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## October 1, 2016 – Exploring Differences

I am interested in the human dynamic that makes something that is different attractive. I find myself drawn to explore new places, meet new people and have experiences that I have not had before. The pull of this attraction is powerful, and it may be one of the reasons to have hope in this world.

My mother's people came from folks who had made some big moves in their lives, but once they settled in Montana, they stayed put. My mom is third generation Montanan on both sides of her family and those folks all lived in the same small town. Her father had spent a few years away from Montana, studying at Northwestern College near Chicago, but then had returned to his hometown to practice his profession.

My father's people, however, are a bit more prone to wandering. We don't know of any who stayed in the same place for more than two generations anywhere in our family tree. My grandfather was born on a homestead that had become a successful farming and ranching operation, but when he had the opportunity to sell out and start over, he took it. By the time I knew him he was a service station operator beneath the Beartooth mountains in Red Lodge Montana. The terrain and the work were vastly different than the life of a dryland wheat farmer in the rolling country of eastern North Dakota.

When I moved from my hometown, I was eager. The move was a short distance - only 80 miles - but it was to a city or at least a close to that as we had in Montana. From there I moved to Chicago for graduate school, assuming all the while that I would complete my education and return to Montana to live for the rest of my life. As it turned out, I haven't gotten around to going back to Montana and I have lived in South Dakota for more years than I have lived in any other state.

Even though we are comfortable in our home in the hills and familiar with our surroundings, however, the urge to wander and the attraction of that which is different is strong. I remain very interested in going to new places and seeing new things. The realities of limited time and finances keep me from traveling full time, but I make up for that with extensive reading and research about different places. I've dreamed of a trip to the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Alaska for years and every few years I obtain a new copy of the Milepost, the mile-by-mile guide to the Alaskan highway. I own campground directories for areas where I have never gone and sometimes spend an evening reading and thinking about trips that I may or may not take.

In a similar way that I enjoy traveling, I enjoy meeting people who are different from me. I have no military experience, but I am fascinated and delighted by the opportunities to tour the Air Force bases where our son-in-law has served. Other than cub and boy scouts I never wore a uniform of any kind until I began serving as a Sheriff's chaplain a few years ago. I am fascinated by the mindset of law enforcement officers and have cherished the opportunities to get to know them better.

Although we all come from mixed heritages and I certainly don't know all of the stories of my family tree, it appears that I come from mostly European stock and have no claim to being indigenous. I am attracted to the people I have met who are Native American, visit the neighboring reservations regularly and have many friendships with native speakers and leaders.

I have fairly strong political opinions and I enjoy visiting with those who agree with my point of view, but I also spend a fair amount of my time listening to, working with, and sharing community with those who probably vote different from me on nearly every issue. I spend a bit of energy just trying to figure out how they think and what makes them attracted to their positions and opinions. I am delighted to serve a congregation where the diversity of bumper stickers in the parking lot make it look like our people have little in common. Yet we are drawn to worship together on a regular basis and get to know one another despite our differences.

It is the attraction of the different that gives me much of the hope that I experience. I assume that I'm not the only one who is attracted to things that are new and exotic. I assume that I'm not the only one who shares a fascination with those whose life experiences and opinions are different from my own.

I don't believe that genuine community is a product of associating only with those who are similar. I believe it comes from making commitments to exploring differences. Of course, there are many things about us that are very similar when we look beyond the obvious differences. Our basic anatomy is simple even when there are obvious physical disabilities. The proverb "He puts his pants on one leg at a time" reminds us of how much we have in common with others. I don't deny that we have many similarities. The differences, however, remain and are important part of what makes others fascinating.

Our differences are worth recognizing and celebrating. After being married for more than 43 years, my wife and I still can surprise one another from time to time. As well as we think we know one another, there are new discoveries to be made. We treasure and value our differences as much as we do our similarities. I remain absolutely fascinated by her in part because she isn't me.

Today I head off for a quick trip to visit friends who are participating in the protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota. I have no political statement to make. I'm not even sure what the right political decision are. But I am fascinated by the people and by their decisions and commitments. There are a few of my friends who disagree with my even visiting the protest. That difference is part of what makes them interesting to me. Today, and the conversations that follow, should be an opportunity to learn even more about the folks with whom we live. in community.

## October 2, 2016 – Triggering Memories

It is surprising and delightful the way that certain sounds or smells trigger memories for me. One of the wonderful things about having been around for so many years is that I have a lot of great memories. I don't think I could have predicted how valuable memories would be for me when I was younger. At 25 years of age, for example, I was focused on the new things that I was doing. I wasn't inclined to look back or to think of my memories, other than the short-term memory tasks that are required for a successful education.

These days, however, I realize that much of my identity is shaped by the experiences that I have had and the memories that are a part of who I am. I draw upon my memories in my writing and my preaching and in my everyday living. I make decisions that are based on things that I learned many years ago. It is more than simply possessing memories, though that is the language we use. We say, "I have these memories." But the truth is that we are the memories that make up our character.

Yesterday evening, I walked into our house where Susan had been baking apple bread and making chicken noodle soup. The aromas were inviting and warm and evoked host of memories. I instantly remembered a story my parents delighted in telling over and over. When they were newlywed, my mother would cook chicken and dumplings for my father. He would taste them, enjoy them, and then comment, "These are really good, but not quite like the dumplings my mother made." My mother, seeking to please her husband, tried recipe after recipe, variation after variation. Each received the same comment. Finally, several years later, she sat with her mother-in-law and asked her for the recipe for dumplings so that she could finally make dumplings for her husband that were like his mother's. My grandmother looked at my mom with a surprised expression and said, "I don't have a recipe for dumplings. I never make dumplings!" From that time on, whenever she made chicken noodle soup my dad would say, "Where are the dumplings?" and they would laugh and one or the other or both would tell the story again.

The aroma in our house was more than a pleasant sensation. It evoked a story that I know I have told my family many times - a memory that is ingrained in my identity so deeply that it is likely that my children tell the story from time to time.

Another example of how smell or sound can trigger memory came later in the night. I woke from my sleep in the middle of the night and lay quietly in bed. Soon I heard coyotes singing in the distance. They were quite a way away and I had to strain just a little bit to make sure that I was really hearing them instead of just confusing some other sound. There definitely were coyotes yipping and calling out.

That sound instantly transports me back four decades to a camping trip we took into the mountains when I was a young adult. We took our back packs and hiked about seven

miles up into a high plateau with several mountain lakes. It was late summer, and the weather was excellent. We didn't own a proper backpacking tent in those days but knew how to rig a shelter from a couple of plastic tarps. We spread out our sleeping bags and after making a supper over an open campfire we lay under the stars looking up at the majestic spread of the heavens, properly tired from having walked up hill for a good stretch. Just as I started to drift off to sleep, I heard the coyotes begin to sing. This was in the days before wolves were reintroduced into that area of Montana, but we had stories of wolves that others had told us. I made myself wake up and listen to be sure that what I was hearing had the distinctive yip, yip, yip of coyote song. Convinced that what I heard was coyotes, I drifted off to sleep to the music of such a beautiful space.

To this day singing coyotes sparks the memory of the beauty of the lake plateau and the gorgeous beauty of the clear night sky without any light pollution. It was a powerful moment, and it stays with me wherever I go.

The truth is that we carry lots and lots of memories in our minds and many of them do not rise to consciousness very often. They are there, but sort of lurk in the background as we focus our attention on other matters, solving the problems of the present or making plans for the day to come. Then something triggers our memory, often a smell or a sound, and we recall something that we hadn't been thinking about for a long time.

Recalling a treasured memory is more than a mental exercise. It isn't the same as recalling information that was learned and has not been recalled for some time. Some of my memories are full-body experiences. I not only recall the sound of the coyotes and the sight of the night sky. I recall the gentle ache of muscles stretched and pushed just a bit, the smell of the pine boughs, the warmth of my sleeping bag and the joy of the friends with whom I was camping.

There are some things about aging that I anticipated when I was younger. I don't think that I anticipated that I would become a sentimental and nostalgic old fool whose emotions would sometimes overcome him. That is, however, a fairly accurate description of me, at least part of the time. And now that I'm at this point in my life, I don't mind the description. I enjoy the nostalgia and I enjoy the sentiment.

I'll keep inhaling deeply and listening carefully for the smells and sounds that trigger my memories.

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### **October 3, 2016 – Talking About Love**

It seems as if there are always quite a few people thinking and talking about love. It is a universal human need and the search for love is a major factor in any human life. I've been intrigued recently by conversations I have had and a few books and articles I have

read. It seems that there are folks who want to talk about love without using traditional religious language. Perhaps they see religious language as arcane or have found some of the forms of fundamentalism to be less than rational. I don't know all of the reasons, but there seems to be a quest among folks for ways to talk about important life issues without reverting to overtly religious language.

Any serious discussion of love quickly moves beyond talk of fleeting emotions to qualities of love that are deeper, more lasting and more universal. While not denying or minimizing the power of romantic love, people seem to want to reach beyond the emotion of the moment. There is an understanding that powerful emotions can fade and that there is more to genuine love than romantic attraction.

One of the problems of talking about love, however, is that our talk can quickly turn to abstraction. While we experience love as a vital and very real force, it is difficult to talk about love without reaching for symbolic language. Our preferred method of talking about love is metaphor. We are fairly adept at saying what love is like. There are a lot of things that love is like. Love is like fruit. Love is like spice. Love is like a rose. Love is like a garden. Love is like a star. Love is like a journey, a pilgrimage, a trip. Love is like a key. You get the picture. We employ simile to speak of love in part because no definition seems complete.

The result as David James Duncan wrote in *The River Why*, is that "people often don't know what they are talking about and when they talk about love they really don't know what they are talking about."

Our language is imprecise and falls short of this powerful life force that is so important to human existence.

I don't pretend to be able to define love. I doubt if there is much that I can add to the discussion that has not already been said. But I do have a sense that there are a couple of aspects of love that seem to be missing from a great deal of contemporary conversation.

I just read a book in which a significant portion was a discussion of love. The author was thoughtful and insightful and included reports of conversations with several deep thinkers. Nowhere in that book, however, was a discussion of promise or covenant or commitment. It has been my experience that love thrives in the presence of genuine commitment. Promises really do make a difference in human lives. I'm not talking about blind promises that are used as contractual traps. I'm talking about genuine covenant where a person makes a life-long commitment to a relationship regardless of what the future may hold. The traditional language of wedding vows is deeply meaningful to me: "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live." It seems, however, that a more common commitment in today's society

doesn't include remaining in the relationship "for worse," but rather "if worse comes to worse, we can always get a divorce."

I don't mean to attack those who are divorced. I understand that human life is complex and that there are times when the choice is not between good and evil, but rather between various shades of in-between. I am sure that there are occasions where the choice to divorce is in the best interests of those who are involved. I also believe in the power of forgiveness and the human ability to start over in life and receive a second and a third chance.

but I do think that intention does make a difference and honest commitment can enable love to blossom in circumstances where it requires time and energy to nurture. Lasting commitments can provide the conditions for love to be nurtured. And love matures and grows over time in such a way that those who are blessed with long term relationships experience a depth that may not be available in shorter connections.

It seems to me that a discussion of love without a discussion of covenant ends up being a bit shallow and hollow. And that brings me to a second thing that I find missing in many discussions of love. The great covenant of human experience, in my opinion, is that between God and the people of God. It is the story that is lived out in a religious life. given my perspective, I don't really know how to talk about love without talking about God. As the first letter to John body declares, "God is love." This is not some puff of emotion, but rather a substantive life-altering force that empowers the entire universe. Talking about love seems to demand reaching beyond and seeking the universal.

21st century science is unlikely to revert to religious language, but it seems to be filled with religious concepts. Increasingly I notice concepts like wonder and surprise in the midst of serious scientific exploration. To hear an astronomer speak of the distances of the universe or a physicist describe dark matter or dark energy is to encounter a deep sense of awe and reverence for the transcendent.

I have no problem with the rejection of the notion of God as some kind of super-human being to whom the laws of nature don't apply. Those who don't believe in that kind of god aren't rejecting the God in which I believe. I've been known to say, "The god in which you don't believe - I don't believe in that god either." That doesn't make me an atheist. it is simply a declaration that I believe in God who is bigger, grander and more expansive than some notions that are expressed.

I enjoy talking and thinking about love and I believe these discussions are important for us. I pray, however, that we might go even deeper and discuss even more facets of love's deepest mysteries.

## October 4, 1996 – Talking of Suicide

The French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus wrote an essay that was published in the book “The Myth of Sisyphus” in which he ponders suicide as a philosophical problem. Essentially, he poses that he will think through the problem, come to an answer, and then carry out that answer, even if it means to die. He wasn’t, of course, the first philosopher to consider suicide as a rational problem.

Famously Socrates, after being found guilty of “refusing to recognize the gods recognized by the state” and of “corrupting the youth” by a vote of 280 to 220 of a 500-person jury, joked and refused to take seriously the sentencing portion of his trial. It was assumed that he could easily have escaped the death sentence by choosing exile. However, he did not make that choice and ended up being sentenced to death by drinking a cup of Hemlock. In essence the sentence was to suicide. He would become his own executioner. And that indeed is how he died. We don’t have much information about his thought process other than Plato’s description told through the fictional character Phaedo. That description actually focuses on the mechanics of the death more than the philosophy or thought.

Nonetheless, philosophers have, over the centuries, contemplated suicide both in terms of their own deaths and the deaths of others. Jennifer Michael Hecht has done an extensive study of the philosophy of suicide in the book, “Stay: A History of Suicide and the Philosophies Against It.” Most philosophers have come to a similar conclusion to the one drawn by Camus in his famous essay. For Camus, killing oneself is an unwarranted “insult to existence.” Even though life is painful and filled with sorrow and struggle, even though he knows life can be exhausting, repetitive, anxious and depressing, he comes to the conclusion that love and joy can arise from life. He urges his readers to embrace life, even if it makes no sense. Camus believes that human awareness is the essence of living. Being aware of one’s life is the goal of each human. Being alive and feeling life is more important than any particular experience.

Of course this brief summary of Camus’ thought doesn’t really do justice to the ideas of one who invested considerable energy in thinking and writing about life. Further, I’ve never really found myself to be fully in the camp of existentialist philosophy in the first place, so it is difficult for me to be unbiased and clear in discussing the ideas of such philosophers.

However, I would submit that there is an error in the essay that is consistent with errors made by most other philosophers who have contemplated the idea of suicide. The approach is rational. The philosophers try to come up with a point of view that has logical connections and makes sense from the point of view of the analysis of thought patterns.



My experience with survivors of suicide (those left behind when someone dies by suicide) leads me to believe that suicide is rarely a rational act. Even when it is carefully planned and executed with what seems to be careful forethought the act of dying by suicide is not the product of rational thought. People don't think their way to the end of their lives by suicide. They engage in an act that defies logic and is, at its core, irrational. To say that someone who has died by suicide wasn't in their right mind is literally true.

Had that person been able to see the consequences on those left behind and weigh them in the decision, the action might have been different. Had that person been interrupted and given a chance to look at things from a different perspective, the result might have been very different.

Survivors of suicide invest a large amount of energy in trying to figure out what happened when their loved one died, including trying to analyze how that person could have come to the decision to die. Eventually, such analysis becomes futile because we can't know exactly what another was thinking. The evidence was lost in the death and cannot be retrieved. We will never know for sure what that person was thinking. Speculation can lead us to possible answers, but they all fall short of being the complete truth.

I think having a philosophy of life is important and a meaningful activity for any person. However, I do not believe that getting the "right" philosophy is sufficient protection from dying by suicide. Our lives hinge on much more than simply having acquired the right thoughts and ideas.

Connection, relationship, and community are the best answers I know for the process of preventing death by suicide. A depressed mind can isolate an individual from contact with others and convince that person that they don't make a difference or don't matter to others. They become isolated and lonely and in that isolated state think, draw conclusions, and act in patterns that can further the lack of connection with others. Knowing that others care and continue to seek to understand can make a big difference for one contemplating suicide. Having someone to talk about suicidal thoughts, who isn't afraid to ask tough questions, can provide needed perspective. Making a plan to stay alive in the face of honest expression of suicidal thoughts is literally lifesaving.

It isn't a matter of changing another's mind, or of convincing that person to have different thoughts. It is a process of careful listening and then making deep connection. Knowing that another person cares about your thoughts and actions - knowing that what you do affects that other person - changes the choices you make.

Unfortunately, we do not have the knowledge and insight to prevent every suicide. There are times when the opportunity to intervene simply is not presented. However,

awareness and openness to talk about suicide can help to reduce tragedy. Lives are saved by bringing attention to suicide in private and public conversation.

Even though I see the world differently than Camus, I am grateful that he had the courage to think and write about a topic that too often is considered only in silence and loneliness. May we also have the courage to speak openly.

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## **October 5, 2016 – Black Lives Matter**

I have been reluctant to comment on the Black Lives Matter movement in my blog for several reasons. First, it is, rightly, a movement led and promoted by people who do not need my “assistance” or “endorsement.” Those who are promoting freedom and justice for all black lives have been articulate and effective in their engagement in the American public life. There are too many occasions where liberal whites have jumped on others’ bandwagons and diluted their causes by claiming as their own a struggle that does not belong to them.

To put it bluntly, I am a person who has benefitted from white privilege for all of my life. I don’t live in fear of being mistaken for someone else by law enforcement officers. I don’t worry about my children going out in public knowing that they might be profiled and viewed as criminal even though they have done nothing wrong. I know that a simple traffic stop or other encounter with law enforcement is unlikely to escalate beyond a conversation or the writing of a ticket.

Additionally, although I have watched some of the video posted on social media, I don’t have the perspective to make judgment about the specifics in individual cases.

I don’t deny that there is systemic racism in our criminal justice system. I know the statistics about incarceration of Blacks and other people of color. I understand how the courts have been used as a contemporary replacement for Jim Crow laws that have disproportionately punished people based on their race and ethnic background.

I also know that blaming the officers on the street for problems that are much bigger than they does not result in solving systemic problems. I know too many law enforcement officers who are people of integrity seeking to protect and serve the people of our communities to believe that they are the source of the ills of our society.

However, an experience I had yesterday is worth at least a comment. Along with many other religious and civic leaders of our community I attended the funeral of a prominent and distinguished fellow pastor who has faithfully served our community in many different ways. Bishop Kelly was deeply respected not only in our community, but also across the nation, most notably in his denomination, The Worldwide Church of God in

Christ. Because of that respect, African American church leaders came from across the country to participate in the service. The room was packed with leaders from California and Maryland and Tennessee and Minnesota and Michigan and Illinois, and a dozen other states. The congregation that Bishop Kelly served in our community is widely multiracial and multicultural, but in a community that is predominantly Euro-American a Black majority congregation is unique. The funeral crowd gathered yesterday was equally mixed, but predominantly Black.

Being a Sheriff's Chaplain who works with the staff at the Pennington County Jail, it was natural for me to sit with officers from the jail whom I know and who attended in uniform. Along with other members of our community, they had been touched by the ministry of Bishop Kelly, who for many years was a prominent and faithful jail chaplain. Flanked by the jail commander on my right and three uniformed corrections officers on my left, our row of white faces and uniforms stood out in the crowd.

As one would expect, we were greeted warmly by other worshipers and treated with the same respect and care as were all who attended the event. There was no overt racial tension anywhere in a funeral that was well organized and planned to celebrate the life of a community leader, a church leader and a man who was beloved not only in our community, but all across this country. Still, I couldn't help but reflect on the tensions that have existed between predominantly White law enforcement agencies and African American protestors that have made the headlines in recent months. I couldn't help but be aware of the tragic shootings of black men by police officers that have sparked outrage and protest. It was impossible for me to ignore the grief of other funerals for Black men that have been a part of our national story.

As we seek to make necessary changes in our civic life it is important that we take seriously what is being said by our neighbors. While it is intrinsically true that all lives matter, there is no need to use that as a slogan in contrast with the simple assertion that Black Lives Matter. For it is true that Black Lives Matter. Bishop Kelly's life matters. So do the lives of those whose names don't become familiar to us. Justice for African Americans is inherently linked with the lives of all Americans. When one group of people suffers from racism and injustice, all are affected.

Living where we do, we need to also understand that Indigenous lives matter. I know the statistics of the jail population in our community and prison population in our state. Because of my work with the Sheriff's Office, I know many of the individual people who are involved. I know that there is systemic racism in our community. I also know that there are people of integrity and good faith who go to work every day to defend the rights of all people and to stand for justice that reaches beyond racism and who work for fairness and respect for every individual.

It was an honor to attend the funeral of Bishop Kelly, to pay tribute to this remarkable religious and civic leader, to offer support and care to his family, and to thank God for

the gift of his life. It was an honor to sit with the men and women who serve as corrections officers in our community and to be identified with those who genuinely care about justice and fairness for all. It was equally good to have my conscience stirred and my awareness raised by the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement.

We can best honor the memory of those who have died by working for a more just community and fairness for all.

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## **October 6, 2016 – Seasons**

We covered up the tomatoes last night. There was a warning of possible frost for our area. As it turned out, we didn't get frost last night but there is still a possibility of frost tonight, so we'll have to cover the tomato plants again. After that, we're supposed to see highs in the 70s and 80s for a week or so with overnight lows in the 40s and 50s. Not bad as we approach the middle of October. There have been plenty of years since we moved to the hills when we had the garden closed around the first of October. It was only three years ago, in 2013, when we got slammed with a huge blizzard on October 3 that pretty much had us snowed in and shut down for two or three days.

This beautiful autumn we are enjoying certainly invites some reflection. It has been beautiful. There are still plenty of colors in the hills, though some believe that we've passed the peak of fall colors. Lots of trees in town still have their leaves even though most have changed color. Autumn is a season of metaphor and poetry and, like the other seasons of life, invites reflection on the bigger picture.

Many of the tribes of the plains counted the length of a person's life by counting the number of winters that person had survived. Winter can be harsh around here and just surviving it is a victory worthy of a celebration.

The problem with similes, however, is that they are by nature imprecise. When something is "like" another thing it isn't the same as that other thing.

I'm trying to find ways to talk about the season and the winter without drawing comparison to the stages of life. I enjoy the autumn. I even like winter. But I resist describing myself as in the "autumn" of life. I was born in the spring, just before it passed into summer. Who knows what season of the year will be my last? For now, however, it appears that I have many more seasons left in my life and I'd like to retain the spring in my step without ceasing autumn strolls. I just think that the use of seasons as similes for the stages of human life is over played in much of our literature and I'd like to avoid that comparison for now.

There are so many ways in which the seventh decade of life is not like autumn. As they go through the cycle of seasons the flow of sap in a tree varies, in part due to changes in temperature. As it gets colder, the flow of sap decreases. Humans don't do that as they age. Despite very effective treatment, my blood pressure is a bit higher in this decade of my life than it was in earlier ones. Quite frankly, I'm not a whole lot like a tree. I don't go dormant in the winter. I take in water by drinking, not by creating suction in my roots. And, unlike a tree, I'm prone to wandering through the forest and occasionally traveling great distances.

I suppose there is nothing inherently wrong with talking about the autumn of one's life. I'm just tired of it.

This year I'm enjoying the displays of pumpkins for sale around town and the fall decorations that are appearing without thinking of death particularly. I'm in a mood to celebrate the joys of the season without thinking that this is somehow the end.

Our garden is inspiring me. Although the days are shorter and there is less total sunshine for the tomatoes to ripen, they continue to put forth color. Our garden was nearly wiped out by hail on July 15, so it is well behind the regular season. I suppose there are 50 or more tomatoes that I'd prefer to have ripen on the vine. We could pick them and they would ripen indoors, but we'll wait as long as we continue to have deliciously warm days. The pedals are dropping off of the sunflowers and the garden looks a bit different than it does most years. That's no worry, each year is a blessing with its own unique flow of events. Most years we're picking the last tomatoes while the heads on the sunflowers are still brilliant yellow. This just isn't most years. It is unique.

I'm content to experience the season without needing to contemplate the shortness of life or the inevitability of death.

After all, autumn holds as many surprises as does spring in this part of the world.

A paddle on the lake brings no sensation that ice is coming soon. Even when there is a chill in the morning, as has been true for several days, I haven't had to resort to the ice scraper for the windshield yet. If I turn on the heater in the car as I drive to work in the morning, I'm surprised at the hot air coming out when I start it up to head home in the afternoon and quickly get my windows opened to feel the outside air. The days may be a bit shorter, but the sun still packs a significant amount of energy. With sunrise around 7 am and sunset still nearly 6:30 pm, we've still got lots of daylight left. I did, however, reset the clock controlling the light on our church's outdoor cross last night when I discovered that it was waiting until 8 pm to turn on the light. I can remember when it stayed light until 8 pm, but those days are now past.

I'll take winter when it comes. I have warm jackets and like the crunch of snow underfoot. Given the choice I probably prefer shoveling snow to mowing the lawn, but

neither chore is distasteful. I've got warm gloves and warm socks and I like the feel of lying under a couple of comforters at night. But I've no need to rush the change of seasons.

For now, I'm content to just enjoy fall for what it is: a beautiful time to be in the hills.

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## **October 7, 2016 – Pondering Assisted Dying**

Today's Washington Post has an opinion piece by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in which he states, "When my time comes, I want the option of an assisted death." It isn't the first thing by Tutu that I have read on the subject. A couple of years ago he publicly reversed his opposition to assisted dying in an op-ed piece published in the Guardian. In that piece he eloquently argued that compassion for others demands that alongside palliative care, the choices should include assisted death. In this piece he directly addresses himself. Today is his 85th birthday. He wrote:

"Just as I have argued firmly for compassion and fairness in life, I believe that terminally ill people should be treated with the same compassion and fairness when it comes to their deaths. . . . Today, I myself am even closer to the departures hall than arrivals, so to speak, and my thoughts turn to how I would like to be treated when the time comes. No more than ever, I feel compelled to lend my voice to this cause."

I have deep respect for Archbishop Tutu. He is a world leader, a man of peace, and a Christian whose theology and counsel I treasure. It would be totally out of place for me to ignore his words. But I must confess they have left me wondering and struggling with my own opinion on the subject.

One of the causes of my wondering may be the simple fact that I am more than twenty years younger. Although definitely in the second half of my life, and no one knows in advance the span of their living, I feel that my current state of health promises many more years. I probably do not spend as much of my time pondering my own death as will be the case when I am older.

My position on assisted dying, however, is not based on myself, but rather my desire to develop even more compassion for others.

I understand the fear of a lingering death. I have no desire for my own departure from this world to be prolonged by heroic, last ditch efforts. I have made my wishes clear to my family and established the necessary legal documentation that enables caregivers and family members to make practical decisions and avoid, to the extent possible, prolonging the process.

My direct observation of those who are dying, however, leads me to doubt the image of untreatable pain. Pain medication is, of course, a trade off. Too much medication and the person has less time awake for relationship. Too much alertness and there is more pain experienced. Each individual and their caregivers need to come up with what is appropriate. However, when I visit people in the hospital or hospice house I am impressed with the skill and compassion of palliative care givers in helping patients manage pain. When I think of my own time of dying, fear of uncontrolled pain is not one of the dominant emotions.

I think that the argument in favor of assisted death is based on the notion that uncontrollable pain might be present. My experience, however, leads me to believe that there is a large spectrum of pain medications available to treat suffering and ease pain.

I've often heard the argument that we treat our pets with compassion by assisting in their deaths, but that has not been the case in my personal experience. We have chosen to keep our pets at home when they near the ends of their lives and have experienced their deaths as peaceful times. I know that there are occasions where thoughtful, loving and caring people have felt that an assisted death was the best choice for their pets and I have no reason to doubt the choices they have made, but I have never had to face that particular choice.

I wonder more about the effects of assisted dying on those who provide the assistance. Although I am not a health care provider, when I try to imagine myself in that position, I wonder if I would be capable of such an action. And if I did submit and participate, would it change my personality and my values? Does it influence society when we change our relationship to those who are dying by actively participating in speeding up the process?

My mother would have agreed with Archbishop Tutu. She favored laws that allowed for assisted dying and it was one of the things about the State of Oregon that attracted her. However, she lived with us in South Dakota at the end of her life and her brief final hospitalization never presented a desire or need for any assistance with the process. She was placed on comfort care orders, and we did not witness undue suffering as we sat with her during her final days and hours.

I do not know what the right policy for lawmakers is. I think that I could be persuaded that making a dignified assisted death possible would be a reasonable law. I am not familiar with the law in Canada, but I know that it does allow for assisting dying for terminally ill people. Similar laws exist in some states in our country. I don't, however, feel compelled to go out and campaign for such laws at this point.

I imagine that even if legal, assisted dying would be extremely rare. The caregivers I know would be compelled to seek every alternative before suggesting such an action.

And I can't imagine the decision being anything other than gut-wrenching and leaving all kinds of doubt in its wake.

I have been with families as they made difficult decisions in the care of their loved ones. There are times when withdrawal of a respirator is an appropriate decision. There are times when switching from actively fighting disease to palliative care is the most loving choice. There are times when chemotherapy or radiation treatments or surgery is not the best choice. But these decisions are difficult to make and require care and compassion.

So, I remain uncertain. I could not have written the clear and concise article that Archbishop Tutu has written. While I admire him personally and take his opinion seriously, I'm left pondering and wondering and thinking.

Fortunately, we seem to have time to think carefully.

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## **October 8, 2016 – Comfort and Affliction**

I scan the headlines from several newspapers each day. I check out our local Rapid City Journal, The Washington Post, the New York Times, and the Chicago Tribune (I've got to keep up with the Cubs!). I also look at a handful of international news sites, among them BBC News. It surprises me sometimes how many stories that BBC covers about events in the United States that I don't find in US newspapers. This morning I was reading the story of 67-year-old Leroy Switlick. Mr. Switlick has voted in every presidential election for more than 40 years. However, he's having trouble this year. Wisconsin has a new voter ID law that requires a photo ID such as a driver's license or passport. Mr. Switlick has neither. Legally blind, Mr. Switlick has never driven and has never had a driver's license. He went to the DMV to obtain a photo ID, carrying a stack of documents including his birth certificate. The first question he was asked was, "Can I see your photo ID?" He never got the DMV employee to even look at his birth certificate.

On his second trip, the official he had been told to ask for simply didn't show up and he left with no ID.

On his third trip he was accompanied by his lawyer. They were told that the computers were down, though his lawyer was told later in the day that there had been no record of a computer problem on that day.

It is estimated that 300,000 registered voters in Wisconsin may not have the required ID to cast their ballots under the state's new ID law. Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker says the legislation will make it "easier to vote, but hard to cheat." He also said the law is justified if only one fraudulent vote is prevented. It seems that the "easier to vote"



part of his statement isn't the case for Mr. Switlick. And I'm having trouble with his math. Deny 300,000 people the right to vote on the fear of 1 fraudulent vote?

Voter fraud is not a major problem in the United States. Loyola Law School found only 31 cases of credible voter impersonation between 2000 and 2014, out of a billion ballots cast. Adam Gitlin of the Brennan Center stated that "estimates suggest that 11% of eligible voters in the United States lack the ID required by states with voter ID laws and that those people are disproportionately black, Latino, low income, students and elderly voters.

The voter ID law in North Carolina was struck down by the Supreme Court, but there are still eight states with similar laws. I live in one of those states.

My interpretation of democracy may be naive, but I was taught that for it to work, everyone needs to participate. Voting isn't just a right, it is a responsibility. I try to educate myself and vote in every election. Then again, I have a driver's license and a passport in addition to a government-issued photo ID from the Pennington County Sheriff's Office. I won't be protesting, simply complying, when asked for my ID when I vote in November.

There is no denying that it is easier for me than it is for Mr. Switlick, who by now has gotten enough publicity that I'm pretty sure the State of Wisconsin will come through with an ID so he can vote. I'm not worried about me or Mr. Switlick. There are hundreds of thousands of others that worry me.

I was thinking of what seems to me to be an inherent unfairness of the voter ID laws while I was reading a review of C. Nichole Mason's new memoir: "Born Bright." It is the story of a young woman who somehow made it through the violence and structural poverty and systematic racism in Southern California in the '80's and '90's to end up in college. Like Frank McCourt's "Angela's Ashes," it is a tale of innovation and triumph in a world where the odds seem stacked against the hero of the story. Mason, however, doesn't claim exceptional talent or abilities. She is quick to point out how incredibly lucky she is to have survived the challenges of her past. The fact that she ended up at Howard University is something of a miracle.

We read about the exceptions. The victims fall underneath our radar. The BBC story is about someone who has had problems with the voter ID law, but who will get to vote. No one is writing stories about the people who will simply be turned away from the polls because they have been denied full participation in American democracy. The children who never get through high school don't write memoirs for us to read.

In seminary a common piece of advice was that a preacher's job is to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." The actual quote doesn't come from the bible. It comes from humorist Finley Peter Dunne, whose original statement was made in

reference to newspapers. Regardless of the source of the quote, it seems to be good advice for those of us who seek to make active our love for others.

On that score, I confess that I am among the comfortable. I haven't suffered the terrible challenges that were overcome by C. Nichole Mason. I haven't had to overcome the unfairness encountered by Leroy Switlick. But there are those in my community who have been similarly afflicted.

While I don't know the entire history of US elections, it does seem that this presidential election cycle has been extraordinarily divisive. Far too many angry words have been said and far too much hateful rhetoric has been cast. While it is not my role to tell others how to vote, it does seem appropriate that I should encourage them to participate. Then, on November 9, after the election is over, regardless of the winners and losers, it will be the job of each of us to try to bring healing and unity to our divided country. Reaching out to those with whom we disagree must become a way of life.

It is time to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

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### **October 9, 2016 – The World Came to Rapid City**

Rapid City is a small city in a relatively out-of-the-way place. Flying to Rapid City on the airlines requires a change of planes from most destinations. We are served by mid-sized commuter airlines, not the big planes flown on the major routes. If you want to drive into our town, we are more than 300 miles from a city that is larger than ours. That means that we are used to traveling. We know that sometimes it is simply necessary to go to other places to experience certain cultural and social events. That is no problem for us. We like our place, and we are fond of solitude. The hills give us a ready opportunity to go off by ourselves and listen to the natural world. Those of us who are attracted to this place seem to also be well suited by personality to living here.

Still, it is a pleasant, if rare, occasion when people from many different places come to our community. It seemed as if the world came to Rapid City twice last week. The first was the funeral of Bishop Lorenzo Kelly last Tuesday, about which I've already blogged. Then, last night, a great community, vastly different from the crowd drawn for the church services for Bishop Kelly, came together in the performing arts center. As they say, I'm just glad I was there to see it.

I would have gone to the event just to hear the presentation by Jane Chu. It isn't common for the chair of the National Endowment for the Arts to come to our town. Those of us who have invested our time and energies in the arts in our community take notice when an arts event in our town draws national attention. In the context of last

night's celebrations, the appearance of Jane Chu, however, was just a small part of the festivities.

I would have made a big effort to go to the event if its only draw was the Git Hoan Dancers. I've long had interest in the Pacific Northwest indigenous people and their culture. We learned more about the Tsimshian people in 2006 when our sabbatical took us to British Columbia. We got to see some of the elaborate masks that are a part of their dances, but those masks were parts of a static museum display. Last night they came alive with the dancers on the stage and singers drumming and intoning traditional songs. The dances were a rich and magnificent display of Tsimshian culture with elaborate costumes, bright colors, sacred dances and songs. The masks are manipulated with strings like marionettes for incredible motion and action.

It would have been a worthy outing just to hear the award winning Sicangu Lakota Hip Hop artist Frank Waln. This Rosebud Reservation native was a winner of the Gates Millennium Scholarship. A three-time winner of the Native American Music Awards, Frank has incredible stage presence and demonstrated his artistry by getting the somewhat staid upper midwestern Rapid City crowd fired up and clapping our hands. His worldwide travels have brought the story of Dakota Reservations to audiences far away from our area. He inspires youth and adults alike as he tells his story.

As a lover of books and poetry, I would have found it a good investment of my time to hear the slam poetry of Dances with Words. The pair of Lakota youth from Pine Ridge have been empowered by a youth development indicative of First Peoples Fund and the mentorship of some inspirational teachers. I had read about the program, but last night was the first time that I experienced the power of live poetry on the big stage. I won't forget the poise and confidence of the poets or the eloquence with which they told their story.

There was so much more! The Lambe Deer Singers, a traditional Pow Wow procession of fancy dancers, videos of traditional artists and award winners. One of my friends commented to me on the way out of the building that I must have enjoyed the video about the traditional birch bark canoe by Wayne Valliere and Ojibwe youth. I was. It wasn't the only thing that inspired me. There were two Native Hawaiian artists honored, amazing basket making and quill work, and a lot of other gorgeous displays.

In my previous experience, I have had the opportunity to hear quite a few groups of male singers, but I had never heard traditional songs presented the way that Jennifer Kreisberg and Pure Fe Crescioni sang. Both are amazing solo artists, but when they sang together the room was filled in a way that is impossible to describe. You had to be there. You can see why they have been invited to perform at Carnegie Hall, the Hollywood Bowl, and the Olympics. It was simply amazing.

And this brief essay doesn't mention all the artists and all of the contributions they have made to our community. Honoree Jack Wallace Gladston, a member of the Blackfeet Nation from East Glacier, Montana, gave presentations of song and story in three Rapid City Schools on Friday. It is just part of his way of life that includes the amazing generosity of spirit and passion for educating children. Jack was a star athlete and football standout for the University of Washington and now dedicates his life to sharing his culture and heritage with children and adults.

Chief Phillip Whiteman, Jr., who along with Lynette Two Bulls was an honoree, sang a powerful honor song as a response to the award they received. Among other contributions to community, Whiteman and Two Bulls are founders of the Fort Robinson Break Out Run, an immersive, five-day re-creation of an historic wintertime escape and journey home.

Indeed, it certainly seems as if the world has come to Rapid City in the past week. Such amazing people have come to our town. I'm grateful I was there to see and hear and experience part of it.

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## October 10, 2016 – Sorting Pictures



It is possible that my digital photographs are slightly better organized than was the case when I was dealing with negatives and prints, but the improvement in organization is only slight. Some of the organization is technical. With GPS capabilities in my cameras, I can do a quick sort by location, which helps me find the pictures I'm looking for. Face recognition technology is also improving and works at times to help me find pictures. But the problem that I had before, clutter, remains. The bottom line is that I take a lot of pictures - perhaps not the number of those who are constantly taking selfies with their cell phones, but a lot.

The recent rebuild of my web site has sent me looking through my photos for images to use in the headers on the site and to place in other strategic locations throughout the web documents. What I have discovered is that one of my favorite locations for pictures is seated in a canoe or kayak. In the past three months, I've taken several pictures of the sunrise over Sheridan Lake with the bow of a canoe in the foreground. Since I've built my canoes and kayaks, I recognize individual boats with ease, so I also know which boat I've paddled the most in recent months.

Of course, there are plenty of other pictures. I've got pictures of family events, of our grandchildren, of some of the scenery from our travels, of events at the church. It surprised me how many pictures I have of stacks of split firewood. I guess that the Woodchuck project is something that captures my eye and my imagination.

As I go through the pictures, I realize that I have a whole lot of pictures that bring back pleasant memories to me that won't show up on my website. I take a lot of pictures of other people. And, for the most part, I don't have permission to publish their pictures in any way. I know that there is an active debate among people who use the Internet a lot about the ethics of posting identifiable pictures of other people. I'm not sure that I have any overarching ethical rules, but I simply am aware that pictures tell stories and not every story is mine to tell. Children attend Vacation Bible School at the church. I take pictures. But I don't feel comfortable publishing pictures of other people's children. We do post a few pictures of children on the church web site, knowing that it is important for potential visitors to understand how important children and children's programs are in the life of our church. But we are careful to obtain permission and we never provide direct identification of the children. When it comes to my personal web site, I'm pretty careful about which pictures I choose.

What you won't see are pictures of myself. I don't have very many. I've got a few pictures taken by others that I like. Interestingly, my favorites are of me paddling boats (go figure!). I do have a couple of formal portraits that I've used on the church web site and in other locations. But I have no intention of getting a selfie stick and starting to post pictures of myself all around the Internet.

The thing about it is that I kind of like some of the selfies that other people take. My niece is constantly posting pictures of herself with her friends doing interesting activities and as an uncle, I enjoy seeing the pictures. They give a report of what is going on in her life and how she is connecting with others. It helps me to feel close to her even though we live in locations separated by more than a thousand miles.

A couple of years ago I read a report that people upload an average of 1.8 billion digital images every day. That's 657 billion photos per year. To put it in a different perspective, every two minutes humans take more pictures than ever existed 150 years ago. There are more pictures loaded onto the Internet every day than the total take per year at the height of the film camera business.

The large number of digital images on my computer is small in comparison to the total of digital images. My problem with photo clutter is small in comparison to the rest of the Internet.

In place of photo albums, people pass their cell phones around the table to show off pictures of their grandchildren. The world is changing, and part of that change is instant access to images. I celebrate that change. I love receiving pictures of my grandchildren

every day. I watch every video sent of them multiple times and I'm as likely to whip out my phone to show pictures to others as any other grandfather.

In general, I have found that most people would rather look at pictures of my grandchildren than pictures of my canoes. Still, I've chosen a picture of the sunrise over the lake as the banner photo for the home page of my web site. It doesn't show any people, but I believe it says something about who I am and how I seek to become centered in the world. The banner photo for the blog is of the same lake but taken from a different angle on a different day. It also speaks of my connection with nature, something that is important for me to convey.

Today I am feeling grateful that I have had the opportunity in the last month to rebuild my web site. It has been quite a bit of work but thinking seriously about what to keep and what to discard has been helpful. Looking at my pictures, even the ones that I choose not to publish, has reminded me of what a wonderful life I have and how many terrific experiences I and blessed to enjoy.

And occasionally I choose another picture to publish. Chances are pretty good there is a canoe in the picture.

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October 11, 2016 – Awe



I don't read much of the print newspaper these days. I get most of my news from websites, many of them posted by newspapers. When our print newspaper arrives, I scan the headlines, usually having read the articles online. I read the obituaries and the comics and occasionally something else catches my eye that I had missed while reading the online articles. I can remember when the Sunday newspaper was a big deal in our house. We'd read a bit of it before worship in the morning and then save it for reading later in the day. Some weeks, we'd have bits of the paper around for a couple of days while we finished reading and passed articles back and forth. There just isn't that much in the Sunday paper anymore. I usually have seen all I need before breakfast, and it is in the recycling bin early in the day. The magazine in our Sunday paper is called "Parade" and it used to have a few articles worth reading. I also would have a couple of cartoons and I got into the habit of paging through the magazine each week. These days the magazine is very short and mostly advertisements. Most weeks it is not even sorted out from the other ads that make their way to the recycling bin unread.

However, someone commented to me about an article in Parade this week, so I fished it out and read the article. While not great journalism, it did provide a starting point for a



bit of reflection. The article was about the health benefits of feeling awe or being awestruck. Based on a project of the University of California, Berkeley's Social Interaction Lab in which researchers have discovered that shared awe strengthens relationships, the experience of awe soothes frayed emotions, people gain fresh perspectives, and happiness and joy increase.

Researchers documented a decrease in cytokines, a marker of inflammation, in those who frequently experience awe.

I don't mean to be condescending, but . . . duh. I don't think it takes a Templeton grant and three years of study to state the obvious. I've known instinctively the positive effects of the experience of awe for most of my life.

Read Psalm 8. The power of awe has been noted in literature for thousands of years.

Sometimes, however, we must re-discover things that the ancients understood better than our present generation. Because it is difficult to quantify and explain in mathematical terms, religious experience has been discounted by some scientific investigators. I don't really mind the fact that the researchers in Berkeley are reluctant to describe their research in religious terms because I know what they are talking about whether they are comfortable with theological language.

We are made for relationship with God - with that which is beyond.

I had a few moments for recreation yesterday and as is my custom, I was sitting in my kayak at the lake. I was listening the geese who are noisily forming their flocks for migration, and looking at the colors of the shoreline. I grabbed my camera and took a few pictures. The source of my awe was the visual tricks being played by the reflection in the water. It was calm and the glassy surface of the water was producing a visual image of the trees and hills. Except the trees and hills are three dimensional. They have distance and height and depth. The image on the surface of the water was flat. In my kayak, I sit almost exactly at water level, with the boat only a couple of inches below the surface. From where I sat to the shore was completely flat, then the shoreline rose toward the hill beyond. What I saw, however, seemed different from the reality I knew existed. My eyes wanted to report that the boat was pointed uphill, not level and that the inverted images of trees in the water were somehow upside-down.

As I write this morning, I know that I am not able to describe the feeling. That is the thing about being awestruck. You have encountered that which is beyond words and though words are the tools of description that we have we know that there is more than we will be able to say.

As I went through the rest of the day, enjoying yet another gloriously warm and bright fall day in the hills and appreciating the brilliant colors and fresh smells, I kept remembering the feeling of sitting on the lake in the morning.

I have friends who are accomplished with mathematics and theoretical physics and other scientific pursuits and though they do not use religious language in describing their professional studies, there is a tone of voice I have heard when they describe some of their discoveries. Mathematicians are, from time to time, awed by the beauty and precision of complex formulas. Physicists are awed by the intricacies of the inner workings of the universe. I can hear it in their words as they speak. And I know that they, like me, are unable to find words to describe the experience of beauty they experience. They have encountered that which is beyond and experienced that which cannot be described.

There are many ways to experience the in flowing of sensations that overwhelm and cause awe. Hikers achieve a particular vista and see a fresh perspective. Astronauts look back at the earth and see its wholeness. Whale watchers experience a sudden breach of the magnificent mammals and are impressed by their size, power, and agility. Firefighters experience the raw power and life-like behavior of flames. Pilots watch a rainbow form above the clouds. Doctors marvel at the inner workings of the human body. Parents and grandparents are overwhelmed at the sight of a newborn baby.

The gift of awe is readily available for those who take time to ponder this world. Not every gift of awe, however, demands words. While we may try, with prose and poetry to say something significant, there is yet another response to awe that is very appropriate: silence.

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## **October 12, 2016 – Listening**

The last couple of days have involved some times of intense listening for me. As a participant in our Conference's Sacred Conversations on Race, there were others who were sharing their perspective and challenging some old notions that lie deeply ingrained in my identity. As a member of a majority-white community, I grew up with less awareness of race and its impact on people's lives than those who grew up in minority communities. I was fortunate to have parents who talked about race in our home, who invited others into our home and who worked hard to educate us in the complexities of our society and our world.

Still, conversations that seek to bring honesty and openness to difficult topics demand careful listening. Our conversations over the past five years or so have required plenty of careful listening.

Part of careful listening for me, especially in long-lasting relationships, is occasionally admitting that I've gotten something wrong. I try very hard to understand how others see the world and to share their experiences as fully as possible. I try to be compassionate and loving. But there are times when my perspective is a bit skewed, times when I have understood only partially the experiences of another, and times when the assumptions I bring to the conversation are inaccurate. When that occurs, relationship is deepened by a simple apology. "I'm sorry. I was wrong. I will try harder to understand how you see things."

Recognizing my mistakes and misperceptions does something very deep and important in relationships. It returns to my awareness the sense of mystery and wonder in another. Differences are blessings when they are recognized.

The shrillness of the political rhetoric of this most unusual campaign season has convinced me that true leadership doesn't rest in converting others to your way of thinking - of insisting on sameness in thought and interpretation. True leadership thrives in the careful cultivation of uncertainty and questioning. When we are uncertain and when we raise questions, we become open to the world and the possibility of new options and possibilities.

The deep problems of our society are not solved by black-and-white, either-or choices. They are solved by discovering additional options and considering unseen choices. Creative leadership involves becoming open to mystery and newness.

To put it another way, I remember a wise teacher who once said, "If all you do when you pray is talk, you'll never hear what God is saying." Indeed, from a theological point of view, the failure to admit mistakes is a form of idolatry - of failing to admit one's humanity in the face of God's divinity.

In a world where impact is measured in sound bites, 24-hour news cycles and advertising is sold by the second, it is difficult to find enough silence to think. We begin to view the candidates as perpetual talking machines and evaluate them in terms of the words they say, without remembering that true wisdom is cultivated in silence and listening.

I understand I don't have what it takes to be a successful politician. Furthermore, I don't aspire to be one. I do have political opinions. I suspect, however, that I have more to add to the quality of political conversation in our community by listening than by talking.

In his famous book, "Walden," Henry David Thoreau, after writing a chapter on the economics of his venture and stating his reasons for going "to the woods to live deliberately," writes an oft-quoted passage towards the end of the second chapter:

“Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink, I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born.”

I am not called to live the life proposed by Thoreau. I appreciate his invitation to live deliberately. On the other hand, I am not inclined to live separately. Life in community is deeply important to me. Relationships with other people are the focus of my life. Still, there is wisdom to be gained from reading his words.

The first sentence is more of a slogan, almost short enough for a bumper sticker, short enough for Twitter. It is what comes after that sentence that is so inviting to me. Thoreau can see the shallowness of our usual perception of the passage of time and seeks to drink deeper.

I, too, seek to drink deeper, especially of the otherness of this world. I want to go beyond what is visible on the surface and discover the mystery and fresh revelation that is each human soul. I long for a world where the privilege of one's race is not a constant factor in the suffering of another. One of my favorite lines in a traditional liturgy for communion is the prayer that sharing by all will mean scarcity for none. The invitation is to offer all that we have and all that we are to God and trusting the abundance of God's grace.

Achieving those visions requires intense listening. It also requires confession of sin - acknowledgment of mistakes made and making fresh commitments to avoid repeating those mistakes. For it is in the honest admitting of mistakes and misperceptions that we open ourselves to the mystery of seeing things in a new way. The world isn't quite the way we once perceived it. There is more to it: more wonder, more glory, more hope, more faith, more peace, more love. I don't understand everything. The universe and the people in it are filled with mystery. There is much more to be revealed.

And it all starts with listening - really listening. May I discover places in the midst of this season of shouting to listen more carefully than ever.

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## **October 13, 2016 – Counting the Passage of Time**

From time to time when my mind is wandering and wondering about different topics, I'll bring up one of those topics in conversation with my wife or another person who is close to me. For example, somehow yesterday, I was thinking of the origins of tea. It seems to me quite possible that the practice of tea bears a connection to the practice of boiling

water to make it potable. A few leaves fall into the boiling water by accident and people discover that they like the taste and pretty soon they are steeping the leaves on purpose to make tea. Since we know that there are regional differences in the development of the practice of drinking various hot beverages, does it mean that other places had other practices for purifying water. England, for example, imported its tea habit from India. Throughout much of Europe, fermentation was a preferred way of making a beverage safe from bacteriological infection.

At any rate, I was commenting about these thoughts to my wife as we drove to a meeting yesterday morning and she was amused at the way my mind works, to come up with such thoughts and ideas.

It is just the way I think, I guess. I'm always coming up with questions. So, the question for today is this: "Why have we settled on the various ways we have for measuring the passage of time?"

Take the days of the week, for example. The Greeks named the days of the week after the sun, the moon and the five known planets, which were in turn named after the gods Ares, Hermes, Zeus, Aphrodite, and Caronus. They called the week *Then hemerai* "days of the gods." When Roman culture dominated over the Greek, they substituted their equivalent gods for the Greek ones: Mars, Mercury, Jove (Jupiter), Venus, and Saturn. Then, when Germanic peoples invaded at the fall of the Roman empire, they substituted roughly similar gods for the Roman ones, Tiu (Tiwia) got Tuesday, Woden got Wednesday, Thor got Thursday, Freya got Friday. They stuck with Saturn for Saturday for reasons that seem to have been lost to time. And we've finally settled on the Old English "day of the sun" for Sunday.

That is interesting, but the real question is why didn't we substitute Norse and other northern European names for the months of the year? We've stuck with mostly Roman names: Janus, Februus, Mars, Majesta, are gods; Julius (Caesar) and Augustus were emperors. April got its name from a Latin verb *apeirie*, meaning "to open." and the end of the year's months names are based on Roman numbers. *septem* is seven; *octo* is eight; *novem* is nine and *decem* is ten. Why didn't we substitute Norse names when the geopolitics shifted as we did with the days of the week?

Thinking of months named after Roman numbers brings up another quirky question about the passage of time. You'll notice that there are 12 months but the last one is named for the number 10. What is with that? The original Roman calendar had just 10 months, but it was observed that there are 12 lunar cycles in the year. Actually, the lunar cycles don't come out even, so there are really a bit more than 12 cycles per year, but that is another story entirely. Anyway, the Romans added two months to the beginning of the year, Janus and Februus, at the same time as they renamed the previously numbered months of July and August after their emperors.

The reason for having 12 hours in the day and 12 hours in the night, however, is apparently not related to the reason for having 12 months in the year.

24 hours in the day comes from a strange adaptation of an ancient Egyptian decimal (base 10) counting system. The Egyptians devised shadow clocks that were based on ten even divisions. Egypt, being close to the equator, had roughly equal amounts of daylight and dark. When the moon shone brightly the shadow clocks worked well. However, there was roughly an hour of twilight at the beginning and the ending of the day so they added those two hours. The day was thus divided into 10 hours of light and 10 hours of dark with an hour of transition at each change. For some strange reason that counting system stuck.

When it comes to dividing the hours into minutes and the minutes into seconds, however, you must look to a different part of the ancient Mid East. Before the rise of Babylon as a dominant culture, the Sumerians developed a counting system based on their astronomical observations. Like the Egyptians, they divided the day into 12ths then each 12th was broken into 1/360ths called a gesh and each gesh into 240 seconds. It is confusing, but you must understand that the Sumerians and later the Babylonians were fascinated with the number 60 in a similar way that the number 40 became prominent in Biblical writings. The Babylonians further developed the base 60 system and invented the abacus to provide for base 60 calculations. Their system was so complex, that it might not have survived had it been transmitted through memorization only. Therefore, the base 60 counting system was transmitted to future generations through the medium of writing, often making marks in wet clay that subsequently dried and left behind a semi-permanent record.

None of this explains why a 63-year-old man in South Dakota who has a busy day filled with meetings and who needs to be paying attention to the business of running a church and dealing with people who have complex lives and pressing problems would wake up with such thoughts on his mind. After all, I don't really need to know why we count with seconds and minutes. I have a watch and a phone with a digital clock either of which will get me to the meeting of the Altar Guild on time.

There is a fascinating story about how our computers and cell phones keep track of the passage of time, but that, perhaps, is a thought for a different day.

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## **October 14, 2016 – Songs as Poetry**

The Nobel Prize for Literature is a big deal. It isn't just any hack or writer who will be awarded the esteemed honor. And that is the way it should be. The prize should honor distinction and exceptional writing. So, it makes sense that the first songwriter to win the Nobel Prize for Literature is no ordinary troubadour. As one BBC writer put it, "Eminem

and Tupac were never going to be the first songwriters to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.”

I am sure, however, that generations of pundits will be arguing over the decision to award the prize to Bob Dylan. Poets, teachers and literary critics have argued for years that poetry and song lyrics are two completely different genres. Simon Armitage, one of Britain’s most popular poets wrote, in 2008 that songwriters are not poets:

"Or songs are not poems, I should say. In fact, songs are often bad poems. Take the music away and what you're left with is often an awkward piece of creative writing full of lumpy syllables, cheesy rhymes, exhausted cliches and mixed metaphors."

I think that the judgment is inaccurate. For many generations, great poetry has been set to music. The oratorio to Handel’s masterpiece, Messiah, didn’t start out as lyrics to a song, but rather Biblical literature around which Handel wrote music. It was great literature before the song surrounded it.

The debate, however, will continue, with some literary high brows claiming that it was a mistake to consider song lyrics as literature. Some will say that the intention of poetry is different from the intention of a song, but that is a subtle distinction that doesn’t hold up after the passage of time.

I, for one, am thrilled that the Nobel committee has chosen Dylan as the recipient of the award. His lyrics reflect dozens of different moods, sometime witty, sometimes warm, sometimes coldly cynical, sometimes nostalgic. His songs are, in my opinion, highly literary. He can be subtle and funny and clever and profound. He can make you laugh, and he can make you cry. It is exactly what we want from literature.

And there is more. I believe that the quality of Dylan’s work that prompted the prize is the simple fact that he is a consummate storyteller. “Lilly, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts” is much more than just a pop song. Like other Dylan songs, it is long - stretching to nearly nine minutes. And it traces the events leading to the death of Big Jim, a diamond mine owner who is married to the long-suffering Rosemary and having an affair with Lily, a dancer. Lily, in turn is smitten by her former lover, the Jack of Hearts, who is a clever and charming bank-robber. OK my summary doesn’t even begin to tell the story. But a story is told by the song and while some might consider the song to be rather long, it is much shorter than a novel or a television show or a movie. Dylan succeeds in a very poetic fashion to be compact with his language and to pack intense meaning into very few words.

It may not be your style of poetry, but it is pure poetry, nonetheless.

Dylan, of course, doesn’t need me to defend his prize. His life and his songs are the lasting testament to his contribution to the world of literature.

When speaking of song lyrics as poetry, I have heard countless times that Dylan described Smokey Robinson as “America’s greatest living poet.” The problem with that 1965 quote is that it appears that the fact checkers have traced it back to Motown records press officer instead of having originated with Bob Dylan.

Of course, even his name is a bit of a literary tale. Bob Dylan was named Robert Zimmerman when he was born. The stage name he took is from a literary giant, the poet Dylan Thomas. The Welsh poet and writer is author of “Do not go gentle into that good night,” and “And death shall have no dominion,” two poems that will last for generations. I suppose that there are some who believe that Dylan Thomas chose the stage name from the erratic behavior and sometimes drunken appearances by the Welsh poet, but I suspect that more likely there was a genuine appreciation for the poetry that sparked the choice of name.

I suspect that the debate over song lyrics as poetry will continue for many generations. And I am sure that future Nobel committees will award plenty of awards to writers of more traditional forms of literature: novels, nonfiction, and classical poetry.

I can be a bit highbrow when it comes to poetry. I am an online subscriber to Poetry Magazine, and I read poetry from books every morning. I know, however, that over the years far more poetry has slipped into my life through the medium of music. I frequently find myself quoting song lyrics and my family will tell you that I often respond to events of everyday life by singing a few bars from some musical or pop tune. Music has a way of getting into our minds and our souls in a way that makes it easy to retrieve in different moments. It is accessible. The ancients knew this. That is why so many great words have been set to music. The music aids in memorization. Try to get a young child to recite the alphabet without singing and you’ll see what I mean.

Making a distinction between poetry and song lyrics simply doesn’t make sense. Music and words are so intertwined that they are permanently connected in our lives.

My delight in Bob Dylan’s award is probably a statement about my age - and the age I was when I first discovered his music. There is something about teenage years that allows music to make a deep impression. When people ask for “good old hymns,” they usually mean the songs they sang when they were teens and young adults. At any rate, my congratulations go out to Bob Dylan.

Now, if I can only get people to admit that Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land” ranks as a national anthem.

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## October 15, 2016 – Compassion Over the Long Haul

I think there was a time early in my career when I thought that I might be able to help others solve their problems. I studied psychology and counseling and I worked a couple of years as a professional pastoral counselor. I thought of sage advice that might be offered and ways to inspire others to make changes in their lives.

I still believe that compassion is more than just feeling another's pain or sorrow. It must be accompanied by a genuine desire to alleviate the suffering of another to be meaningful. And I seek to be a compassionate person.

I have, however, discovered that there often is little I can do to genuinely help another person. Of course, there are times when gifts of food or shelter do provide much-needed relief in the face of the devastating effects of poverty. I volunteer regularly at the mission, and I contribute to a variety of groups and agencies that provide direct support to needy people. I am also known to reach into my own pocket to help another when I am able.

Often, however, it is simply impossible to fix the problems that cause another's suffering. No matter how much I want to help and no matter how much the other may need help, sometimes it is simply the case that change must come from within. It is one of the hard lessons that family members of addicted persons must learn. You can't make another person change. There are problems that you can't "fix."

What I can offer to others is companionship. I can listen very carefully and try to understand things from the other's perspective. I can offer encouragement and support in ways that empower the other. And, often, what I can do is to simply share the burden and sit with another in the midst of their pain and suffering reminding that person that they are not alone.

It has been a week for listening to people walking some painful journeys. The week opened with news of a death in our congregation. We invested two days in our Conference's "Sacred Conversations on Race," with our Lakota partners, part of which was hearing some painful stories. A mid-week funeral and a few sessions with church members who needed to talk about their problems combined with the experiences of earlier in the week to remind me that there are troubles in this world that are bigger than me. I can't fix all of the problems. I can't stop all of the pain. I can't protect others from suffering.

Still, I don't have to disengage. I can remain in relationship in the midst of this messy, troubled and, yes, sometimes painful world.

And that brings me to another lesson that I have learned from my career as a pastor. I know it sounds selfish, but the truth is that I need to practice good self-care to have the

energy to be present for others. Being who I am and doing the job that I do demands that I sneak away from time to time and paddle a boat on a lake. It requires that I go for a walk and leave the troubles behind for a few moments. I need to read a good book or a good story and listen to some good music from time to time to have sufficient resources for the job of caring for other people.

The last thing a hurting person needs from me is my lame attempts at meeting my own needs. To genuinely help others, I need to be healthy myself. To be truly present with others, I need to have invested enough time and energy to have healthy relationships in my own home.

Last night I prepared a home-cooked meal and after dinner we went downtown and strolled through an art gallery for a little while. I wasn't thinking about the "to do" list at work. I wasn't focused on solving problems for the committees on which I serve. I wasn't paying much attention to the grief and sorrow of those around me. I was just looking at the art and being impressed and amazed at the skill of the artists. I was enjoying reading the short biographies of the artists that were posted near their work. I was making comments about what I like and what impressed me to others who had come to view the art. I was chatting with a few friends who also were enjoying the evening and the art.

It might have been one of the best things I could have done for those who have shared their pain with me in the past week. Rather than being shaped by the pain I have witnessed, I became aware that there is still much beauty in the world. There are still artists whose creativity can inspire. Pain and grief and sorrow and suffering are not the last words on the state of the human experience. We also are creatures of beauty and meaning and purpose.

Those are important reminders in a season of the nastiest political campaigns I can remember. Despite the intense rhetoric and downright mean words that are being exchanged, there are some good people in this world. There are people who care about others. There are people who are called to public service. At its core, a career in politics is not about self-aggrandizement, but about serving others. You could easily forget that truth if you only paid attention to the advertisements or the reports of mainstream media. The inherent goodness of people comes forth most often when you take time to listen and look beyond the differences and disagreements.

There is a lot of burn out in my profession. I know the stories of a lot of dedicated colleagues who finally had to give up. Endurance comes from seeking balance and learning to practice self-care.

Perhaps the most important skill I have learned as a pastor is to go home at the end of the day with work that remains undone.

## **October 16, 2016 – Stocking Up**

For as long as people can remember autumn has been the season for preserving food in temperate climates. In the day of modern supermarkets and food that travels around the world in short times, these practices have faded. Here in Rapid City, we have a seafood market that features the catch of the day. Remember we live more than a thousand miles from any ocean. The airlines fly in fresh fish packed in ice every day to replenish the stocks in the market. We can buy bananas and tomatoes year-round and fresh spinach and lettuce are staples in the grocery store.

Still, there is something inside of us that carries an urge to put up a bit of food when the days begin to shorten, and the night takes on a chill. This year was a banner year for tomatoes for us. We didn't think it would be that way. On July 15 our plants were stripped of their leaves by a hailstorm that lingered and dropped hail for more than a half an hour. Although bruised on the tops, the tomatoes that were on the vines at the time survived and many of them ripened. It took a few weeks, but the plants recovered remarkably well and by mid-October we had hundreds of tomatoes back on the plants. We finally decided, a week ago, to go ahead and clean out the garden as we were seeing frost at nights and covering the plants was becoming a chore. With the busy days and the string of meetings we had last week we ended up bringing the green tomatoes into the house to ripen. Now we're working to process the tomatoes that have ripened while we devise strategies for those that remain in the basement and search the internet for recipes for green tomatoes.

In addition to the tomatoes, we still have a large box of apples from a friend's apple trees. So yesterday I went to the basement and got out our food dryer and loaded up five trays of apples and a single tray of tomatoes. The dryer has been a part of our family for around 30 years now and it is a bit noisier than was the case when it was new. It still works well and within 24 hours the fruit will be ready to pack into bags for winter storage. Dried apples can be reconstituted for apple breads, but we mostly just eat them dried as snacks. They are tasty and nutritious. The dried tomatoes work well in omelets and other cooked dishes. Tomorrow will probably be a day for freezing a few tomatoes for soups and such as well as putting up a few jars of salsa.

Our modest process is nothing compared to the generations who have canned and put-up food for storage. I still encounter people purchasing cases of canning jars and know that there are lots of people who can the summer's bounty as their primary process of preserving food for the winter season.

I remember jars and jars of apple sauce each fall in our home when I was growing up. We rarely make apple sauce these days and rarely eat it. After all, we can buy fresh apples in the store all year round and take advantage of the storage and shipping of the

professional growers to have access to all of the apples we need. My mother also was a good one for putting up lots of chokecherry jelly and syrup for winter use. It was a banner year for chokecherries back home this year and the chokecherries all went to the birds except for those harvested by a wandering bear that came around when they were ripe. We just don't eat much jelly or jam any more. Our lifestyles and food choices have changed with the changes in available foods and the pace of our lives.

Still, there is something comforting about the sound of that noisy fan in the food dryer. It feels satisfying to be putting away a bit of food for the future. Knowing that we will have some snacks in the house when we get hungry is a good feeling.

We keep a basic stock of food in our house. We are not dependent on having to go to the grocery store every day. As recently as three years ago we were snowed in at our house for three days and although we didn't have any electricity, we were at no risk for going hungry. There is always rice and beans to cook and our freezer has a selection of meats that can be cooked. Our kitchen is all electric, so when the power is out, we do our cooking in the garage on our trusty Coleman stove.

Although they are not stormed in, our children living in Olympia, Washington, have been witnessing some intense storms over the past few days. The remnants of a Pacific typhoon have brought winds above 50 mph to the whole northwest. There were plenty of trees down, including trees that fell onto the Interstate, blocking travel in some lanes. And they've had a couple of extended power outages. One day last week our grandson went to school in the dark. Officials thought that power would be restored during the day, but it was still out when it was time for the children to go home. It was a fun adventure for a kindergartener, getting to use flashlights to go to the bathroom and modifying activities so that they could be closer to the windows for light.

We are constantly reminded that the weather is a powerful force, and it is beyond our ability to manipulate or control. Like our forebears, we need to maintain a healthy respect for the forces of nature. It just makes sense to stock up on staple foods and have a plan for dealing with the inconveniences that come with severe weather events.

Besides, stocking up for winter is so ingrained in our upbringing that it feels natural.

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## **October 17, 2016 – Wounds and Blessings**

My father was missing the tips of three of his fingers on his right hand. The loss was the result of two different accidents with the planer on his Shopsmith woodworking tool. I witnessed the second accident; though I was hardly aware that anything had occurred. He calmly powered down the tool, wrapped his hand in a towel and walked out the back door of our house and across the alley to the emergency room of the hospital. We were

working on a science fair project making sample pieces of all of the kinds of woods that were being used in our family's kitchen remodeling project. I later mounted the pieces of wood on a piece of poster board and carefully labeled each one.

The three fingers were shortened to the location of the final joint in the finger. They had no fingernails and after they healed the ends were smooth with a flap of skin pulled over the tips that neatly healed into the rest of the finger. You barely noticed the difference. It didn't seem to limit his ability to do the things he enjoyed. He continued to work and use tools effectively. He shook hands with his customers without embarrassment of causing them discomfort. He could pick up us children and enjoy his grandchildren.

Later, when I had become an adult, he would sometimes report about the challenges of nerve endings that had been lost and others that had been relocated from the sides of these fingers to his tips. His most common symptom is a condition called hypoesthesia. His fingers didn't feel things that they should feel. This was especially true of extremes of temperature. He had to be especially careful when working outdoors in the winter because he could get frostbite in those fingers without knowing that they were cold. They were relatively good at sensing touch, especially if he pushed a bit harder than his other fingers required, but he couldn't gauge temperature with those fingers. Most of this time it wasn't a problem because he could use his other fingers to determine temperature. He wasn't likely to burn those fingers because they probably wouldn't be put into contact with hot objects since he could feel heat with his remaining fingers. However, they were the fingers most distant from his thumb and forefinger with which he did fine motor tasks and because he used them less than the other fingers, they would become colder from working outdoors and sometimes he didn't notice.

Earlier in his injury he had also experienced dysaesthesia - the experience of pain when there is no source for the pain. He would have the sensation that the tips of his fingers were still present, and they might itch or hurt without any reason for either sensation. That seemed to fade with the passage of time as his brain and nerves relearned the shape of his body and the condition of his hands.

Yesterday when participating in a small group at the church, the thought of my father and his hands came to mind briefly. Another person was speaking of grief that comes with the loss of something other than the death of a loved one. I never spoke to my father about whether he experienced grief with the loss of the tips of his fingers. I know that those who lose limbs experience grief over their loss, but perhaps it is a matter of degree - the larger the loss the more acutely the pain of grief is felt.

As a writer, I often think about words and how we use them to describe our human experience. As a theologian and a student of the bible, I often reflect on the challenges of translation from one language to another and the possibility of miscommunication of important concepts when translation takes place. The poet Gregory Orr points out that while in English "to bless" is to confer divine benevolence on someone or something, in

French the verb “blesser” means to wound. The two are linked, he suggests, beyond logic.

When I think of the process of grief, however, I might take issue with Orr’s conclusion that the link is “beyond logic.” It seems to me that the connection might be more logical than it first appears. To receive God’s benevolence, God first needs to get under our skin. We must allow God to become a part of our lives before we can know God’s goodness. Sometimes it is at the point of injury where we allow God to become a part of who we are.

My former teacher Granger Westberg always referred to grief as a good process. Even though it involves pain, grieving connects us to other people and to God in ways where we previously were separated. Sometimes we must go through the experience of pain to discover the blessing that is present.

Two gestures, which have become habits for me, provide a constant reminder of how blessed I am. The first is the practice of touching each finger of my hand to my thumb. I start with my pinkie and proceed to my ring finger, middle finger, and pointer, each in turn. The sensation in the tips of those first three fingers remind me that I can feel something that my father could not feel after his accident. I am blessed to have fingertips with all their sensations and abilities on all five of my fingers on each hand.

The second gesture, like the first in meaning, is placing the tips of each finger to the tip of the corresponding finger on the other hand. I frequently hold my hands in that position when I am listening carefully. Often, I am unaware of the gesture until something makes me look at my hands or I allow my mind to wander from the intensity of careful listening. Somehow this brief reminder of my wholeness helps me to be wholly present to another person.

Perhaps our wounds are also blessings when we allow our vulnerability to show and face the world as real human beings, flaws and all.

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## **October 18, 2016 – About the Beard**

I’m not a big fan of television, but it is impossible to escape knowing a little bit about television in our culture. In the first place, television is omnipresent. Waiting rooms from the shop that works on my car to the doctor’s office all have televisions. The pharmacy even has a television. Every living room in every nursing home in town has a television, usually with the volume turned up above my comfort level. There are televisions in hospital rooms, and it is common for homes to have more television sets than bedrooms. We still buck the trend with a lone television set in our basement that is not hooked up to cable.

But I do watch a bit of television on my computer from time to time, primarily clips instead of complete programs. And yes, I do know the names of some of the personalities who are famous because of their roles in television.

I learned about the fact that David Letterman has grown a full beard, however, not from television, but from a piece in the New York Times. Judging from the photographs in that piece, he looks considerably different than was the case when he appeared clean-shaven in a suit and a tie for thousands of evenings of late-night television. According to the article, Mr. Letterman said, "I just got tired of shaving every day, but then it became something else, and I'm not quite sure what it became. The beard is a good reminder to me that that was a different life. I'm hopeful that I will either find something else, or something else will be presented to me."

I guess I'd have to do the opposite if I were to go for a completely different look upon retirement. Although I sported a beard on my wedding day 43 years ago, I was clean shaven for the rest of that summer as I worked in a bakery. However, that fall, when I returned to school, I grew the beard again and I have not shaved it off since. My children and grandchildren have never seen me without a beard. The members of the churches I serve have never seen me without a beard. After 43 years, I guess I don't know what I'd look like without a beard.

It isn't that I'm opposed to shaving, though I'm sure the skin under that beard is tender and would be irritated by shaving. In fact, the style of beard that I wear requires trimming. I keep part of my cheeks and my neck shaved. It has become so much a part of my appearance that I don't give it much thought.

I remember a couple of factors in my first growing of a beard. I thought that there was a certain academic look to a beard. I was trying to fit into college and a lot of my professors sported beards. I guess I thought that it made them look wise. Then there was the simple fact that I could grow a beard. Shaving isn't a thing that children must contemplate. I was college age before I was able to grow a beard and the first beard was a bit thin. I have sported with a longer beard at times, but I prefer the look of my beard trimmed. It really grows fast - at least twice as fast as the hair in my head. If I let it go six weeks between a good trimming I begin to look like Santa Claus. I can trim it myself, but when I go to the barber shop the results are straighter and look better.

There is quite a bit of religious symbolism associated with beards. Sikhism, Islam, and some sects of Judaism require men to keep beards. I don't belong to a group that requires beards and I'm not sure of the religious symbolism of beards, but most depictions of Jesus show him with a beard, so I have to admit it is a bit of a factor in my own faith tradition. Historically there have been sects of Christianity where beards were banned, especially among clergy, but those bans have been relaxed during my lifetime. Orthodox Christian priests almost always sport beards.

The beard is a sign of being an adult male. We're the ones who can grow beards. When I first grew my beard, I was working summers for my father delivering machinery and I would get a fair amount of teasing from the men of the Hutterite colony where we often made trips. It seems that in that colony men don't grow beards until they have become a father, but from that point onward they constantly sport a beard.

The truth is that I have trouble associating much deep meaning with a beard. It seems to me to be more of a fashion statement than anything else. It is a choice that has very little social consequence in our society. There are many different styles of facial hair among men.

I have a young friend who likes to sport a wide variety of different looks. Sometimes he will grow out a full beard and often he will grow his hair longer when he is sporting a beard. Then, one day, he'll shave off the beard and get his hair cut short. He has, at least once, shaved all the hair off of his head. He just likes having different appearances and getting different reactions from family and friends. I make it a point to comment and react to his sudden changes and he always responds with a smile and a laugh. He enjoys making changes and he enjoys having people notice.

I'm not quite that adventurous. I guess I'm more shaped by habit. I don't want to be surprised by the image in the mirror first thing in the morning.

So, unlike David Letterman, I have no plans for changing my appearance when I finally decide to retire. I'll probably keep wearing the same clothes and, other than the slow process of aging, which has already turned my beard white, I doubt that I'll make many adjustments in appearance.

You never know, however. It would just take me a few minutes to shave it off.

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## **October 19, 2016 – An Observation and an Inquiry**

There are things about my life that continue to surprise me. One is that when I get tired, I don't sleep as well. It seems counterintuitive. Last night was a good example. I worked hard and straight through the day. With meetings at 8:30, 10:30; 12 noon, 1:30, 6:00 and 7:00, I didn't take any breaks in my day. I caught a sandwich on my way to my noon meeting and grabbed a snack before my 6 pm meeting, but didn't have a proper meal during the day, either. By the time I got home in the evening, I was ready to wind down and prepare for bed. But after a couple of hours of sleep, I was wide awake and ended up getting out of bed and reading for a while.



I wish I could teach myself to simply sleep when I am tired. I've got a full day today, too. What seems to happen is that my brain gets going with all kinds of thoughts and I wake with ideas in my head and kind of want to keep thinking. Sometimes the thoughts in my head have a direct connection with the work I am doing. As often, however, they are wrestling with bigger philosophical and theological questions that will remain for years and, while fun to contemplate, do not need to be "solved."

So, once again, I have been wondering about the classic philosophical debate over the nature of mathematics. The question to consider boils down to this: Are the laws of mathematics fundamental realities about the nature of the universe, or are they human inventions that come from our imaginations to explain the phenomena we observe? For a specific example: Did Einstein invent  $E=mc^2$ , or did he discover it embedded in the fabric of reality, waiting to be seen?

How that question is answered reveals a fundamental assumption of science and influences how scientific inquiry proceeds. If, on the one hand you believe that basic principles such as mathematics are the product of human imagination over generations of inquiry, you conclude that there are multiple ways of interpreting our perception of reality. A fundamentally different system of counting and measuring might produce a fundamentally different reality. On the other hand, if you believe that the universe has immutable laws that can be discovered and, once discovered remain constant, you must come up with other ways of explaining exceptions and inconsistencies. A common practice among physicists, for example, is to question our powers of observation. To a particle physicist, the walls of this room are not really solid, and their color is not fixed. The walls are made up of moving particles and my assumption that they are solid and of a particular color is not a matter of reality, but rather a projection of my mind based on sensory input from my hands and eyes.

The debate can become esoteric, but they have real-world consequences. The Large Underground Xenon experiment (LUX) that is currently running at the Sanford Underground Laboratory in the former Homestake Mine in Lead, South Dakota, cost \$10 million to build. It has not discovered any evidence of dark matter. Those who believe that the theories of dark matter are not projections of human imagination, but rather quests for observable reality, are in the process of securing funds to build a much larger and much more expensive detector that will render the current \$10 million model obsolete.

In perspective, \$10 million would build over 125 Habitat for Humanity homes, which in turn would produce sufficient mortgage revenue to eliminate poverty housing in the State of South Dakota within 25 years. Of course, the funds available for scientific research are not available for addressing poverty housing, but it reveals another philosophical debate that, in my mind, is directly related to the question of mathematics.

The fundamental formula of Christianity can be summed up in a short quote from one of the letters of John that appear in our Bible: God is love. Apply the same question. Is the statement that God is love a projection of the human imagination - a manifestation of the best of human intentions and understandings? Or is it a reflection of a fundamental reality that is within the universe discovered by generations and generations of people seeking to understand the very real experiences of being human?

Is love a puff of emotion or a necessary requirement for human existence?

You probably already know where I land in that debate. To my sometimes atheist-sounding scientist friends I submit that love is as fundamental to the organization of the universe as mathematics. When they contend that without mathematics, I don't exist, I counter that without love no one exists. Either love is real, or nothing is real.

I've decided to stick with love.

But that is obvious. You can tell what I think by my profession and the work I do every day. You can tell what I think by the sermons I preach. If you've been reading my blog before you knew that about me before you started to read this morning's post. And I know it about myself. Yet I allow those thoughts to disrupt my sleep when I am tired.

The reason, of course, is that is literally that important. Love is more important than any of yesterday's meetings even though some of them involved discussions that affect dozens of people's lives. One meeting, of our Local Outreach to Survivors of Suicide (LOSS) Team, is a place where lives literally hang in the balance. Love is more important to saving lives and preventing suicide than the organization of the team, however. If we forget that, we will fail to succeed in the work to which we are called.

Love is more important than the church budget, its capital projects, or the slate of nominees for leadership positions.

Love is more important than the hymns for worship in upcoming weeks or the structure of the Black Hills Association.

At least, when I wake in the night with ideas dancing in my mind, I know that I haven't forgotten that fundamental truth.

Love is at the core of our being. Without it we do not exist.

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## October 20, 2016 – Surprised by God’s Presence

The differences between the tenses in Biblical Hebrew and contemporary English make real challenges for translation. It isn’t just a matter of translating words to words, which alone is a challenge; it is a matter of a mindset that is reflected in the language we use. Our words express the way we understand the world. There can be some debate about whether it functions the other way around. Does our language affect the way we understand the world? We might find ourselves in a “chicken and egg” kind of argument with no way of resolving the debate. What can be said is that language and culture are so closely intertwined in human perception that language can be used as a reliable measure of cultural understanding.

What got me to thinking about this particular subject was a conversation I had recently with an honest person of faith who sometimes struggles with whether or not God exists. I’m not talking about an evangelical atheist who is constantly trying to convince others to reject the notion of God. This person continues to practice faith in a meaningful way, but sometimes is uncertain about God’s presence, and often experiences something akin to the absence of God.

Theologians sometimes refer to that kind of doubt as a dark night of the soul. The term is often incorrectly attributed to the 16th-century Spanish Poet and Roman Catholic mystic Saint John of the Cross. John of the Cross, however, doesn’t ever use that term. It is, however, the title given to a poem he wrote which describes the journey of a soul leaving its human body in search of union with God. It is hardly a poem grounded in existential doubt, and John of the Cross wrote two book-length commentaries on the poem which also demonstrate deep faith in God.

Whatever you call it, however, genuine doubt is not an enemy of faith, and it is common during a life of faith. Most famously, some doubts recorded by Saint Teresa of Calcutta clearly illustrate that mental questioning and doubts are, in fact, quite compatible with a life of deep faith and service.

Back to the problem of translation. One of the foundational stories about God’s identity from our Bible comes from the Book of Exodus. When Moses encounters God at the burning bush, he rightly asks God, who he is. Or at least he enquires of the voice that comes from the bush what its identity is. The answer comes in three Hebrew words - actually two with one repeated: “Hayah asher hayah.” The phrase is probably most known by the English mistranslation in the King James version of the Bible: “I am that I am.” The Revised Standard version doesn’t get it any better, translating it, “I am who I am.” Both have God instructing Moses to tell the people of Israel, “I am has sent me to you.”

Here is where tense throws off the translation. Most contemporary scholars agree that a more accurate translation would be “I will be who or how or where I will be.”

The difference may be subtle, but it is substantial.

It may only be possible to talk about God if one is constantly aware that God is a part of our future as much as a part of our past. And God isn't a fixed concept that can be known or possessed or fully understood. God, by the very nature of God, is constantly surprising us. And God is constantly appearing in places where we might not expect to find God.

Whenever someone talks about God with absolute certainty, as if God could be fully known, you can be certain that they aren't talking about God. That includes those who try to argue against the existence of God. What they claim doesn't exist may in fact not exist. It just isn't God that they are talking about.

This is an especially important thing for those of us who work within the institution of the church to remember. To put it simply, God is bigger than religion. God is more expansive than the institutions of religion. Even though we long for fellowship with those who are outside of the church, even though we try our best to keep our doors open and to learn the practice of hospitality, we must never forget that we don't hold a corner on God's presence. When we open our hearts and minds, we are quick to discover God in all kinds of people and events and connections and communities that lie beyond the normal definitions of church.

"I will be who or how or where I will be."

It not only means that the people of Israel will come to know God independently of Moses' recounting of the stories of his experiences. It also means that we will discover God in the lives of those who have rejected most of the trappings of traditional religion.

It may be tough for a preacher to take, but God may be as present in the utterances of a frustrated sports fan on a Sunday morning as in the words of my sermon despite the years of education, training and practice that lie behind my preaching. God is very good at surprising us that way.

God's answer to Moses is also an important lesson to us as we engage in conversation with those of different religions. We must be open to God's presence wherever God may be found. And, it seems to me, that it is very possible that God takes delight by letting us discover a trace of God's presence in the peacefulness of a Buddhist monk, or in the hospitality of Sikh practitioners, or in the graciousness of Hindu life.

We too often arm ourselves with John 14:6 in which Jesus said, "no one comes to the Father but by me." We want to interpret that to mean that you have to be a Christian to know God, instead of a declaration that Jesus Christ is everywhere that God is and that

Jesus, too can surprise faithful Christians who think they have a corner on the Messiah by being present in the least expected locations and practices of faith.

I find that my faith thrives on discussions with those who doubt the existence of God, for amazingly, God's presence seems to manifest itself in the honesty of their questions and the genuineness of their conversation.

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## **October 21, 2016 – Spiritual Exercise for Endurance**

Yesterday, at a routine meeting of an organization where I volunteer, I discovered that a colleague will begin an emergency medical leave today. From today to at least the end of the year, he will be away from his job and out of town in the home of his mother seeking to restore his health under the care of a team of doctors and medical specialists. The list of his medical problems is long and I'm sure I don't know all of them, but they include hypertension, sleep apnea, tachycardia, and panic attacks. This is a young and vibrant person decades younger than I who has accomplished much and is widely recognized as a leader. His career has been one of constant promotion and increasing responsibility.

On the other hand, he does work for an organization that has a decades-long reputation for hiring young and burning out its employees. Although he has not yet entered his forties, he is one of the most senior employees. Few people work for the organization for a decade and those who remain longer are seen as the exception.

You can't of course, blame health problems on a single source. Our physical health is complex. The diseases with which he is struggling are influenced by genetics, diet, lifestyle, stress, and dozens of other factors. It would be wrong for me to jump to conclusions about the causes of or appropriate treatments for his distress.

I do, however, see some things in his life that make me think there are a few lessons I could teach my younger colleague. I understand he won't be turning to me for advice and that he will receive care from other sources. Still, it got me to thinking. We share a sense of dedication and both of us have been generally blessed with high levels of energy. Neither of us is a slave to the clock and both are willing to do what it takes to get the job done. Both of us have a sense that one way to solve problems is to buckle down and work harder. Probably the main difference between us is that I am older, and I somehow was blessed by not encountering illness at a younger age.

Endurance in a helping profession demands a discipline of healthy boundaries. I am blessed that my denomination requires recurrent boundary training for all its authorized ministers. We take time, on a regular basis, to look at the complex ethical issues that surround the practice of ministry. We are reminded regularly that self-care is critical to

those who work in our profession. We develop plans that help us avoid turning to those we serve to meet our personal needs. I didn't learn that working harder and putting in more hours made me less, not more, efficient the first time I took a boundary class. It took repetition for me to internalize that lesson. I still struggle with its application.

It isn't only the health of the individual that is threatened by a lack of boundaries. It is also the well-being of those who are served. Clergy occupy positions of incredible power in the lives of those we serve. A betrayal, whether intended or not, can cause lifelong scars for the victim.

I would also counsel my colleague on the development of honest personal spiritual practices. Sometimes leaders are afraid to allow any vulnerability to show. Some spiritual leaders invest incredible energy in masking doubt and only speaking of their beliefs to others. The reality is that everyone experiences doubt. Several years ago, I heard a quote from Anne Lamott that sums it up well: "The opposite of faith is not doubt, the opposite of faith is certainty."

Real leaders are aware that making deep connections with those we serve requires our humanity, not our perfection. That is one of the most amazing things about the Christian faith. For us, God comes to us in the form of a human being - finite, subject to all the limitations of humanity. We, who follow, are not required to be perfect. We are not required to be God. We can be honest with our vulnerabilities and, yes, our doubts. It is in our doubts that we discover our need of faith. The burden of always having to be certain is not a mark of leadership. It is a demonstration that we are not being honest about our doubt. Often, spiritual leaders who are constantly certain mask their doubt not only from their followers, but also from themselves.

Daily, and sometimes hourly, prayer and study provide a space to wrestle with thoughts and engage doubts. In the context of my practices, I am free to be a follower and not required to be a leader. I am constantly reminded that ours is a relationship of many generations, and it doesn't all fall on my shoulders. For me regularly engaging Moses, who experienced doubt in the wilderness and Jeremiah who questioned his call to be a prophet and Jesus who struggled with his destiny in the garden reminds me that I belong to a long tradition and our people have a long future. The problem of the moment may be intimidating, but it is not the defining moment of my life or the turning point of religious history.

However, as I said, my friend is not turning to me for advice and there is no reason he should do so. What I can do is what I did yesterday and have already done today. I can pray for him. I can bring him into my consciousness and remind myself that I trust God to work in his life. And I can let my friend know that I am praying. As life has taught me on many occasions: When you can't find the words for your prayers, it is good to know that you aren't the only one praying.

## **October 22, 2016 – Pet Peeves are Generally Petty**

My father was an early riser. Generally, he would get up at 4:30 in the morning and would get to work quickly. My parents kept a home office and often did bookwork from 5 to 6 am while we were sleeping. The days he went directly to the airport or his shop to complete tasks and plan for the day. Family was a priority, and he did close his business for an hour at noon to have dinner together. His shop closed at 5 pm and most days he was home by 6 pm for supper together. It wasn't uncommon for him to bring a customer, salesman, or other business associate to dinner at noon. My mom got used to setting an extra place on short notice. I can remember many an evening when he would return to the shop to help a customer obtain needed parts or solve a problem for someone who was traveling.

I can also remember him complaining about "banker's hours" In our town the bank didn't open until 9 am and it closed promptly at 5 pm. Unlike my father's business that was always open on Saturdays, the bank never was. Those hours often seemed like an inconvenience to my father. He would want to make a deposit or handle another transaction at the edges of his workday. The problem was that the bank wasn't open at the beginning or the end of my father's work hours. As I child, I remember thinking that bankers must be lazy because of the complaints that I heard from my father.

My children have no conception of banker's hours. They expect and employ banking services at their own convenience 24 hours per day. Neither think of going to a bank to transact business. They do most of their business online and, on the rare occasion when they need cash, they turn to an automatic teller machine. Computers have practically eliminated any need for them to do their banking directly with a human being.

Of course, automation is coming to a lot of other jobs as well. According to the American Trucking Association there are 3.5 million professional truck drivers in the United States. Each driver is allowed to drive up to 11 hours in a 14-hour period providing there is a 10-hour break between those 14-hour periods, effectively meaning they can drive up to 11 hours per day. With two drivers and an appropriate sleeper on the truck, the driving can cover more hours. However, experiments are being conducted with autonomous vehicles. Right now such vehicles are being operated in experimental modes only with professional drivers in the cab following the existing hours of service rules. Most experts agree that once the safety of computer-driven trucks is established we will see driverless trucks transporting goods. The computer will not have hours of service rules and except for time to fuel, unload and load the trucks will be running around the clock.

There is enough automation that we have grown to expect services to be available whenever we want to use them. We shop online at all hours of the day and night. When

I am planning a trip, I can purchase tickets and make reservations whenever I want to do so. I can go to the post office web site and have my mail held without needing to observe any office hours. I can also purchase and print US postage from any computer equipped with a printer at any hour of the day or night.

As a result of all of this, I've grown to expect that kind of service from lots of different businesses.

Of course, it doesn't always work.

We divided our vacation into three blocks of time this year. Each time I went to our newspaper's web site to place a vacation hold on the delivery of the print edition of the newspaper. Each time I got the same result. I find the appropriate web page, log on, fill out a form with all the necessary information (although it isn't clear why a telephone number is required information for an online request), select the dates I want delivery suspended, and submit the form. Every time I have done that in the past year, the web site flashes a box that says, "We're sorry our system is unable to complete your request at this time. Please call (it gives the phone number) during office hours (it gives the office hours). In the scheme of my life, this is a minor frustration. A web site that doesn't work isn't going to ruin my day. It is, however, a sign that the newspaper is unable to keep up with the pace of change in our world.

Admittedly, it has not been easy for newspapers to meet the technology challenge. Many papers, like our local one, were slow to get into the internet distribution of the news. The web site for our local newspaper is slow to have current news and is awkward to navigate when they finally get the news posted. There are way too many popup ads and many of those ads take over the entire screen rather than just a portion of it. There are dozens of "hover" ads on news stories, so if you leave your cursor in the wrong location for a few seconds, the screen changes to an advertisement and you must re-navigate to the story you want to read. As I write this morning seven of the top ten articles on the home page of the newspaper's site are more than 24 hours old. Because the site ranks news stories by popularity rather than relevance, it is hard to find things that are genuinely news.

That list of complaints is added to the fact that their customer service pages are less than optimal to make using their web site a challenge. This would be forgiven if the print edition were still a first-class newspaper. Of course, like print papers around the world, it simply isn't up to the standards of a few years ago. The radical decrease in staff at the newspaper means that machines check spelling and grammar, and they don't do a very good job at that task yet.

Just as I can remember my father complaining about banker's hours, an issue that simply doesn't exist for my children, I'm pretty sure my grandchildren would find my



complaints about the newspaper to be completely irrelevant. They probably don't even know what is meant by the term newspaper.

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## **October 23, 2016 – Access Sunday 2016**

This morning, in partnership with the Black Hills Association and the South Dakota Conference of the United Church of Christ our congregation will commission Ben Anderson as minister of disability education and advocacy. It is a formal acknowledgement of a process that has been going on in our congregation for many years and Ben is joining a long line of people who have worked for accessibility and elimination of barriers.

The work of making our church accessible to all didn't start in this generation. I've heard the stories of church pioneers who insisted on a church built on a single level back in the 1950's before anyone had imagined the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). I can name a long list of leaders who contributed to making our church building what it is today. The truth, however, is that there is still a lot of work that needs to be done. It is a process that will last long beyond the span of our lives.

A few examples from the life of our church serve as illustrations of why this work demands long-term commitment:

Back in the 1950's one of the big advocates for accessibility in our building was a man named Pete Melgren. He had a daughter who had suffered from polio and it was important to him that the church be a place where a person who uses a wheelchair for mobility could navigate. His faithfulness in meeting after meeting with the architect resulted in the design of the building we now have. He was proud of the building and his accomplishments. Pete was a plumbing contractor who also provided crews to do some of the actual work of building. The building was dedicated in 1959 - before standards had been established for accessibility for those with wheelchairs. One of the biggest remodeling projects in the building was the construction of new bathrooms because the original bathrooms didn't have the physical space to provide accessibility. The plumbing contractor couldn't envision the bathrooms that would be needed.

Bill Staton was another leader and advocate for accessibility. Upon his death, his family and friends provided memorial funds that allowed for the installation of the first power-operated door at the main entrance to the church. His widow and children routinely commented to me how pleased Bill would have been with that power door, operated with a large round button, to provide access to the church. It is a wonderful device, but it doesn't provide complete access to the building. Once inside that front door, there is a second row of doors that remain without a power operator. We deal with that challenge by leaving those doors wide open most of the time, but dream of the day when they too

can be opened by someone who lacks the physical strength to push and/or pull the large glass doors.

Speaking of doors, our new ADA compliant bathrooms have doors that are a physical barrier to some people. We did so much right in designing the bathrooms, but failed to recognize that opening the door can be a real challenge to a person using a wheelchair. Furthermore, we have no private bathroom for those who need assistance. Construction on our family access bathroom is slated for January of 2017, but in the meantime, there are real challenges for those who need assistance.

Also on the list of capital projects to be completed in the next three years is a vertical access lift to allow those living with disabilities to access our choir loft. As our present choir illustrates, using canes or a walker to get around is no barrier to singing in the choir. The steps up to the choir loft, however, are a different matter. The resilience and strength of our choir members is routinely tested, but we know that access can be improved.

And when we finish the current list of projects, we still will have barriers in our building. As Nels Dyrdaahl taught us, although we have pew cutouts to allow those with wheel chairs to sit with their families in worship, access to those cutouts requires going in the center doors and up the middle aisle then around the front of the pews and back down the outside aisles because the doors providing access to the outside aisles are a fraction of an inch too narrow for some brands of power wheelchairs.

It is obvious to any observer that a person using a wheelchair cannot access the chancel, pulpit and communion table. Although we can envision a ramp to provide that access, it isn't on a current list of projects.

Our west entrance, which provides access to our preschool has no power openers on the outside doors and the space between the inner and outer door is too small to allow the swing of the door and a wheelchair. The solution will be an opener that can open two doors at once.

Even if we were to eliminate all of the physical barriers, our work would not be done. Less obvious, but just as real, are the psychological barriers that make our church an intimidating environment for those suffering from certain psychological illnesses. Our awareness of and attention to the ways we use language, the listening skills we employ, and our understanding of mental illness require constant vigilance and careful attention.

Becoming a church that is accessible to all is a long process of education and awareness. Work will remain when this generation passes the reins of leadership to the next. A friend's use of language has guided me in this process. He referred to those of us who do not have visible disabilities as "temporarily-abled." The term reminds us that we all will suffer forms of disability in the span of our lives. This is not now, nor has it

ever been about “us and them.” It has always been about who we are and our efforts to realize that disability education and advocacy benefits everyone.

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## **October 24, 2016 – A Week of Vacation**

When we accepted our first call to the ministry, there was some conversation about the amount of vacation time that we would be afforded. The standard at the time, as it is now, was four weeks of vacation each year. I hadn't thought about it very much but was encouraged by the conference minister that the amount of time was appropriate. That same Conference Minister had given similar advice to the churches who were seeking a new pastor. Their previous practice had been to shut down and simply not have church at all during the month of August. Since we were starting our ministry in July, it didn't make any sense at all to me to simply stop having worship so early in our time of ministry. I understood that it was a farming community, and that August is a very busy month for the farmers, but I also knew that harvest can be unpredictable and other months can be as busy. Also, many of the families were ranching families whose schedules were less dependent on grain harvest. We ended up working for an entire year before we took any vacation, and when we did take vacation, we made careful plans for worship to continue in our absence. The pattern was set in our relationship with those churches and continued for seven years until we were called to Idaho.

At the interview with our Idaho congregation, there was more substantive talk about vacation. Savvy urban employers who were members of the church knew that four weeks of vacation was uncommon and wondered at the expense for the church of having its primary employees absent for such an amount of the year. Having established the pattern of vacation in the previous call and knowing the stress that comes with the job, I was reluctant to give up any of that vacation time. I suggested that the committee consider the fact that when not on vacation I worked every weekend. How many of you would trade your weekends off for an additional two weeks of vacation? I also pointed out how seldom a minister even gets two days in a row off, let alone a three-day weekend, something that is common in other employments. We agreed to a schedule of one week's vacation earned for each three months of service.

Moving into our current call, there once again was little talk of vacation. The search committee was quick to accept the same amount of vacation that my predecessors had taken.

Still, I find myself occasionally apologizing for vacation time I take. When our children were very young, we often took at least one week's vacation in the winter and saved some for summer. When they were in school, we took most of our vacation in the summer. Now that we are officially empty nesters, we tend to take our vacation in several blocks. This year we took one week in the spring, two in the summer and are

taking one week now. Regardless of the amount of time that we have taken, some members of the congregation notice that we have taken three vacations this year, something that very few working people are able to do.

While it is true that there are families in our congregation who have short amounts of time off for vacation, and who see four weeks of vacation as a luxury they might never afford, there are very few members of the congregation who consistently attend worship four weeks in a row. Most of the members of our congregation who are regular and rarely miss worship are retired. I have been especially aware of this in the last couple of years as I have been singing with the choir. In the two months that our choir has been singing this fall, there are only a small number who have made every rehearsal and every Sunday's anthem. We've had choir members in Alaska, on fishing trips to Montana, in Ireland, in California, New Mexico, and in half a dozen other cities in our state. There are several choir members who have had several unexplained and unexpected absences. It can be frustrating for the choir director to not know what kind of choir he will have every week.

It isn't just the choir. We have no Sunday School teachers that have been present five weeks in a row. In fact, we no longer recruit Sunday School teachers to serve as solo leaders. We have to double-recruit and have substitutes lined up on top to maintain a consistent program.

Of course, just because people are not at church doesn't mean that they are on vacation. There are lots of jobs that require working on Sundays. On the other hand, most of the patrol deputies in our Sheriff's department, an organization that must be fully staffed every day of the year, work four ten-hour days each week and have three days off. Three days off each week! It is a luxury I cannot imagine. To be honest, I can't imagine what it would be like to work only 40 hours a week. My life just isn't that way.

I don't think that I am complaining. I'm mostly justifying to myself the simple fact that I'm on vacation this week. It is part of my routine for switching gears. I spend a few days worrying about the work that is left undone in my absence. I know I will be doing it when I return. I also know that some jobs simply won't get done.

Still this time is very important to me. One of the things that I try to model for the people I serve is a healthy balance of Sabbath and work. I also try to model healthy family relationships. Having adult children and grandchildren is a relatively new venture for us, so we are feeling our way and learning the ropes. But I know I am eager to visit our daughter and son-in-law and will be excited to see them today. And I know that I need a break from the alarm clock and the pace of my usual work week.

I pray I can accept this week of vacation for what it is: a gift and a blessing.

## **October 25, 2016 – Father-Daughter**

I already had three sisters when I was born. There are some gaps in the ages in our family, so my sisters were 14, 7 and 2. My first brother was born when I was 2 years old and before long, we were sharing a room. Being born into a household where there is already a teenage resulted in my always having a sense of specific boundaries in the relationships between men and women. There were some specific prohibitions that we learned to observe. The bedrooms of my sisters were out of bounds. And we learned that a boy was never, repeat NEVER, allowed to look in a woman's purse. We all, regardless of our gender, had our privacy respected in my family. As a result, I grew up with a sense of mystery about the differences between men and women.

Ours was not, however, a household with rigid boundaries when it came to tasks and work. My parents were business partners, and my mother was very involved in the day to day operation of my father's businesses. She understood the inner workings of the business and we all knew that her work for the company was as important to our family as her work in the home. My folks, did, however, divide up chores along somewhat traditional lines. My mother was the better and more often cook. She did the baking and the laundry and much of the cleaning inside of the house. My father took the lead with home repairs and the garden. He also worked long hours outside of the home. As the oldest boy in the family, I was often allowed to go to work with my father and therefore escaped some of the household chores that fell to my sisters and instead had small jobs and chores around the shop more than they.

My wife grew up in a family that had only daughters. Three sisters who remain very close to each other even though they have lived in different cities all their adult lives. Growing up in the age of the telephone, the phone is still their primary choice when it comes to keeping in touch. They also exchange email and connect through social media, but the phone is still very important in their relationships.

In other ways, my family and that of my wife were very similar. We grew up in the same denomination of Christianity with parents who were very involved in the local church and served in the Conference. We met at church camp, which was a special and important place in our upbringing. Our families were of similar socio-economic background and both of our fathers had grown up on North Dakota farms. Education was important to both families and we grew up with the expectation that we would graduate from college. It was in college where we refined and strengthened our relationship. We were college students when we married.

That sense of familiarity and mystery has been an important dynamic in our relationship throughout our adult lives.

In the mystery workings of God's creation, we were blessed to have two children: one boy and one girl. And it has been a deep blessing. I treasure my relationships with our children. I know that it is a bit cliché, but there is something very, very special about the bond between me and my daughter. It was absolutely love at first sight when I first held her and as she grew up, we had lots of opportunities to do special father-daughter activities. Her mother and brother liked to sleep in a bit in the morning and we would often get up and have some special time before the others got out of bed. When she was a schoolgirl we would ride our bikes to a local restaurant for breakfast on Saturday mornings from time to time. When she was a teen, we would take a canoe to the lake for an early morning paddle, singing at the top of our voices to the songs on the car stereo as we came and went.

There have been, of course, tensions and differences. Her early years of dating were a bit tough on me and I found myself biting my tongue a few times. I was less than impressed by some of the young men she met. When she went away to college she suffered from some depression, and I wasn't completely aware of how hard that time was for her until later. We were always close, nonetheless. When she married, I was very taken with her choice and her husband is a wonderful man whose love and care for her is evident and strong.

So, when our son became a father, first of a son and then of a daughter, I was delighted. I had so enjoyed having both a son and a daughter that I wanted him to share the experience. Now that our granddaughter is 2, I delight in watching their growing relationship. The uniqueness of each of his children means that he has developed a different style of playing with each. Some of the toys are the same, but the games are often different. His son, being older, has the capacity to delight our son with words and they enjoy playing word games, making up silly rhymes. His daughter expresses herself less in words at this point, though she is currently going through an explosion of language learning. She loves to tickle her father and elicit a giggle.

I know how fleeting these moments of childhood are. As we visit our daughter and son-in-law and feel the comfortable hospitality of their home, I am deeply aware of how quickly the years have passed. They will go quickly for our grandchildren as well. What doesn't change is the love and the joy of family. I am filled with gratitude and reminded how much it restores my spirit to spend time with our adult children.

The father-daughter bond is truly one of the great wonders of this world.

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October 26, 2016 – Sounds of This Place



As consciousness seeps into my mind, I listen to the world and remember where I am. The sounds in this place are different than home. They are different from any place that I have lived. I've known the sound of the wind in the pine trees for decades now. Wind blowing through these trees, however, sounds much different. The sound reminds me of the season. It is autumn. There is a rich carpet of fallen leaves coating everything several inches deep. The dry leaves swirl and blow around in the wind. There are, however, still plenty of leaves on the trees. I grew up with cottonwood trees and their sound, but the cottonwood trees carry their leaves higher off the ground and those leaves are relatively small when they fall. Here, in a grove of oak and maples and several other varieties of trees whose names I do not know, there is a sense of being

surrounded by leaves. There is a constant pitter patter of leaves falling, softer leaves landing on the crisp, dry leaves that occupy the ground. Other sounds creep into my consciousness: the thump of acorns when they land on the roof of the camper; the crunch of a small animal crawling across the ground. We've seen both raccoons and opossum exploring the area in the dusky shadows.

I must concentrate to tell whether or not it is raining. It is not. The sounds mostly have to do with leaves.

There is an abundance of leaves in this forest that reminds me of the abundances of other signs of life in other places. Nature is generous with its quantities.

Knob Noster State Park is a tranquil retreat of open oak woodland with a few patches of prairie along both sides of the meandering Clearfork Creek. The park has many different trails for day hikes and plenty of space to spread out and enjoy the tranquility. We've stayed here before. The park also features an oxbow slough, which has been officially designated as Pin Oak Slough Natural Area.

The sounds of nature aren't the only sounds of this place. Although we are set back off of the highway far enough to be removed from its constant whine of tires on pavement, we can occasionally hear a particularly loud car or truck passing. In the night I woke to the sound of the giant jet bombers taking off from Whiteman Air Force Base which is just a short distance east of our campsite. In a couple of hours, reveille and first call will sound from the loudspeakers at the base, and we will hear the bugle sounds from our campsite. Most evenings we are out with our daughter and son in law and arrive after taps have sounded, but we've heard that evening song as well when we've camped here before.

Knob Noster is a bit of a funny name. I guess it means "our hill," but it is a jumble of a colloquial, folk name for a hill, "knob," and the formal Latin for "our." There are a couple of somewhat prominent small hills northeast of town, and I suppose that it is from one of those that the town took its name. Settled in the mid nineteenth century, the town was mostly a small farming community until the construction of Whiteman Air Force Base. Begun during the buildup to World War II, the field was originally named Sedalia Army Air Base and was a training ground for glider pilots in an area known as blue flats because of the color of the soil. Sedalia is the name of the large town to the east.

Knob Noster State Park sits down a bit from the town in an area that probably wasn't very productive for farming and was left forested as settlement surrounded it. We have tended to stay here in the fall, so we don't know all its seasons, but one can imagine that there is rich soil under the carpet of leaves. It probably doesn't have the blue color that lent its name to the natural prairie fields where the base was located. I imagine rich dark loam, the product of years of decaying leaves. It provides for healthy trees and supports a community of wildlife that includes deer as well as several different small



mammals. When we walk about in the day, we can hear frogs singing in the wetlands as well.

The land we set aside as parks is one of the treasures of this nation. We've found state parks to be good managers of land in general. As we've traveled around, we've learned to look for state parks as places to camp. We're not as attracted to the modern camping resorts with all their amenities. We don't seem to need swimming pools, playgrounds, activity buildings, mini golf, and wagon rides, though we understand their attraction for families. We're happy with a little more space between campers and the sounds of nature to surround us.

Camping barely describes our experience in our current camper. We have a comfortable bed that says made up as we travel down the road. We have ducted air conditioning and a furnace that takes the chill off as well as a complete kitchen and bathroom. It is a far cry from our days of sleeping in a tent and cooking outdoors with a pit toilet a short walk away. This campground has modern toilets and warm showers available in several locations. Even tent camping is comfortable in this setting.

It is a fine place for a bit of vacation. The gentle sounds of the trees and leaves are soothing and the quiet affords us time for contemplation and reflection. The closeness of our family nurtures our spirits as well.

I sleep well in this place even though the sounds are not completely familiar. And if it takes me a minute to become orientated when I wake, that is a good thing, too. It reminds me that I am not at home and each day is a new adventure. Soon enough we'll head back and put the camper in storage for the winter. For now, I am grateful for the luxury of this place.

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## **October 27, 2016 – Vacation Pace**

One of the joys of life is helping with little chores around our children's homes. It somehow feels different than tackling similar projects in our own home. Part of the reason is that I don't feel much pressure to do home repair for our children. They will sometimes identify a project because they know I like projects. Our daughter and son-in-law are preparing to move out of their home. They have a buyer and a closing date set and soon will be moving out of this house in preparation for a move to Japan, where they will live for four years. There are plenty of projects as they prepare to move. Yesterday, my wife and daughter were sorting the kitchen, identifying which items would be moved, which would be stored, and which would be sold or disposed. I decided to check into a bit of brick molding around an exterior door that needed scraping and painting. Except scraping revealed a bit of rotted wood, so I decided to replace the molding. And removing the molding revealed a bit of rot at the bottom of the door jam.

I ended up replacing all of the door framing, including the jam, That meant having to miter in new insets for the hinges and door latch, make several trips to the lumber yard for the appropriate supplies, and a variety of other tasks. I don't have very many tools with me on this trip, so some of the work had to be done by hand - tasks for which I would normally use power tools. The project ended up taking all day and I still must do some calking this morning. And, in the inspecting of the outdoor doors, I discovered another one that needs essentially the same work.

If I was at home, such a discovery would be frustrating. A project that I thought might take an hour expanding into a dozen hours would mean rearranging schedules, making plans, and sometimes even hiring someone else to get the work done as I pursue other projects that take precedence when it comes to my time. But there is a different quality to vacation time. On vacation I am allowed to do things at my own pace, and to pursue one project at a time. I probably won't tackle the second door today, but let it go to tomorrow, because I know I have the time. As is true with other tasks, the second door will take a lot less time than the first because I know what needs to be done, I can assemble all the required materials easily and don't have the same learning curve in terms of solving the problem.

When they build a home, they don't take time for the kinds of work that I did yesterday. The door, I'm sure, came pre-hung with the jam and stop already installed. The hinges and latch stops had been routed out using jigs in a factory setting and the door simply set in the opening. In the case of this door, it was installed without any shims and with gaps that would seem too big in our cold environment. Here in a slightly warmer part of the world, I guess a little air leaking in around the door was deemed to be acceptable. If a contractor were hired to do the job, or if I had done it at home where I had access to all my tools, the insets would have been done with a roto-zip tool and would have taken just a few seconds. However, I carefully measured and marked the cut outs and used a chisel and hammer to chip away the wood, a little at a time. The work is like the way my grandfather would have hung a door; except he would have had the advantage of separating hinges to ease the process a bit. It is fairly satisfying to work wood with a good sharp chisel. I bought a new chisel for the project yesterday as I don't travel with wood chisels, but the tool had to be sharpened before it would work properly. Fortunately, I had a stone for sharpening knives along on the trip.

The fact that the lumberyard - or big box home improvement store as they call them these days - sells a chisel that needs to be sharpened before it is used says something about how home repairs are done these days. I suspect that if I had asked a clerk about the work I wanted to do he wouldn't have thought of a chisel and would have said that one has to use a power tool to do that particular job. One clerk in another part of the store suggested that I replace the entire door with a pre-hung unit before discerning that I simply wanted to replace the jam. Then he tried to "upsell" me a new threshold for the door to go with the jam kit that I bought. I suppose that a Habitat for Humanity restore

would accept the donation of the used door, but when I have volunteered with Habitat we have installed pre-hung doors. I remember trimming in a closet door in a Habitat house a decade or so ago, but it was a bit unusual even then.

We are a society that looks for quick fixes and solutions. Virtually every door in every home is of a standard size so they can be made in factories and mass produced. I remember the door to my father's office when I was a kid. My father, like me, was not a tall man. The remodeling of his shop that included a new showroom required a large beam to bear the load above the new hole in the wall cut to get into his office. He simply left the beam in place and installed a door that was six inches shorter than standard. It didn't bother him, and he used to say that people over six feet tall could duck a little as they passed in. In my grandparents' house there were doors that were narrower than the current standard. Each was custom made and hung by hand. Those skills are no longer regularly used these days.

Then again, I wouldn't be setting doors with hand tools if I weren't on vacation. Life moves too quickly. That is why it is good to pause, from time to time and reconnect with life at a slower pace.

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## **October 28, 2016 – Modes of Travel**

One of the stories that I heard early in my time of serving in Rapid City came from one of the elders of our community. Emma Tibbetts was probably ten or fifteen years older than my mother. She was the daughter of missionaries that worked among Lakota people in the Dakotas in the 19th Century. Once, when I was visiting her, she told of a trip her family took when she was a child. They went from Cannon Ball, North Dakota to Santee, Nebraska for the mission meeting of the Dakota Association. The trip is about 400 miles along side of the Missouri River. They made the trip without crossing the river, staying on the west side of it as it flowed. Sometimes they traveled right alongside the river on the river bottom. In other places, they climbed to the top of the breaks and traveled across the prairie. I took them three weeks to make the trip one way. Each day they would rise, eat breakfast, break camp and travel until the sun went down when they would set up camp, cook dinner and sleep on the ground. They averaged around 20 miles per day in their travel.

Today, it would be considered a short day to drive between the two locations. The quickest route would involve crossing the river on permanent bridges twice. There is now a dam that creates a lake on the river, one of a series of dams along the Missouri. There are areas where it is impossible to travel the exact path taken by Emma and her family because those places are now under the lake formed by the dam. In other places, the division of land means that fences and other barriers lie in the path they had taken.

I don't know the details of the trip. I don't even know if it was a once-in-a-lifetime trip, or one that they took several times. I suppose that they had a tent to provide protection from inclement weather, but I don't even know if that was the case. What I do know is that there weren't any restaurants or hotels on their agenda. They slept under the stars most nights and carried essential provisions with them as they traveled. Most likely, they didn't have to carry much water. They traveled alongside a mighty river that, in those days, had water that was safe to drink.

When Lewis and Clark followed the same path nearly a century before Emma's family made the journey, they traveled on the river in boats. They had keel boats for the journey upstream and a combination of different craft for the downstream journey. Compared to the downstream journey, the upstream travel had been slow for the members of the expedition. Emma's family didn't have a boat. They had a horse, or perhaps a couple of horses, to carry supplies. They walked.

We have nearly doubled their distance in our journey for a one-week vacation. We took a day and a half coming and will take about the same amount of time going, though it is technically possible for us to make the trip in a single day.

We, too, are traveling with food for our meals and accommodations for sleeping. Our camper, however, is a 25-foot-long trailer that follows our pickup along the highways. When we stop, we have a made-up bed in a room with a furnace and air conditioner, a kitchen with a stove, oven, sink and even a microwave, and even a bathroom with a shower. Compared to rolling out blankets under the stars and eating around the campfire, ours is a luxurious journey.

They, of course, saw things that we miss due to the rate of our travel. We are less likely to be aware of the birds and small mammals along the way. We don't take time to study the nuances of color in each day's sunset and sunrise. We check the thermometer to tell the temperature outside instead of determining how many layers of clothing to wear by the chill in the air.

Between the days of pioneer travel by foot and horse and our contemporary days of freeway travel there was a time when covering long distances on the plains was accomplished by riding the trains. That is how my parents made a couple of big and important trips when they were young adults. Here in the Dakotas train travel worked best for east-west travel and wasn't very convenient for north-south travel. The trains, running around the clock, could make enormous distances each day compared to previous methods of travel. They also could carry enormous amounts of freight from one place to another. Trains still transport huge amounts of cargo but are less and less a mode for transporting people here in the United States. Around the world, however, trains still are the way many people travel from one place to another. We, of course, also use airplanes to travel great distances at high speed.

Riding the train or flying in an airplane is a passive activity for most people. Except for the crews staffing the transportation methods, most people are just along for the ride, looking out the windows and passing the time with a book or a movie. The trip that Emma's family took required the active participation of every person. I'm sure that there were times when small children were carried and elders were allowed to ride on the horse, but for the most part, each person had to pick up their feet and move themselves. Walking 20 miles a day for several weeks builds up the muscles and the appetite. They probably sensed hunger and thirst and heat and cold more intimately than we do.

I'm comfortable with our mode of travel. I'm grateful that we can cover so many miles in a single day and that we can visit our loved ones in distant places. But I'm also grateful that I at least have the memory of the story of other ways of travel. It strengthens my admiration for those who have gone before and my appreciation for the luxuries of our lives.

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## **October 29, 2016 – A Decorated Campground**

I've been camping all my life. My parents took me to church camp when I was only a few weeks old. Our family went camping every summer of my life. In a way we lived a camp lifestyle after my parents purchased a piece of property where we spent our summers. It wasn't fancy and we often cooked outdoors over the campfire. When we got married, we camped under a tarp for a few years until we saved up for a tent. That tent served our family well. When our children were teenagers, we obtained a used pop-up trailer. When they were through college, we got a used pickup camper. Now we have a bumper pull trailer that we really enjoy.

Still, I think of camping as a summer activity. I knew we were stretching the season a bit to plan this trip at the end of October and our original plan was to leave the camper in storage and travel with our car, staying a couple of nights in motels and sleeping at our daughter's home. However, weather forecasts were good, so we decided to get in one last camping trip before winterizing the camper.

We aren't the only ones thinking this way. Last night the campground filled up. There are still a few empty campsites, but a lot more people joined us for the weekend. The campground officially closes on Monday, the last day of October, so this is the last weekend for this campground. We might chalk it up to an unusual year, which is the way I was thinking about it. We could also explain it by remembering that we are considerably south of our usual territory. It is a bit warmer here in Missouri than it is at home, though after a chilly and rainy day today, it is supposed to warm up in Rapid City for the rest of the week, with highs in the 70's.

Given the weather and the situation, it isn't surprising that people want to get in one last camping trip before winter. More surprising for me, however, is the number of campers who have decorated their campsites for Halloween. Thought the campground there are orange lights, pumpkins, mannequins in costumes, skeletons, ghosts, and a variety of other decorations.

It has never occurred to me to decorate my camper for any holiday.

Then again, we don't decorate our home for Halloween, either. We might put out a pumpkin and sometimes we carve one into a jack-o-lantern, but beyond that, Halloween isn't much about decorations for us. We aren't into doing a lot of exterior decorating in the first place.

I read that Halloween is big in terms of retail sales for yard decorations, lights, and other items. I understand that candy sales are up. We enjoy the stream of trick-or-treaters, and we like to have something to give them. We've tried to avoid the sweetest candy treats because we think that too much of a good thing isn't the best for children, but we do like to have fruit snacks and other items to give out.

I'm not sure I fully understand all the decorations. I suppose the adrenalin rush of being scared is an attraction for some in the same way that amusement park rides and horror movies appeal. Being scared without really being in danger is a particular sensation. However, there really isn't much that is scary about Halloween decorations. The fake skeletons and ghosts don't seem very threatening, and I wouldn't describe any of the campground decorations as frightening. Here in the campground, there is a bit of "keeping up with the Jones" going on. A kind of friendly competition to be the campsite with the most decorations may be one of the motivations for loading up all that extra gear into the car and camper before heading out.

Then again, there are plenty of campsites where the occupants are into traveling with more gear than our usual. We have a couple of folding chairs, but we don't have an outdoor suite with carpet, recliners or an outdoor entertainment center with a bar and a big screen TV. We don't travel with a TV at all, let alone an elaborate satellite antenna. Our camper does have a television antenna, and I raise it once a year when I am scrubbing the camper roof, but other than that, it stays stowed full time. I do have an outdoor grill that I take along sometimes when I am cooking for a large group, but it isn't with us on this trip. We rarely put out our awning, and feel it is completely unnecessary here in the trees where there is plenty of natural shade. There are folks in the campground who have their awnings out to display their party lights.

There are social and cultural aspects to most forms of recreation, and we certainly do enjoy camping with friends from time to time. However, vacation is often a time to get a way for us. We enjoy solitude and space and don't need to have every day be a party.

We are happy to celebrate time with our daughter and son in law and are spending most days away from our camper. When we are at the camper, I'm likely to pick up a book and read as my preferred activity. I certainly don't want to add the work of putting up and taking down decorations to my adventure.

Still, for those who find decorating to be fun, I see no harm in their activities. There is a happy mood to the campground. The children seem to be having a good time. The decorations are cheerful.

The world is changing. We certainly take more with us when we travel these days, and it shouldn't surprise us that there are others who take even more than we do. Still, it seems a bit strange to have all the decorations.

I'm likely to keep looking for even more out-of-the ways places to visit on our travels where there are even fewer campers. It will be a challenge.

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### **October 30, 2016 – Reflections of a Cubs Fan**

There are folks out there who think that the situation is dire for the Chicago Cubs. They are down three games to one in the World Series. That means that tonight's game is a "must win." If they lost the game, they lose the World Series. If they win the same situation is true on Tuesday night. The games will return to Cleveland where the Cubs must win to stay alive in the series. In fact, they must win three games in a row in order to win the series. It is an unlikely scenario, given their record in the series so far. They have been out pitched and out played by Cleveland so far in this series. Except for game two, in Cleveland, the Cubs haven't looked very good at all. It was different before last night's game. The Friday night game was only 1-0. It seemed like the Cubs might win with every inning of play. And they started out great with a 1-0 lead in the first inning last night. Then things didn't go so well for the Cubs.

Still, there are some important lessons from the series so far. To begin with, for Cubs fans, it is a dream season, and we are in a dream scenario. The Cubs haven't been to the World Series in my lifetime. To have the best regular season record in all Major League Baseball and to have won the National League Championship Series is something we have never before seen. And it has felt pretty good to be a fan of the team from Wrigley Field.

And there is something particularly sweet about the opponents the Cubs face in this series. Being the team in baseball that has gone the longest amount of time without making it to the World Series, we Cubs fans know that Cleveland is the team that has gone the second longest time. These are two teams whose die-hard fans know a thing or two about losing. We've done that before. It is very important to note that Cubs fans

don't dislike Cleveland Indians fans. We don't think they are terrible people. We understand their loyalty to their club. We admire their faithfulness and dedication.

Anybody can cheer for a winner.

It takes something special to love a team that, year after year, comes up short.

I've read the sports commentators who argue that baseball is no longer America's sport. They claim that football has surpassed baseball in stadium size and fan base and advertising dollars and all kinds of other factors. But football teams don't play the number of games that baseball teams do. 161 games in the regular season is an impressive number. Even in a best season in all of baseball scenario like this year, Cubs fans saw our team lose 58 games. Cleveland lost 67 games in the regular season.

What makes baseball America's sport, however, isn't just the number of games played or the fact that fans need to be loyal in times of losing as well as times of winning. It is something deeper.

In a season of incredibly divisive politics in which we see the nation carved up into red states and blue states and polls swing wildly and angry words are uttered by candidates and their followers alike, where hatred is expressed in campaign advertisements and on the debate stage and in the angry rhetoric of crowds assembled in stadiums to rally for their candidate, we need a national sport where it is acceptable to love the losers as well as the winners.

Make no mistake about it, however, Cubs fans aren't ready to admit defeat. We will remain loyal until the last inning of the last game. We can imagine a scenario in which our team wins even though we are down 3-1 in the best of four series.

But we don't be angry if Cleveland wins. We won't accuse someone of cheating. We understand that questionable calls fall in our favor and against our team. We know that the rules are there for the benefit of both sides. We believe that the game is fair. The Cubs may have had a little dry spell. We haven't won the World Series since 1908. But we believe in the inherent fairness of the game. We don't think the system is rigged against us.

In a divided nation with contentious politics, we still believe in baseball. And we will believe in baseball whether we win or lose. And we will believe in the goodness of the fans of the other teams whether they win or lose.

After all, my son-in-law and I have enjoyed watching the games together and his team, the Washington Nationals have never made it to the World Series. And they had a pretty good season this year, falling to the Giants in post season play. Although other teams have had the name Washington Nationals, the current National League Team



has only been organized since 2005 when the then Montreal Expos made the move to the city under new ownership and management. The team doesn't have the history of the Cubs and old guys like me might jokingly refer to the shortness of their history as evidence that their fans haven't endured enough losses to deserve a big win, but we respect their fans.

If anything, we Cubs fans are a little bit disappointed in our fellow fans in this World Series. The home field advantage hasn't been as great as we had hoped. The crowds have been moody and subdued as the Cubs have lost at home. Last night the crowd in Wrigley Field seemed to be fickle and fall silent at all the wrong moments. Despite that kind of criticism, we know that Cubs fans are more likely to be philosophical and quiet than overly exuberant and rowdy. You don't wear the badge of "long suffering" without a bit of stoicism.

Win or lose, we love our team. And in baseball, just like farming, there is always next year. After all Anthony Rizzo is only 27 years old. That's 20 years younger than Mets pitcher Bartolo Colon. Even if the Cubs were to lose this year's series, and I'm not saying they will, prospects for next year look good.

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## **October 31, 2016 – Piners Punts**

A decade ago, we traveled in Australia as part of a sabbatical. Our primary field of study was an exploration of thin spaces - places where God's presence is especially evident. We also were interested in communities that had a similar size and sense of isolation as Rapid City. We began that sabbatical by visiting sites sacred to the Lakota in our own community. We then traveled in British Columbia visiting sacred sites as well as looking at communities in the 50,000 to 70,000 size range that were physically distant from other communities.

One of the memorable parts of that sabbatical was our time in Tasmania. Our primary objective was a Uniting Church in Australia congregation in Launceston. Launceston is a bit bigger than Rapid City, but it shares a similar sense of isolation. It is about 200 miles from Tasmania's other and more famous city, Hobart. Being an island state means that the rest of Australia seems a bit far away for all the residents of Tasmania.

While on the Island we visited Hobart and Port Arthur and enjoyed driving on two different routes through the state. Port Arthur is a former prison colony. It was a place to which prisoners were exported from England for crimes as small as stealing food or candles and as vicious as pre-meditated murder. The prisoners literally built the colony and lived in near isolation, many for the remainder of their lives. It was also the site of some of the early experiments with penitentiary style prison, based on the belief that if people were left alone to contemplate the severity of their crimes, they would become

penitent. There was a building devoted to silent isolation of inmates, who often suffered severe mental illness because of their total separation from any form of community. Port Arthur is also the site of a 1998 killing spree. Thirty-five people were murdered before the shooter was captured. The event led to a revision of Australian gun regulations and remains the most violent mass killing in recent Australian history. Port Arthur is now a World Heritage site and one of the island's most popular tourist attractions.

Hobart was very different from the other places we visited in Tasmania. I was most struck by its heritage of wooden boats. There were many excellent examples to be seen as we walked around the harbor and got a feel for the area. Tasmania is also famous for its wool production and there were many shops where woolen clothing could be purchased, but I was well entertained by looking at and thinking about boats and boat construction.

We were also able to visit a sanctuary for the endangered Tasmanian devils. These amazing and frightening animals are different from any other type of animal I've ever experienced. They seem to show little or no care for their own species, attacking each other as viciously as they attack any other animals.

Tasmania is a gorgeous place. It receives a large amount of precipitation that falls primarily in the forms of snow and rain. Some of the mountain streams that flow to the river rise by as much as seventeen or eighteen feet when at flood stage. In the rural and remote areas of the island cutting timber was one of the ways of earning a living. The giant Huron pines grow to great heights and are straight grained and very rot resistant. They make great timbers for boats and spars for masts of the tall ships. Over cutting has resulted in the protection of the trees and they are no longer cut except on very rare occasions under special circumstances.

When the harvesting of the timbers was at its height, small groups of loggers would take tiny row boats, called Piners Punts up the rivers, sometimes portaging hundreds of times to get around falls and cascades. They would cut trees and mark logs and when the rivers flooded, float them down to the sea where they would be caught, rafted, and towed to the sawmills. Piners weren't paid until their timbers reached the sawmill. It was a rugged and isolated life.

The boats they rowed evolved from whaleboats that were used to explore the rivers and streams of the remote areas. The whaleboats, however, lacked sufficient rocker to maneuver in the while rushing water of the rivers and soon a different kind of boat was designed to fit the needs of the Piners. One of the stories of the boats is that in the 1890s the colonial government of Tasmania paid meter boat builder Artie Doherty to build seven identical punts and place them at the mouths of seven of the region's rivers "for the succour of shipwrecked crews." There is no record of the boats ever being used by shipwrecked crews, but there are many tails of their use for the rescuee of seriously

injured loggers working in the remote areas. The boats, equipped with two sets of 10' long oars could be rowed in the coastal waters as well as the rivers and streams and there are tales of rugged piners rowing nonstop for 12 to 18 hours and covering tremendous distances.

This incredible industry and specially adapted boat design grew out of a population that was forced to make do with local resources. Isolated from the rest of the world, they adapted the technologies they had received from Europe to their local needs and developed and refined them into highly specialized watercraft. Most of the piners and boatbuilders had little formal education and gained their skills through trial and error and their own imaginations and ingenuity.

The world has changed. We no longer live in complete isolation. The Internet and social media keep us connected with those who are far away. But traveling far from home still requires a spirit of adventure and a bit of ingenuity as one uses the skills and knowledge of the former place and adapts it for use in the new home. Stories of others' successes can be inspirational to travelers in our contemporary world.

Now more than a decade since our visit, I continue to be inspired by the stories of the Piners and their boats.

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