests of the 2 billion people who use your product. How can you expect them to align with the best interests of humanity.

If we had had the chance to talk, I suspect that you would have gone away very sad. You would probably be disappointed with our conversation. For you are a man of great wealth. Like the rich young man in the story, you have the potential to touch the eternal, but it won't be easy for you.

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October 12, 2017 – Surprising Ideas

Yesterday a small group of us were discussing the challenges of this week's Gospel reading in the Revised Common Lectionary. The passage is the parable of the Banquet. Luke records a version of the parable that is about inclusion and the welcoming of those who are marginalized by society. Matthew's version (Matthew 22:1-14) which is Sunday's reading is much more harsh. In Matthew's telling of the parable, those who refuse to come are killed and their city is burned. Then after guests are gathered from the streets, one is thrown out for not wearing a proper wedding robe. As is true of other parables, this one begins with a direct, stated comparison to the kingdom of heaven, and ends with a warning: "For many are called, but few are chosen."

When we are honest, we admit that this parable leaves us uncomfortable. Some of my colleagues admit having avoided poaching on the parable by focusing their attention on the Epistle or Hebrew Lessons of the day. I have done the same on multiple occasions. In the continuous lectionary, which is the version we use, the Hebrew scripture is the story of the Golden Calf from Exodus and I'm confident I've preached more sermons on that calf than I have on the Matthew version of the banquet. When the Luke version of the banquet comes around in the lectionary, I'm much more likely to focus my sermon on its somewhat gentler message.

In general we don't like parables of judgement, though I have preached multiple sermons on other passages of judgement, such as the parable of the sheep and the goats. Judgment, especially harsh judgment, challenges our notions of the nature of God. We are pleased to think of God as loving and accepting, quick to forgive and eager to welcome all into the heavenly realm. We are made uncomfortable by the notion of harsh judgment and severe punishment for those whose sins seem to us to be relatively inconsequential. After all, in this parable, the sins that result in death and destruction are making light of a wedding invitation and going on with business as usual.

Of course it is a parable. It is supposed to be a lesson to those who might take lightly the invitation to a meaningful life of faith and a closer relationship with God. Those who are punished in the parable do have the chance to make changes and choose to go on with their lives without accepting the invitation.

It is really a parable about priorities. What do we put first in our lives? What is most important? And the parable proclaims that there are consequences for those actions.

Still, the parable makes us squirm.

Thinking of our discomfort with the parable, I was made aware that the time and temperature sign at Calvary Lutheran Church in our town is not working properly. I've made fun of dysfunctional time and temperature signs in our community before. They amuse me. I've also spoken to my friends about my question of why churches need time and temperature signs in the first place. I know that historically church steeples were used to display large clocks in many locations, dating back to the time when common people did not have portable clocks and a village clock was a good way to know what time it is. However, these days, we don't really look to our churches to be the authority on time and temperature. I wear a watch. Most cars have thermometers installed in them. I don't happen to have a thermometer in the car I drive, but it is easy to discern the temperature. My phone has an application that gives the current temperature at a dozen or more weather reporting stations in our community in a single glance.

Anyway, yesterday, the sign in front of Calvary Lutheran Church was reporting that the temperature was 190 degrees. I assume that it reports in Fahrenheit. That's 87 in Celsius, which is hot enough. If the sign happens to be reporting in Celsius, that would be 374, a temperature hot enough to roast a chicken or bake a cake.

I'm tempted to send an email message to the pastors of the church, who are good friends of mine, inquiring about the temperature. Perhaps they have a handle on God's judgment that has escaped the rest of us and therefore might have some really important insights on the parable that we share for Sunday's worship. My schedule prevents me from attending worship at their church, but it does seem like it might be fun

to be in that church on Sunday morning just to see whether or not the sermon makes a reference to the display on their digital sign. Perhaps they will have the sign repaired before Sunday.

I know I'll be looking at that sign each time I drive by for a few days now, which makes the sign all that much more effective in conveying the rest of the information that they have programmed into it, such as worship times.

I probably have a very unusual sense of humor when it comes to such things, but I actually enjoy the dysfunctional temperature reports. I'm pretty sure it isn't really 190 degrees, even with fiery preaching at Calvary Lutheran.

The Bible has a great capacity to challenge entrenched notions about God. Just when we think we understand God's nature, we discover a nuance or aspect of God that we haven't previously considered. That's what makes the commandment about not making graven images so appropriate. We don't fully know God, so every attempt to represent God falls short. God is greater than the capacity of our imaginations.

In the Hebrew reading for the week, God, "changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people," as the result of Moses pleading. It challenges our notion of God as being unchanging. If God can change his mind about destroying the people who made the golden calf, it changes the way we interpret the gospel's promise of exclusion and destruction to those who ignore God's invitation.

Calvary might not be the only church where I could be surprised by the sermon. The sermon at our church is still capable of surprising me as well.

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October 13, 2017 – Inspiring Young People

Yesterday I had a conversation with a friend who is about my age. As is typical of our conversations, the subject ranged from local concerns to national politics to travel plans and family matters. We share a lot in common and have no trouble finding interesting subjects for conversation. After we talked, however, I had a sensation, that our conversation was a bit depressing. We had laughed and shared some positive news, but the general tone of the conversation was a bit down, with the usual list of complaints about the continuing distressing news from our government, increasing partisanship, inability to work together for the common good, and other topics.

It is a problem of growing older that I was aware of when I was in my 20's. It is rather easy for those of us at the end of our active careers to sit around and complain about the current situation and what we see as a lack of leadership. It is simple for us to get distressed with the dysfunction at nearly all levels of government.

This friend of mine is a loving, generous and caring person who has contributed a great deal to the world by the way he has lived his life. The negative tone of our conversation is not his total outlook on the world. He is generally positive and eager to get involved to make things better.

As I reflected on our conversation, I began to think about some of the good things that are going on in the world and some of the people who inspire me. I'm pretty sure that neither of us will end up being grumpy old men who simply sit around and complain about the state of the world.

One of the joys of my life is that I know some truly impressive people in their twenties and thirties who give me great hope for the future.

I have a friend who is a brilliant physicist and researcher who teaches in the university setting. He really believes in the power of science to provide solutions to very difficult problems and he sees the potential in his students. His commitment to teaching because it is his way of making a positive contribution to the world is impressive. I know that he deeply touches the lives of his students and that they will go on to make new discoveries and contribute to the quality of life for many others.

Another person who inspires me is a student in law school. I know that there is some perception that lawyers are all driven by money and corrupt, but this is a young person of exceptional integrity who genuinely believes that skillful navigation of the legal system is a way to address systemic problems in our society. She intends to use her training and education to work for social justice and the making of a more fair society for all. It is probably too early to know whether or not she will pursue politics and public service, but if she does, she will be able to go a long ways towards restoring trust and faith in the power of government to accomplish good in people's lives.

I've been privileged to have some long conversations with a young man of exceptional wisdom for his age who has a very good grasp on the role of local government to provide solutions to situations of injustice and inequality. He is a superb researcher and knows how to gather information and put it into presentations that inform and inspire those working in local government to find solutions to tough problems. Every conversation with him leaves me feeling good about the future.

In the evening, I spoke on the phone with a young woman who has her hands full with family and career, but when a family health crisis occurred she was exceptionally level-headed and direct. The first time I met this young woman, when she was a teenager, she displayed exceptional courage and honesty in defense of her sister. I was impressed at that time. Now her sister's husband has come to a crisis with major mental illness and she has been there for her sister again, directly confronting the problem, demonstrating her care and concern and insisting that they get the help that will be

needed as they go forward. As I listened to her recount how she had intervened with care and compassion, I felt a surge of pride. I'm not sure that I have any right to pride, for I have not contributed to her strength of character, presence of mind, and depth of compassion. But I was listening to someone who had done the right thing in a very difficult situation and I was incredibly proud of the way she had responded.

I suppose that I could become one of those old folks who sits on the porch in a rocking chair and complains about the state of the world. I do think that the current state of politics in Washington, D.C. is deplorable. I am disappointed with the selfishness of our nation's most wealthy citizens. I find the abuse of social media to be distressing. I am angered by the insensitivity of those we have elected to represent us. I am capable of loud complaints about the priorities of some of today's parents who put almost everything ahead of building a community of spiritual care and support. I am distressed by the decline of the contemporary church and the decisions that have led to that decline. I can complain for hours on end.

But I am saved from becoming a bitter, grumpy old man by the inspiring lives of people who are decades younger than myself. They bring me hope and new vision every day. My generation may have done a lot to make the mess of this world more severe. We may be leaving a lot of unsolved problems to the next generation. But there are some truly capable and competent people who are in their 20's and 30's. It is a privilege and an honor to know them.

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October 14, 2017 – Distances

I have a friend and colleague who lives in New Hampshire and works in Massachusetts. Her job involves visiting churches all over the state, but when she goes into the Conference office, it is a 40 mile drive. Distances are a bit different back east, so when we speak of the size of the conference, she is a bit mystified by things we take for granted. I have served as a pastor in the United Church of Christ in three different conferences and have never lived in the same time zone as the Conference office. The closest I ever lived to my Conference office was 150 miles. Once, when we lived there, I drove the 150 miles to the Conference Office then drove a bus an additional 850 miles for a meeting in one of the Conference's churches near Edmonton, Alberta. A day and a half's drive each way to attend a two-day meeting is a long ways, but we took the distances for granted. When we lived in Idaho, we drove 450 miles one way to take our kids to a weekend conference youth event at least once a year. Leave early Friday morning, return late Sunday night. Driving long distance is part of being in the church throughout the west.

So today we head out for a meeting that will take less than two hours. It's in Chamberlain, which I often say is a perfect place to hold a meeting for the state of

South Dakota. That way, the people from Rapid City drive 210 miles and the people from Sioux Falls drive 140 miles and the folks from Sioux Falls believe they came half way. Everybody is happy. The other joke I make about meetings in Chamberlain has to do with the time zones: It takes 4 hours to get to Chamberlain, but only 2 to come home. Imagine how much time we'd save if all of the meetings were in Rapid City!

I've never found the distances to be much of a barrier. My health has been good and driving is not a burden for me. Traveling to be with other people of faith to share the work of the church is a worthwhile enterprise for me.

I have to keep reminding myself of that simple fact because our Conference is in the process of getting bigger and the distances are growing. We are in the midst of a transition from a Conference that is the State of South Dakota to a "Tri-Conference" that includes South Dakota, Nebraska and Iowa. Rapid City is on the western edge of the South Dakota Conference. Combining South Dakota and Nebraska adds a little distance for us, but going to the Eastern edge of Iowa is a big change. Our Conference Office is currently in Sioux Falls, about 350 miles away. After our reconfiguration, it is possible that the main office will be in Des Moines, Iowa, 625 miles away. I've been known to drive to Sioux Falls and back in the same day to make a meeting, but that isn't going to happen with Des Moines.

Technology is a big assistance when it comes to distance. With one of our children in western Washington and the other in Japan, we have found that video conferencing via computer is essential to staying in touch. That technology wasn't available a couple of decades ago. Most of the Conference meetings in the future will take place with video conferencing. I and not on any of the tri-conference committees, but I suspect that they are already holding most of their meetings over video conference. Physical travel would be cost prohibitive.

Still, there is something important about being face-to-face. We notice it with our grandchildren. As good as it is to talk to them over Skype, we know we need to travel and be with them as often as possible. Sometimes we get on the airlines and fly, other times we make the 1,200 mile trip with our pickup and camper. Our typical drive takes us 2 1/2 days one way, but it is well worth it to spend time with our family.

Those distances boggle the minds of some of my east coast friends and colleagues. When my car passed 250,000 miles, I reported that to a colleague who lives in Rhode Island. She replied that she didn't think she had put 250,000 miles on all of the cars she has ever owned. She has a car that is similar in age to mine in years with less than 100,000 miles on it. She has never owned a new car and has never owned a car that has more than 100,000 miles on it. I'm going to try to remember to call or email her when my car hits 300,000 miles. I'm thinking she still won't have 100,000 on hers. She once told me that she gets her oil changed and tires rotated once a year by the calendar and doesn't go by the number of miles driven. She goes to work by bus and often goes

several weeks without taking her car out of the garage. She lives in a different world than I.

I'm thinking that for quite a few of my colleagues today's trip would be a big deal. I'm thinking it is slightly farther than I drove last week, but about the same. It is just what we do in order to stay in touch with one another.

I accept the fact that my carbon footprint is probably a lot bigger than that of my eastern colleagues. I try to be careful about my energy consumption in other ways. Our home doesn't require air conditioning the way theirs does. We can eat meat that is produced a short distance from our home and vegetables from our garden. But there are efficiencies to cities that cannot be reproduced in rural areas. Although we believe ourselves to live in a city, it isn't like the cities on the coasts and the fact that we are more than 300 miles in every direction from a city that is larger than ours is incomprehensible to my east coast friends.

Still. I'm happy where I am. My wife and I get six hours in the car for conversation today. (You know, 4 hours going and 2 hours coming home!) I'm looking forward to it.

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October 15, 2017 – Hearing the Story Freshly

I wasn't present and I didn't witness it, but I have heard the story and it is a story worth repeating. A young boy in our preschool was participating in a class that was discussing the stories of Moses. He knows the stories, having heard them both at home and in church and he was eager to participate. Asked to tell the story of Moses as a baby he began in the first person, "When I was a baby I fell into the water and some people came and pulled me out of the water."

He didn't know it, but his style of telling the story stands in a long and rich tradition of reporting on the exodus. It is a custom, among some teachers of this critical biblical story, to always tell the story in the first person, imagining oneself to be in the heart of the story. "When we were slaves in Egypt . . ." begins one famous telling of the story. The concept is that God's actions of saving the people are universal actions and that we are all included in the family of Israel. Whether we have come to our faith community by birth or by choice, we stand in the lineage of the people who God chose for special responsibilities. The stories of ancient Israel are not stories of others, but of our people, our community. By accepting the faith in our generation, we accept the history that led us to this place. We are not different from the ancients, but rather members of the same family.

I have observed this practice when telling the stories of our people. I try as often as possible to speak in the first person, speaking as a member of the family. However, I

don't think I ever have thought of myself as Moses. The uncommon leaders that God has provided over the course of history are somehow set apart in my mind. I can imagine being a member of the crowd, a part of the family, but I don't see myself as God's spokesperson, carrying God's word to Pharaoh or leading an unruly tribe through a generation of wandering in the wilderness with all of the challenges of feeding and maintaining morale. I'm no Moses.

There are other parts of the story where even though I use the correct words, I have trouble imagining myself as part of the events I am reporting. Take the story of the golden calf, for example. It is much easier for me to think of this incident as something that people who think much differently than I would do. When we tell the story, removed by all of these generations from the event, it always seems like the actions of impulsive, rebellious, and frankly, stupid people. How could they think that worshiping an idol made of gold was somehow equivalent to worshipping the God who brought us out of Egypt? See how I used "they" and "us" in that sentence? I instinctively separate myself from that part of our history. I don't want to be one who worships idols.

I do, however, have to admit that the problems of turning away from God and worshiping idols are as present in my generation as they have been in every generation of God's faithful people. Of course, we aren't prone to melting down earrings to make a calf for a kind of primitive religious ceremony. We are more likely to think that a golden soccer trophy is more important than worshipping God. We are more likely to think that working extra hours to provide extra income to purchase a fancy home is more important than caring for the spiritual health of our children. Our idolatries take a different shape than the calf in the story, but they are as real and as present.

If we would understand this story about our people's straying from relationship with God, we also have to put ourselves into the next part of the story - the part where Moses argues with God for the salvation of the people. God says to Moses, "I've seen these stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that I may consume them with the fire of my wrath. I'll start over with you and make a great nation." Moses begs God to reconsider. He even asks God what the Egyptians would think of God destroying the people after having brought them out of slavery. The fate of the people hangs in the balance. If I tell the story properly, however, it is our fate that hangs in the balance. God has every reason to be angry with us. God has every reason to give up on us and focus on others who might be more grateful, more appreciative and more attentive to worship.

Somehow, Moses' argument prevails. And God changed his mind about the disaster he was planning to bring upon us. We weren't wiped from the face of the earth over the golden calf. We didn't experience the harshest form of judgment. We found forgiveness.

The story teaches more about the nature of God than it does about our human nature. We didn't get forgiveness because we said the right prayers or because we somehow

saw the evil of our ways and changed our course of action. We received forgiveness because God is gracious and granted us forgiveness that we in no way deserved.

We came this close to being no people at all, and yet God has continued to see us as his people, his family, his community.

Perhaps it is the courage and boldness of that three year old who can tell the story of Moses in the basket in the bullrushes as his own story that keeps God falling in love with us over and over again even when we stray so far from the basic commandments we have received. The prophet Isaiah, when imagining the peaceable kingdom, suggests that a little child shall lead the way.

When our children tell our story, may we learn to listen very carefully. They speak the truth.

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October 16, 2017 – When Disaster Strikes

I don't want to sound detached and like everything is in my head. I know that I love complex thought and I deal with a lot of things by thinking and writing and using words. But I am actually a pretty emotional person. I don't mask my emotions well and people usually know when I am upset or when I am grieving or when I am passionate about a topic. On the other hand, I have no intention of making my daily journal entries into a catalogue of emotions only. I celebrate my ability to think and analyze.

I have been reading posts and following the news of the California Wildfires. I am less interested in statistics than I am in people. Singer/Songwriter Bobby Jo Valentine, whose career I have been following and who has performed in our church, is one of the thousands who has lost his home. Everything is gone. Every sound system, all of the CDs except those he had in his car, all but one of his guitars . . . everything. Over the next little while, one of the problems will be trying to figure out what is the highest priority. What do you get first when everything is destroyed? Essentials like toiletries, food, and clothes come first, but what comes next?

There is another factor and that is the process of second guessing that is going through his head. He knew that the area where the home was located was fire-prone. There were other reasons, including family issues, that compelled them to live where they did.

This is just one story. I haven't seen the total on the number of homes burned, and the fires are still raging, so the number will be higher in the days to come. One report I read said that at least 5,700 structures have been destroyed. That's 5,700 stories. And the death toll of 40 is sure to rise. Hundreds are still missing.

It seems like this has been a year of natural disasters. Hurricanes, floods, fires. Experts tell us that these devastating natural disasters are getting worse. There are many factors that influence the frequency and severity of disasters and I am not going to analyze all of those factors today. One factor is that population is growing and people are attracted to the places that are vulnerable. People enjoy living in Florida. Its natural beauties and mild climate draw people to buy homes in the state. The population density is much greater than we see here in South Dakota. The fact that historically Florida has been a magnet for hurricanes, getting hit more than any other state since they began keeping records back in the 1850's, has not deterred people from moving there. But natural disasters rarely become the focus of our attention for long. People move into areas that have previously experienced flooding and return to storm ravaged locations as soon as the winds die down and the water recedes.

The same is true of wildfire. People want to live in places with lots of natural fuel. I know. I live on the edge fo the forest. The truth is that a devastating wildfire could roar through the hills and our subdivision would be as vulnerable as those that have been destroyed in California. When the fires heat up, homes become additional fuel for the raging flames. But we put those fears aside and while we do a little to try to "fireproof" our property, we aren't obsessed with fire.

Some natural disasters are affected by human decisions, such as global climate change and decades of fire suppression that result in excessive fuel build up. But natural disasters have been a part of this planet for as long as it has existed. Both of our children live within the zone known as the ring of fire, an area of increased volcanic activity on the coasts of the Pacific Ocean. The beautiful mountains that they see every day are active volcanoes that hold the potential for great devastation. Those same regions are prone to intense earthquakes and resulting tsunamis, such as the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami that prompted the worlds worst nuclear disaster at Fukushima.

Researchers in the Pacific Northwest have discovered that every few hundred years and offshore fault known as the Cascadia Subduction Zone ruptures in a manner that causes powerful earthquakes and devastating tsunamis. The odds of an 8-magnitude or greater earthquake range between 30 and 40 percent in the next 50 years in the area where our son and his family live.

It is probably true that natural disasters are possible in every part of the world. Those of us who live outside of hurricane zones might face a higher risk of wildfire, blizzard and tornadoes, but the power of nature is immense and our human structures are tiny by comparison. We all live with a certain degree of vulnerability. It is easy to criticize from a distance - labeling as foolish those who build homes in flood zones or to close to areas known to be ravaged by wildfire.

We are learning to use science and technology to limit the hazards of this world. Better weather monitoring and forecasting has enabled more people to evacuate ahead of devastating storms. Earthquake prediction, while far from a completely accurate science, has increased in reliability. Seismic hazard maps now exist while just a few decades ago, people didn't know when or where to expect an earthquake. Modern communications technologies enable better access to emergency information. There were some amazing rescues in Houston during the flooding that were assisted by social media and the use of cell phones and the Internet.

In the disaster response community, emergency managers are being trained in "all hazard" approach to emergencies. People need to be ready for whatever might happen. Disasters can come in many different forms. Sometimes there will be little or no warning. Individuals need to have survival and evacuation plans in place for whatever might occur.

We cannot live our lives in constant fear, but a bit of preparation can make a big difference when disaster strikes.

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October 17, 2017 – Coots

The Free Dictionary online defines coot as "An eccentric or crotchety person, especially an old man." I've been thinking that I may have become one. I'm not really all that crotchety, perhaps, at least if that means bad-tempered, grumpy or grouchy. I can be a bit irascible and occasionally curmudgeonly, at least a bit stubborn, though I've never shooed away Christmas carolers with a "bah humbug." Still, I have been known to refer to myself as an old coot from time to time.



So I was really in my element yesterday when I was surprised to find, when I went kayaking at Sheridan Lake, two rafts of coots paddling around and feeding near the shoreline. The distinctive white-billed birds don't normally hang around in the hills. In fact, I don't remember ever seeing them in this part of the country. Their year-round habitat is pretty much along the west coast, though they move north and east during breeding season. Nesting pairs aren't that uncommon in Ontario and I guess that they can be seen virtually anywhere in the United States during the summer. I'm figuring that these particular birds are on their way back west after having summered in Canada, or perhaps in some wetlands of northern Minnesota.

At first, when I arrived at the lake, I thought they were ducks. They're a relatively small bird and the rafts were floating on the water. They didn't have the distinctive colors of our summer ducks and as I got closer, I could tell that the shape of their bills was quite a bit different. Coots are not ducks. They don't have webbed feet. They are more capable when walking on land or in the mud, though their feet make it more difficult for them to go quickly on the water. This makes for an awkward splash-filled take off from the surface of the water.

Yesterday was a beautiful day with a slight breeze and bright, sunny skies. There were only three or four boats left in the water at the lake and at least two of them were headed for their trailers yesterday. The docks have been pulled and soon they'll go out and take up the floats in preparation for winter. I'm a bit of a fan of paddling during the shoulder season. I switch from canoe to kayak when it starts to get cold and I have to wear special clothing in case of an inadvertent swim, but I get to have the lake to myself. The change of seasons is fun to observe. Spring means geese - lots of Canadian geese on the lake. Summer brings the mallards. Mallards swim with their tails above the water. When they take to flight, the transition is almost instant. They spring from the water in a manner that is very different from the coots I was watching yesterday.



Both geese and mallards nest along the edges of the lake, so I get to see the little chicks paddling along before they have fledged. If I paddle too close to them, they'll scramble and hide in the reeds at the edge of the lake. Their skill at hiding combined with the speed of transition from swimming to flying for the adult birds really pays off in the middle of summer days when the lake fills up with all kinds of people playing in the water, paddling everything from kayaks to stand-up paddle boards and flying around the lake on jet skis and almost anything that could be towed behind a motor boat. Quite a few people seem pleased to tool around the lake in boats that are way too big for that body of water. I find paddling very early in the morning to be the best in the mid summer season, to avoid the traffic. Jet skiers seem to enjoy sleeping in and I've no reason to dissuade them.

But this time of year I get the combination of some very beautiful days and a nearly empty lake. Yesterday, I felt that I was a little over dressed as I paddled my little boat, but that is necessary because you always have to dress for the water temperature not the air temperature even if you are very unlikely to get wet. An accidental spill could turn into a tragedy for the unprepared.

Yesterday I was quite lazy and didn't get to the lake until about 9 am. Mine was the only car in the parking lot and there were no other boaters in sight when I launched. Paddling my homemade wooden kayak with a Greenland paddle allows me to be very quiet. At first I didn't know what kind of birds I was seeing, so I tried to float as close to the coots as possible in order to photograph them. As long as I didn't make too much noise they were willing to allow me to come quite close. The raft, however, was bound to stick together. They would not have allowed me to paddle into the midst of the group. When I paddled toward them, they all swam in the same direction to get out of my way. Across the lake, I found a second raft floating and feeding along the shoreline. They allowed me to get a good look and to snap a few pictures with my simple point-and-shoot camera. In a similar manner to the way I prepare for myself to get dunked should something occur, I only carry a waterproof camera when I am paddling. This doesn't have the resolution and won't take the long zoom lenses that I use with my good camera, so I am aware of its limitations, but from time to time I get a decent picture all the same.

Before long it was time for me to finish my paddle and take my boat from the water. I had lots of other things to do and in the afternoon, after doing a few other chores, I was able to spend an hour or so working on building a new kayak in my garage. That project has been going on far too long and I need to spend the time to finish it.

But for one glorious hour in the morning, it was fun to be out on the lake and not be the only coot on the water.

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October 18, 2017 – I'm not Gone Yet

Part of life is trying things that you have never done before. It seems like that is one of the themes of my story. I'm attracted by doing new things and don't want to fall into a rut of always imitating the way that I have done things in the past. Sometimes this tendency leads to some spectacular failures. Not every new idea is a good idea. Not everything that I try succeeds. That has always been acceptable to me. Making mistakes and learning from them has been one of my modes of continuing education.

Of course every human being has certain life events at which there is only one shot. Being born is a once-in-a-lifetime, though it requires no conscious choice on the part of the one being born. You only get one first day of school, one first bicycle ride, one first kiss. There are many other firsts in life. We also only get once death, although I don't know what it would mean to fail at that critical life task. Everyone gets through it one way or another eventually.

There are, however, a lot of things that are repeated, usually with significant differences. A first day on a new job is usually a bit of a repeat of other first days in new jobs. A

vacation, while the destination may be new, is a process that is undertaken repeatedly. I've met more than one person who has retired multiple times. Life frequently gives a second chance to attempt a critical task.

The last few weeks have held some strange firsts for me and they aren't ones that I have consciously chose. We have been having some meaningful conversations about leadership transition in our church. Because a colleague is retiring at the end of this month, it is a good time for our church to consider what kind of leadership it wants to pursue in the future. There are many possible staffing configurations and different ways that the congregation might proceed. The conversations have been healthy and good for the church, I believe. They have, however, had some unintended consequences.

At an out of town meeting a colleague approached us and wanted to discuss our retirement. The colleague had mistakenly interpreted a report of the leadership transition conversations in our church as an announcement of our retirement. This colleague obviously wanted a shot at the job that I currently hold. I have made no announcement of my retirement and although I do think about it from time to time, am not ready to make such an announcement. I think the colleague was disappointed that he wouldn't be able to submit an application for my job in the next few months. That somewhat awkward conversation has been repeated a couple of times in the context of our congregation as various members have made inquiries about retirement plans.

While I realize that I occupy a public position and that leadership in the church is a very important concern for all of the members of the church, I am also a fairly private person. I am not comfortable discussing the details of certain aspects of my life in public. I would like to reserve conversations about my retirement for the period between the time it is announced and the time I actually retire. And I'd like that period of time to be relatively short. Of course we don't control all of the conversations and I may not get my wish in this case.

Unlike a few people who have retired multiple times, I have never before retired. Some aspects of retirement are, frankly, threatening to me. I do not long for a separation from the congregation I have loved and served for the last 22 years. I am not counting the days until I will no longer be leading worship each week. There are some things I would like to do in retirement, mainly travel and visiting with family, but I have been willing to defer those things at the present as I am fully engaged in work.

There are a few milestones I would like to pass before I announce my retirement. I'd like to get beyond my 40th anniversary of ordination which is nearly a year away. I'd like to complete the six capital projects that our congregation voted to accomplish over a five-year period. I'd like to guide the congregation through its transition following the retirement of our Minister of Spiritual Nurture. And there are other goals I share with the congregation. Some of those goals are threatened slightly by too much conversation about what happens in the church after I retire.

I'm pretty sure that I don't have the option of simply not talking about retirement now that the questions have begun. Like other things in life, I'll discover some way to muddle through. I have frequently said that the years of active parenting when our children were living at home were more a matter of muddling than of careful preplanning and execution of a plan. We simply did what we had to do at the time, sometimes exhausted from lack of sleep, but somehow carrying on. Maybe this part of my life requires a similar capacity to muddle through, trying to be as responsible and as thoughtful with each decision, knowing that I won't get the various decisions in the right order and that there is no single right way to do this.

However, for the record, as far as I know, I'm not gone yet. I plan to lead worship this Sunday and I'm working hard on Advent and Christmas plans. I'm looking forward to Holy Week 2018 and thinking about major capital projects for the summer of 2018. I'm working hard to complete the bathroom remodeling project at the church and have set the end of the year as the completion date. Those working on the project know I expect us to be using the new bathroom by Christmas Eve.

I did a bit of additional research after writing yesterday's journal entry. The longest-lived coot recorded by science lived to an age of 22 years. That means that any coot over 20 years of age is definitely an old coot. That means I definitely fall into that category.

The rumors of my demise are, however, somewhat premature.

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October 19, 2017 – Living my Poem

I have many friends that I have never met face to face. Most of them are authors and I have come to know them through books, articles, columns and blogs. I recognize their names and their style of writing and I enjoy turning to them for wisdom, insight and understanding. One of those friends is Parker Palmer, a Quaker elder, educator, and founder of the Center for Courage and Renewal. Recently he wrote, "Our lives leave a trail of words, even when we're not speaking or writing." He compares life with a poem that we compose as we go. Reflecting on a line that Henry David Thoreau wrote in "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," he develops the idea of life being written as a poem. Thoreau's couplet is this:

*"My life has been the poem I would have writ
But I could not both live and utter it."*

I'm pretty sure that I am not as eloquent as Thoreau, nor as perceptive as Palmer, but I like the idea. My life has been a kind of a poem, and it clearly is a verse that has not yet come to its conclusion. There was a stage in my life, when I was pursuing my academic

career, when I didn't give poetry much thought or time. The particular education that I was following required enormous amounts of reading. I loved the reading and dove in deeply, but I didn't make time for other kinds of reading. The only fiction I read during my college and graduate school careers were novels that were assigned reading for courses I was taking and a few short stories read from magazines when I was taking a break from school. I nearly gave up poetry during this time as well, thinking wrongly that time was too short for frivolous words.

Now that I am older, and perhaps a tad wiser, I have come to know that poetry is far from frivolous. Yes, there are flowery verses full of sunshine and light. But there is much more poetry that wrestles with the complexity of human existence, not shying away from pain and sadness. Robert Penn Warren wrote, "For what is a poem but a hazardous attempt at self-understanding: it is the deepest part of autobiography."

At its best, poetry is the most significant form of human communication. That fact is reflected in the huge amount of poetry in the Bible. We think of the Psalms as a book of poetry, which is true, but there is a lot of poetry in other parts of the Bible. The prophets, seeking to communicate the deepest intentions of God to human listeners, often resort to poetry. The power of verse to reach beyond the range of prose is clearly demonstrated in the prophetic vision. The Gospel of John uses poetry to reach beyond the power of prose to express the deepest connection of God and humans, something that is literally beyond the power of words to express. That sense of being beyond, however, does not prevent John from providing some powerful and deeply meaningful words to open his Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

Parker Palmer wrote that he intended to write a book with Thoreau's concept, "The Poem I Would Have Writ." Perhaps he thought of it as the ultimate autobiography. He did a lot of research, read and re-read Thoreau, wrote and re-wrote chapters and talked with his friends. A lot of work went into the book, but it just didn't come together. It just wasn't working. One of the problems is that his life was on-going. He had new ideas and new insights. He thought of different ways to say things. He gained fresh perspectives and new ways of thinking.

The result is, so far, not a book. Perhaps that book will be written one day. Palmer, however, did come up with a poem:

The Poem I Would Have Writ by Parker J Palmer

*My life has been the poem I would have writ
But I could not both live and utter it.*
—Henry David Thoreau

The first words are the hardest. Sound

surrounds you in the womb, grows louder when you're born. You listen. You know the day will come when you must speak words, too — that's how we make our way through this trackless landscape called the world. But how? And what to say? And what does saying do?

Later, words come easily. You learn to speak the language of what you want and need, to help you find a pathway into and through your life, to make it clear what you believe, reach out to friends, find work to do, heal your wounds, ease your fears, get chance on chance to give love and receive. Sometimes words leap out of you in ways you soon regret — or in ways so magical you silently rehearse them, hoping never to forget how these words came out of the blue, begging to have life breathed into them by you. You live a life of words.

Then you learn that first words aren't the hardest. The hardest are the last.

There's so much you want to say, but time keeps taking time and all your words away. How to say — amid the flood of grief and gratitude you feel — "Thank you!", or "How beautiful, how grand!", or "I'm so glad I survived...", or "I was changed forever the day we two joined hands and lives."

As you reach for your last words, you realize, this is it — this ebbing tide of language called your life, words trailing into silence, this unfinished poem you would have writ — had it not been for the heartache and the gift of all the years that you've been living it.

One line has been sticking with me as strongly as Thoreau's quote stuck with Palmer:

"Then you learn that the first words aren't the hardest. The hardest are the last."

With a bit of luck and God's blessings, I am a long ways from my last words. And that is a blessing because I'm thinking that there is a lot of my poem that I have yet to live.

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October 20, 2017 – Succession or Transition?

A friend who had worked in information technology and accounting in a major corporation and is now retired, once told me about how the company for which he worked did succession planning. Part of the process was for employees to make lists of every task they performed in a month so that the actual job, as opposed to the job description, could be known. Then the list was revised to eliminate tasks that should be delegated to other employees. Finally each remaining task was coupled with other people within the corporation who had the training and expertise to do each task. When tasks were discovered that there was only one person who could do that task, then others were trained.

I suspect that the system worked well for the corporation for whom my friend worked.

It would never work in the church. There are several reasons why. One reason is that there is not a rigid boundary between jobs performed by paid staff and jobs performed by volunteers in the church. Having been pastor of this congregation for quite a long time, the tasks I perform are in part dependent on which tasks are best suited to the particular volunteers who are elected to various leadership positions in the church. It is often, but not always the case, that I end up doing the jobs that no one else is doing. That often means that we need to look at other ways to get those jobs done, but in the short term, the senior pastor is the "buck stops here" person in a church. If the dispenser in the rest room needs additional paper towels I often simply put towels in the dispenser. That doesn't change the fact that we have a janitor to do that job most of the time, it just means that sometimes the job just needs to get done and someone needs to do it. My having a fit over whose job it is has no value at all. Just getting the job done enables the smooth operation of the building.

Yesterday, I started with some computer work, including writing liturgy for Sunday's worship. I checked in with a retired pastor, spoke on the phone with a pastor serving a different congregation, made a visit to an inmate in the jail and took a cup of coffee to a county employee who couldn't get away from his desk because there was a problem with phone lines in downtown Rapid City and they needed extra help staffing the phones that were working. I went over our call list with the other ministers and noted the

people who are in need of special attention in our congregation. We discussed pastoral care concerns in general and a few specific cases. I also framed a 6' section of wall and removed floor tiles as part of a small remodeling job we have going at the church, met with a committee, consulted with our office administrator, spoke on the phone with an engineering company involved in a street and utility reconstruction project on a street near the church, consulted with another member of the board of a community nonprofit, worked on the script for our early Christmas Eve service, and responded to a plethora of email messages. It wasn't exactly a typical day. It wasn't atypical, either.

The framing of the wall would normally have been done by volunteers. We had the workers lined up, but one had a combination of a heavy work load and some health concerns of his partner that were not anticipated. Another volunteer was suddenly called out of town to help support another department that experienced an unexpected death. It wasn't anyone's fault that I was the logical candidate to get the job done in preparation for the electrician's arrival this morning. Had I not possessed the tools and skills, things would have had to be rescheduled. As it turned out, the smooth operation of the church sometimes requires that I do things that are well outside of my job description.

That list of tasks, or even the skills and abilities that are required to accomplish them, however, is of little use to the next person who becomes the pastor of this congregation for one simple reason: The way I have done things is not the only way for those things to be done. A new person will bring different skills and abilities, a different style of leadership, and a different way of solving problems.

the bond between a pastor and a congregation is a relationship and as is true of all relationships, it requires hard work on both sides. Successful relationships come from congregations and pastors who are honest as they choose one another and willing to work hard to make the relationship work for all. This is not to say that there aren't parallels with business, just that ministry truly is a unique vocation and less defined by the tasks accomplished than by the identity of the pastor. It is not so much what you do as who you are.

I've been a bit uncomfortable talking about leadership succession when it comes to the church. As we as a congregation adjust to the retirement of our Minister of Christian Nurture, we need to allow some time to grieve. She is a capable and gifted leader. We will miss her leadership in several key areas of our life together. Then, when we've had some time to adjust to the new realities of our lives, we can begin to assess which directions we want to go in terms of leadership as we move forward. Perhaps the next phase won't have someone with that title. Perhaps the next phase will involve a different set of priorities for the congregation. Perhaps someone will appear who seems to be a very good match for our congregation. That was definitely the case with the person who is retiring. She came along at the right moment for our congregation and offered the right set of skills and leadership qualities.

For now, I have no intention of asking her to make a list of the tasks she does each week. We will discover that together as we move forward.

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October 21, 2017 – Lessons in Language

I have a nephew who is a high school English teacher in a fairly small town in Oregon near the border with Washington. We don't get to see him as often as I'd like. He is a fascinating and educated man and each time we are face to face our conversations are delightful. He has traveled extensively and speaks multiple languages, a skill that he uses regularly in his work. The parents and grandparents of some of his students use Spanish as their regular language at home and being able to converse with them helps him to meet the needs of his students. He reads extensively and always is a good source of new and exciting book recommendations.

He teaches a course in journalism and emphasizes the development of communication skills to his students. He speaks about integrity and objectivity in reporting and writing and the power of honest language.

I wonder if some days he feels that his efforts have become futile in a world of Internet bots posting fake news stories using computer algorithms to target unsuspecting readers who are trying to sift through all of the scams and spam to get an update on family members and friends. Are there times when his efforts to teach reporting and writing skills seem small and forgotten in a world of trolls and liars who seem to dominate nearly every media these days? It is a conversation I'd love to pursue with him.

I hold him and his colleagues in high regard, however. I believe that teaching the skills of writing and clear expression are of great value to society. I believe that citizenship is a skill that must be taught in a democracy. That seems to be a fact that is frequently ignored in the hyper-partisanship of our current political climate. Twitter wars are hardly expressions of articulate language use. Political rhetoric is rarely logical, concise or clear. Much of what is labeled communication doesn't communicate well at all.

In the midst of this, local newspapers are teetering on the edge of financial ruin. Our local newspaper has abandoned half of the building including the area that housed a bustling newsroom when I moved to this town. There are so few employees at the newspaper that it is hard to see how they get the paper out at all. Major journalistic tasks are left undone. There is virtually no editing going on. Those who produce the newspaper don't notice when a story is repeated or a headline doesn't coincide with the article. Grammar mistakes that would distress a generation of high school teachers are everyday occurrences.

I don't want to be a language cop. I understand that language is constantly evolving and that some of the "rules" we learned when we were younger no longer apply. In fact I had a conversation with my English teacher nephew about ending sentences with prepositions. I was taught, somewhere along the way that it is never acceptable to end a sentence with a preposition. This rule, however, is rapidly becoming a grammar myth. Long accepted in oral language, ending sentences with prepositions is now considered to be acceptable in writing. Here is an example: "What did you step on?" would have been corrected to "On what did you step?" by some of my teachers. But no one really talks that way and it doesn't make sense to write in ways that are not common to conversation. So I accept that there are times when having a preposition at the end of a sentence is acceptable. That doesn't make the sentence, "Where are you going to?" stronger than "Where are you going?" Extraneous prepositions sill should be eliminated by competent writers. After all, the point of writing is clear communication.

There are plenty of examples, however, of writing that does not result in clear communication. Here is a complete paragraph, written by staff writer Richard Anderson of our local newspaper:

"Rapid City Central head coach Thad Caldwell, who along with Cobbler athletics director Darren Paulsen and others, have been developing the course and he said they have been looking to build one that most people around the state would be acceptable with."

I can't even tell what the single sentence paragraph means. The concluding preposition is supposed, I guess, to connect people around the state and the cross country running course at a resort in the hills. I'm unclear whether or not acceptance by most people in our state is required for a running course for high school students. I'm unclear whether or not "most people around the state" means "a majority of South Dakotans," "a random sampling of tourists," "more than half of the taxpayers," or just "a lot of high school students and their coaches." And how does one become acceptable "with" anything? Why do people need to be acceptable with a running course? In a way it seems that it might be more important for the course to be acceptable to people than the other way around. Perhaps it is good news to learn that most people are acceptable, since I think I may be vaguely a part of the group referred to in the sentence.

The story clearly shows the lack of editing. A good editor could have found the solution to the convoluted paragraph in the title of the article: "Hart Ranch course should please runners and fans." Actually, reading the headline only results in clearer communication than reading the entire article.

Fortunately, the topic of the article is not vital to national security or critical to public safety. The problem, however, is that it is representative of the quality of writing in local

media. The standards to which we hold a paid professional writer are far lower than those by which high school students' essays are graded. There are days when I feel like taking a red pen to the newspaper. And I am not qualified to teach High School English.

Sometimes in this life you need to do the right thing even if the wrong triumphs. Despite the words in our newspapers every day, I still believe in the power of language and effective communication. My hat is off to high school English teachers everywhere. They face an enormous challenge.

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October 22, 2017 – More to be Revealed

The very nature of God makes it a challenge for humans to know God. It often doesn't seem that way because there are overwhelming experiences in life that reveal the power and creativity of God. The birth of a child, the journey of grief, the wonder of creation, the warmth of community - there are many human experiences that reveal aspects of God. Yet God is always more - always greater than even our ability to imagine. Furthermore there are perils of imagining God as less than God is. People experience something to be true and quickly jump to the conclusion that they possess all of the truth, which is a fallacy. People stand in awe at the beauty of a sunset and convince themselves that they understand the nature of beauty, which is not the case.

The Biblical narrative demonstrates how even after generations of seeking God, our people fail to fully understand God. There was a time when we understood God as being revealed to our ancestors. "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" was one way of talking about who God is. Later we spoke of God as the author of freedom: "The God who led our people out of slavery in Egypt." The psalmists speak of God as the creator of all things: "When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers . . ." They hint at God's eternal nature: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God." Over and over again, our people come up with ways of speaking about God only to discover that words fail us. God is always more than we can speak and we are never fully able to describe God.

The impossibility of the task, however, doesn't prevent us from trying. We use analogies. We say God is like a father or like a mother. These are small truths, but they don't capture the full truth. In Hebrew, the language of the portion of the Bible commonly known as the Old Testament, scriptures are referred to as Torah. The word Torah means truth and the scriptures are held to contain truth. But there is another way of speaking. Adding the article ha to the word transforms its meaning. HaTorah is the ultimate truth - the truth of God. In English, we might say "Truth with a capital T."

One of the challenges of speaking of God or of Truth is that we often present ourselves as if we have been on a quest for new discovery when in reality we frequently are

arguing for positions we arrived at by other means. We combine previously held biases and prejudices and speak as if we possess moral truth. We become entrenched in a particular worldview and convince ourselves that ours is the only way of seeing the world. This form of fundamentalism virtually always leads to violence. Once we have convinced ourselves that we are right and others are wrong, it is a short leap from “we should convince them of our truth” to “we should force them to our position.” There are numerous examples from around the world of people resorting to violence while claiming that they hold the good of others and are doing what they do for the highest of moral reasons.

We have often been guilty of a form of altruism when trying to help others. We identify a victim and try to render assistance. Compassion comes to us naturally and we feel the urge to help. Our helping, however, is rarely just help. We make judgements about what healing and justice would be for the person we want to help and we conclude that it must look like the way we live our lives. Our helping turns into a form of cultural exportation and a devaluing of other people’s way of living. Early missionaries tried to impose dress codes on indigenous Hawaiians despite their Northern European modes of dress being inappropriate in the tropical heat. Do gooders saw children naked and eating insects in Central Australia and removed them from their homes and families, imposing western clothing and ways of living that stood in stark contrast the the ways people had lived successfully for millennia before the arrival of Europeans. Boarding schools for the education of indigenous Americans turned into a form of cultural genocide. Our attempts to do good have often resulted in not being good at all.

We become so convinced that we possess the truth that we fail to see the truth in others’ ways of being.

Our human tendencies to fall short and make big mistakes was observed by our ancient ancestors. The stories of Exodus stand as examples of the ways we have convinced ourselves that we are right and others are wrong. God gives simple instructions for living a life of freedom and humans turn them into rules and impose human punishment without even noticing that the commandments are not demands, but rather simple instructions for living freely. See how quickly Israel moves from the ten commandments to the complex legal codes of Leviticus. That is our story, and there is much that we could learn about human foibles and frailty from reading it.

The focus text for this morning’s sermon tells the story of Moses, who was reported to be “the most humble of men” arrogantly asking to see God’s glory. It is an audacious request. God knows that Moses is incapable of taking in God’s glory. God knows that the human capacity to experience the fullness of God is limited. Moses forgets his place. Even this greatest of leaders reveals his desire to lead from a position of special knowledge and special relationship instead of leading from the midst of the people. God protects Moses in the cleft of a rock and shields Moses’ vision with the hand of God. Then God reveals a bit more of God’s nature. It makes a story that our people have

been telling for 4,000 years. But it does not allow us to possess the full knowledge of God.

When we are able to humbly admit that we do not possess the whole truth we become capable of seeing the truth in others' ways of living. God is that God of all people in all times and places. We, who inhabit this place in this time, still need to discover that there is much more to be revealed than the knowledge we already possess.

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October 23, 2017 – A Prick in the Fingertip

On Friday, I was handling a boat on which I am working and a single thread of fiberglass cloth that had been saturated with epoxy that had cured poked a tiny hole into the tip of my finger. It was like getting the smallest of splinters. It bled a bit, so I put a bandaid on it and went back to work. By bedtime, I could remove the bandaid. On Saturday, I was working on a trailer and a single strand of copper wire poked a small hole in my thumb. It decided to bleed. I reached for my handy first aid kit in my pickup and put a bandaid on it. That bandaid was gone by bedtime as well. The tiny little pricks in the tips of my fingers hardly bears mentioning. I can feel the places where both events occurred this morning, but neither is a cause of pain or distress. One is on the side of my left thumb. The other is on the tip of my pointer finger on my right hand. That one is in the part of the pad where my finger strikes the keyboard as I type. It doesn't seem to be affecting my typing, but it gets pounded a bit. I type a lot. Most of the time I use wireless external keyboards with my laptop because I'm capable of wearing out the keyboards. My last computer, which I had for a little over seven years, had the keys replaced twice in the span of its life.

Feeling that tiny little irritation, which will be gone in a day or so, reminded me of living with my mother during the years that she was a brittle diabetic. Part of that time she managed the task of testing her blood sugar (glucose) levels herself. After a while, however, that task became a problem for her and I took over. Three times a day, and more often when things weren't going smoothly, I'd take an alcohol wipe, clean the tip of one of her fingers, and use a little spring-loaded device to make a small hole with a sharp lancet into the finger. I'd then put a drop of blood on a test strip and insert the strip into her testing device. While the machine did its work, I'd hand her a tissue and she'd put pressure on the fingertip until the bleeding ceased. It was rarely more than a small additional drop of blood on the tissue. I'd record the results and follow the ups and downs of her levels, adjusting insulin dosages and diet to manage her sugar levels to the best of our ability. Her glucose injections usually went into her belly and they didn't seem to bother her at all. Her finger tips were a different matter. I traced her hands onto a sheet of paper and marked an x on the location of each prick. I tried to change the location of the pokes in a regular pattern, making sure that I avoided a site that was recent. After years of regular testing, her finger tips were mostly scar tissue

and I had to adjust the lancet device to get it to poke deeply enough to produce that small drop of blood.

Fingertips are filled with capillaries, making them a good source for that tiny drop of blood needed for the test. They also have many more nerve endings than other areas of skin, facilitating the dexterity that enables us to type and hold gentle items and do a great deal of other tasks. So fingertips are a good place to poke and they hurt when they are poked.

I can remember those charts of mother's hands. I used six different places on the edges of each finger before starting over with a new chart. That's 60 finger pokes. Towards the end of her life we were going through two charts a month. She never complained, but I think that her fingers must have hurt sometimes.

What is amazing to me is the way that my brain works. A tiny splinter of fiberglass in the tip of my finger can give me memories of my mother. Testing blood sugar levels was such a tiny part of my relationship with my mom. She gave me life. She fed me from her own body. She made sure I was clean and comfortable and warm. She tucked me into bed and read stories to me. She cleaned up messes from when I was sick and different messes that seem to follow little boys around. She counseled me when I was upset and taught me some very practical life skills like how to do my laundry and how to cook a simple meal. I poked holes in her fingers.

But I also got the deep privilege of holding her hands in mine several times each day for a couple of years.

She was widowed young - before her 60th birthday. After my father died, she said that one of the things she missed was holding his hand. He, like his son, was a fast walker. She had short legs and preferred to walk at a more leisurely pace. When they held hands, both compromised so that they could walk together. He was right-handed and she was left-handed, so they usually walked with him on the left and her on the right. They had perfected that art long before I appeared on the scene. Waving hand in hand was a part of their lives for as long as I can remember. Virtually every Sunday we'd walk to church as a family and back home afterwards. My folks held hands as they walked and we kids sometimes ran ahead and sometimes lagged behind - a loose-knit clump of people heading down the sidewalk. After he died, she missed the feel of her hand in his.

I got to hold her hands. Sometimes life gives you the biggest gifts and it takes a little while for you to realize how wonderful they are. This week I got a couple of pokes in my fingers that turned into genuine blessings of memory.

October 24, 2017 – An Idea

I've begun to notice that our service from United Parcel Service is not as good as it once was. The drivers are frequently late, arriving at the church after normal business hours. Packages shipped via "Second Day Air" generally arrive in our town on the third day. I'll follow the tracking and they seem to make it into our state on the second day, but don't get to our town and out for delivery until the third day. When I place an order on Amazon.com, I generally simply accept that the delivery date will be one day later than promised. One UPS driver told me, "Amazon is killing us!"

I remember when United Parcel Service first became a nationwide delivery service. We were amazed that they could deliver a package to any home anywhere in a reasonable amount of time. My cousin lives down on the river bottom outside of a very small town in rural Montana. He has more than four miles of road that lead to his place and no other place. His place is not on the way to anywhere else. Yet UPS sends a brown van all the way to his home with his packages. We lived in North Dakota when UPS began to be the dominant package carrier and they said that they could only deliver to a street address. We all got our mail at the post office and had post office box numbers, but we had to use our street addresses if we expected UPS to deliver. That was fine for us, but the little town just west of where we lived had no street names. The locals just made up names. Texas street was where Tex's shop was. Hanson Lane was the street where Hansons lived. You get the picture. Without street signs, finding the addresses was impossible unless you were from that town. The UPS driver would come to town, stop at the Senior Citizen's Center, and ask for directions just like everyone else.

We were amazed that a for profit company could compete with the United States Postal Service. UPS specialized in package delivery and they got good at it. The company wasn't really a new company. It was founded in 1907. But it wasn't a national service and it was largely unknown in our part of the world until the 1980's. UPS didn't become a publicly held company until 1999. Perhaps they were spurred along by the success of FedEx, a company that specialized in overnight deliveries. FedEx has been around since the early 1970's, but it took a big leap forward in 1981, when it opened its SuperHub facility in Memphis TN. It remained Federal Express until adopting the FedEx brand in the mid 1990's.

But the real marvel, when it comes to communication isn't either company. It is the United States Postal Service, a government run communications company that serves all the people of the United States. Benjamin Franklin was appointed the first Postmaster General of the United States in 1775. Delivering the mail was a priority for the newly forming government. Throughout nearly two and a half centuries, the US Post Office has gone through an amazing set of circumstances to deliver the mail. Before the railroads crossed the continent, Pony Express riders made sure the mail got through. During times of war and times of peace, the post office delivered letters all around the world. We have learned that we could rely on the United State Postal Service. The

official mission of the Postal Service includes “the obligation to provide postal services to bind the Nation together through the personal, literary, and business correspondence of the people. It shall provide prompt, reliable, and efficient services to patrons in all areas and shall render postal services to all communities.”

Contrary to popular opinion, famous phrase chiseled into the stone over the entrance of the New York City Post Office is not the official motto of the service. “Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.” That motto has been around since about 500 BCE.

The world, however, is changing. We don’t write letters the way that we used to. Email, text messaging, video conferencing, and a lot of Internet-based communications tools are now the standard of communication. While we still send a few cards and write a few thank you notes, more and more our mail is mostly filled with advertising and junk. As we switch to electronic bills and payments, we don’t even receive that many bills in the mail any more. Much of what we do receive we never read. I don’t need catalogues from companies whose products I can see on line. I don’t need advertisements for products that I have no intention of buying. There is a lot that comes in the mail that is worthless to me.

All of this is background to an idea that has been capturing my imagination. At the founding of our nation, our forebears believed that communication was a legitimate function of government. They saw no need for a for profit corporation to deliver the mail. It was deemed a necessary service and right for all citizens. A well-informed citizenry was deemed essential to a modern democracy. Those values remain true. In our day, however, the media is no longer letters in envelopes. What would it happen if our legislators saw electronic communication as being as essential to the survival of our democracy as mail was to our founders? Instead of having for profit corporations like Facebook and Twitter messing with official communications, instead of having foreign governments sponsoring misleading advertisements in an attempt to influence the outcome of elections, what if we developed an official United States Internet Service, providing Internet to all of our citizens because informed citizens are essential to democracy?

I know that some people think that the government already does too much and others don’t trust the government to do a good job with such a technical service. But if it were a national priority, we are quite capable of working together to provide efficient and modern communication “to bind the Nation together through the personal, literary, and business correspondence of the people.”

I don’t expect my idea to go anywhere, but it may well be an idea worth considering.

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October 25, 2017 – Preparing for Winter

During the fall and winter, I wear the same thing most days. I have a half dozen mock black mock turtleneck shirts which I wear with blue jeans. It is simple. I don't have to put much thought into what I will wear. I can put on a sports coat if the occasion demands a bit of formality or simply wear a parka when the weather is fierce. I wear a nice pair of walking shoes most days, but when it is cold and the streets are filled with snow and slush, I wear hiking boots and my feet remain toasty. The main advantage of this wardrobe is that I don't have to spend time or energy thinking about what I will wear.

There was a time when I wore a white shirt and a tie to work every day. I kept a sports jacket in my office for more formal meetings and worked in my shirtsleeves most of the day. Then, while on sabbatical, I began to notice that the standards of dress for professionals was changing. My doctor no longer greeted me dressed up, but often wore surgical scrubs instead. The folks in the dentist's office also switched to scrubs most of the time. Even the bank, which used to be a place of formal dress sprouted casual Fridays and neat polo shirts with the bank logo began to replace white shirts and ties. Because my job has to do with forming relationships and drawing close to the people I serve, my dress began to evolve to reflect the norms of the wider culture. I purchased colored shirts and a few brighter ties. Then, after another sabbatical, I began going without ties during the week. Gradually, I shifted from dress shirts to polo shirts to the mock turtleneck shirts I wear during the fall, winter and spring.

I have never put much thought into what I was going to wear and still don't. I'm sure that if anyone was paying attention there have been months when I wore the same tie on Sunday for weeks in a row. It is Wednesday, and I think I wore a red tie on Sunday, but I'm sure I'll wear a red tie on this coming Sunday simply because it is Reformation Sunday. It will probably be the same one.

But today - now here is a dilemma. I've been wearing black mock turtle necks and blue jeans for weeks now. After all it is past the middle of October. But it is already 60 degrees out there and the forecast calls for 80 by mid day. It simply isn't a long-sleeve kind of day. At least my shirt needs to be different. On Wednesdays, I walk downtown leaving the office a little after 7 am and after sharing a couple of bible studies, walk back to the office around 10 am. By then it will be much too warm for my autumn usual. That means I have to make a decision about which short-sleeved shirt to wear. No worries, however, life has much bigger challenges and I'm pretty sure I can cope with these circumstances.

What is harder to wrap my head around than what to wear is that today is also Winter Weather Awareness Day in South Dakota. Officials of the South Dakota Office of Emergency Management are urging all South Dakotans to start planning for cold

temperatures and snow. They warn that power outages, blocked roads and other conditions can force people to stay at home during severe weather.

Having once spent the night in our pickup because of a failed starter when we were 8 miles from the nearest home, I have been even more disciplined about the winter gear I carry in my vehicles whenever I leave home. We were warm enough and didn't suffer during our overnight stay and easily walked out to help the next morning, but we didn't have much food with us. These days, my winter survival kits contains freeze dried meals and high energy snack bars and even coffee and tea for warm beverages. I've got a small stove and candles and flashlights and enough emergency blankets to build a shelter were we to be forced out of our vehicle. But each fall it is time to take all of the gear out of the survival pack and make sure i've got the right stuff. I replace the flashlight batteries and check the equipment.

It is a good idea to make sure that we have sufficient supplies at home as well. We keep a fairly well stocked pantry and while our diet might be a bit monotonous if we were to be snowed in for an extended period, we certainly would not lack for proper nutrition. We know from experience that in an extended power outage you eat through the refrigerator first and then you can use the freezer as an ice box after a few days. I keep my chainsaw and snowblower in good operating condition, so we could deal the a fallen tree or a snow-blocked driveway. We are fortunate to have a capable four-wheel drive pickup and tire chains for all four wheels should the snow get deep.

We're pretty much ready for winter.

I'm not, however, completely prepared for 80 degree days in October. Let's see, I need a hat and sunscreen for walking. I probably don't need the extra hooded jacket, warm stocking cap and gloves that I am currently carrying in the small pack I tote back and forth between the office and home. Don't worry, I may have become more casual with the passing of time, but I won't be wearing short pants to work. The light reflecting off my pale white legs might pose a hazard to others. Besides after all these years, I'm not really comfortable wearing shorts to work, though I did so on a couple of occasions this past summer - the first time I took that bold fashion step.

In South Dakota we always have to be ready for whatever weather comes our way. I like the bright sunshine, but I could use a little less heat in October. I have no fear, it probably won't be long before we're complaining about cold weather.

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October 26, 2017 – Frustrating Technology

Like everyone else I know, I have a mixed relationship with technology. I'm certainly no luddite. I use computers every day. I have a very capable laptop that I use for writing my

blog. There is another laptop at the office of which I am the exclusive user. I carry a smart phone with me 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I used the phone for being available to respond to calls in the middle of the night as well as using it as a camera and an alarm clock. I use FaceTime to video chat with my family. I send and receive text messages and check my email on my phone multiple times each day. I've got applications for tracking my medicines and blood pressure, for paying with my bank card, for keeping shopping lists, looking up Bible passages, reading books, managing my bank accounts and much more. I have a tablet computer that I use for leading worship. I have the entire service, including hymns and choral anthems set up to display on the device so that I need carry only one small thing for leading worship. I use technology every day and while it can be intrusive, for the most part I appreciate the things that the various devices allow me to do.

Still there are aspects to the use of technology that drive me up the wall. Last night gave me a clear example. Our church has digital controls that manage our boiler, air handlers and other components of our heating system. One of the features of the computer controls is that we can enter the building schedule into the system and it will turn heat up and down based on actual building use. This is generally managed by office staff who can use any of several different computers to manage the system. That system also allows for checking temperatures in various parts of the building, catching problems with the system and diagnosing problems so that the correct repair person can be notified. It has an additional feature that sends text messages to phones when the system sends out an alert of a problem. Theoretically, we would be notified if a pump goes down, a filter needs to be replaced, or the boiler fails to ignite, leaving our building exposed to damage from cold weather. That is the theory. The reality is that the system sends us text messages that are obscure and rarely give us enough information to know what is going on. The most frequent message I receive from the system has to do with an air handler that frequently doesn't put out quite the air pressure that the sensor expects. The air handler is working well and the filter is fresh and clean, but as it spools up the pressure rises more slowly than the sensor is programmed to accept. This causes it to send a false message about the condition of the filter. I receive multiple messages each day about this. We've had the technician over many times attempting to address the problem, including readjusting the programming for pressures, etc. But each visit of the technician is over \$100 and as steward of the church's finances, I have found myself being willing to accept false messages rather than spend too much time chasing the problem.

Last night a sensor that measures water flow went into alarm. We probably have a pump coupler or perhaps even a pump in the system that is failing and needs to be replaced. We have multiple pumps in our system and the temperatures are warm enough that this isn't a crisis. It does not demand paying the extremely high rate for a contractor to come out in the middle of the night to address the problem. It doesn't even mandate my going back to the office after a 14 hour day to check on it. It can be felt with in the morning. The system, however, has sent 97 text message alerts to my phone

since 10 pm last night. I turned off the tone in my phone that sounds when I receive text messages. It meant that I wouldn't know if another person sent me a text message, but it allowed me to sleep, which is pretty important. Even if there had been a total boiler failure, there would be no need for the same message to be sent nearly 100 times to the same person.

This morning, I'm considering removing the text alerts from the system. We have yet to be able to use them in a meaningful manner.

More technology isn't always better. The day will come when the software is improved and the system will work in the way that it is intended to, but in the mean time, being on the cutting edge of technology doesn't really make life better. It just makes life more cluttered with things that we learn to ignore.

What we want is for our technology to work when we need it. What we don't want is to spend huge amounts of our time or money solving problems with the technology.

I've learned over the years that we rarely need the best specifications or the latest and greatest gadgets. While developments in software are usually designed for the latest and most capable machines, for the most part older computers work fine for our needs. We don't need the most powerful processors or the largest memories for the jobs we do at the church. We certainly don't need to replace our computers every couple of years. Replacing computers almost always involves a learning curve for staff and ends up making us less productive in the short run. I've learned to get a kick out of young technicians referring to our equipment as "this old machine." I know that the next time we call for assistance we'll have a different technician because our machines seem to last longer than the technicians last in their jobs.

Like many things in life our computers frustrate us and demand more time and energy than we would like. Still, we've become dependent upon them and have to learn to live with them.

This morning, however, I'm thinking that I could easily live without text messages from the computer that runs the church's heating system.

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October 27, 2017 – Consider the Source

Sometime in the last 24-hours, I read a meditation by Jerry Colonna, who is an advisor to On Being, the blog and web site hosted by Christa Tippett. His reflection was about his struggle with the state of American politics, something that is a cause of concern for a lot of us these days. What keeps rolling over and over in my mind, however, is how he

opened the piece: "With apologies to Saint Francis... Lord grant me the serenity not to bite the hook of my anger and fear."

My initial reaction was to wonder why apologies to Saint Francis were in order because he had adapted a line from a prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr. Both men wrote prayers that are widely quoted and often misquoted in popular writing, but I couldn't come up with a line in Saint Francis' most famous prayer that matched the line in Colonna's piece. I really think he was referring to Niebuhr's prayer.

Here is the prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr in its original version:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen.

Niebuhr prays for grace to accept with serenity and Colonna prays directly for serenity but the reference seems pretty clear.

I'm not a Saint Francis scholar, but in my limited knowledge, I would judge this to be his most famous prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

I see nothing in Colonna's line that would require an apology to Saint Francis, but I do see a reference to Niebuhr.

On the one hand, it isn't a big deal. Neither Saint Francis nor Reinhold Niebuhr would withhold forgiveness from Jerry Colonna and neither would be offended that he made a reference to something of which he had been the original author. Both were committed to the free sharing of ideas and the development of serious thinking.

It has become so common in our public lives, however, to engage in a sort of intellectual laziness. I fall prey to it frequently in my own writing, especially in these journal entries. Each morning I sit down to write and follow the strains of ideas, often inspired by the writings of others to whom I do not give credit. I don't adhere to the disciplines of my academic life, wherein I surrounded myself with original sources and educated myself about the field of literature surrounding a topic before writing. Instead, I write out of my memory and, I hope, out of my heard about the topics that come to my mind. It isn't quite the stream of consciousness writing of Jack Kerouac or Samuel Beckett or Dorothy Richardson. I've never come close to the ability to just write the ideas as they come to my mind. Most of my journal posts come from at least a few hours of mulling and thinking about ideas.

My process, however, may have unintended consequences. Because I am nearly constantly processing ideas and because I read a lot, I suspect that I am frequently guilty of accidental plagiarism. I write down an idea that came from someone else's writing without being conscious that the idea is not my own. I have occasionally wondered what would happen if I were to use one of the computer programs designed to detect plagiarism to check my writing. I have never used any of those programs and am not familiar with them. When I have been in the position of teaching the instances of plagiarism that I did detect were very obvious. It is easy, using computers, to simply cut and paste large blocks of text from other sources. There is nothing wrong with quoting other authors. I have two prayers by other authors in today's journal. What is intellectually dishonest is using another's words and claiming them as your own.

I'm not very afraid of that kind of mistake, however. I would never intentionally do that. But I suspect that I am frequently guilty of the kind of mistake I detected in Jerry Colonna's piece. I sort of know the source of an idea and I proceed without taking time

to fully check my sources. It is more a matter of intellectual laziness than of outright dishonesty.

The widespread use of social media and the regular posting and reposting of ideas from other people has given us a tolerance for practices that would be considered inappropriate in academic writing. Among the things I regularly read are carefully edited books, but I also read a lot of posts to blogs, Facebook and even Twitter posts, since people have discovered that by converting a page of text into a graphic and posting it they can put a lot more than 140 characters on Twitter. Reading all of these things does lead me to a certain kind of laziness about checking sources. I rarely pass on the things I read directly, but I am not always aware of how much reading such things influences my thinking.

There is still room and need in this world for those who are careful with their use of words. I hope that I can maintain enough discipline in my writing to demonstrate care for the ideas of others.

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October 28, 2017 – On the Phone

I remember that at the time I moved to South Dakota I was convinced that I did not need a cell phone. My father-in-law had a bag phone that they carried in the car for use in emergencies and they loaned it to us for the trip to Rapid City in which we closed on the house we now live in. We knew that the phone wouldn't work in any of the rural and isolated areas through which we would drive, but thought it might work to make any needed business calls while we were in town. I think I made one phone call to the realtor with that phone in a multiple-day trip.

I remember telling people that I didn't want a cell phone, which at the time we referred to as "car phones." They were mostly too big to carry around with you and frequently needed to be plugged into the lighter in the car and an external antenna to work. I said that I enjoyed the solitude of the car and the ability to speak with others as I drove and I had no desire for the interruptions of a telephone.

After I settled in town, the realities of serving a larger congregation than before meant that I was spending a lot of time outside of the office. I was making calls to members, visiting in the hospital, making contacts with community organizations and getting to know the congregation I was serving in a lot of different ways. The interim pastor who had preceded me in my position had worked mainly from the office and my style was a bit difficult for the office manager. She would receive calls for me and not know where I was or when I was going to return to the office. After several incidents of missed communications, I eventually got a cell phone. By that time they were small enough to be carried in my pocket. I gave the number to my colleagues at work and to my family

members, but didn't circulate it widely. At first the receptionist at the church would take a message for me then hang up and call my cell phone rather than giving my number to church members and others who called. I might receive one or two phone calls a day on my phone.

That was a long time ago. Times have changed. My phone rings frequently and it vibrates to alert me of incoming text messages and emails. My cell phone number is on my business cards and a lot of local people, including many church members have it. At choir practice last week, our director handed out some music that the choir had sung a few years ago and one member showed me that one piece of music had my name and cell phone number written on it in pencil. It isn't just choir members, either. I get calls from lots of church members on my cell phone. Many community leaders only have my cell phone and use it exclusively to communicate with me.

Yesterday was a good example. I don't log my phone calls, but here are just a few calls I remember from yesterday.

- The chair of a human rights committee on which I called phoned to discuss the need for an immediate decision on a matter.
-
- A local community leader called to see if I could deliver an invocation at a community event.
-
- A woman from a community southeast of town called for assistance. This call sort of surprised me because it was the actual owner of the phone that called me. I've identified that phone as one that gets passed around and my number has been identified as the one to call if you need assistance when in Rapid City. I frequently get calls from that number and find myself speaking with people whom I've never met what say they got the phone, with my number in it, from a friend.
-
- My office called to inform me of a member of the church in the hospital.
-
- The executive director of a local non-profit called to set up a meeting.
-
- I received a thank-you call for a presentation I had made earlier in the week.

There were plenty of other calls as well. About half of them occurred while I was driving. I have a hands-free connection in my car that allows me to answer the phone without actually handing the device and I hear the caller over the car stereo and speak through a microphone mounted near my head while driving.

My car doesn't seem to offer the same kind of solitude that was once the case. The change came so gradually that I didn't really notice it happening. My phone went from

one or two calls a day to dozens. I don't seem to get irritated when it rings or vibrates. I keep the ringer turned off much of the time.

And I let calls go to voice mail when I am visiting in the hospital or in direct conversation with someone else. That, of course, creates a need to make time to listen to messages and return calls as soon as it is convenient.

We live in a world where constant communication is expected. In some cases it is demanded. I have been reprimanded for not responding quickly enough to emails and text messages. I don't like responding to email with my phone. The keyboard is too small for my fingers and I'm well adapted to the full sized keyboard on my computer. I try to set aside two or three times for responding to email each day, but I don't intend to respond to each message as it is received.

Yesterday I was visiting a woman in her late nineties who had fallen and broken her hip the previous day. The surgery had gone well and she was sitting up in a chair in her hospital room. As we were visiting, she took two calls on her cell phone. I decided that if she could adapt to the technology of the time, so could I.

Still, if you call, please be prepared to leave a voice mail. I wouldn't dream of interrupting a conversation with you to answer my phone, and I won't do it if I'm conversing with another person either.

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October 29, 2017 – Leadership

The church that my family attended when I was a child is currently seeking a new pastor. They've had a lot of pastors over the years. I can remember four different pastors between my baptism and the time I went away to college. The average tenure of pastors in that time was in the neighborhood of four years. It was fairly common for our church to hire a young pastor, just graduated from seminary and when that pastor moved on to hire another fresh graduate. It was an entry-level job, with lower pay than some other congregations, but served as a great place to gain some basic experience. In those days the church owned a parsonage, so housing was one of the benefits of the job. Over the years since I moved away from that town it has had many different pastors, some beloved, some barely remembered. I don't think that they have had any pastors who served much longer than a decade and they've had quite a few who served shorter. In this particular search, I noticed that for the first time in my memory they are advertising the position as a three-quarter job. The membership and financial base of the church has shrunk and their options for leadership are more limited than was the case when I was a child.

Part of the difference between then and now is that students who have just completed seminary are more expensive for at least two reasons. It costs more to support a pastor because health insurance is so much more expensive. Today health insurance for a young couple with children costs nearly double the amount of our entire support package when we began our ministry. Although there has been some inflation in that time, inflation doesn't account for all of the difference. The second factor is educational debt. The cost of obtaining a four-year undergraduate degree plus a three-year graduate degree is staggering and most students emerge with educational debt that demands that their income be higher in order to pay off the loans. This means that recent seminary graduates are often too expensive for smaller congregations.

The prospects don't look too promising for my home church. It is likely that they will be searching for their next pastor for an extended period of time. Perhaps they will find a pastor who is nearing retirement and looking for a cut back in hours. Perhaps they will find a pastor who is part of a family where the spouse produces sufficient income to allow a lower salary for the pastor. Perhaps they will find a bi-vocational pastor who can work at another job to provide a complete income. The setting is gorgeous with access to all kinds of recreation. The town is pleasant with all necessary services. The congregation is probably not too challenging. However, most pastors don't see advertisements for part-time work as part-time. They see it as all the work with only part of the salary. Since a pastor's work is never finished, 3/4 of a pastor's job is also never finished.

Paying attention to my home church has got me to thinking about leadership in general. There is a kind of a joke that all congregations are seeking the perfect pastor and that the perfect pastor is an impossible combination of qualities. Congregations tend to think they want younger pastors to attract younger members, but they also want very experienced pastors that don't make newcomers' mistakes. They want a pastor who will bring in new members, but they also expect the pastor to spend most of their time caring for the exiting members. It is always a bit of a dilemma.

From a wider perspective, we seem to want our leaders to be more than is humanly possible. And we have a tendency to tell the stories of our former leaders in such a way that we remember them as more than they were.

This is the week of reading the biblical report of the death of Moses. Deuteronomy reports that Moses was 120 years old when he died and that his sight was unimpaired and his vigor undimmed even at this advanced age. There are few biblical reports of any of Moses' shortcomings. Even though we hear reports of the people of Israel complaining about Moses' leadership, he is always presented as an able and capable leader who always did what God asked of him. Despite the rather exaggerated reports that come from looking back, Moses did not live forever. He was mortal. Even if we don't remember his less appealing qualities, we do know that he was human.

This week we also will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther, the brash young man who is credited with starting the reformation is remembered as a prolific writer, an able pastor, a steadfast reformer, a man of convictions, a strident advocate of literacy for the people, and much more. I'm guessing that most of the tributes paid to Luther over the next few days won't remember him as an anti-semite who had strong opinions and who didn't deal well with conflict. They probably won't emphasize his short temper or his intolerance of dissent among his followers. Luther was a great leader. He also was a human being.

All of us who assume the mantle of leadership in one form or another have our strengths and weaknesses. All of us are vulnerable when our congregations compare us to their memories of our predecessors. There is a joke that the best pastor that a congregation has ever had is always the one who came before the current pastor. It is easier for us to see the shortcomings of present leaders than it is for us to remember the shortcomings of former leaders.

All ministry is about relationship and relationships are tough work. Ask any marriage counselor. Maintaining a loving relationship requires commitment from both sides and a lot of plain old fashioned work.

So we proceed in our own imperfect way, hoping that we are leading our congregations in the paths that God intends, knowing that we will not be the leaders forever. In our most humble moments we remember that we need to always be preparing for future leaders. Sometimes we succeed in making their job a bit easier. At least that is our hope.

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October 30, 2017 – Thinking and Talking about Death

Yesterday afternoon I was chatting with a friend who is 83 years old. I have a lot of friends who are in their eighties and I have noticed that they are a very diverse group of people. Some of my friends who are that age have severe health problems that dominate their lives. Others seem to be in good health and shew few signs of aging. I've also noticed that attitudes toward mortality and death vary quite a bit among my friends who are 20 or more years older than I. Another of my friends in his eighties will occasionally speak of his own death in a very frank manner. He is not morbid, nor does he focus on his death, but he is honest and understands that death will come to him. He hopes that when his time comes it will not be a lingering death with years of decline or a period of incapacity. He sees his heart condition as a friend, offering him the possibility of death with dignity. He does not know how his life will play out. His wife is the same age as he and both are in reasonably good health at this time, so there is no way of knowing which will die first. They have been careful to make plans for either eventuality.

The friend with whom I was visiting yesterday, however, is not one with whom I've ever spoken about death - at least not his death. He is full of life and doesn't seem to want to speak of his death. We have, however, spoken of issues regarding housing as one ages. He has enjoyed an extended retirement, being able to retire at a relatively young age. But in recent years he has had to sell his dream retirement home and move into an apartment in a continuous care facility.

The conversation I had with my friend yesterday focused on the health of another man, a mutual friend of ours. This man has been living with cancer and extensive treatments for quite a while now and has finally come to the point where the doctors have run out of options. His lifespan will be short. Although doctors cannot put a date on his death, there are none who believe that he will be living a year from now. Most believe that the end of his life will be in the next three months. This mutual friend has been open and honest with his situation and has been striving to live honestly and fully in the face of the inevitable.

What struck me about my conversation with the octogenarian yesterday was that we seem to have achieved a level of comfort talking about death when it is another person's medical diagnosis. But if we are honest, we all have the same medical diagnosis. I don't mean that we all are afflicted with cancer. Nor do I mean that we will all die within a matter of months. What I mean is that we are all mortal. We will all die. Most of us, however, go through large portions of our lives without that awareness. We talk, as I did with my friend yesterday, about death as a condition that is unique to other people and somehow doesn't affect us.

This particular friend is a retired clergyman. Like me, he has officiated at a lot of funerals. He has not shied away from the places of grief and loss. And, like me he has faced the loss of loved ones. He knows firsthand the power of grief. He was, for many years, a chaplain serving in Veterans Administration hospitals. He walked the corridors of facilities where death takes place every day. He is familiar with pain and courage. He comforted families who were facing the mortality of their loved ones. He understands grief and loss.

Still it is easier for us to speak of death in the abstract as something that happens to other people.

I wonder how our lives might be different if we were more comfortable speaking of our own deaths. It isn't that I don't want to live fully until my time of dying. I do. I want to be remembered as one who is full of life, not as someone who was obsessed with death. I want to be as fully alive as possible for as long as possible. But I don't want my death to come without having spoken of what is most important to my family. I don't believe that every medical condition is a problem that needs to be fixed or cured. Some realities of our health are things that we learn to live with. Some produce disabilities that can offer

grace and understanding. Not every illness is a fight that must be fought and won. Some are companions and friends that reshape the meaning of our lives.

I don't mean to lay all of this on my friend who happens to be 20 years older than I. It is just that my conversation with him reminded me that I, too, am mortal. I won't always be the one officiating at funerals. I have limitations. Some conversations about that reality might be easier if we have them sooner rather than later.

One thing I have learned from my friends and from my own experience is that growing old is a wonderful thing. Despite much of popular culture's continuing assertions that aging should be fought, I am discovering that aging is a blessing. This does not mean that we should all form bucket lists and cast aside reason in pursuit of some imaginary set of experiences. Rather it means that none of us will be able to do everything that we have imagined, or even everything that we have wanted to do with our lives. At some point we have to accept that we are limited. Learning that truth is a blessing. We all are limited. We can't do everything or have every experience. As rich and wonderful as life is, we can't have it all. The limits of our resources are ways of learning to live fully with what we have.

Who knows what conversations are yet ahead for me. But in the time that is mine, I aspire to have those meaningful and honest conversations about death with my friends and family and I pray that I won't wait until a life-threatening illness crowds my time to do so.

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October 31, 2017 – A Halloween Anniversary

When I was in school, the version of the story that was taught went something like this: On October 31, 1517, the eve of the Feast of All Saints, 33-year-old Martin Luther posted 95 theses on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg. The act of posting them on the door was not in itself an act of defiance. The door functioned as a sort of public bulletin board for various announcements of academic and church affairs. We were also taught that Luther had written the theses in Latin and they were printed by John Gruenberg, an entrepreneurial printer. In addition to posting his theses on the church door, Luther sent copies to friends and church officials. Luther had been appointed professor of biblical theology at the University of Wittenberg, which was a small and virtually unknown institution in a small town.

The theses, however, made it big time. Church officials, including the archbishop of Mainz, Albert of Brandenburg, sent copies to Rome and demanded action against Luther. By early 1518, Luther's name was associated with demands for radical change in the church.

It doesn't appear that all of that attention was his intent. He had simply called for public debate of issues that were being debated in private: the relationship of money and religion. Indulgences, the selling of forgiveness for cash, had become complex and lucrative instruments for the church. They were abused. Pope Julius II, granted a "jubilee indulgence" in 1510, and used the proceeds to build the basilica of St. Peter in Rome.

Under pressure from church authorities, Luther dug in his heels and began to preach against the sale of indulgences. By 1520, Luther was preaching that baptism is the only indulgence necessary for salvation.

He later reported "I never wanted to do it, but was forced into it when I had to become a Doctor of Holy Scripture against my will."

Luther was condemned by the church and by the state. He did, however, escape attempts to burn him as a heretic.

As the schism between Luther and his followers deepened, a Benedictine nun, who had been sent to the Benedictine sisters at the age of five, became interested in the growing reform movement. She was dissatisfied with her life in the monastery. Conspiring with several other nuns to flee in secrecy, she contacted Luther. On April 4, 1523, Luther sent a fish merchant to the monastery, who secreted the nuns in his covered wagon and brought them to Wittenberg.

There had been debate about whether Luther should marry. Phillip Melancthon thought Luther's marriage would hurt the Reformation. It held the potential of scandal. Luther came to the conclusion that "his marriage would please his father, rile the pope, cause the angels to laugh, and the devils to weep. On June 13, 1525, the defrocked priest and the runaway nun were married.

They became parents of six children. It is said that there may be as many as 50,000 direct descendants of Luther worldwide, but that number may only include those who are aware of their heritage. If you use the conservative number of 3 children as an average family size and the equally conservative span of 30 years per generation, a couple with six children becomes nearly 720 million in 500 years. No one knows the exact number for sure, but scholars estimate that of the approximately 2.4 billion Christians worldwide, more than 900 million are Protestants. Luther's ideological progeny have become many and are a major religious category.

The reforms that Luther suggested have, for the most part come about throughout the entire church, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. But the reforms took a lot of time, much longer than Luther's lifespan. During his life, the work that he did was emotionally draining and his temper frequently grew short. He was forced, at times, to suspend preaching in order to revive his spirit and energy. He was known by some to be full of

fun, but he also had a fearsome temper. His personality had an effect on the course of the Reformation and the content of his theological writings.

Luther is also known for some of his anti-Semitic writings, most notably the 1543 treatise entitled "On Jews and their Lies." Luther will forever be remembered not only for his work of reformation of the Catholic Church, but also for his anti-Semitism. Luther's writings were used by Nazis to justify their brutal persecution and attempted genocide of all Jews.

The complex history of a complex human being has become the focus of a lot of attention on this the 500th anniversary of the posting of the theses. Tens of thousands of Christians from around the world have descended on Wittenberg, a town of 47,000 about 60 miles southwest of Berlin. Among those gathered are faithful Christians who are gathering to silently protest continuing anti-Semitic artwork and statements by German politicians.

The story of Luther probably won't be popular among the trick-or-treaters who come to our door this evening. They'll get their candy treats and a smile from us without a lot of debate of the history of the Protestant reformation. However, because of the 500th anniversary, the Reformation is on my mind and will remain there for some time to come. Our story is the story of humans, who are flawed and in need of forgiveness. We accomplish some very good things and we are capable of some very evil things. We stand in the heritage of a great Reformer who also had some terrible ideas.

As we celebrate the traditional holiday with costumes and decorations and treats for the children, we will be aware that today is a significant anniversary.

So Happy Halloween! If you haven't already figured out your costume, how about dressing as Martin Luther or Katherine von Bora? Depending on who you visit or which party you attend, you could end up being among the most frightening of the characters in the room.

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