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January 1, 2009 – 2009



Once again a new year has come. It is now the last year of the first decade of the 21st Century, by our way of counting. The transition from 2008 was accomplished without much fanfare. The worry and consternation that came with the transition from 1999 to 2000 seems to have faded. There was an extra leap second added to 2008 and a software glitch did cause a large number of Microsoft Zune music players to lock up, although Microcoft says that they will spontaneously start working again sometime after 7 a.m. today, provided the owners let the batteries drain and then recharge them from a "dead" state. Not a very big computer crash, really.

We want every year to be significant, but few of us started 2008 thinking that it would set records for the decrease in stock values, or that we would end the year with gasoline prices the lowest in five years or more. There is a sense that despite all of the information technology we have at hand the future is still unpredictable. The pundits are trying to come up with what they think are the most significant news items of 2008. Each of us will remember the year for more personal reasons.

Nine is not one of the big numbers in the Bible. There is some association with judgment and the number nine. Three is a Biblically significant number and nine is three times three. Since nine is the highest single-digit number it does denote some sense of finality, but there is no special significance for the number nine in Biblical scholarship.

There are nine justices on the United States Supreme Court, nine players per side on the field in baseball, and some smaller high schools play a form of football with nine players per team on the field. The musical nine opened on Broadway in 1982 and ran a revival tour in 2003. It is based on a book by Arthur Kopit that tells the story of a film

producer facing down a midlife crisis. A movie version has been in the works for a couple of years and is expected to be released sometime this year. The rock band Nine Inch Nails is still together and producing songs, but not enjoying the same popularity they enjoyed in the nineties. They've enjoyed too much success to rate the term "underground" as a band.

It may be that nine isn't one of the "big" numbers.

Still we begin the year with a sense of anticipation and expectation about what lies ahead. For a certain number of people, 2009 will be one of the years that produces life-changing events. I already have four weddings booked for the year - for those couples 2009 will be a year worth remembering. It will also be the birth year for millions around the world. And 2009 will be the last year of the lives of some. Some people will remember the year for the loss of a loved one and it will bring the memory of grief to their minds for the rest of their lives.

I'm no good at predictions. But this moment seems as significant as any other.

2009 is the 50th anniversary of our church building. The building is in remarkable shape for its age. It continues to serve our congregation well. The design provides for easy accessibility for all and there is plenty of space for the activities, mission and ministry of the congregation. There are a few things that are beginning to show wear, as well. The 50 year-old tiles in the Kitchen are in need of replacing and the boiler won't be around for too many more years. But we have kept up with on-going maintenance and there is no reason to expect that we can't continue to use the building for another fifty years, if we continue to care for it.

I feel as though I should be writing something pithy and important to mark new year's day, but the truth is that today is one in a series of new days. Every day is a gift and each day holds the potential to be a blessing for others if we live our faith. The significance of New Year's Day lies more in our system of counting than in the inherent operations of the universe or the unfolding of God's realm. It is unlikely that our current system of counting the years is a measurement that has any real value on a cosmic scale. But counting does help us measure a flow of time, and each decade produces its own characteristics, accomplishments and memories.

May we live our lives in such a way that 2009 will be a year of compassion for others. The letter to the Corinthians reminds us that faith, hope and love remain. May our lives give others reason to see faith, hope and love in the deeds and decisions of 2009.

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January 2, 2009 – Farewell Senator Pell



Senator Pell with his wife, Nuala. Rhode Island Journal Photo/Connie Grosch.

Years ago, when we lived in Idaho, we worked with a young single mother who was seeking to improve her life and that of her son. She went back to school and finished her degree in spite of having limited income and facing enormous challenges in terms of her time and energy. She worked part-time at several jobs, including helping the congregation set up its first computerized data base. As we watched her gain the education that she needed, we heard over and over again from her that she simply would not have been able to afford college if it were not for the federally-funded Pell grant program. She was politically active, a member of the Republican party, as were her parents and other relatives. They had a heritage of public service and were not the kind of people who believed in big government or in government being the solution to every problem. But the Pell grant program provided a much-needed boost for a woman of modest means to make a better life for herself and her son.

The educational grant program was named for Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island, who once said, “The strength of the United States is not the gold at Fort Knox or the weapons of mass destruction that we have, but the sum total of the education and character of our people.” The federally-funded grants were named in honor of Senator Pell in 1980 after they had already served our country for seven years. Senator Pell was the leader of the effort to get Congress to create the need-based grant program for low-income undergraduate and certain other students. Legislation creating the program was originally passed in 1973. By the time Senator Pell retired in 1997, it was estimated that 54 million low- and middle-income Americans had benefitted from the grant program.

Senator Edward Kennedy said of Pell: “He believed strongly that a good education could open infinite doors of opportunity, and he has transformed the lives of millions of young people who have been able to go to college because of the grant that rightly bears his name.” Pell believed that financial aid should be given directly to students rather than distributed by colleges and universities. Investing in individuals rather than institutions was a hallmark of the Pell grant program.

Claiborne Pell never would have qualified for the grants that bear his name. Born to a prominent and privileged family, he was a descendant of early New York landowners who lived among the old-money families in Newport, Rhode Island. Five family members served in the House or Senate, including great-great-granduncle George M. Dallas, who was a senator from Pennsylvania in the 1830s and vice president under President James K. Polk in the 1840s. Claiborne Pell graduated from Princeton without the need of financial aid a century later in 1940. He served in the Coast Guard during World War II and remained in the Coast Guard Reserves until retiring as a captain in 1978.

He believed that people who had never know the privilege into which he was born should have access to the education that shaped him. And, together with colleagues in Congress, he devised a way to make that belief a reality in the lives of millions of Americans.

Education wasn’t Pell’s only cause. He was sponsor of the legislation that created the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He had a strong personal interest in the arts and believed that the arts, like education should not be the exclusive privilege of the wealthy, but rather made accessible to all of the people of the nation.

Senator Pell retired from public service in 1997, after having been diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. He insisted that the disease had nothing to do with his retirement. “There is a natural time for all life’s adventures to come to an end and this period of 36 years would seem to me about the right time for my service in the Senate to end,” he said in announcing his intention not to run for an additional term in September 1995.

I never met Senator Pell. I don’t run in the circles of Newport’s elite. I’ve never been a part of the culture of the East coast and I am not descended from persons of wealth, power or privilege. I might not have noticed the passing of Claiborne Pell or looked into his life had it not been for the simple fact that I’ve known a lot of students who would not have been able to complete their education were it not for the federally-funded Pell grant program. I have seen first hand what a difference it can make when a deserving student receives the support it takes to complete his or her education. While I am sure that it is a worthy enterprise to develop and support institutions of higher education, I share with Senator Pell the conviction that the best way to invest in education is to invest in students.

Early yesterday morning, Senator Pell died at home, surrounded by his family. It isn't the first time his wife of more than 64 years, Nuala, has faced grief. Their daughter Julia died of lung cancer in 2006 at the age of 52. There will be plenty of public accolades as the days go by and the friends and family gather to support one another in their grief.

There will be no erasing the legacy of this man. The millions of students who have already completed their educations and who are hard at work in our society will be joined by millions more in future years in making the best of the opportunity provided by a nation that believes in education and in investing in its students.

Farewell Senator. Though this life's adventure has reached its conclusion, the great causes in which you believed continue.

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January 3, 2009 – Recurring Themes



Regular readers of this blog know that there are many recurring themes. When I started the blog, I had no sense of an organizing theme. It was an outgrowth of a daily journal that was begun during a sabbatical leave in 2006. For the most part, I write about whatever strikes my fancy each day. I often react to some event in the news and it is not uncommon for me to write about events and activities in the church. From time to time I reflect upon scriptural themes, especially when I am working out directions and details for worship. A little over a year ago, I resolved to stop writing about cats for a while because I thought that I had pretty much exhausted the subject. Because the blog also features a daily photograph and because the cats are both available and photogenic, I do have a lot of pictures of cats. In most of the pictures, the cats are sleeping, as that is the main activity for cats in our house.

There are some themes that I expect to continue to show up from time to time in 2009.

One of those themes is mission and outreach. One of the things that I appreciate so much about the congregation that we serve is that it is so dedicated to serving others. We receive five special offerings each year for mission beyond our local church: One Great Hour of Sharing, Strengthen the Church, Neighbors in Need, Blanket Sunday, and The Christmas Fund. In addition, a significant portion of our local church budget is designated for mission and outreach. But the mission projects that are most exciting for me are the ones in which we invest more than money - the ones in which we invest our time and energy. Meals at the Cornerstone Rescue Mission, regular participation in

United Campus Ministries, support of Church Response, and other local mission projects have long-standing importance to our congregation.

Our sister church in Costa Rica is another focus of our mission. This relationship began with the visit of church members, George and Mae Louise Zeise in 1988 and has blossomed into a pattern of annual visits for Vacation Bible School, regular visits and work tours for larger groups, and a continuing relationship with the pastor and other mission partners in Costa Rica. Knowing that we have a sister church and being aware of the challenges and opportunities that are a part of their church life gives us a sense of connection with Christians in different cultures and places around the world.

Our regular participation in the local affiliate of Habitat for Humanity is another important hands-on project for our church. We decided to build a home as a gift to our community on the occasion of our 125th anniversary. That home led to a larger project, a duplex, built in partnership with other Black Hills Association of the United Church of Christ congregations. And we have just started another home in partnership with Rapid City downtown churches.

Another project that has been and will continue to be a recurring theme of this blog is the Woodchuck Society. The project didn't begin with our Costa Rica Sister Church, but it involves some of the same key people. The beginning of the project was simple. Members of our congregation were thinning trees on their property and had more firewood than they could use. They asked if there was a need for firewood. The need on the Pine Ridge reservation was obvious and the first year we borrowed a pickup and a horse trailer and took the church van with a few people and headed out with a load of firewood. We delivered wood to a couple of different locations in the early years before developing partnerships with people on the reservation who could distribute the wood. These days we make an annual run to Eagle Butte, where Rev. Norman Bluecoat and his family supervise distribution to reservation churches and to families with need on the Cheyenne River Reservation. In addition we deliver to Wanblee where the Catholic Church oversees distribution. This year the Episcopal Church in Wanblee also helped with distribution. Our trips have grown into caravans of nine or ten pickups and several trailers. We are able to deliver as much as 12 cords of firewood in a single trip.

The process of gathering and preparing the firewood for delivery has grown as well. A few years ago a generous supporter loaned us a wood splitter. Later the splitter was donated to us. A large tandem axle trailer was also donated to the cause. An additional splitter is routinely made available for the project. People from many different places around Rapid City have donated trees and logs to the project. As the word gets out, we receive more and more calls with offers of firewood.

This year, with the severe weather and colder than normal winter, we are making an additional delivery to Wanblee a week from today. The crew has been busy preparing for that delivery. Some of the firewood is already loaded into trailers and pickups. The

crew spent parts of three days last week picking up logs and splitting them in the church back yard. A call for volunteers routinely nets a half dozen people and delivery days have seen twenty or more participants. Over 100 members of our congregation have participated in the project and the number continues to grow. The Woodchuck Society has an annual picnic in the summer that fills the church back yard with food and people and fun.

The Woodchuck Society now receives donations of hats, mittens, coats, scarves, baby blankets and warm clothing that are delivered with the firewood. In Eagle Butte, the public school has a supply of hats and mittens that the children can take out for use at recess and return. This supply is rejuvenated each year by the Woodchucks. Rev. Bluecoat delivers blankets to new mothers that are supplied by the Woodchucks. We notice hats that were knitted by a church group in Florida on the heads of youth in Wanblee when we visit. A church in California has also joined in the project and is sending warm clothing.

But there is an aspect of the project that is worthy of attention in this blog. The Woodchuck Society has no budget. It is not set up to receive cash donations. And we see no need to change that, even as the project grows. Our project is about making connections between people and developing long term relationships. We don't need money for that kind of mission. We receive the things that are donated and we try to connect those donations with those who need the items. Our focus is firewood, but we don't mind delivering hats and mittens and coats and blankets as well. Those who are able donate the use of their pickups and trailers and fuel for the trips. Those who are able give their time and energy to the project. While raising money for mission projects is important and giving money is one way to support mission and outreach, this project is different. It is not about money. And we don't intend to make it be about money. Those who want to participate are encouraged to join us for a delivery or a splitting party. Those who are not able to participate in the heavy lifting and physical labor are encouraged to provide food for a work day or knit a hat or blanket. There are lots of ways to participate in the project, but we have decided to stay away from fund-raisers, offerings, and budget.

The Christian life is about using the resources that we have to do the work God calls us to do. Some of those resources are financial and the generosity of this congregation is significant. But to focus our attention only on the financial resources is to miss so much of what God has given us as a blessing. The Woodchuck Society is one place where we pay attention to gifts of time and talent and the work of our hands.

One of my favorite Psalms is 90. It begins with acknowledgment of a sense of being at home with God: "O Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." We always have a home and our home is with God.

The ending of the Psalm is significant to me as well: “Establish the work of our hands for us - yes, establish the work of our hands.”

The Woodchucks are all about establishing the work of our hands.

If it is a recurring theme, it is a good one. May our generosity never be limited to mere money.

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January 4, 2009 – Another Road



Each year, on the Sunday closest to January 6, we read the story of the visit of the Magi - the "Wise Men from the East." The passage ends with a simple statement that has profound meaning: "And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another road."

Herod was the Roman tetrarch of Galilee. He is sometimes referred to a the Governor of the area, but he was not elected by the people he ruled and he solely possessed the imperial power of Rome. He was elected "King of the Jews" by the Roman Senate after Antigonus tried to seize power in Jerusalem. He ruled for 34 years and was known by the Romans for his architectural accomplishments and is referred to as "Herod the Great." Although Herod identified himself as a Jew, having descended from a family that converted to Judaism under pressure in previous generations. He was, however, criticized by the Sanhedrin for excessive brutality.

He was a violent man with great power and incredibly jealous of any perceived threat to his authority. Few dared to disobey Herod.

According to the report in the Gospel of Matthew, Herod had agreed to release the Magi and allow them to continue their quest for the child whose star they had seen on the condition that they come back to Herod and report their finding. The Gospel reports that Herod claimed that he wanted to "go and worship him," though readers familiar with the character would not have believed for a moment that Herod was inclined to worship anyone.

As opposed to Luke's almost cheery report of the birth of the baby, Matthew's story is filled with gloom and impending doom. The child seems to be threatened from the beginning and it is only a remarkable set of circumstances that allows the child to survive in the first place. Shortly after he is born his parents flee in terror to Egypt where they live as refugees until after the death of Herod. Their escape is made possible only by the decision of the Magi to return to their home "by another road."

Susan and I often use a different road when returning from a trip. We enjoy traveling and we like to explore different routes. When we have time we are inclined to leave the Interstate highways and travel less busy routes. Our preferred method of traveling usually takes more time, but rewards us with views that we would not otherwise see and visits to towns that we would otherwise bypass. For us returning by another route is the gift of additional new territory to explore and new sights to see. The dynamic has little impact upon the lives of others.

It is easy to read the report in Matthew's gospel as and act of divine providence. God provides the dream that causes the change of plans for the Magi. God intervenes to provide the conditions for the baby to survive Herod's brutality. While I have no doubt that this is the case, I like to believe that the experience of visiting the child changed the lives of the Magi forever. After experiencing the Christ, how could they go back to the same old routine. A new road was a symbol of deeper changes that were occurring within them.

The Magi were not religious leaders. They were scholars who studied the earth and the stars by direct observation. They noticed a new star precisely because they kept track of the stars. They were used to looking up into the heavens and keeping records of what they saw. They were able to discern patterns in the movements of the lights in the heavens, and they drew conclusions based on what they had seen. I like to imagine that the first part of their trip was pure curiosity. Having seen a new star, they set forth to investigate what they had seen. They may have heard of a theory that the new star marked the birth of a new ruler for the people of Israel. They wanted to check out the theory. They wanted to see and to experience first hand the phenomenon that they had observed. So they undertook a trip for the sake of discovery.

The trip was something for which they were prepared. Meeting with Herod and his advisors also might have been within the range of their expectations. But I like to believe that they were a bit unprepared for the meeting with the baby and his parents. After all, how can one prepare for such a meeting. The Gospel reports that upon entering the house and seeing the child and the mother "they bowed down and worshiped him."

The act of worship must have been a bit of a new experience for the men whose lives had been based on observation of cold hard facts. When I read the story, it seems to

me that there is a radical change in the mood of the Magi at the point of entering the house. Their trip has been, up to that moment, one of scientific discovery. They were making observations and responding to the facts on the ground as it were. When they enter the house something new occurs - something new overwhelms them. They bow down and worship.

And then they respond to a warning that comes in a dream.

How could they go home by the same route that they had previously taken? How could they just repeat the steps that had brought them to this place? They had been forever changed by the experience of meeting the child.

We too, are transformed by our experiences with Christ. We too, are invited to choose another road.

We never quite return to life as usual. Encountering Christ is a transforming experience.

Each Christmas season provides the invitation and the opportunity for a fresh encounter with Christ. It may come through our prayers and meditations upon the familiar texts. It may come through worship with the community. It may come through the rituals and traditions of our life together. However it comes, each Christmas offers the possibility of transformation of our lives. Each Christmas offers an invitation to take a new road as we go on with our lives.

This year, as we come to the end of the Christmas season. This year as our country faces uncertainty with a financial crises, growing unemployment and distress for our family members, friends and neighbors, decreases in our own assets and investments, and a change in the presidency. This year as our world is experiencing extreme violence and the killing of innocents in so many countries and areas. This year, of all years, is a good time for us to consider another road.

Like the magi, may we be transformed by our encounter with Christ.

Like the magi, may we be ready to head out down “another road.”

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January 5, 2009 – The Violence Continues



Photo from Getty Images.

If Joseph and Mary were making their run for protection in Egypt today, they most certainly would not make it. There is no way to run away from the violence in Israel in today's world. Chances are, they would never make it out of the West Bank. Military checkpoints severely restrict the movement from the Palestinian West Bank into Israel. And they never would mad the border crossing into Egypt. Even if they took a route that led them back into Palestinian controlled Gaza, there would be no possibility of crossing the border into Egypt. A couple with a young child in that area has no avenue of escape.

It seems as if the whole world is watching in horror at what is happening and that we waver between trying to understand the complex political dynamics and wringing our hands in helplessness.

Hamas, the political faction that controls Gaza, continues to issue angry and hateful statements. Mortars from Gaza continue to be fired on Southern Israel. Innocent Israelis have been wounded and there have been fatalities. But Hamas lacks real military might. Israel's response has been relentless. Air, sea and ground attacks have been coordinated. There have been over 500 casualties in Gaza, including large numbers of children. Essential services such as electricity and water have been cut off for the entire region. Gaza is not some isolate piece of desert. Gaza city has nearly 500,000 inhabitants. About 1.4 million people are in the small strip of land that stretches 25 miles from north to south and 4 - 8 miles in width. It is a very small strip of land that is

intensely populated. Many of the residents of the strip live in refugee camps and temporary housing.

And the full military might of Israel is being brought to bear on this tiny strip of land. Israeli president Shimon Peres has stated that Israel has no intention of occupying the strip, or even of crushing Hamas. He claims that his only intent is to stop the mortar attacks.

But nobody knows what it will take to stop the mortar attacks.

The death rate is already over 100 Palestinian deaths for each Israeli death. How much more must the violence escalate? Will a death rate of 1,000 to one stop the attacks? Will it take 10,000 to one? Aid workers estimate that 20% to 30% of all casualties are children. More than 100 children dead. As many as 700 children injured. Hospitals are overwhelmed. Medical supplies are exhausted.

With thousands injured, there is enough memory of violence to stir generations of hate. It appears that the current round of attacks is almost certain to produce more and more individuals committed to revenge and terror. And terror, like war, is never specific in its targets. Innocents are wounded. Innocents die.

And the people who want to simply flee the violence have nowhere to go.

According to Matthew's Gospel, the infant Jesus was born into a world of incredible violence. An unstable leader was willing to commit infanticide in order to eliminate what he perceived to be a threat to his power and stability. It seemed that there was no way for the child to escape the violence. But through the warnings of Magi and others, the parents were able to anticipate the violence and flee their homeland to temporary refuge in Egypt.

Parents are still seeking to flee their country in hopes of saving their children from the violence. But there is no way out. Aid workers with medical supplies have made it to the border, but are not allowed to cross from Egypt into Gaza. Hospitals inside of Gaza, struggling to cope with the large amount of wounded are running out of supplies and there seems to be no way to get the supplies to them.

Diplomats are scurrying to try to negotiate some type of cease fire. French and other European leaders are in the area. U.S. negotiators are invested in establishing a sustainable, durable ceasefire that will be respected by all parties. But each day that no political solution is found, the casualties mount.

Pope Benedict XVI got it right when he declared, "War and hatred are not solutions to problems." But while Christians around the world, Protestant and Catholic alike have joined in the Pope's call to pray for the end to conflict in the Gaza Strip and for justice

and peace for their land, prayer alone seems inadequate in the face of the overwhelming violence.

And the truth is that there has been so much violence in Palestine and Israel that the current round of violence isn't the most popular news story of the day. The upcoming inauguration of a new President, the beginning of a new legislative term, the death of the son of John Travolta and dozens of other stories are capturing the headlines and attention of people in this country and around the world. Violence in Israel and Palestine is so common that it doesn't seem like news.

But there are many who will think of nothing else today. If you live in Gaza, there is no other topic except survival. Even grief has to take a back seat to simply remaining alive for another day.

I do not pretend to have a solution to the violence. I do not pretend to know how to bring peace and justice to this land where so many have suffered so much. But I know that God has not turned a blind eye to this violence. And I refuse to ignore it as well. My prayers are joining the prayers of millions of people around the world. In December Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders in the United States, including John Thomas, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, announced a new, unprecedented collaborative effort to mobilize broad public support for active, fair and firm U.S. leadership in pursuit of Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace. A letter from religions leaders to President-elect Obama reminds leaders that the change in leadership in the United States represents an opportunity for renewed efforts for peace in the Middle East. Additional information about this initiative is available at http://www.nili-mideastpeace.org/

So I urge you, my friends, to continue to pay attention to what is happening in Gaza. As painful as the news is, we need to be witnesses to what is occurring. And I urge you to join my in offering your prayers for peace with justice in this area and an end to the violence of both sides of the conflict.

If you read Matthew's Gospel, it seems that the survival of the Prince of Peace was a narrow escape. Perhaps the chances for peace are as slim in our generation. But we will not lose hope. For this we tell our story to ourselves every year. Even when the world seems dark and hopeless, God's hope remains. Even when the forces of violence threaten to overwhelm, God's peace remains. And "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Pray for peace, my friends. Pray for peace.

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January 6, 2009 - Epiphany



A brightly lit Christmas angel in a Costa Rican nativity display. Photo from amcostarica.com.

An epiphany is the sudden realization of the larger meaning of something. An epiphany is an “I get it” moment - the moment of recognition and comprehension of the deeper meaning that lies beyond a particular event or occasion. The word is Greek in origin and means “to manifest or show.” Epiphany is the name that has been chosen for the Christian holiday, 12 days after Christmas, that recalls the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus.

The visit of he Magi is a minor Biblical story, only appearing briefly in the Gospel of Matthew, but it has risen to prominence in many areas of the world, especially in Western Christianity. Easter Orthodox churches tend to emphasize the baptism of Christ rather than the visit of the Magi. The feast day is sometimes called Theophany in Eastern tradition churches.

The Biblical Magi come from a distant location and therefore have come to symbolize non-Jewish peoples. Since they paid homage to Jesus, their visit is marked as the occasion when the wider world first recognized the significance of Jesus. Although there was some controversy surrounding the subject in the early church, today Christians celebrate Jesus as the savior of the whole world and not just one religious group.

Epiphany marks the end of the official celebration of Christmas and is a traditional day for taking down Christmas decorations. In some communities, churches recognize the day with a bonfire, burning the Christmas trees of the community. Epiphany celebrations

are often associated with bright lights. Christians declare that Jesus is the light of the world and celebrate with candles, lights and in some places, even with fireworks.

In Costa Rica, where we have a sister church, the celebration of Christmas often extends beyond the day of Epiphany. Throughout Latin America and in some parts of Europe Christmas celebrations can last as long as forty days ending on Candlemas on February 2. It is common in Costa Rica for celebrations of Rezo al niño celebrations to be held at various locations throughout the month of January. Nativity displays commonly remain up throughout the month. Rezo al niño is a social event with a few prayers included. There is often music and food. In Catholic congregations a full recitation of four rounds of the rosary is included, but many celebrations prayers are reduced to a single round of the rosary to allow more time for singing, sweet cakes, punch and activities for the children. There are usually gifts for children in rezo celebrations. Being close to the equator, Costa Rican schools follow a southern hemisphere schedule. Children are on school holidays and summer activities are in full swing. The weather is usually wonderfully warm during the month of January.

It is quite a contrast with activities and events in the United States, where New Year's day is a common day for removing Christmas decorations. The holiday aisles in most retail stores are decked out with hearts and candies in anticipation of Valentine's day, the next occasion for card and gift sales.

In our congregation, we recognize Epiphany on the Sunday closest to January 6 and the Baptism of Christ on the first Sunday after January 6. This means that some years the celebrations are on the same day and other years, like this one, they occur on two successive weeks. Both events have a character of the realization of a wider recognition of Jesus. His presence and significance is noticed by a wider circle and there is a growing awareness in the community of his followers that his life carries more meaning than their personal experiences. Being disciples of Christ twenty centuries later, we feel that we are beneficiaries of these events that allowed the Christian faith to reach beyond a narrow circle of friends to a worldwide religious movement in which we have become included.

Happy Epiphany, my friends! May this day be a day of new revelations and deeper understandings of the meanings in your life.

And may we not rush too quickly from our Christmas celebrations, but linger to absorb the fullness of the meanings that are granted in this season of the year and this season of our lives.

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January 7, 2009 – A Particular Grief



AP Photo, from the blog of BBC Mideast Editor Jeremy Bowen, Israel has placed a ban on the entry of international journalists to the Gaza Strip. Most photos from that area come from Reuters and APTN cameramen who were in the area before the current round of violence erupted.

For some time now, I have been working on a book about funerals and the process of working with families as they navigate the difficult and confusing journey of grief. I have been told that our church does a good job with funerals. I know that the funeral service can be an important step in grieving. The work that I am doing is also being informed by my volunteer work with the Pennington County LOSS team. LOSS stands for "Local Outreach to Survivors of Suicide." The LOSS team is a first responder when there is a death by suicide. We are on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, ready to be there for families near the moment of notification of their loss to provide support, resources, and referral. We walk with the family as they go through the funeral and throughout the process of grieving, especially in the first year after their loss.

So I know that suicide grief is unique.

But the truth is that every grief is unique. While I can write about some things that are common among different funerals, one of the messages of the book I am writing is that every funeral is unique and needs to be treated as different from every other one.

Particularly challenging are funerals for young people. The presence of parents, grandparents and other elders makes the process seem out of order. Our people have known from Biblical times about the unique grief of the loss of a child. Seeing a life

snuffed out when it is hardly started is an overwhelming tragedy. The loss of a child is the loss of the future and often it seems to be the loss of hope.

This week our congregation gathered for the funeral of a 94-year-old member. It was a triumphant celebration of a life well-lived. There was grief. And a sense of loss and sorrow and sadness. There was a sense that something had occurred which forever changes the family. But those elements were combined with a joy that the beloved grandmother had had such a good life, that she had lived long enough that her great-grandchildren have wonderful memories of their "Nana," that she had triumphed in the trials and tragedies of life. Her family were well aware that she could not go on living forever. And they were somewhat prepared for her death.

How different it is when a young person dies. Yesterday was the funeral for Nitai Stern, an Israeli soldier killed in the fighting in Gaza. The tradition in Israel is for a quick funeral, as close to the time of death as possible. Nitai's funeral was the day after his death. He was 21 years old. Some of his comrades from his unit, the Golani Brigade, and his family gathered to bury the body. There were plenty of tears and uncontrolled sobbing. Even the military helicopters flying overhead could not completely drown out the sound of crying in the short video clip that I saw. There was no way to make that funeral a celebration of life. For those who witnessed the funeral it seemed like such a waste. Why is he dead? Why could he have not survived?

The few pictures we are getting out of Gaza of Palestinian children wounded and killed remind us that there is intense grief on both sides of the border. I have seen pictures of a Palestinian father carrying the limp body of his dead son. There are also pictures of the same man in a mortuary with the wrapped bodies of two other children and his wife. And another picture of him sitting in a doorway, sobbing. I do not know the man, the reports do not include his name, but his image haunts me. His grief comes through grainy Internet photos and I cannot forget them.

I've been to enough funerals to know that he will never recover from his loss. You don't get over the loss of your children. You survive. And survival has to be enough. There is no gracious way to mourn the death of a young one. Every family muddles through their grief. And the pain remains, even decades later.

Like all chronic pain, when the survivor realizes that there is no cure for the pain, they adapt. Learning to live with pain as a constant life companion becomes the challenge of their lives. There is enough post-traumatic stress being generated in Gaza to overwhelm all of the world's psychiatrists. The truth is that most of the victims will not receive the support and treatment that they need. Generations from now the pain will persist.

Such is the true cost of war. It is difficult to imagine a gain that could outweigh the deep cost of the current violence. No one will emerge from this feeling victorious. There will

be no winners. It is not just my opinion. It is the reality of the family of Nitai Stern. It is the reality of the unnamed man sobbing in an unidentified doorway somewhere in Gaza. It is the reality of all of Israel and Palestine. And all of us, who are citizens of this world and witnesses to the events in the middle east are a part of that reality.

If there is anyone who is not experiencing at least a small sense of loss and grief, that person is simply not paying attention.

No book about funerals could guide our world through this tragedy.

And the truth is that it isn't the only tragedy playing out in our world. There is another in Iraq, and one in Afghanistan, and in Somalia, and Sri Lanka, and Mogadishu, and Zimbabwe, and Nigeria, and Papua New Guinea, and Indonesia, and Cambodia, and Thailand, and a thousand other locations around the globe.

The tears of grief in this world are sufficient to add another ocean to the globe.

Grief is our way of life.

As tragic and overwhelming as all of this sounds, I am not without hope. In a peculiar way there is consolation in knowing that no one grieves alone in this world. As lonely as grief first appears, the truth is that there are many others who are sharing the journey of grief.

And I have become convinced that grief is a good process - a blessing from God. It is grief interrupted that loses its essential goodness. When grief is diverted into anger it cannot be assuaged. When grief is halted and not allowed to run its course, it can become destructive of individuals and result in increased illness.

But when grief is allowed to run its course and flow through all of its stages, it is a healing process. We do not find hope in running away from loss and sorrow and sadness, but rather by facing them directly. True hope - Biblical hope - does not come easily. It is not some quick declaration of an oft-repeated phrase. It is forged in the realities of life, singed with real loss and sadness, and refined by chronic pain. Obvious short-term gain is not genuine hope. Hope lies in that which is unseen and is revealed only slowly, in its own time.

Hope, however, does not die. It may be obscured from our vision by all sorts of things, but it does not die.

And we in the church are in the business of hope. We cannot fix this broken world, but we can feed a hungry person. We cannot restore the pain and tragedy of overwhelming violence, but we can speak up for justice and peace. We cannot make everything right, but we can offer a shoulder to cry on. Part of our message of hope is that the true

source of hope lies beyond us and that we belong to something that is far bigger than ourselves.

Left to ourselves we would be overwhelmed and defeated. But we are not left to ourselves. So we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Our grief is different. And our calling in this life is to bring that hope to others in whatever form we are able.

Sometimes our prayers are best accomplished by the work of our hands. Sometimes they are accomplished by our silent presence. Sometimes they are accomplished by our tenacity to keep engaged when others cannot. Henri Nouwen once wrote, “All real living is praying.”

God, who witnesses all of life has not abandoned us. And everything we do is witnessed by God and becomes a prayer.

May our prayers be meaningful. And when we cannot wipe away all of the tears of grief in this world, may we be willing to honor the tears of one grieving person. From time to time we will witness the genuine miracle of tears of grief transformed into blessing. And once again we will glimpse the hope that has never been absent from this world.

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January 8, 2009 – Our Hospital



Rapid City has an excellent community hospital. It is a regional medical center, serving an area with a radius of over 200 miles, with a wide variety of services. Like many communities, Rapid City once had two competing hospitals: one with a Catholic background and one with a Protestant background. As the twentieth century progressed the two hospitals developed some specialities and unique services, but for the most part competed for patients, doctors, funding and other resources. Both institutions fought with facilities that were costly, cumbersome, and difficult to keep maintained with the increasing demands of technology and equipment. When a flood in 1972 caused extensive damage to one of the buildings and stressed the community's capacity to provide medical services to its residents, the two hospitals got together, combining resources and together launched construction of a new state-of-the-art hospital. The new building was a huge undertaking for the community, but also a marvel. Construction in the 1970's and 1980's focused on a ten-story tower with four patient pods of eight rooms each on the upper five floors. The second floor, which is at the ground level on the south side of the building, was devoted to the emergency room, surgical suites, surgical intensive care and other specialty services. The ground floor housed senior administration, admitting, cafeteria, gift shop, chapel, pharmacy and other services.

The new hospital was a triumph for our community. It attracted new physicians and new services were developed. It had a true community board of directors, who gave countless hours of their time.

Hospitals are incredibly complex institutions. The requirements of technology and service are mind-boggling. The hospital has to be capable of operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week regardless of weather, interruption of services such as electricity, communication, delivery of goods, etc. It require a huge number of employees. In addition to medical staff, a hospital needs a huge infrastructure of support staff to provide cleaning, laundry, maintenance, and a host of additional services. Ongoing training of staff, issues of staff morale and other human resource problems are significant. And like any other human institution there are competing interests and institutional politics.

When the ones we love are ill, we often adopt a “spare no cost” attitude about their care. And in the United States, we have developed the most expensive system of care available anywhere on the planet. And there was a time when it was also the best system of care in the world. But as is true of many other things, just spending the most amount of money alone doesn’t insure that the result will be the highest quality of care. In our country, the costs of practicing medicine have outrun the ability of many to pay. While our hospital, like all community hospitals in our nation would never turn away a patient from care because of an inability to pay, medical bills are the leading cause of bankruptcy in our nation. And while our hospital is a community-owned non-profit corporation, it handles a lot of money. And there are individuals and corporations who do make a profit from medical care in our community. Our hospital has the widest range of salaries of any institution in our community. The lowest-paid hourly employees cannot fathom the six and seven figure incomes of some of the specialists.The incredible capabilities, skills, education, and knowledge of medical specialists has convinced them that they deserve very high levels of compensation.

Of course a single blog entryway cannot begin to address the issues of health care in our community or any other. And health care certainly is not an area of my expertise. But the hospital is an institution with which I have almost daily contact and where I spend a lot of time. Because despite the advances of scientific medicine, despite the advanced and expensive technologies, despite the focused and specialized training of sub-specialists, healing remains a spiritual practice. There are plenty of people at the hospital who might argue that point with me, but I am convinced that healing lies beyond our ability to manipulate and control and always will be beyond our abilities.

This is not to say that we should do nothing. The advances in scientific medicine over the last century are wonderful. The capabilities to intervene and change the course of many different disease processes are a blessing to our community. The knowledge and understanding of the human body is incredible. And we will continue to learn and make advances in the healing arts. But the object of our study, the human body, is infinitely complex. We are all finite and subject to the effects of time and disease. We all experience pain and not every pain can be alleviated. Not that we shouldn’t try.

When a patient is admitted to our hospital, they are asked if they have any religious or cultural traditions that might affect the course of their care. The question is on the admission survey in an attempt to discover any resistance to scientific medicine, such as a refusal to consent to blood transfusion or specific surgical procedures. There is also an attempt to determine some of the limits of care by inquiring about advance directives, living wills, and other legal documents that define end-of-life care. The designers of the admissions survey think that their questionnaire is purely scientific and are for the most part unaware of the religious and cultural bias that is built into all of the practices of the hospital.

The decision whether or not to insert a breathing tube or connect a respirator is a spiritual decision no matter how cold the cost/benefit calculations that are being made. The decision to use extraordinary means to shock a human heart back into rhythm or to restart a heart that has stopped beating needs to be made in a very short amount of time, but it is a spiritual decision, whether or not those making the decision are aware of it. The calculation of the amount of brain function and the ability to recover from a coma is based on direct observation and carefully gathered experience, but it is still a spiritual decision.

Religious terms are based on specific observations and experiences of life. It is no mistake that the term “spirit” itself is in part a medical term. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word for spirit is the same as the word for breath. Early humans observed that there was a connection between breathing and life. Breath was seen as a life-force and should be respected. A pulmonologist is, by definition, a spiritual practitioner.

Our curiosity about life and death has lead us to different understandings about what makes a human alive. After generations of focusing our attention on breathing, we began to learn more about our circulatory system and the standard test of life and death, “is the person breathing?” gave way to “Is there a heartbeat?” Our capacity to re-start breathing and heartbeat has led to new discoveries and understandings and a new question about the end of life: “Is there brain activity?”

As advanced and specialized as our hospital becomes, it is still a place where the human spirit is a major dynamic. Human emotions effect decisions at every level. And we are engaged in a purely human enterprise - with all of our human frailties and limitations.

But God is always present, whether or not God is invited.

Often, when I leave the hospital, especially in the evening, I am aware of the cathedral which is across the street from our hospital. The hospital is a larger building and more brightly lit. The parking lot always has more cars than are at the cathedral, regardless of the time of day or activity at the cathedral. In many ways, our hospital has become the cathedral of our generation. We invest more money, time and energy in hospitals than

we do in overtly religious structures such as churches and cathedrals. Medical facilities are the leading consumers of artwork and patrons of art in our generation. Hospital entryways and lobbies are designed to impress and inspire those who enter. Archeologists of future generations will excavate the remains of our cities and determine that our highest priority for resources was our hospital. Just as church cathedrals were the focus of communities throughout most of the previous millennium, hospitals have become our focus. They are our cathedrals.

And I suppose there are those who object to such a shift in priority and resources.

But I am convinced that God has never been contained in buildings or defined by human architecture. God is not limited by where we choose to invest our resources.

So I visit the hospital frequently. I participate in its practices. And I find lots of evidence of God's work in that place. It is a very spiritual place. The dichotomy of religion verses science just doesn't hold up science and religion are, ultimately, very compatible and even scientists who claim to be atheists are engaged in spiritual enterprises.

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January 9, 2009 – Markets



Like many others who are watching the current economy, I have a sense that things may be shifting for our culture as well as the markets. I confess that I don't understand the nuances of financial markets. I think I have a relatively accurate command of the basics. There is supply and demand. When supply outpaces demand, prices go down; when demand outpaces supply, prices go up. I understand the basic concept of interest. When interest earned is invested, the new earnings are able to earn themselves. Compound interest allows invested funds to grow at a greater rate than simple interest. I understand the difference between stocks and bonds. I understand the concept of balancing a portfolio of investments.

But I really do not understand the markets. When someone tries to explain the market in futures of derivatives or other dynamics, I can follow part of the explanation, but not well enough to explain it to someone else.

All of which isn't a really big problem for a minister. First of all, I don't have a large amount of money to invest. Secondly, my job and life's work doesn't focus on money, but on other aspects of living. Our church serves people who have significant wealth and people who live in poverty. I have found that people who have good jobs struggle with their vocation as well as those who are unemployed. Grief and sorrow affect all people, regardless of their financial circumstances. And the spiritual quest for meaning is not a commodity that can be exchanged on a market.

Financially, my life is pretty simple. The church pays me each month to serve as its pastor. Some of my money goes to pay taxes, the rest covers the expenses of my life. When we needed a house, we did not have enough money to purchase the one we wanted in cash, so we have a mortgage. As mortgages go, it is pretty simple. It has a fixed rate of interest and the payment is the same each month. We have borrowed money for other items such as car purchases and our children's educations. We have a pension, which is managed by the Pension boards and invested in a balanced fund of stocks and bonds. We try to save additional funds, most of which are invested in a mutual fund, managed by people who work in the financial markets full-time. The system works pretty well for us. When things were going great in the markets, it looked like we were making great strides. The value of our home was increasing and the value of our investments went up, too. Then the markets turned down and the value of our home decreased and the value of our investments decreased too. Just like those of our neighbors and friends.

The ministry offers pretty stable employment. We do not have the fear of layoffs and job losses that are a part of other professions. This is not to say that we couldn't end up with a period of our lives when we are unemployed, it is just less likely to happen to us than to folks with other jobs. Even with the downturned economy, there are fewer ministers than congregations seeking to hire ministers.

Of course, I have questions, like everyone else. I understand that banks are reluctant to lend money because there is less money to lend. With defaults on mortgages and declines in market value the total wealth of the nation has decreased and there is less money available for investment and lending. It might seem then, that someone who had extra money and was willing to lend it would have something in high demand and therefore be able to get a fair return on his investment. If the supply is short and the demand is high the price goes up, right? But that is not the case with interest rates on cash investments. The few people and institutions who are willing to invest in certificates of deposit are not being offered higher rates of return. Putting more money into banks does not seem to result in there being more money for the banks to lend.

Aren't you glad that I am not a banker? I really don't understand the markets.

What I do understand is that our economy and our culture are shifting. Things will not operate the same in the future as they did in the past. The idea of setting aside a portion of your income each month so that at some point on your life you can retire and live without income from a daily job worked well for some generations. Their investments grew and then they were able to live off of their investments. The principle amounts they had saved, combined with the interest those amounts earned to be available for spending in retirement. But most people are like us. In the past two quarters we have lost more money in our retirement fund than we paid in during the last five years. If one loses five years of investment in half a year, it follows that there may not be enough money in the retirement accounts for one to stop working and live off of the retirement

accounts. Or at least we will need to work more years in order to have enough money in the accounts to retire.

The impact is significant enough that people are beginning to question the concept and the length of retirement. If one is healthy and able to work, should one retire? Of course that affects the markets, too. If people start to delay retirement, that produces more workers. More supply and less demand means the price goes down. More workers means lower wages for those who are working. You would think that more people retiring would mean more jobs for those who have not retired. But the markets are not that simple. Other factors affect the number of jobs available.

Saving is supposed to be good, but if people don't spend money, then there is less income and fewer jobs in businesses that are based on retail sales.

I think it is safe to say that the time has come for us to rethink our basic notions of retirement. Maybe being fully retired isn't the right goal for every worker. Maybe there are those who would continue to work part-time or to work full-time for part of the year, even though they have passed the usual age for retirement. Maybe there are jobs that need to be done that don't produce enough to live on, yet still need to be accomplished.

I know people who have retired from their regular jobs who work just as hard as when they were being paid for their work. They do their own home maintenance instead of hiring others to do it. They volunteer their time and energy to accomplish the work of non profit organizations. One of the jokes in the church is that we have a word for those who retire: "volunteer." The church gains far more value from the time donated by members than from the money donated by members. And our congregation receives generous donations of money. Our budget is over a quarter of a million dollars a year. But we accomplish several million dollars of ministry because our largest stream of income comes in volunteer hours. By this Sunday, our Woodchuck Society will have delivered 36 cords of firewood this fall and winter. At the current market rate of $125 per cord, the value of that wood is $4,500. With our closest delivery point 120 miles away and our farthest delivery point double the distance, the cost of the delivery of the firewood probably exceeds the actual value. It would be a conservative estimate to say that delivering and stacking 36 cords of cut and split firewood to our reservation partners would cost as much as $9,000 if we hired someone else to do the work. But the Woodchuck Society does not operate in cash. Our enterprise is all donations of labor, of pickup trucks, of fuel, of time.

We operate in a different economy. When the demand goes up, we work harder to make the supply go up. The price does not change. We deliver the firewood as a free gift. That's it. It is free when the economy is good and it is free when the economy is bad. It is not unlike Habitat for Humanity. At Habitat, we build houses at cost: no profit, minimal labor costs. And then we sell them for cost and loan the homeowners the money with no interest. No profit, no interest means the cost of the house is affordable

to people who could not afford a regular house. Because the “customers” of Habitat cannot afford houses on the regular market, we do not compete with conventional builders. They still sell the same number of houses. And because we help people increase their standard of living and we build new houses in neighborhoods, we increase the tax revenue for the city and increase land values in neighborhoods. Everybody is is winner in the economy of Habitat. And despite the downward trend in the housing market, Habitat is recession-proof. We still have plenty of families who need the houses we build, we still have plenty of volunteers and donors, we still receive the payments from our homeowners for the houses they have purchased. We simply operate in a different economy than the wider world. As Millard Fuller used to say, “The economics of Jesus work.”

So the markets will rise and fall. Some people will make great profits and others will lose a great deal. And those of us who work in the church will be affected by the economy. But the impact of the wider economy is lighter than on other institutions, even than its impact on other non-profit organizations. Because our major stream of income is not cash - it is people. Rich and poor participate in the life of the church alike. And when the wealth of our families decreases it is only the amount of money that we have that decreases. We continue to have all of the other qualities for our life as a congregation. And when it comes to the church, money simply is not the most important of our assets.

I don’t understand the markets. But I do understand Jesus’ call to discipleship. I do understand his advice to “consider the lilies of the field,” and not worry about the future, for the future is in God’s hands. The world may be in upheaval, the culture may be shifting, but we’re doing fine.

And there is no shortage of the work of serving others in the name of Jesus Christ. Even if we don’t have money, we won’t be out of work. As we say, “God is good. All the time.” “All the time, God is good.”

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January 10, 2009 – Earthquake



Workers in San Jose standing outside during one of the aftershocks. Photo by Saray Ramirez Vindas from amcostarica.com.

Our congregation feels a deep connection to our sister church in Costa Rica. We have several members who monitor the daily news from Costa Rica and who maintain year round relationships with our pastor and church leaders there. We have all had our eyes on Costa Rica for the past few weeks because we are preparing to send a couple of workers there next Tuesday. It is time for Vacation Bible School and our congregation has had some one in Costa Rica for Vacation Bible School since 1988.

So the news of the earthquake and aftershocks spread through our church quickly. At first our reaction was, “another earthquake.” Earthquakes are common in Costa Rica. and most people who have traveled there several times have felt the earth shaking. But this quake was more dramatic.

We had members who were speaking to Costa Rica when the quake started around 1:20 on Thursday, and the abrupt end of the conversation caused a lot of worry. And, as news began to spread, it was evident that this quake was a big one.

Reports say the quake was measured at 6.1 or 6.2 on the Richter Scale. The epicenter was somewhere near Paos National Park, northwest of the city of San Jose. Many communities have been affected and there is a national alert in San Jose. The death toll is at 15 with many others stranded. A national emergency has been declared. Hundreds of people have been evacuated but more remain stranded by the mudslides and other

dramatic effects of the quake. Many tourists are trapped by landslide-closed roads in the vicinity of La Paz Waterfalls Gardens, north of Heredia.

San Jose city residents are nervous as there have been more than 250 aftershocks large enough to be felt. On Friday and explosion and fire, not caused by the earthquake, ripped through the national emergency commission storage building. The storage unit is operated by the national agency in charge of dealing with the results of earthquakes and is located at San Jose's secondary airport. A large quantity of relief supplies were destroyed in the fire.

The road to Poas National Park, familiar to several people in our congregation, is closed in several places and there are many houses that have been destroyed by landslides. There is some damage in downtown San Jose. Centro Colon may have suffered serious structural damage to upper floors. Hospital Mexico had almost all of its first floor windows blown out by the quake and there was damage on other floors. There were leaks of oxygen and other gas throughout the hospital, which has not been fully evacuated, but patients have been moved to more secure areas within the building. There is at least one building on the pedestrian boulevard in downtown San Jose that is roped off by police and there are cracks on the sides of some buildings. More than 90 percent of the offices and businesses in San Jose have had some interruption of business since the earthquake.

Over the years we have collected a lot of stories of how the agencies and organizations that are established to respond to disasters themselves become a part of the disaster. There was a devastating hospital fire during one of our visits several years ago, and emergency agencies are often damaged and their effectiveness limited during emergencies. It takes a long time to recover from significant events.

The death toll is likely to rise as rescue crews are able to reach more remote areas. Neighboring countries, including the United States have sent equipment and crews to aid in rescue and recovery. At least two U.S. helicopters are on the scene and working.

Our relationship with Costa Rica is sustained, in part, by stories. The majority of the members of our congregation have never visited our sister church. And there are many people in Rapid City who have shown great generosity and concern for Costa Rica who will never visit. We remain connected through regular exchanges, letters, e-mail and occasional telephone calls. And we remain connected because those who do travel bring back pictures and tell the stories.

The earthquake will give us another story to tell, once we have gotten past our worry for those who are there and those who will be traveling this week.

We have decided to shift our work tour schedule to make things a bit more convenient here and to avoid conflict with other work groups. That means that we are not planning

to take a group to Costa Rica this year, and to put our efforts into a 2010 group visit. However, we will change our plans if our mission partners discover special needs for a crew this year.

It is the nature of our world and the nature of our faith that we become connected with others who live in distant locations. An earthquake in Costa Rica cannot be felt in South Dakota through the movement of the earth, but it is felt through the lives and stories of the people. Increasingly we recognize that ours is not a story about “us” and “them,” but rather the story of our church at work in two different locations.

Events in the world frequently shake us up. Sometimes they inspire us to greater faith and service. Our prayers for Costa Rica include a sincere wish for the safety of those who are cut off and missing as well as a prayer for relief from the quakes that allow rescue to proceed. Long-term, we pray for more effective government response to disasters and the construction of more buildings that can withstand earthquakes. May those who survive the earthquake learn from it and may the lessons they learn be put to use in preventing tragedies in the future.

Please join me in praying for the people of Costa Rica. Additional news about Costa Rica is available at www.amcostarica.com and at http://news.bbc.co.uk.

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January 11, 2009 – A Good Day



News continues to arrive from Costa Rica. It appears that there is significant damage in the Cedcas Clinic operated by Latin America Ministries. The shaking on the third floor was so severe that it broke a toilet, the running water from the broken fixture ran for almost an hour before it was located and shut off. The running water damaged the ceilings in two surgical suites. There is additional damage in the dental treatment area on the first floor as well. There are some cracks in the building and additional damage may be discovered. An additional building near the clinic that houses wellness and educational programs has broken windows and some roof damage. The important news is that none of the people who live at and work in the Clinic and none of the people from the work team that was there at the time are injured. “Shaken, but not broken” was the news in the last e-mail.

In the meantime, we gathered yesterday for a firewood delivery to Wanblee. It was a new record for our Woodchuck Society: eleven pickups, two trailers, twenty-three people, and over 12 cords of wood. Wanblee is a little over 100 miles East of Rapid City and we made an impressive convoy as we headed down the highway. Travel went smoothly, our partners in Wanblee were ready for our arrival and we were unloaded in short order. After we unloaded and stacked the wood, we took our food and there was an abundance! Three pickup tailgates were required to set up the buffet that included fried chicken, wild game jerky, cookies of a wide variety, fruit, cheese, crackers, vegetable trays and lots more. The drive home through the badlands was beautiful and we were done with our work in the daylight.

A few of us lingered for a a little conversation in the parking lot after we had put away the trailers. “It was a really good day,” was the comment that we shared.

All of the elements were in place: meaningful work, the company of friends to share the work, a genuine need that we are able to address, food, fellowship and prayer. There was time for conversation in the vehicles as we drove and sharing with friends upon our arrival. We have made enough trips to Wanblee for the people who handle the distribution of the firewood there are familiar to us and we are eager to see them and hear about their lives when we arrive.

It is a simple process, really. We are aware that there are significant problems on the reservation. There is high unemployment and intense poverty. There are people with inadequate health care and substandard housing. Winters can be harsh on the prairie and severe weather can become life-threatening. Alcohol abuse and crime are dangerously high. We cannot solve the problems. What we can do is help a little bit by delivering firewood and developing partnerships with people who arrange for it to be delivered to those who are in need.

The work of cutting and splitting the firewood warms our bodies. The friendships warm our spirits. Then the firewood warms homes of people who have genuine needs. We get a lot of value out of each load of fuel.

The truth is that this life gives us a lot of good days.

We live in a beautiful part of the world. We have been blessed with the ability to travel and make friends in other locations. We are a part of a church that has the freedom to set its sights on outreach. The generosity of previous generations has given us a beautiful place to meet, worship and work and we are freed to focus our thoughts and actions on serving in our community.

And the Woodchuck Society has unique qualities that make is a great mission quality. The project runs on in-kind donations. We do not need money for the project. It has no budget. People donate time, the use of trucks and tools, and fuel. I don’t have the latest count of participants, but it is over 100 members of our congregation and a significant number of friends from the community who have donated wood, labor, tools, trailers, trucks and other elements to our project. We have no need of meetings or officers or structure. Volunteers make phone calls, write thank you notes and organize work days. We work when there is a need and when we have time.

And the project continues to grow. Yesterday was our biggest delivery ever and it was a second trip to Wanblee in a cold winter. We have delivered about 30% more firewood this year than last. That kind of growth certainly is different than businesses that require capitol and banking services to grow in this economy.

It was a good day.

And somedays, having a good day is enough.

It is enough for us to feel genuine gratitude for the blessings of this life.

May you have a good day today.

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January 12, 2009 – The Wind



I woke up to the sound of the wind outside. The forecast is for high winds throughout the day as a cold front moves into the area. We've had quite a few really nice days in a row. Yesterday it was nearly 50 degrees as I went about my afternoon activities. But the wind is really whistling by outside. Today is our day for garbage pickup but I'll have to see if I think that plastic container can remain upright until the truck arrives. I have not desire to donate my garbage to the neighbors. And with winds like this, the garbage might make Missouri before it stops blowing. We had a dusting of snow last night, but it has pretty much blown away from any flat surface. The forecast includes the possibility of a bit more snow and continued winds with gust to 70 mph during the day.

Most of my life has been lived in places where the wind blows. It is a sort of companion, in a way. Wind usually signals change. And wind freshens the air, moving smoke, dust and other pollutants to new locations. But the wind is easiest to appreciate when one is in a tight building protected from the blast. A little wind can make things very cold and adds significantly to the risks of exposure. It wouldn't be easy to survive long outdoors without some shelter.

It is a good thing that Costa Rica isn't experiencing the winds we're having. With hundreds of people living in tents and temporary shelters after the earthquake, at least they should have mild temperatures and clear skies for the next few days as rescue work continues. Shelter is critical for all people, regardless of where they live, but the type of shelter can vary significantly with the location. In Costa Rica and other places closer to the equator, home heating is practically unknown. There is no need for the

thick insulation and central heating systems that are designed into every home in our part of the world. Habitat for Humanity is able to build simple, decent homes for families at a fraction of the cost in Costa Rica that we need to spend to build adequate housing here in South Dakota.

Today we have the wind to remind us that there are plenty of elements in this life over which we have no control. Even so, our lives are less affected by the weather than was the case for people a century ago. A windy day like today meant that people would stay put a century ago in this area. All forms of travel involved exposing oneself to the elements. Even with heavy, warm clothing, traveling any distance was a real struggle. Today we get into our cars and travel where we want. We'll complain about the wind and extremely gusty conditions will sometimes slow us down, but we have systems to safely travel in all sorts of conditions. The reliability and comfort of our cars would have been unimaginable to those who traveled the prairies by horse or walking.

Still, a good gust from the northwest can push my insulated front door hard enough to make a whistle and allow a little air to enter around the seals. It can rattle the storm windows on the outside of the house. It rushes through the trees with enough force for us to hear it even inside a tightly built and warmly insulated home. There's real power in the weather.

And I think it does us good to pay attention to the weather.

As the people of Israel began to settle into the land of Caanan and adapt their lifestyles after years of wandering in the desert, they had more time to interact with people who had different religious notions and different experiences than those of Israel. The Caananite people had multiple Gods and saw the forces of nature as signs that there were multiple Gods. It seemed to them that the forces of harsh weather were different than the ones that brought gentle rains and warm sunshine. Certainly the cause of bad weather would be different than the cause of good weather. The people of Israel resisted this notion. Their belief in a single God that was in control of all of the world led them to assert God's sovereignty. There are several parts of our Bible that reflect this understanding of God. One is the psalm that we read in worship yesterday.

"The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon." (Ps 29:5)

"The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forests bare." (Ps 29:9)

We are less likely than our forebears to identify the sound of the wind as God's voice. We have lots of scientific explanations and technical names to give to weather phenomena. All the same, thinking of the wind as the breath or the voice of God is not a totally useless image. God is continually refreshing, renewing, and moving in the world. And constant change is just one of the signs that God is present in the world.

And, on occasion, the weather impresses us enough to make us take notice, maybe even to cry out “Glory!” like the people in the Psalm. When we remind ourselves that God is active in all of the universe, we are reminded of how magnificent are the forces and scope of God’s realm is.

A contemporary psalmist might reflect on the vast distances of the universe, or the incredible beauty in a single flower or an open vista, and perhaps a contemporary psalmist might reflect on the power of certain forces of nature. But I hope that we don’t lose our ability to see God’s presence in a gentle breeze or in the sometimes relentless wind across the prairie.

For surely God is in this place. And the breath of God is powerful indeed.

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January 13, 2009 – Blog Themes



The moon is at its perigee, the closest to the earth that it will be this year. This means that we have had dramatic moon rises and that he moon has been spectacularly bright. I spent a few minutes trying to capture it with the camera last evening, but of course a camera combined with my skill level doesn't fully capture what my eyes see. Still, I think that the pictures I took will serve as a reminder of a beautiful evening.

A quick glance over the titles of my blog entries for the past couple of years reveals that there seem to be themes to which I return from time to time. I was especially aware of that yesterday. It seems that I write about the wind a lot. And we don't live in a place that is particularly windy. I'm not sure why the wind captures my interest so much. And when I'm not writing about the wind, I seem to get in several blogs that focus on the weather each month. More than a year ago, I decided that I had exhausted my knowledge about cats. I had been writing about our cats on a fairly regular basis. The cats and the moon make sense as blog entries because they are photogenic. Since I post a picture with my blog each day and try to post one of my own pictures most days, I write about the things that I photograph. And I do have a lot of pictures of cats and of the moon.

There have been plenty of articles about life in the church, which one would expect from a pastor's blog. I have written about the various church meetings that I attend and about activities in our local church. Occasionally, I have expounded on a biblical passage, and often I have written about sermon texts. My style of preaching requires quite a bit of mulling the texts and that is reflected in the blogs that I have written.

Life in the hills is a consistent category. I write about the animals in our yard, about gardening and baking bread. There have been a large number of pictures of deer and quite a few of wild turkeys in our yard. I write about canoes and kayaks - building and paddling them.

From time to time I write about the news that makes headlines, offering my perspective and commentary as if there was a need for more commentary about the news. Most of the time my perspective isn't truly fresh, but a reflection of points of view that others have expressed.

I write about friends and friendship quite a bit and family as well. I am blessed in both of those departments. We have wonderful friends, and I have a wonderful family. I guess that the major themes of my blogs are the themes of my life.

I've been having trouble coming up with a topic for the past few days. That happens from time to time. It would also explain today's blog - a blog about blogging. One dynamic is that one of the big things that is happening in my life is that my mother has been in the hospital. Yesterday we moved her from the hospital to a care center. Things are going really well, but there are a lot of emotions involved with helping her settle into a temporary new residence and saying good bye when I head home without her. And I'm not yet ready to say much more about that topic.

I am aware that although my days don't involve an excess of physical work, I am going to bed tired in the evenings. Processing emotions requires energy as well. The next two weeks will be a busy time in the church as we finalize a budget, prepare annual reports, and produce the resources we need to keep our congregation informed and involved in plans for 2009. We will be having a planning session with an outside consultant early in the year that will help us focus our priorities and set directions for our work together. And there seem to be the usual round of meetings that were put off due to the busy days of the holidays, creating a busy season that follows the holidays.

One theme that emerges as I look over the list of blogs and their topics: life is good. In the midst of busy days and activities, there is much to celebrate and much for which I am very thankful. And if there is to be a recurring theme, it seems that gratitude is worthy of repetition. The joy of life is probably less boring for readers than the weather.

It will be interesting to see what themes and patterns emerge in the year to come.

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January 14, 2009 – The Mess



There are a variety of different ways that we measure time and its impact on our lives. One of those measures is the counting of years. Based on the amount of time it takes the earth to orbit the sun, and the resulting change of seasons, people have long counted years. In our numbering system, we just made the transition from 2008 to 2009. Because our church uses a calendar year for its business cycle, there are a lot of tasks that need to be accomplished as one year finishes and another begins.

We are almost finished with the financial reports on the year just ended, and most of our departments and committees are in the process of submitting their end of the year reports. We usually do a summary of mission and ministry and our pastors file annual reports as well. All of the reports are drawn together in a booklet which is published in paper form and also made available on the web for members of our congregation. We have just over a week to accomplish that task.

The reports are full of cross-references, and documents like the budget are affected by a variety of different factors. So the only way I know how to tackle the project is to spread the various documents out on my desk and dive in. I am not known for keeping a clean desk in the first place, so the various piles of papers and books could hardly be called a "system." The truth is that my style of working results in a certain level of disorder. My focus is on the finished project and I'm willing to make a mess to get there. My desk at home doesn't look any neater. There are plenty of year-end tasks for a homeowner in a family where we manage finances and prepare tax returns for our parents as well as ourselves.

I keep dreaming of cleaning up the mess and making perfect order out of the chaos, but it is a dream and not a reality at this point.

The truth is that life is often messy.

I am very grateful to the people who are organized and who help others to become organized and I appreciate the ways in which their organization enables all of us to work more efficiently. And somewhere beneath the various piles of papers, I have a sense of organization, too. But there are some times when I need to allow a little chaos in my life while I focus on the end result.

Chaos and creativity are connected. The Bible speaks of creation as a process of bringing order and meaning to chaos, but it also acknowledges that the process of creation can be disruptive. There are descriptions of God scooping out the dirt of the earth to form the human from the humus. There are images of wild winds that strip the trees bare and rains that flood the entire earth. Relationships between people get messy in the bible as well. There is intrigue and betrayal and change of affection and loyalty. When the bible attempts to create neat genealogies, there are all sorts of twists and turns in the heritage of the people of Israel.

Life is often messy and real life faith is not afraid of an occasional mess.

Parents know this without the need of formal thought or instruction. Babies and children are experts at making messes and they often need help cleaning up their messes.

But the invitation of our faith is to move through the mess. We are not called to give in and succumb to the mess, but to continue to create - to look for patterns and ways of making connections. The general flow of creation, from chaos to meaning is the direction of our faith. I can understand my frustration with the mess and my occasional need to simply go through and sort the trash from the valuable objects as the voice of God pushing me in a direction that I need to know. I know that God has much more important concerns than the condition of my office, but I also know that my conscience is one way that God speaks to me.

So each year, somewhere in the midst of the chaos of preparing annual reports, I resolve to become more organized and to clear out the chaos. I know that I will not eliminate chaos from my life. I know that life is messy. But I also know that I could make some progress against the ever-mounting piles of mail, reports and paperwork.

The challenge is worth tackling if for no other reason that my real work is not in the papers in the first place. My real work is with the people and in the relationships in which we engage. My office is there to enable to me be out of the office - with the

people that I serve. And when it gets too messy, I have to spend too much of my time cleaning up my mess when I should be spending more time with God's people.

So don't be surprised if I get a bit lost in my office in the next week. Hopefully we will emerge with the resources we need to hold our annual meeting and to conduct our business in a meaningful fashion. I'm not going to ask you to excuse my mess, and I am not going to spend much of my energy apologizing for the mess. But I am resolving to work through the mess and to eliminate as much of the clutter as possible. And in so doing, I hope to make room in my life for the things that are really important.

I once saw a plaque that said, "God bless this mess." I am not asking God to bless my mess, however. I am asking God to inspire me to the creativity required to move beyond the mess to the ministry.

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January 15, 2009 – The Tree



“So pastor, what’s with the Christmas tree in the sanctuary?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, first of all no one decorated it this year. We just had a plain tree. But it is still there. Why hasn’t it been taken down?”

“I guess it hasn’t become important enough for someone to take it down. When it does, it’ll get taken down.”

Actually, I took down the tree in the sanctuary yesterday. I do have responsibilities to prepare the space for worship and I have a sense of how I want things to look this week when we gather for worship. But there is still an undecorated artificial tree in the fellowship hall. I’m not sure how long it will be before it is taken down. I may take it down as well one of these days. I put them both up, after the bags with the unassembled trees had been sitting in the rooms for a week or more. I didn’t think the bangs were very attractive.

But I really don’t want to add “putting up and taking down the Christmas trees” to the list of duties that the pastor does. It isn’t that I think I’m too good for the job or that I think that there are certain things that pastors shouldn’t do. It is just that my list of tasks is already longer than my energy and time and dealing with the trees doesn’t seem very high on my list of priorities.

Apparently it isn't very high on the lists of others, either.

It isn't that I am opposed to Christmas trees. Going out into the woods and selecting a tree for our home, bringing it home and decorating it, gathering at the tree on Christmas morning, and enjoying it throughout the season are highlights of the year for our family. We even enjoy the process of taking off the decorations and packing them away. Taking down the tree signals, for our family a time to rearrange the furniture. We usually shampoo the living room carpet as a part of this seasonal shift as well, so the room feels fresh and comfortable after the tree comes down.

Our church used to have a tradition of beautiful trees in the sanctuary and fellowship hall. We had a family in our church who enjoyed selecting beautiful trees for those places. Some years members donated trees from their yards that had to be cut. We always had beautiful trees. I don't know the origin of the tradition, but the tree in the sanctuary always had simple white lights and no other decorations.

When the fire marshall informed us that we could no longer have live trees in our building as we do not have a sprinkler system, the Department of Buildings, Equipment and Grounds purchased large and beautiful artificial trees for the sanctuary and the fellowship hall. The fellowship hall tree was decorated by the women's fellowship in preparation for their Christmas tea and the sanctuary tree always had lights.

Until this year, when nobody could remember whose job it was to put up and decorate the trees. A member of the Department of Buildings, Equipment and Grounds carried the trees up from the basement, but that was as far as it got. And somehow, it wasn't important enough for other members of the congregation for anyone to do anything more about it. Our sanctuary was lovely with new banners, paraments, and lots of poinsettias. The undecorated tree stood in the corner and didn't distract from the rest of the decorations.

After a brief discussion, the Department of Worship voted to take on the project of the sanctuary tree next year. They made plans to put up and decorate the tree and I am sure that they'll do a lovely job. But no mention of who was going to take down the tree this year was made. I had a few minutes between meetings yesterday and took down the sanctuary tree and put it into storage in the basement.

I'm afraid to do the same with the fellowship hall tree since no group or individual has come forward with an offer to take care of the tree. Traditions are easy to establish in the church, but tough to change. I can just imagine the conversation next year: "Who did it last year?" "The pastor." "Well, if it is the pastor's job, we'll get him to do it." As I said before, I'm not eager to add putting up and taking down an artificial Christmas tree to the pastor's job description.

It isn't that our church is short of volunteers. We have lots of dedicated volunteers engaged in all kinds of tasks. People come into our building on a regular basis to help with maintenance, care for the live plants in the sanctuary, decorate the church for seasonal activities and may other tasks. Last year, the congregation took on the job of mowing the lawn and volunteers kept things looking great all summer long. We have plenty of volunteers for our mission projects, which are numerous and varied. When it comes time to cook the mission meal or prepare the newsletter for mailing, there are plenty of volunteers eager to work with joy.

It is just that somehow Christmas trees wasn't one of the projects that volunteers wanted to tackle this year. It has very little to do with the trees themselves. The trees are a symbol of the transition that is taking place in our church. Some jobs are easier to pass from one generation to the next. Sometimes it is difficult for established leaders to share tasks. Sometimes it is difficult for new members to figure out how to become involved. Some jobs are more welcoming of new participants than others. And Christmas Trees are associated with tradition in the minds of almost all of our members. And no one wants to disrupt a tradition. I don't think it would be difficult to establish a tradition of an undecorated tree in the sanctuary. Soon people would say, "We've always done it that way," even if no one could remember why we do it that way. It takes a bit of courage to change a tradition, even if the tradition is no tradition at all.

The funny thing is that very few people have said anything at all about it to me. Last Christmas, when the star was simply projected over the manger in the Christmas pageant, instead of moving ahead of the wise men as they processed, i heard about it. To hear some people's expressions of disappointment, you might think that a moving star was as essential to the meaning of Christmas as the baby in the manger. There was enough of an outcry that it was not difficult to get the memorial committee to approve the purchase of a follow spotlight that projects a star. And I made sure that there was a volunteer to operate the star this year. It worked without a problem. So I know that people will complain when things are important to them.

But somehow the tree wasn't that important this year. I find it to be interesting that I cannot predict which things will become important to people.

It is entirely that the process of the Department of Worship taking on the tree will turn the sanctuary tree into an important and valued tradition in the church. A few years from now there may be a group of people who can't imagine the sanctuary at Christmas without a decorated tree. Or perhaps another tradition will emerge.

The important thing is that the traditions of caring in our church are in place. There is no shortage of volunteers to deliver firewood, cook mission meals, host the TLC group, take food to the mission, sell coupons for Church Response and other important outreach projects.

Maybe the tradition of the trees that are cut, split, and delivered for energy assistance to families in need is our version of a “Christmas Tree” for this phase of our life together. You have to admit that it isn’t a bad way to celebrate the spirit of the Christ child.

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January 16, 2009 – Thank God



New York Times Photo.

For the 155 passengers and crew members of US Airways Flight 1549, today is a day of thanksgiving. For their families and friends, today is a day of thanksgiving. For the people of New York who had a direct view of an airplane descending below the tops of the buildings, many of whom have vivid memories of September 11, 2001, today is a day of thanksgiving. And for the rest of us, it is a day of thanksgiving as well.

The story is quite simple. The Airbus A-320 took off from New York's La Guardia airport at 3:26 p.m. bound for Charlotte. Shortly after take off, when the plane was at an altitude of approximately 3600 feet and still over the city, the plane suffered a catastrophic double engine failure. The pilot radioed air traffic controllers that the plane had sustained a "double bird strike." The exact cause of the failure is still under investigation, but it appears that the plane ran into a flock of birds, perhaps geese or gulls. Without power, the airplane was unable to return to the airport of departure or to make it to Teterboro, N.J., the closest airport. The largest area where there were no buildings or people was the Hudson River. The pilot was so busy making multiple decisions that the only warning he was able to give his passengers and flight attendants was the simple statement, "brace for impact." Flight attendants were able to add more specifics: "feet flat on the floor, heads down, cover your heads." The pilot executed a textbook perfect water ditching of the aircraft. Coming in slightly nose high, the plane skimmed over the water until it came to a stop without substantial damage to the aircraft.

From that moment on, everything went just like a safety demonstration. Remember the part in the safety lecture about “In the unlikely event of a water landing . . .” The event occurred. The people in the exit rows got the emergency exit doors open and out of the airplane. Passengers went to the nearest exits and left the plane. The plane, which was slowly sinking, remained afloat long enough for passengers to assemble on the wings and the exit slides that doubled as life rafts inflated from the front and rear exits. A makeshift flotilla of rescue boats, mostly New York ferry system ships which made transfer of passengers from the aircraft wings to the low ferry decks relatively easy. The pilot personally checked then entire airplane to make sure that all others were evacuated before exiting the airplane. Passengers and crew were evacuated to both sides of the river and it took a little while to sort them out and count them. But in the end the news was all good. 155 passengers and crew members all alive. 15 passengers were treated in area hospitals for minor injuries, primarily hypothermia from the cold. Some had stood up to their ankles in 35-degree water.

In a world filled with bad news, it is a joy to receive good news.

Thank God for a pilot and co-pilot who were superbly trained not only in normal operations, but also in emergency procedures. Thank God for crew coordination that allowed them to work together not only with each other, but with the flight attendants to get essential safety information to the passengers. Thank God for passengers in the exit seats who knew how to operate emergency exits and assist other passengers. Thank God for passengers who, although terrified and traumatized from the emergency landing did not panic, but followed instructions and exited safely. Thank God for all of the nearby boats that rushed to assist in rescue. Thank God for trained fire fighters and rescue personnel who quickly got passengers to warm places and kept them organized so that accurate counts could be made and any in need of medical attention would receive it promptly. It is an event worthy of thousands of doxologies: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow . . .”

When I think how close we came to a tragedy of enormous proportions, I shudder. The challenges and problems that I was working on yesterday and the ones that face me today seem minor by comparison. The raising of the sunken airplane, the recovery of what can be recovered from the wreckage, the compensation of passengers for items lost in luggage and alternate travel arrangements, the investigation of the accident for what can be learned - all of these are enormous tasks. But they pale in comparison with the good news. Everyone survived - all were rescued safely.

I grew up around airplanes. Both of my parents were pilots. I was taught that aviation was an inherently safe practice, when undertaken with due diligence and caution. My father operated his aviation business for 25 years without an accident that resulted in serious injury. We had some incidents of damage to aircraft, but not to people. I remember my father quoting safety statistics about various forms of travel.

Airline accidents are very rare, but they are always dramatic because the airplanes hold so many people. And emergency landings are risky because there are few places with sufficient open space to accommodate the size and speed of the airplane. But the training of the crews is rigorous. They practice emergency procedures and are trained in emergency decision-making. And that training pays off. Yesterday was a demonstration of how good the results are when safety procedures are followed.

I take nothing away from the crew or the passengers or the rescue workers, when I say "Thank God." It was a blessing and God works through the actions of people. And God is present in every moment and time. And it is appropriate to thank God.

So today is, for me, and for millions of other people around the world, a day of thanksgiving. The memory will soon fade for many of us, and other news, some dramatically tragic, will soon appear in our lives. But in the midst of the chaos and turmoil of this world, we pause today to say, "Thank you, God."

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January 17, 2009 – Trust



It seems as if every day there is a new story about an investment manager who has gone missing, or who has been arrested, or who can't be contacted by investors. This morning there is a story of Arthur Nadel a Sarasota investment advisor responsible for millions of his client's dollars. Sarasota police captain Bill Spitler said, "It was brought to our attention that there has been a very significant number of victims with a very significant amount of money that has disappeared. Allegedly it's hundreds of millions of dollars."

The stories continue about Madoff, who was running a Ponzi scheme, and Marcus Schrenker, who botched his attempt to fake his own death.

It is not just that there seems to be an increase in theft and fraud. The reality is that all across the country people who trusted investment advisors with their money are waking up to the reality that there is less money. The savings they thought they had are gone. Promises like "the rule of seven" (double your money for each seven years you leave it invested in the market) don't seem to be working out as planned. Advice like "balance your portfolio" don't make sense in a time when stocks, bonds and real estate are all plunging.

People are wondering who they can trust.

I grew up with stories of the Great Depression. My grandmother had a very modest amount of savings at the time of her death, but it took quite a bit of time and effort to

close out her estate because the money was distributed in seven different banks. She never learned to trust banks after the bank failures of the 1930's. By the next generation, the distrust of banks was largely forgotten. And by the time my generation came along, we were all encouraged to place our savings in mutual funds. Invest in the market and allow the professionals to manage your money.

Most of us did that. And we bought homes which seemed to continue to increase in value.

It seemed to be working. Until we received our third and fourth quarter statements last year.

About a third of the wealth we thought we had is gone. It was all paper anyway. We never realized any of that wealth. It was something that we thought would be able to spend in our retirement. Now it is evident that we need to re-think the whole idea of retirement.

And all of a sudden I catch myself thinking like my grandmother, suspecting that there is no one who can be trusted to keep money safe.

The problem is as old as money itself. As long as currency has been used as a medium of exchange, there have been people who didn't understand all of the dynamics of the exchanges and there have been others who were willing to manage the funds of their clients. As long as people have exchanged money, the distribution of funds has not been equal.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all report that Jesus was asked about money management, specifically about taxes. Jesus asked to see a coin. They brought him a denarius and he asked, "Whose portrait and inscription are on it?" He never directly answered the question about taxes, but he did make it clear that the process of loving God is not about money.

There is plenty of talk about money in the gospels. It appears that it was one of Jesus' favorite subjects - or, if not, a subject that others brought up again and again. The are stories of a widow's mite, a lost coin, a rich young ruler, a farmer who built more storehouses, and many others.

Jesus never encouraged his disciples to save up lots of money. He never gave them financial investment advice. He never remarked about who could be trusted to manage money. The common story in Christian tradition is that the very person who betrayed Jesus, Judas Iscariot, was the one who kept the common purse for the disciples.

There is no evidence that Jesus invested any energy worrying about money.

Being a disciple of Christ might mean that we need to worry a bit less about money. But that is easier said than done. We were raised with the expectation that we would be responsible with money. The minister's code of ethics specifically addresses the responsibility of being faithful and trustworthy in financial management.

My father was very successful at financial management. All of his children seem to have fallen short of his talents and abilities in that category.

But I have to remind myself again and again, "It's not about money."

The church, with its generous donors, significant expenses, carefully-crafted budgets, is not about money. Mission and ministry are not primarily about money. We occasionally handle money in our quest to do God's work, but we are not about money. If we were to lose all of the funds in our accounts, we would not stop being the church. If we were to have no way to write a check or to pay for heat in our building, we would not lose our desire to help God's people in need.

It truly is a matter of trust.

I have heard it remarked that U.S. citizens print the words "In God we trust," on our money and then behave as if we don't believe a word of it.

There is an interesting twist in the story of Jesus and the coin. After his question about whose image is on the coin, he issues the famous quote: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." He doesn't say anything about saving. He doesn't say anything about what is kept or retained. The money doesn't matter. Who is holding the coin isn't important. Because Jesus knows - and everyone who is listening knows if they stop to think about it - that everything belongs to God. Even if Caesar amasses a pile of money, all that he is and all that he has belongs to God.

This is true to us as well.

The money we thought we lost never was ours in the first place. All that we have belongs to God.

So here is my advice for uncertain times: Don't come to me for financial advice. I have no unique wisdom about money and its management. But I will advise: Don't spend all of your energy worrying about what you have lost or scheming about how to get more money. Invest your energies in doing God's work and the things you truly need will be provided.

The same thing applies to church budgets. Smaller budgets don't need to mean less ministry. If we focus on the work God is calling us to do and not on how much money

we have to hire someone else to do the work, we will discover an abundance of mission and ministry and an abundance of the means to do God's work.

It is a matter of trust.

And in this crazy, unsettled world, you can still trust God.

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January 18, 2009 – The Call of Samuel



Eli had a problem. He had several problems, really. The issue was one of leadership for the future. Priests at the temple were supposed to raise up their own sons to replace them when the time came. The priestly tradition was a family tradition. He had two sons and our traditions tell us that they became priests, but that they were not good priests. They did not honor, love or serve God. They were interested in their own power, prestige and position. It was a problem for Eli. It was not the first, or the last, time that the children of prominent religious leaders didn't show much aptitude for religious leadership. It was not the first, or the the last, time that a priest was embarrassed by his sons. But it was a unique problem for Eli because he was responsible for the succession of priestly leadership in the temple.

He was not aware that the entire nation of Israel was engaged in a difficult lesson about succession of leadership and power. The then new experiment in monarchy for Israel was not working out, though there were few signs of its failure in the time of Eli.

Eli's attention was focused on institutional maintenance. The Bible does not tell us all of the reasons why his sons were such a disappointment. Perhaps they became that way because they had been raised with too much privilege and too little work. Perhaps they were that way because their father had been to absent from their lives and too engaged in his priestly duties. Perhaps they were that way because of some inherited trait that was suppressed in Eli's life, waiting to be born in the next generation. The Bible doesn't give us the reason why. It just says that they didn't know God.

Samuel seemed to be a way out for Eli. Brought by his mother to the temple to be raised in the temple, Samuel was a second chance. Having failed in the raising of his own sons, Eli gets another chance to raise a son. Old enough to be the boy's grandfather, he has a different attitude toward this boy than he did toward his own sons. It seems that Eli had a solution for his problem of the maintenance of the temple and the succession of leadership to keep his institution going strong beyond the span of his life.

So when God calls Samuel, it takes quite a while for Eli to recognize what is going on. At first, when the boy hears the voice and reports to Eli, he only knows that he wasn't the one who issued the call. He might not even have believed that anyone called. He dismisses the boy and sends him back to bed. It happens a second time, with a similar result. Only when the child comes to him a third time, does Eli finally remember that it is God who calls, that the profession of a priest is not to serve the institution, but to serve God.

It may have been a long time since Eli had really listened to God.

It may have been a long time since Eli had heard God's call.

Repeatedly throughout the Bible, God shows little interest in the maintenance of institutions. The work of justice and peace and care of widows, orphans and immigrants is much higher on God's priority list and much more likely to be the result of God's call.

After hearing what God has to say, now Samuel has a problem.

The news isn't good for Eli, nor for his sons, nor for the succession of his family in the priestly profession. God, finding no leadership in one place, raises up a new leader from another family. God will provide the leadership, but not always in the way humans want. How is Samuel supposed to deliver this news to Eli?

Eli has to work to get the report out of the boy. And when it does come out, he takes it surprisingly well. Somehow he remembers when God was calling him. Somehow he remembers that it is God who call. Somehow he remembers that the profession of a priest has little to do with lording it over others, with authority and ritual and power and prestige. Being a priest has to do with serving others and submitting to the will of God.

Eli remembers and he submits to God's will, even though God's will contains harsh judgment for him and for his sons.

It is a short but important story in the book of 1 Samuel. We read it in worship early in the middle year of our cycle of lectionary readings. It serves as a reminder to us of how leaders emerge in our religious tradition - they are he product of God's call. We read it over and over because we need to be reminded over and over. We want to control the leadership of our institutions. We want to be the ones to choose future leadership.

Despite having often failed in our stewardship of the next generation of our institution, we keep looking for someone to carry on our programs, our traditions and our style of leadership.

We forget that it is God who calls, God who raises up leadership - and that leaders are produced for God's work - not our own.

Somehow Eli was able to recognize that God calls not just when he himself received that call, but later, much later, when Samuel hears the voice of God. May we who are caught up in the leadership of the church in this generation, remember our own experience of call and look diligently for that call when it comes to others.

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January 19, 2009 – King



We live in a violent world. One doesn't have to look beyond the daily newspaper, television or Internet news sites to see signs of violence all around. Israel and Hamas have finally declared a ceasefire after three weeks of war, and the devastation is overwhelming. Half a million people have been without water for three weeks and more, huge numbers of people have no electricity. Four thousand homes re ruined and tens of thousands of people are homeless.

Taleban militants have blown up another five schools in northwest Pakistan in recent days, despite a government pledge to protect schools.

About 3,500 United Nations troops are helping to maintain a tentative cease fire in Somalia, while Ethiopian forces are pulling out. Somalis are wary and weary after years of violence and a power vacuum in the government.

In Cambodia, the first of the Khmer Rouge trials has been set amid new stories of genocide and killing fields.

The list could go on and on and on. We live in a violent world with millions of innocent victims.

And the violence of this world makes the recognition of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day even more important. Because every generation is in danger of forgetting the power of

nonviolence in this world. Not every change has to involve hatred, killing, death and destruction.

With a solid theological foundation and careful study of the techniques of Mahatma Gandhi's principles of nonviolence, Dr. King was able to inspire thousands of people to participate in bringing change in a violent world without resorting to violence themselves. He was routinely criticized and attacked. There was significant resistance to the changes for which he stood. Even those who favored the causes he championed were wary of his techniques. Jails filling with children who participated in non compliance and civil disobedience, marches and boycotts that disrupted the public order, speeches that inflamed workers - all were routinely criticized and attacked in his time.

And even the man of nonviolence could not escape the violence himself. Killed by an assassin's bullet, Dr. King's life was ended far too early.

It is critical that we remember.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Dr. King said, "I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality. I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of a thermonuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant."

"Unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word."

In a violent world, we need to be reminded again and again of what is temporary and what is permanent. And we are called to stand for that final word - for unarmed truth and unconditional love.

So today is a day for remembrance.

But more than that it is a day for rededication. May we once again dedicate our lives to bring about change in this world through nonviolent means. May we have the courage to stand in the face of a violent world with a refusal to adopt its violent ways.

The closing words of his last speech were seen by many to be prophetic. They continue to inspire and to remind us of this man and his life: "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop and I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will, and He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over and

I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight, that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

"I just want to do God's will."

It is that dedication that is stronger than all of the violence this world can muster.

May we, too, have the courage to follow God's will.

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January 20, 2009 – the Crowd



Photo of the crowd at Sunday's concert at the Lincoln Memorial from CNN.com.

I have never been much for crowds. I grew up in a small town where the biggest event was probably the annual rodeo. We were capable of turning out a couple of thousand people for the parade, stretched across a couple of miles. The rodeo grounds themselves could seat about 1,000 on the bleachers. There was an open field where the cars parked. During the 50th Anniversary of the United Church of Christ's Synod in the City, I attended some of the big events in the arena where the crowds were estimated at 10,000. I had a motel room across from the arena and I didn't drive at all that day. When we lived in Chicago, we attended a couple of concerts where there were crowds in the 15,000 to 20,000 range. Living in Chicago itself was an experience of lots of people for me. But one doesn't have to deal with them all at once.

Today there will be a crowd in Washington, D.C. Estimates vary, but all of the sources I can find seem to agree that the crowd statistics will crush the previous record of 1.2 million people who came to see Lyndon Johnson's swearing-in ceremony in 1964. The 1960's were a time of crowds. There were several record crowds in Washington, D.C. in the first half of that decade.

Today is expected to break all records. Estimates are that over 2 million people who have come to the city to experience the inauguration and attend inauguration events. Hundreds of thousands of visitors have been arriving in Washington in recent days - roads and subways are said to have been packed. Competition for tickets along the parade route has bee fierce. It is estimated at there is room for approximately 300,000

persons along the parade route. An unprecedented force of 40,000 security officers is being deployed.

The day for the new President, Vice President, and their families has already started. They are beginning with worship at St. John's Episcopal Church. The swearing-in ceremony is set for noon. Official Inauguration activities conclude tomorrow morning with the National Prayer Breakfast at the National Cathedral. Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins will be preaching at tomorrow's service, which begins at 10 a.m. She is the General Minister and President of the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, and the first woman ever invited to preach at the National Prayer Breakfast.

There will be lots of "firsts" this week.

And lots of crowds.

Major highways into the city are closed for security and crowd control purposes. Most people attending the ceremonies will travel by DC Metro. Trains started hauling people into the center of the city at 4 .m. local time. Metro officials are anticipating that the wait for a train will be more than an hour in the middle of the day. Some people are planning to walk five or more miles in order to be a part of the events.

And many who won't be there in person will be watching on television.

A lot of the people who are attending the events live will be the part of enormous crowds. Sidewalks and restaurants near the National Mall have been packed since Sunday. The Starbucks coffee shop in the 1100 block of Pennsylvania Avenue had lines a block long yesterday and was slated to remain open around the clock during inauguration events.

There are plenty of pundits who will list all of the ways in which this Inauguration is historic. Of course all inaugurations are historic. But there are many unique features to this one. Barack Obama is our first African-American President. The combination of the worst economy in decades, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, incredible violence and fear Israel, and many other issues results in a hunger for change in our country. And our system provides for a smooth transition of power from party to party and from one administration to the next. The expectations of the country are high and the road ahead will be difficult, but today is a day for hopefulness and celebration.

Like many of my fellow citizens, I am paying attention even though I won't be a part of the crowd. I'll likely listen to the swearing-in ceremony on the radio. I watch part of it on my computer if I decide to take a mid-morning break. The mission and ministry of our congregation continues and this is a week with a heavy work load for me as we prepare for our annual meeting on Sunday.

So today I pray for safety for those who are a part of the crowds, and wisdom and insight for a new administration, and peace and justice for our world. And, like millions and millions of others, I will say a special prayer for our new President that he may not forget the statement of faith of the church to which we both belong and find “forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, God’s presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in God’s realm which knows no end.”

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January 21, 2009 – Challenge



It has been a heady week for our nation. Record crowds, a peaceful transition of power from one administration to another, balls and preyer services, speeches and celebrations. For many, the inauguration yesterday stood as the fulfillment of a dream. An African-American president stood before the nation and took the oath of office as a visible sign that we are capable of judging others by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin. Forty years after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. 45 years after the famous “I have a dream” speech, our nation’s mall was filled with record-breaking crowds to pause for a moment and reflect on the simple fact that we have made progress.

It was symbolism that President Obama took the oath of office with his left hand on the very Bible that had been used for the swearing-in service at the first inauguration of President Lincoln. The vision of slavery overcome, of a nation’s unity restored after a bitter civil war was also present in the celebrations of the day. The day was a day for more: not just 40 and 45 years of dreams, but 140 years of dreams since the ending of slavery - nearly 240 years of dreams since the Declaration of Independence.

And perhaps our mood should be one of wild celebration and unrestrained joy.

But there continues to be an appropriate somberness when we consider the tasks that lie ahead.

While Washington celebrated, Wall Street foundered. The Dow Jones Industrial Average lost 4%, falling below 8,000, the bleakest inauguration day performance since the average has been used as a measure of the health of the stock market. Leading the downward trend were bank stocks. Even banks considered to be more healthy than others have seen their stock values plummet to half of their former values. The market is wary of investing in banks, who continue to lose money in a tightening financial crisis with no end in sight.

President Obama was realistic in his inaugural speech: “That we are now in the midst of crisis is now well understood. Our nation is at war, against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred. Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age. Homes have been lost; jobs shed; businesses shattered. OUr health care is too costly; our schools fail too many; and each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet.”

It might have been a moment of national repentance. We may look back on this day as the day when we stopped going in one direction and headed out in another. It was less dramatic than the ashes and sackcloth of Nineveh’s repentance upon hearing the words of Jonah, but it had some of the elements of repentance.

There was an admission of guilt - not just the typical finger-pointing at the guilt of others: “greed and irresponsibility on the part of some” - but also the acknowledgement that we all have shared in wrong choices: “our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age.”

We have shunned the hard choices. We have wanted to believe that we were exempt from hardship. September 11, 2001 brought us the harsh and painful reality that the shattering of innocent lives and the violence of destruction are not just reserved for far away places. The terror that is a part of the everyday lives of so many around our world can also visit our shores. The collapse of the housing market and the failure of the banking system in the past months has once again awakened us to the reality that we have been headed in the wrong direction.

Repentance requires more than an act of confession, however. It requires the hard work of going in a new direction.

It was good to be reminded of our roots yesterday - with the use of a particular Bible, with the references to the American Revolution in the speech - our nation has, in the past, discovered the ability to make changes when change is required and to re-focus our energies with hard work and sacrifice.

James Russell Lowell, son of a Massachusetts Congregational Minister, wrote an eighteen-stanza poem, “The Present Crisis,” first published in December of 1845, as a protest against the war with Mexico over the territory of Texas. Parts of that poem have become a beloved hymn: “Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side; some great cause, some great decision, offering each the bloom or blight, and the choice goes by forever, ‘twixt that darkness and the light.”

“Though the cause of evil prosper, yet the truth alone is strong; though her portion be the scaffold, and upon the throne be wrong; yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown, standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own. “

I have lived my life believing that the times in which I live are consequential. The unrest of the Civil Rights Movement, the horrors of the War in Vietnam, and other consequential national choices were a part of my growing up and young adult life. But today’s national circumstances and the choices we together face seem equally momentous.

Perhaps this is our moment. Perhaps tis is our time. If it is, may we, together, choose the cause of good. May we, together, never forget that God is keeping watch.

History will reveal the wisdom of our choices. God alone will be our judge.

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January 22, 2009 – A Typical Day



We've been putting in long days this week, getting reports ready for our congregation's annual meeting, dealing with a slightly higher number of folk in the hospital, preparing for a funeral, and keeping the church operating. I am teaching a class this weekend and although the subject is familiar, a colleague, Carol Wehrheim has been teaching this class in South Dakota for a number of years, so I need to prepare some fresh lectures and learning experiences. Today we have a 100th birthday party for a church member and I have to testify about a break-in at the church that occurred in late December. Testifying is usually a lot of waiting for a couple of questions to answer. It will be a typical day in a life that doesn't have much that can be called "typical."

It has been warm in the hills and much of the snow is melted. A lot of folks are driving clean cars, as the streets are dry enough for them to stay clean for more than five minutes. The forecast calls for snow by tomorrow and through the weekend. It will be a bit of a change of pace for us after two or three days of really nice warm weather.

The forest service has announced that conditions are right for a controlled burn a few miles from our home. Winter is a good time to decrease fuels and clear undergrowth that can make for devastating fires in the summer. It will be good to get the burn completed, but if we don't get the forecasted snow, we will have quite a bit of smoke for a few days. It is a minor inconvenience in the scheme of things.

The Black Hills national forest is a relatively small pocket of forest. Because of the physical isolation of the hills, our area is a little different from the huge interconnected

forests of the Rocky Mountains. Historic photos show that there are a lot more trees now than there were in the mind 1800's. It is likely that the cycles of fire and re-growth occasionally produced very big fires that left large expanses of open space for several years. It is also likely that more frequent fires resulted in a forest with less underbrush and trees that were more widely spaced. Now that the forest is managed, decisions about when and where to burn as well as decisions about harvesting timber for practical uses need to be made with a lot of different interests in mind. The hills have many different recreational interests. We also have need for jobs for local people. There is grazing of livestock and other agricultural interests. And the hills are dotted with private land and a lot of homes and other buildings. Protecting them from catastrophic fire is a growing challenge.

But I won't be involved in any of the forest management decisions that need to be made today. Those can be left for others. I'll keep my eyes open and look for smoke plumes when scanning the horizon and I suspect I'll be able to smell smoke by the end of the day, but there is good reason to trust the Forest Service with the prescribed burn.

Sometimes it seems as if a prescribed burn is a reasonable metaphor for this phase of my life and career. The time has come when there is a lot of "stuff" that has piled up. I have boxes and boxes of resources, some of which have become dated and probably will never again be used. I have piles of books, both ones that I want to keep for future reference and ones that I have read and probably will never read gain. There are lots of places in my life that need to be sorted out, and part of sorting out is getting rid of clutter that threatens to overwhelm.

In the church, there are all kinds of little "fires" that crop up. Sometimes there are areas of disagreement and minor conflict. Sometimes there are problems that need attention. Sometimes there are issues that need to be resolved. The art of being a pastor involves a fair amount of judgement about when and where to respond. Not every disagreement in the church needs my intervention. Not every conflict can be avoided. While there is much I can do to soothe hurt feelings and reduce the fires of passion, there are other times when it is in the best interests of the church to let things take their natural course.

Like forest managers, I am human and I make mistakes. Sometimes the failure to deal with a small problem today means that there is a big one next week. Sometimes I over react and invest my energies in activities that are less important for the future of the church. There are lots of competing interests in a church like ours. Just the management of the building means having things ready for a pre-school, a concert, worship, classes, receptions and fellowship functions, a funeral, rehearsals, and construction on the organ project all in the same week. And building management is very easy compared with time management.

I have been successful making my hospital visits in the morning most of this week, but yesterday required a return trip to the hospital and two returns to a nursing home to

make all of the contacts that needed to be completed. I drove over 30 miles in town between the time I got to work and the time I headed for home in the evening. Many of those miles were repeat trips over the same path. It is hard to be efficient with travel and time when your priority is people.

Of course the analogy between forest management and the operation of the church is, like all analogies, imperfect. We don't use trucks and heavy equipment to manage church issues. I have tools like prayer and scripture that aren't commonly used to inform forest management decisions. The science of human behavior produces far less predictable results than biology and plant science.

But both enterprises require an attempt to look at the big picture. The things that happened before we arrived and the things that will happen after we leave are important. A forester once told me that the cycles in the forest often take centuries, not years. The church is here for the long-term as well. And our decisions need to be made with an eye not just to the next generation, but to the long-term survival and growth of the religious heritage that we have inherited. Sometimes decisions have to be made where the benefits will not be recognized until long after we are gone.

So I won't be alarmed if I see smoke in the hills this week. And I won't be alarmed if there is a change in my plans at work, either.

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January 23, 2009 – Beauty



As I indicated in yesterday's blog, it was a full and very busy day. In order to achieve some efficiency, I sat in front of the computer from 7 a.m. until noon and worked all the way through the layout, graphics and other details of the annual reports for our congregation. I had brought a sandwich from home, so hurriedly ate the sandwich and headed out at about 12:30 for a quick trip to an office supply store and from there to the public safety building to give testimony to a grand jury. From there I headed to the hospital and visited with patients and their families, then on to a care center for a 100th birthday party. I visited my mother while at the care center and worked out some details of her laundry, etc. Then it was back to the office to make corrections to the annual reports after they had been proof-read. I got back to our house just before 6 p.m. for a quick supper and change of clothes before heading out to spend the evening with a family whose son recently died in a car accident. By the time I got back home, I was ready for bed. I fell asleep trying to read a little bit before going to bed.

But this morning, when I awoke, the first thought that came to my mind wasn't the busyness of yesterday, or the long day ahead. Those thoughts quickly came, but the first delicious thought of today was a memory of how it felt to step out of the building shortly after noon yesterday.

It was absolutely beautiful. The temperature must have been nearly 60 degrees. If there was any wind, it was just a light breeze. The air smelled fresh and clean with no hint from the controlled burns in the hills. I walked towards my pickup and then just walked out to the base of the cross in our yard and looked over the hill. A little later, when I

arrived at the hospital, I said to one of the patients, “I know that you need to be here to get well, but I’m sorry you’re missing that beautiful day outside.”

God gives us beauty at every turn.

I know better than to get spring fever in South Dakota. It is still January after all. We live in a land where May blizzards are not unknown. In fact the forecast calls for snow today and throughout the weekend. But yesterday was a brief reminder that spring will come, and furthermore, that it will be worth the wait.

Other points of beauty in the day are worth noting.

In the interview with the States Attorney before testifying, I found out that the person who broke into our church building in the middle of the night on December 28 was a juvenile. It appears that he had been drinking, but not on any other type of drugs. I hadn’t thought of him as a human being before, just a problem to be solved. But somehow hearing his name and a bit of his story, any sense of anger left me. He was a kid who made an immature mistake and got himself into a lot more trouble than he bargained for. When the States Attorney asked me what I thought might be a fair resolution of the case, I said, “Maybe if he worked alongside us at our Habitat House, he would learn who we are and what we do.” I wish I had also mentioned the firewood project. There are a lot of lessons that can be taught splitting firewood. And a lot more that can be taught working side by side with faithful Christians. For the first time, I thought of this young man as a person with potential for a bright future. There is beauty in God’s world.

Two of the rooms that I visited in the hospital were nearly crowded with family members. Children of the patients had assembled to lend love and support, to help make some decisions about care, and to be with the ones they love. We shared a prayer in each room - a circle of family holding hands - acknowledging that hope and healing lie in God’s hands. There is beauty in God’s world.

At the 100th birthday party the guest of honor greeted me by saying that since my mother had moved into the care center, she could see that we were related. “There’s a lot of your mother in your face - and a lot of you in your mother.” It was a compliment of the highest order. Her memory isn’t always that clear. I wasn’t even sure that she had made the connection between my mom and me. She was giving her best to the occasion and reaching out to others. There is beauty in God’s world.

Back at the office I took five minutes to grab a camera and take a few pictures of the clouds blowing by over our cross. The pictures aren’t that great, but they remind me of that beautiful day that I almost missed by spending too much time indoors. There is beauty in God’s world.

The hardest part of talking with someone about the death of a loved one can be the first few minutes of greeting. There are no words for that time. A hug, a few tears, a simple acknowledgment that their pain is shared. That is about all that can be done. But for some reason, before we got to the subject of funeral plans and the process of grief and other important topics, the father started to tell the story of Jonathan's adoption. Mom joined in with the beautiful and incredible story. Being adoptive parents ourselves, we know a little bit of that sense of surprise when you finally receive the notification that there is a child who is available. What has been relegated to the imagination for so long suddenly becomes real. You drop everything else in your life. In their story and in ours there was a long drive to a distant town, a bit of exhaustion, and an incredible moment of meeting and connection. The four of us in that room all knew that no matter what else happened, no matter how much pain must be endured, no matter how many tears remain to be cried - it was worth it. That incredible moment of connection was worth whatever might follow. Life is all too short, and Jonathan's tragically so. There are a thousand, "what ifs" and "whys" and "if onlys." But there is no denying that this incredible gift that was entrusted to them by the processes of a mother releasing a child for adoption, a foster family lovingly welcoming one more child to their home, an agency daring to place a child in your arms - this incredible gift is a gift of God and more valuable than any amount of pain and suffering that may later come. Even in the darkest moments of life, there is beauty in God's world.

I can count on being tired by the time I come to the end of this day. And tomorrow as well. But the day will be bright because I am looking for that beauty. I know it is there. There is beauty in God's world. And I am privileged to witness that beauty.

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January 24, 2009 – Paseo



Today is the day of the Paseo at our sister church in Costa Rica. The Saturday after the week-long Vacation Bible school there is a field trip for the children who have participated every day in the VBS program. Busses are chartered to take the children to a park, often one that has a swimming pool. A picnic lunch and an opportunity to play are part of the reward for their participation in the VBS.

I have never been in Costa Rica for VBS, but I have participated in several Paseo events that have occurred when we take groups to visit our sister church. One of the things that a group visit can offer is lots of eyes for supervision of the children. Pastor Dorotea and her volunteers always set the criteria for attendance, but each Paseo is a special treat for participants.

These children live in a neighborhood where there are no fields of open grass. The opportunity to visit a place where the ground is clean enough to sit and enjoy is rare. Their homes are located in crowded urban areas primarily without yards. Others live in squatter camps where every bit of open ground is trampled from the traffic of so many feet coming and going to get to shack and sheds and other makeshift dwellings. Group games are played in the streets with an eye to a passing bus or arriving car.

Going to a park is a real treat.

And a swimming pool full of clean water - sometimes with a slide - that is a really big and uncommon adventure for the children. We have planned games and activities for

the children and when we first started making regular visits to our sister church we worried a bit about what would keep the children engaged and entertained for five or six hours. We didn't need to worry. A grassy hill that one can roll down is entertainment for a long time. A swimming pool will take up as much time as is available.

But I am here. It is 2 degrees outside with a high around 10 or 12 in the forecast. We have a good chance to get some more snow today. In San Jose, Costa Rica it is about 60 with the forecast calling for a high in the mid-eighties. There is a chance of a thunderstorm this afternoon. Their weather forecast includes a "heat index," which is a combination of temperature and humidity that can make it feel like it is warmer than the measured temperature. It is sort of the opposite of the "wind chill" that is included in our forecast.

I can picture the scene that will emerge in a few hours at the church. There will be a growing crowd of children, many with parents who have accompanied them to the church. Most will be milling outside. The charter buses will stop at the corner. It is too difficult for them to navigate onto the street in front of the church, especially with the crowd of people waiting. The buses will be old school buses, but may sport different paint jobs than you would see in the United States. One of the adults from the church will be checking names and making sure that the children who board the buses are entitled to participate in the event. The kids will crowd three to a seat with adults scattered here and there.

This year the destination of the Paseo is a secret. The children have been asking all week long where they will be going today. Most of the adults, including the members of our congregation that are there to help with Vacation Bible School, didn't know the location all week so it wasn't hard for them to simply say, "I don't know" to the children's questions. There will be plenty of excitement about their unknown destination.

The bus will be noisy with conversation as it heads down the hill and around several corners into heavy urban traffic. Eyes will be glued to the glass with everyone looking out at the sights. When they arrive at the park there will be a few instructions and usually a group gathering after the buses have unloaded. There will be some songs and perhaps a brief devotional. When the time to play arrives, there will be an "explosion" of kids running, shouting, enjoying themselves. Adults will spend the day counting and watching to make sure that the kids stay together in a group.

I can't guarantee it but chances are pretty good that lunch will be hot dogs with a mixture of cabbage, mayonnaise and ketchup. It is possible that there could be some other type of sandwich as well. Usually there are a few potato chips and a glass of punch.

We gringos from North America really love going on Paseo with the children. It is an opportunity to see smiles and experience laughter, not that these are uncommon at the

church and in the neighborhood. Beyond that, however, it is a way to observe children doing what children do: play. There is something universal about children playing that transcends culture and language. We can connect with their play and we can see the connections between their play and the play of children in other parts of the world. What is revealed to us is the simple truth that we all share in a common humanity.

I think that we once thought that we went to Costa Rica to share our faith. That by spending time with our sister church and engaging in work with them we would, by our presence, demonstrate the love of God in Christ Jesus. What we discovered is that faith is alive and well in Costa Rica and that we go to witness the faith that is already present and to share in the life of faith with our sisters and brothers whose language, culture and economic circumstances are different from our own. Regular visits to our sister church are for our transformation as much as they are for their transformation and for the purpose of sharing in our common faith. We are one in the Spirit.

So today, I will tell a bit of the story of Paseo to the class that I am teaching in windy and cold Hermosa, South Dakota, and perhaps one of our mission partners will tell a child about Christians who live in a place that gets cold this time of year. Part of me wishes I was there, not for the weather, but for the people. I know that there will be a report in my e-mail in-box that I can share with our South Dakota congregation tomorrow.

The truth that continues to present itself is that the distance and difference between our congregations is smaller than the commonality. We are a people of One Lord, One Baptism, One Faith. And our common life of faith is one of joy and life. Gracias a Dios!

Adios, amigos. Via con Dios!

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January 25, 2009 – Annual Meeting



We have a quantity of postcards around our church that have a lovely picture of our church building - with an empty parking lot in front. I had once been told that architects like pictures of buildings without any cars or people because automobiles and clothing can date the picture. Buildings last longer than fashion trends or automobile styles. But I have never really liked the postcards and have been trying for years to use them up so that we could get something else. For me, so little of our church is about the building. The building is important, to be sure, and we are fortunate to have such a beautiful and functional building. But the church is the people and the empty building just doesn't say anything about who we are or what we are about.

The annual report of our church has a photo of our building on the front cover. It also shows a line of eleven pickup trucks and trailers loaded with firewood about to head for Wanblee to deliver firewood to those who need it. There are a few people in the picture, chatting and getting ready to get into the trucks and head out.

It says something about our church that an empty parking lot picture could never say.

I guess that this is the thirty first annual meeting of my career as an ordained minister. And I had attended several congregational annual meetings before I was ordained. Perhaps it isn't quite accurate to use the number 31, because I did miss one annual meeting of a congregation that I served. I don't remember the reason that I needed to be out of town on that particular day, but I do remember feeling guilty. The meeting was well-moderated, the congregation was perfectly capable of taking care of its business

without me, but it still seemed wrong, somehow, for me not to be with my congregation as they made the decisions that set in place their programs and ministries for the coming year.

I used to get really nervous about annual meetings. There are a lot of things that can go wrong. Budgets can be amended and even thrown out of balance. Since everyone has an equal voice in the meeting and not everyone participates in the meeting, it is possible for a vocal minority to assume undue power. And what I really feared most was conflict. I have seen some conflict in annual meetings. I remember arguments about remodeling a church, and disagreements about how to get a roof repaired. I remember disagreements about the purchase of a parsonage and even one rather heated argument about the pastor, though that meeting wasn't a congregation that I was serving.

Every pastor knows that it is dangerous and wrong-headed to take the actions and discussions of an annual meeting personally. People rarely intend their comments to be personal attacks, and the congregation must be allowed to have a life of its own. In order for our form of church government to work, the power of the congregation must be real and the meeting must have authority to make significant decisions.

But it is really hard for pastors not to take some of the things that are said personally. Salaries are usually more than half of the operating budget of the congregation, and pastoral salaries are the majority of that figure. And ministers become intimately connected and attached to the programs and ministries of the church. Every program cut feels a bit like losing an old friend. Every criticism of a church project feels like a personal attack, even when there is no intent on the part of the individual speaking.

But I don't get as nervous about congregational annual meetings as I once did. I have learned to keep my ear to the ground so that I have a pretty good sense of what might come up at the meeting. I have learned to work with budget committees to resolve budget issues and present budgets to congregations that will work, even when they have certain flaws. I have learned to consult with moderators about agenda so that there are no surprises. And I am working on, but have not fully learned, the art of keeping quiet. The truth is that my voice does have more impact than the voice of other members of the congregation. I have a weekly audience - they have the opportunity to address the congregation only rarely.

Our way of doing business works best when everyone is treated equally and all members feel permission to speak freely.

So I am learning to relax about congregational meetings. This is not to say that I won't be busy today. I need to assist congregational leaders so that they can do the work they have come to do. Microphones need to work. The right numbers need to be projected

onto the screen so that everyone can look at them at the same time. My job is mostly behind the scenes to assure that things go smoothly.

This day begins with a bit of anticipation. I want things to go smoothly for the congregation. But I don't want to eliminate every surprise. I want the power of the congregation to be real and the ability of the congregation to speak and be heard to be meaningful. I take this meeting seriously. And there will be a small sense of relief when it is over.

I hope that congregational meetings never become so routine for me that I fail to take them seriously. The business of the church belongs to the people of the church and we conduct that business best when we learn to say the things that really matter to us and to listen carefully to the things that other members of our congregation have to say. Most importantly, we all need to listen for the voice of God. Our forebears believed that God spoke through the collective wisdom of the group and that congregational meetings were an essential part of discerning God's will.

I just hope that we did a good job of proof reading the annual reports and that we haven't made too many glaring mistakes.

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January 26, 2009 – Sunday Paper



Culture is never static. It is always shifting and changing. One of the changes that is apparent is the role of newspapers in daily life. Newspaper circulation and revenues are down. Staffing is down at newspapers and the number of newspapers in the United States continues to decline. At the newspapers that remain there is a significant shift from print editions to online news services.

Like many other places where culture is shifting, I seem to end up somewhere in the middle with mixed feelings. We still subscribe to a daily newspaper and I take a look at it every day, but I usually have scanned the headlines from at least three online news sources before I ever get to the newspaper.

The ritual of the Sunday newspaper has always been a bit different at our house. Sunday is a busy work day for us and we need to get up and get going. The slightly slower pace that is present in the homes of people with different jobs just isn't our Sunday routine. Most Sundays the newspaper arrives as I am ready to pull out of the driveway. When we had children at home, I had a sort of ritual of going through the Sunday paper over a light lunch after church services, but in our current life stage, I often don't get to the paper until late afternoon. By that time, there isn't much that is news left. I've gotten the headlines and obituaries from the online edition. People have spoken of the contents of many of the articles, and when one is particularly relevant, I've looked into it online. And even if I were to have a ritual of reading the Sunday morning paper upon rising, I would know most of its contents anyway. The process of producing a newspaper means that most of the news gets to other media before it can

be printed, and the reduction in newspaper staffs means that most of the news in the paper is drawn from sources that are widely available on the Internet. There isn't much that is new in the paper.

But we still have the comics. I'm aware that individual comics are available online. Some even offer a subscription service that allows individuals to receive a daily comic in their e-mail, but there is a big difference between viewing a comic online and sitting down with the Sunday comics.

Comics are an art form that are uniquely suited to newspapers. As color printing became technologically possible, many newspapers began experimenting with color pages on Sunday. The comics became a good place for the color printing because printing techniques were ahead of color photography, because set up for the new process was very complex and time consuming (and therefore unsuitable for headline news), and because the simplified characters of the comics allowed for imprecise registration of colors. Using color to depict realistic images came much later in news printing, and has become popular only after the advent of digital photography and printing techniques.

The Sunday Comics have been a mainstay of newspaper journalism since the late nineteenth century. The comic book initially was an offshoot of Sunday comic editions which ran as large as 32 pages in some newspapers in the first half of the 20th century. During the great depression of the 1930's, comic artists were superstars. Some continued to earn six figure incomes when most of the rest of the nation was struggling to survive.

Comics continue to be the mainstay of syndication, with approximately 70% of newspaper syndication income coming from the comics.

But it is changing. Syndicates can no longer get long-term contracts with comic artists. the old standard 20 year contract of the 20th century has given way to much shorter contracts for artists. Comics like Blondie, Beetle Bailey, and Gasoline Alley that ran for decade after decade and passed from artist to artist are becoming less common. Features like the Far Side, Calvin & Hobbes, and Bloom County enjoyed great popularity and attention, circulating in over 1,000 newspapers, but ran their course in much shorter time spans, their creators retiring at relatively young ages without passing on the strips to other artists.

Our local paper continues to print a Sunday Comics section with color printing, four pages and about four features per page, which allows the individual comics to be a good size for reading. It is part of my Sunday ritual, although often an evening activity instead of something that I read over breakfast. I did notice that the newspaper recently dropped the color advertising insert that used to be in the comics after months of being unable to sell all of the ads and running full-page newspaper promotion ads.

I suspect that the comics, and the rest of the newspaper, are on their way out. It isn't going to be economical for printed documents to be delivered door to door. Advertisers aren't going to support decreasing subscription rates and declining readership. There are other ways for advertisers to get in touch with customers and there are other ways for individuals to get their news. But I hope that the decline is slow. I'd really like the Sunday comics to survive until my retirement when I might have time to sit down at the breakfast table and linger over the comics with a second cup of coffee before heading out for my daily activities.

It may not happen. The decline in newspapers seems to be accelerating and my retirement plans seem to be shifting as well. I may not retire quite as soon as I once thought. Time will tell.

I glanced through a few color comics online this morning. It's not the same, but I suspect that whatever the media, creative and intelligent artists will continue to find ways to entertain us.

And perhaps we will not become too busy to include laughter in each day.

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January 27, 2009 – Another Delay



It is cold and clear this morning, with a dusting of new snow overnight. My thermometer is showing -9. It is supposed to get above zero by noon, but not up to 20. Earlier forecasts had said we might make it into the forties today, but it now appears that weather will be reserved for later in the week. I've had my eyes on the weather because we had a plan to raise the walls at our "Faith Builds" Habitat for Humanity home this noon. Press releases have gone out. Ministers have been recruited. We thought that it would make a great statement to our community if a group of ministers from various denominations raised the walls together.

It is easier to herd cats than to schedule ministers. Every date we have picked has held a conflict for some of the ministers. I've heard most of the excuses that can be imagined and with the exception of Sunday, there is at least one minister taking the day off every day.

But we won't be raising the walls today. There aren't that many ministers who have insulated coveralls and good gloves. If we want the walls to go up with the hands of ministers, we have to choose a day more suitable for delicate hands. And rescheduling will be as challenging as it was to get this day on the calendars of ministers. We may end up raising the walls with a couple of ministers and a group of laypersons.

The extra time will be greatly appreciated. I have a funeral today and another tomorrow and I have to find some way to transform stacks of notes into coherent sentences and meaningful liturgy sometime before each funeral begins. I won't be bored with the gift of

extra time. Still, it is a bit of a disappointment that we can't seem to get the chance we want for the photo we have imagined.

Of course, we are trying to build a house in January in Rapid City. It shouldn't surprise that there can be weather delays. The only way for Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity to sustain year-round building is to have one or more houses that are closed in so indoors work can be done. And on a day like today it requires heaters to work even indoors.

The weather has always affected the pace of life on the plains.

Winter is the time for storytelling and staying close to home. We know that there can be some wonderfully warm days for outdoor activities in the midst of winter, but they have to be taken as they come. The long-range forecast calls for highs in the '40's next week and if we are lucky we might be able to raise the walls then. After this snow, a few days in the 40's should make for an impressive amount of mud at the construction site.

Patience is what is required. And though sometimes I think I am getting more patient, patience has never been my strongest quality.

And the snow is really beautiful.

Despite the proliferation of electronic calendars and time management tools, despite the seminars on planning and organization, despite our attempts at control, our time is not truly our own. Our lives are affected by events and forces that are beyond our control. There is joy to be found in learning to be flexible and to accept the things that cannot be changed. We can plan around the weather but we cannot control the weather - and the art of predicting the weather is imprecise at best.

The forecast is for highs in the low eighties in Costa Rica today. And there certainly is no shortage of need for decent housing in Costa Rica. Maybe we're building in the wrong location today. But we have learned to respond to the needs where we find ourselves. And this house will be completed in due time.

Patience is what is required and perhaps the events of this day will help me to learn more of its value.

In the meantime, I don't think I'll have time to get bored today.

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January 28, 2009 – Delightfully Wrong



Most of what I wrote in yesterday's blog turned out to be wrong. And I couldn't be more happy about it. It turned out that the cold weather did not cause a delay in our building project and the walls are up. A dedicated crew of volunteers was on the job despite the cold weather preparing for the wall-raising. At noon the lunch showed up and the clergy started to arrive. Within a few minutes there were more than enough hands to raise the walls in a short amount of time. Newspaper and television crews were on hand to cover the event as well. Click here for a link to the article in the Rapid City Journal.

The day was every bit as busy as I had predicted. There were lots of details involved in getting ready for the funeral, and I was nervous about the technology. We don't show a lot of videos in our church and I wanted to make sure that things worked right for the family. But there was time for me to stop by the Habitat site in the morning and then come back for the wall-raising.

I can't describe the sense of gratitude that came wave after wave as I discovered all of the things others were doing to make the wall-raising a success. A phone call revealed that someone else had already arranged the lunch. A little before noon I noticed my colleagues arriving. The executive director of Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity arrived. All of the members of my Wednesday morning clergy Bible study were on hand. It was so good to see them there and to stand shoulder to shoulder with my friends and raise the walls for a new house.

Habitat for Humanity has always been about stepping out in faith. It takes a lot of planning, no small amount of hard work, and a dose or organization. But what makes Habitat work is the faith. Alone we do not have the resources to solve the really big problems of this world. When we are intentional about connecting with God's work and God's timing we are able to accomplish some incredible things in this world.

Today there are four walls standing on a new house. It is ready to have the trusses lifted into place. After that comes a roof and siding, windows and doors. And the house will be yet another reminder of one of life's lessons for me.

I don't have to do it all alone. I can't do it all alone. The simple truth is that if I had not shown up at all yesterday, the work would have been accomplished all the same. But I'm glad I was there to see it. I'm glad I was there to be reminded of the strength that comes from working together. It was a cold day, but I was warm all over with gratitude.

Last year, Habitat for Humanity International participated in the construction of 55,000 homes worldwide. The world's largest builder of homes constructs them one at a time with volunteer labor. The crisis is not over. There are still far too many families living in substandard housing all around the world. But through the simple economics of interest-free loans and non-profit fundraising, each home that is built comes with a mortgage that produces income for the building of more homes. The capacity to build homes increases with every home that is built. It is estimated that this accelerating building of capacity to build with each home will produce 66,000 homes in 2009; 100,000 homes by 2010. Here in our corner of the world, we have grown to a point of being able to build ten homes a year and from now on we will have a "faith builds" home - a home funded by the churches of Rapid City - under construction at all times.

When we spread out the cost, the work we can do is incredible. At current costs, it is just $4 per member per year for each of rapid city's churches to keep building.

I'm sure glad I was wrong in my blog yesterday.

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January 29, 2009 – Rabbit Remembered



I have written two eulogies this week and at the moment it doesn't seem that I have a third in me, but I cannot let the death of John Updike pass without some comment. Lung cancer is a terribly devastating disease and, in its end stages wracks its victims with pain and discomfort. Anyone who has witnessed the effects of this disease knows that it reaches a place where its victims and families no longer wish for it to go on. Death is a release and a relief. So I would not want John Updike to be defined by the disease that claimed his life.

But disease is not what the world will remember of a prolific author of more than 50 books and hundreds of articles, short stories and columns. The man was a writer. I think that I probably first met John Updike through a college literature class. I eventually read three of the Rabbit novels. He once said in an interview that I heard, "I don't think that I have exhausted the subject of suburban adultery, but it has exhausted me." I understood that feeling. After three of the Rabbit novels, I was not eager to pick up another book about divorce, displacement, despair and the results of people's poor decisions. I never got around to reading the last two books in the series. But Updike had created a character, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, who continues to populate my memory. The first novel has one of the best descriptions of a pick-up basketball game I have ever read. For a novel, it seems incredibly real. Rabbit is not John Updike and the novels are not autobiography, but there are elements of experience and realism that show through the fiction.

It has always amazed me how an author can create an entirely fictional character. They say that you write what you know, and Updike's novels are roughly set in Pennsylvania where he grew up and later novels, such as the Witches of Eastwick and the Widows of Eastwick are set in a place that resembles the Massachusetts where Updike lived as an adult. But the amount of each novel that springs from the imagination of the author is an amazing thing to me. I've started several novels in my life, but never completed one. One of the big dangers of the fiction writing that I have done is that the characters begin to resemble all too closely someone who I have really met. It could be a gray line between fiction and parody. And that is a line I do not intend to cross.

There are so many other examples of Updike's creativity that come to mind. He was a good writer of short stories and he served as editor of several collections of short stories that I have enjoyed deeply. *The Afterlife and Other Stories* contains 22 stories that explore the meaning of aging. All of the stories are of married men who are facing their own mortality. The approach of death produces painful insights and unusual behavior. The approach of death is something that Updike has explored deeply. On wonders what insights and behaviors populated his life at the end.

The Alligators, which is either a very long short story or a short novel, tells of a fifth-grader who participates in bullying until a strange dream changes his behavior. It might be a love story, but it is also an exploration of how people change. I suspect that there is a certain quality of autobiography in the story. John Updike suffered from psoriasis much of his life and as a child he had speech problems with stuttering and stammering. It must have been frustrating for the child of a math teacher to wrestle with speaking. His mother wrote stories and perhaps the young boy saw how the tools of a writer give the opportunity for a different kind of expression than speech. Maybe Updike knew the taunting of children from both sides of the experience.

Time and space do not allow comment on all of the writings of John Updike. He was prolific. His youthful goal of a book a year was matched and exceeded for many years, but he later slowed in the production of books and perhaps spent more time an energy in research. His later writing shows a maturity and wisdom that took years to forge.

He had been in decline for some time. The man whose face had made the cover of Time and Newsweek and who had been featured in The New Yorker multiple times faded from public view in recent years. His death, while noted by the major news outlets, did not warrant headline status.

It would not be accurate, exactly, to say that I will miss John Updike. I never met him face-to-face and did not know him as a person. I met him through his writings and although I've read quite a bit, I haven't begun to exhaust the possibilities of that relationship. There is enough reading in his works to keep me in touch with his way of thinking for years and years.

A teacher once told me that each human being is an “ecology of spirit.” Each person is a network of relationships that is amazingly complex and rich. This is certainly true of the human mind. We have all sorts of ideas and memories, gathered from a widely diverse set of sources that are put together in a pattern that is unique to each individual. Part of that network for me has been forged by the books I have read and I have allowed more than a small amount of fiction to enter my brain and my experience. Most of the early years of my ministry I constantly had a novel in progress. While reading to keep up with my profession and changes in my areas of academic interest, I also pursued fiction with a passion. You might say that my ecology of spirit is populated with real and fictional characters.

I know that I have read enough stories to have become a bit of a storyteller myself.

Many of my stories are based in reality as I have experienced it. Others are the stories of our people, forged through generations of telling and re-telling. Still there is room for an occasional tale and flight of fancy among my stories. It was Elie Wiesel who said, “Sometimes, in order to tell the truth, you have to tell a story.” Fiction can convey true messages.

I am grateful that for John Updike all sorrow and suffering are ended. The adventure of his life has now reached its conclusion. And I am grateful for his prolific writing throughout his life. The stories he told are not the stories I would tell, but they do illuminate my life. And his characters populate the corners of my mind. Even when I discover my own heaviness and clumsiness there is within me a Rabbit who can still handle the ball and who plays hoops with the tips of his fingers and the tips of his toes.

Thank you John Updike for the stories you have told.

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January 30, 2009 – Newark



Photo from jaunted.com.

There is a joke in some of the travel blogs about Newark Airport. It is sometimes referred to as “the airport that is nicer than the city.” It is a major travel hub because of its proximity to New York City. There are plenty of jokes about Newark and about the entire state of New Jersey.

Susan got to spend enough time in Newark yesterday to have some sense of the airport. She was returning home from Bangor, where she went to attend Convocation and participate in a seminary student’s mid-program review. The visit had been good, but too short and is often true with travel, it would have been good if her delay could have been spent at one or the other end of the trip instead of at an airport somewhere in between. The delay was caused by a mechanical problem that appeared to be minor, so they waited the first hour and a half on the airplane. By the time the airline found another airplane, the delay was over five hours, long beyond the time to catch the last flight from Denver into Rapid City, so she spent the night in Denver and will return to Rapid City this morning.

It is nothing like the ordeals that have been endured by some - extraordinary delays in airplanes sitting on airport ramps without food or adequate restroom facilities. Still, we don’t spend much time apart, so the delay in her return is a disappointment. There is little disruption from my point of view, but after a long day yesterday, that was filled mostly with waiting, she will have another couple of long days today and tomorrow to get ready for Sunday after having been gone. For the most part it is the nature of our

work that we simply have to get it done regardless of travel or days off or even sick days. What you don't get done before you leave will be waiting for you when you return.

While we are as good as anyone else when we complain about travel days, travel is one of the huge luxuries of our time. Our parents probably would never have tried to make a trip to a place as distant as Maine in four days. Even though the technology existed for one day travel between any two places in the United States, the distance involved would have meant a longer visit. Our grandparents barely lived long enough for such travel options to exist in their lifetimes and lived their lives much closer to their homes. A trip from North Dakota to visit relatives in Minnesota was a major adventure, rarely undertaken in a span of time less than a couple of weeks. A delay of five hours could come from multiple flat tires in those days. Arrival times, and even arrival days were offered in general terms, without much hope of meeting a specific hour.

Mud was responsible for more than one extra night en-route and they would have never considered major travel in the month of January.

All in all, we are pretty lucky to be able to do the things that are most important in a timely fashion. An occasional delay is to be expected, and on this particular trip, a delay in the return is not as disruptive has would have been a delay traveling to Bangor. Both Rapid City and Denver have forecasts for good weather today so things should go smoothly.

Our attitudes toward travel are significantly different than those of previous generations. I had a meeting in Pierre yesterday. I thought nothing of traveling 170 miles each way for a mid-day meeting. There was no reason for me to consider staying overnight for an event so close to home. The meeting assumed that participants, from across the state of South Dakota, have access to dependable automobiles. Although the high price of fuel has resulted in my participating in more meetings via telephone of computer conferencing, we still travel a fair amount for face-to-face gatherings.

By the middle of March, our daughter will be living in England for a while and we will join the ranks of families with one or more members on a different continent than the family home. With computer video-conferencing and other communications, staying in touch is relatively inexpensive and convenient. We have no plans to travel to visit her during her stay, but it is not something that we would rule out. The price of airline tickets for such a trip is under $500 per person. Not inexpensive, but fairly reasonable and certainly, when adjusted for inflation, much lower than the prices payed by previous generations for a trip to Europe.

So we will take the delay in stride and soon it will be just another story we sometimes tell when we experience another delay. Life goes on and our lives are relatively comfortable as they continue.

Safe travels wherever you may be going today. May you arrive safely and when you return home may you be greeted with love.

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January 31, 2009 – Rodeo



Kristina Baker/Rapid City Journal photo

In the town where I grew up Rodeo day was a big day. There was a parade and the town was full of visitors. We often got a new pair of jeans and a new cowboy shirt for the occasion. My dad's business always had a float in the parade. One year he towed an airplane down the parade route with a saddle on the tail and I rode in the saddle, dressed in my rodeo best.

It was a big deal, but it was only one day. We had to have a rodeo. The hometown of Cremer Rodeos had to have a rodeo. And so our rodeo was billed as "The Biggest One-Day Show in the West." I have no idea how they measured such things, but it was a source of community pride.

Our family wasn't a ranch family. We lived in town. My parents always had a connection to agriculture, first through agricultural aviation and later through the farm machinery and feed business. We visited area ranches all the time to see our friends and with our dad when he made sale calls. And ranch culture was a part of our town. I can't remember when I first learned it - it was something I just always knew: cattlemen and sheepherders don't mix. In our town, the Court Bar was for sheepherders and the Grand Bar was for cattlemen. If an out of town cattle buyer wandered into the wrong bar by mistake, the error of his ways were soon pointed out to him.

We knew about the big winter stock show in Denver, but we had never attended. So, now, as an adult, the Black Hills Stock Show and Rodeo is a bit of nostalgia for me and

at the same time it is a whole new world. An indoor rodeo is quite a production. Truckload after truckload of dirt is hauled into the Civic Center. Area high school and college students are hired by the score to rake the dirt and set up temporary corrals. Before long they'll be scattering wood chips and shoveling manure. Ranching is an inherently outdoor activity and there are certain complications when you bring it inside. But they've been doing it for years and have got a system figured out that works.

Any rodeo is a combination of a love for animals, showmanship, salesmanship, and an old-fashioned get together. It takes promoters and advertisers and lots and lots of people who have something to sell. The Black Hills Stock show features auctions every day and it isn't just the animals who go up on the block. Antiques and artwork will be featured at the Foundation Sale. There will be a separate auction for genetics and breading. And, of course there are individual auctions for specific breeds. There'll be a horse auction where animals will sell for prices that justify the $30,000 horse trailers on display in the parking lot and the $65,000 pickups to pull the trailers.

Now, as an adult, I'm not a rancher. I've never owned a horse and I don't have an acreage. The closest I come to ranch work is an occasional trip to haul a little manure for the garden. I'm a preacher: a tie-wearing, office-job, indoor-working guy. I could easily go through my work life without getting into the mud and the muck and wearing dress-up clothes most days.

I own a boot and hats, but that doesn't make me a cowboy. I learned those rules as a little kid. On rodeo day we all dressed up like cowboys, but those of us who walked to school were in a different category than the kids who got off the bus each morning.

But on Rodeo day folks are just folks. Everybody is in the same category. And everybody is treated like family. And that is what I like best about the Stock Show. The people that I meet when I attend are just good people - people who make their living producing food for the rest of us - people who work hard and once in a while take a few days off to enjoy themselves. And they welcome the rest of us and treat us the same as they treat their closest neighbor. Rank and class, position and power don't mean much at the stock show. The guy who donated the set of horns that came from a steer that was slaughtered to feed the 7th calvary to the foundation auction is more popular than the governor. Everybody is welcome to look at the critters and walk through the displays. Real cowboys, who wear feed store caps when working at home, save their Stetsons for special occasions and will walk into the convention center as duded up as those of us who live in town.

And some of the folk who are in town for the stock show will stop by for church on Sunday morning. It's what they do every Sunday and we'll be able to welcome them. After church we'll sit down for a cup of coffee and maybe tell a few stories.

After all, there is time to go to church, stop for coffee and still make the sheep shearing contest set for noon on Sunday.

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February 1, 2009 – Fire



This picture, from bbc.com is likely of a different accident as the fire in Kenya occurred after 7 p.m., when it would have been dark.

The news has been full of devastating fires in the past few days: At least 22 were killed in a fire that gutted a store in Nairobi, Kenya, and about 25 additional persons are missing in that fire. The death toll in a nursing home fire in northwestern Russia rose to 23, as rescue workers discovered more bodies in the ruins. A group celebrating a birthday shot off fireworks at their table and set fire to a bar in China's Fujian provence, leading to the deaths of 15 people. Four more fires were deliberately set early Saturday in an area of eastern Pennsylvania plagued by arsons.

In the most recent fire story to hit the news, at least 111 people have died in Kenya after an overturned tanker caught fire on a highway and exploded. An additional 200 are being treated for burns from the same incident. The story reported by BBC News is that hundreds of people gathered to collect spilling gasoline from the overturned tanker. Some reports say that the fire was started by a lit cigarette, others say that people being turned away by police for trying to gather spilled fuel started the fire deliberately.

Fire stories catch my attention. Although my life has been wonderfully free of pain and injury, I did burn myself in an accident a half dozen years ago. I was using the wrong kind of fuel to start a slash pile on fire and I stood too close and the resulting flash caused burns on my face, chest, hands and arms. Fortunately the burns were primarily first and second degree burns and after treatment in the emergency room and about ten days of recovery, I was able to go on with my life without additional disruption. I

remember the pain being pretty intense at the time, but we tend not to remember the most intense pain and from my perspective of years later, it wasn't all that bad.

At least, i can clearly say it was nothing compared to what happened at that overturned oil tanker last night. I can't even imagine the scene. Hundreds of bodies littering the site, hundreds more in various states of injury. How could rescue workers even know where to begin to provide relief to so many?

Fire has long been used as a symbol for the most horrible thing that can happen. Descriptions of God's judgment speak of fire, most descriptions of hell include images of fire and burning. "You're playing with fire," is a common warning of extremely risky behavior. People talk of being the victim of a con artist as "getting burned." Hospital workers report that the pain experienced by burn victims is among the most intense form of pain that they witness. Even with modern fire fighting techniques and equipment fire is difficult to control. Fire experts speak of "fire behavior," almost as if he fire itself were a living entity. In rural Kenya last night, emergency response was slow.

The town of Molo, where the accident occurred has no fire engine. The Nakuru Municipal Council's fire engine arrived at the scene more than an hour after the explosion. Emergency services in Kenya are very slow and often nonexistent. Red Cross volunteers who have some emergency training, but lack necessary equipment, are often the first responders to disaster.

The amount of human suffering is indescribable.

And the survivors are left to try to make some sense of all of the pain and suffering. In a place of intense poverty, where most people do not have money for traditional transactions, the thought of spilled fuel going to waste was anathema. A few policemen weren't going to keep the crowds from what was known by all to be very risky behavior. It is hard for those of use who live in entirely different circumstances to imagine a scenario where we would risk our lives for a gallon of gasoline. But it is hard for us to imagine the circumstances of the world's most impoverished people.

Paul Collier, economics professor at Oxford University, coined the term "bottom billion" to describe the world's most impoverished citizens. Roughly one billion people live on less than a dollar a day and have experienced stagnant economies with no growth for as long as twenty years or more. Intense poverty is often the result of civil wars or other conflict, the depletion of natural resources, and poor governance.

It would be easy to read the news stories of tragedies in far-away places as events that have no effect on our lives. The victims are unknown and nameless to us. And yet we have the power to make a difference in their lives. It simply takes less money to raise the standard of living for the world's most impoverished people than any other

population group. The price of a fancy coffee at a coffee shop could double the weekly income for a family.

We don't have the power to prevent tragedy and suffering. But we do have the ability to respond. May we do more than look on with horror at these tragedies. May they inspire us to action in the ways that we can help.

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February 2, 2009 – The Castle



Youth in our church have been working on the construction of a castle. It is made out of donated non-perishable food which has been donated by members of the congregation. The castle got dramatically larger yesterday as people brought in shopping bags full of food. It is part of the annual Souper Bowl of Caring food drive that coincides with the Super Bowl football game.

The first Souper Bowl of Caring took place in 1990 when youth in 22 churches in Columbia, South Carolina organized a canned food drive. Their appeal was for each person who intended to watch the Super Bowl to bring one dollar and a can of food. Seeing the huge crowds of people who attended the event live and the even larger television audience, the youth thought what the impact would be if each person donated $1 to help end hunger. That initial effort raised $5,700. It was inspired by a simple prayer, “Lord, even as we watch the Super Bowl, keep us mindful of those who don’t even have a simple bowl of soup to eat.”

Since 1990, the Souper Bowl of Caring has grown to the largest youth-led food drive in the world, raising over $50 million for soup kitchens, food banks and other charities in communities across the country. Through the Souper Bowl of Caring, hundreds of thousands of youth have experienced for themselves the joy and satisfaction of giving and serving. And their efforts have inspired people of all ages to follow their generous example.

2008 was another record-setting year for the Souper Bowl of Caring. Not all participating youth groups register and report to the national website, but those who did accounted for 262,000 youth participants in 14,300 youth groups who raised more than $10 million. A whopping 4.5 million pounds of non-perishable food was collected. This year's giving and participation is expected to be even greater.

One of the unique features of the program is that every penny and every can of food collected is donated directly to a charity selected by each group. There is no national clearinghouse to receive the donations. Each youth group selects its own charities who provide food to the hungry, shelter the homeless and show compassion to those in need.

The youth in our church have, for several years, divided their donations between Cornerstone Rescue Mission, which provides food and temporary housing, and Church Response, which participates with a local food bank to provide groceries to those who have a place to live, but need assistance with food.

The castle is a visual demonstration of the amount of food that is donated. With walls that are three or four cans deep and towers that are eight or ten cans high, the structure contains hundreds of donated cans. Additional donations of boxed foods are piled high on adjacent carts and the floor. The amount of donations is impressive. And the youth will be receiving donations and displaying the canned goods for one more week before loading up the donations and delivering them.

The truth is that this amazing display of generosity reflects only a very small portion of the potential. This program is capable of growing and expanding for many years. Everything about the Super Bowl is enormous. The international audience is estimated at a billion viewers, with as many as 97 million viewers in the United States. An advertising slot during the game costs $3 million. $206 million in advertising was sold for this year's game.

Think of the potential impact. If everyone who watched the Super Bowl donated $1 to hunger relief the face of poverty in the world could be transformed. Even a very small fraction of the money spent on Super Bowl parties, events and advertising would be a huge amount of money.

We may not have the power to end hunger in this world, but we do have the power to make a difference. One prayer combined with the efforts of one youth group who proceeded to organize a couple of dozen other youth groups. They, in turn recruited others into what has become a nation-wide outpouring of generosity.

If you think the castle in the entryway of our church is impressive, multiply it by the estimated 15,000 youth groups participating in the Souper Bowl of Caring this year.

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February 3, 2009 – My Tartan



I know that I have English ancestry. Whether or not there is any Scottish is a bit uncertain, as my ancestors have been in the United States for a long time and my knowledge of my genealogy is restricted to the most recent generations. I do think that it is possible that I have some Scottish in me, if the behavior of my ancestors is any indication. But we are not like some of the descendants of Scottish and Irish clans who can name their kin and claim a specific tartan for their kilts.

I've never worn a kilt.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, highland tartans were associated with regions or districts, rather than any specific clan. The cloth designs were produced by local weavers who used their own taste and locally available natural dyes to form the patterns in the cloth. I suppose that people tended to purchase locally woven materials, but I suspect that there was some shopping from one weaver to the next to find a design that was to the liking of the purchaser. Sometime in the mid 1800's specific tartans became associated with Scottish clans or families and also with institutions that are associated with a Scottish heritage.

These days there are folks who are proud of their Scottish heritage who have associated with a particular tartan through family or community associations. They proudly wear their family colors as a show of their roots. Probably the most common Scottish tartan is the Royal Stewart worn by the pipes and drums of the Royal Highland

Regiment. The Regiment is also known as the Black Watch, a name that is also given to its distinctive tartan of blues and greens.

Modern printing techniques means that tartans are no longer limited to textiles, but are reproduced in a wide variety of non-woven mediums. Paper, plastics, packaging and wall coverings all can be found with various patterns of stripes that imitate the effect of weaving.

Which is how I think that I have discovered my tartan. As I stated earlier in this blog, my Scottish ancestry is in question in the first place and so far I have been too lazy to research all of the details of my heritage. So, like an ancient Scotsman, going from weaver to weaver to select the design that he likes best, I have decided to select my own tartan. Who knows? Someday I may pick up the game of golf and develop a need for a distinctive plaid for my pants.

I discovered my tartan as the result of a Christmas gift. Several years ago, as a joke, I wrapped a present for our son in layers of duct tape. I thought that the duct tape wrapping would make the present difficult to open and provide a laugh for our family on Christmas morning. At that time duct tape was available only in the gray-silver color that can actually be found on heating and air handling ducts. The present was a hit and the method of wrapping became a tradition. Each Christmas I select one present for our son and wrap it in duct tape. Presents wrapped in duct tape have come the other direction also over the years.

And, a few year ago, we began to discover colored duct tape. First there was black and then white and then primary colors. At times I've had rolls of duct tape in most of the available colors. Then some creative company came out with clear duct tape. I use it all the time for all kinds of patches.

Duct tape has become the "bailing wire" of my home-made repairs. It is a joke that I keep a roll of duct tape handy in all sorts of places. I have some under the seat in my pickup, and a roll or two in the garage. There is duct tape in my study and even a roll of duct tape in the pulpit at the church. You never know when an emergency repair might be needed. Just last Sunday, there was a script that kept blowing off of a music stand whenever anyone walked by. Duct tape to the rescue, the drama proceeded without a hitch.

It was just a matter of time before someone started printing plaid duct tape. And it was just a matter of time before someone in my family purchased a roll as a gift for me. Actually, I received two rolls of plaid duct tape for Christmas this year. One has a pattern of greens and blues, not quite, but not all that dissimilar from the Black Watch or Royal Stewart. The other features green on a red background. It seems that such duct tape would be a perfect compliment for almost any occasion.

We wear inexpensive leather gloves when handling firewood. It doesn't take long for the gloves to have holes in the fingers. Duct tape is the preferred method of extending the life of the gloves and silver used to be the color of choice. No more! I've repaired the fingers of my gloves with plaid duct tape to add a touch of class to any Woodchuck Society occasion.

It is said that Scottish folk are frugal with their money, unwilling to spend when it is not necessary. This trait has been translated and exaggerated into the common lore in such a way that frugality is associated with being of a Scottish heritage. What better association than duct tape and frugality. A person with duct tape on the fingers of his gloves speaks of someone who seeks to avoid wasting money.

So I probably don't have much Scottish heritage, really. At least I've never been known for skillful management of money. And I am as apt as anyone else to spend money in ways that don't maximize the return. Collecting money has never been one of my life's goals and I have tended to pursue interests that don't result in an accumulation of wealth. And I do enjoy giving money to causes in which I believe.

But I do have gloves with plaid duct tape on the fingers. It may be as close to Scottish as I will ever get.

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February 4, 2009 – Waiting for Dawn



Although I often rise before the sun, there are different moods with which I greet the dawn. Some days, I am wishing that it wouldn't come so soon, longing for more time in bed and another opportunity to rest. Some days, I am eager for the morning's light and its promise of a new day, new opportunities and new adventures.

We've been engaged in a long vigil. One of the matriarchs of our church is dying and for the last 24 hours, I have been checking in with her family at the hospital. I started to bed last night, but in the wee hours I headed up to the hospital and spent most of the night with the family. These events, however, happen in God's time, not ours and so I've taken a break from being with the family to come home and start my day. The truth is that as much as I would like to be there for the family and as much as I would like to be with them at the moment that their mother passes, I am a finite person. I have only so much energy and I have other commitments to other families, including my own. So I am taking a break and pausing to reflect on all that has been happening.

The passing of a matriarch is a momentous occasion. This is a large family and there are daughters with their own daughters and granddaughters gathered in the room. There is a sense of wanting to take care of their mother just like they have cared for others. And yet, there is also a sense that the mother who nurtured them, the one who cooked and cleaned and cared for them, is now headed for a place where they cannot follow. The example that she set of how to be a mother and a grandmother was easy to imitate. This new chapter is more difficult. The one who has been present for all of the significant events of the lives of her children is now facing her mortality and when we

are honest about it, her passing makes us come face to face with our own mortality. Mothers are like that. They put us face to face with life's most important moments.

There is a shifting in the life our our church - something that is always true, but of which we are more aware at certain moments. Yesterday I spent some time with another matriarch of the church who has finally come to a point of having to leave her home and begin to live in an assisted living facility. She fought this day with all of her strength and will. She stayed in her own home as long as she could. And part of her is still resisting this change. She has heard the words of the doctors and of her family and she has resigned herself to the truth of their words, but there is an emotional reluctance to accept the inevitable. She wants to hang on for one more moment, one more hour, one more day.

The legends of our people say that the passing of Moses was like that. Moses was so full of life that he didn't want to take leave, even when the time came for him to die. Some stores tell that he argued with God up until the end. Having won arguments with God in the past, Moses could be very frank and blunt with God. But none of us have been chosen for immortality. None of us can go on forever. In a sense our struggles are merely postponing the inevitable. But there can be some moments of intense relationship and deep love exchanged during that delay.

So ours is a vigil. We watch and we wait and we confess that we don't know the timing of these significant moments in our lives and in our community. In God's time we will move forward. For now this is the quiet time, before dawn, waiting for the light to be revealed.

And we are not alone in the darkness. Even if we weren't surrounded by people, we would not be alone. As I have recited a thousand times and more, "thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." Whatever valleys lie ahead, we know that we will receive God's blessing and comfort.

May the dawn renew our strength and revive our spirits.

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February 5, 2009 – One Man



The Gospels report that Jesus once met a rich young man who asked him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus reminds him of the commandments and the young man reports that he follows them. Jesus then says to the young man, “One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have, give the proceeds to the poor, and come, follow me.” When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he was very wealthy.

A couple of millennia after the encounter between the young man and Jesus that is reported in both Matthew and Mark, another rich young man read that story in the bible. He was at a crossroads in his life. His marriage was unstable, and he was unable to discover his purpose in life. He had achieved remarkable success early in his life, He had graduated from Auburn University and the University of Alabama Law School. While still in school, he and a friend had started a marketing firm. He was a millionaire before his 29th birthday.

Millard and Linda Fuller took the gospel seriously. They reconciled, and decided to sell all of their possessions and give the money to the poor. They ended up at Koinonia Farm, a Christian community near Americus, Georgia, where founder Clarence Jordan helped them start a new life of following Jesus.

When I tell the story of the founding of Habitat for Humanity, I am always clear to point out that Millard and Linda did not take their money and start Habitat for Humanity. They sold everything they had, gave the money to the poor, and then, with nothing in hand, no money and no resources, themselves poor, Habitat for Humanity began to grow.

What they had was a believe that the economics of the bible would work in real life. “Do not charge interest to the poorest among you.” “Give what you are able.” “Remember the widow, orphan and immigrant in your midst.”

In 1973, Linda and Millard moved to Africa to test their principles. In Bokotola, a small community in Zaire, they built simple, decent homes and sold them on a no-profit, no-interest basis. Homeowner families invested their own labor in the homes and in the homes of other families. Money from the payments owners made on their homes was placed in a revolving fund that built more homes.

In 1976, the Fullers returned to the United States and with others expanded the program of home building to create “Habitat for Humanity” International. Today, Habitat for Humanity has constructed over 300,000 homes in more than 100 countries around the world. More than a million people live in Habitat homes. The economics of the Bible work on a large scale far better than the founders of the organization could have imagined.

Millard became a prolific writer and an inspirational speaker. He wrote more than 10 books and his eloquence inspired many people to pick up a hammer and go to work and others to donate what they could to help build homes. I know that hearing him speak made a difference in my life. His practical theology, using the Bible as a guide to solve everyday problems, his ability to start with nothing and give from his poverty, his confident belief that everyone deserves simple, decent housing, and the example of his own life, are all stories that I have told over and over again. I think of him every time we start a new home an every time we dedicate a home and help a family move in. I tell stories about him every time I speak to a new member of the board of directors of our local affiliate.

Tuesday, while we were preparing trusses to be lifted into place for the roof of a Habitat home here in Rapid City, and where literally thousands of homes were under construction around the world, Millard Fuller began to feel ill. His brother Doyle reported that Millard complained of a headache and chest pains. He was taken to the hospital in Americas, Georgia, where it was decided that he should be transferred to a larger hospital in Albany. He died in the ambulance en route to the larger hospital.

The obituaries and news reports speak of all of the awards that Millard was given, and famous people are quoted about their friendship with him. Former President Jimmy Carter said, “He was an inspiration to me, other members of our family and an untold number of volunteers who worked side by side under his leadership.” I was one of the untold number. When I met him, he was in Boise Idaho, to help a local affiliate gear up for increased home production. He spoke to our Association of congregations about providing shelter as “a matter of conscience.” He made me want to get out of my suit, pick up a hammer, and go to work.

And I have believed, ever since, that some of my best sermons are not the ones I preach in the pulpit, but the ones I live working side by side with other volunteers. Millard taught me and so many others, that you don't have to be rich in order to give. The gift from poverty can be the most significant you will ever make. In my life the thing that I seem to lack the most is time. So it is my time that I tithe. I have tried to tithe my time to Habitat, giving one day out of every ten as a volunteer. Sometimes I fall short, but each new day is a new opportunity.

Habitat for Humanity is a truly remarkable organization. It is the largest home builder in the world and continues to grow exponentially. Through the expansion of this simple concept, entire communities are renewed, individuals are enabled to rise from extreme poverty, children are given the opportunity to grow up on safe and stable homes, and people of faith become partners with God's people in need.

And it is all because of one man.

Millard Fuller would be the first to remind us that the one man is Jesus.

I give thanks to God for the life of Millard Fuller.

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February 6, 2009 – Trusses



Probably most construction projects are a combination of waiting and rapid activity. This seems to be particularly true of homes constructed with volunteer labor. It seems like we waited and waited for the raising of the walls and now, just ten days later, we have a nearly enclosed building. The roof sheeting is on and it really looks like a house now. Yesterday was one of those amazing "fast forward" days.

Fritz, the owner/operator of Badlands Crane Service believes in Habitat for Humanity. A while back he started donating his time and his crane to lift trusses into place for the roofs of the homes. This really speeds up the process of setting the trusses. The use of the crane also increases safety on the worksite. Some assemblies, like the gable ends can be put together on the ground and then lifted into place as a unit.

Fritz's enthusiasm for Habitat is so great that he has succeeded in recruiting some of the builders with whom he works to help. Yesterday, the whole crew from T-IV Construction showed up. A couple of workers arrived at about 7:30. By 7:45, the crane was on the site and the T-IV crew had parked their large construction trailer next to our site. A few more preparations such as organizing air lines, power cords, etc. and the work began. The crane hooked onto the first truss at about 8:00 a.m. By 8:45, all of the trusses were in place. By noon all of the roof sheeting was on and the gable ends were also sheeted. The professional crew as practiced and efficient and the amount of work accomplished in a half day was amazing.

Through a special arrangement with Dakota Craft, a local company that prefabricates home components, our affiliate uses pre-made trusses in all of our construction. Roof trusses, consisting of rafters, posts and struts, are assembled in the Dakota Craft shop on jigs so that each truss is the same as each other truss. They are assembled with nail plates, loaded onto a truck or trailer and delivered to our job site. Then the crane lifts them into place and the crew nails them to the house. It is possible to assemble trusses on the site from plain lumber and simple jigs can be made to assemble trusses, but the specialization of work and precision of the Dakota Craft process makes assembling roof trusses rafter by rafter and stick by stick and inefficient way to build a house. Since we work with volunteers, the slowness of our processes would mean that our houses would be exposed to the weather for long periods of time were it not for the pre-fabricated trusses.

The trusses we set in place yesterday can easily hold up the roof of that house for century and more. Over the years, the shingles on the roof will wear out and be replaced, the siding may even be replaced. Windows and doors and other building components will wear out and be replaced. But the basic framing of the house will last for the entire life of the house. Trusses need to be set up correctly, spaced evenly and set plumb and square. The trueness of the framing dictates the quality of the house. And we have every reason to build the highest quality that we can afford. We are, after all, building a home to shelter a family. This house will be the place where children grow up over the next couple of decades. They deserve a roof that doesn't leak and walls that don't let the wind in.

Volunteering with Habitat for Humanity has taught me a great deal about construction. As time goes by, I'm becoming a better carpenter. I'm no craftsman yet, but each project teaches me more. Watching the skilled crew from T-IV Construction yesterday, I learned quit a bit about the process of building and framing. Each new lesson makes me more useful on the next construction site. I have no illusions about becoming a master carpenter, or even approaching the skill of he professionals. It is not my job or my calling. But I can learn to participate in the process. And every hour I donate helps to decrease the price of the house for the families who will live in them.

Yesterday was a day for me to watch. I had meetings throughout the day. I had desk work to do at the church, I had a funeral to plan, I had the typical events of my regular job. And it would be unfair for me to spend too much time at the construction site, as exciting as the day was. I spent about 45 minutes there before my first meeting of the day, and dropped by on my way to a noontime meeting just to see the progress. I snapped a few pictures that we can give to the homeowner.

Today the crew at T-IV will be back to work on their usual jobs, constructing custom homes that are valued by using fractions of $1 million rather than counting the individual dollars. Compared to yesterday's work, the homes they usually build have complex roofs with lots of gables, corners, valleys and other features common to larger and more

complex homes. They are artists at getting the angles right and making the finished home look spectacular. But no house they build, no matter how expensive, no matter how large, no matter how architecturally unique, will mean more than the simple 4-bedroom, one-bathroom house they helped to build yesterday. Safe, decent, warm housing is a need we all share.

And when we work together in partnership with those most in need, the process is truly amazing. One truss at a time, one roof at a time, one home at a time, our community is being transformed for the better.

May our actions speak louder than our words.

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February 7, 2009 – 24/7



For whatever reasons, I have seen more of the night life of the hospital this week. Three different days I have been in the hospital in the wee hours. The hospital is one of the institutions in our community that operates twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. There are all kinds of people who work during the night: physicians, coroners, police officers, fire fighters, emergency medical services personnel, nurses, laboratory technicians, operators of imaging equipment, and more.

One of the ways that communities provide staff for essential services is by having people work different shifts around the clock. In the emergency room, the general shifts for nursing staff change at 3 p.m., 11 p.m. and 7 a.m. Other personnel work 12-hour shifts. And additional people work on an "on call" basis, responding as needed. I fall into the latter category. My job mostly involves daytime activities, but I am on call to respond when needed. Middle of the night calls are relatively rare. Three in the same week is even more rare. But this was one of those weeks.

Last night's visit was a part of volunteer work that I do with the front porch coalition and the Pennington County Sheriff's Department. Our LOSS team provides outreach to survivors of suicide. We serve as first responders, providing support, information, and referral to family members and friends of people who die by suicide. Last night we were called out by law enforcement before we knew whether or not death had occurred. All we knew was that there was a serious attempt.

It turned out that our fears were realized and death occurred. We made it to the hospital just ahead of the survivors and were able to be with them throughout the process of notification and initial response to the reality. There is no easy way to tell a survivor that a loved one had died. In most cases, there is some advance information that bad news will be received, but there is no way to prepare for receiving such news.

Still, it isn't as bad as people imagine. People imagine that the would not be able to survive such news - that they would either go crazy or die. The truth is that they do not. There is an initial period of shock that can last for varying amounts of time. The family member receiving the news. Sobbing can convulse a body, a person might hyperventilate, they might collapse and need support.

But it doesn't last forever. In most cases after 20 or 30 minutes signs of hope begin to emerge. Last night the hope emerged in the form of people who were genuinely concerned and ready to offer support. Emergency room physicians and nurses offered medical support. Friends arrived to do what they could. Employers and fellow workers offered assistance. Law enforcement personnel offered answers to questions. The hospital chaplain offered a prayer. And we were there to offer information and the perspective of other survivors who have experienced death of loved ones by suicide.

Even on the the worst night of a person's life, there are signs of hope and healing.

And so the healing begins. Tears flow until one believes that one could cry no more, and then they come again. People who genuinely care offer a shoulder to cry on and a hug of support. Offers of food and support come. Phone calls are made. Additional family and friends rally to the crisis. The process of surviving isn't always smooth. One day at a time seems like a distant goal when one is surviving one minute at a time. There is no way to get through such an event gracefully. Muddling through becomes a way of life for some time.

But there are plans to be made. Decisions that are demanded. And slowly, grief begins its process of healing. One breath at a time, life goes on. There are relatives to inform, family members who need care and support, arrangements that need to be completed. In the midst of the activity a small sense of reality begins to emerge. Even though survivors operate in a cloud for a long time, there are moments of clarity and understanding. A thousand questions that being with "why" have no answers, but once in a while a "what" question finds an appropriate answer.

We believe that no one should have to go through that process alone. There is still plenty of stigma in our community for those who are victims of mental illness and those who die by suicide. But education continues and the situation is improving. The LOSS team is available 24/7. Packets of information are delivered. Contacts are made. Support groups are in place.

Suicide not only claims the life of its victims, it wounds our community. But we are survivors and we form community in the midst of crisis. Strangers become friends. Helpful support is received. And our community goes on.

So today's blog is not carefully crafted. I am bone tired. And I'm heading back to bed to get some more rest. But I have no regrets about being available 24/7. Sometimes the needs of our community are simply more important than my need for sleep. And I know that there are others who are awake in the darkness waiting for the dawn of a new day. We are not alone.

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February 8, 2009 – Wildfire



BBC Photo

We have always been attracted to remote places. We enjoy going up into the hills to camp and hike and explore. Growing up in Montana, our church camp was more than 40 miles from the nearest town, more than 20 from the end of the paved road. From that base we hiked up into the wilderness. As opportunities presented themselves, we have traveled to other parts of the world and, while we enjoy visiting cities and urban areas, we also have tried to visit rural and isolated areas when we travel.

In 2006, we had the opportunity to visit friends who live in Melbourne, Australia. During our visit we traveled to other parts of Australia including Uluru in central Australia and Tasmania, south of the mainland. But we also were able to take several leisurely drives through the forested hill country north of Melbourne. It was at the ned of Australia's winter when we visited, but we found the temperatures to be comfortable.

The world is vastly different in rural Victoria today. Enormous wildfires are raging out of control, destroying entire communities. In Kinglake, Strathewen, Wandong and Clonbiane, there are hardly any buildings left standing. The town of Marysville is gone. At least 640 homes have been destroyed and the death toll stands at 84. More than 100 square miles have burned, with gum trees exploding in walls of flames that exceed 150 feet in height. The fires are the worst in the history of Australia.

And arson is a big factor in the starting of the fires. In at least one case a fire that was contained was re-ignited by an arsonist.

It is difficult to imagine the devastation and terror of fires burning on that scale. Even with temperatures dropping a bit with a change in the weather, fire officials estimate that the only thing that will enable the fires to be fully controlled is rain. Fortunately, much of the area in the path of the fires is not heavily populated. The rural isolation, however, makes fighting the fires more difficult and notifying people of the danger is also more challenging. At leas 14,000 homes are without electricity and communications are hampered by fire damage. In some cases, access to and from communities has been cut off by the fires.

A national disaster has been declared and army troops have been deployed to help with firefighting efforts.

In previous record fire years, February and March have proven to be the height of the fire season. In February of 1983, 75 died and 2,300 homes were destroyed. There were scores of fatalities in fires in Victoria in 1969, 1967, 1939 and 1922. But this year's devastation is the worst ever experienced.

There is substantial agreement in Australia that one of the factors in the increasing size and intensity of wildfires is global warming. Although the majority of human-caused climate change stems from the production of carbon in the northern hemisphere, the effects of global warming have been more intense in the southern hemisphere. We live in a world where the results of our actions can impact the lives of people living in distant locations.

It is a helpless feeling to sit at home and watch the news of the fires knowing that there is little I can do in the short term to lessen the impact of the fires. I suppose it would be easy to take the attitude that it is something that is so far away that it doesn't concern me. But it does concern me. I have friends who live in Victoria. Although none of the people I know personally are currently in danger, some of the places that have burned are places that I have visited.

Due to the difference of time, it is now late evening in Australia. Soon it will be Monday there. We get news of their day before we have reached that day ourselves. Sunday was a terribly devastating day for the people of Victoria. So today and tomorrow we send forth our prayers for the safety of the firefighters and for those whose homes lie in the path of the fires. We pray that those who have set fires might see the error of their ways and that no more fires will be set. We pray for those who have lost their homes and their towns to the fires that they might discover new beginnings and strength and support in rebuilding. We may be watching helplessly, but we are not hopeless.

God is with the good people of Australia today and every day. May they also know of the prayers and support of their brothers and sisters in distant locations.

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February 9, 2009 – Philanthropy



BBC Photo

The news continues to come from the fires in Victoria, Australia. The news continues to be bad. Now over 131 persons have died and officials have cautioned that people need to be braced for an increase in the death toll. In many cases there hasn't been time for proper evacuation. In at least one instance thought they had time to get out because the fire was on the other side of the mountain 80 km (nearly 50 miles) away. The fire covered that distance in a half hour. Flames spreading at nearly 100 miles per hour are difficult to escape. The thick smoke has caused accidents and accidents have blocked roads that are being used as escape routes. The stories of tragedy are riveting and revolting at the same time. I can't bear to think of the suffering of the victims and I can't stop checking to see what is happening.

Our lives are touched by the lives of others. Their greatest joys and deepest pains affect us. We cannot escape sensing our connection with others. Our minds rush to thinking about what we would do in a similar situation. "How would I react?" "How would I feel if I had just lost everything I owned?" "What would it be like to be suffering from severe burns and at the same time to be grieving the deaths of family members who did not survive?" These thoughts are inescapable as we witness with horror the tragedy half a world away.

There is something deep within us that connects us to other people.

In medicine, the common term for a victim is “patient.” We often associate this term with “waiting.” Patience is the ability to accept or tolerate delay without undue discomfort or anger. The connection between the terms, however, is not based in the acceptance of delay, but rather in the Indo-European word root “paen,” which means to endure. A patient is one who endures. And often what a patient endures is pain.

We have another important concept that comes from that same word root: compassion. Compassion means “to endure with.” It means to endure whatever is being endured by another human being.

There is an abundance of patients in the areas north of Melbourne Australia today. Much is being endured. And we are called to compassion - to endure with those who are suffering much. And endurance is part of what is demanded in this situation. While the best efforts of thousands of firefighters and emergency personnel are being invested, while support from the military and from other countries is being extended, while the world continues to offer resources and support, the fires are too great for humans to control. Tinder dry conditions and record heat have created the circumstances for firestorms that will continue to rage out of control for some time. “Get out of the way,” and “endure” seem to be the order of the day for many.

And we feel compelled to endure with those who are suffering - the patients in need of healing that will take time.

This brings to my mind another concept that we often define in a very narrow fashion: philanthropy. We think that it has to do with rich people giving away money. The original Latin term does not refer to wealth or to money at all. “Phil” is familial love - the love that siblings experience for one another. “Anthropy” is the whole of humanity. Philanthropy is the love of all humanity. The term literally comes from the realization that we all belong to the same family. We are connected.

Geneticists teach that we come by this naturally - because all humans are connected - we share the same lineage and the same genes. We are brothers and sisters - or at least distant cousins. We are connected in one human family. We come by philanthropy - the love of humanity - naturally. Philanthropy is not some extraordinary act that is reserved to a small portion of the wealthiest people in the world. It is, rather our natural disposition that occasionally is realized in the form of financial gifts.

But those suffering in Australia today aren’t soothed by philosophy or the search for the root meanings of words. They are patients - those who endure. And patients are in need of healing. Compassion: sharing that which is endured is the first step, but our philanthropy commands us to go beyond compassion.

Our scripture teaches: “ . . . suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5:3b-5)

Hope is an interesting concept. And if you can endure just a bit more philosophy and language study, our English word, "hope" also has Indo-European roots. The root word is "Kev" - the same root word from which we get the word "curve." It means a change in direction. Our hope is literally based in the belief that we can change direction. Things don't have to keep going the way they are. Change is possible.

Hope is our expectation that good will come and the expectation is based in the conviction that change is possible. No matter how much suffering we must endure, we know that change is possible. And this knowledge is the source of the hope that will not disappoint us.

So, despite the pain and suffering ever-present in Victoria to day, despite the uncontrollable raging firestorms that threaten so much, despite the pain and loss and suffering and grief that are ever-present, we choose to live in hope - hope for Australia and hope for ourselves. It is a hope that is born of love for others.

May our philanthropy - our love of all humanity - inspire us not only to give a bit of our possessions, but more importantly to share our hope.

"Hope does not disappoint."

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February 10, 2009 – Downsizing, Sort of



One of the themes of my life these days is moving furniture. I remember when we first moved to North Dakota 30 years ago. We moved into the parsonage with almost no furniture. We had a bed and a small desk and a kitchen table with a couple of chairs. The house looked so empty. It wasn't long before we had rounded up more furniture: a dining room table, a sofa and a couple of chairs.

Time passes, and we live in a frugal family. There have been many options for obtaining used furniture from relatives. We haven't purchased too much new furniture, but have a few pieces that we obtained new. And our family has expanded and consolidated. My mother and Susan's father have moved to our community. Both have gone through several different living situations in the past decade, downsizing from a house to an apartment and from an apartment to an assisted living facility.

Add to that, our children, while getting settled in life, have needed us to provide storage for their possessions from time to time as they made adjustments and changes in their lives.

Yesterday, after a short period of time on the waiting list, I was able to obtain a large storage unit near our home. I have had a smaller unit in the same facility for a couple of years. The result was that the contents of the storage unit need to be moved. I got some of the items moved yesterday, but still have a couple of hours work before I get everything moved.

And my mother is moving back to our home after a brief stay in a nursing home. Her increased use of a walker has meant that we needed to have a bit less furniture on the main floor of our home. More things to move.

I think that we are testing the limits of frugality in our generation. While we appreciate that our elders were not wasteful, it seems that saving everything is not the most efficient strategy when space is limited. Paying rent at a storage facility can end up costing more than getting rid of unused items and, if they are ever needed in the future, replacing them as needed. It makes rational sense.

But, of course, we are not rational when it comes to possessions, especially ones that have been in the family for a long time. And, as I moved things from one place to another yesterday, I was dividing the new storage space into sections for the various people who may someday need the items. There are three of us living in our house, but our storage unit houses possessions for six different family member. “Save that, someday I’ll come and get it.” There is a table in the storage unit that is being stored until we can transport it to Oregon. Of course it has been unused and in storage since I transported it from Oregon a few years ago. Like I said, we are not completely rational about all of this.

And it is not just the big items that need sorting and delivery. There are small things that have sentimental value that we keep but rarely use.

And there are the collections of items that we have acquired that we do actually use, but are in need of better organization so that they are more readily available. I have been known to purchase a small tool such as a screwdriver or putty knife even though I already have the item, just because I can’t put my hands on it at the moment.

We have been successful in slowing the acquisition. We are much more careful about our purchases and the gifts we choose to give one another than we once were. And we have had some success taking boxes of items to rummage sales and getting rid of many items. But some days it feels like a losing battle. A move of one of our parents can result in enormous duplications. A dining room table makes sense when you have a dining room. But it is no longer necessary when you take your meals in the common dining room. There have been enough aunts and uncles and grandparents and parents to make for a supply of extra dining room tables in our storage unit.

The important factor in the long run really won’t be the number of months that we pay rental on a storage unit. The important factor will be how much we can reduce the inventory of items before we begin to downsize. Our current situation involves the accumulation of multiple generations. And there are treasures that should be passed from our generation to the next, many of which we have received from previous generations. But not everything should be passed along.

So it becomes our mission to continue to sort and downsize. We weren't moving in the right direction yesterday, obtaining a larger storage unit. But we did move additional items out of our house. And we did identify more items that we are ready to throw in the trash and others that will go to the next rummage sale.

And we are forever hopeful. We know that life can take us in new directions. We know that the changes in the economy may indeed result in people around us who have increased needs and perhaps some of the items we have in storage can be of genuine use to others.

I didn't take any pictures of the shuffling of items in the storage units. So the sunrise picture is of a different reality. We live a good life in a good place and we are surrounded by beauty. And part of the beauty of our life is that there is enough open space.

May we live our lives in such a way that there is always room for open space in our lives.

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February 11, 2009 – Family



"You can quit a job. You can move to another place. You can even get a divorce from your spouse. But you can't resign from this family!" The ties that bind us together are deep and strong and we take them seriously even when they engender significant passion on our part. We care about our family and that is why sometimes the gatherings of our family are emotional encounters.

I grew up in a large and diverse family. My parents started with adopting children, had children born to them and then adopted more. Before sociologists were using terms such as "blended" or "reconfigured" family, I knew that family was more than just blood relationships. Our siblings and our relatives come to us by birth and by choice and the road to our family is a one-way street. Once you're in, you're in. "You can't resign from family."

As the years have passed, however, our relationships have changed. Like many other families, we have dispersed to many different locations and the physical distances between us are significant. Our lives are busy and complex and we aren't always thinking the same way. The picture that accompanies this blog was taken at a recent gathering where five of the six remaining siblings were together. One missing seems to be typical for our family gatherings these days. If we waited until everyone could be at the same place at the same time, we might never get around to getting together. What the picture doesn't show are the complex networks of family that extend from each of my sisters and brothers. Our lives are interesting and exciting, but they are not, for the most part, conventional.

Of seven siblings in our family, only two have not experienced divorce. One is no longer living. All are parents. Because of the differences in our ages and because of starting our families at different points, our children are very diverse in age. I have a niece who is older than two of my brothers. I am not yet a grandfather, but I have lots of great nieces and nephews and even a few great-greats. Mapping our family tree would challenge a genealogist and intrigue a family systems therapist.

We are all descended from very strong religious roots. Our grandparents were leaders in their churches and communities. Our mother's father served the Methodist Church in its national setting. If you get into aunts and uncles and cousins there are a lot of ministers in our family tree. But this generation spans a very wide range of theological perspectives from skeptical humanist to fundamentalist, with a generous smattering of new age, diverse old line denominations and even a taste of other world religions.

We've earned our living from occupations as diverse as lawyer, nurse aid, aerospace compliance officer, minister, city maintenance worker, water slide operator, restaurant worker, convenience store clerk, tree surgeon office manager, truck driver, newspaper deliverer, writer, community organizer, and car salesperson.

We've lived in homes as diverse as a cabin miles beyond the reach of power and telephone lines, hilltop executive home, parsonage, mobile home, multi-generational home, apartment, and nursing home. Some of my siblings have experienced homelessness and have been sheltered by rescue missions. There have been times when I have been able to visit the homes of all of my siblings and times when one or more haven't had an address.

We are a diverse lot.

But we are who we are. We are a family. And you can't resign from this family.

While my experience of my family seems to me to be unique, I am aware that there are plenty of other families with complex relationships and diverse personalities. For the past couple of weeks, I have been working closely with a large multi-generational family in our church who have experienced the death of their matriarch. They are every bit as capable of strong opinions as the family where I grew up.

On the other hand, the family where I grew up did more to prepare me for working with this particular family in devising a funeral for their mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, great-great-grandmother than four years of graduate theological education. Seminary classes in liturgy, ritual, rites and sacraments don't prepare ministers for the real-world complexities of family funerals. Cremation or burial, public viewing or not, open or closed casket, the choice of funeral home services and a thousand other decisions are only academic arguments until they concern the members

of your own family. Walking alongside a family as they make these decisions requires well-developed skills of listening and occasionally the art of compromise.

I am grateful for my family in ways that I have not communicated to them. And I am made aware once again of how short our time is to say thank you for the things that are most important.

How fortunate I am to have been born into a family from which no one is allowed to resign.

NOTE: Regular readers of this blog will note that it is late in posting this morning. A major software update yesterday resulted in the need to re-publish all of my web files to the server. It is not a big job for me, but it is taking a long time. This page will publish only after the rest of the pages are posted. I apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.

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February 12, 2009 – Homecoming



Yesterday was a homecoming day for our family. On January 6, mother was admitted to the hospital with pneumonia. She remained in the hospital until January 12, when she went to Westhills Care Center, where she stayed for a month. Yesterday, after a month of physical and occupational therapy and loving care, she was able to come back home. The treatments of the hospital and care center have been effective. She is stronger and healthier than she was. We have made arrangements for physical therapy and some other services to continue through a home health care agency.

So our family is reunited again. At least we are back to a more recent configuration. Like most families, we have had our share of changes, with children growing up and moving out and elders moving out of their own homes into different living settings.

Of course a month is long enough for us to have forgotten some of the routines. And mother's medications have changed during her stay in the hospital and care center. We came home with a shopping bag full of medicines and it took a bit of effort to translate the various cards of tablets into an organized system for her to receive her medications at the right time. All of that is part of the process of adjusting to the current configuration of our family.

There are other routines that need to be re-established as well. When mom was in the care center, Susan and I were not very careful about our meals. We tended to work through mealtime some days and to be less formal about what time we ate on others.

Regular meals are essential for mom's health and submitting to the discipline will have positive health benefits for us as well.

The main thing is that we are happy together. It is good to have mom back in our home and to be together. Although I was able to visit her every day that she was in the hospital and care center, some visits were brief and her routine was very disconnected from ours. She wasn't able to share in the daily ups and downs of our lives and to offer her care and concern for the routine stresses of everyday living. And we weren't able to share our lives as fully with her in visits that often were in a public dining room or public lounge.

One thing about my job is that I get to observe a lot of families and my experience has taught me how precious time with family really is. The people in our lives are never truly ours. They are a gift of God for a little while. And even when we are blessed with longevity and good health, none of us will go on forever. That means that each day, each conversation, each hug is a precious gift.

So we cherish the moments we have. In our hectic lifestyle with lots of coming and going, full appointment calendars and long lists of things to do, some of our moments are rather brief. And our new lifestyle is going to have a new parade of people coming and going from our home as we adjust to the various home health care services and meet the people who deliver them to us.

Yesterday afternoon, as we were leaving the health care center, there was a parade of people who came to give mom a hug. The physical therapist, the director of social services, the dining director, the activities director, the nurse and aides, the dining room wait staff and others all stopped by for a hug and a greeting and to tell mom they would miss her. I thanked each one for their good care and I realized that all care is based in relationships. They will genuinely miss my mom. And she will miss them. We become attached to the people in our lives. And each change brings new relationships. I am not the only one who loves my mom and appreciates her smile, warm attitude, gentle sense of humor and upbeat nature.

There will be challenges as we provide the care that is needed and adjust to the new routines, but we re indeed fortunate for every moment that we have together as a family.

The cats seem to be pleased, too.

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February 13, 2009 – Tragedy in Buffalo



Photo from bbc.com.

Officials say 49 people died after a Dash 8 commuter airplane crashed into a house in a suburb of Buffalo, NY last night. Killed were 44 passengers, 4 crew, and one person on the ground. Among the victims was the widow of a victim of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, who was traveling to Buffalo to present a scholarship that has been established as a memorial to her husband.

I grew up with parents in the aviation business. I have heard over and over the statistics about the safety of air travel. When I need to travel, I don't hesitate. I was a pilot myself before I decided to quit due to the cost of flying enough to meet my standards of safety. I do not ever remember being scared in an airplane. Riding in airplanes is something that seems quite natural and fun for me.

The odds of being injured or killed in an airline accident are much lower than other forms of public transportation. And they are incredibly lower than private automobile travel. The US loses more people to automobile accidents every week than the number of victims of the 9-11 attacks. And those events weren't accidents, they were attacks.

Nonetheless airline accidents are dramatic. Although most airline accidents do not produce victims and those that do usually also have survivors, there are occasional dramatic accidents like the one last night, where all of the passengers and crew are killed.

The cause of the accident remains under investigation, but it occurred during approach to landing in snow and freezing rain - conditions that can result in decreased airplane

performance. An airplane that gets too slow will stall and a stall too close to the ground cannot be corrected. But the causes of the accident are pure speculation at this point. The fire was intense. Investigators will have to wait until the site is completely cooled from the fire and then collect whatever evidence remains.

Witnesses report that it is amazing that there weren't more victims on the ground. Two people escaped from the house that was hit with only minor injuries. Damage to surrounding houses was light. "It could have been worse" is slight consolation to the families of the victims, however.

The news was still carrying stories about the U S Airways flight that ditched in the Hudson River almost a month ago. In that accident, all passengers and crew were successfully rescued without any major injuries. It is the way that we want all airline accident stories to end.

There are many intersections of life and death in this world. We, who are living, find ourselves thinking about those who have died. Yesterday I attended a firefighter's funeral. Sitting on the edge of the sea of blue uniforms I was intensely aware that the people surrounding me are the people in our community who respond to the fires, drive the ambulances and respond first when a tragedy occurs in our community. They are the ones who transfer patients to the ambulance gurneys, inset the bodies into body bags, and come face to face with the realities of life and death in our community every day.

And they, like us, are not immune. We all will one day die from this life. It is that simple. And it is that complex and confusing. Human beings are finite. We do not go on forever. So our memorial services turn our attention to the things that last - the things that do not die. Memories remain. Legacies continue. But love never dies.

As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, we may have some ability to envision the future, we may have some ability to speak, we may have some knowledge. But these things come to an end. Faith, hope, and love abide, these three. And the greatest of these is love.

So how do we respond to the very real tragedies? With love. We respond by nurturing the relationships that we have been given, loving more deeply, committing more of ourselves to love.

The fire trucks have returned to the station. The blasts from the sirens can no longer be heard. Even the memory will begin to fade. But love never dies.

Today, on the eve of the feast of St. Valentine, may we once again be prepared to invest in love.

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February 14, 2009 – The Flowers



Today is Valentine's Day, a good day to celebrate love and the presence of love in our lives. The Bible teaches that God is love, so it is a day of the celebration of God in our lives. We recognize God in big and little things. Last night the beauty of a bouquet of flowers was a joyous addition to and unexpected ceremony.

We have an altar guild at our church who take care of our sanctuary. They care for the live plants in the front of the room, consult with the Department of Worship about banners and sanctuary decorations, maintain altar cloths and paraments, and provide for flowers on the communion table. The flowers are donated by the members of our congregation, but there is substantial coordination required with members, flower shops and others. The donation of flowers is noted in the worship bulletin each week and often there is a memorial phrase as part of the flower dedication.

The usual flower delivery time is Saturday morning. However, for some reason the flowers were delivered and set up in the sanctuary on Friday this week. When I arrived at the church last evening, the altar was set up for worship, with candle sticks and the flowers. During the middle of the week, a Bible and a different pair of candlesticks are our usual appearance.

Last night was the night of a small, private wedding. A young couple met at work a couple of years ago. He was born in Bali, in Indonesia, and came to the United States when he was a teenager. He has lived and worked in Rapid City for 7 years. He has no other family members in the area. The bride grew up on a South Dakota reservation and

moved to Rapid City as a young adult, to seek a better job and living for herself. She has a sister who lives in town. They fell in love and decided to marry. Without strong religious affiliations, and with few family members in the area, they decided to have a simple civil ceremony. They saved up and purchased rings. On January 30 they went to the courthouse and purchased a wedding license only to find out that there was no officiant available to perform the ceremony.

In South Dakota, a wedding license is valid for 20 days after issue. That means that their license, if not executed, would be valid only through February 19. They began to call churches in search of someone to officiate at their wedding. In Rapid City, there are many churches that have a strict rule about pre-marriage counseling. And counseling takes time. Some congregations do not allow people to be married in their church unless they are members. Others have high fees associated with weddings. It is typical for the charges at a church to be between $500 and $1,000. This young couple has little extra money. They kept calling.

Something in the bride's voice intrigued me when I took the phone call. This type of wedding is very unusual for us. We have weddings that are scheduled a year in advance. I usually refuse weddings where there is no connection between the couple and the church. A church is primarily relationships, not just a building to rent for a backdrop for wedding pictures. But there was an openness in the conversation with the bride-to-be that interested me. Something told me that our church could help this couple by reaching out.

So the wedding was planned. We planned the wedding for the evening, because both the bride and groom work full time and cannot afford to take time off of work. Planning for a Friday evening allowed me to fit the wedding into my schedule at a time when there were no other activities planed for the church. By not turning up the heat and not having any of the usual "extras" such as organist, wedding coordinator, janitor, etc., I was able to offer the church and the ceremony to the couple at no cost to them. The hotel where they both work offered a dinner and a room for the night.

The groom arrived first, with three friends. He had on a brand-new white shirt, a tie and dark slacks. The bride had a nice dress. Her sister was with her. After checking the license and a few additional details, we turned on the lights and went into the sanctuary.

The flowers added a brightness to the evening that would otherwise have been missing. One of the friends brought a camera and took pictures of the ceremony.

It was simple and short. The promises exchanged by the couple were as genuine as I have every witnessed. The reverence and respect paid to our building by the couple and their friends was far more impressive than many weddings that occur in our

building. They were nervous and a bit shy about the kiss. It was a sweet evening. They will remember it for the rest of their lives. I am unlikely to forget it as well.

Their heartfelt thanks and expressions of gratitude were deeply appreciated. They took a reply envelope with them so that they could make a donation to the church at a later date. I invited them to join us for worship on any Sunday. I don't know if I will ever see them again.

But for a brief moment last night, the flowers were part of a deeply religious ceremony in the traditions of our church.

The donors of the flowers intended them for our Sunday worship service, where they will serve beautifully. But I intend to tell them the story of the extra worship that the flowers graced and thank them for the beauty they added to a simple ceremony that changed the lives of a young couple forever.

After all, a Valentine's story like this one is too good to keep to oneself.

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February 15, 2009 – Healing



The Gospel for this morning is very simple. A man identified as a leper approaches Jesus and says, “If you choose you can make me whole.” Jesus replies, “I choose. Be well.” The man is healed. The report in the Gospel of Mark is very direct and simple. Over the years since the story was first told, theologians and others have added to the complexity of the report, speculating on the reason Jesus told the man not to tell of his healing and asking why everyone who suffers an ailment isn’t instantly healed. Earlier in the gospel we learn that not everyone who came to Jesus for healing was healed in a simple statement, “all who were sick in that region came . . . many were healed.” One can conclude from the report that there were some who were not healed.

We want religion to be magic. If I say the right words, if I believe the right things, then I’ll have a life without sickness and suffering. But we know better than that. We know that good, faithful people who live lives of prayer and service experience illnesses. We know that there are diseases that cause incredible pain and suffering and that believers are not somehow exempt from those diseases. We know that we cannot manipulate disease by our attitudes or beliefs.

That’s where the man who approaches Jesus gets it right. He confesses that the choice about his illness lies beyond himself. Whether or not he is healed, and when that might occur is not something that the victim can control. “If you choose” is a simple admission that the choice does not belong to the leper. In a few words, he admits he does not control his situation.

All around the world preachers are struggling with this text, seeking deeper meanings, trying to figure out how it connects to the lives of their people. Some will be addressing people who have received devastating medical diagnoses and are praying for miracle cures. Some will be addressing people whose lives are shattered and who are desperately praying to be made whole. Faith isn't magic. It doesn't give one the power to be exempt from mortality.

The simple truth is that the leper did not live forever. He was cured of his disease on that day and went out and told others, but another day came in his future when he suffered a disease from which he could not recover. His faith made him whole, it did not make him immortal. Healing doesn't mean that there is no more disease. The Gospel doesn't report what happened to the leper after Jesus granted his healing. A life of faith doesn't give us knowledge of the future.

Healing doesn't always mean the cessation of illness. Sometimes it means being able to live life fully in the present, free from guilt and worry. Sometimes it means being able to be fully present in relationships with others of genuine love. Sometimes it means accepting the truth of our own mortality.

The cross in the front of our sanctuary is a continuing reminder of the intersection of life and death. In this death joy and sorrow, healing and illness, hope and fear, life and death, are very close to one another. There are times when we can't tell if the tears running down our cheeks are tears of joy or tears of sorrow. The cross in the front of our sanctuary is a continuing reminder that it is at this intersection of life and death where we meet the resurrected Christ. Whatever this life has to give us, we don't have to face it alone. Whatever the future may hold, we can face it knowing that we are loved.

We like the front of our sanctuary as it is: simple. Maybe we like our faith that way at times, too: uncluttered. "If you choose . . ." might just be a very good opening for our prayers this day.

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February 16, 2009 – Where to Put the Prison



The State of South Dakota is looking for a site to locate a new Prison in the Rapid City area and each proposed new site is met with controversy. The latest site to be proposed is the site of a former decking and fencing business off of Elk Vale Road in Rapid Valley. The proposal is for a facility to house 265 inmates that would replace the current 102-bed minimum security facility on Creek Drive. Neighbors have reacted negatively. No one wants a prison facility in their neighborhood. The proposed site got my attention because our daughter works at a day care facility that is in the neighborhood.

I don't think that there would be any risk to the day care center if the prison were located at the proposed site. It is a minimum-security facility. The inmates housed in the facility would be very low risk. And the security at the day care center is first rate. Access to the building is carefully controlled and the facility has full time video surveillance. It is probably a bit alarmist for me to use a picture of the day care center for this blog, but my early-morning search for pictures of the area revealed that the only pictures I have that were taken within a mile of the proposed prison were taken inside the day care center.

Being in the neighborhood with the prison would probably affect business for the day care center, however. Because people are afraid of prisons and prisoners.

Where to locate the prison is a problem for State officials. A previously studied site north of the Flying J truck stop ran into flood plain issues. A location near the city landfill would have cost more than twice the $6 million for the proposed All Decked Out building. All of the proposed sites have prompted complaints from neighbors.

We are afraid of prisoners. And we have a lot of prisoners. Incarceration rates in our country are the highest in the history of the world. At 737 per 100,000 citizens, our incarceration rates are significantly higher than countries that are considered to be repressive such as Russia (611/100,000), Turkmenistan (489/100,000) and Cuba (487/100,000).

Our rates of imprisonment of our own citizens are much higher than our neighbors, nearly quadruple that of Mexico (196/100,000) and eclipsing Canada's rate (107/100,000). And in South Dakota, our rates are high, more than double that of our neighbors in North Dakota and Nebraska.

Incarceration rates in the United States are rising. Despite falling crime rates since 1991, the population of people in prison has risen by nearly 50% in the same time. The biggest factor is change in sentencing policy, with a nearly 30% increase in the length of sentences between 1995 and 2000.

I don't pretend to be an expert in the area of prisons or prison reform. Like my neighbors, I want violent offenders to be isolated from society and prevented from offending again. I have observed the expensive and large additions to our county jail and other prison facilities. I don't know how to have a safe society without prisons. At the same time, I am alarmed at accelerating costs of housing prisoners and the failure of our society, in many cases, to re-integrate people convicted of non-violent crimes back into the role of productive citizen.

Despite positive statistics of work-release programs, they are expensive and cumbersome to administrate. Non-prison alternatives such as supervised house arrest, tracking bracelets, etc. are reserved for a very few high-profile cases and not in regular use here in South Dakota. The most hopeful programs I have witnessed in my time of living here are the teen court system and the center for restorative justice.

The teen court system is designed for early intervention and fair punishment for minor infractions committed by teens. Teens serve in a wide variety of roles in the system and punishments are aimed at keeping offenders actively involved in the community while imposing real penalties for infarctions. Community service is often a component in sentencing.

The Center for Restorative Justice brings perpetrators face-to-face with their victims and puts a human face on what is otherwise an often-impersonal process. Offenders who have been through the restorative justice process are much less likely to reoffend.

Six weeks ago a juvenile broke a window and crawled into the church. It appears that he was intent on stealing computer equipment. However our alarm system was triggered and the police captured the youth inside of our building. The total loss to our

church was one broken window. The expense to the community of law enforcement personnel, equipment, and time was much higher than the church's loss. I don't want anyone to be breaking into churches, and I believe that there should be consequences for people who are caught stealing, but I worry about a juvenile who might get caught up in the system and, through exposure to other criminals become much more hardened and more likely to resort to crime in the future.

The States Attorney asked me what I thought might be a fair sentence for the crime. I suggested that a fair sentence might include getting to know the members of the church by working with us on a Habitat for Humanity project. After thinking about it, I think that splitting and delivering firewood might also be a good way for him to get to know who we are and what we do. I don't know if it would make him a better citizen, but I think it might have a more positive effect than sitting in a prison cell.

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February 17, 2009 – Gallo Pinto



Food is one of the identifying features of a culture. There are, of course, many other ways to identify a specific culture: art, music, clothing, nuances of language, and other features. But food is a big part of culture. The United States, with its “melting pot” of cultures, has a wide variety of cuisine. Most small cities have restaurants that feature Italian, Chinese, Mexican, and other regional flavors. And those who have traveled know that the fare in U.S. restaurants is not the same as one finds when traveling to another country. It is difficult to say what food is distinctive to the United States, but after traveling in other parts of the world, tourists return with a hunger for a good hamburger. Perhaps the ground meat sandwich, even though its name comes from a German city, is one of the defining foods of our country.

In Costa Rica, there is no doubt that Gallo Pinto is a food that marks the culture. The dish of rice and black beans is served everywhere from the fanciest restaurants to the most humble homes. There are some variations in recipe, but the basic ingredients are the same: rice, black beans, finely chopped onions and sweet peppers, and cilantro. Garlic is another common flavoring and hot peppers are added in some places. In Costa Rica gallo pinto is served with fried or scrambled eggs for breakfast and with fish or meat for dinner. It is common for gallo pinto to be served with every meal of the day.

I do not know why the dish is called gallo pinto. The name means “spotted rooster.” Maybe the color of the dish, with the rice taking on a gray hue from the bean water, resembles the color of an exotic spotted rooster. For gringos in Costa Rica, it is enough

to simply learn the local term for the dish - we often use language without knowing all of its origins and the subtleties and nuances of meaning.

For me, an occasional tourist in Costa Rica, the flavor of the dish reminds me of some of the first meals I had in that country, served at the Community Christian Church of Los Guido. I associate the flavors with the good people who live in the neighborhood and whose lives are marked by poverty. The ingredients are inexpensive. Dried beans, soaked overnight, are combined with rice that has been cooked in a large kettle or sometimes a deep frying pan. Cilantro is a much-used and very common spice and the amount of onion and pepper in the dish varies with what is available. There are plenty of recipes for gallo pinto on the Internet, but locals don't use recipes for such a basic dish. It is, for the most part, something that everyone just knows how to cook.

It is a dish that I have learned to cook a bit, because we have developed a taste for it and because it reminds us of our friends in Costa Rica. When our church has a Costa Rican meal, I usually volunteer to make gallo pinto because it requires minimum preparation time. As long as I remember to soak the beans overnight, the rice, onions, peppers and flavorings can be sauteed in a little oil in a few minutes and everything combined into a crock pot to simmer until the rice is cooked and tender. The rice absorbs the water, so it requires little attention. Over cooking produces a bit of a mushy mess, but the flavors remain. If I forget to soak the beans, canned beans can be substituted, but the flavor and texture aren't quite the same.

When there is little meat in one's diet, beans become an important source of nutrition. And dried beans are inexpensive.

In the short, ten-day trips that we make to Costa Rica, there isn't enough time to get tired of rice and beans at every meal. People who spend more time in the country get their fill after a while.

It is important to us to share the food of Costa Rica along with the stories of our sister church. Christians in the United States have a tendency to think that mission work is about exporting our faith. We have faith and we take it to another place. The image is not accurate, at least in my experience. Rather we travel to places where we discover that faith already exists. Christianity came to Costa Rica with Christopher Columbus at about the same time it first arrived on the North American continent. The country is officially Roman Catholic, but protestant churches thrive and find room for witness and service throughout the country.

When we tell the stories of Costa Rica, we help our congregation see that our relationship is not one of "us" and "them," but rather a shared mission and ministry that takes place in two different locations. As useful as food is, it is a poor substitute for real relationships. So the heart of our connection with our sister church is regular visits. It is more challenging for members of their congregation to travel to visit us, but we have

been blessed with a visit by Pastor Dorotea and her two daughters, and we continue to work with our partners to discover other visits that may be appropriate. So we continue to discover ways for our members to visit Costa Rica. In addition to commissioning our members for service during Vacation Bible School in Costa Rica, we try to take a group for a shorter trip with some significant service project every couple of years. Some people make multiple trips. Others only go once. Over the years, the number of people who have been able to make the trip has increased and we have a small community of committed folk who have seen our sister church first hand.

And that group of people contains some wonderful cooks. So, from time to time, we put together a meal of Costa Rican recipes to share with our church here. It provides a perfect atmosphere to tell stories and share the faith of our sister church. We've planned such a meal for the first Sunday in March.

I'll bring gallo pinto even though I don't know why a dish would be called "spotted rooster."

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February 18, 2009 – The Logo



It amuses me to see the popularity of certain logos in clothing. John Deere logos are showing up on lots of children's clothes and on numerous items for adults as well. Of course people pay extra to tout the brands of their choice. You can buy all kinds of items with logos on them: t-shirts, caps, jackets, coffee mugs, clocks, calendars, even dishes and silverware.

This is nothing new to me. As you can see by the photo that accompanies today's blog, I've been wearing clothing with the John Deere logo since I was six years old. In fact my whole family had clothing with the logo, even a couple of my cousins.

My dad was a John Deere dealer. I was 25 years old before I had a jacket that didn't have some kind of logo on it. In general we preferred John Deere to Purina Chow when we made clothing selections as kids. But you don't always get a choice in the matter, or at least didn't when I was a kid.

The picture reminds me of another phenomenon of my growing-up years. We had "family shirts." The t-shirts with the logos were the exception. Most years my mother would get a few yards of cloth and make shirts for every member of our family out of the same material. After a few years, we could go on a family vacation or for a week at church camp all wearing matching shirts. The fact that we kids were constantly changing size wasn't much of a problem, there was always an older kid to donate a shirt the right size and a younger kid to take the one just outgrown. I don't remember this as any kind of a burden. I thought it was kind of neat to have a family that was big enough

to have our own uniforms. Not many of my friends had similar circumstances. We even have a few pictures of our family dressed up in family shirts with the dog wearing a modified wrap made out of the same material.

We lived in a small town. Everybody knew what family we belonged to without the need of identifying clothing. When we traveled out of town, there was little doubt in the minds of strangers who belonged together.

We don't have matching shirts these days, but the truth is that we still belong together. Family is one of those things that shapes you forever.

Looking at old family photographs illustrates not only changes in our family, but also changes in our culture and community. Just the fact that our family photo albums show the switch from black and white to color photography illustrates one big change. As the years went by, we have more photographs. I assume that this was due to decreasing costs and increasing availability of cameras that were relatively simple to operate. It certainly is not due to the fact that I have become more photogenic as the years have passed. At last count, I have nearly the same number of digital photographs on the hard drive of my computer as we have in our collection of four generations of family photographs. I rarely go anywhere without a camera. And our children all have cameras built into their cell phones.

It is difficult to tell, from this perspective, which of the contemporary photographs will become treasures and which will need to be sorted out to make room for new images. The process of sorting photographs mirrors the sorting of memories that takes place as we seek to integrate the various experiences of our lives. Some memories come to the forefront, others are shifted to less prominent places in our minds. Some are available for instant recall and immediate storytelling, others require considerable pondering and searching.

A photograph like the one above can set my mind off in a hundred different directions, recalling a thousand different memories. Until I looked at the picture, I had forgotten that the honeysuckle bushes by our house were ever that small. I had nearly forgotten about the wide venetian blinds in the living room of the big white house that we called home. Actually the house wasn't any bigger than the one in which I live today, it just seemed bigger because I was smaller. And I had nearly forgotten how utterly irresistible my sister's hair was. How could you not grab a handful of those curls and pull, even when you knew it would get you into trouble? I can almost hear her cries of "mother, mother, mother, mother mother!" It seems perfectly normal to me that my mom has her hands firmly on my shoulders and that my sister is standing beyond my reach leaving a blank place between us in the photo.

The picture includes two cousins and was taken just before the two littlest boys joined our family. The summer that the picture was taken, we flew to Washington, DC to return

the cousins and to visit our nation's capitol. I will always remember that summer. We saw the Wright Brother's airplane the first ever to fly at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. And the Spirit of St. Louis was on display in the same museum as well.

Every snapshot is a partial story, none can capture all of the stories of our childhood. But every picture seems to stir multiple memories and stories. Some of those stories are worth forgetting. Most are memories to treasure.

My memories aren't as well organized as the photographs in my mother's albums, but looking through the albums helps to organize them a bit more. Perhaps one day I'll try to write down some of the stories and organize some of the memories.

In the meantime it is as interesting to me to notice the things that don't change as it is to note the changes in our lives.

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February 19, 2009 – The Teleological Question



PLEASE NOTE: I serve as a member of the Pennington County LOSS team. LOSS stands for "Local Outreach to Survivors of Suicide." We are a group of first responders, dispatched by the local 911 system, to respond to suicides in our county. Our purpose is to provide services and referrals to the survivors - family members and friends - whose lives are forever changed by a suicide. Although today's blog was inspired, in part, by my work with the LOSS team, it makes no direct references to a specific recent suicide in our county. Although I am on call this week, we have had no call outs so far. It is important to note that I do not discuss the private affairs of people's lives with others and I do not use the personal tragedies of those I serve as material for sermons or blogs. This blog is about my experiences and not the stories of others.

Somehow I have fallen, from time to time, into the task of notifying persons of the death of a loved one. I remember clearly the first time I was called upon to do this job. I was working as a family counselor for the Wholistic Health Care Center in Hinsdale, Illinois. One of my clients had been hospitalized as the result of an acute psychotic episode. She was capable of rational thought on occasion, but also had a wide variety of alarming symptoms including hallucinations, both auditory and visual, suicidal ideation, and bizarre religious opinions and convictions among other issues. She was hospitalized, in part, for her own protection. We were taking her suicide threats seriously. While she was in the hospital, her teenage son had taken suddenly ill. He was admitted to the same hospital with as yet undiagnosed symptoms, including significant internal bleeding. It turned out that he had been poisoned by chemicals that he had contacted while working at a farm in rural Illinois, but at the time the only information

that I had was that he had become violently ill and suddenly died. I was called in the middle of the night by the husband and father, to make the notification to the mother that her son had died. I was still a student. It was only my second funeral. I had no idea how to break the news. I had a 20-minute commute to ponder what I was going to say. Because the mother was a patient in a locked ward, the nurses had already awakened her. She had to know that it was bad news when she saw her husband and me approaching her in that empty lounge area in the middle of the night. But I started with the obvious anyway, “We have some bad news and we need to tell you this ourselves because no one should hear this kind of news from a stranger.” While I was struggling for what words to use, her intuition kicked in. “It’s Bobby, isn’t it?” From there on I didn’t know what to expect. She sort of collapsed in my arms and we sank together to a sofa and for a few minutes she simply sobbed and sobbed and I had no words.

She didn’t disappear into a psychotic fog. She didn’t turn violent and start hitting us. Slowly but surely she began to gather herself together and to speak with her husband. She asked a few questions about what had happened. She even asked if they had played his music for him as he lay dying. They had. Somehow we got through that evening and the next few days of planning and conducting a funeral. She was released from the hospital for the funeral and burial and then readmitted.

Over the years, I have been called upon to make death notifications on too many occasions. There are no easy ways to tell people the truth. But we are called to speak the truth in love.

Being a minister, I am often asked, “Why?” or more specifically, “Why did God do this?” or “Why did God let this happen?” Why does a teenager loose control of a car at a high rate of speed in the middle of the night while not wearing a seatbelt? Why does a young man suffering from major depression and multiple addictions grab a handgun from the console of his SUV and wander back into his bedroom to pull the trigger? Why does a fifteen-year-old write dark poetry, arrange mementoes from the funeral of his cousin on his bed and hang himself with a belt from the bar in his closet? Why does a middle aged man in good health leave his stuck car and strike out across an open field in the middle of a blizzard? There are a thousand questions to which I have no answer.

It is what philosophers call the teleological question: What is the purpose of the things that occur? Why do things happen?

It is not far from the question of theodicy: If God is all good and all powerful, why do bad things happen? How can there be evil in a world ruled by a good God?

I can tell you this much. In the midst of a crisis, when we are face-to-face with death’s ugliest realities, cheep theology doesn’t work. “It was God’s will” is about the stupidest and least helpful thing I’ve ever heard a minister or another well-meaning person say. God doesn’t work that way. God doesn’t cause accidents, big or small. God doesn’t

make me drop an egg on the floor in front of the refrigerator and God doesn't cause the tires of a car to lose traction and enter an uncontrollable skid. God doesn't send depressed persons into the woods with a gun to kill themselves. God doesn't cause cancer or heart disease or muscular dystrophy or Lou Gehrig's disease. God doesn't work that way.

Nowhere in the Bible does it say "God is clinical depression," or "God is broken eggs," or "God is the combination of an automobile and alcohol."

Get it straight. God doesn't cause evil.

Ultimately, the teleological question might never be answered in our lives. The purpose of tragedy and evil in the world is not clear. It is undeniable, but we often do not know the answer to the question, "why?".

The Bible does say, "God is love."

And I have been witness to great love in this world. I have worked with the deputies and police officers who bend down in the snow and carefully and respectfully lift the lifeless remains onto a stretcher to transport to the hospital. They treat that person as if it was a relative. They wait until they are alone in their cruisers to cry and when they get off their shifts they hug their own wives with special intensity and call their children to make sure they are OK. I have watched the emergency room nurses work with silent efficiency to do everything in their power to bring comfort and order to a chaotic situation. I have held the sobbing body of a bereaved widow in my arms as friends arrive and gently take my place and move in with a familiarity that I cannot offer. I have been in the home when the casseroles and baked goods begin to arrive, often delivered without any knowledge of what to say, but with genuine care and concern all the same. I have been witness to great love.

If you want to ask the question about where is God in the tragedy, don't ask for the laws of physics to be repealed. Don't ask for human freedom to be revoked. Trace the path of the tears down the cheeks of the survivors and sink to the floor with them and understand that God is weeping right along with you. The Bible doesn't pretend that pain and sorrow and suffering aren't real. The Bible doesn't present characters whose lives magically work out and who get whatever they want just by asking for it. The Bible is filled with stories of every imaginable human tragedy and horror: rape and incest and infanticide and lust killings and unfaithfulness and forced prostitution and war and injustice and ugly violence of every kind. Real people facing real evil. And God is in every story, even the ones we cringe to re-tell.

Read the book. God doesn't make the bad things happen.

God stays with the people of God in the midst of the worst tragedy imaginable. Love never dies.

I have a friend who is a member of the Search and Rescue Squad. He lives for his volunteer work. He carries his pager with him wherever he goes so that he will always be ready to respond to the next crisis. He can drive the emergency vehicles, operate the jaws of life and put on scuba gear and make a dive to recover a body. He has placed human remains in body bags at accident scenes and repelled down rock faces to assist victims. He gets an adrenalin rush from each unique situation.

And then he comes to my office and we talk about it. Or we take a walk or sit in a vehicle and he tells me what he had to do. He can talk to me without breaking any privacy rules or ethical boundaries because I am his pastor. We always talk about where God is in every situation. He has told me some pretty gruesome stores, but never one where God was absent.

I'll talk theology any day with any cop or fish and game officer or EMT or firefighter or rescue squad or LOSS team member. When you can no longer see the love, the job becomes unbearable and you quit. The good ones can still find God in the worst of human situations. They might not use theological language. They might not be regular church goers. But you don't wade into the lake and grasp the inert form of a stranger's child and breathe your own breath into that child's lungs and then have to go tell the child's parents that despite your best efforts their child is dead unless there is a reserve of faith somewhere deep inside of you.

Quite frankly, the people with whom it is the most difficult to talk about theology are young pastors with no real-world experience. Despite the best of intentions, their attempts to make things better with words often fall short and ring hollow. Sometimes things can't be made better. Sometimes they are just bad.

It takes real faith to understand and recognize that God is present in the bad times as well as the good. But if I have learned anything from over 30 years as a minister it is that love never dies.

No matter how bad it gets. Love never dies.

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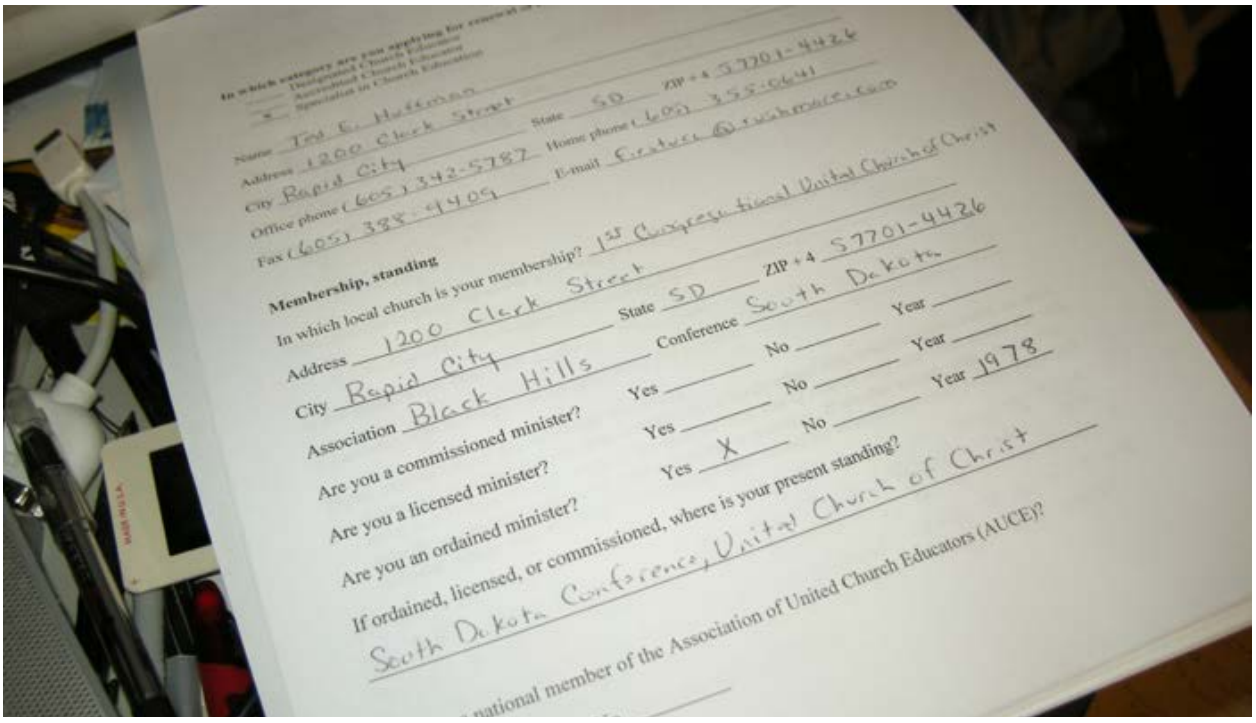
February 20. 2009 – Paperwork



I became a minister because of many different factors. One factor was the deep joy that I found in theological thinking. The philosophy of religion and the history of religious thought are delightful mental challenges for me. Most theological concepts are complex thoughts that have taken generations to develop. The thought of wrestling with ideas that are too big to develop in a single generation is intriguing. I enjoy examining the Scriptures for fresh meaning in the context of today's world.

Even more than the intellectual challenges of the ministry, however, I think that what called me to ministry most was the relationships with people. I am genuinely moved by the stories and experiences of others. I want to help when I can. I enjoy the give and take of conversation and the experience of meeting new people. I have time-tested friendships that are deeply meaningful to me.

I did not go into the ministry because of my love of paperwork. From the time she was little, our daughter has enjoyed filling out forms. She used to fill out the customer response cards whenever we ate in a fast food restaurant. She would fill out the subscription cards in magazines just for the fun of it. When applying for college or for jobs, she tackled the application forms with relish.

I do not share her joy at that particular task.

There are plenty of forms that need to be filled out in the ministry. Many of them ask for information that has already been given. We fill out annual report forms for the

denomination, corporate and officer report forms for the state, employee report forms for the federal government, and lots of other paperwork. Our congregation has an administrative assistant who helps with the paperwork. Increasingly there is less paper and more computer forms in the task, but the mountains of paper remain.

I maintain my certification as an educator in the United Church of Christ. Certification is granted for a five-year period and must be renewed every five years. Being a church, the deadline is a liturgical date: Ash Wednesday. That's less than a week away and this year is my year to renew my certification. The application packet for renewal is 21 pages of forms. At least we're doing our part to keep the Post Office in business by mailing lots of paper back and forth to Cleveland.

I have been an advocate of certification for educators. I believe that every profession needs to have standards and that those who receive pay and present themselves as professionals must meet certain educational standards and engage in rigorous continuing education to keep up with advances in their field. I have worked hard to be responsible in my own continuing education and am ready to demonstrate my competence in my field. In the past five years, I have attended more than the minimum number of in service education programs, have earned 21 credits of graduate education, have published professional papers every year and have continued to hone my skills as a teacher. I believe that I am worthy of renewal of my certification.

But that renewal won't happen until all of the forms are filled out. And they must be sent in by the deadline. Which means that for half of the day yesterday, I was sitting at a desk filling out forms. And I'm not finished. I probably won't be finished until sometime on Saturday or maybe even next Monday, barely in time for the forms to reach Cleveland in time for the deadline. I wish I hadn't procrastinated with the paperwork, but the truth is that I enjoy teaching far more than filling out forms. The truth is that it is easier for me to see hands-on face-to-face work as a higher priority than filling out the forms. The truth is that I happen to think that those who put people ahead of paperwork are better teachers.

The certification process is not perfect. I requires too much paperwork. The forms are confusing and have been revised too many times to be fully consistent. Welcome to life. The members of the certification committee are more interested in teaching than in designing forms. The forms we fill our are recycled and modified from previous years.

So I will fill out the forms. And I'll get them in the mail by the deadline. And I won't give too much time or energy to thinking about the forms for another five years.

Already today, I've written nearly 800 words about my reluctance to fill out forms. If I had inserted the 800 words into the forms I'd be nearly finished with this year's application. But then, I've known for years that I enjoy writing this blog more than I enjoy filling out forms.

May your day be as free from paperwork as possible.

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February 21, 2009 – Another Farewell



Yesterday was our daughter's last day at her current job. She is heading off on a new adventure. An opportunity to live in England for a while developed and she is heading off for what seems to be a grand adventure. She is twenty-five. A great age for a great adventure. I am fifty-five, a good age to worry about my twenty-five year-old daughter - just a little bit.

I'm up very early this morning to take her to the airport. She's going to spend the weekend with her brother before coming back to spend next week packing her things, cleaning out her apartment and getting ready for her trip to England.

It was hard for her to say good bye to the day care center. She's become attached to the children and to their parents. She is very good at her job and there is no doubt that she has special gifts for working with children. There was a cake and some pictures and lots of hugs and more than a few tears as she bid farewell to the children. It is not easy to say good bye, even when there is a grand adventure waiting.

I think I can remember being twenty-five enough to share some of her excitement about her new adventures. Just before I reached my twenty-fifth birthday I was packing up all of the things in our apartment and getting ready to put them in storage for a couple of months. We spent six weeks in Europe, including some time in England, before arriving in North Dakota to start our first parish as full-time pastors. I was excited about the trip. I was glad to have made it through my degree program. We had lived in Chicago for four years and I was ready for a new place and looking forward a bit to getting out of the city.

Of course it seems quite different to me, looking back. By the time I was 25, I had been married for five years. We had just finished graduate school, we had received the call to be pastors to two small congregations in Southwestern North Dakota, and things were in motion for our ordination in the fall. My parents and my sister and her husband were able to take time off for the grant European adventure. We had friends in many places in Europe and it seemed like the right time to take a big trip and see a bit of the world before settling down to our new career. My parents paid for the trip to Europe.

Rachel's parents aren't paying for her trip to England. She never asked us to. She has figured out her own way to head of on this grand adventure. She is choosing her own path, which is a good thing. She is a very intelligent, resourceful and capable young woman. She is a hard worker and has earned the respect of her colleagues and the people for whom she has worked. She has threaded the path from high school into her young adult years with an incredible amount of grace. She has made more good decisions than bad, has treated others with respect and care and has made her father very, very proud.

But I worry just a little bit.

We live in a precarious world with lots of problems that can occur. The economy is tough and finding a new job when she returns form England will be a challenge. I want her to be happy in this life and I know that it is a good thing for her to experience the world beyond our little corner, but it seems like she will be so far away.

I know my thoughts are not rational. When I was 21, I loaded my wife and most of our worldly possessions into our car and set off for Chicago. When we arrived, I didn't have enough money to make the return trip without calling and asking for a loan from my parents. There were as many risks awaiting me as I threaded my way through my young adult years as there are for her. But I was blissfully unaware of most of the risks I was taking. I was just off on a great adventure. I would walk around Chicago just amazed to be there. I could spend hours in the library just being overwhelmed that there was a library so big. I had to pinch myself to remind myself that is was my life and not a dream.

I know that Rachel has the skills and grace and wisdom to tackle the problems of her life. I know that she is capable and willing to work hard. And I know all of the things that might go wrong. So I worry a little bit.

But I pray that my worries don't hold her back from her life's adventures. My parents never held us back from our adventures. And who I am today is, in part, due to the adventures I took before I was old enough to know better.

Twenty-five is a great age for a grand adventure. At least that is what I keep telling myself. I'm even blogging about the topic this morning as I contemplate all of the changes in her life.

But today she isn't headed for England yet. She's just going to Olympia. And her brother will be there to meet the plane. And they'll have a fun weekend for him to show her his life in that place. And Monday evening, I'll be at the airport to meet her when she comes back. She'll be off work next week and I'll have more time to be with her. Of course we'll be spending that time moving her furniture into the storage unit and getting things ready for her trip. But working times are often the best talking times for us.

And this morning I'm looking at the pictures of her with the children in her day care center and I am remembering when she was their age. I'll never forget the first time I held her in my arms. She was so tiny she fit between my elbow and the tips of my fingers. It was like holding an angel. I had to make myself stop trembling. I remember sitting in the rocking chair that is still in our living room with her had on my shoulder in the middle of the night - I've lost a lot of sleep due to that girl over the years - and thinking I don't know what I would do if anything bad ever happened to her. And now she is too big for me to pick up in the same way and I am still thinking that I don't know what I would do if anything bad ever happens to her.

But I also know that she needs to live her own life and have her own adventures and that the time has come for her dad to wish her well and say farewell and cheer her on. It is definitely not the time for me to hold her back and keep her all to myself. Our children are never really "ours" in the first place. We are given the gift of their presence for a little while and our job is to prepare them and send them forth into the wide world.

But I'm glad she asked me for a ride to the airport this morning. I still need her to need me just a little bit.

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February 22, 2009 – The Summit



I am not a mountaineer. I have done a bit of rappelling, but I never developed the skills of a technical rock climber. I'm more suited to trails that wind through the woods. Still, there are plenty of summits that can be reached by a trail. I've climbed the Barr trail up Pike's Peak, though I guess it is no great accomplishment to have climbed a mountain that has both a railroad and a road for cars that go all the way to the top. Crazy peak, at a little over 11,000 feet is the highest point in the mountains north of the town where I grew up. It is a hike that is best undertaken from a base camp, so three days are in order. But there isn't much technical about the climb. One has to cross a large field of scree and it is rather narrow near the top with some dramatic places where one could fall, but as mountain summits go, it isn't on the list of top accomplishments.

The two summits around here are Bear Butte and Harney Peak. Harney at 7200 feet is the highest point in the Black Hills and the highest point west of the Rocky Mountains in the United States. The trail up Bear Butte is probably a more rigorous climb. It is steeper, at least at the beginning of the hike, and there are a lot less trees and therefore less shade as one walks. Neither is much of a challenge from a technical point of view. It is easy to summit and return from either in less than half a day.

Our summits here in South Dakota may more closely resemble those in the Middle East. Israel isn't exactly filled with mountains like Colorado. And the climate in the region is warmer and dryer than many mountainous areas.

But there is something in the human spirit that draws us to go up to the highest places in whatever region we find ourselves. We look up to the heights and wonder what it might be like to see the world from up there and then, when the opportunity presents itself we take a little hike and go to the top of the mountain. Perhaps we do so just to say that we have done it. Perhaps there is some sense of accomplishment in being able to say, “I’ve been up there.” Perhaps it is a real desire to get a fresh perspective and to look at our world from another point of view.

The Bible has plenty of stories of summits. Moses would go up on Mt. Horeb to talk to God and it was at the summit of Mt. Nebo where Moses looked over the promised land and received the news that he would die without entering that place. Jesus took Peter and James and John and went up on the mountain to pray. It was there that he was transfigured in their sight and he spoke with Moses and Elijah, a complete suspension of the normal limits of time.

For thousands of years, our religious traditions have held that God is not restricted to any single place. Since God is everywhere, people can be in relationship with God no matter where their location. Yet, we continue to identify some places that somehow seem to us to have a particular sense of the holy. For the most part, these places are hallowed by the events that took place there. Horeb is sacred because it is where Moses was when the law was revealed. Nebo is sacred because it was the ending place of Moses’ leadership. But there are plenty of sacred places that are not on the top of mountains. Jerusalem has a few hills, but is hardly a summit. Pineal, where Jacob wrestled with the angel, is alongside the river.

Still, from time to time we seek the high places. And we have had some awesome experiences at the summits of our lives.

Perhaps is is the departure from the everyday more than the elevation that makes us more aware of God’s presence and receptive to God’s call. In the story of our people, these mountain top experiences, while deeply significant, cannot be retained. They are fleeting moments and soon enough we go back down and rejoin our everyday life at a somewhat lower elevation. I can stand in the old fire tower on top of Harney Peak and wonder what it might be like to watch a thundershower from that vantage point. But I have never been inclined to stay up there through the winter.

The high places are for visiting. We live most of our lives in other places.

Today, with Christians around the world, we celebrate transfiguration Sunday. We re tell the story of Jesus and James and John. And part of the story that we tell is how the suggestion that they build structures and stay on the mountain was quickly rejected. They descended the mountain after that experience and got on with the activities of their lives. The experience on the mountain was transient. No matter what they did they

could not hang on to it. From time to time we may glimpse the eternal, but it is the nature of the eternal that we cannot posses it.

Most of our lives are lived with memories of experiences at the summit. Only a very few moments are spent at the actual summit of any hill or mountain. But our memories are strong. We have stories of summit experiences that have sustained our people for uncounted generations. And even though we know that telling the story is not the same thing as having been on the mountain on that particular day, there is still a bit of the awe and wonder contained in the story and we share a fraction of that experience in the re-telling.

May we continue to experience the summit long after we are able to climb to the top.

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February 23, 2009 – Fishin'



The days are starting to stretch out again. We can really notice it at the ends of the days. There is more light in the evening and more time for outdoor activities. And the sunrise is earlier. It is getting very close to the season of driving directly into the sun on the way to work. After months of going to and coming from work in the dark, the light is a welcome friend.

I suppose, if I were like a lot of other folks, I'd be turning my mind to fishing. It's the way we grew up. Fishing and hunting were regular pursuits of my father and grandfather. We have pictures of me joining them on their adventures at a relatively early age. I'm pretty sure that the fish in the picture above weren't caught by me, although my dad used to set the hook and then hand me the rod to reel them in, and it is possible that I participated in the fishing. I certainly have lots of fond memories of scrambling over rocks and walking along creeks and rivers with my dad.

We ate what we caught. There is nothing better than a pan-fried brook trout with your eggs for breakfast. I've had many a fresh-caught fish fried over a campfire with a little butter, a little flour and a little salt and pepper.

But my mind hasn't really turned to fishing. I don't do much fishing these days. I haven't lost my taste for fish. They are still mighty good eating. I have a good fly rod and all that is needed to tie my own flies, but I haven't tied a single fly this winter. The feathers and deer hide and other supplies are all in a box on the shelf and have been in the same place for several years.

It may be that I'm just not that good of a fisherman. My youngest brother, Randy, is the fisherman in our clan. From the time he was big enough to go down to the river with us, he has focused on catching fish. He can see them when all I see is glare on the water. He can roll a cast under a bank edge and skim the water with a hook without making a splash. When we were younger, we could fish both sides of the river and switch sides for the walk back home. By the turnaround point, I might have one or two and he'd be begging me to take some of his because he was limited out. He has the eyes and the touch of a fisherman. I've never quite had that ability.

But another part of the truth is that I've always been distracted by all of the other things that go with fishing. I love to skip rocks, wade in the creek, and look at the birds. I used to find bullheads and minnows as interesting as fish that were big enough to eat. I could spend more energy catching grasshoppers for bait as I did fishing. I loved making rafts out of old inner tubes and strapping on a face mask and snorkel to look at the fish close up. When we go fishing as adults I take my camera and spend more time taking pictures than catching fish.

And once I discovered boats, well, I just headed off in another direction entirely. I can have my attention entirely diverted by the shape of a canoe or the joy of silent paddling in a good wooden boat. I've spent more time hauling canoes and kayaks to the lake than I have fishing in recent years. More than once I've loaded my rod into a canoe and started paddling. By the end of the paddle I haven't made a single cast, but have had a joyful time just the same. Many days I don't even have fishing gear with me when I head for the lake.

I am so distracted by all kinds of things that go with fishing, that I really don't do much fishing these days. The folks who head out on the ice with an auger in one hand and a tackle box in the other are dedicated fishermen. It isn't that I've never been ice fishing, it is that I don't get around to it every year. I'm not like some of my friends, who study everything piscatorial and can focus on the fishing so much that they don't notice the scenery.

Jesus seemed to have a special place in his heart for fishermen. He selected several as his disciples. Norman Maclean, in his masterful book, *A River Runs Through It*, reports

of being the son of a presbyterian minister whose main passion was fishing. In fact the stern old minister taught his sons that not only did Jesus prefer fishermen, but that the beloved disciple, reported in the gospel of St. John, was probably a fisherman who fished dry flies exclusively.

I identify more closely with the disciples in Mark's Gospel, who seem to never get anything quite right, including fishing. They obviously weren't selected because they were good fishermen. In fact one gets the impression that had Jesus not chosen Simon, Andrew, James and John, they might have starved to death as fishermen. They couldn't even figure out which side of the boat to cast their nets without advice from Jesus.

Which explains why they are famous not for their fishing, but for leaving their nets and boats behind and following Jesus.

I guess that new kind of fishing is what really caught my attention and my passion and became for me worthy of a lifetime's investment.

But like those other disciples, I started out as a fisherman. And I have the photos to prove it.

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February 24, 2009 – Catalogues



"What are you studying so intently?" my mother asked. I hadn't been aware that I was studying anything. I had started to look through the mail. At our house most of he mail is headed for the garbage can, but there are still plenty of things that we get in the mail that we need to see: bills, personal correspondence, a few appeals from causes that we support, and the like. What I had paused to look through was a catalog of Japanese hand tools: saws, block planes, knives, axes, chisels, etc.

I have no need of additional tools. My garage resembles a poorly-organized hardware store. I've been collecting tools since I was a kid and I have the things I need to do the building and respiring that needs to be done at our home. I have chisels and hand saws and planes. I have carving tools and finishing tools and clamps. I have saws that cut on the push stroke and saws that cut on the pull stroke.

We receive a lot of catalogs at our home. I'm not sure why, because we don't make a lot of catalog purchases. We try to make local purchases when we are able and when we can't find what we need locally we purchase a few things online. Of course a single online purchase gets one on the list for catalogs from that company for years to come.

I'm sure that I have purchased from Japan Woodworker a couple of times. They are an excellent source for the thin-bladed finishing saws that I use in building canoes and kayaks. But if I were to need something from them, I would never bother to look for the catalog. I would go to their web site. The catalog doesn't arrive at the moment that I need something and I don't try to keep catalogs around until I need to order. If I did, our house would fill up with catalogs and there would be no room for other things. My general goal is to get the catalogs to the garbage can the same day they arrive.

Still, I was studying the catalog yesterday. I had no intent of making a purchase, I had no need for the products advertised, but there I was, reading the descriptions of the various tools that they have for sale. I don't know why I was doing it.

One might say that I love to read, but there is no shortage of interesting reading material in my home. I always have several magazines and books at hand for a quiet moment when I can turn to reading. One might say that I was reading to learn more about the various tools that are offered. And that may be a bit of the case. But I doubt if I will remember the distinctions between master grade and standard grade Noko Giri saws. And I am sure that I will not remember the names of the various toolmakers who are featured in the catalog. I wasn't reading for information.

I just like looking at tools. There is some pleasure associated with tools that goes beyond their functionality. The beauty of fine craftsmanship has an allure of its own. Well made tools are worthy of my attention even when I am not working on a project.

I'm sure that different catalogs appeal to different members of my family. There are some clothing catalogs that come that would never get a second look from me.

But the bottom line is that as resistant as I am to that kind of advertising, it works. Somehow those catalogs that we say we don't want and that we try to dispose of quickly make some sort of impression on us. It is difficult to say how they influence our purchase decisions. I'd like to believe that I make purchases in response to needs and not just because I saw an advertisement, but there is no getting around the fact that there are plenty of items in our house that I have purchased that we really didn't need.

I have heard of people who become addicted to the shopping channel on television and who order items that they never use, sometimes placing their family at financial risk. We don't have cable television and we don't receive the shopping channel, so I have no sense of its allure, but it doesn't sound attractive to me. I can't imaging watching advertisements only - they are an unwanted distraction in the bit of television that I do watch.

And yet, I have to admit that I am influenced by the catalogs.

Fortunately, the catalogs do not demand that I "call now," and I have time to think and reflect before placing an order. And the tool catalog that arrived at my home yesterday is now in the garbage can.

Still, there were some really neat block planes in that catalog . . .

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February 25, 2009 – Lent



Today begins a new season in the church calendar. Lent is the 40 days of preparation for the festival of Easter. I know, in the church, we count in a funny fashion. In order to end up with forty days from Ash Wednesday to Easter, we don't count the Sundays. The origins of Lent are ancient. The Christian season has roots in Jewish Passover traditions, which in turn have roots in earlier festivals related to the birth of spring lambs and the end of winter. The name "Lent" means "lengthen." It refers to the the lengthening of the days that is observed in the spring in the Northern Hemisphere. Although Christianity has its roots in the places where the days get longer during these months, its area of most rapid growth is in parts of the world where the days are growing shorter at this time.

I noticed the lengthening yesterday. The picture that accompanies this blog was taken just as I parked my pickup in the church parking lot. For months I have been arriving at work in the dark, but yesterday the sun was making its first appearance as I pulled into my parking place near the outdoor cross. The low light angle gives the cross an enormous shadow at that time of day. With all of the religious meanings of this season, it makes sense to begin it in the shadow of the cross.

Lent is a season of penance, of admitting guilt and seeking ways to change one's life. Confession is always a part of a Christian walk, but during Lent special emphasis is given to the conviction that things do not need to stay the way that they are. Change is possible. We can go in new directions. It is traditional for Christians to give up something for the season. With a life that is as full and sometimes as hectic as mine,

the thought of giving up something is attractive. Even with lengthening days, my energy is near its limits as I sink into my bed each evening. But shedding obligations seems hardly to be the kind of change that i need.

I have often used Lent as a time to consider the excesses in my life. I eat too much. Lent is a six-week invitation to pay more attention to my eating and to make changes that will increase health and decrease my excesses. It is not that Lent is a convenient season of dieting. According to health educators, dieting doesn't work. If one wants to lose weight and keep it off nothing short of a change of lifestyle is demanded. At its best, the season of Lent can be about real change, not just temporary self-denial.

Most of the changes that we need to make are difficult and challenging. If change were easy or automatic, we would have made the changes by now. Real repentance - turning one's life in a new direction - is always difficult. But our faith reminds us that it is always possible as well.

In the midst of my busy life, I need to make more time for prayer. That means that I need to give up other uses of my time. It means that I need to exercise for endurance - I will need energy for additional focus. It means that I need to calm the frantic nature of too many of my days and quiet myself to genuinely pay attention to God's call in my life.

The connection between the words "disciple" and "discipline" are not accidental. To follow Jesus requires a significant level of commitment. Jesus invites us to make our faith into something much deeper than a puff of emotion. The call to become disciples is nothing short of a radical change in the direction of one's life.

One might think that a pastor has already made those decisions and commitments, and that Lent might be somehow less dramatic in my life than in the life of someone who was new to the Christian faith. But the reality is that the invitation to repentance is constant and the need for real change is a part of our human condition. I am no less in need of repentance than any other member of my congregation. And my role as a leader demands more than words from my mouth. It demands action in my life.

So today is a new beginning for me. There will be a few outward signs, as usual. I will dress in black today. I will have my forehead smudged with ashes during worship. I will spend more time in prayer and contemplation. But the important changes will be less visible.

May I use the lengthening of the days as an opportunity to grow in faith this year.

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February 26, 2009 – Good Morning



I've been used to getting up early in the morning for a long time. When we were children, going flying with dad meant being willing to get up early in the morning. I loved going flying with dad a lot more than I loved lying in bed. So I learned to get up. In fact, because going with dad meant getting ready before he left, I learned to hop out of bed and get dressed and out to the car before he left.

Susan and I made it through college and graduate school with a single manual typewriter. Since she was an evening person and tended to work into the wee hours at the typewriter, I took my shift in the morning. I'd get up and could count on having the typewriter to myself in the morning. I never remember having any conflict over whose turn it was to use the typewriter. Although we've moderated our schedules a bit, we tend to stay up at opposite ends of the day to this day. It gave us extra endurance as parents when our children woke in the night, and it seems to give us each a bit of space for private thoughts and meditation each day.

When we lived in North Dakota, I'd rise and head off to work. After unlocking a few things and turning on the lights, I'd usually make a pot of coffee, turn on the transmitter and do a bit of paperwork before precisely at 5:55 to the second, I switch on a microphone and say, "Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen, you are listening to Radio Station KNDC broadcasting from Hettinger, North Dakota at 1490 kilocycles at a daytime power of 1,000 watts under authority of the Federal Communications Commission in Washington DC. We now begin our broadcast day." Play the national anthem, make a few announcements and then switch in the feed from the network

precisely at 6:00 a.m. My headphones gave me a signal at 30 seconds out from the live feed and then would give tones to count down the last five seconds. I had to adjust the pace of my reading or speaking to make the switch at exactly the right second. “Dead air” and incomplete feeds were noticed by my audience and I sought to avoid both.

I enjoyed my brief journey into radio land. The congregations I was serving had called me to a part-time ministry, so I had time and needed the funds. I did several part-time jobs over those years, including driving school bus. But the radio was fun. I had an audience. Of course we are talking about small town, low-power radio here, so the audience wasn’t very big. I read the local “birthday list” every day and played special songs for all couples who were celebrating 50th or higher anniversaries. In those days there was a television situation comedy about radio stations called WKRP in Cincinnati. Our station wasn’t very similar. No one in our station had designated jobs. The sports director was also the salesman and also the engineer for remote broadcasts. The general manager hosted a daily talk show, the secretary recorded ads, read recipes and typed copy. At certain times of the day, the station phones were answered only when we were playing records on the air.

A few years before I moved away from North Dakota, there was a special program that enabled reservation communities to get their own radio stations. Several small stations were begun on area reservations. It was a struggle from the start. There was adequate funding for equipment and some built modern studios, but there was not enough funding for staff training or for assistance with programming. The stations were really home grown, with announcements about lost pets and reminders to individual teens that it was time to head from home. But broadcasting in native languages became an important part of building community and preserving the languages. Many of those stations broadcast for a few years and went off the air.

Yesterday KILI radio, celebrated its 26th anniversary. They had cake and tours of the studio and the Crazy Horse Singers crammed into the studio to play their drum and sing songs live over the air. Dennis White Shield staffed the phones and took calls from folks remembering and wishing the station well. KILI now broadcasts on the Pine Ridge reservation and now with translators on the Cheyenne and Rosebud reservations. The signal can be received in some parts of Rapid City and is weak and fuzzy in other areas. The radio on my pickup seems to be the best at picking up the signal for some reason.

A twenty-sixth anniversary isn’t much, really. The 25th anniversary last year was a larger milestone. But the anniversary demonstrates significant staying power. Listening to the programs demonstrates significant maturity that has come from years of experience. The station has taken some big steps in recent years. A little over two years ago a summer storm blew through Porcupine and a lightning bolt struck the tower, taking part of it down and blowing out the transmitter. KILI was off the air for a couple of months. Remaining independent has resulted in financial challenges and it has

remained a bare-bones operation with little funds for new equipment. But the station is being very proactive working to keep energy costs down. They have installed a wind turbine and undertaken other steps to decrease operating costs. For a few minutes at a time, they are able to be “off grid” broadcasting on power that is generated on site. The system isn’t fully operational and it will be some time before KILI would be able to keep on the air during a long power failure, but little by little they are making progress.

Rapid City has plenty of radio stations. Some of them are established operations that produce polished and professional broadcasts. Others use extensive feeds and automation to produce quality programs. But there is a bit of me that enjoys, from time to time, a taste of small town grassroots radio. Even the poor reception adds to the ambiance of the experience. In a small way it is a metaphor for the work I do in the church. People want to have a church that is professionally managed and has the trappings of success. But even more than that, they want to be a part of a community - to be known and to feel like their church operates on their own level. Some of our congregations are called to serve that need for community by being genuine and faithful even when it means that there are larger church buildings that are better equipped. Religion is not a competitive race to the top. It is a faithful witness to God.

So congratulations KILI on 26 years of broadcasting. May the next 26 be a bit easier than the last - but not too easy. The struggle to survive is part of the quality we appreciate in your independent nature. Even those of us who don’t speak Lakota are listening. And we enjoy it when you have live singers even more than we enjoy the recordings. Your voice is an important part of our community.

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February 27, 2008 – At Table



These days, most of our meals are three persons at our table. The leaves for the table are usually in the closet and there is plenty of room at the table. For most of my adult life, our family has been relatively small. When our children were growing up, we had four for dinner most days.

That's a bit different from the way I grew up. We had seven children in our family, but we are widely spaced, so most of the time there were only five at home. Still, with my parents that meant seven at the table most days. And my dad loved to invite others to our house for a meal, so eight or nine at the table wasn't uncommon. I remember going home to the house where I grew up after we had been married for more than a decade. It was the first time I had seen the old kitchen table without the leaves in it. It seemed so small. By that time, there were many meals when my mother was eating alone at that table. The table was pushed up against the wall on one side. It seemed really different.

When we were growing up the table was in the middle of the room. My mother sat at one end of the table and my father at the other. My sister and I sat on one side and the three little boys on the other. If we had one guest, that person usually sat to my left and I moved down the table. If we had more, the seating plan was disrupted and people sat where ever there was a space.

Last night we had our usual three, Susan's father, our daughter and her boyfriend, and three other friends for dinner, so we were nine at the table. It was a little crowded, but with the leaves in the table there was room for everyone. It really was nice to have a full

table. Conversation was lively and everyone seemed to be enjoying the food and the conversation.

A simple family dinner is becoming a rare treat in our fast-paced world. A friend recently told me that she was helping with pre-kindergarten screening and part of the process was showing the children simple pictures and having the children say the name of the object in the picture. One of the pictures was of a table. The child hesitated and the screener attempted to help. She said, “Where do you sit to eat dinner?” “In the car,” was the quick response. Chances are that the child had had plenty of meals at home at the table, but it was equally likely that a rushed meal in the car on the way to or from some other event was a common way of getting a meal.

We live in an over-scheduled society. Fast food has become a staple in the menu plans of many families. Convenience is stressed at the grocery store, where there is a large section of food that is already prepared, ready to be taken home and served. Families think nothing of dining out.

For the most part, our family eats at home. Most weeks I bake our bread and most of our meals are cooked in our own kitchen. But there are days when we are too busy. There are times when I drive through a fast food drive-up lane and pick up a couple of sandwiches to take home for lunch when I haven’t allowed enough time to shop for groceries. And we use more prepared foods than we did when our children were living at home.

Rushing meals, however, comes at a high cost. The financial cost is obvious. Last night’s meal featured London broil, a cut of steak that is not common in our home, and yet the total cost was way less than feeding half as many people in a restaurant. But there are costs beyond the dollars and cents. When families don’t make time for shared meals, the cost in relationships is significant. There is something about table conversation that connects us in deep ways. When I get over committed and work through mealtimes, it becomes immediately obvious that there is something missing from my life.

These days our work schedules are such that we generally only have one meal a day when we are all together. I’m often out of the house before the others have breakfast and Susan often works through the lunch hour just to get things done. It is not an ideal situation, but we adapt to the demands of work and home and our life is often a “juggling match.” I’ve long since given up striving for some idealized “perfect” life. Often we are muddling through our day to day existence, over committed and over scheduled. But we make it for a home cooked dinner most days. And we find time to have friends over to our house on a regular basis.

It is our family custom to hold hands when we say grace before meals. It is the way I grew up. Probably the practice comes from the need to still the busy hands of small

children, but it is a pleasant custom when we are all adults as well. One of the table prayers from my childhood that we use to this day goes: “We thank thee, Lord, for happy hearts, for rain and sunny weather. We thank thee, Lord, for this our food, and that we are together.”

There is something about that prayer that just feels better when there is a gang at the table rather than a few. For those times when we are together, there is a genuine sense of gratitude in our lives.

It is good to be together.

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February 28, 2009 – Gandhi's Glasses



Photo by Margaret Bourke-White from Life.com.

Mohandas Karamahand Gandhi, commonly known as Mahatma Gandhi, was a leader in India's independence movement. He pioneered the principles of resistance to tyranny through mass civil disobedience. His principles of nonviolent political action have been the inspiration to many other significant world leaders including Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Early in his life, Gandhi made a commitment to Ahimsa (nonviolence) and he swore to always speak the truth. He chose to live a very simple life, with few possessions. He lived at Sabarmati Ashram, a small self-sufficient community and wore the tradtional Indian dhoti and shawl, woven with yarn he had hand spun on a charkha. He at simple vegetarian food and also undertook long fasts as means of self-purification and social protest.

So, it seems out of place to learn that the few simple possessions that he had have come to be viewed by some in the world as commodities. An auction has been announced at Antiquorum auction house in New York City that features Gandhi's glasses, pocketwatch, sandals, bowl and plate. The assorted items are estimated to sell for as much as $30,000. The nation of India has announced that they are prepared to do whatever is necessary to obtain the items and bring them back to India.

How did the possessions of a simple man become a commodity to be traded on world markets? Not that Gandhi has any need of possessions any more. He lived a life that

was remarkably free of possessions and never traded in the world's financial markets. His intelligence and spirit were largely unencumbered by possessions in this life and I am sure that he would have no regrets about giving up his possessions at his death. Still, it seems wrong that anyone else could claim ownership of these items.

I suppose that it is the price of fame. Although he never sought fame or attention in conventional ways, Gandhi's methods of working for social change depended upon people knowing what was happening. His protests, fasts, and acts of civil disobedience would have been ineffective if it were not for the fact that others were aware of what he did. At times it was necessary for people around the world to know of his actions. Being in the public eye and having a degree of fame was essential to the dramatic changes that he led in India. He never sought to be center stage, but it was the attention of the world that forced the change he sought.

The details of his private life became the stories that have been told and re-told for generations.

Gandhi first employed the principles of nonviolent change while working as an expatriate lawyer in South Africa. There is a large community of people of Indian background in South Africa and under apartheid they were labeled as "colored" and did not have full civil rights. From 1893 to 1914 he lived and worked in South Africa, suffering all of the injustices that were common to that society at that time as he attempted to organize people to force the South African government to grant vote to the majority of its citizens. While he was in South Africa the 1906 a Zulu uprising erupted. Having previously served as an ambulance driver in the Boer War, he was not a stranger to the horrors of war, but the Zulu uprising and the sheer brutality of the British response heightened his conviction that war is a poor solution to human conflicts.

His experiences in India were life-shaping and it was through those experiences that he formed the principles of nonviolent action that were so successful when he returned to India to organize peasants, farmers and urban laborers in civil disobedience to change unfair land tax issues and later to bring about the Independence of India from British colonial rule. Non-cooperation, non-violence, and peaceful resistance were effective tools for incredible social change. They proved to be mightier than the world's strongest armies.

There are many stories of Gandhi's life - too many to be told in this short blog. But it is clear that for Gandhi the principles that he taught others were the principles by which he lived. There was a personal integrity and commitment to the truth that helped him eschew the normal trappings of fame. He avoided wealth and honor and chose to live simply and faithfully.

His few possessions belong to the whole world, not to any individual. I suppose that the Indian government is right in seeking to have them returned to India and that in the

terms of governments the price that they will pay is small. And I am sure that the owner who will leave with cash in hand will be pleased to have money. But I hope that the seller is thoughtful in the use of the proceeds. It would be wrong to use the funds for personal luxuries or comfort. Were I to be asked, I would advise careful consideration of charities or other organizations that help to bring about peaceful change in a world that is too violent. I will not, of course, be consulted in the matter.

Perhaps it is not important in the first place. Gandhi wouldn't need to hang on to his possessions. He would not waste his time or emotional energy in a battle over ownership of a few simple possessions.

Let the auction proceed. I won't be bidding. I have the stories of Gandhi's life which are far more valuable.

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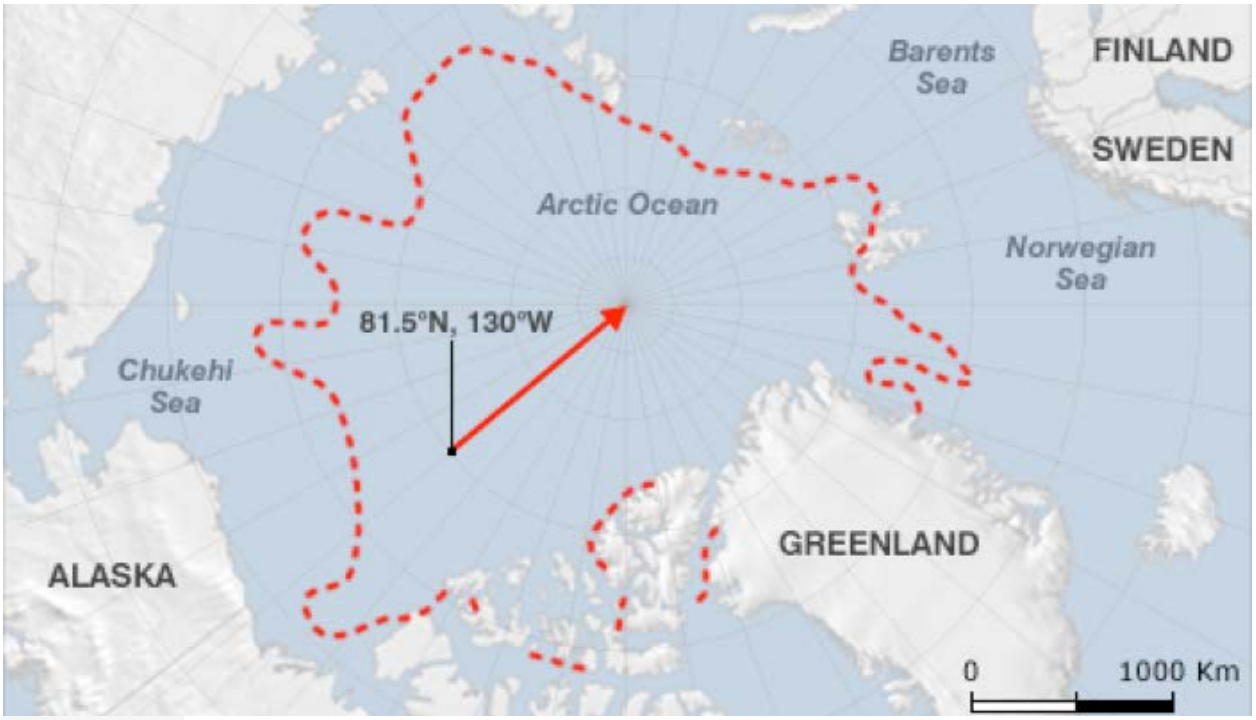
March 1, 2009 – Room for Adventure



Map from bbc.com.

I went through a phase, when I was much younger, of reading the diaries and other reports of the exploits of the great adventurers. Admiral Byrd's trip to the North Pole, Amundsen's trip to the South Pole, and Shackleton's incredible survival. But I read of these great adventures as history - events which happened in the past. The people who were discovering new territory in my lifetime were astronauts. There was no place on this planet that had not been explored.

But that really isn't true. Among other things, this planet keeps changing and just because a place has been visited before doesn't mean that a new trip would be any less bold or require any less resourcefulness.

There is still room for adventure in this world.

Yesterday three British explorers were flown to the Arctic ice pack north of the border between the United States and Canada. Pen Hadlow, Ann Daniels, and Martin Hartley plan to walk approximately 1,000 km to the North Pole. They will be pulling sledges loaded with equipment to test the thickness of the ice. Walking across the Arctic is not just a matter of heading out in a straight line. The ice is filled with obstacles and barriers to foot travel. The team plans to put on survival suits and swim when they encounter open water. The ice is constantly shifting. There will be times when their position will move more in a day due to ice movement than their efforts at walking.

This isn't Hadlow's first Arctic adventure. He was the first person to walk solo from Canada to the North Pole in 2003. This trip has much loftier scientific goals and requires companions to transport the equipment needed to make the measurements. The team hopes to gather specific and precise information about the thickness of the ice. Scientists are convinced that the arctic ice cap is melting at an increasing rate due to global warming. The expedition seeks to gather additional evidence to aid in understanding what is really occurring.

The group will be resupplied from the air every 20 to 25 days, but their trek is still a huge human effort. The explorers are all expected to lose weight during the expedition, even though they will be eating a 6,000 calorie diet. The efforts of pulling the sledges and keeping warm in the sub-zero temperatures are expected to take around 7,500 calories per explorer per day.

So why are they doing this?

I suppose that if you asked them, you would get all sorts of information about the scientific necessity of the expedition. They will be gathering data that cannot be obtained through any other method. They will be traveling in late winter and early spring, the time when the ice reaches its greatest extent. Their measurements will be precise and accurate and should provide scientists with a great deal of fresh data.

But the real reason for the adventure goes beyond the science of global warming. There is something in us humans that moves us to test our own limits - to discover who we are and what we are capable of doing. This particular adventure is not the product of unrestrained youthful enthusiasm. All of the explorers are in their 40's. They have enough experience to know how truly daunting their trek will be.

But they are headed for the pole anyway. There is something in the human spirit that longs for adventure.

Of course not all adventures are made of walking across empty wilderness. There are people who are expanding our knowledge through innovative research in laboratories and others who are pioneering new therapies in clinical settings. Some are expanding human knowledge through their explorations in fields as diverse as physics, economics, psychology, theology, and education.

There is, within each human being, a quest for discovery - a sense of adventure that leads us to do new things.

Some of us find our boldest adventures in the field of human relationships. There must be better ways of bringing peace and justice to the diverse peoples of the world and we aim to learn more through exploring the relationships in our own communities.

We long for adventure.

I used to think that I might one day go on some grand adventure. I loved reading of the exploits of those who do and I continue to be inspired by new expeditions. But I know that I am too old and too out of shape to be walking across the arctic. I know those adventures belong to others. Still there are adventures for me. They may not involve travel, but there are tests of my imagination and endurance that are yet to come.

Life itself is an adventure for each one of us.

So the team is now less than 24 hours into their trek. The adventure has begun.

And here, in South Dakota, far from the Arctic, there are new adventures yet to be found. May our thirst for discovery never be fully satisfied.

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March 2, 2009 – Rebuilding



Photo of Samouni Street from BBC.com.

This week begins with an International Donor's Conference in Egypt to coordinate funds and efforts to rebuild Gaza. The most recent conflict with Israel resulted in the destruction of over 14,000 homes and 240 schools. Approximately 1300 Palestinians, including 412 children were killed during the fighting in December and January. It is expected that donations will exceed the $2.8 billion that has been requested. Saudi Arabia has promised $1 billion and the United States has pledged $900 million.

But it will take more than money to rebuild the area. Currently there is only a standoff. Israel and Palestinian leaders declared a mutual ceasefire on January 17, but the situation could hardly be called peace. Israel maintains a virtual blockade around the area, tightly controlling all passage of aid, people and goods going in our out of Gaza. Aid workers do not have access. Essential commodities cannot get in. For example, Israel is not allowing any steel to enter the area. Construction of concrete buildings is impossible without steel reinforcing bars. The political stalemate could prevent aid reaching those who most need it for some time now.

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon recently stated, "If ever there were a time to think freshly, to lead boldly, it is now." But fresh thinking and bold leadership continue to be starkly absent from the situation. While most of the world agrees that the only viable future is a two-state solution, with Palestinians and Israelis living side by side with adequate security for both states, the question of how to provide the needed security remains unanswered.

Generations of violence have resulted in uncounted numbers of people who can think only in terms of destruction of the enemy. Anger, fueled by a passion for revenge, has left many incapable of rational action or reasonable compromise. There is no shortage of hard-line, hard-headed people on both sides of the conflict who refuse dialogue and talk of peace and who engage in further attacks and military action even when the results of military action are abundantly clear. Israel simply has more military might. The power to destroy clearly rests in Israel's hands. Dialogue and the search for a peaceful solution is the only route to the creation of a viable Palestinian state. But there seem to be all too few people who are willing to walk that route.

While the international community is to be commended for the generosity and for the efforts to rebuild Gaza, the question remains: "How long will it be before a new crisis provokes additional attacks and re-built areas are subject to destructive attacks?"

Money, construction, and new infrastructure are meaningless without a diplomatic solution. And a diplomatic solution seems as distant and difficult as it has ever seemed. Fresh thinking is certainly needed. In the meantime there is enough suffering and human need to make it impossible for the world to turn its back.

The traditions of our people teach us that true hope emerges in spite of evidence. Genuine faith comes precisely in those places where there is nothing visible to support belief. From one perspective, one would have to be an irrational fool to believe in the possibility of peace in Gaza and Israel. But it is precisely that belief upon which the future rests. That which seems, from almost every point of view, to be impossible is the task that lies ahead for this world.

In the midst of economic crisis of unprecedented proportions, in a world that is strained by overpopulation and facing a climate crisis of unknown consequences, in a world populated by humans with incredible capacity for destruction and violence, we choose to hope for peace. It is precisely in this world that we choose to work for peace.

As daunting as it may seem, the task of physical re-building pales in the face of the task of teaching a whole new generation to trust and to care for those who have been labeled "enemy." That generation is now growing up in the midst of incredible shortages and deprivation. Whether they choose paths of violence and destruction or learn the ways of peace depends, in part, on the education that is provided to them.

Schools and homes need to top the list of priorities for rebuilding. But programs that enable Israelis and Palestinians to get to know one another as fellow human beings are as essential. School exchanges and family-to-family contacts must begin. The road ahead is unclear and uncertain.

But now is the time for out of the box thinking and bold action.

May we find the path to peace together.

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March 3, 2009 – Open Country



The Iron Hawk family lives about 3/4 of a mile off of the BIA Road, just down from Frazier Memorial Church. The BIA road is the gravel road between Red Scaffold and Cherry Creek. It is about 18 miles to the nearest paved road. There are folks would call the country “the middle of nowhere,” but it is beautiful and unique country in the southern part of the Cheyenne River reservation. City folks might not understand why anyone would want to live way out there. But for the Iron Hawks, it is home. It is home because they have a house with room to keep a couple of horses. It is home because of the history of that corner of the world. Children in that area go to Takini school. Takini means “survivor” or “barely surviving.” Takini school is near the place where Bridger Creek flows into the Cheyenne River. That is the place where the survivors of Wounded Knee came after the massacre in the winter of 1890. The people who live there now can trace their lineage to those survivors. And they see themselves as survivors.

The history of the last 200 years has not been kind to Dakota, Lakota and Nakota people. But they continue to survive. And survival can be tough. The Iron Hawks have a propane furnace in their home, but the furnace is too small for the home and so it runs constantly. And propane, although down a little from its highest price last winter, is expensive. And when you live a long way away from a town, the delivery charges mount up as well. So the Iron Hawk family heats their home with wood.

They don’t exactly live in a forest. Firewood is difficult to obtain. They gather cottonwood from creek bottoms and areas around their home. But early this fall, the old

Plymouth Voyager van that they were using for a wood hauler broke down and with no way to haul wood the family was running short on heat.

A conversation with pastor Byron Buffalo put them in touch with the Woodchuck Society at our church and yesterday a couple of us took a pickup and trailer of firewood to deliver to the family. It was a beautiful day. The sky was filled with hawks and eagles and we got a couple of really close-up looks at bald eagles as we drove out there. Unloading and stacking the wood was a relatively small job with many hands working together. We had some hats and sweaters from a knitting group in Florida that sends a regular supply our way. They can be distributed through the church to those who need them. The people in Florida might have trouble imagining what it is like in open country, but that does not stem their generosity in any way. What is required is a little coordination and a bit of communication.

The picture above was taken for the folks who knit the hats and mittens. It is a picture of the Iron Hawk place, taken from Frazier church. It's hard to pick out the small home by the creek at the base of the bluff. That's the way it is in open country. The houses dot the prairie with few trees and lots of open space.

For me, it was a good day to get out of town and take a drive in the open country. I find that it renews my spirit to see the beauty of the land. The sun was sparkling off of the snow and the birds were having a good hunting day as the warm temperatures brought out the mice and the sun exposed food that had been buried in the snow. Traffic is not much of a problem in that part of the world and we were traveling in a reliable pickup truck and so had little fear of mechanical problems. I was with good friends and the conversation was pleasant. It was a good change of pace from my typical day - although it is difficult to tell what is "typical" in a job as varied and changing as mine.

Today I'm back to juggling appointments, meetings, paying bills, and sorting paperwork. There will be a large stack of mail on my desk and a number of things that demand my attention. But I'll walk with a little fresh energy in my step because I got to spend a bit of yesterday outdoors with good people doing good work with results that are evident. We left the Iron Hawk place on Cherry Creek yesterday knowing that the wood pile would last through the winter. And we had a little bit better understanding of the challenges of living in a remote location with unreliable transportation and long winters.

And as we rode back home in a comfort, I couldn't help but think of the survivors who, in the middle of the winter of 1890 walked from Pine Ridge to the Cheyenne River with insufficient food and barely enough supplies to survive. They were walking with hearts heavy with grief, having lost family members and friends in the attack. They were walking without any sense of where they might find the will to keep alive, much less build a new life for future generations. Life is still hard for the descendants of the survivors. One might argue that it isn't getting much better, but it is. There are enormous challenges facing their community: unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, isolation

and poverty. But they are survivors. And the tiny churches that dot the reservation are not only places of hope, but also places of connection. Through the church a group of knitters in Florida can made genuine contact with those with cold ears in South Dakota. Through the church firewood can be obtained and delivered. Through the church we can learn and share each other's stories.

It is the connections between people that make all the difference in the world.

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March 4, 2009 – Mud Flaps



Mud flaps are of limited use on a pickup. In this country where highway crews use a lot of salt, mud flaps can limit the corrosion on the rear quarter panel of the pickup. But mud flaps can get in the way in deep snow, when putting on tire chains, and in other circumstances. They certainly are not a necessity. However a recent sale at a vendor where I sometime shop caught my eye and I purchased a pair of mud flaps for my pickup. I'm not sure why I did it at this moment. The truck is four years old.

But it made me chuckle to see the mud flaps with their John Deere logos, on the back of my truck. Anyone looking at my truck can see that I will spend money in places where it is not absolutely necessary. Vanity license plates and now mud flaps.

I'm not a farmer. The only piece of John Deere equipment that I own is a fourteen-year-old walk behind lawn mower. And I've never been overly committed to any brand in anything. The John Deere logo is a part of my past. And lately, I've gotten a bit of pleasure out of remembering my past.

When I was a young child, my father purchased the local John Deere dealership. It seemed to be a good extension of his airport business. Many of his airport customers were farmers and ranchers and he needed to grow his business to meet the needs of a growing family as well as develop additional ways to earn money that weren't quite as dependent on his physical health, eyesight, and other factors as was his flying. And he was by nature an entrepreneur. He loved to start new ventures. John Deere was a good match for his skills as a salesman and manager. He understood the operations of the

shop and the kind of service department that was needed in order to make the dealership flourish.

So I grew up with John Deere. We had logos on a lot of our clothing. I grew up with the principle: “Trucks are red. Tractors are green. Life is simple.”

But I am no longer a child. My family’s income doesn’t come from John Deere. I have no need to promote their products. The mud flaps aren’t a statement about what kind of machinery I think anyone should buy for any job that needs to be done. They are an expression of my past - of the place from which I came.

We all need roots.

Of course the roots of our faith run much deeper than the stories of my childhood. My parents raised me with the stories of family that went back for generations and with the stories of our faith that stretch back millennia. I was raised as a Christian both in terms of faith and practice and in terms of knowing that I stood in a lineage. The people of the Bible are somehow my people. They represent the heritage of faith and relationship with God that I have inherited.

I don’t think that they make mud flaps with Jesus on them. And I probably wouldn’t buy them if they did. Somehow it makes sense to put John Deere in the mud and muck in a way that I wouldn’t want to put some of the significant parts of my past in a similar place. There are certainly a lot of different mud flap designs that I would not put on my pickup. Stop by any truck stop and wander around the rigs and you will find that mud flaps at times push the limits of good taste.

Maybe I’ve been thinking about roots lately because our children are getting pretty much launched into their adult lives. We raised our children with some intentionality that they would have booth roots and wings - we wanted them to be able to grow and move beyond our lives and to explore the world with fresh eyes. We wanted them to go places and do things that we have never done. And we have succeeded in that task. They live in places far from our home and they are engage in exciting and wonderful adventures.

But we want them to have roots as well. We hope that we have given them a sense of belonging and of having a home to which they can return. We hope that we have given them a foundation of faith and passed on the stories of our people. I’m fairly confident that both of our children know the role of John Deere in my upbringing. I also know that they understand the value of my grandfather’s bible to me.

So the mud flaps on my pickup give me pause to chuckle. I hope they amuse someone else some day. I hope that they aren’t seen as some kind of religious endorsement of a particular brand of equipment.

But if anyone asks me about them, they're likely to get a story. Probably they'll get a story that is much longer than they anticipated.

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March 5, 2009 – Ziebach County



Ziebach County is not one of the most populous counties in the United States. And its name makes it the last county in the United States when all of the counties are arranged alphabetically. It is often near the bottom of the list when it comes to per-capita income, as well. It is one of the poorest counties in the nation. The entire county lies on two Indian reservations. Most of the county is on the Cheyenne River reservation, with the northern portion of the county on the Standing Rock reservation. It is open country without too many people. The census bureau lists population density at 1.3 people per square mile. The county seat, Dupree, is the largest town in the county. Most of the other communities are unincorporated. With less than 750 households in the county, it just isn't a place where there are many people.

The United Church of Christ has several tiny churches in the county. Isabel, Dupree, Red Scaffold, Frazier, Cherry Creek. None of the congregations is large enough or wealthy enough to attract seminary-trained ministers from out of the area to move into the county to serve the churches. Lay ministers, most of whom grew up in the area, serve the congregations.

The little congregation at Red Scaffold is typical. Members come to the church from a fairly wide area. Ted Knife serves the congregation as well as the congregation at Cherry Creek, 22 miles to the southeast on the BIA gravel road. The congregation is not able to support itself, and relies on financial support from the Council of American Indian Ministries through the Dakota Association to provide a stipend for their pastor. Several

congregations from outside of the area have lent support in the form of work days providing maintenance for the church building.

Still it is a struggle for the congregation to survive.

From time to time someone will suggest that the little congregations of the area be merged. But those suggestions usually come from someone who doesn't really understand the dynamics of the small congregations and the intense loyalty of the families. Most of the tiny churches have their own cemeteries and emotional ties that run deep. Even though they appear to outsiders to be inactive, they represent centers of community for people who live tough lives in an area where it is difficult to survive.

But survival is the story of these tiny congregations.

They have seen leaders come and go. They have seen the politics of their support shift and change. They have seen the work camps come and go. And they continue to survive and to serve as congregations.

The twelve congregations of the Dakota Association hold two meetings each year, rotating the location of the meetings from church to church. The meeting in June focuses more on business and organization, the meeting in August focuses more on mission. Both gatherings feature lively worship, good food, and fellowship. The Dakota Association owns a large tent which can be taken from congregation to congregation and set up to provide shade and shelter for group meetings and Bible study. Some of the participants in the meetings camp on the church grounds. Others drive from their homes, sometimes traveling as much as 40 miles one-way to attend the weekend meetings.

It is a way of life that outsiders struggle to understand. So it is important for the people of the congregations to retain control of their own congregations.

I have lived in South Dakota for nearly 14 years now and I still haven't visited all of the churches of the Dakota Association. It takes time for trust to build and for relationships to provide opportunities for shared ministry. So it was fun for me to have time, earlier this week, to travel up to Ziebach county and to visit some of the churches there.

May our relationships continue to grow as we share the life of faith together.

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March 6, 2009 – Seeking Clarity



I grew up alongside a fast-moving mountain stream. The boulder river had a considerable flow by the time it came by our home, but it wasn't far from its source. Unitl the 1970's one could safely drink its water most of the year. The river would flood for a couple of weeks each spring and the flooding meant muddy water, but most of the year the stream ran fresh and clear. My cousins lived alongside the Missouri river, which is deeper, wider, and carries a lot more water. It also runs muddy most of the year. But my cousin one showed me a simple demonstration that I have used in many different settings. He took a quart jar and dipped it full of Missouri river water. The jar was filled with the brown stuff. Then he sat the jar down and waited. Within a half hour, the sediment had begun to sink and the water at the top was much less cloudy. Within a couple of hours the water at the top of the jar was perfectly clear.

I used a pitcher of muddy water for the same illustration at the beginning of our Lenten worship service last night. I stirred up the water and it quickly became cloudy. Our lives are like that. We spend so much energy stirring things up and sometimes we get so agitated that we have little clarity in our lives. Clarity comes only when we restore a sense of calm. Sitting quietly may not seem like a productive use of time for those of us who are constantly on the go, but it is exactly what is needed if we want to focus our attention. And focus is required in order to be truly productive.

Our culture is filled with the notion that multitasking is efficient. And it may be so, to a certain extent. If I listen to a recorded book while driving across the state, I have made my trip and increased my knowledge at the same time. I can have a meaningful visit

with my mother while I am preparing a meal. Sometimes I can even sort papers on my desk while talking in the telephone to someone. But my talents at doing more than one thing at a time are limited. I am easily distracted and when I try to do too many things at the same time, I end up accomplishing less than if it did them one thing at a time. Furthermore, there are some tasks in life that demand our full attention. Studies show that driving in heavy traffic and talking on the telephone dramatically decreases safety. The lessons we heard from our parents and passed on to our children are true: you can't do a good job with your homework with the television on.

Sometimes multitasking is just not paying attention.

Our relationship with God at times demands our full attention. It is like any other relationship in that it requires time and focus. Loving relationships with people require that we focus on the other, pay attention, and give our full attention to that person. So it is with God. If we are to have any notion of God and how God works in our world, we need to pause, to free our minds from distractions, and to focus on God.

Centering our thoughts on God is not an easy task. It takes practice. It takes time. It takes discipline. These are not things that are easy for the church to market. When we promote religion or participation in the church we are quick to focus on the benefits that come to those who are a part of the congregation. We seldom talk aobut the commitment that is required. We like to talk about the joys of discipleship, and only more infrequently do we talk about the costs of discipleship. But we are called into the church to share the costs and the joys of discipleship.

A mature faith does not come without commitment.

Lent is an opportunity for Christians to examine our priorities. We are allowed to ask, "What is most important in my life?" We are freed to make changes. At the core of our faith is the message that we can make changes. The Christian concept of grace includes significant changes. Forgiveness requires repentance - a genuine change in the direction of one's life. To repent is to turn in a new direction.

One of the changes my life needs is an increase in the amount of calm time. I'm pretty good at stirring things up and sometimes that is of value. But there are also times when I need to simply be quiet and allow clearity to emerge in its own time.

I've decided to keep that pitcher of muddy water in my office this Lent. It will be a constant reminder that patience is one of the qualities of faith I wish to cultivate. I'm sure I'll stir up the mud from time to time. But I will also simply allow the dirt to settle out and clarity to emerge in the water at the top of the pitcher.

I left the pitcher sitting on a table last night. When I return to the church this morning, the water will be quite clear. I'm a bit like that, I think more clearly in the morning than I

do later in the day. Perhaps I can change the pace of my life enough to have a degree of clarity at other moments as well.

However, I don't think I'll ever completely stop stirring things up from time to time.

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March 7, 2009 – Lent



In the diverse culture of the United States in this time, there are so many different expressions of Christianity that I often find myself in a position of clarifying who I am and what I do. The fact that I am a Christian minister leads some people to conclusions about me and my job that are not even close to the reality. I find that there are often misperceptions of the church and of the seasons of church life as well. Even people who are close to me like my siblings don't always fully understand my vocation.

Lent is one of the misunderstood seasons. People often will say things to me that indicate that they think that during Lent people are more somber, or more focused on death and human mortality. While not denying the simple fact that we will all one day die from this life, the season of Lent is not, for me, a season of focusing my attention on death and dying. The flow of the texts does lead toward the dramatic events of the end of Jesus life and we always read the texts of his crucifixion during the last week of Lent, but the season is not focused on crucifixion. It is focused on life.

In fact, I find Lent to be a season of hope in this life. Sometimes we can become obsessed with all of the things that are going wrong with the world. We focus our attention on the deepening financial crisis, or global warming, or violence in so many places around the world, or other crises that are constantly in the news. The message of Lent is that the way things are is not the way they will always be. Lent is rooted in the absolute conviction that human beings can change.

By investing my time and energy in considering the changes I can make in my own life, I begin to understand that I am not the only one capable of change. Others can change as well. The course of human history can change. Governments can change. The future can change. We are not stuck in the way things have been. Our faith in God brings us to the deep belief that change is possible.

Change is at the core of the Gospel message. John the baptizer's central message was, "repent!" The term means to go in a new direction. Jesus picked up on that message and lived a life that demonstrated the powerful ability of humans to change. Fishermen become disciples, sick people become well, blind people recover their sight, skeptics become believers, cynics become hopeful, hungry people become satisfied. Story after story of the life of Jesus demonstrate the power of humans to change.

While I am serious about Lent, I am not somber in this season. I don't engage in self-abuse or self-denial. I do recommit to disciplines of faith. Even the disciplines of faith are misunderstood by some people. Prayer is not only quiet moments sitting alone with the symbols of faith. Prayer is a heightened awareness of the presence of God in all of my life. God doesn't make a distinction between praying and not praying. God is always paying attention to humans and God is always aware of us. Praying is the process of reminding ourselves of the truth that is ever constant. Henri Nouwen wrote, "All real living is praying." Lent involves making my life into a prayer that includes gratitude and thanksgiving, openness to being led in new directions, compassion for those in need, and love at the center of everything. For God is love.

Early in my life I had trusted adults who showed me how to not be afraid of the dark. I remember walking in through the woods with my father at our church camp and his pointing out to me that if I used a flashlight my eyes would adjust to being able to see only the things in the beam of light. If, rather, I allowed my eyes to adjust to the dimness and walked without the flashlight, I could see much more and I would be less surprised by things outside of the beam of the flashlight. Even on a very dim night if you give your eyes a chance to adjust, there are many things that you will be able to see. What seems, at first, to be total darkness, really has multiple sources of light and even the tiniest bit of life can enable sight. I have always been grateful for the people in my life who taught me to go into the darkness without fear. It has heightened my enjoyment of all of life.

Lent may be such a season for us. By walking into the darkness we overcome our fear. By being honest about the reality of death we become able to be more fully alive. By accepting our ability to change we become freed from the way things have been.

So don't expect only dark clothing and grim expressions on my face this season.

It is not a season of sadness or fear for me. It is a time of deep joy and hopeful reflection.

May we all have the courage to walk into the darkness. And may we have the patience to allow our eyes - and our lives - to adjust to discover the light that is present even in the darkest moments of life.

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March 8, 2009 – Games



One of the joys of having our parents live in our town that we had not anticipated is that other family members come to visit more often. Our home has become the gathering place for our families in a similar way that our parents' homes were the gathering places a few years ago. And when our families get together, one of the things we do is play games. Games seem to be a good bridge between generations. Our children and their cousins, mostly in their twenties, can enjoy playing games with their grandparents, who are in their eighties.

I'm not exactly sure why, but I am not much of a game player. It is not that I can see anything wrong with playing games and I don't have any negative memories of playing games. Games have been a part of family gatherings for as long as I can remember and I have lots of pleasant memories of family gatherings and playing games with my siblings, cousins and others.

But usually I would just as soon be present in the room, doing some other task, when the family is playing games. I join in the games from time to time, but it doesn't make me feel left out in any way for the rest to be playing games while I'm doing the dishes or some other chore.

It is surprising how many different ways a group of people can amuse themselves with a deck of cards. There are plenty of card games that I have never learned to play, but there are many others that I've at least learned the basics of the game. I know people who have invested hours in mastering a deck of cards, being able to shuffle and handle

the cards in just the right way, learning tricks to amaze and amuse others, and mastering complex games. I'm not one of them. I'll play with a deck of cards from time to time and I even know a couple of different ways to play solitaire, but I soon lose interest and move on to other activities.

My mother is usually up for whatever game others want to play. I remember a particular camping trip when our children were young and the weather wasn't very cooperative. I don't know how many games of "Go fish" were played, my mother patiently amusing our daughter and passing the time with plenty of giggles and happy feelings. I think that both of them have joyful memories of a trip that might have otherwise been a bit of a disaster.

My attitude toward games may be, in part, a product of the stage of life in which I find myself. I am very rarely bored. I always have multiple tasks that will consume my time. I often get to the end of the day wishing that I had accomplished more. Setting aside deadlines and tasks that must be accomplished to play a game seems like a bit of an indulgence. It is not that I avoid recreation. I can lose myself for hours in a woodworking project or a walk in the woods. I love to paddle a canoe or kayak and I can paddle in the same lake over and over again without any problem. I can lose myself in a book for hours on end. But I have a limited tolerance for playing games.

There may come a time in my life when I have fewer task on my "to do" list and when time passes more slowly and a deck of cards can become a vehicle for creative thinking and for relationships with others.

In the meantime my family sometimes thinks me to be a bit strange. And fairly frequently they get me involved in playing games of one kind or another. I'm usually good for two or three hands of cards before I make up an excuse or find another task to occupy myself.

Last night as I puttered around the kitchen putting away things and doing a few dishes, three generations of our family were sitting at the table playing games and having a good time. There were lots of smiles around the table and there were fun stories being shared. I joined in the conversation and enjoyed the evening. And it didn't seem to bother anyone that I wasn't actually playing the game.

After all, I know there will be another opportunity and that I'm always welcome if I say "deal me in."

Let the games continue.

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March 9, 2009 – Enjoying Technology



I'm still adjusting to the shift to daylight savings time. It only takes me a couple of days, but I find that the adjustment is a bit slower than it was when I was younger. So I was a bit reluctant to get out of bed this morning. But when I turned on the computer, I discovered that our daughter was online. We had a brief chat exchanging text messages and then switched over to Skype for a video chat. She's in London and adjusting to the jet lag of the trip over there. We didn't exchange too much news as they are just getting settled. She's got a good job lead to follow up on today and they'll be looking for an apartment later this week. It was good to hear her voice and see her face.

When I was her age, we traveled in Europe for six weeks. We would have had access to telephone conversations if there had been an dire emergency, but we simply assumed that we would be out of touch with those we left behind for the duration of our trip. Portable computers were just a dream at that time and video conferencing was reserved for episodes of science fiction.

Today I'm delighted to have a computer with the ability to have a video chat built in. And sometimes the technology works flawlessly.

It is interesting how some of our fantasies about the future work out and others do not. Decades ago, when live video conversations with someone half way across the world were the stuff of imagination, we had other visions of the future. I can remember thinking that personal aircraft would be as common as automobiles, that travel through

space to the moon and other planets would become common, and that we would discover ways to travel to distant places at a much more rapid pace - like the transporter on star trek. Not all of those ideas have come to pass. But other technologies are more common and work easier than we imagined.

I remember my grandparents talking about the advances in technology in their lifetimes. Their lives began before the invention of the automobile or the airplane and they grew up in homes without electricity or telephone service. The speed and convenience with which travel was undertaken by their senior years was amazing to them. We had lots of conversations about how long it used to take to travel a short distance and how relatively convenient it has become to travel great distances.

The change in my lifetime has been equally dramatic. I guess I've become one of those old folks who is just amazed at all of the change that has occurred. Especially dramatic has been information technology. I begin my day by scanning the headlines in Washington, D.C., London, Sydney and San Jose. I exchange messages with friends on three or four different continents. And I am amazed that I can video chat with my daughter in London first thing in the morning.

Of course the time zones work to our advantage. During daylight savings time, it's 10:30 in London when it is 4:30 here. 4:30 a.m. has never before been a good time to have a conversation with Rachel.

For all of the frustrations that I have with technology and my lack of understanding of it, it continues to amaze and delight me. Being able to chat with our daughter makes it seem worth all of the frustrations with web sites that don't work as imagined and glitches in programs.

It continues to surprise me how much of my life is wrapped up in technology. I spend more time at the computer as a part of my work than I ever expected. We are in the process of switching to a web-based system for worship planing that allows us to have a continuing conversation about upcoming worship without getting everyone together at the same place and the same time. Different worship leaders post their comments at their convenience and the process can be collaborative without eating up large amounts of time. I think that the system, when we get it running, will work well for us and will result in fewer meetings. Time will tell. It is still at that frustrating, "takes more time" stage. When we get the bugs out of it, I suspect that we'll wonder why we used to spend so much time in meetings just to plan worship.

Of course technology will never replace a hug or the joy of sitting down to coffee with a close friend. And while I can truly say that I appreciate the technology, it is not the computer that I love - it is my daughter that I love. When the machine is a way to stay connected with the people we love it has value. To the extent that technology enables

me to stay more connected to people, it is a value to ministry because my vocation is all about communication and connection. Ministry is a profession of relationships.

So this morning I'm enjoying technology. I'm sure I'll be frustrated with it at some other point of the day.

May we all learn appropriate uses of technology to remain connected with those we love.

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March 10, 2009 – Not Done with Winter Yet



I took time yesterday to make some repairs to my snow blower. It was snowing lightly and the forecast is for more snow today and I wanted to make sure that the machine was running properly when we get our next spring blizzard. The problem with the snow blower turned out to be minor. A small piece of firewood had been ingested into the second-stage blower and had jammed. It was a chunk of cottonwood, so it was tough and stringy and a bit difficult to get out of there, but a few minutes with a hammer and chisel and we were back in business without any problems.

I'm not expecting a heavy spring dump out of this storm. The temperatures are too cold, hovering around zero and the forecast is for moderate snow amounts - a couple of inches or a bit more.

This storm isn't behaving like a spring blizzard. We've likely got one or more spring blizzards in store before the season is over - we've had them as late as May 11. Spring blizzards dump loads of heavy, wet snow and slow things down for a couple of days, but melt quickly.

The snow we're getting today is light and powdery, like real winter snow. With the cold temperatures, it's got me thinking about the ranches that are calving. A week ago, when we made a firewood run up north, we saw several places where the new calves were just taking their first steps. There were a lot of cows waiting to calve out.

Ranchers don't get too much sleep during calving season - especially when the weather turns cold. The calves are born wet and they need to be dried off and warmed up in order to be safe. Prudent ranchers check their stock on a regular basis and are ready to move vulnerable cows and calves to shelter if needed. These duties are added to the chores of feeding and keeping water open. The cows need more energy to keep warm, so good feed is essential to keeping them healthy.

Wind chill temperatures could be well below zero in the open country and blowing and drifting snow can make visibility low and driving difficult. The cold weather makes mechanical equipment more vulnerable to break down.

Winter isn't over in ranch country.

The weather is unlikely to make much of a difference in my life today. There may be a few less deliveries for the church rummage sale today, but by the end of the week there will be plenty of rummage for the sale. We have reliable vehicles and don't have to make any out-of-town trips today, so we'll be safe and warm inside most of the day. The storm is expected to play out in time for evening meetings and other scheduled activities at the church. Compared to a rancher with a yard full of cows ready to calve, I've got it easy.

I'll make sure that I've got my warm parka handy and good gloves and warm boots. And I'll get to shovel a bit of snow today. And if the wind bites into my cheeks as I head out to my daily routines, I'll be thinking of the ranchers who will have to be out in the weather for many hours today, and of the young calves being born into a world that is pretty darn cold.

The ranchers I know aren't inclined to trade their lifestyle for any other. And that's a good thing. Because today I'm glad to have an indoor job and a warm place to sit and watch the snow blowing outside the window.

Be careful out there. We count you when you go out and we count you when you come in, hoping to have the same number. In a blizzard we've got to keep track of one another.

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March 11, 2009 – Grim News



AP Photo

The headlines are grim this morning. A gunman who killed at least ten people in southern Alabama began his murder spree by burning down his house, where his mother was later found dead. Among the victims were his grandmother and grandfather as well as an aunt and an uncle. As he drove through the community, the gunman appeared to shoot at whatever people he saw, killing people who were sitting on their porches. The gunman later killed himself.

After nearly two years without a story about a school shooting incident, news is coming from Southern Germany, where this morning, in Winnenden, north of Stuttgart, a lone gunman killed at least ten people at a secondary school. A major search was initiated for the gunman, who fled the school and the town, wearing black combat gear. German television is now reporting that they have a suspect in custody. The gunman is said to have shot randomly into the crowded school, where nearly 1,000 students attend. Rescue workers at the school are reporting that there are a number of injured in addition to those killed. Victims include eight children and two adults.

Twenty innocent victims - maybe more. While the numbers aren't all that high, when one considers the total amount of violence committed in the world each day, the two separate tragedies are overwhelming to the communities where they have occurred. And, so far, both seem to be senseless. People don't understand why they have occurred. Like too many other tragedies, it is possible that we never will understand the dynamics that have led to such overwhelming human tragedy.

I' like to write some neat little treatise about violence in this world and give a theological analysis that explains what has happened. But I cannot. It seems to me that too much of this world's violence is truly senseless. Too many survivors are left with unanswered questions. Too many deaths are the result of just being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Too few patterns emerge that give clues about how to prevent the next tragedy.

I can't explain away the pain and grief for the survivors.

I can't explain away the loss of a sense of security in a small town or in a school - both places where people had learned to feel safe and where their safety, it seems, was an illusion. I can't come up with a satisfactory answer to those who ask, "is there no place that is safe anymore?"

The truth is that we live in a violent and often unpredictable world, where an individual can gain access to incredibly destructive weapons and use them in ways that are not at all what was intended. The truth is that we are daily exposed to violence in television programs and games where the pain and tragedy of the violence is not always apparent.

Despite all of this, I hope that we never lose our horror or revulsion when we learn the news of such tragedies. I hope that such events will always cause my stomach to turn and my brain to react with a sense of shock and horror. I don't want such stories to ever become so routine that I simply accept them. I have no intention of ceasing to cry, "NO!"

Because it is in the shock and horror that lie the seeds of making a change. It is in the refusal to accept violence as the way of the world that can become the opening for a new path.

As the tragedy played out in Alabama, police pursued the gunman to a metal products plant, where the gunman had been employed. Approximately 30 shots were fired at the plant before the gunman shot himself. One of the bullets hit Geneva Police Chief Frankie Lindsey, who was saved by his bullet proof vest. Until recently, small town law enforcement officers didn't wear bullet proof vests. Thank goodness this one was wearing his.

There will be months of news stories covering both tragedies. There will be plenty of analysis and examination. Much of it will be senseless repetition of information that we have already received. But hopefully in all of the study and analysis there might be some clue that will help prevent a future tragedy - some grain of understanding that can be of use in the future.

For now we join with the grieving families in their sense of shock and horror and loss. This isn't the way life is supposed to be. We refuse to accept these acts as normal. We pray for the wounded that they may recover as fully as possible. And we support the investigators, combing through whatever evidence they can find for some clue that might prevent such a tragedy in the future.

Grim news produces a grim day. But we refuse to give up hope. It doesn't have to be this way. And we refuse to stop looking for ways to prevent such tragedies.

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March 12, 2009 – Pain



Illustration from braintrainingcentersfl.com

So far, in this life, I have experienced a very small amount of pain. Because of my vocation, I have been with a large number of other people when they are in pain, but my own personal pain has been limited to an occasional toothache and a single time when I was burned. And yesterday. And maybe today - we will see.

Although I don't know how I did it, the doctor says that I have injured my back and that there is inflammation in one or more discs in my lower back. The sensation that I have is all in my hip, extending from my waistline to my knee. I woke up stiff and sore yesterday morning and found that I couldn't stand to sit, even enough to write the blog. I wrote the blog standing at the kitchen counter. When I got into my pickup to go to work, there was no question that my day could not be normal, so I drove to the urgent care clinic instead of work.

A couple of x-rays, an examination and a consultation later, I was headed for the pharmacy and home. My instructions are to stay flat on my back for three days. I've never done that before. Yesterday, there was no choice. I was counting the minutes between the time for pain medication. Any motion really got my attention.

Today is better, and it appears that the treatment is working. It looks like following the doctor's instructions and a little physical therapy will allow my body to heal without any major interventions. I won't know all of the details for a few days, but I should be back to something approaching my normal routine before long.

One of the things of which I have been aware is how small my pain is in comparison with others. There are people that I know who have similar levels of pain as a chronic condition. They live with it day in and day out. There are many types of pain that cannot be effectively treated. The medication that I am taking that makes me groggy and clouds my thinking is a constant companion for people with some illnesses and conditions. Those who experience knee, hip, or back surgery have pain levels that are much higher than I have experienced.

But I let the small amount of pain that I was experiencing be the only focus of my attention yesterday. I set everything else aside and thought of little else. It wasn't just the pain. It was also the fear of pain. The dull reminder with a sharp shooting sensation every time I moved made me want to do almost anything to avoid the pain.

From a theoretical and philosophical position, my behavior and thoughts yesterday were quite the opposite of how I think I ought to be. In theory, pain is inevitable. Everyone experiences pain. And life should not be lived in the avoidance of pain. There are times when the best thing for a person is to confront the pain. Pain treatment is filled with compromises. Doctors can eliminate pain by inducing unconsciousness. Such treatment is appropriate at times in order for healing to occur. Short of that level of medication, any pain medication can dull senses, slow reactions, and inhibit relationships. I didn't sleep very much in the past 24 hours, but my judgment and reactions are blurred by the pain medication. It would not be safe for me to drive a car, for example. I can't focus my attention sufficiently to accomplish much of my work beyond a couple of phone calls.

In theory, I could accept a little more pain in exchange for a bit less medication - and a bit more focus. In practice, I seem to want to take all the pain medication that is prescribed.

I know this is a little problem that will soon be gone. I'm not really injured that badly. Three days off of work isn't going to disrupt my life. My doctor is well experienced and well trained. I won't be allowed to be over-medicated. But there is a lesson to be learned in all of this. Not every pain in my life can be so effectively treated. I will, at some point in the future, experience increased chronic pain. I could develop an illness with much more pain than I am now experiencing. And if I can learn from an experience of temporary pain, I might be better equipped to face my future.

So I'm going to try to comply with my doctor's instructions. I've got a couple more days ahead of pretty much lying on my back. And, if I am lucky, I'l be tapering the medication so that I will be able to think more clearly as time goes by. And I hope that I will learn to be more appreciative of good health and a better steward of my health.

Educational psychologists know that pain can be an effective teacher. They also know that excessive pain can inhibit learning. Although people learn from pain, they learn

more quickly in environments that are relatively pain-free. Positive reinforcement is a better teacher than negative reinforcement. Yet is is definitely true that people can learn from the experience of pain.

May I be perceptive enough to learn from this experience. And may your life be as free from pain as possible.

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March 13, 2009 – Peaceful Places



About once a week I change the picture that appears as “wall paper” on my computer screen. I prefer a single picture to a set of pictures that changes. Often I select a photo that reminds me of some place that I have visited. I am less likely to put pictures of people in that particular location. I have never really analyzed my practice, but looking through the pictures of the past month or so, it is clear that I prefer to post pictures of peaceful locations, mostly places that are remote and isolated, often places that I have visited by walking.

In 2006, Susan and I took a sabbatical during which we focused on issues of people and land. We spent a month in rural and isolated locations in British Columbia, hiking every day and taking time to seek out lonely places where there weren’t crowds of people. The spiritual discipline of going to lonely places to deepen one’s relationship with God has a long and deep heritage. Moses found it easier to hear God’s call for his life when he went up on a mountain. The Gospels report that Jesus would get up early in the morning and go off to lonely places to pray.

Beginning in the third century, a group of Christians known as the desert fathers and mothers, lived an ascetic lifestyle in the desert in Egypt, seeking to avoid the chaos and conflict that had erupted in the Roman empire. Their writings have been preserved and continue to be sources of inspiration and focus for Christians to this day. The history of the Christian church is filled with many other stories of monks and hermits who sought to live far away from other people in order to draw closer to God.

The calling to such a lifestyle is not my calling, although the wilderness holds a great attraction for me. My work is with people and inside the community of the church. And I find God's presence in the midst of the people to be very powerful and compelling. I witness the resurrected Christ in the lives of faithful people and in the practice of the mission and ministry of the church.

Still, I need my moments of solitude. And I treasure my visits to lonely places.

And when I am not in the quiet and lonely places, I have photographs that remind me of the way it felt to visit such sacred places.

It is one of the most ancient lessons of our faith - the lesson taught to Abram and Sarai before they received their new names: God is not attached to any single place. As sacred as it feels to pray to God in a particular place, when one moves to another place, one discovers that God is there also. There is nowhere that we can go where God is not present.

Sacred places are all about clearing our minds and focusing our attention so that we can see what has been there all along. Sometimes we need to set aside the distractions of everyday life in order to focus our attention more fully on God.

We seek to find a balance of solitude and community, of wilderness and city, of reflection and action.

The past couple of days have been times of almost no action for me. I have had most of the day to lie quietly. The medicines that I am taking have made it difficult to focus my attention, my mind wanders rather freely through any number of topics and concerns. But I have found that remembering some of the beautiful wild and lonely places has brought me some relief from pain and a sense of peacefulness as I wait for my body to heal.

I've been thinking of cool water in the midst of desert places. I have remembered the pools in the shade of Uluru in Australia, the Colorado river carving a canyon through Arizona, and other times when we have encountered refreshment in the midst of a harsh environment. The photo that accompanies today's blog was made in Zion National Park less than a mile from the road where busses carry gawking tourists around the park. Only those who get off the bus and take a walk will discover such places.

I am fortunate to have been able to visit many peaceful places. And I am fortunate to have memories and photographs that allow me to re-visit those places. It is my way of maintaining balance. And balance is critical for life to be filled with joy.

I hope to soon be visiting more wild places. In the meantime, I have some wonderful pictures of some very peaceful places.

May you find moments of peace in your life today.

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March 14, 2009 – Assessing Value



CNN Photo

My parents came into their teens in the 1930''s, during the great depression. Those years shaped the kind of people that they became. And the values that they learned were passed down to their children. We are reluctant to throw away any items that might be useful in the future. We are skeptical about "get rich quick" schemes. We are a bit distrustful of financial markets. We tend to value experiences over possessions.

Hard times can force hard decisions. My father's parents ended up leaving their North Dakota farm and forged a new life for their family in Montana. There are plenty of family stories about making do with the resources at hand, living frugally, and getting by. The sharpness of depression-era thinking has been dulled by the passage of time. Subsequent generations of our family have lived with less scarcity and more luxury that was the story of our parents and grandparents.

Scarcity can provide an opportunity to assess what is most valuable. And in such assessments, one discovers that the most important things in life are not possessions. They aren't the things that money can buy. More valuable than any items that can be bought and sold are love and family and friendship.

Still, it makes me vary sad to learn that the Schindler family, having lost most of their financial worth in Bernard Madoff's Ponzi scheme, has decided to auction off some priceless pieces of Judaica in order to provide for the needs of their family. Pictured in the illustration above are a Torah Crown and a Torah Pointer that were presented to the

late Rabbi Alexander Schindler as retirement gifts. The crown was made in the United States in the early 20th century. The pointer is much older, dating to the 1780's and was made in the Netherlands. Both gifts were presented with the belief that they would stay in the Schindler family, passed from one generation to the next as each subsequent generation produced rabbis for the community.

Now the items must be sold. Schindler's widow has no money for her living expenses and the family must sell valuable items in order to have financial resources for every day living. Hopefully the items will be purchased by a synagogue or a museum where they can be displayed and perhaps used for Jewish ceremonies.

It is too bad the family didn't have a comic book collector. A rare copy of the first Superman comic was just sold in an online auction for $317,200. The comic book sold for 10 cents when it was published in 1938. The owner who just sold the comic paid 35 cents for it in 1950. For decades it sat in a box in a basement, forgotten.

The irony of one family having to sell priceless heirlooms at the same time as a collector can afford to spend over $300,000 on a single comic book is striking.

The truth is that neither the comic book nor the Jewish antiquities are the most valuable things in this life, no matter how much money is exchanged. Rabbi Schindler's daughter understand this. "My father came out of Nazi Germany," she said. "His mother once told me when she came out of Germany, 'What's in your mind and what's in your heart, they can never take away from you.' And that's a lesson that's always been with me. . . Nobody can take that from you. And the rest of it is just things."

The Schindlers realize that the most important legacy of their family does not rest in their possessions. The stories, values and beliefs that have been handed down for generations, tested by hardship and trial - these are the true family legacies. It is possible for them to sell their possessions, even priceless heirlooms because they understand that they have a heritage that no one can take from them.

The swindler Bernard Madoff may have taken the family's money, but he never got close to the things that were most important.

One wonders if the person who was willing to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for a comic book is able to understand that simple truth. Is that person attempting to purchase happiness or joy? Or is the quest for possessions distracting that person from what is most important in life.

There won't be any rare comic books or priceless heirlooms in my estate. We haven't been into accumulating many possessions. But I hope that our children and their children will someday learn the lesson of Rabbi Schindler's mother: "What's in your mind and what's in your heart, they can never take away from you."

May we discover treasures in our hearts and minds that are worthy gifts to future generations.

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March 15, 2009 – The Ides of March



In the Roman calendar, the 15th day of March, May, July and October was given the name “Ides.” The 13th day of the other months received the same name. Some believe that the Ides was the day of the full moon, but the Roman calendar wasn’t a purely lunar calendar and so the full moon would not land on the same day of the month year after year. The Ides of March gain their fame from the assassination of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March, 44 BC. Caesar had declared himself dictator of Rome for life. A soothsayer warned Caesar to be on his guard against a great peril on the Ides of March. As the story goes, Caesar saw the soothsayer on his way to the senate-house on the Ides of March. Caesar greeted the soothsayer with, “The Ides of March has come.” The seer replied, “Aye Caesar, but not gone.” As the senate convened Caesar was attacked and stabbed to death by a group of senators who justified their actions on the ground that they were preserving the republic from the tyranny of a dictator.

Thorton Wilder wrote a novel titled “Ides of March,” and it is also the name of a 1970’s rock band.

The day can be seen as a warning. The soothsayer said, “Beware the Ides of March.” But it can also be seen as a liberation - the day of the end of a dictator. For most people in contemporary times, the day passes without much notice.

In our family, the Ides of March is the birthday of Isaac, our son. It is a day of celebration and joy.

In the Cleveland suburb of Hinckley, Ohio, March 15 is Buzzard's Day. Cleveland Metroparks welcome visitors on March 15 to the Buzzard Roost on Hinckley Reservation. Each year thousands of turkey vultures return to the area after wintering elsewhere. The event is hailed as a sign of spring with many different celebratory events, including a pancake breakfast at Hinckley Elementary School.

Legend has it that the buzzards were first attracted by tons of butchering refuse and unwanted game left behind in the great Hinckley Hunt of 1818, but there are reports of the buzzards being present before that time. In 1957, a reporter from the Cleveland Press became interested in the claim of Ranger Walter Nawalaniec who claimed he had personally observed the buzzards arrival in Hinckley each March 15 for six years and this his predecessor, Charlie Willard had logged the arrival of the birds on the same day for the prior 23 years. The reporter published a story on the buzzards on February 15, 1957. Over 9,000 people showed up to watch for the buzzards, who did not disappoint and arrived right on schedule at about 2 p.m. on that day.

Whether the day is observed as Buzzard's Day or the day of Julius Caesar's death or as the birthday of one of the many people who were born on the day, March 15 comes to those of us in the northern hemisphere as a reminder that spring is on its way. We know that we might have more snow after this date, but we also know that the snows we get will soon melt and that we can get some pretty warm weather from here on.

So Happy Buzzaard's Day to all of you. May your day be filled with joyous celebrations and happy events. After all, there's only one month more until the deadline for filing your taxes!

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March 16, 2009 – Chicken Soup



I guess we've been feeling a bit under the weather lately. First I got a cold, which I shared with Susan and then something happened to my back and Susan's cold got worse. There is nothing really big going on, but we've been feeling a bit less than optimal for several days now. This is an unusual feeling for us. We have been blessed with good health and rarely find ourselves under the weather for more than a day or so.

So it was a real treat, yesterday, when a friend gave us a large pot of chicken soup. Chicken soup has long been regarded as a home remedy for a number of ailments. Even if it doesn't have any specific medicinal properties, it is certainly comfort food. A gift of chicken soup is a gift of love and care and comfort. And it certainly is delicious.

Mark Hanson and Jack Canfield had built their careers as motivational speakers and had been collecting uplifting stories for many years before they put together their first volume of inspirational stories. *Chicken Soup for the Soul* was published in 1993, and by the end of the year had made it to most best seller lists in the country. Subsequently there have been a host of additional *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books published with stories targeting various age groups and interests. There is a *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book for parents of twins and another for fans of Basketball. There are *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books aimed at middle school, high school and college students. There are editions with stories about cancer and special editions for different denominations. Each book has the same focus - a collection of stories that are uplifting and make readers feel better. The idea has caught on and the books have enjoyed enormous popularity.

A good story can have restorative qualities. Although I cannot imagine how a clinical study of the healing power of stories would be designed, I am sure that stories do have an effect on us.

I certainly have gotten a lot of stories since I injured my back. Back pain is common. There are a lot of people who have experienced it. While the pain can be temporarily debilitating, it rarely is permanent. With proper exercise and care, most people can control their back pain and lead healthy, productive lives. Because it is so common, when I made mention of my back pain in church, there were a lot of people who wanted to talk to me about it. There was plenty of sympathy and no small measure of advice. I heard from people who were adamant about chiropractic treatment and others who advised me to avoid it. I heard from folks who thought walking was the best exercise and others who said walking made their pain worse. All of the advice and stories that were shared were offered out of concern. There was acknowledgment that the pain is real and a genuine desire to offer help.

I suspect that the event that set off my back pain was shoveling snow on a slippery driveway. While I wasn't aware of a problem at the time, I was lifting and twisting and standing in awkward positions to keep my balance. Muscle strain seems like the easiest explanation for what has happened. But I am also aware that back pain is a common symptom of poorly managed stress. And my life has had its share of stress lately. I have not been as attentive to exercise and self care as I might have been. And I have had a tendency to over-schedule my life leaving little time for self-care.

A pain in the back is impossible to ignore - a sure sign that I can make some relatively minor lifestyle changes for better health. A few days off work, a more intentional exercise program and taking care of my back will have me free of pain before long. I am planning to work a normal schedule this week, but I will be looking for places to adjust my schedule to provide for adequate rest and exercise. I'll have to learn to cut back on some of my activities and restore balance to my life.

And I resolve to eat plenty of chicken soup. Chicken soup isn't just good for the soul - it is good for the body. The distinctions we make between various aspects of our lives are artificial. Mind, body and soul are all aspects of the same life. A healthy body is not somehow distant or distinct from a healthy soul. Care for all aspects of our lives gives us strength and endurance to face the future with joy.

For today, I have a little pain in my back and hip to remind me that I am not invincible and that I need to take care of myself. I have stories of others who have experienced pain far deeper than mine and have recovered and returned to normal life. And I have a bit of chicken soup in the refrigerator to warm for my lunch to remind me that I belong to a community of people who care for and support me.

Life is good, even when it hurts a little bit.

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March 17, 2009 – Wondering About Our Past



A picture of part of one of the scrolls by Michael Kappeler\AFP\Getty

At the center of Biblical-historical scholarship since their discovery in 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls are an amazing collection of ancient texts. The scrolls, found in the caves of Qumran, near the Dead Sea, by a Bedouin shepherd, have been carefully preserved, copied and translated over the sixty years since they were discovered. There are fragments of Biblical texts along with other ancient writings. Some of the biblical texts are the oldest copies to which scholars have access and therefore have great value in the quest for some sense of the original texts. Prior to the discovery of the scrolls, the earliest known copies of Biblical writings were from around 900 a.d. The scrolls date back to 200 a.d., nearly 700 years older than any previously discovered scrolls. The texts are carefully stored in Israel, although in recent years some fragments of the scrolls have been allowed limited public showings in other countries.

We were privileged to see some of the scrolls when they were displayed in Chicago as a part of an international tour. The fragments, carefully displayed in a low-light environment, were impressive to see. It was easy to make out individual Hebrew characters on some of the fragments. There was a quiet in the room, as if each person who entered had some sense of awe and respect for documents that were so old.

For more than sixty years, since the discovery of the scrolls, the dominant theory of historians has been that the scrolls were part of a collection of sacred texts maintained by an Essene community. The Essenes were an ascetic Jewish community that flourished in the 1st century and lived in the scorching desert canyons near the dead

sea. The primary source of information about the Essenes is Flavius Josephus, a former Jewish Priest who wrote a history of Judaism while being held captive in Rome during the first century.

Now the community of Biblical historians has been shaken by the claims of prominent Israeli scholar, Rachel Elior, who disputes that the Essenes ever existed at all. She claims that the Essenes were a fabrication of Josephus, who wrote to counter anti-Jewish writings that circulated in Rome. Josephus, according to Elior, wanted to portray Jews who were the highest ideal of human behavior - a parallel to the Spartans who, for the Romans, were uniquely virtuous. Elior claims that virtually all descriptions of Essenes by Greek and Roman historians are based on the works of Josephus and thus expand the false portrayal of Jewish history.

Elior bases her claims on her careful reading and study of the scrolls themselves. She contends that there is no mention of the Essene community anywhere in any of the scrolls. “It doesn’t make sense that you have thousands of people living against the Jewish law and there’s no mention of them in any of the Jewish texts and sources of that period.” She argues that the Essenes were not a group of especially virtuous Jews, as Josephus claims, but rather the renegade sons of Zadok, a priestly caste banished from the Temple at Jerusalem by Greek rulers in the 2nd century B.C. When they left, they took their scrolls with them. The discovery at Qumran is the remnants of a huge library that was hidden for safekeeping. The scrolls address a biblical priestly heritage in many different places.

The controversy stirred up by Elior’s theories isn’t likely to have a huge impact on contemporary practice or belief among Christians or Jews, but the scholarly conversation that it has stirred up is nonetheless helpful in the quest to better understand our past. History is always presented with a bias - a point of view taken by the historian and official histories never present every interpretation of the events that have occurred.

The conversations raise a question about how much of our past can be known. Even with the discovery of ancient texts and new discoveries from archeological evidence, our understanding of the past is like the scrolls themselves - incomplete fragments. We know some stories, we have some bits of evidence, but a complete picture eludes us. Although we are undoubtedly the product of our past, we know our past imperfectly. We have a faith that is rooted deeply in the history of humanity, but it is a history that we know only in part.

James Charlesworth, director of the Dead Sea Scrolls project at Princeton Theological Seminary, is not at all concerned that the word Essene does not appear in the scrolls. Essene is not the name that the members of the community would have given themselves, but rather a title imposed by those outside of the community. References to

‘men of holiness,’ or ‘sons of light,’ are present in the scrolls and are direct references to the community that held the scrolls.

It may be just an esoteric argument among scholars, but the interplay is fascinating to an armchair historian like myself. My life has led me in a different direction than direct study of original historical material. I gain my information by reading the works of contemporary scholars and following their arguments, rather than studying the original texts.

What I have learned that is important to the practice of our faith in this generation is that history is not always the way it first appears. Some of the historical “facts” that we have been taught are called into question by developing scholarship. One needs to be open to new information, new scholarship and new ideas. Sometimes historians have related second-hand stories as fact and in the telling of those stories obscured the truth about history rather than making history more clear.

The world is not always the way it seems. History is not a finished book with set facts. There is more that can be learned through scholarship and through offering new theories on the past.

I don’t pretend to know all of the nuances of the technicalities discussed by the scholars, but I am, nonetheless, intrigued by their arguments. They keep me wondering about our past and, hopefully, open to new revelations about the distant past that might help shape our understanding of who we are and what God calls us to do in our generation.

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March 18, 2009 – Quilters



From time to time, we make comparisons between the congregation we are currently serving and the congregation we served before coming to this church. Our previous congregation is in Boise, Idaho, and their building was about the same age when we arrived as the building of our current congregation is today. That means that some of the building issues we face are ones we had previously faced in Boise. New bathroom construction occurred in both congregations during our tenure in order to provide for accessibility for those with disabilities and increased capacity for the congregation. Heating systems and controls are another area where experience with our previous congregation gives us a sense of what to expect as we live through this phase in the life of our current congregation.

In Boise, when we updated the heating controls, we had to make a special provision for the women's quilting circle. They met in the fellowship hall, the room with the largest amount of open space. They set up a large quilting frame and sat around the frame tying quilts by hand. The members of the circle were in their seventies and eighties and the sitting and the age of members combined to require a room temperature that was significantly warmer than any other activity that took place in the room. Whereas normal activities in the room called for a room temperature of 62 - 65 degrees depending on the size of the group, the quilters needed the room to be at 72 - 75 degrees in order for them to be comfortable.

While temperature controls is an issue that I understand, having gone through upgrading of the systems in both of the congregations, the quilters are a different matter

entirely. The new “Quilts of Hope” group that was formed in our congregation last fall is not a group of elders who do a lot of sitting. This quilting group doesn’t set up big quilting frames. In fact they do most of their quilting on a large machine that is not located in our building. When they gather, they are cutting and sewing together quilt blocks, creating banners for the sanctuary, designing paraments, and a host of other activities. This quilting group comes in with a bustle of activity and keeps moving throughout the afternoon and evening on the days that they meet. They require large tables to roll out their fabric and smooth surfaces for cutting and sewing. They rearrange the furniture, plug in several sewing machines, and usually have an iron going on one side of the room. They don’t require the room to be warmer than usual. In fact their level of activity more closely approaches that of a Sunday school class than a traditional sewing circle.

The Quilts of Hope group is one of the new ministries that has emerged in our congregation in recent years. Like other emerging ministries, it hasn’t required much staff time, effort, or support. The group has done its own organization, set its own goals and planned its own work. They require little in terms of support from the traditional structures of the church and they are focused on their primary activity, not on organizational structure. They don’t worry about maintaining the institution and don’t have time for long meetings. They would rather get to work than talk about working.

These emerging ministries are quickly becoming the heart of the congregation. The Quilts of Hope group is not connected with worship through the design and creating of paraments for our communion table and banners for our sanctuary. They create a quilt for each baptism that occurs in our community and provide quilts for other special events and occasions. They brought new energy to the annual women’s retreat which focused on quilting this year. They are open to new members and provide an easy place for those who are interested in quilting to connect to the wider church. They have a broad range of ages and a wide spectrum of church experience among the members of their group. There is no formal process to become involved. Just show up for a quilting day and you’re a part of the group. No dues, no officers, no worries.

The pattern is not dissimilar to the Woodchuck Society, that delivers firewood to our neighbors on the Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge reservations and provides great opportunities for fellowship around the process of cutting, splitting and delivering firewood.

As I think about the future of our congregation, I believe that one of our strengths is found in the focus on ministries. We aren’t organized into formal mission teams, we don’t have an organized volunteer coordinator who deploys our volunteer resources, we don’t have structures and funds set aside to start new projects. But we are incredibly quick to respond to real needs when they are identified. We are flexible in the ways in which our members can participate, and we are eager to say “yes!” to new ideas. These

centers of ministry are not patterned after one another, but rather arise out of the congregation in response to an identified need and available skills.

They transform discipleship from “we have to” into “we get to.”

Last night the quilters worked right up to the time that the church board was scheduled to meet in the same room. As board members were arriving, quilters were putting away their fabric and machines and moving the furniture back into a place for a group of a dozen church leaders to have their monthly meeting. The brief overlap when members of both groups were together in the same room, moving tables and chairs and talking about their respective activities in the church was a wonderful time. The board got a better glimpse of the ministry of the quilters and the quilters sensed some of the excitement that the board has around its strategic planning process.

I’m quite convinced that the church of the future doesn’t look like the church of the past, but there is a line of continuity that connects the various times of our lives and the various ministries in which we engage. We may have fewer institutional structures and patterns of decision-making that are even more streamlined than our current organizational scheme. It may be more difficult to chart our organizational structure. But we will continue to be open to new and emerging ministries.

And as the level of activity increases, we can turn down the thermostat a few more degrees.

A neighbor of the church seeing the growing pile of split firewood in the church yard, commented, “you don’t heat that building with firewood, do you?” We don’t. But the emerging ministries of the congregation are providing warmth and energy for an aging congregation in ways that are more lasting than raising the temperature in the building.

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March 19, 2009 – Hallways



It has been a week since I injured my back and my recovery has been substantial. I am able to be fully involved in my job and there are only a few limits to my normal activities. I did cancel a planned trip to Cleveland to participate in the spring meeting of the board of directors of Local Church Ministries. I would not have been able to tolerate the airline rides. The problem is that I cannot bear to sit down for any length of time at all. I've learned to place my computer on a counter and work standing up. I shift my position and place a pillow behind my back when attending meetings. It isn't much of limit.

One of the results of this is that I take frequent breaks from my work and wander around the building. Waling is good exercise for me and it eases the sensations in my hip and thigh to walk.

For the most part, when I think of our building, I think of the rooms. We have a beautiful sanctuary, a large fellowship hall, a comfortable parlor, a kitchen, classrooms and more. The hallways are just there to connect the other spaces. Sometimes we decorate hallways with pictures or posters, but their primary purpose is to get people from one room to another. But in a building as large as ours, hallways account for a significant amount of space. There are as many square feet of hallways as the largest room in the building.

Most of the time the hallways are places of activity. On Sundays, people stop for conversation in the hallways and children are going back and forth from one room to another. When we have meetings or concerts, we tend to fill up our building and there is

a constant flow of people to get to coat racks, bathrooms, and other places in the building. In the mornings, when the preschool is in session, the hallways are full of kids and parents going to and from the drinking fountain and pausing for conversation. The walls in the hallways are brick and concrete block and sound carries pretty well. My office is at the opposite end of the building from the preschool, but I can often hear the children when I step out into the hallway.

But most days in the late afternoon, there is a time when the hallways are empty. There are fewer activities and the building empties. It is not uncommon for there to be only two or three of us in the building and our offices are clustered at the east end of the facility.

So for the past few days, I've been walking the halls. I'm not the sort of person who spends too much time sitting at a desk in the first place. My job is varied and I can usually find an excuse to get up from the desk and paperwork and go visit someone. But with a bit of nagging pain, I hesitate before heading for my car. Between sitting at my desk and sitting in my car is the time of walking, which is more pleasant than any of the sitting. I've taken to wandering the hallways.

It is a good thing. I should be familiar with the building. I should be paying attention to what is going on. A bit of loose moulding or mopboard can be easily repaired before the problem gets bigger. There is always a bit of clutter to be cleared and things to put away. And walking around the building stirs my imagination about new programs and possibilities for new activities. We've been working on plans for our Easter celebration and most of our attention has been focused on the sanctuary, but I am getting some ideas about the events that happen in the hallways as well. The hallways are often places of greeting and building fellowship. The informal activities of the hallways help to build up the community that is expressed in the events of the sanctuary and fellowship hall.

I often am aware of how grateful I am for our church's building. When we lived in Idaho, we focused much more attention on our building. It was a bit too small for the congregation and had multiple maintenance problems. As we sought to raise funds for renovation and expansion of the facility, I would say things like, "our building is the focus of our mission and ministry." We would talk about how important it was to have a physical presence in the community and a facility to house our work. But the truth is that the building can't every become the focus of mission and ministry. Mission and ministry is always about the people. The building that we have here in Rapid City frees us to focus our attention on the true center of our life together. We are the inheritors of the sacrifice and insight of a previous generation who envisioned, planned and constructed this facility that continues to serve our congregation so well. Not having to make the building the focus of our attention allows us to engage in mission and ministry.

But it is always a balancing act. We dare not ignore our facility. We need to have the same kind of eye for the future as did our forebears so that we do not pass on building problems to the next generation.

So it is good to walk the hallways with an eye to how we might reduce energy consumption and how we might make changes to improve the utility of our facility and how changes in program, membership, and mission might shape the ways in which we use our spaces.

I know that my physical condition is temporary. I'll soon abandon the frequent wandering through the building. Even if it takes longer than anticipated, today is the last day of winter and the weather will soon have me walking outside. For now, it's good to take some time to wander the hallways and imagine the work we continue to do in this place.

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March 20, 2009 – Eucharist



We like to make distinctions between events in our lives. This is an ordinary day. Today is special. This meal is the usual. That meal is a celebration. This person is an acquaintance. This person is a friend. Perhaps one of the ways that we mark the passage of time is by designating some events and some activities as unique. We count our birthdays. We set aside holidays. We designate some meals and some relationships as special.

But there is great value in the ordinary.

From the beginning of the Protestant reformation, there has been a discussion in the church about the celebration of communion. There was a sense that the tradition of using Latin instead of the common language somehow distanced the meal from the people in the pew. The words that were shared along with the bread and the cup had become somehow the province and special possession of priests who had been separated from the common folk by education, their role in the community, and special privileges that they shared. On the other hand, there were reformers who argued that the overuse of the special meal had somehow trivialized it. By celebrating daily, and at times multiple times a day, the ceremony had become a ritual of rote and repetition instead of a unique and powerful celebration of the presence of Christ.

The truth is that the tension has been in the meal since its inception. Jesus said to his disciples, “I have earnestly desired to share this passover with you before I suffer.” The ceremony that we call Holy Communion was itself deeply rooted in the past. It grew out

of the celebration of an ancient celebration of our people. It was a meal that was shared once a year with special ritual and ceremony. The passover was anything but an everyday event. On the other hand, Jesus transformed the meaning of two of the most common symbols of the meal. We have no memory of special words that were said with the sharing of the lamb or the bitter herbs or the haroseth. The unleavened bread and the cups, common elements that would have been present at other meals, became the focus of the new celebration that has continued since Jesus gathered with his disciples in an upper room. The distinction between the special and the common was blurred.

During Lent, a small group of our congregation gathers weekly for quiet contemplation and the sharing of communion. The elements of our gathering are simple. The music is simple, we use fewer words, we allow more time for quietness. And we share a bite of bread and a drop of juice. It has become a very special time for those who participate. And yet it is very ordinary.

Last night we shared bread from our kitchen. Nothing special, just the everyday bread from which we make toast and sandwiches and eat with our meals. I simply sliced of one end of a loaf and brought it to church for our celebration. The words that I said were words that have been said before.

It was very common.

It was very special.

In that meal we were given the simple gift of being reminded that it is not about us. We were joining with faithful people who throughout many generations in many places with many languages have participated in the celebration of Christ's presence. It did not matter how many people we gathered. It did not matter how much money was deposited in the offering. The service wasn't about preserving our institution or promoting our causes. It wasn't about us.

There are moments in this life when we catch a glimpse of the wider reality of which we are a part. We spend much of our lives thinking that where we are right now is life and the time that follows the disposal of our physical bodies is death. Only occasionally do we glimpse that life is much broader than the span between our birth and death. Only occasionally do we remember that we belong to a people who have been in relationship with God for thousands of years and who will love God long after the days of this generation are past. We spend much of our lives counting time as if our sense of minutes and hours, days and weeks and years is somehow the only way of measuring time. Only occasionally do we catch a sense that past and present and future are only our frame of reference and that our sense of time doesn't describe the vastness of the reality that lies beyond our perception.

We remember that Jesus wanted to share one of those occasional shifts in perspective with his disciples. Perhaps his desire was fueled by his knowledge of his approaching death. Perhaps it was sharpened by the disciples' anxieties over their future and over what they perceived as a great separation. What we do know is that he asked those who follow to remember whenever they shared the bread and the cup. And in our own imperfect ways we have continued to remember ever since.

The arguments about which words or what language, the discussions about what beverage or what kind of bread, the conversations about how often and who is in charge all fade and seem somehow silly and irrelevant when we gather together to remember and to experience the very real presence of Christ in our lives. Life and death are not divided by some stark wall. The one who died is alive. The one who seemed absent is present. The past and future are now. The not yet already is.

It is a fleeting moment. We cannot hold onto it.

But it is enough.

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March 21, 2009 – A Short Trip and a Long Story



My back is improving and we took a little drive down to the southern hills yesterday afternoon. The purpose of our trip was to pick up a car that had been damaged in a collision with a deer. It was an older car with over 270,000 miles on it. It had belonged to the son of a colleague of mine. When he hit the deer during Christmas vacation, the solution was for his father to help him get into a different car. Dad ended up owning the salvage car. The Woodchuck Society at our church has a large, tandem axle trailer for hauling wood and with the sides removed, the trailer is large enough to haul the car.

As we drove along, I got a story.

Some time ago, a local congregation became aware that there was a mother with two children living in their church. When the investigated, they found out that the trailer in which the family had been living had been damaged during cold weather when the furnace had failed and water had frozen the pipes, causing leaks. The pastor and another member of the church went out to the trailer to see what they could do to help and discovered that the problems with the trailer were much bigger than they imagined. There is no need to go into details here, but a negotiated price with a motel, three weeks, a 22-yard dumpster, more than 50 loads of laundry, a deal with a mattress store to donate mattresses, searches through thrift stores, a work day with volunteers, a furnace repair, and a couple of days of working on the plumbing later and the trailer is almost ready for the family to move back.

The single mother works virtually full time and the children are sometimes with their father, who lives nearby and sometimes on their own. One of the jobs that the mother does in the evenings to make ends meet is pizza delivery. And her car is on its last legs. It is burning oil badly and repairs would easily exceed the value of the car.

Hence a car that has hit a deer, has no value, but still runs well and could be repaired with a hood and a radiator from the junkyard, a new serpentine belt and a little volunteer labor becomes a solution to another problem.

It is unclear what would have happened if there had not been a church to start solving the problems one by one. The total of the problems was overwhelming the mother. There were too many things that had to be done and some of them, while not requiring too much money, required more money than she could set aside from the costs of surviving. And many of the problems were of the nature that they kept getting worse and worse. The pipes had continued to leak for weeks, destroying floor coverings and mattresses that had been placed on the floor without bed frames. The fact that water pipes were corroded actually helped to slow the water flow and limit the damage. The mattress soaking up water seemed to prevent water from traveling to another room. The pipes would freeze and the water would stop flowing each time it got cold. None of that damage would have occurred if the mother had had the resources to replace a $15 part in the furnace. But she never even attempted to solve that problem. The furnace stopped working, she knew she didn't have money for a service call and she didn't have knowledge to fix it herself. So she didn't know what to do.

Not knowing what to do made the problem get bigger and bigger and bigger until it was literally impossible for her to solve the problem of where she and her children could live.

Sometimes, when we seek to help people, the problems are so overwhelming that we can't figure out what to do. My friend and colleague has a gentle style and a calm approach that lead him to just start working on the small problems one at a time. He figured out how to get the water shut off and the furnace fixed. He recruited some volunteers to help with clean up.

And then he thought of the car.

Hiring the towing and paying for repairs would exceed the value of the vehicle. But instead of giving up and starting to look for some other inexpensive vehicle, he started to think about how he could get it moved and repaired. Earlier in the week he had asked me if I had any experience towing an all-wheel-drive vehicle. I had no experience, but I mentioned that our church had a trailer that was large enough to haul it. I didn't expect him to want to move it so quickly, but as the story unfolded on the drive, I began to understand why yesterday was the day to go get the car.

Of course, we know that the car, even when it is repaired, is not the end of the story. There will be continuing problems for the family. The plumbing is now leak free, but the trailer is barely habitable. There are some stress-management and perhaps other issues that indicate the family would benefit from counseling. The trailer is in a location that requires a working car and the car that we hauled yesterday when repaired will still be an old car with a lot of miles on it. There is very little back-up in the family system. When problems occur, there are few places to turn for help.

A church, seeking to help someone can easily create dependencies that result in the problems becoming too expensive and too big for the church.

But doing nothing doesn't seem like the right thing to do.

So my colleague is trying to do what he can, realizing that it may be too little help, realizing that the next problem may be too big, realizing that time invested in helping this family means time away from his own family. Limits have to be set.

But each day that the family has its own home is one more day of stability for children growing up in a chaotic world. Each day that the mother can go to work and earn money to support her family is better than a day when she has no income. Each example and lesson that is taught about living with less is a valuable lesson and a life skill that might be helpful in the next crisis.

There are many problems that are too big for us to solve on our own. But just because the problem is too big to solve doesn't mean that one should ignore it. We know that we cannot solve the problems of poverty in our community. We know that there are plenty of families whose lives are chaotic and dangerous. We know that there are children being raised in impossible circumstances. And we know that we can't solve all of the problems. So we do what we can. Yesterday, for the price of a half tank of gas and a half day's time, I was able to provide a little help. At the same time a volunteer handyman was giving part of a day to do some repairs on a trailer. My colleague who likes to tinker with cars on his day off will get the car repaired. Another colleague who once worked at an auto salvage yard will help find necessary used parts.

We won't get everything set right. But we might be able to help a little bit.

And even if things don't work out as planned, we are all gaining new stories to tell.

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March 22, 2009 – Getting Ready



We do continue to live in South Dakota. A week ago today, Rapid City set a record high temperature for the date. Today we are told to brace ourselves for a blizzard. The blizzard warning will go into effect at noon tomorrow and continue through 6 p.m. on Tuesday. The forecast calls for 100% chance of precipitation on Monday. Falling temperatures should make conditions right for a significant snowfall. If we are lucky, moisture amounts will be significant as well. Some are saying that we might get as much as three inches of moisture. If it all falls as snow, that would be a couple of feet on the level. With significant winds forecast, there could be some large drifts.

The grocery stores will be busy this afternoon and people will do a little stocking up, but most folks are pretty well prepared for spring blizzards. We have them most years and they usually don't last too long. As soon as it stops snowing, with a little digging out we're back to normal. We've lived here long enough to have our share of blizzard stories. We've cancelled church events for blizzards as late as May 11. Experience teaches us not to plan to go anywhere during the blizzard and to be ready to cancel events, if necessary. It also teaches us that a couple of days are probably as much disruption as we will have. With the blizzard forecast for a Monday, we'll have church as normal on the following Sunday.

Weather is one of the favorite topics in this corner of the world. It is a favorite topic everywhere, I guess. While the level of hardship that we endure is not much in comparison to the problems blizzards caused for those who lived on the plains in previous generations, our lives are still affected by severe weather.

For the most part, we live in a place where our weather events are easily survivable. We are too far away from the coasts to have experienced hurricanes. Tornadoes are rare around here and mostly occur off to the east of our town. People can't remember significant earthquakes. We do get blizzards and the hills are prone to flash flooding, but the flood of 1972 taught Rapid City some lessons that have made subsequent floods easier to endure. Our home is high enough in the hills that we don't feel vulnerable. We know that the right storm can result in an interruption of electrical service and a few blocked roads, but that is about as much problem as we will see and we're set up to deal with those things.

So our lives will be going on as usual today. We'll probably check supplies before going to bed tonight and make a late afternoon trip to the grocery store.

All of this is to say that it is a rather slow news day in Rapid City. Lent is progressing. Our church is journeying through the season with some significant moments in worship and some good opportunities to engage in service. The woodchucks had a splitting party and stacked about 5 cords of wood yesterday. Since we delivered about 35 cords last fall, the work represents about 1/7 of the wood we expect to need for delivery by fall. March is early for us to have such significant stores. And we had 19 people show up for the splitting party, which is a good crew. People were laughing and enjoying themselves. I even got a little bit of sunburn on my neck. Not bad for the weekend before the blizzard.

The rapid changes in the weather are one of the things that makes this such a wonderful place to live. There are people who haven't seen their lawns for months because of all of the snow. There are places where the snow comes and stays . . . and stays . . . and stays. But our weather brings us variety. I've been reading articles and thinking about my vegetable garden, even though I know I'm well over a month away from first planting. Warm weather gives us a taste of what is going to come. And spring blizzards give us the moisture that we need. Without them, summers can be long and conditions can get too dry and we spend the summer months with fire danger looming. This year we are in pretty good shape. The reservoirs are nearly full and our wettest time of the year is yet to come.

As the Australians say, "no worries, mate." In fact, I'm looking forward to the predicted snowfall. I hope we get plenty of it. I just want it to hold off today so all of the college students heading back to classes after spring break have safe travels and good roads.

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March 23, 2009 – All Ages



It was a busy day at church yesterday. The department of education had set up an all-ages event for people to decorate goose eggs. There were pots of glue, stickers, colored papers and all sorts of other decorations available. There was another table where brightly colored fabrics were being cut and ironed together as part of a banner-making project. The room was abuzz with conversation and happy sounds. Tables were filled with all ages, from the tiniest children to grandmothers and grandfathers.

Some folks just enjoyed rolls and coffee and watching the ones who were engaged in the crafts. Others were watching a slide show of pictures of a Woodchuck work day. Others were simply making time for conversation and enjoying an opportunity to talk. There seemed to be something for everyone.

It is the kind of event at which our church excels. People genuinely enjoy getting together and a little activity gives them a reason to remain after worship instead of rushing off to other activities.

We live in a time when people are prone to getting over scheduled. There are so many activities and events that they crowd together and sometimes it feels like there is no time at all. When we try to schedule events for youth, we find that their schedules are so busy that they often cannot remember what commitments they have made. They will think that they have some free time, but when the scheduled event occurs, they are forced to choose between several events because they are double and sometimes triple scheduled. Parents of younger youth spend a great deal of time driving back and forth

to events. Scheduling transportation for the many events and activities is a challenge for many families.

We hope that Sundays can offer a change of pace for busy families. While we want to offer enough programs to hold the interest of our people, we don't want to contribute to their sense of busyness and lack of time. Intergenerational events seem to offer something unique to the families of our congregation. Many of the events and activities in our community are targeted for a specific age group. The young children go to one event, older children to another and teens to a third. Adults are often divided up into peer groups with different events and activities targeting specific age groups. We also do age-level programming in the church, but there is something special about intergenerational events.

A young mother with two children was sitting at one of the tables. Her husband was working and unable to attend. Soon I noticed that her baby was being held by another member of our church. The baby was thriving on the attention from all of the elders as he was carried from one table to the next. The mother had two free hands to work on a project and time to share a little time with her daughter. And all of the events were taking place in the same room, with everyone close enough to be aware of what was going on. This particular family lives some distance from grandparents, aunts and uncles, so the church offers the only easily accessible community that has members of all ages who participate on a regular basis.

Of course a church does not exist for its members alone. We are not just another social club in a community with a few too many organizations. Our focus remains on worship and service. But part of the living of our faith includes being together in a variety of settings. Saturday was a work day that accomplished a great deal. Sunday was a day with a slower pace and different activities. Both are meaningful in the story of our church.

Today is a light day for programs at the church. The beautiful 80-degree day that we had yesterday is just a memory now. As our community prepares for a blizzard that may cause some temporary disruptions, we don't have events scheduled for the church until tomorrow evening. And even that event may have to be rescheduled if the blizzard is significant. Our life together is varied in terms of the kinds of activities and the pace of events. Hopefully there is a little something for everyone in our community.

I hope we never forget the importance of the events we plan for all ages. May we continue to be a church that brings together people who might not meet in their lives outside of the church.

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March 24, 2009 – Snow Day



So far the blizzard is playing out pretty much the way it was forecast. Rain turned to ice pellets which turned to snow around noon yesterday. There have been significant winds and the snow continues to fall. It is hard to determine the exact amount of snowfall because it is blowing and drifting, but there must be several inches. The storm should begin to play out later this morning and it is possible that we will be able to resume many of our activities by late afternoon or evening. After checking with other institutions we've decided to reschedule all of the events scheduled for the church for today. There is nothing on our schedule that is worth having people risk exposure to the elements.

So we have a snow day. That means that there will be a little more time for some tasks around the house. With the deadline for filing income tax looming, I'll probably invest my extra time in catching up with some record keeping and getting the mileage from our vehicles entered into the computer for the annual report.

There will be the challenge of snow removal - at least from the driveway. Usually that is not much of a problem. I am used to having my driveway cleared before the county comes by with the snowplows on the streets, but with my recent back injury, I won't be doing any shoveling and I'll have to be careful with the snow blower. But we've got plenty of healthy adults and some good neighbors. There will be no reason to over exert or take any chances.

Blizzards don't really disrupt our lives all that much, but they do provide a topic for conversation all around town. Last night, I was checking out which businesses and

institutions were closing as we made decisions about church activities. The list is impressive. And some are going to have to make significant adjustments. Rapid City area schools already were scheduled to run much later than usual due to previous snow days. Now they will be adding at least two more days to their schedule. This will affect the planning of vacation Bible school in some churches and the planning of family vacations. It also will have an effect on when teens become available for summer employment - a significant factor in the tourist industry.

The church had a light schedule early this week, so there won't be too much disruption. The computer and the telephone system make it easy to get out the word about church activities. We may delay the printing of our monthly newsletter because of the decrease in staff time, but we won't make that decision until tomorrow at the earliest.

In a way, I appreciate the change of pace. Staying home seems like a treat in the midst of a busy schedule. There are plenty of things to do and I am able to do much of my work from home, so I won't fall too far behind. I have no big trips planned, and no one who is traveling in so the airport closure is no problem. We no longer have children in school, so the impact of the change in the school schedule is minimal. The caregivers who normally come to work with my mother will be able to stay home and we can provide the care because we will be staying home as well.

From another perspective, I appreciate the reminder that we are not in control of this world. With all of our machines and 4-wheel drive vehicles, we still have plenty of limitations. The forces of nature are still significant and need to be respected. Our lives, priorities, and activities are not the center of the universe. It is good to be humbled by the weather from time to time. It helps us to regain perspective.

So, friends, stay inside and stay warm. Be careful when the time comes to move the snow. It's going to melt soon enough anyway. And we'll get back to our busy lives. Enjoy the break in the schedule for what it is: a blessing.

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March 25, 2009 – Fargo



The Red River begins at Wahpeton, North Dakota, where the Otter Tail and Sioux Rivers flow together. From there, the river runs straight north, forming the border of North Dakota and Minnesota. After crossing the Canadian border, it flows into Lake Winnipeg. It was a thoroughfare for fur traders and a gathering place for Metis people in Canada. The Red River Colony, formed where the Assiniboine and Red Rivers flow together, grew into the modern city of Winnipeg. There are three urban areas along the river, Fargo and Grand Forks, North Dakota and Winnipeg.

The river flows north on a relatively flat plain. That means that the ice breaks up stream while the river is still clogged with ice. The terms “up” and “down” are often confused because of the direction of the river’s flow, but the problem is simple. The ice blocks the flow of the river and the water spreads out. This has been happening for eons, long before human settlement. In fact the region is the site of a major paleoflood study, where the effects of flooding on the shape of the land can be determined by excavations and other archeological techniques.

There is some flooding every year. But the locals talk of three really big floods: 1826, 1950, and 1997. Now the residents of Fargo are wondering if 2009 will be added to that list. The exact location of the flooding can vary, depending on temperatures and the condition of the ice down river. The 1950 flood caused the most damage in the city of Winnipeg. In 1997, most of the estimated $3.5 billion in damages was focused in the Grand Forks area, though several other towns were also evacuated.

There is a flood control system in place on the river. A series of levees and dikes built in the 1950's constituted the largest earthmoving project of its time. Although there were detractors and some derision of the project, it is estimated that the flood control plan has resulted in savings of tens of billions of dollars.

Today attention is focused on Fargo. As many as 10,000 volunteers have been working virtually around the clock since Sunday to place sandbags along the river. Students from North Dakota State University and The University of North Dakota will have a third day off from classes today to assist in the completion of sandbagging. The two schools, in Fargo and Grand Forks, have a history of rivalry, but students are working side by side on a common cause this week. The flooding of 1997 is recent enough to spark emotions and memories among those who are working the flood lines this year.

Last night the river was flowing at 32 feet - 14 feet above flood stage. In 1997, the river crested at 39.57 feet, nearing the record of a hundred years earlier when the crest was 41.1 feet. The levees only rise to 38 feet, so anything over that means water where no one wants it to flow. Of course there are a lot more people, a lot more homes and a lot more development these days than in 1897. Officials say conditions are right this year to set a new record - both in the river's level and in the potential damage.

Today will be a day to watch and wait. In fact it will be a tense week for North Dakota's largest city. Nearly 100,000 people call Fargo home and officials say the crest of the flooding will probably come on Friday or Saturday. And on the Red River, the floods linger. Once the crest has come, it could be days before the water levels subside significantly.

While they wait, residents and volunteers from out of the area are filling sandbags. Over a million sand bags have been filled in a massive effort at the Fargo dome since Saturday and another million will be filled and in place by the end of the week.

Even the largest of our human efforts are small in comparison with the forces of nature. We have some ability to divert flood waters, but we cannot control the flooding itself. Property can be protected in many instances, but the damage will be real. Right now the extent of the damage is unknown, just as the actual level of water at the crest of the flood is unknown. It will be a tense week in Fargo, with people thinking and talking about little else. The municipal courts have suspended trials so that all officers are free to assist with emergencies. Many other institutions have interrupted or altered their business to focus on the flood.

The weather can also be a big factor. Additional precipitation anywhere in the river basin is a concern and colder temperatures can increase the risks of exposure.

At this point there are enough volunteers in the area. Additional people simply create additional problems at this point. So we will watch and wait from a distance. We've good

good communication with our friends in the area and right now it appears that everyone is safe. There may be a need for volunteers to help with clean up and recovery after the waters have subsided. Church World Service has moved flood relief kits into the area so that they will be ready when needed.

The people of Fargo and Grand Forks and Winnipeg and the other towns along the river are in our prayers this week. They aren't the only ones who are watching and waiting.

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March 26, 2009 – Changes



Somehow the normal course of life has taken me from being a young pastor to being one of the "old guard." I am the second-longest serving pastor in my association and among the longest-serving pastors in the conference. I get the mailings from the Pension Boards inviting me to pre-retirement seminars. I am older than the parents of the youth in our church. The ways in which I have changed have resulted in some changes in youth ministry. There was a time when my age was between that of the youth and their parents, when I was an interpreter of youth culture and an advocate for the youth in the church. These days I am outside of that culture in many ways, and there are voices who are more effective in advocating for youth and youth ministries than mine. I haven't lost my passion for youth and ministries with youth in the church. I haven't lost my faith in outdoor ministries and camping programs. I haven't lost my vision of youth as leaders in the church. But I have learned that there are times when other voices need to be heard. I have realized that there are times when I should not attempt to speak for others, but rather to listen to them. I have discovered techniques for enabling young people to assume leadership in the church.

But I am not the only one who has changed. The youth who were active in my first church are in their forties now. They are the parents of teens themselves. A surprising (and disappointing) number of them are no longer active in their churches. They have experienced some incredible journeys and more than a few have become community leaders and quite a few maintain regular contact with me. But many have drifted away from regular church participation, their lives swallowed up in a host of other events and activities.

Youth culture has shifted as well. There are plenty of elements that are familiar: energy, enthusiasm, experimentation, a willingness to listen to different voices and different music, an exploration of the world beyond the arenas of their parents' lives, a passion and energy for change, a genuine concern for one another and energy for outreach to those who have need. There is a sense of impatience and invulnerability, strength and passion that are often untested, limits that have not yet been discovered and appetites that exceed capabilities. But there are also changes in youth culture that surprise me and sometimes are a cause of concern.

In general, the lives of youth are more heavily programmed than they were a few decades ago. There are more activities and more opportunities for participation, but almost all of their time is consumed in activities and events that are planned and led by adults. There is less free time for the development of their own ideas and activities and more demands to meet the expectations of adults. The result is what looks, from the outside, like a decrease in freedom. The range of choices is much wider: there are more sports, more school activities, more clubs. But the possibilities for genuine leadership by youth are fewer. They are encouraged to fill offices in structures inherited from previous generations, assume roles that have been defined by adult leaders, and follow programs that are led by others.

Youth in today's world are more tired than we were. It is not that we didn't have some late nights - we did. It is not that we weren't pushed to get up and get going in the morning - we were. But there is a relentlessness to the schedules endured by most of the youth in our congregation that moves them from one event to the next with little time off. I suspect that there is more free time in my schedule than in that of many youth in our church.

At the beginning of my career, a large part of youth ministry was presence. I made sure that there were set times and locations where the youth knew that I would be present. They felt free to drop in and discuss the things that were going on in their lives. Many youth activities were barely programs. We would sit and talk. I would drop by a local fast food restaurant and we would share a snack and a few stories. Youth don't have time to drop by any more. There has to be a specific program with a precise starting and ending time in order for them to show up. And the evidence that they are used to being managed is everywhere. Ask a youth a simple question about her or his schedule and it is likely that she or he doesn't know what will be happening a week from today. Increasingly youth will promise to be present and participate in an activity only to find out later that they had a previous commitment. In many cases, there is a parent or another adult who is managing the schedule. In other cases, the youth are so used to being double-scheduled that they simply make a decision on the spot as to which activity will garner their attention. Planners of youth programs devise increasingly severe consequences for missing activities. The motivation to participate comes from

outside of the youth in the form of punishments rather than from inside the youth in the form of commitment.

Part of this reality is pure sociology. Our nation is aging. Families are smaller. There are fewer youth in our schools and fewer youth in our communities. Adults have expectations that the number of programs and events will increase. More programs with fewer youth means that youth have less of themselves to give to any specific program or activity. Part of the reality is that the lives of our youth reflect the lives of their parents. Adults are more busy. Our lives are more programmed with fewer moments of free time. Citizens of the United States are working more hours and are more over-extended than at any other time in our history. The majority of our children are raised in households where all of the adults work outside of the home. Busy parents demand that their children be busy as well.

I don't want the world to stay the same. I don't want the youth of today to grow up in my culture. The unique moment of history in which I made the transition from childhood to adult was shaped in part by the unique confluence of the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam war. I do not want the lives of the current generation to be shaped by assignations of leaders, erosion of trust in government, and violence in the streets. I do not want history to rewind. Today's youth face wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and wars continue to consume the lives of young adults. Today's youth face an uncertain job market that is in many ways far more challenging than our experience. Each generation faces its own time in history. Each is shaped by factors that are far larger than an individual's experience.

When I pray for the youth of our community, I pray that they will find time for solitude and silence. I pray that they will discover their own unique vocation and experience genuine freedom of choice in the direction of their lives. I pray that they will listen to the voice of God that calls them.

Part of growing older is learning to trust. I now know that the future of today's youth does not hinge on my intentions and actions. I now know that I need to trust the intelligence, creativity, compassion and wisdom of a new generation.

I know that things will not stay the same. Change is inevitable. May I learn graciousness as I participate in the lives of yet another generation of youth and young adults.

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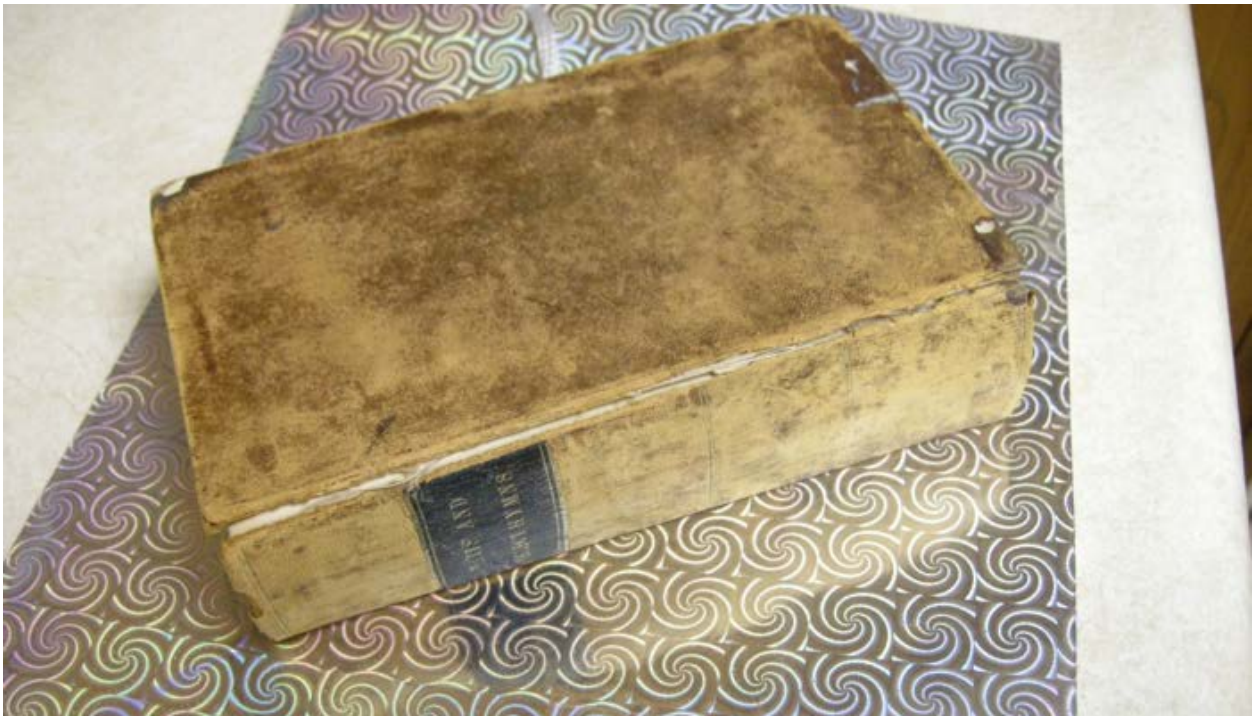
March 27, 2009 – A Trust



Isaac Watts has been called the father of English Hymnody. He was a prolific writer of hymns, many of which are in use today. Many contemporary Christians, even if they do not know his name, are familiar with hymns such as “Joy to the world!” “Jesus shall reign where’er the sun,” “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” and “When I survey the wondrous cross.” It is said that he wrote over 750 hymns. In addition to his hymns, he was a prolific writer of essays on theological themes.

Isaac Watts lived from 1674 to 1748. He was the son of a very independent thinker. His father, who also was named Isaac Watts was jailed at least twice for controversial thoughts. The son received a formal education and became a pastor of a large independent chapel in London and became involved in the education of pastors. At the time of his life, Watts was more ecumenical than was common. His interest was in promoting faith, education and scholarship rather than preaching any particular doctrine.

Protestants at the time most often sang only the Psalms in worship. John Calvin had initiated the practice of Psalm singing by creating vernacular translations of the Psalms. Watts’ hymns were revolutionary for the time in the fact that they were based not just on Hebrew Scriptures but on the wider experience of Christians and opened the door to the creation of new poetry. The revolution in hymnody that Watts initiated set of a flood of new poetry and hymns for the church. His hymns reflect a personal spirituality that is emotionally captivating to singers centuries after he wrote the words.

Watts was drawn to the independent spirit of American Congregationalists and developed a special relationship with Yale University, which was founded by Congregationalists. At his death all of his personal papers and original works were donated to Yale, which continues to be the primary archive of his work.

A century after Watts' death, Samuel Worcester, a professor at Amherst College and pastor of the Tabernacle Church in Salem, Mass., published a collection of hymns of Isaac Watts. The book was an attempt to collect all of the hymns of Isaac Watts and give instructions for their singing. It is not a complete collection but contains nearly 400 of Watts' hymns along with a selection of hymns by others. The book contains no notes, only text, but includes the names and composers of tunes for the poems. It also contains translations of the Psalms by Watts, set in meters that make them more easily sung by users of the English language. Originally printed in 1834, they hymnal went through several different printings before 1850. The collection is considered to be a classic and most copies are in the hands of museums and private collectors.

Last night, following our mid-week Lenten service, I went into my office and discovered a bright silver gift bag. Inside was a copy of the Scottish Psalter from the 1920's. The Scottish Psalter has a unique design, with the pages split. The top pages contain the tunes and the bottom pages the psalms. The tunes and psalms can be selected independently, so that the same psalm can be sung to many different tunes and the singer can see both the tune and words at the same time.

Also inside the same bag was a copy of the 1847 printing of Samuel Worcester's collection of Isaac Watts' hymns. I had to force my hands to stop shaking as I paged through the book looking at the familiar hymns. Here, in my own hands, was an incredible piece of the history of the hymns we sing in worship each week. The hymnal was an extremely gracious gift from faithful members of our congregation. And I recognized immediately that it is not something that I can possess, but rather a trust that has been placed in my hands to treasure and to pass on to future generations. The leather-bound book, now more than 160 years old should be preserved, treasured and passed on.

But it should also be shared. Isaac Watts did not write his hymns to reside in some carefully hermetically-sealed document storage area of a museum. He wrote his hymns to inspire faith and teach theology. He believed in the power of education and the value of careful study and precise use of language to express faith. He understood that the gifts of God that were recognized by previous generations should be used, sung, enjoyed and understood in the light of the experience of the current generation.

Isaac Watts' hymns transcend time. When we sing them, there is no separation between us and a man who died two centuries before our birth. Our emotions are engaged and our faith is expressed in a fashion that is timeless.

From all that dwell below the skies
Let the Creator's praise arise;
Let the Redeemer's name be sung
Through every land, by every tongue.

It will take careful prayer and discernment to discover the best ways to display, share and pass on this treasure of song. It is a trust that I do not take lightly.

Deeper than the trust of a particular book that temporarily resides in my study is the trust that we have received in the hymns of Isaac Watts. An independent and creative thinker, Watts did not want any generation of Christians to be bound by the dusty traditions of the past, but to find new ways of expression of faith. His hymns were to be sung and enjoyed, but also to inspire new generations to write their own hymns. His love of education and intellectual honesty would have led him to reject hymns that are theologically inconsistent of spiritually shallow, but he would support the writing of new hymns for each new generation. Perhaps his hymnal can serve as inspiration and a reminder that we are called not just to sing the old, old, songs, but also to create new songs with the same commitment to integrity in the expression of faith that mark his hymns.

It is a trust worthy of the best of our thoughts.

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March 28, 2009 – Not Quite a Luddite



The term luddite comes from a movement of English textile workers at he beginning of the industrial revolution who protested changes in the textile movement by engaging in sabotage of mechanized looms. There is considerable disagreement among historians as to whether the resistance of the luddites was to the technology of the changes or to the economics of the changes, but in contemporary usage, the term luddite is used to refer to someone who resists the use of modern technology. There is often a bit of derision in the term. I have heard it used, on several occasions to refer to people who resist the use of computers and even specific aspects of computer technology.

Recently someone used the term, jokingly, to refer to my reluctance to spend much time on social networking sites, such as facebook. The term doesn't fit if one compares it to the historical meaning. I have never destroyed a computer, and I often have been the first to introduce technological devices to my setting. I carry a laptop computer with me almost everywhere I go and I use a computer for all of my writing, of which there is a considerable amount. My cell phone doubles as a personal digital assistant and I keep all of my calendars and addresses on the Internet and access them through a variety of different devices, depending on where I am. I have a digital camera and keep about 12,000 images on my computer and about double that amount on my backup hard drive.

But I have seen a lot of changes in the technology of communication. And I am reluctant about some of the changes. Susan and I were married during the summer before our senior year of college. The first five years of our marriage, we were both full-time

students. And for all of that time and for most of our first parish, all of our writing was done on the Olympia portable typewriter that I had received as a gift from my parents as I headed off to college. Actually, it was the typewriter that my sister had received a year earlier. We swapped because I preferred the smaller “pica” type. That typewriter contributed to two bachelors degrees, two masters, a doctorate and nearly seven years of sermons.

Our first computer was purchased about eight years into our career as pastors and there has been a stream of increasingly sophisticated machines in the intervening years. We helped one church purchase its first computers and another set up its first network.

Often the technology serves us and the church well. But there have been days of frustration. When I went to seminary, I never expected that I would become the primary person responsible for solving computer problems. I do most of the software installation, make many of the decisions about the purchase of software and hardware, serve as the network administrator for our church, and am the primary “go to” person in our organization when things don’t work. And when things don’t work the institution can grind to a halt. We can’t produce worship bulletins without functioning computers and a networked printer. Our newsletter appears on the monitors of at least three different computers before it is distributed. Members can now opt out of the printed version and read the newsletter online. So when computers aren’t functioning properly it is a crisis and we set aside other work to get things going.

Regular readers of this blog will notice that it was very late yesterday and it is going to be late today as well. There is a problem, most likely in our remote server, that has required us to republish large amounts of the web site. A minor change, such as updating the blog, requires that we re-post every interconnected element of four different web sites. This is a time-consuming process and I don’t yet know for sure if the problem is in my machine or the server. It mimics a problem that occurred at our last software update. The technical support people were suspicious of my software installation, but it turned out to be a problem on their end, not mine, They solved it and life went back to normal. I haven’t even called them this time because the problem is so similar that I believe that there must be many others experiencing the same situation and hopefully the problem will be gone in a few days.

In the meantime it is frustrating. I don’t have too many readers, and most of them don’t read at the same time each day, so there are only a few who notice that the blog isn’t there when they look for it, but it is a part of my daily routine. Most days the blog is done and out of my consciousness by 5:30 a.m. and I am on with other activities. Yesterday, I spent much of the morning checking to see how the process of web publishing was going. Today has started out with the same frustration. If the problem persists tomorrow the blog just won’t get posted. It won’t be the first time that there was a suspension in

publishing the blog. I'll keep writing and one of these days the blog will appear on a regular basis.

At least I have the sense to walk away from the technical frustrations for worship and, I hope, for the needs of the people of my church. Technology is neither good nor bad. It is a tool. And not our primary vocation. I use the computer because a minister is in the communication business. Communicating with others is an important part of what i do. My experience has taught me that there will be many more changes in the machines that we use to communicate.

I still have that portable typewriter. It is still in functioning condition, but the ribbon has dried out over the years and I have no idea where to find a new ribbon. On the other hand a Google search for "Olympia typewriter ribbons" revealed over 23,000 sites and the first ten all claim to be sources for the ribbons. It might not be a problem to continue using a typewriter as long as one has access to the internet.

As I write this, my publishing attempt has failed again. Sigh . . . it could be another frustrating day. On the other hand, it could be that I'll just take the frustrations with the computer as an excuse to spend less time with the machine today.

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March 29, 2009 - Paddler's Dream



Yesterday was another day of frustration with web publishing. I know that the problems will soon be solved, but the instant information world of the Internet doesn't exactly lend it self to patience. A couple of days of disruption is significant. Of course, I haven't been spending all of my time just trying to publish my blog. I've had plenty of other things to do and just give the web publishing an attempt from time to time as I go about other duties and activities.

At some point during the frustration, I changed the photograph on my computer's desktop. I change that photo frequently, preferring to select a single photo over setting up a slide show. The current image is a picture that Susan took of me paddling in the Bay of Fundy in the summer of 2007. The trip was a wonderful adventure and we have great memories of the places we went and the things we did.

The little wood strip kayak is the most traveled of my boats. It has been in the ocean off of the east and west costs of Canada and the United States, in the waters of a couple of the great lakes, down the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers, and a lot of lakes and puddles along the way. It isn't the fastest of my boats, not even the fastest of my kayaks, but it is very sturdy and easy to transport. I've scratched it up on the rocks and a little sanding and a couple of coats of varnish later it looks pretty good. Over the years I've had a couple of different seats and foot pedal systems in the boat and it remains easy to repair and modify.

Of course, it isn't really the boat that makes the adventure. Having a boat is wonderful, because it grants access to the water. A kayak is a good way to explore the water because one sits low, right on the surface of the water and the boat is easily maneuverable and safe and warm to paddle. This particular boat isn't the right vessel for stormy weather, but staying close to shore affords the possibility of heading for dry land when storms arise.

The ice is breaking up in the lakes in the hills, but it isn't exactly paddling weather right now. Forecasters are calling for another blizzard to hit our area sometime in the next twenty-four hours and we can have our share of spring storms for another month.

It is a good time for dreaming.

Susan and I have been planning a trip for this summer. The General Synod of the United Church of Christ will be held in Grand Rapids, Michigan this year. We've decided that it is a good opportunity to take a couple of weeks of our vacation around Synod to drive around Lake Superior. Our plan is to drive the southern shore from Duluth to Sault Ste Marie, before Synod and then return to Sault Ste Marie and drive around the north shore after the meeting. Because the trip will occur during the height of tourist season, we will need campground reservations and so have been selecting campgrounds and making our reservations.

It provides a wonderful diversion from the everyday.

We all need to have a few dreams about the future. At our particular age and stage in life, planning a trip is just such an adventure. We used to be more able to just take off and travel as we saw fit. Vacations were sometimes occasions for wandering without too much set agenda. But with our responsibilities for our parents and work and other things, we now need to carefully plan our times away from home and make sure that we have others who can carry some of our responsibilities in order for us to be able to travel.

What we are discovering is that he planning can be a lot of fun. It gives us a goal toward which to work and the work of planning provides pleasant interruptions for our daily activities. Looking at a few web sites, checking the mileage, making note of the things we want to do and see - each builds our anticipation for the trip.

So if you notice that I'm a bit distracted at times, it's just a paddler's dream. One of the lucky things in my life is that when I wanted my first canoe, I couldn't afford to buy one. So I decided to build one. The process of building that first canoe took most of a winter, and I spent far more time thinking, planning, dreaming and building than I did paddling. Now, years later, I suppose that the number of hours I have spent building boats is about equal to the number of hours I have spent paddling them. I have literally gained double the entertainment and recreation of having purchased boats.

I resisted the urge to get out the kayak to put a fresh coat of varnish on it yesterday. I know that there is a storm coming and I need the space in the garage for other things right now. But it won't be long before I will be checking out equipment and heading to the lake for a few test paddles to make sure we're ready for our trip.

In the meantime, I've got the picture on my computer as an inspiration for the daily work that needs to be done right now. I enjoy the work that I do day to day, but it's fun to keep a paddler's dream in the back of my head as the days go by.

May you discover your dreams as well.

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March 30, 2009 – Alone on the Water



Row for Hope photograph. www.rowforhope.com.

Paul Ridley is only 25 years old, but he has a few stories to tell. He is only the third American and the youngest ever to row across the Atlantic ocean. Yes, he rowed. No sail, no motor, no way to move the boat except his own muscles. And he did it alone. He was on the ocean alone for eighty-eight days, averaging 12 hours per day of rowing. His little boat carried all of the food and water that he needed for the crossing. He endured seasickness, salt sores and more.

But he has done it. He is back on dry land.

He started training about a year ago, rowing up to 10 hours a day, every day. The boat is a custom built vessel, made just for this journey. It is 19 ft. 4 inches in length with a beam of 5 ft. 4 inches, and weighs about 400 pounds empty It is ballasted to be self-righting in heavy seas, and has a solar-powered electrical system to provide for a gps navigation system, a laptop computer and a satellite phone. Paul and his sister spent $60,000 of their own savings to pay for the boat. Although he had constant communications throughout the trip, there was no chase vessel or rescue boat anywhere near him during the trip.

He named his boat Liv, which is Norwegian for life. Translated in an older norse dialect, the word can also mean protection or defense.

After a few delays, Paul set off from the Canary Islands on January 1. He landed on the Island of Antigua yesterday afternoon, having rowed nearly 3,000 miles. It is no small feat for anyone.

He has crossed the ocean and reached land, but he has not reached his goal. The goal is to raise $500,000 for cancer research while fulfilling his own dream. He still has to raise $400,000 to reach his dream. It is hoped that fund-raising can continue through his web site www.rowforhope.com and through opportunities to speak about his adventure.

Paul and Joy Ridley lost their mother, Katherine, to skin cancer in 2001. It was deepest kind of grief for the two teens. Paul found that he could work through some of his grief through the physical activity of rowing. At some point the dream began to form in his mind. He would combine his love of rowing with his desires to change the world. He developed a partnership with the Yale Cancer Center to fund cutting-edge cancer research and Row for Hope was born. The choice of cancer research as the focus of the fund-raising was simple. The same year that Paul's mother died from cancer, his father was diagnosed with Prostrate Cancer, which has been successfully treated. His father is now cancer-free, but the family has been forever changed by the disease.

There have been more than a few obstacles to overcome. But he has done it. The reception in Antigua was incredible yesterday. The harbor was swarming with boats and a really big crowd came out to see the young man who rowed across the Atlantic. His hands are blistered and his seat was sore, but there was a sense of accomplishment that will never leave him.

After a few days off to rest and recover, Paul and his sister Joy will be hard a work. They hope to keep the Row for Hope organization functioning as a support for other athletes who want to take on big adventures in support of cancer research. "We want to help people use their big dreams to create big change in the fight against cancer." A quote from Hubert Humphrey has been one of the inspirations for Paul as he tackled the Atlantic alone: "Oh, my friend, it's not what they take away from you that counts - its what you do with what you have left."

Paul and Joy lost a lot when their mother died. What they have done with what they have left has been truly remarkable. It is an illustration of the power and energy of youth. But it is also an illustration of the power an energy of a dream. And sometimes, in this life, we have to be able to dream really big and then work really hard to accomplish our dreams. When someone asks, "what difference can one person make?" we will all have the story of Paul's amazing row to tell.

Skeptic will ask, "Why row across an ocean that has been successfully crossed by so many in so many different ways?" "Why not just buy a plane ticket and fly across?" There may be no way to explain Paul's adventure to those who see the journey only in terms of transportation. The triumph was hardly a nautical breakthrough. It is, however,

a triumph of the human spirit. One man, alone against the ocean and the weather. One man overcoming all of the odds. One man taking time out of the normal activities of life and job to accomplish a really big goal.

And one man did it. He was alone on the water. But he has never been truly alone. His sister has supported him all of the way. He has a team of people who have been inspired by his dream and who have invested in its success. The celebration in Antigua last night was the expression of the joy of a whole community of people.

And for those of us who take to the water in tiny boats with oars and paddles, Paul Ridley is an inspiration. You don't have to have the biggest, most powerful, most expensive boat in the world in order to travel across the water. A big dream, careful planning, attention to detail, and preparation for survival can take a person a long way. In Paul's case, nearly 3,000 miles across the sea.

Congratulations Paul! May you continue to dream big. An may your dreams continue to inspire others!

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March 31, 2009 – Digging Out



Well, it appears that the snow is letting up and that our second spring blizzard is now mostly over. It is hard to compare, but it seems like we had less wind and a bit more snow than a week ago. The county plows are already out on the roads and it won't be long before the neighborhood is full of snowblowers and 4-wheelers plowing out driveways. It doesn't take us long to get back to normal, which is a good thing because the forecast calls for more snow by the end of the week. Folks are a bit weary of the snow, but reluctant to complain. The years of drought are too recent and the memories of dry times too fresh for us to complain. We've been praying for a wet spring and now we have one.

And it is easy to find folks who have more severe weather challenges than ours. Although the flood waters are receding in Fargo, they are getting hammered by a spring blizzard and the additional snow in the floodplain means that the river will be even slower to go down and the sandbags will become even more saturated and there will be additional problems.

The snowfall has been even greater in the northern hills where snow loads are getting significant. Although most buildings are designed to take the snow, there are always a few problems that arise when the snow is especially heavy.

So, all in all, we don't have it too bad.

Probably the biggest issue around here has to do with the things that get delayed because of the weather. Area schools have had a lot of snow days. Rapid City schools are scheduled to go through June 10, now - a very late date in tourist country. Our office will need to get out a newsletter and prepare for Palm Sunday and holy week with a week that is at least a day shorter because of the snowfall. The work that needs to be done remains the same, there is just less time to get it done. And we're still up in the air about some of the activities at the church. There is a meeting scheduled for this week that was rescheduled last week due to the blizzard. If we don't hold it this evening, it is hard to tell when we will get around to having the meeting.

The weather creates additional problems for folk who live on area ranches. There are still a few places that are calving and this weather can be lethal to newborn calves. Ranchers need to get out regardless of the weather to get feed to the animals and to check on those ready to have their calves. The more remote the ranch, the longer it takes for the county snowplows to reach their roads. Equipment is more likely to experience breakdowns and other maintenance problems with the heavy snow.

Event though we grumble a bit and keep hoping that the next storm will come as rain instead of snow, there is a part of us that enjoys a snow day. We could have gotten out most of yesterday, but we stayed home in part because we didn't have anything that couldn't be delayed and we had plenty of work to do here at home. The date of Easter this year comes very close to the deadline for filing income tax returns, so the work load in our personal lives is rising at the same time as the work load at the church is rising. I got a lot of our financial records organized yesterday by having an uninterrupted day at home. I probably wouldn't have had such a focused day of work had I been able to get out, run errands and the like. When you live ten miles from town, just a trip to town can take up quite a bit of time.

Things will be slow getting going this morning. With a tender back, I need to be careful. I can walk behind my snow blower, but I'm not up to lifting snow with a shovel quite yet. Fortunately there are plenty of people to help and we'll have things cleared soon enough. And some of the snow will be left to melt.

Just before last week's storm, I got out and seeded an area of ground in our yard where we had some dirt work done last fall. My timing should be great. The snow will keep the ground moist as the temperatures rise and the seeds should germinate as soon as we get a few sunny days. That is one of the joys of spring blizzards. The melting begins almost as soon as the snowfall ends. Temperatures really aren't all that cold and a little sunshine will have the snow turning liquid quickly. The process of snowing and melting releases the moisture at rates that allow the earth to absorb the water. It is good for the health of the forest and good for the renewal of the reservoirs. Most of our area reservoirs will be filled to capacity sometime this spring. And the recovery of the bigger water systems, such as the Missouri reservoirs is occurring as well.

We're doing just fine and we'll be out and about today with a minimum of disruption. It probably isn't the last blizzard of the spring, but we can hope. So be careful out there. The roads and walks are slippery and we don't want anyone to get hurt. And if you end up feeling a bit wet and chilly, come in and warm up, but try to remember the feeling. Sometime in the middle of August, the memory of a spring blizzard will seem inviting.

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April 1, 2009 – Growing Bananas



Regular readers of this blog will remember that I have written on a couple of occasions about the problems of bananas in our grocery stores. The American taste for bananas and our demand that they be constantly available at reasonable prices has resulted in no small amount of chaos and suffering around the world. In semi-tropical areas the growth of the banana industry has threatened the self-sufficiency of local family farming operations. The political involvement of large word banana corporations has resulted in unjust governments in several different places around the world. And bananas, with the huge distances they travel consume vast amounts of petroleum, making them a poor choice for food when considering global warming. It is far too easy for those of us who live in the United States to walk into a supermarket and purchase a banana without thinking of the global impact and human suffering that comes from that decision.

As we try to purchase more food that is produced locally and to lower our impact on the world, bananas have become a symbol of what is wrong with the current food distribution system.

But bananas taste good. And they are an excellent source of potassium. And we have become addicted to their flavor.

As a result, we have been looking into ways to produce bananas locally. Around the region, the Black Hills are sometimes referred to as the banana belt of South Dakota because of our relatively mild weather compared to the surrounding country. And our home has excellent southern and eastern exposure. The experiment began with a

single banana tree in the kitchen window of our basement apartment. When we started it, we were pretty inexperienced in growing such plants. Two problems were apparent early in the experiment: bananas take a lot of water, and they are really big plants. The window was soon too small for the rapidly-growing tree. Long before there was any sign of fruit production, we found ourselves needing to place the plant on the floor. Soon a passage way from the basement to the first-floor hallway had to be constructed. Before much longer, we had to punch through the second floor hallway and into the attic of our home. The normal kitchen window had to be replaced with a larger window and then a series of windows that stretch from the peak of the roof to the basement along the eastern side of the house.

The resulting increase in passive solar heat in the home was good for our banana plants (there were several by this time), but the demand for water raised the humidity throughout the entire house. Carpets had to be replaced with laminate flooring, which in turn gave way to industrial rubber floor mats. The project began to demand more and more of the living space in our home.

Our friends Marc and Sharyl Stewart had gotten into keeping tropical birds, first as pets, then as a small side business. They had converted a room in their basement into an aviary and bird breeding area. Somehow it became natural for us to care for their birds when they traveled and they cared for our banana trees. Then one day it occurred to us that perhaps it would be easier for us to care for their birds in our home. It was a good idea in the beginning, but it was nearly impossible to catch the birds in the increasingly lush tropical forest that by then was dominating over half of our home. We never did get all of the birds rounded up and now we have a substantial population of birds who live in the trees in our home. The droppings from the birds seem to encourage growth in the banana trees and the system seems to be working in a limited way.

The snakes started out as a joke. A friend, who works at Reptile Gardens, was trying to make a point about how our banana trees had taken over our lives. He thought it was ridiculous that we had gotten rid of our bedroom furniture and taken to sleeping in hammocks hung between the banana trees. So one night when we invited them over for dinner, he brought a couple of snakes from reptile gardens. You can imagine what happened. We never did find the snakes. They disappeared into the undergrowth around the banana trees. We see them from time to time, but none of us are sure that there are just two snakes out there. For the most part they don't bother us. We used to wonder about what they were eating, but the birds seem to be producing enough eggs to sustain the snakes.

But the bottom line is that we have yet to harvest any bananas from our little home experiment. There are a couple of trees with clusters of the fruit, but it grows way up high, near the ridge of the roof and we aren't sure how we would get up there to pick the bananas. And with my recent back injury, I'm not sure that I could climb the trees anyway. I'm a rather large person and the trees seem a bit spindly to hold me.

The logical solution, it seems to us, is to import monkeys to pick the bananas. There are several significant problems with importing monkey from outside of the United States. The USDA has several regulations regarding the quarantining of the animals and there are a lot of veterinarian procedures, including inoculations, which have to be performed. None of the veterinarians in our area have any experience with monkeys. We've had some internet contact with zoos around the Untied States and there are some possible leads there but they seem to be more interested in disposing of problem individuals than in providing a breeding pair for our little home tropical forest.

All this and still no bananas.

So far the only harvest from our little home garden worthy of note is that we have produced enough palm branches that we won't have to be using florist palms as we celebrate Palm Sunday in our church this Sunday. Or palm branches are quite a bit bigger than the usual and they are not all even and regular, but they should suffice and may be closer to the palms that were strewn on the road as Jesus entered Jerusalem than the tiny branches that we are used to waving in church.

As a result, we don't know if our little experiment will result in any home-grown bananas. But the tropical bird sales are supporting the addition of new windows to the house. And it seems that by next year most of the mainline congregations in our city will be using palms from our home. Not having to import palms from distant locations will save money and energy, so that is a good thing, I guess.

I'm still wishing I had a banana to eat. Ah well, it is only the first of April. So I'll just wish you happy April Fool's day and get on with my breakfast.

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April 2, 2009 – In London



PA Photos/Landau

Most of us know the Mother Goose Rhyme:

1. Pussy-cat, pusssy-cat, where have you been?
2. “I’ve been to London to look at the queen.”
3. Pussy-cat, pussy cat, what did you there?
4. “I frightened a little mouse under the chair.”

President and First Lady Obama have gone to London and they did get a look at the queen. The G-20 summit is being held in London and the leaders of what are reported to be the 20 largest economies of the globe have about four hours of meetings today to discuss financial policy and world economics. I suspect that the meeting is a series of rather long and sometimes boring speeches, but I would never be invited to such a meeting, so I’ll never know for sure. It is clear the the dynamics of world economies are shifting and that financial decisions made in distant places have an effect on the economics that touch our everyday lives such as the price of food and clothing. There will be a lot of words said and a lot of pressure put on translators for accuracy in their craft. In the end, the effect of such a meeting is not measured in the number of words said, but in the concepts truly communicated and the ideas truly shared.

Looking at the headlines of the major news organizations around the world, it might be difficult to discern that there is a financial summit taking place. There are lots of protestors and there has been some significant property damage, primarily to bank lobbies. British bankers have been advised to “dress down” so that they might not be so

easily targeted by protestors. BBC world new is reporting 88 arrests of protestors in the last couple of days.

But the real news that is garnering the headlines around the world has to do with Michelle Obama. It seems that she has a schedule of appearances and meetings and is constantly surrounded by the press. She is making a big splash in London. Apparently she changes her clothes quite often and each change of clothes is reported in great detail by the press. It seems that it is only a matter of time before one of the newspapers will make reference to President Barak Obama as "that guy who accompanied Michelle on her trip."

And, of course, there has been scandal! Reported on the front page of newspapers from London to Sydney, Mrs. Obama touched the queen! Yes, she actually touched her. There is a grainy photograph taken at a formal reception that shows Queen Elizabeth II and Michelle Obama standing arm in arm. Mrs. Obama's arm is resting lightly on the queen's shoulder. The queen, much the shorter of the two, has her arm around Mrs. Obama's waist. It is shocking news to the subjects of the queen. What a breach of protocol! One doesn't just touch a queen. How shocking! There hasn't been such a meaty scandal in the Australian press since 1992 when then Australian prime minister Paul Keating briefly placed his hand on the shoulder of the queen.

The news is overshadowing the verbal gaffe made by Prince (put my foot in my mouth) Philip. British subjects are used to his knack for saying the wrong thing at state occasions. President Obama remarked: "I had breakfast with the Prime Minister, meetings with the Chinese, the Russians, David Cameron. . ." to which Philip replied, "Can you tell the difference between them?" The Daily Express reported, "It was, given his record for talking about Chinese slitty eyes, dud Indian factory products, Scottish alcoholics and Hungarian pot-bellies, not the wisest thing to say."

I have never understood the obsession with royalty that many other people seem to have. I'm glad that our President's wife is able to travel with him. And I'm glad that she and the queen enjoyed meeting and felt comfortable enough in each other's presence for a little human contact. After all the queen is a human being. Wouldn't it be oppressively lonely to be someone who was so set aside from the rest of society that no one could touch you? From the pictures I've seen, it appears that they were getting along. They both have lovely smiles and seem to enjoy wearing a string of pearls. Maybe they have more substantive things in common. Probably they do not lack for topics of conversation.

I don't believe in super powers. And I am not too influenced by super stars. I believe that all of our leaders are human beings. And I believe that all of them need to be reminded that they are human. For every hour meeting and greeting world leaders, our president should spend an hour meeting and greeting factory workers and unemployed folks and municipal employees and homeless veterans and a host of other common

folk. If we keep telling him how special he is he might start believing that he is in a category above the people he serves.

There once was a revolution over the role of royalty in the everyday decisions of the people. My family arrived too late for the fireworks, but were attracted to this land because of the way the revolution went. I'm not descended from royalty as near as I can figure.

The difficult decisions that face world leaders as they gather need to be infused with a simple reality check. Their decisions are not some kind of a game. Their use and abuse of power and authority has a very real affect on who gets food and who does not, on who receives medical care and who is denied, on who lives and who dies. Well, maybe not the last one, as the one thing we all share is our mortality.

The truth is that in the end, the world's economy probably doesn't hinge on what outfit the first lady chooses or who touched whom at which reception. It probably doesn't hinge on what awkward words come out the Prince's mouth that are gobbled up by the press who have been waiting like vultures for some social misstep. It probably doesn't even hinge on which presenter at the formal talks has the most eloquent speech.

It seems likely that the most important quality that a leader can bring to such an important meeting is the ability to listen and truly understand other leaders. In the moments of genuine human connection, listening is almost always more important than speaking.

I pray that the leaders of our world will be blessed with the ability to listen more carefully and more completely than ever before. But I'm not holding my breath. My role in this world has nothing to do with advising those in power. I'll spend my day working with people whose stories will not be reported in the newspapers.

In the meantime, I've been wondering about that old Mother Goose rhyme. If I had a chance to interview the President and First Lady about their visit to the queen, I might be tempted to ask, "Is the palace really infested with mice?"

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April 3, 2009 – Like Déjà vu All Over Again



I am thinking that I should write a couple of generic blog entries that could be used whenever I am not particularly inspired to write. The trick was employed by some newspaper columnists in the past. They would work up a column that could be used on any day and keep it in reserve for the day when they developed writer's block or when the workload was so heavy that they didn't have time to write in a way that was up to their usual style. I have considered another option, simply stockpiling blog titles and pictures so that I would have a list of possible ideas when I cam to a day when I didn't know which topic to choose.

Today might have been a good day for such ideas. I slept late. The continuing treatment for my back resulted in a medication change yesterday and the medicine made me groggy. Or at least that is the way it seemed to me. I took the pill and went to bed and slept straight through to about 45 minutes after my usual rising time. And reading the news headlines didn't inspire any great blog ideas.

If I were to have a generic column ready to go, a good topic this spring would be spring blizzards. The National Weather Service has issued a blizzard warning for this evening. Around noon today the winds are going to pick up and snow is likely to continue into Saturday, with possible accumulations of 6 to 10 inches in Rapid City. Our weekly blizzard is a couple of days early this week.

We're used to spring blizzards. We get them most years. But I think that the pattern of one a week for three weeks is a bit unusual. We were already assured of having snow

on the ground for Palm Sunday and there will at least be a few piles and drifts that haven't completely melted by Easter. Ah spring! Easter bonnets and new dresses accompanied by parkas and snow boots. We have our own fashion parade for Easter around here. Comments like these have been overheard in our church: "I see you have a new pair of bib overalls - those are so clean they look this is the first time you've worn them." "Don't you just love insulated sweatshirts. I wear mine all the time."

The thing is that practice makes perfect. Other than replenishing some food stuffs and other supplies, we're pretty much ready for blizzards around her.

And I have always appreciated the ability of snow to cover up undone yard work. There is quite a bit that I need to accomplish before time to plant the garden, but those things will have to wait until the snow melts.

I know I'm still in South Dakota when the hardware store has pallets of ice melter and lawn fertilizer sitting side by side near the front door. You have to have impulse displays for all kinds of weather.

The folks making up the school calendar are having fits. Rapid City schools were scheduled to have the last day of class on June 5. It is traditional for graduation to be the weekend before the close of classes. Graduation is set for May 31 this year. The school district has already cancelled six days of classes this year. If they make up all of them by extending the school year, classes would extend through June 15. That isn't going to happen. Rescheduling graduation is too complex - it is a major event in our town. The seniors won't be in class after graduation.

And it is unlikely that the district will extend classes for regular student by more than a week. There are a lot of factors to consider. The state mandate for the amount of education is set in hours of instruction, not days - some school districts have four day weeks and other five day weeks. And the state mandate isn't the only factor to consider. There are contractual commitments with teachers, and unofficial but still serious commitments made to the families of the students that give time for students to attend summer events, many of which cannot be rescheduled.

So the bean counters at the school district office will have their beans all out of the jar this week.

It is unlikely that this particular storm will disrupt school schedules. The worst weather will be on the weekend. But there is no guarantee that this is the last blizzard of the season.

Learning to live with unpredictable weather and ever-changing schedules can be a spiritual discipline. The reality is that we do not control our schedules. All of our calendars and portable digital assistants and computer schedule manager programs

only give us the illusion of being in control. There are a lot of things that can disrupt our plans over which we have no control. It is not just the weather. Yesterday I had to make room in my schedule for an emergency telephone conference call meeting to deal with a crisis in an agency where I do some consulting. This afternoon, I'll be attending a funeral that wasn't on my schedule until yesterday. Interruptions are the usual in my line of work.

And I am learning that dealing gracefully with interruptions opens me up to a closer relationship with God. Accepting the fact that there are things I cannot control gives me an opportunity to adjust to new schedules and new ways of thinking. Not that I have stopped complaining. In fact, I think that my reaction to oversleeping this morning needs a bit of an attitude adjustment. It wasn't the medicine that caused me to oversleep. My body needs more hours of sleep than I have been allowing. The doctor knows that sleep is important to my recovery. So the doctor adjusted a prescription to allow my body to get more sleep and more healing.

I probably won't stop complaining, but extra sleep is a gift, not a curse. And when I've had a good night's sleep, it is likely that I can work more efficiently than when I am too tired.

So, let it snow. Or rain. Or do whatever the weather has in store for us. Who knows, maybe another blizzard is the gift of patience for a somewhat impatient person.

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April 4, 2009 – Beyond the Sunset



I attend a lot of funerals. Part of the reason is my vocation. I officiate at my share of funerals. The congregation that I serve has a lot of elders and so we have more funerals that some congregations whose average age is younger. But I attend a fair number of funerals at which I am a worshipper and not a leader. I suppose that part of the situation is due to my age. Increasingly the funerals I attend are for someone who is my age. Another reason I attend a lot of funerals is that I am an active volunteer in our community and so the circle of my friends and acquaintances reaches beyond our congregation.

As a pastor, it is a good thing that I attend funerals where I am not officiating. It is important for any leader to keep perspective and one of the ways to do so is to take opportunities to look at events from a different point of view.

It isn't difficult to criticize the planners and officiants at a funeral. A funeral is a time of complex and varied emotions and the members of the congregation have widely divergent needs.

Mourners need to hear that the person they have lost lived a life that was significant. Most of the time this message is not difficult to convey. The truth is that there are many truly amazing people in this world. When a person dies, it is not difficult to come up with a large list of significant accomplishments, of important contributions, and of examples of a life well lived. Many funerals are a long line of tributes to someone whose life made a difference. But just hearing that the person who has died was a good person, or even

a great person, is not all that mourners need to hear. When I leave a funeral that was simply a series of praises of a good person, I feel hollow inside and I suspect that I am not the only one with this feeling.

Mourners need a sense of their place in history. The truth is that ours is not the first generation to have known death. We are not the first to experience tragedy, sorrow, grief, and loss. And we are not the last. It can be enormously comforting to be reminded that we are not alone. Our people have faced hard times and overwhelming grief before. While the death that we mourn is of a person who was unique in all time, that person now takes his or her place in history with others. And we who are for the time being left behind are not left alone.

Mourners need to be reminded of hope. The initial rush of activities that take place between the occurrence of a death and a funeral service are overwhelming, especially for family members. There are decisions to be made, plans to be set in motion, friends and relatives to notify, and a host of other tasks to perform. Sleep patterns are disrupted and life takes on a focus on what needs to be done in the short term. Long range hopes and dreams are laid aside in order to deal with the realities of the present moment. But the truth is that life is not conquered by death. There is more that life has to offer, even in the midst of grief. And we have a hope that is far greater than the scope of present realities. What we know as this life is only part of the story.

Mourners need to have the signs of love, which are ever present, lifted up to their consciousness. As an outsider, it is easy for me to see the phone calls, the stream of neighbors dropping by with cookies and casseroles, the cards and notes that appear in each day's mail and the kind words from colleagues as sure signs of love. In the depth of grief, mourners don't always see the many signs of love that surround them at every turn. A gentle reminder can make a big difference.

I do not know the details of the practice of other faiths. What I do know is the Christian faith. Our faith has grown out of a place of deep grief, loss, sorrow and sadness. The crucifixion of Jesus is no small part of our story. It seemed to some of the Roman authorities that they could end this struggling and small movement by executing its leader and so Jesus died.

But for us, death is not the end of the story. In a very real sense, our story finds its beginning in the death and sorrow, grief and sadness. The gospel of Luke reports that shortly after Jesus' death, two of his disciples were walking to Emmaus - a journey of about seven miles. A man joined them on their walk, but they were so blinded by their grief that they did not recognize him. It was only later, when they had completed their journey and sat down for a meal that they recognized Jesus. Their transformation from hopelessness to hope, from doubt to belief, from isolation to love - that transformation is at the heart of the faith we live.

Every once in a while a funeral occurs when all of these factors are balanced. We go away with a sense of being privileged to have shared this life's journey with the one who has died and of belonging to something that is far bigger than the grief of this moment. It is the kind of funeral service that we would would want for others.

Sadly, there is a shortage of competent leadership in the church. Sometimes it feels like there are more funerals that are a series of missed opportunities than those who truly provide connections for those who grieve.

I'm not leaving behind any specific instructions for those who plan my funeral. I don't want to place any restrictions or to tie their hands in any way as they struggle to find ways to journey through their grief. The hymns and readings should be chosen for the mourners, not for me. But I do have a hope for that time. I hope that the leader of that event will have the ability to communicate a truth that is larger than I am. It is not particularly important to me to have those who attend my funeral going away with more knowledge of who I am. They will have their own information and experiences. But I do hope and pray that, when the time comes, they are able to go away with a sense that this moment is part of a much bigger picture.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

May we learn to carry this blessing to others.

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April 5, 2009 – Sheer Pin



Every once in a while I feel vindicated in my decision to purchase a snow blower. I bought it the same year that we moved into this house. We have a steep driveway and sometimes we get significant snow fall. Of course there have been plenty of times when the snow blower sits in the shed while I shovel an inch of snow. The machine really is designed for those times when the snow is deep. It will carve through a two-foot snow drift without a problem. Every owner of a snowblower learns about sheer pins. The big augers that churn the snow and feet it into the blower are attached to their drive shaft with sheer pins. Sheer pins are special bolts that are designed to break if the auger encounters significant resistance. If a large rock or a big piece of ice or other debris gets into the auger, the pin will break and the auger will come to a stop without halting the drive shaft. This prevents the drive shaft, gear box and motor from being damaged by a sudden stop.

The use of sheer pins in machinery goes back a long ways. They are used in a wide variety of mechanical devices, all with the same purpose. Anticipate a problem and design the machine so that it can encounter the problem with minimal damage. Replacing a single bolt is far easier that overhauling a transmission or replacing a twisted drive shaft.

The machine is literally designed to break. And the design means that damage will be limited. If a sheer pin were to be replaced by a hardened steel bolt, it would not break and the damage would be far more severe.

A sheer pin provides an analogy for the deeply mysterious events that unfold during holy week. The death of Jesus of Nazareth raises a lot of significant questions in our minds about the nature of God. If God is all powerful, why did Jesus have to die? Why wasn't that death prevented. The answer, in part, lies in the reality that we are all destined to die. Death is a part of human nature. When God took on human nature in the person of Jesus, God also took on human death. Immortality is not the way of humans. We all die.

Sheer pins are designed to break.

Our human frailties and limits are an essential part of who we are. Life without limits would not carry the same meaning as the lives we now lead. The knowledge of the shortness of our time gives us the ability to focus our energies on the things that are most important. The knowledge of our own death provides a reason to embrace life fully in the moments that are ours.

Human beings are designed to break.

Pain and sorrow and suffering are parts of our very nature. This is the way we are. It doesn't mean that we ought to enjoy suffering. Nor does it mean that we should seek pain. Rather, we are invited to live boldly in the face of the limits that are ours.

Like all analogies, the analogy of the sheer pin is only a partial example. We aren't the same as the bolts that attach the auger to the shaft in a snowblower. We are more resilient. We can take our blows and accept our injuries and move on with life. We are not the first to break when the going gets tough.

It is, however, useful to understand that our human limits are an essential part of our nature. Holy Week invites us to look at our limits, to consider the reality of death and loss and sorrow and suffering. Life gains richness, depth and meaning when we open ourselves to these experiences. The resurrection only has meaning when the reality of death is confronted.

So we will celebrate this week in our own way - imperfectly, with limits. And we will await with eagerness the new life that is coming. May we have the courage to face all of life's realities this week.

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April 6, 2009 – Melting



One thing about a spring blizzard: as soon as it stops snowing, it starts to melt. There is a lot of water in the snow that fell over the weekend and with highs in the 40's and perhaps even up to 50 degrees tomorrow, the snow will be melting quickly. The streets will be full of puddles and even streams of water running downhill wherever possible. It will be difficult to walk in some parts of town for a couple of days with the huge piles of snow and the constant showers from passing cars. But things change quickly and it won't be long before the patches of bare ground appear.

We are so surrounded by the snow that we often forget how incredible and amazing this substance is. Water is the stuff of life. Without water there is no life as we know it. Our human bodies are mostly water. All plants require water to grow. Plants and animals go through some incredible adaptations to survive in arid areas, but even in the desert, there are sources of water for the resourceful.

And here we are with excess water, at least for a little while. The dry years are not to distant and our memories still recall our anxious eyes scanning the horizon for a cloud and our noses sniffing the air for a whiff of smoke. The forest is still suffering from the onslaught of insects that take advantage of drought-stressed trees. But for now, this year, we have sufficient moisture. The reservoirs are almost all full. The creeks will be filled bank to bank with the runoff for the next few weeks. And it is early April, we could easily have two or three months of soggy weather ahead.

Scientists are employing all of the tools that they have to search the universe for another planet that is as supportive of life as our own. From what we know at this point it appears that such places are incredibly rare.

And we take the water for granted. Sometimes we even complain about it.

Every drop of water has been on an incredible journey. The snow that has fallen all around us was once water vapor in a cloud. In that form, the winds blew it long distances. It became a part of a cloud after evaporating from some other place. Perhaps it was on the surface of an ocean or a large lake and the heat from the sun enabled it to break free from the liquid surface and evaporate into a cloud where it was joined by many other molecules of water. A water molecule could travel thousands of miles as part of an ocean current, visiting the uncharted depths of the sea before rising to the surface. Water that falls on the mountains melts into rivulets that gather into streams that combine to form rivers. A snowflake that falls on the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains can travel to the Gulf of Mexico by flowing alongside other molecules.

Some of the water travels underground. Some is stored in the soil. Some travels through the roots of trees and makes it way to the tips of the leaves. Some water is drunk by animals and becomes part of their bodies for a while. It boggles the mind to think of all of the possible places the water that lies in a snow bank on my lawn has traveled. The stories a drop of water could tell if only it possessed memory would amaze and delight us.

Of course individual water molecules have no such memory. On the other hand our human brains would not possess memory were it not for the water that is a part of their structures and the chemical processes of thought and memory.

We are daily witnesses to incredible phenomena and once in a while it is a good thing to slow down and reflect on the incredible wonder that surrounds us. indeed we live in an astounding universe.

There will be a few folks who continue to dig out today. There will be plenty of work for bobcats and loaders and motor graders to clear the ice and snow from streets and walks. But most of the snow will disappear on its own. Whether we move the snow or not, it will melt in its own time, in its own way. The water molecules in the snow will not remain in the same place for long. Without any brain function at all they possess an amazing wanderlust and motion is part of their molecular structure.

Today I thank God for the snow and for the gift of a mind that is capable of understanding part of the nature of this universe. And I thank God for the curiosity that drives us to explore and discover even more. Like the drops of water in the snowdrifts, we are engaged in an incredible journey. May we take time to pause and behold the wonder of it all from time to time as we travel through this life.

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April 7, 2009 – One for the Record Books



If you talk to people who have lived around here for a long time, you will often hear comments about how unusual the weather is. “It’s not usually like this,” people will say. The string of three spring blizzards in as many weeks has gotten folks to talking. Such a weather pattern is a bit unusual, but there have been plenty of winters and springs with a lot of snow. It is unlikely that this year will go down as a record year for snowfall. But we have set a few records.

Yesterday’s high temperature of 28 degrees was the lowest hight temperature ever recorded for April 6 in our area, but the overnight low of 15 degrees was 4 degrees warmer than the record low for the date.

When it comes to snowfall, we’re quit a bit short of a record. So far this season has yielded 75.5 inches of snow in the downtown area. That is more than double the amount that fell last year (34.8 inches) and significantly higher than the average of 36.5 inches. But it is nearly 5 inches shy of the record of 80.3 inches set in 1969-70. And we’ll need about four more inches of snow to match the winter of 1949-50. Of course, it is possible that we could get enough snow to set a new record in a single blizzard, and we’ve been known to have spring blizzards well into May, so we might be working on a record year for snowfall.

We have set one record: the number of days when at least one inch of snow fell, which translates to the number of days when we had to shovel our walks and driveways.

We've had twenty such days this year, which is a record. Although it is not much of a record. There are plenty of cities in snow country where the number is much higher.

The truth is that one of the things we like about our area is our mild weather. A check of the weather in Williston, North Dakota or Aberdeen, South Dakota will reveal that we don't live in an area of weather extremes. Still we like to talk about our records. And one more good blizzard would give us a winter to talk about for decades. The winter of 1949-50 still comes up in a lot of conversations around here.

We may be on to a record for our church - the most amount of money spent for removal of snow from our parking lot. Because our fiscal year runs on the calendar year, we have until the end of December to rack up snow plowing bills.

Having lived through some pretty severe drought years, I'm grateful for the snow. I'd rather have to clear the snow from my driveway than spend the summer in fear of wildfire. I'd rather endure a few cold days than watch as bark beetles infest acre after acre of drought-stressed forest.

But I am old enough to appreciate the value of a record year for future storytelling. Someday I can tell my grandchildren about the spring of '09, when the spring blizzards brought snow so deep that the drift by the front door was higher than my waist. And who knows, by then I might have exaggerated the snow depth as much as some folks do when they speak of other record blizzards.

We tell the stories, in part, because we like to think of ourselves as survivors. The weather may throw us some unexpected twists and turns and there may be some hardships when we are snowed in so often, but we are a people of hardy stock. Times may be tough, but we're tougher than the times.

LIke the blizzards, the recession in which we are living, with high job losses and with people having lost sizable portions of their retirement accounts, is a season of hard times for many. And like the blizzards, the day will come when we tell the stories of how we survived these times. We like the image of ourselves as survivors and as people who are hardy enough to endure hard times.

So we'll keep our eyes on the records, but we'll also work to keep our spirits high. We're in this together and we'll get through this together.

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April 8, 2009 – More Grim News



AP photo from bbc.com

The news from central Italy continues to be grim with the death toll rising to 250 and at least one person who survived the initial quake perished in one of the frequent aftershocks. Aftershocks continue to hamper rescue workers. And everyone knows that time is of essence in locating and extracting survivors from the rubble. Every hour that passes makes it less likely that survivors will be found. Today, two days after the initial quake, one aftershock measured 5.5 and caused masonry from damaged buildings to cascade down on the area below. Rescue workers have been forced to slow their search in order to preent further injury and death.

There have been some dramatic rescues. More than 150 survivors have been excavated from the rubble. According to the Italian Red Cross, more than 10,000 buildings have been totally destroyed and nearly 20,000 people are homeless. Relief agencies have provided blankets and tents and more temporary housing is being delivered to the area. Many people are living in their cars. Entire villages have been evacuated and no one knows how soon survivors will be allowed back into the area to search for personal items.

Rescue workers from around the world have arrived in the area. French firefighters were among the first to join the Italian rescue workers, trained dogs and their handlers have come from many different areas to aid in the search. The hospital in L'Aquila was so badly damaged that it is no longer useable. Rescue workers have set up a field

hospital to provide emergency stabilization and victims are being transferred to hospitals in Rome as soon as they are able to make the trip.

Every building in the historic center of L'Aquila has been structurally damaged and in the nearby town of Ona 40 out of the town's 300 residents were killed. Every single home was destroyed on most of the streets in the town.

In his weekly general audience, Pope Benedict XVI promised to visit the area. "Dearest ones, as soon as possible, I hope to come and visit you." Vatican officials said it would be at least two weeks before the pope is able to make the visit.

The tragedy and the dramatic rescue efforts are capturing the attention of the world. Like many other world events, it seems as if there is little we can do but to sit back and watch. As I checked out photographs on the Internet in the last couple of days, I have been pleased to catch a glimpse of simple woolen blankets and tents of hope structures that are distributed by Church World Service. It makes the One Great Hour of Sharing offering that we received in our congregation a couple of weeks ago seem relevant, as some of the disaster response has come from funds raised in local congregations around the world.

As tragic as the earthquake is, it does appear that rescue and assistance are being appropriately mobilized to assist the survivors. Additional assistance will be needed to aid rebuilding. But there are many tragedies around the world each day that do not garner the attention of the world's news outlets. Perhaps the suffering is on a smaller scale or perhaps it is merely occurring in a place that is more remote and less likely to have witnesses. There are tragedies that produce human victims which can be prevented. Others, like the earthquake in Italy this week, defy our ability to prevent.

Even in the events that cannot be prevented, there are things to be learned that might contribute to the lessening of human suffering. New construction techniques produce buildings that are more survivable in earthquakes. New rescue techniques are assisting more victims and increasing the possibility of finding survivors before they expire.

All the same, we confess that we live in a world that we cannot control. There are forces in this world that are stronger than our abilities. And events like the Italian earthquake remind us of our powerlessness in certain circumstances. With that knowledge in mind, it seems like today is a good day to lay aside the disagreements and differences that have separated faithful people around the world. Certainly we can join Pope Benedict in daily prayer for the victims and the survivors. Certainly we can offer what assistance we are able without having to "brand" our gifts so that they can be delivered by only one particular institution or agency. In the face of the truly powerful forces of this world the differences between people of faith seem petty.

I vow to lay aside my usually strong religious biases and prejudices as best as I am able, and to be especially vigilant about it as the drama unfolds in Italy. Regardless of the history of division, regardless of the history of hurt, I invite every Christian to lay aside the distinctions between Catholic and Protestant, between Eastern and Western and respond to this tragedy as the body of Christ.

Who knows? If we can lay aside our differences in the face of one tragedy, perhaps we can give up our divisions forever.

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April 9, 2009 – Maundy Thursday



Holy week is a time of radical mood swings for those of us who immerse ourselves in the life of the church and the cycles of reading. We hold extra services and therefore it is a busy week for us. We have lots of bulletins to prepare, changes of scene and mood in our sanctuary, and plenty of tasks to perform. And the texts lead us to experience the widest range of human emotions possible. From the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to an intimate supper with disciples, to soul-searching prayer in the garden to the arrest, trial and execution to the day of preparing and waiting and finally the joy of the morning of the resurrection, our texts lead us to understand Immanuel - God-with-us - as one who shares every emotion that we may experience.

Those of us who live an work in the midst of the story probably drive our loved ones up the wall this week. They never know what emotional response or reaction to expect. Today is Maundy Thursday. It is the traditional day to remember the last supper. It is a day that is all about love. But the love that we celebrate this day is more than a puff of emotion that is here one day and gone the next. It is about the kind of love that is a lasting commandment.

The name of the day comes from that commitment. “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John 13:34) In Latin the verse is: “Mandatum novum do vobis ut diligtis invicem sicut dilexi vos ut et vos diligatis invicem.” The name Maundy, comes from the first word of the Latin phrase, “Mandatum.” Today is the day of that new commandment. If we recognize the day by focusing on the death of

Jesus - by wearing black and feeling all sad and sorry and down in the dumps, we miss the true meaning of this day. It is all about love.

The bread, the cup, the remembrance. It is all about love.

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

Of course that kind of love is a goal not often achieved in this world. It isn’t that we don’t want to love one another. We do. But we often make mistakes and fall short. There are times when we are angry and irritable and resentful. There are days when we don’t feel particularly love-able and sometimes our actions are not the most loving.

We receive the mandate of Maundy Thursday, but we have trouble fulfilling that mandate.

That is when we receive another important gift. The Bible is filled with that kind of imperfect love. The disciples are always bumbling and getting things wrong. Peter is positive that he would never deny Christ, but when he feels that his life is threatened, he does the very thing that he was so sure he would never do. They get tired and fall asleep at the wrong time, they struggle for position and prestige. They wonder about how others see them and worry about their future.

The first ones to receive the mandate were, like us, human and prone to mistakes and missteps. “We have this heavenly treasure in earthly bodies.” We live this love as best as we can as we keep learning how to love one another.

In that we have the example of Jesus, whose love sets the standard for how we are to love one another. So we keep telling the stories and we keep repeating the actions. Tonight we will gather once again to share the simple meal that Jesus initiated so many centuries ago. Ever since that night, our people have gathered to experience freshly the power and promise that he revealed. And we have practiced the love.

Even with all of the practice, we don’t get it perfect. We are imperfect people. But we can still remember the perfect love that has touched our lives. “Mandatum novum do vobis ut diligtis invicem sicut dilexi vos ut et vos diligatis invicem.” “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

May we continue to strive for that love.

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April 10, 2009 – Holy Week Activities



Canada/AP photo.

The great commission at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, urges the faithful to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth. And subsequent generations of Christians have done so. There are Christian communities and congregations in every country of the world. And as the faith has spread it has grown into different expressions in different cultures.

Around the world, Christians recognize Holy Week in a lot of different ways. Costumed Processions are common in many countries. The processions usually reenact in some way the journey of Jesus from his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane to his crucifixion on Golgotha. Carrying large crosses is often a part of the procession. Elaborate costumes are often a part of the process.

In El Salvador, men dress in red costumes with red masks, representing devils. At one point in the procession, they all lie down on the ground and a man portraying Jesus walks on their backs as a sign of the victory of good over evil.

In Madrid, penitent believers wear hoods and masks to hide their identity as they take part in a procession. In several other places in Spain large sculptures of Jesus on the cross are carried through towns in processions.

Passion plays, sometimes with graphic reenactments of the beating and crucifixion of Jesus are held around the world. In many places believers voluntarily allow themselves to be whipped as a sign of their faith.

In at least two places in the Philippines, volunteers are literally nailed to crosses and raised up for a few minutes to experience the pain of crucifixion. In Kapitangan Town, just outside of Manilla, 30 were hung on the cross for about five minutes each. Another 25 were nailed to a cross in Cutud Town, north of Manilla. Some choose to go through the painful process multiple times. There is one man who has had himself nailed to a cross every year for 23 years since he survived a fall at a construction site. The spectacle of healthy people allowing nails to be driven through their hands and feet draws huge crowds and Good Friday is a major day for tourist revenue in the area. Some people travel from other countries to participate in the crucifixions.

I don't understand all of the things that are done. I've watched my share of Passion Plays and most, in my opinion, glorify violence without providing a clear understanding of resurrection. The emphasis on blood and suffering does little to promote a clear understanding of the whole of the Gospel. The 2004 Mel Gibson Movie, The Passion of The Christ, focused deeply on the pain and blood of the whipping of Jesus and the agony of death by crucifixion. In my viewing of the movie it failed to communicate the victory over death that is at the heart of the Gospel and left viewers, rather, with their attention focused on death, when the core of the Gospel focuses on life.

But we Christians are a varied lot. And we find many different expressions of our faith. And the things that are most meaningful to some are not so important to others.

So I thought that I ought to report in today's blog, just in case you missed it, that the Church of the Resurrection Here in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, offered drive-through foot washing yesterday. Cars lined up as people removed their shoes and stuck their feet out of the windows for Reverend Leon Burke to wash the feet. It was a relatively warm spring day in the city just across the border from Buffalo, NY, with highs in the mid '50's, so at least there was no ice involved. Still, the idea of sticking one's feet out of a car window seems to lack some of the elements that I associate with worship.

When reading the story of Jesus washing the disciples feet, I have always associated with Simon Peter: "You don't need to wash my feet. I can wash my own feet, thank you very much." It is hard to accept an offer of service from another, especially one to whom you think you owe service. Jesus, ever the teacher, takes time to help Simon Peter understand enough to allow the process to continue and then takes the example of his washing their feet to help the disciples understand his wish that they serve one another.

The ceremony never was about clean feet. It was, from the beginning about learning to love and serve one another. In an urban setting, where people rarely travel by walking

and where good shoes are the norm, there may be little need of foot washing as a sign of service. Perhaps a car wash might be a contemporary analogy for Jesus' service to the disciples.

The truth is that the real stories of our faith rarely come from the holidays. The formal celebrations of holy week may serve to refocus our faith, but the acts of service are more likely to occur in our everyday lives rather in the midst of pageantry and public display.

So we will gather quietly today for a brief time of prayer and remembrance. And we will hold a somewhat larger celebration on Easter morning. And there will be services in the nursing homes on Easter afternoon. But the real mark of our faith comes on the other days of the year when we honor our neighbors with the gift of firewood to heat their homes and share in daily prayer for our sisters and brothers in other parts of the world, and provide a simple meal for those who are hungry.

These events will escape the attention of the world's media. And it is just as well. It is hard to imitate the humility of Christ while seeking to be the center of attention.

May your holy week be blessed.

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April 11, 2009 – Waiting



We are waiting around here. There is just too much snow on the ground for it to truly feel like spring. The snow is melting and the days are getting a little warmer, but it is going to take time. The forecast is for a high temperature in the mid 50's today, which should hasten the melting. However there are still some drifts that are three or four feet deep. Forecasted precipitation later in the week should fall as rain instead of snow.

We are ready for some spring weather. We can remember crocus and daffodils and the leaves bursting forth from the trees. After a winter that set a record for the amount of snow, it seems like it would be nice to turn our attention to the garden and maybe even a little bit of yard work.

But for now we're waiting.

This is a day of waiting. We know that Easter is tomorrow. There are a lot of preparations that have to be made. The church isn't quite ready for Easter services. There are banners to hang and music to practice. There are instructions for lay readers to be written and a list of other tasks to accomplish. We'll get them all done.

And we'll have to wait for Easter morning.

The formal services for the Saturday before Easter are called Vigil Services. Vigil is short for vigilance, careful watching. Even if we have heard the story over an over, even if we know its conclusion, it is appropriate to have a day of watching and waiting. The

liturgy for the service of Easter Vigil slowly goes through many of the highlights of the Biblical story. There are readings of creation and of exodus, of psalms and of prophets. The story of Jesus' birth and baptism are recalled and worshipers are reminded of their own baptisms as well. The events of Jesus life and even of the last week in Jerusalem are recalled. Communion is celebrated. We tell almost all of the story of our faith.

But we stop short.

The full impact of the resurrection is placed on hold for the first service of Easter Morning.

Grieving families know the sense of waiting. After they have received the news of the death, after they have begun to adjust to the reality of the loss, after they have notified the relatives and planned the funeral . . . there comes a time of waiting. The preparations, such as they are, have been made. The plans have been set in motion. But there are hours when the time seems to go so slowly. Like watching snow melt, there seems to be little progress. The tick of the clock on the wall seems to slow and there is almost a sense of wanting to just get past the funeral. The grieving family has some sense that they would like to someday feel better than they do today, but they are not even able to imagine what that might feel like.

Easter's joys are revealed in their own time, not at our convenience. Letting go of control is part of the process. The truth is that there are many things in this world that we cannot control.

Spring will come to the hills and summer will follow. Those of us who have been here for a while know that the seasons can change very quickly. We could be complaining about the heat before the end of June.

Ours is an impatient culture. We are used to instant gratification. We are used to having the things we want when we want them. The financial structure of our economy is based on borrowing money rather than waiting to earn it. It is possible that the current economic downturn will help us to once again re-learn the joy of waiting for the things we want - of delaying gratification. That remains to be seen. For now the advertisements for "buy now, pay later" continue to dominate the newspaper and television. Government leaders are urging caution and suggesting that the economy will take time to come around. They are even forecasting that there will be more unemployment and more hard times before things get better. But they all know that if things don't turn around in their term of office they won't be re-elected. The voters are fickle and they want quick results. There will be no small amount of political power brought to bear to make things look good by the next election, even if it is at the cost of delaying long-term recovery.

I hope we will accept today - this Holy Saturday - as a gift. It is the gift of waiting. Tomorrow will be soon enough.

May today help us learn the art of waiting.

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April 12, 2009 – Easter Vigil



The Great Vigil of Easter is a service held in many Christian Churches beginning at sundown the night before Easter. Keeping tradition with our Jewish forebears, Christian holidays begin and end at sundown, rather than midnight or sunrise. The Great Vigil of Easter is considered to be the first service of the holiday. The service includes a celebration of light. Usually it begins outside of the church with a bonfire from which the pascal candle is lit. The candle is then carried into the church by the priest. The church is dark as the light is carried inside and the priest carrying the light pauses in the Nave of the church to proclaim, “Christ is the light!” to which the people respond “Thanks be to God!” This proclamation is followed by a service of the word in which the readings span the whole of Christian history, beginning with the creation, telling of God’s acts of salvation in Exodus, through prophets and summarizing the Gospel of Jesus Christ from birth to death and resurrection. The service then contains the sacrament of baptism with a baptismal reminder for all believers, sometimes the rite of confirmation, and proceeds to the sacrament of communion.

In some practices, the service also includes long blocks of silence and can take all of night, concluding as the first rays of sun come into the new day.

The Great Vigil of Easter was not part of the tradition in the church where I grew up. Our tradition was to rise early in the morning, before dawn and go up onto a hillside to celebrate Easter with a sunrise service. We did have the bonfire and the service marked the beginning of a day of worship and celebration.

For the past few years, my Easters have begun with solitude rather than communal worship. I rise and go to church early to prepare for the 9:30 a.m. service, which is our big celebration. Our congregation participates in a sunrise service held at Mount Rushmore, but the timing is too quick between that service and the 9:30 service, so I do not attend the Mount Rushmore service. I usually participate as a worshiper in the Great Vigil of Easter service held at a local Episcopalian congregation where a colleague and friend is rector.

Today my day will be filled with three nursing home services, held in the afternoon as the Easter celebration focuses on the complex schedules of many people more than the first rays of sun.

And my Easter vigil did not involve going to the Episcopal church. Instead, my first prayers of Easter this year were made in the hospital. I greeted the transition that we call midnight in the emergency room keeping vigil with my mother as the doctor adjusted her medication prior to admitting her to the hospital. The diagnosis is of a simple infection, easily treated, and probably would not have involved a trip to the emergency room for someone younger, but it threw off her system and her symptoms included irregular heartbeat, elevated pulse and some wide swings in blood pressure. So in the wee hours of the morning she was admitted to the hospital and after the usual paperwork I headed home for a few hours of sleep before beginning my work day.

I expect we will be able to bring her back home in a day or so. She responds well to antibiotics and her heart condition should be easily treated with some minor adjustments in her medications.

Maybe it is a good thing to start Easter day tired. I'm sure that the women who first discovered the resurrection were tired as they trudged up the hill carrying the spices to anoint the body and prepare for the formal burial. Grief can make one really tired. It disrupts sleep patterns and requires huge amounts of energy. Grieving people often feel very exhausted for days after the funeral.

If I begin the day focused on my tiredness, the wonder and surprise and joy of the resurrection is even more dramatic. Death is not the end. This heaviness and weariness that I carry is not the final word on the state of the human spirit. Life cannot be conquered by death. God's gift of life always has the final victory. The bright candles and Easter eggs are only symbol of a deeper reality. We celebrate a living God!

Today I will have the distinct honor of standing at the font for the baptism of four new Christians and then I will carry the water into the congregation and remind us all of our baptisms. My day will involve visiting in the hospital and care centers and reading the story of Jesus' resurrection at least three times. It will also include a celebration dinner with family and friends and the warm and gentle hospitality of those we love.

It is going to be a wonderful day. And if I am a bit tired, I can be reminded that this day isn't about me in the first place. For all those who grieve and mourn, this feeling you experience isn't the end - it isn't the final word. We celebrate a risen Christ. Alleluia!

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April 13, 2009 – Home Place



Susan and I have lived in several different places over the years. When we were newly wed and students we changed apartments every year. Sometimes we had multiple apartments in the same year. Since we have graduated, we have lived in three homes, each for a few years longer than the last. We have tried to make each home into a gathering place for friends and family - a place where we are comfortable and a place where others are comfortable as well.

We know that the most important qualities of home don't have to do with the physical place. In the past ten years, we have participated with our parents and siblings in preparing the homes in which we grew up for sale. These were places that for decades we called home, even when we had houses in other places that we called our own. They were filled with the treasures our parents had collected over a lifetime and part of the process was sifting and sorting through possessions and learning to say good bye to some things.

But things are just things. What makes a home is relationships.

Now our children have grown and are making homes of their own. And our parents have moved to the town where we live and our home has become a place where we gather. The cats that our daughter adopted have become our cats and the companions of our parents as well. The living room that we have decorated has become a gathering place for our family, and a place where our friends feel comfortable.

For now this place has come to be our home.

I didn't realize it when we were growing up, but we are descended of nomadic people. While our parents didn't move around very much in our growing up years and when I think of my childhood home I think of a specific building at a specific address, you have to go a long ways back in our genealogy to discover a place where our people stayed for more than a couple of generations. There is a homestead in Montana that first settled by my mother's parents and grandparents and now is where my cousin's children live. But it isn't where my mother grew up and she never lived in the same town as her parents after she reached the age of twenty.

Unlike some people who can count the generations that their families have dwelt in the same place, our families have tended to move about from time to time. Having a bit of the nomad in us isn't a bad thing, however. We have learned that home is more than just an address or a specific building. Home is any place where family and friends gather.

And family is not a static entity. Children are born and grow up and meet friends and become married and move out into the world and have children of their own. And friendships become close enough to form traditions. Elders watch as their roles change within the family and one day leave an empty chair at the dining table. We are a mobile people and as we go from place to place the particular faces in our homes change.

So what is a home?

For me, home is the place where you are valued for being who you are. It is the place where there is no need of pretensions, you are loved and accepted for just being you. It is a place where your are given the freedom and the structure to grow up, and where you are given the grace and love to grow old.

There are many places in the world where our value is based on our ability to do work or to contribute or to perform specific tasks. There are places where we have to maintain a particular image or perform a specific role. Home is the place where our value isn't attached to the tasks we perform or the image or role we assume. We can simply be ourselves.

In our living room we have a very comfortable chair. It isn't one of the family heirlooms, it hasn't always been in our living room, but it is a very comfortable place to sit. And we also have a friendly cat, who loves to sit in your lap. Sitting in that chair with the cat in my lap is a very content feeling for me. When I am there, I feel at home.

But the best part isn't when I sit in that chair, comfortable as it is. The best part is when I see someone else in that chair sharing the comfort and joy of being in that place. When I see that, I know I am at home.

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April 14, 2009 – First Paddle



Some years I make it to the lake earlier than others, but one of the memorable events of the year is the first paddle. I usually put the canoes and kayaks away for the winter. The lakes freeze over and there isn't much opportunity to use them.

Yesterday was the day for the first paddle of 2009. The ice has been off of the lakes for some time, but I have been busy and we have had our share of spring blizzards this year. But yesterday was busy. The day after Easter is usually quite laid back for us as we rest and recover from a busy schedule. I took my time getting ready and loading up the kayak and gear.

We have a plastic kayak, somewhat pejoratively called "tupper boat" because of my general preference for wooden boats. However, the plastic boat is nearly unbreakable and good for encounters with ice and rocks and forgiving for an out-of-shape paddler. Last year, I had taken my long sea kayak out for the first paddle and although it is a very stable boat, I pushed off from the dock and then leaned back to grab my paddle. The combination of the boat moving away from the dock, my leaning toward it, and not having a paddle to brace meant that I did an inadvertent splash into the water. I didn't go all the way under, but it wasn't a moment of grace and the digital camera in my life jacket pocket got dunked and was ruined by the adventure. So this year I started out with a smaller boat and took my pictures from shore and headed out without a camera.

I wasn't the first to make it to the water. There were a couple of other kayakers having a paddle and two or three fishermen were out on the water. Jack and Arie LaCroix were

there with a sleek shiny powerboat which they launched and took a couple of turns about the lake. I don't know if it was a winter project getting its sea trials, the first test of the new inventory for this year, a sales demonstration or perhaps power boaters get spring fever like the rest of us. Anyway they weren't on the water long and I was soon able to paddle away from others and have a large portion of the lake to myself.

The lake was deliciously full. Launching was easy. I didn't bother to go to the boat ramp, just walked down to the shore and didn't even get mud on my feet. There was a light breeze so the lake wasn't quite smooth, but there wasn't much chop, Even paddling hard into the breeze the bow wake wasn't enough to splash onto my face. I am a bit out of shape, so I paddled lightly, but soon crossed the lake. I noticed a big old snag, that used to be a great eagle tree had fallen over. Its roots had no dirt on them at all, but had taken a huge piece of rock off of the place where it once stood. Another snag had lots its top, almost half of its height. But there were others, still standing, all bare of eagles. I soon reached a cove on the south side of the lake, near the campground. There was some ice over there, in the shade and the snow was down to the water in some places.

Kayaks are fun for playing on the ice, so I took some runs at the ice in places where the water was lapping over it. I could get about a boat length on top of the ice before losing momentum. Then the boat would break through and I'd be back in the water. It isn't a very efficient ice breaker, just a fun way to play. After exploring all of the cove, I paused to eat a sandwich that I had brought along. The mallards were in clusters and were lean after the winter. They would let me approach to within about 30 feet or so and then take off without disturbing the water at all. They made a little noise. The geese were the complainers, honking and paddling about. If I came too close they'd just paddle over to the edge of the lake and waddle up on the shore complaining all the while.

I decided to paddle up the inlet to see what the beavers were doing. Last year one of their dams washed out and they had started a new lodge as well as a smaller dam on a side channel of the stream near the place where a big tree has fallen across the inlet and provides the starting point for a good dam. The great blue herons were in the cattails as I started to paddle up the inlet. I saw four in all, each flushed into flight with much splashing and squawking. They would fly a slow circle and return to a place near their starting point as I paddled by.

Apparently the beavers were experiencing construction delays. I couldn't see much progress from last summer, but the water was quite a bit higher so some of their work was probably submerged. I was able to paddle all the way up tot he tree, with the current getting stronger as I went. I stopped to eat the second half of my sandwich and enjoy the quiet as I drifted slowly downstream toward the lake. After stowing the container I had for my sandwich, I stretched out my legs inside the boat. I was surprised at how cold the hull was. The water must be only a few degrees above freezing.

It was time to head back for the car. I kept scanning the skies for eagles, but hadn't yet seen any. Then I saw one, just a speck at first on the ridge of the distant hill. He swooped down toward me and made a tight 720 degree turn straight over my head. Two full circles about a hundred feet up. Then, without any apparent effort, he rose in effortless flight and headed back for the hilltop. For the rest of my paddle, I could spot two mature bald eagles way up high. I guess that for them the flying was better than the fishing and they stayed up high, just occasionally dropping over the lake to see what was below. I never saw them make a dive for a fish.

By the time I made it back to the north shore I had been sitting in the kayak for two hours. Most of the time I had been paddling, but not very hard, just the right kind of workout for a first paddle. The weather was just right, warm enough to be comfortable, cool enough that I didn't feel a need to remove my paddling jacket.

Although I have don it hundreds of times and often on the same lake, I continue to be amazed and surprised at how refreshing a bit of paddling is for me. I breathe the fresh air and look at the wonders of the natural world. I allow my mind to wander and I forget about my worries. It is a great gift to have the use of a canoe or kayak on a warm spring day.

After I loaded the boat on the roof of the car, I sat on the back bumper changing out of my still dray paddling shoes. A couple of Canadian Geese waddled up to check me out and see if I had any of my lunch to share. I informed them that I had eaten all of it, but I'm not sure they understood me. I couldn't catch a single word in their chatter as they waddled across the parking lot. There didn't appear to be any other potential donors for their cause, just two pickup trucks belonging to the fishermen that were still out on the lake. I gave them wide birth as I pulled out of the lot. I didn't want to make them run or fly. They seemed content to waddle about on the ground. I guess they hadn't gotten word from the eagles, who were still enjoying the view from far above.

The day couldn't have been any better.

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April 15, 2009 – The Green Machine



My father was an entrepreneur. He was involved in several different business ventures over the years. For 25 years he owned and operated the John Deere dealership in our town. We also had a small feed warehouse operation as a part of Big Timber Farm Supply. There was always a supply of green and yellow paint around. There were kids who had red wagons in our town. Mine was green with yellow wheels and John Deere decals on the sides. There were several green and yellow bicycles around our home. Our shop did a lot of repairs and refurbished used machines for resale. Often they were re-painted as a part of the process. My dad used to enjoy running a used Ford tractor through the shop and having it emerge in John Deere colors. They were a bit of a novelty item and often sold to truck drivers passing through our town. The store sold John Deere toys as well and dad accepted trade-ins. Metal toys that could be repaired were repaired and donated to "Toys for Tots." It wasn't unusual for them to sport new paint jobs. Over the years the shop owned pickup trucks that sported a variety of different paint schemes featuring John Deere green and yellow.

But the green and yellow paint has been a part of my past for several years until last week when I stopped by our local John Deere dealer and picked up a couple of cans of paint and a small decal. The project was a second hand walker that I picked up for my mother. Diabetic neuropathy has made one of her legs a bit weaker than the other and the result is that her balance isn't as good as it once was. A couple of hospitalizations this year has meant that she is a bit weaker than her usual and the result is that she needs to use the walker wherever she goes. Her wonderfully independent spirit sometimes chafes at the notion of being tied down and we find her, from time to time, in

a different room from her walker. She is quite good about using furniture and other available things to aid her balance, but her basic safety demands that we keep the walker available at all times.

So yesterday, when she came home from the hospital, we were ready to show off her new green machine. After several years of not having a John Deere around the place, we're back in business. Well, that isn't quite accurate. I have a John Deere lawnmower and my mom still owns a 2040 diesel tractor, but it is in Montana and mostly operated by my brother these days. Mom hasn't driven the tractor in years.

We've spent a bit of time in nursing homes and know quite a few people who use walkers to get around, but we know of no other genuine John Deere walker in our area. She should stand out in almost any crowd.

The truth is that there are a lot of things about growing older that aren't much fun. Remaining healthy requires increasing assistance from doctors. A large portion of one's life is invested in appointments with various medical professionals and treatments. One has to pay more attention to eating and the list of medicines continues to grow. There are some days when one's energy isn't as good as it used to be and there are a lot of things that used to be fun that are now off limits. The losses that come with aging don't come all at once, so their is a sort of continuing grief that comes from accumulating loss after loss. Friends die, family members die, retirement means loss of job and sometimes position in the community. A beloved home must be sold and a move made to smaller quarters. Less space means less possessions. The string of losses continues and increasingly as one ages the losses include loss of independence and increasing need for assistance.

If we didn't laugh about it, we'd get depressed.

But there is a lot of joy and laughter in our lives. Having my mother live in our home and having Susan's father close by are blessings in many different ways. And one of the blessings is that we genuinely enjoy each other. And we laugh a lot.

Having teased my mother for years, it is only appropriate that sometimes the tables are turned these days.

John Deere used to have a marketing slogan, "The Green Machine is on the Move." I wish I had kept one of the caps. But for us, the green machine in our home is not a sign of dependence, but rather one of independence. Without the walker mother would be dependent upon others for simple journeys about the house. She would have to ask for assistance to get up from her chair or to go from her bedroom to the kitchen. The walker increases rather than decreases her independence. It allows her to move safely around the house on her own. And it allows her to keep her mobility. The green machine is on the move.

I expect that the shiny new paint job will show a few scratches and scrapes as the months and years go by. That will be wonderful. Hopefully each scratch on the walker is one that is not on my mother. After all, John Deere is in the business of manufacturing farm machinery. The machines are designed to be used, gotten muddy, and occasionally scratched and dented. They are designed for utility, not appearance.

Appearance is, however, a bonus. And having a green machine around our house lifts our spirits and brings a smile to the faces of visitors.

And, the cans of green and yellow spray paint are far from empty. It doesn't take much paint to cover a walker. Hmm . . . I'm thinking of other things that could use a fresh coat of paint. . .

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April 16, 2009 – Springtime



A few degrees of temperature can make a big difference. It rained most of the night last night. I'm sure there was some snow in the higher elevations, but unlike the previous weeks, we got rain. I even noticed that there was some mud on the car yesterday. It was real mud, not that greasy gray, calcium chloride filled goo that comes from the streets. It was just plain dirt and water.

We've had plenty of moisture and the combination of the melting snow, full reservoirs and falling rain will probably result in some flooding in areas, but for now the rain seems pleasant. There is a fresh smell that comes from the hills as the temperatures begin to rise. We haven't had enough warm days for the soil temperatures to come up, but I have noticed the grass starting to turn green and there are new shoots in the areas where I seeded grass last fall. It won't be long before time to put the snowblower away and get the lawn mower tuned up for another year.

This probably isn't the driest place we have lived and this certainly isn't our driest year, but we have spent most of our lives in places that get small amounts of rain. As such we have grown to appreciate the moisture and even the few inconveniences caused by rain don't seem to us to be much of a problem. For the most part my rain jacket is worn when I visit Costa Rica or head out to the coast for a visit. It will last me for many years since I don't wear it around home very much at all.

That means that a bit of rain is a treat. Life is good lying in bed, listening to the water running out of the downspout, hearing the gentle splash of drops hitting the sidewalk,

smelling the freshness of wet pine trees. And waking to a world that has been gently washed by the rain is a good feeling. Of course I know that the forecast is for sunny weather to return over the weekend. We rarely have precipitation that lasts for more than a few days.

One has to be careful of spring fever in this country. We've had spring blizzards in May. And even on warm springs setting out the garden too early can result in frost damage to tender young plants. It would be prudent to wait a couple more weeks before getting into too much planting. But the urge is there. We've been eating store-bought lettuce for months. And we're ready for the produce of our own garden. We've never fed ourselves with the things we grow, we simply supplement the food we buy with a few treats from the garden, but I added to the garden this year. The area inside the deer-proof fence is about double what we planted last year and I hauled several loads of garden soil to build up and level the planting area. I can add mulch and till the soil any time now.

But I won't be working in the garden today. It is actually too muddy. I need to let it dry for a couple of sunny days. But we live on a hill and our soil is very porous. It won't take long for things to dry out.

I guess we're ready for springtime. It isn't that we've suffered over the winter. Even though we set a record for total snowfall, the storms had plenty of open days between them and we didn't have extended periods where it was difficult to get around. But it is good to feel things changing. A couple of weeks ago we were shoveling. This morning I can hear the birds starting to stir outside of my window.

The taxes are paid and the proper forms filed. Easter has passed with the extra efforts by so many in the life of the church. The time has come for a little cleaning and organizing. We can open up the widows and let the breeze blow through the house. It isn't just the weather that is changing, so too our moods are changing. We had just a little more sickness in our house than usual over the winter and we're ready to get outdoors, get healthy, and enjoy the beauty of this place a little bit more.

As we have grown older, we have noticed that the pace of our life doesn't vary with the seasons as much as it once did. When we were students, we turned from schoolwork to summer jobs each year. And in the early years of our careers we served congregations where programs and activities slowed during the summer. That isn't as much the case in this congregation. We have activities year-round and keep busy with lots of events during the summer. But summer also means vacation. We'll be taking personal time for a trip when we travel to the United Church of Christ's General Synod this summer.

So for today, I'm enjoying the gentle, refreshing rain. It is truly a gift from above. And I'm letting my spring fever go just a little bit. And even if I don't get out to do work in the garden, I'll probably find time to wander around the yard just to see what is coming up.

Enjoy this day whatever the weather brings. Even when we don't notice it, the times are changing and a new season is emerging.

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April 17, 2009 – Applauding Barenboim



Photo: Sesesh Bayat courtesy of Teldea Classics International.

Daniel Barenboim received a rapturous standing ovation at the Cairo Opera House last night. And well she should have. He had just played Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 8 in C Minor. His signature style on the piece takes a faster tempo than most classical pianists, with his fingers fairly flying on the third movement, Rondo. It is stunning and thrilling. He can take your breath away, even listening to a recording. Live it is an experience that cannot be forgotten. He has played that sonata a lot of times. Daniel Barenboim was a child prodigy and has been thrilling audiences around the world for years. The concert began with him on the conductor's podium with the thrilling sounds of Beethoven's fifth symphony, with its signature opening rhythm, morse code for the letter "V," that has come to be associated with the allied invasion of Normandy during World War II.

Barenboim is such a brilliant musician that thunderous applause follows him wherever he travels. That he is applauded is hardly news. That he performed in Cairo is incredible. Prominent Israeli musicians simply are not invited to perform in Cairo and most would refuse, were they to be invited. Daniel Barenboim is different. It was his third performance in the Arab world. He performed in Morocco in 2003 and the West Bank city of Ramallah in 2005. Concerts planned for Qatar and Egypt were called off in January because of safety concerns during the Israeli offensive against the Gaza Strip.

Barenboim was born in Argentina, but moved to Israel at the age of nine. A loyal Israeli citizen, he has long been a supporter of Palestinian rights. Together with the late

Palestinian-American writer Edward Said, Barenboim formed the joint Arab-Israeli orchestra, the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, in 1999. The express purpose of the orchestra is to further cultural exchange between young people in Israel and the Arab world and to use music as a bridge to peace in a region where so many other peace initiatives have failed.

His performance was widely criticized. In Egypt, some critics feel Egypt should resist closer ties with Israel until a final peace deal is reached with the Palestinians. In Israel Barenboim's critics said that the time is not right for outreach and cultural exchange. They see his performances as unearned rewards. The always courageous Barenboim answered his critics directly. He has long asserted that bringing musicians together is not a political project, but a human one. "For 60 years they have been trying with force and they haven't solved anything," he said during rehearsals for the concert. "Every military victory of Israel has left it politically weaker."

"I hope very much that this, my first visit to Egypt, will maybe allow another way of thinking to come."

Barenboim has encountered critics before. He was criticized when he conducted the Berlin Philharmonic. While many applauded, some left the hall shouting "fascist!" when he broke the taboo by conducting a piece by Wagner at an Israeli festival in 2001. Wagner was Adolf Hitler's favorite composer and inspired Nazi cultural propaganda. There has long been an unwritten ban on his music being played in Israel. Barenboim is a man to break taboos and cross borders. His innovative musical work has stunned and shocked audiences for decades.

He is not immune to criticism. A plan to perform "Die Walkuere" by Wagner was scrapped and he conducted compositions by Stravinsky instead. He is honest and speaking from his heart when he says that he does not want to offend anyone.

But he will not give up his quest for peace and for human dignity for all, including those named by his country as enemies. His views earned him an honorary Palestinian Authority Passport in 2007.

The conflict in the Middle East is not ended. The last innocent victim has not yet fallen. Emotions continue to run high and governments continue to place their people at risk. But in the midst of all of the noise and violence of war, the powerful strains of Beethoven, played with passion and intensity, skill and artistry, raise above the noise of war. And for a few moments in Cairo last night the sounds of music transported the audience to a renewed vision of peace.

The world's best-equipped and most well-funded military forces have failed to bring peace to that region. Presidents and ambassadors and other skilled diplomats have failed. Perhaps music can accomplish what no others are able to do.

And even if peace does not come, I applaud Daniel Barenboim. I applaud his courage and his vision. I applaud his talent and energy. I applaud his commitment to reach out to others with his music. I applaud his gifts of his heart.

I was not in Cairo last night, though in some ways I wish I had been. But I am overcome and amazed that I have been granted the privilege of being alive at the same time as such human genius and greatness. To have shared life in the same generation with Daniel Barenboim is a privilege. And if he can stand up and speak out for peace in this world, surely I also can.

When the applause has died and the musicians have returned to their homes may we all renew our commitment to finding paths to peace in our violence-torn world. It is not a political project. It is a human project. Bravo!

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April 18, 2009 – Ingredients



It seems like there were a lot of people who were upset at the grocery store yesterday. A car behind me honked their horn because I was delaying traffic in the parking lot waiting for an elderly woman to push her cart to her car. Cars were sparring for parking places close to the front door, so parked at the edge of the lot, leaving several empty parking places for those who might be in more of a hurry than I.

The store was busy inside, with carts blocking the aisles as shoppers looked for the items on their lists. For some reason, I wasn't particularly in a hurry. I was heading home after a day's work at the end of the week. I wouldn't have needed to stop at the grocery store at all except that I hadn't planned out the menu for the evening in advance and I wanted to pick up a few things for the particular dish I planned to cook.

It always amuses me what people buy at the store. And since there were lines at the checkout, there was time to watch others unload their carts. One shopper seemed to like a particular brand of foods. There were a lot of boxes of frozen items with the words "Just Right" on them. There was almost nothing in that cart that we buy when we go to the store, so I wasn't familiar with the brand or with the items. One box, however, caught my eye. It was a box of frozen garlic toast. That seems like a strange item to me. If you have to thaw out the garlic toast, wouldn't it be just as quick to take a piece of bread, spread margarine and sprinkle garlic salt on it and pop it in the toaster oven? I understand buying prepared foods for convenience, but frozen toast seems like an inconvenience. Of course I don't think like the other shopper.

One shopper has one or more very well-fed cats. There must have been at least a dozen cans of fancy cat food in her cart. It struck me that she might be one of the people you read about who purchases cat food for human consumption because of limited funds, but if so, she was splurging in the fresh strawberries and store-bought cookies. We buy our cat food at the feed store and I am not familiar with the selection of foods for pets that they carry at the grocery store, but I am afraid that if our cats saw the fancy things that other cats get they would feel deprived. Our cats are complainers in the first place. One insists that the water dish have precisely 3/4 of an inch of water in order for her to drink. I comply because it is quieter that way. Imagine if she found out that there are dozens of varieties of food. She's been eating the same brand of cat food since she was a kitten - the same brand the vet recommended when our kids got their first cat years ago. I never thought that cats might develop a taste for variety.

Almost everyone in line was purchasing bread. They might find it strange that I purchase yeast in the jar. It is a lot less expensive than the packets and you can get just the amount you want if you buy it in the jar. We seldom run out of yeast at our home. I bake bread once a week. It is not that we don't buy bread from the bakery or the store, but it certainly seems like we buy less than most shoppers. I guess baking bread is time consuming, but because you can do other things while you are baking I don't notice the time that much. I mix up the yeast and water and flour and then it sits while I do something else. I add some honey and a bit of shortening and some more flour, kneed it for a few minutes and then go off on another chore while I wait for it to rise. It has to rise again after I form the loaves and it takes 25 minutes to bake. Although the process takes 3 or 4 hours from the time I start until the loaves emerge from the oven, there is only about 10 or 15 minutes of actual work. The rest is waiting. And everyone in our house likes the smell of baking bread.

A mechanic once told me that nobody fixes anything any more. "They just replace parts." He could remember when it was common for a repair shop to employ welders and drill presses and lathes to repair things that got broken. The corner garage used to overhaul engines. They might take the heads to the machine shop to have the valve seats ground or take a block out to have the cylinder walls honed, but being able to tear down an engine, fix it and put it back together was a common skill. These days most shops simply remove an engine and replace it. Rebuilding engines is a specialty reserved for others.

Our food purchases also reflect a change in our culture. People assemble menus from prepared selections. You can buy vegetables ready to steam in the bag in the microwave. Never mind the fact that it isn't any quicker than steaming fresh vegetables on the stove top. It is convenient. The store where we buy groceries sells "ready to microwave" potatoes for baking in the microwave. How long does it take to scrub a potato and poke a few holes in it with a fork? We don't often bake potatoes in the microwave, but we've done it. We used ordinary potatoes and didn't seem to have any problems.

I think, also, that people don't often keep their homes stocked with staples. I have to remember to go to a different store to buy flour because ten pound bags are the largest sold in one grocery store. Ten pounds doesn't last us a month and we usually have both whole wheat and regular flour on hand. With so many grocery stores open every day of the week, people tend to shop for a single meal or just a couple of days at a time. There's nothing wrong with that, folks in cities believe that it is the way to have the freshest food. Purchase small amounts and minimize the storage of food. But those of us who are used to living a bit farther from the store are used to having enough on hand to feed the family for a week if we get snowed in.

We still buy ingredients for our kitchen. And we keep quite a few of them on hand. It is a habit. And like a lot of our habits we got them from growing up in homes where there were routines and habits as well. I bake bread in much the same way as my mother did. Unless I'm trying to be fancy the recipe doesn't vary from week to week. I always rub butter on the top of the loaves as I take them out of the oven because that's what my mother did when I was a child. I don't know if it makes the bread any better, it is just the way we do it at our house.

I suppose that other shoppers think that my choices at the grocery store are strange. I often am purchasing ingredients for a lot of meals in a single trip. And there are a lot of ingredients that we buy just to have on hand. We don't often make up our menus before going to the store. And at our house, if you can't remember what is on the list and you didn't bring it with you, you always buy peanut butter because if we aren't out of it, we soon will be. It used to be that way with milk, but the kids have grown up and I've even been known to buy milk in 1/2 gallon cartons these days.

I might make spaghetti for supper tonight. We have all of the ingredients on hand. That is if my family will accept garlic bread that is made up at home instead of purchased from the frozen foods department at the store.

But please, don't tell my cats about all of the different kinds of canned cat food. The one would forget it anyway, but we have one cat that might develop the need to try every different brand if she thought she could get me to buy it for her.

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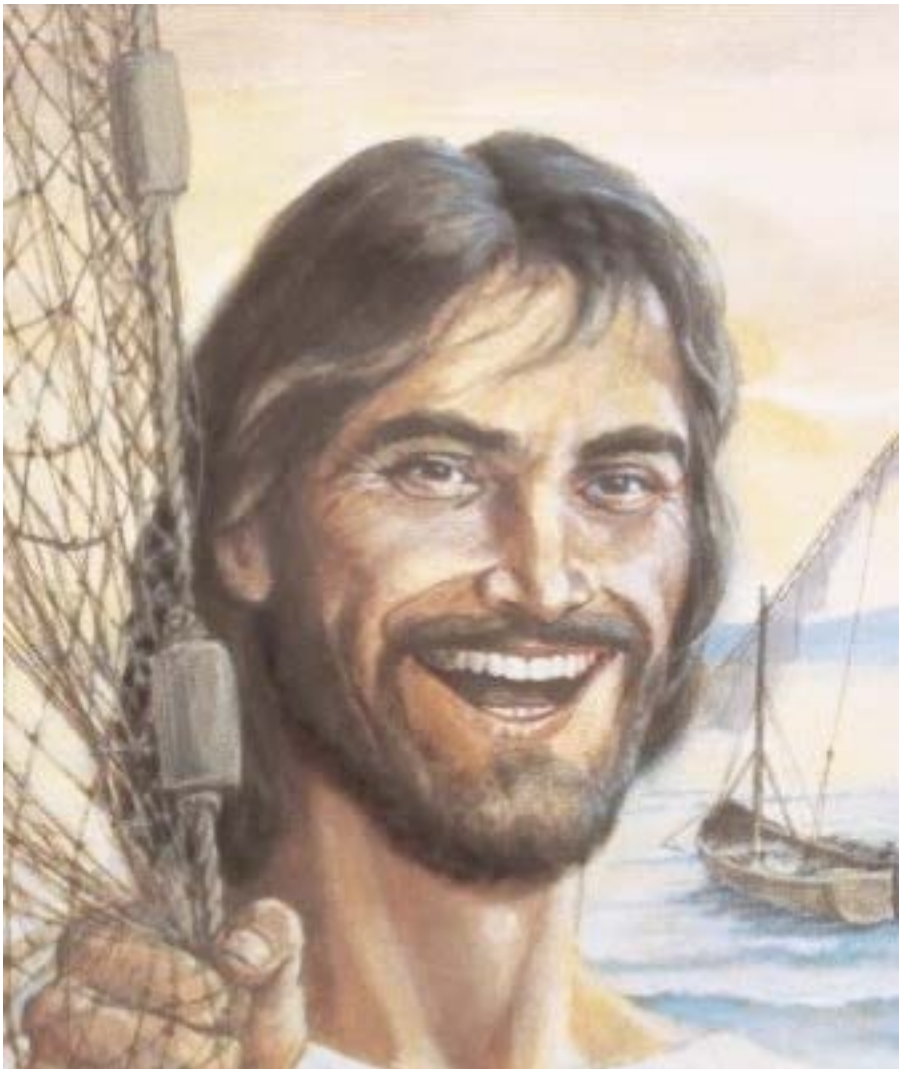
April 19, 2009 – Holy Humor



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The story goes that three congregations pooled their efforts to host a big revival. The guest preacher was selected, the tent was erected, and there were nights of preaching and prayer meetings. After the revival, the pastors of the three congregations got together to compare notes on the event.

“It was a great revival!” said the first, “Our congregation gained four new members.”

“I have to agree,” said the second. “We gained six new members.”

“It was better than great,” said the third. “We got rid of our ten most troublesome members.”

There is much in the season of Easter that is joyful. The news that death is not the end, the triumph of life over death, the discovery of the future of the church despite the crushing power of the Roman Empire - these are just some of the things that have brought a smile to the faces of Christians from the very beginning of the Christian church. Somewhere in the Greek Church, in early days, the practice of a holy humor Sunday began. The concept was pretty simple. The resurrection of Jesus comes as the ultimate practical joke. It has all of the elements: the surprise of the unexpected, the look of shock on the faces of the unsuspecting, the accomplishment of the joke without anyone getting hurt. What joke could possibly be better?

The tradition of holy humor involved minor practical jokes, often played on priests or ministers. It didn't quite take hold in the church and over the years evolved into a totally secular holiday, April Fool's Day, with very few remembering the origins of the day.

In the 1980's the Fellowship of Merry Christians was formed for the express purpose of looking at the lighter side of religious life. Since that time, many Christian congregations have adopted the tradition of celebrating the second Sunday of Easter as Holy Humor Day. In most congregations, the tradition includes telling tasteful jokes and poking a bit of fun at pastors and church leaders. It is an opportunity to let some of the stuffiness out of the church and enjoy the positive effects of laughter.

Not everyone has found Holy Humor to be to their liking. In our congregation, which is made up mostly of fun-loving folks, there are a few who think that jokes in church are some how beneath the dignity that should be given to formal worship. They have found deep meaning in their faith and in the practices of the church and somehow making jokes seems to decrease the value they have found in worship. A couple of folks have suggested that we might skip holy humor Sunday entirely.

But a church is never a gathering of people who agree on all points - at least none of the congregations I have served have been. We have lots of different perspectives and points of view. And worship strives to reach out to the needs of all.

Furthermore, at its core, worship is not about us in the first place. It is about God. And I suspect that God has a deep sense of humor. Remember the story in Genesis where Sarah laughs at the news that she will have a baby? God has the family name that baby Isaac, which means "he laughs." The laughter didn't stop with Sarah's reaction, but became, rather the father of God's chosen people. You could say that we were born in laughter and are all descendants of laughter.

"Wow!" Bill told his friend Isaac. "Check this out! The Bible says here that the Israelites crossed over the Red Sea on foot!"

"Well," replied Isaac, "That's actually the Sea of Reeds, which at that point was actually very shallow, so they probably crossed over in just two feet of water."

“Oh,” said Bill, and continued to read, disappointed. “Hey, wait! Check this out! It says here that the entire Egyptian army drowned in just two feet of water!”

There are a million jokes about church, faith, and the people who practice it. And most of them have been told and re-told so many times that readers of this blog have probably already heard them. Still, we enjoy a good laugh from time to time. And a pleasant surprise can still bring a smile to our faces.

It is not disrespectful.

We continue to stand in awe of God’s amazing creativity throughout all of history. We stand in awe of the sacrifice of our forebears in the church. We stand in awe of the power and majesty of God. And we worship God with genuine reverence. But we need, on occasion, to be reminded not to take ourselves too seriously.

While touring Israel, a couple of South Dakotans thought they’d rent a boat to row on the Sea of Galilee.

“That’ll be a hundred dollars,” said the man at the boat rental.

“A hundred dollars? That’s outrageous! at home we could rent a Pontoon Boat for a whole day for less than that and we wouldn’t have to row!”

“Ah, but this is the lake *Jesus* walked on,” the merchant replied.

Said the South Dakotan, “At those prices, I can see why!”

Here’s hoping we don’t take ourselves too seriously today and that we find a way to laugh at the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. Happy Holy Humor Day!

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April 20, 2009 – The Piano



Bluthner pianos are relatively rare, especially in the United States. The pianos are made by hand in Leipzig, Germany by the company started by Julius Bluthner in 1853. The first Bluthner grand piano to travel to the United States came aboard the famous airship Hindenberg. The piano served for the first broadcast of a piano recital from the air. World War II broght an end to the export of Bluthner pianos to the west. During the years of the cold war and the division of Germany, Bluthner pianos were not imported into the United States. The tradition of craftsmanship survived the nationalization of the company and subsequent return of the company to private ownership. The firm remained in the control of the Bluthner family, with leadership passing from Julius to Dr. Rudolph bluthner-Hasessler, the son-in-law, to Ingbert Bluther, who succeeded his father and continues to lead the company with his sons Christian and Knut. The family continues to limit the number of pianos produced in order to insure hand-crafted manufacturing and continuing excellence in tonal character. Bluthner instruments rank among the best in the world. There are very few 9'2" concert grands in the United States.

Through a remarkable set of circumstances, one has come into the possession of our congregation. The piano serves us as an instrument for worship and for concerts, including appearances by touring pianists.

Yesterday our piano got a good workout. In the morning worship service, Jazz pianist Justin Speck played two of his original compositions as well as a series of improvisations as parts of the children's message and a musical dialogue with me for

the sermon. Last night pianist Pierce Emata took the piano through its paces with a concert that lasted nearly three hours and featured works that displayed virtuosity on the piano. The concert concluded with Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue.

The piano earns high praise from the artists who play it. It's unique design includes a fourth string for each pitch of the upper octaves that is set just above the area where the hammer strikes and rings in harmonic vibration with the other three strings which are struck by the hammer. This provides a brilliance in the high notes that is unequaled by other concert pianos.

It is clear that the piano is not an instrument for individual ownership, but rather a trust for our community to treasure and to pass on to subsequent generations. We seek to be faithful to that trust by caring for the piano and making it available to our community for public performances. This week it will be the accompanying instrument for the annual Young Vocal Artists scholarship competition. It will be featured in a half dozen concerts that are already on the schedule for the coming year.

Although we were enabled to purchase the piano at a substantial discount through the generosity of the instrument's owners, we are aware that it has high value. It's appraisal for insurance purposes made us sit up and take notice. Ostentatious displays of wealth are not in character for our congregation. We are a practical group of people, far more interested in public service than possessions. In the 14 years that I have served the congregation as a pastor we have continued to put air conditioning of our sanctuary and fellowship hall on the back burner as mission and outreach have been a higher priority. Twice in my time as pastor congregational votes have placed outreach projects ahead of the purchase of items for our church in the priorities of the congregation. Although we are pleased with the piano and proud to offer it to our community for entertainment and artistic expression, we are almost embarrassed when asked about the ownership of the instrument.

The church with the large outdoor cross is also the church with the gorgeous concert piano in the minds of chamber music enthusiasts in our community.

But for us the choice has not been presented as an either/or decision between music and service. Our congregation has pursued a both/and approach, sensing that artistry and outreach go hand in hand. The piano has been featured in special events such as the Costa Rica big event, where we raised significant funds for continuing ministry with our sister church in Los Guido. It may well be that the extravagance of the piano reminds us of our obligation to be extravagant in our generosity to others.

However we justify it, the instrument yesterday provided two distinct and different opportunities for listeners to be transported beyond the present. In music contemporary and historic we experienced the power of the arts to stretch our imagination and to open our lives to that which lies beyond the limitations of the present moment. The intimate

connection between the arts and religious imagination was once again demonstrated as we sat in the room and listened to the piano in the hands of a master.

Some of the most challenging words of our Bible are also some of the most artistic. The people are called to return to faithfulness through the power of poetry. Hebrew Scripture scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann refers to the prophets as poets. The glory of God and the challenge of clearly articulating God's message demand careful selection of words and artistry in the rhythm of language. It took poets to communicate truth to power and call our people back into relationship with God. If we do not challenge ourselves, we are tempted to think too small. The realm of God lies far beyond our ability to imagine and only through the engagement of the arts are we able to communicate a portion of God's call for humans.

So we treasure and care for the piano understanding that it is not something we posses, but rather something that we have been called to provide for future generations of faithful people as they seek God through music, thought and lives of faithful service.

May the song linger long after our time on this earth has passed.

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April 21, 2009 – Greening Up



The ground that was just a few weeks ago covered in snow is turning green. The grass is starting to look pretty good even without any attention. Around the neighborhoods power rakes are going through the lawns to stir up the mulch. If one wanted, there is almost no limit to the yard work that could be done. But I just didn't get around to yard work yesterday. I had a long list of other tasks that needed to be done. And I have found that work will wait. It won't be long before I will be out there with the mower and although I need to resist the urge to put things out into the garden too early, we're less than a month from planting the bulk of the garden for the year.

Around town the hardware stores are erecting their parking lot greenhouses and getting ready for the sales of spring plants. It's time. We've had a long winter and we are ready for some spring. The weather is fairly warm and we've been driving around with the windows down in the cars. Some of the bulb plants are up and there will be a few blossoms appearing in the flower beds today.

It is not just the yards that are turning green. The pastures and open spaces are also showing the effects of the warm sunlight on the damp ground. The deer have so many options for fresh shoots of grass that they hardly know where to turn, which makes their movements a bit less predictable. When they are on the move we need to be especially vigilant when we drive because they will appear in places that we don't expect to see them.

Its a glorious fun time to be in the hills. Most of the time we feel very fortunate to live where we do and this is especially true in the spring. I heard the coyotes singing last night. It isn't the first night we've slept with the window open, but I don't always hear the coyotes if I'm deep asleep. It's a bit early for the little pups to join the singing, but there was a spring exuberance in the sounds we heard last night. There's almost no moon showing these days. In a couple of weeks when the full moon appears I expect to hear the coyotes throughout the night.

I'm enough of a small town kid to appreciate the open spaces and the wild animals with whom we share this country. I'm glad that at this phase of my life I don't have to live in a big city with its insulation from the natural world. It is a luxury that not all of the world's people can afford. Urban living is a necessity for many. I am aware of and grateful for our good fortune.

Paying attention to the realities of this life and my present experience is one of my goals. It is easy to get caught up in the fast pace of events and to focus one's attention on the future and not fully appreciate the present. My book study group is reading a small volume on meditation that invites readers to a state of mindfulness - of being fully awake and fully aware. Although the author is Buddhist and writes of Buddhist practices, it seems to me to be very similar to the practices of our tradition, especially the disciplines of prayer and contemplation that have been taught by Christian mystics throughout the generations.

I have not been called to the life of a monastery, but I have a deep appreciation for those who choose to devote their entire lives to focused contemplation. Their practices of prayer and spirituality have much to offer to those of us who live in the complex world of family, community and church. Studying the insights of monastics serves to heighten my awareness and appreciation of my own life rather than call me to a different way of life. To the extent that I understand the concept of mindfulness, I find it to be a practice and an awareness that can be used in the midst of the everyday.

It may be that mindfulness is the opposite of multi-tasking. The simple process of doing things one at at time can be an efficient way of working. This does not mean that the other tasks are not important, but rather that by giving full attention to a single task it is accomplished completely before going on to the next. Of course, I am never fully at one extreme or the other - not quite singleminded, and not fully multi-tasking.

Life is a balance. We balance contemplation and action, prayer and service, focus and a wider view. And the different elements inform one another. We are better able to engage in prayer if we bring to the prayer our concern for others. We are better able to engage in outreach if our mission is informed by prayer. Times of intently focusing on a single task gives us the ability to perform that task later when our attention must be diverted to other things and the task still accomplished.

Achieving the balance is easier said than done. I tend to drift toward the extremes. I discover a new prayer discipline and it becomes the focus of my attention for a while. I find a new interest and I go overboard.

So there will be time for yard work soon. And the garden will be planted and outdoor chores pursued. For this day it is enough to stand outside and enjoy the subtle changes that are occurring around me. For right now it is a joy to feel the warmth of the sun and the visual treat of a world that is turning green. As I watch the sunrise of a new day and listen to the sounds of the open window I am grateful to be alive and participating in this wondrous word.

May your day afford time to appreciate the present moment without becoming overwhelmed with that which is yet to come.

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April 22, 2009 – Everyday Easter



This Easter season, I have been able to feel myself in a pattern of recovery. I didn't even know that I was in need of recovery until I started to pay attention. Oh, I knew that I had hurt my back. And I know that the physical therapy I am receiving is really helpful. I'm making great progress on my physical health. I've even lost a few pounds that I really needed to lose.

Our county has a LOSS team. LOSS stands for Local Outreach to Survivors of Suicide. Our team engages in what is called "postevention." Although most of the efforts of the Front Porch Coalition are aimed at suicide prevention, the LOSS team goes out when a suicide occurs to provide support, resources, referral and education to the survivors. We take turns being on call and attempt to always have a team able to respond within 15 minutes of a call from county dispatch. In a typical month I am on call one week, sometimes I take a second week or a few extra days when we are short of people or when others need a break. Somehow, starting on November of 2008, I happened to be on call each time the LOSS team was activated. One week our team was called out two nights in a row for two different incidents. It was just the luck of the draw or some fluke in scheduling. After week with two calls, I took some extra time off of the call schedule. There were no calls to the team in my absence. The pattern of me being on call each time there was a loss continued for a little over five months.

On Easter Sunday, amidst my own tiredness and the busyness of extra services, there was a LOSS call in our county. I wasn't on call and wasn't a part of the team that responded. It broke the cycle that was beginning to get oppressive. I know that it

doesn't change anything. There are still too many deaths by suicide in our community. Our team of responders is still a bit too small. We go out on a few too many calls. And for each family who loses a loved one to suicide the grief and loss are overwhelming. One death from suicide is too many.

But the simple event of our community having such a death and dealing with it without my presence was an important event for me. I am not indispensable. There are others who are capable and compassionate and ready to assist when there is a need. I don't have to be ready to respond at a moment's notice every time there is a loss.

The call schedule remains the same. I had a week of being on call right after Easter and there were no calls that week. It will happen, sooner or later, that it will be my time to respond to another loss. But one day I didn't have to respond when the need arose.

Grief is cumulative. You never get over death and loss. You get through them. Grief has amazing healing powers. It helps us deal with pain and sorrow and separation. It empowers us to work through shock and denial. But each grief is added to all of the other grief we have experienced in our lives. Even though we are trained as professionals to limit our emotional involvement with grieving families, we cannot be a part of their lives without being affected by their grief. We grieve too. And the loss team needs to grieve in different ways and a different pace than the families we serve. It is our role to offer strength and guidance and support. The last thing a grieving family needs is for our grief to become a burden for them.

So some weeks I save up my tears for another time. Sometimes I need to cry when the time of crying has passed for others. Sometimes it takes me longer to deal with my grief than others. I don't mean to complain. Such a complaint would be unfair. As a pastor living in this time I deal with far less death and grief than one who serves in a war zone or an impoverished community with inadequate resources. Our community experiences death at a slower rate than many communities in this world. And I have a privileged position in the community. There are many who experience far more death and grief than I.

Nonetheless, the Easter season, so far, has handed me a break from dealing with death. It is really just a product of random luck. Death continues to occur and it continues to be very real. And our faith continues to proclaim that death is not the end. Our faith continues to give us the ability to see life's triumph in the midst of tragedy. Easter does not deny the reality of death - it celebrates the reality that faith, hope and love continue even in the times of death.

So yesterday, when I was looking at pictures for this blog, I found a picture taken last summer at a rural cemetery. After years of drought, the rains came last year - almost too much rain for some parts of our state. And the grass and flowers erupted in the little cemetery. They were irrepressible. The crosses reminded of the losses that had

occurred but the wildflowers reminded us of the life that remains. This Easter has been a season of personal healing for me. I have once again been reminded that we can define our lives in terms of how much remains instead of in terms of how much has been lost.

In the final analysis this is a joyful life-giving place for me and for others. The list of things for which we give thanks is significant - sometimes overwhelming. We are fortunate in so many ways.

I am grateful that Easter is a season and not just a day that is here and gone. Our faith is more than a puff of emotion - it is a powerful reality in the face of a world with very real tragedy. As I write this morning my window is filling with color as the sun rises over another beautiful day. It is yet another Easter - an everyday Easter. And I feel grateful for the bounty of this day.

May you experience Easter every day.

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April 23, 2009 – Above the Clouds



The skies were dramatic yesterday. It was a perfect day for cloud watching around here. In the late afternoon the puffy little clouds began to gather together and churn overhead. As the sun began to sink a bit lower in the sky, it was reflecting off of the clouds and making them shimmer in the sky. It brought back memories of childhood summers when we would lie in the grass or sit in our treehouse and stare at the sky. You can see how the ancients formed an image of there being a place in the clouds where God dwells. Floating in the air and walking among the clouds are prominent images in describing heaven. It makes sense in its own way. People who lived in a time before radio and television and before printing presses and books for recreational reading, had more time to just sit and contemplate the world in which they lived.

And when they contemplated the mystery of death they determined that the reward for a life well-lived must involve and afterlife in a beautiful place. And when they looked at the skies, there was a great beauty that attracted them. Their thinking wasn't all that different than our own. If God is everywhere, the realm of God wouldn't be constrained by the limits we experience. God could overcome the forces of gravity and establish a place for the people wherever God chose.

Their cosmology wasn't accurate. We now know that there is no dome covering the earth that separates the waters above from the waters below. We understand that rain comes from the water vapor suspended in the clouds and when temperature and dew point come together precipitation occurs. We have traveled in airplanes that fly above the clouds and looked down at their tops and understand a bit a of their nature. And we

have come to understand that the size of the universe is much larger than the ancients could understand.

But we still ponder some of the fundamental questions of which the ancients thought. What happens after we die? We know from direct observation that human bodies are no longer infused with spirit after death. We ask ourselves where has that spirit gone? We understand what we do with the body by following our funeral practices, but we know that the lifeless remains that we bury or cremate are not the totality of the one we loved and with whom we shared life.

We can concede, at least intellectually, that spirit does not occupy physical space and that heaven doesn't have to be a physical place in order to be real. But we cannot let go of the thoughts of the realm of God as a particular space with height and breadth and depth all its own. Even when we confess that time and distance are human constructs that we have devised for the understanding of this life, we imagine eternal life to also posses qualities of space and time. We are so caught up in our way of thinking of time as having past, present and future, that we cannot fully conceptualize life without time. So we allow our imaginations to create images of a place that we know isn't a place at all.

Pearly white gates, streets paved in gold, life without pain, no sense of grief or of guilt. This seems to us to be the perfect way of living. We rarely entertain the thought that from God's perspective there might be no difference between heaven and the place we now live.

At least yesterday afternoon, when I took a break from working and allowed my mind to wander, it did seem that this universe in which we live is incredibly beautiful - more beautiful than we can imagine. When I look at the pictures taken by space telescopes of distant stars and the vast expanses of the galaxies, I am struck by their incredible beauty. When I simply stop and look at the world in which we live, I am struck by the incredible beauty of it all.

If yesterday afternoon were all that there is to this life, its beauty would be incalculable.

There is a bit of the eternal in the everyday. We keep catching glimpses of that which is beyond our ability to comprehend.

I don't expect to think my way to heaven. That is I am convinced that I am not capable of understanding all that there is to understand. Though I form mental images of the nature of God, God continues to be beyond my capacity to imagine. Thought I begin to grasp the concept of eternity, I am intensely aware of my limits and my finitude. I won't somehow come into a perfect understanding of God and of the nature of this universe through the power of cognition.

At the same time it is deliciously wonderful to think about God. There is great pleasure in attempting the impossible - of organizing our thoughts and perceptions into a mental pattern that begins to describe part of the nature of God. Perhaps what is so attractive about theology is the sheer joy of trying to organize our thoughts around a concept that is so big. If it is so easy to fall in love with the idea of God, just imagine how much more the reality of God transcends that idea.

I look at the pictures I took of the sky yesterday and am immediately struck that they are just images - they are crude reminders of a reality that is far more beautiful than what I see when I gaze at the pictures. God, and the universe God created, is only crudely imaged in the best of our theological thoughts and books. We have not come close to creating a system of understanding the nature of God. But our theologies do contain images that serve as reminders of something that is far more vast and incomprehensible than the words we use to talk about God.

So, from time to time, I will continue to take pictures of the sky, even though I know that the sky cannot be contained within my computer. And I will continue to think about God, even though I know that God cannot be contained within my ideological framework. Both exercises offer incredible beauty and more than a small amount of pleasure.

Life is good when we open our eyes and open our minds to perceive that which is beyond us in every way. May you experience this goodness today.

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April 24, 2009 – First Blossoms



We really aren't much as gardeners. We get a lot of joy out of the things that grow in our yard and garden, but our home is far from a showplace. We have an on-going conversation with the deer in our neighborhood who have definite appetites for certain flowers. When we first moved here we planted tulip bulbs, but they rarely make it to blossom. There is something about the tulips that is very attractive to the deer. With the vegetable garden it is a different matter. I simply erected an eight-foot fence to keep the deer out of that area. But with our ornamental beds it seems to defeat the purpose to erect high fences around everything. So we have learned a bit about what the deer like and what they are less likely to eat. And we have learned that the deer will try almost everything - even plants that are sold as "deer safe." When they don't like the taste, we find blossoms that have been bit off and spit out. It sort of reminds us of the old Life cereal commercials. "Mikey will eat anything." One of our deer must be a "mikey."

But we still manage a few blossoms from time to time. And finally, in the last couple of days we have blossoms. I'm not too good with names, but I believe that these are Jonquils, a variety of daffodil. There are a few growing in the front bed by the curb and quite a few more growing along the east end of the house. So far the deer have left them alone. After a winter that lasted long enough and ended with a series of three blizzards in as many weeks, it is nice to have a few warm days and some beautiful blossoms growing in the yard.

To be fair, the forecast is for rain throughout the day, turning to snow this evening, with snow continuing throughout the day tomorrow. And the weather forecasters have been

remarkably accurate this spring. Some years it isn't too difficult to suppress the urge to plant vegetables too early. Common local wisdom dictates waiting about two more weeks before setting out tender tomato plants - and even then attentiveness to weather and occasional covering of the plants may be required.

But that is part of the nature of spring around here. A few glorious days and a few days that remind us of the winter that has passed and the power of the weather that goes beyond our ability to control. Temperatures can push toward the eighties one day and hover in the thirties the next. The overall trend continues, however. Soil temperatures are on the rise and though a little snow will slow that process, we know that summer is just around the corner.

Yesterday set record highs in part of the state and there was a red flag warning for high fire danger in the south central portion of the state. This can be a land of extremes. While flooding and mud have kept some families isolated for a dozen days, others are keeping a watch out for wildfire in the dry conditions of the high prairies and badlands. If only we had an efficient way to transport the water from the places that have too much to the ones that don't have enough. But this is South Dakota. Wait and the conditions will change. Excessive water today doesn't mean that hot and dry conditions aren't just around the corner.

Flower bulbs are wonderful plants for us. They don't require attention in the spring. They will grow and blossom before we get around to tending the garden. They have their own gauge of soil temperature and of the appropriate time to show their blossoms. Some years they endure a little snow. Some years they are crushed and broken by a big spring blizzard. But they'll be back next year and the year after that. Out on the open prairies there are places where there is no remaining sign of a former homestead except for the blue flag irises growing in a pattern that indicate they came from intentional transplanting. Flower bulbs are truly irrepressible and a good symbol for the joy that, from time to time, wells up within us.

These are hard times for many people. There isn't as much money to be spent and there are a lot of folks who have lost their jobs. In hard times one has to learn where to look for the good news. At our home this week, the news from the box where the paper is delivered is pretty good - especially if you ignore the paper in the box and take a look at the flowers poking their heads out of the soil in the flower bed beneath.

God grants us beauty in every season. May our eyes be opened to behold and our hearts opened to appreciate these gifts.

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April 25, 2009 – Still South Dakota



Lest any readers of yesterday's blog who live out of the area get fantasies about the nature of spring here in the hills, I decided that it was only fair to follow up on yesterday's picture with another snapshot of the jonquils. Yes, there is about an inch of snow on the ground. And today is the official start of road construction season in the hills with I-90 being narrowed to two lanes near Sturgis. It's supposed to warm up and the snow won't stay. It will be melted off by noon and will have no impact on the wedding scheduled for 4 p.m. at the church. And we've already set a record for the most amount of total snowfall in a single winter, so we won't care if the rest of our precipitation comes as rain. But you do have to admit that it was rather pretty. The green grass provided a really nice contrast for the white snow. And most of the deciduous trees haven't leafed out, so there won't be a problem with broken branches and the like. Just a chilly evening and we'll be getting on with life. The walks and streets were too warm for the snow to stick, so there'll be no shoveling needed today.

I know that there are many places in this world where they get no snow at all, but we're rather proud of our hardy nature and our ability to stand a little snow. And most of us enjoy it, just a little bit. There are plenty of fun outdoor activities that can be pursued in the snow. And the variety of weather provides for a variety of recreational activities depending on the season. Even for those who spend more time inside and are less involved in recreation, the variety in the weather provides for an ever-changing landscape outside the window. It is fun to get up each morning when you don't know what the weather will bring.

Yup. We're still in South Dakota. And we like it that way.

I have not yet traveled to the Middle East and I have not visited the holy sites of our religious tradition in Israel, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey. I know that they hold deep meaning and that they have an emotional and spiritual impact on pilgrims who are able to travel to those sites. We have our sense of the meaning of holy ground and sacred sites. Mt. Nebo and the Jordan valley, Bethlehem and Nazareth, Jerusalem and all of its sacred sites, the lands where Paul journeyed - the stories of our people played out in a different part of the world. And our forebears brought those stories with them when they came to this land. And they added new places to the story. Plymouth Rock and Old South Church and a thousand other places have come to have rich meaning in the stories of our people.

Though we live far from the sacred sites of our religious history, we are aware that the place where we live is sacred. Paha Sapa - the black hills - are sacred to the Lakota people. There are several versions of origin stories that center on this place, and there are specific sacred sites within the hills: Wind Cave, Mato Tipi (Devil's Tower) and Paha Mato (Bear Butte). Generations of native people from other tribes have also recognized the hills as sacred.

Even if we had not been told the stories of the indigenous tribes, we would have come to the conclusion that these hills are sacred. The abundance of wildlife, the glorious vistas, the rolling thunderstorms, the peaceful wind in the trees, the gentle brooks and streams - these hills are filled with life and provide an excellent place to be reminded of the intense bounty of creation and the vastness of the creator. All lands are sacred. They are the products of creation. But we are aware of the value and beauty of the place where we have been allowed to live. And we are daily reminded that we inhabit this place as a trust. These hills and streams and trees will be here long after our time on this earth has passed and we will pass this treasure on to generations yet unborn. We inhabit the land that we call "ours" for a little while only.

And while we live here we are amazed and delighted by the beauty. The snow on the pine trees yesterday was stunning. There were several small snow showers throughout the day and brief moments of sunlight between. The snow flocking on the trees kept changing with only about half of each tree covered in snow for most of the day. The dark green of the Ponderosa Pine and Black Hills Spruce stood out against the clean white of freshly falling snow. The weather was warm enough for the delicious smell of wet pine to be present in the air. And the snow makes everything quiet. The deer have been well fed in recent weeks and there were enough bare spots with tender green shoots of grass for snacking. So the deer took the day off for the most part and spent quite a bit of time lying in the taller grass. The turkeys were their usual busy selves bustling about in flocks and raising a ruckus wherever they went. Neither species seemed to be affected much by a little spring snow.

I went through the day with a simple chant in the back of my mind. “Surely God is in this place, Holy Ground!” And I felt a deep sense of gratitude for being allowed to live in this place for this phase of my life.

There wasn’t enough snow to disrupt the usual. The mail contained the usual assortment of bills and advertisements. The undone yard work isn’t really covered up enough to ignore. There will be no cancelled or postponed meetings coming out of this weather save a slight change in the yard work day scheduled for the church for this morning. Mowing might best be left for another day and the hillsides will still be slippery before noon. Life goes on.

But I hope we all take time to look at and appreciate this place where we live. This land is sacred and this place is special and we are fortunate to be here.

May the beauty be more apparent than the problems in your life today.

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April 26, 2009 – Tingling Toes



I don't think there is much Scandinavian heritage in my family, but I certainly grew up in a town with a lot of people of Norwegian ancestry. I don't know if the Norwegians go in for the sauna like the Fins, but I do remember the hot springs being busy. The business of hot springs baths for health is quite different these days with private hot tubs in many back yards. When I was growing up, every little hot springs would sprout a pool and people would come from miles around for recreation and for the health benefits that were purported to be gained from sitting in hot water.

We lived just north of Yellowstone National Park, so there were a lot of hot springs. McLeod and Hunter's Hot Springs were the closest to our town and we loved the opportunity to head for their pools. But there were a lot of other places. The list of hot springs in southern Montana is long and includes names like Bozeman, Fairmont, Quinn's, Wild Horse, Camas, Lolo, Sleeping Buffalo, Reneva, Elkhorn, Corwin Srpings, Angela Well, Norris, Pipestone, Sun River and Symes. For the adventurous, the whole boiling river region around Gardner was filled with hot spots along the river. If you knew where to go you could find a variety of places where the hot springs ran into the Yellowstone river. Move one direction you got warmer, another you got colder. The temperature ranged literally from boiling to freezing in a small area. Locally the practice was called "hot potting," and it required a fair amount of local knowledge because there were springs around Gardner and Mammoth that were so hot that they were dangerous and there are stories of people being boiled as a result of their ignorance about the temperature of the water.

Our favorite place was Chico. This was in the days before it became a fancy resort and day spa. In those days it was the site of an old hotel that had seen better days and the large outdoor pool. The key to our enjoyment was the word “outdoor.” There is nothing quite like sitting immersed in a giant warm pool watching the snow fall.

One of the things we loved to do was to get all warmed up in the pool then climb out and roll in the snow before diving back beneath the warm water. The sensation as you re-entered the warm water was exquisite. It would make your skin tingle all over. It is a sensation that is difficult to describe, but we would do it over and over again and we couldn’t understand people who refused to get out of the warm water and never experienced the change in temperatures.

This spring, I can get the same sensation by going to the end of the driveway to get the newspaper. All I have to do is to head out of the house barefoot. The spring snow continues to come. Of course there is more to the complete experience than getting one’s feet cold. You have to warm them up again quickly.

I can remember that the adult men I knew who would roll in the snow at the hot springs made a point of not screaming or giving a visible reaction to the cold of the snow. They would just roll over in the snow and then issue an audible “ah” as they slid back into the warm water. It took a lot of practice for me to get to the point where I could imitate them. And I remember being proud of being able to suppress the reaction to the cold snow.

I still do it. When I walk out in the snow barefoot, I resist the urge to run or hop and to cry out “oh! oh! oh!” I quietly endure the sensation of cold that is very near to pain and then relish the delicious feeling of warmth when I dry my feet inside the house.

Which begs the question, “What would make an otherwise normal and seemingly sane person do such a thing?”

I can’t explain it. I don’t go out for the paper barefoot all year around any more. I used to, but now I pull on a pair of boots before heading out most winter days. But springtime invites old habits and crazy adventures. We know the snow won’t last. It will melt off by noon. It is a temporary phenomenon. And we had weather into the ’80’s last week. I was walking barefoot in the morning dew on the grass in the middle of the week.

We like to feel alive. There is joy in the sensations that come from knowing that the various parts of our bodies work. Our hands and feet can feel a wide range of temperatures and textures and tell us all sorts of things about the world in which we live. And the range of sensations that they can experience is amazing. The same feet that endure the cold of snow can take a considerable amount of heat when walking on sun-baked sand at a beach. They can differentiate the textures of the lawn and feel the prick of a small piece of gravel in the driveway. They are remarkably tough and yet

tender enough to feel a tickle. We have been gifted with amazing bodies and they have all sorts of ways of experiencing and feeling the world around us.

The tingling in my toes has subsided. They are feeling warm and comfortable, tucked in the carpet beneath my desk as I write this morning. Soon they'll be covered with socks and boots and hidden from public sight for the rest of the day. But they will continue to serve me, helping me keep my balance and walk upright. They will stretch out to give me extra height when I need to reach for the top shelf of the bookcase. And, for the most part, I won't even think of my feet for the rest of the day.

So maybe that's why I do it. When you stick a bare foot into the snow, it is impossible to ignore it.

How's that for more information about me than you ever wanted to know?

Keep warm and enjoy your toes.

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April 27, 2009 – A Couple More Weeks



Tradition has it that Mother's Day is the beginning of the spring planting season in the Black Hills. Of course Mother's Day can be as early as May 8 or as late as May 14, so there is a bit of a range there. This year Mother's day falls on May 10, and locals have a clear memory of the big snow dump that fell on May 11 in 2005. This spring seems to be a bit more snowy, at least if you measure that by counting the number of spring snow storms. We keep thinking that we're past the worst of the weather, but 8 1/2 inches was quite a bit to shovel yesterday. And with weather in the '80's on Wednesday, the contrast is quite striking. According to the forecasters, we could get more snow on Thursday of this week.

I confess to a bit of spring fever. The lawns have greened up beautifully and some days the garden seems ready for some planting - but each blizzard requires a few days for the snow to melt and the ground to dry sufficiently for tilling, so the garden sits waiting. The wait is not unbearable. We've lived long enough to know that many things are worth the wait, and a couple of weeks isn't that significant in the scheme of things. We'll be in the garden in a couple of weeks and it won't be long before the plants and the weeds are sprouting all over the garden. I'm not that big of a fan of pulling weeds anyway. I can wait.

When our children were young a couple of weeks could seem like an eternity to them. For a three-year-old, two weeks until a birthday or special holiday can seem like a long time. But we are at a different phase of our lives now. For my eighty-seven year old mother, two weeks isn't long at all. And my age is closer to that of my mother than a young child.

From my point of view, the question is not how many more weeks, but how many more times will I have to clear the snow from the driveway. The snow was deep enough yesterday that I had to clear the driveway in order to get our four-wheel drive pickup to its usual parking place - it wasn't that 8 inches of snow gave the truck any problem, but the wet nature of the snow, with a film of greasy water underneath made the driveway really slippery. The snow blower clogged repeatedly as I invested another hour clearing snow. It is a good machine, but it wasn't designed for pumping water. It is a good thing that I was busy in the middle of the week, I had given thought to moving the snow blower to the back of the shed so I could get out the lawn mower. The crazy thing is that the lawn does need to be mowed, so as soon as the snow melts and the grass dries, I will need the mower. Maybe I can alternate machines for a week or so.

Despite my complaining, the snow is really beautiful. And the moisture is a blessing. And we enjoy living in a place with lots of weather contrasts. Never knowing quite what to expect gives life a quality that is enjoyable.

I don't know how this crazy spring will affect the flowering trees. And I noticed that there were even a few pine trees with broken branches after yesterday's dump. The power company was struggling with downed lines all day yesterday. We had a couple of short outages, but nothing that lasted long enough to cause any inconvenience. There are some areas in Rapid City where excessive water has affected telephone service, but the crews have been quick to make repairs and restore service.

One thing is for sure as I look out on yesterday's snow: conditions will change. I think it is supposed to get up to nearly 50 degrees today - that will mean lots of puddles and running water in the streets, and the snow piles will shrink quickly. There will be no point in washing the car for a few days as I won't go anywhere without getting splashed.

There are a few camping trailers and motor homes in area campgrounds. We usually drive by the Lazy J a couple of times a day and they are open for business. The folks who planned their early spring vacations may be used to getting snowed upon - or they may have visited the hills during one of the springs when we didn't have a spring blizzard. It looks like propane sales will be good at the campground for a couple of weeks.

A couple of weeks gives me some time to think about how I want to plant the garden this year - and some time to work on all of the chores that are not restricted by the weather. But it is tempting, from time to time, to just sit by the picture window and watch the snow fall.

Stay warm - and hang in there - it's just a couple of weeks . . .

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April 28, 2009 – Reservations



We took some time yesterday to do some planning for an upcoming trip that will be a combination of vacation and attendance at United Church of Christ's General Synod - a biennial gathering of the church for decisions regarding its national setting. We will be taking our camper, a canoe and a couple of kayaks on the trip. We plan to drive around Lake Superior and combine paddling with sight seeing and other recreational activities.

I remember camping trips from my childhood, usually taken quite close to home. We had a tent and sleeping bags, a cookstove and a lantern. We'd load all of our gear in the car and head for the mountains. Later, when I was older, I got a backpack and we were able to camp in more remote locations. We would fashion plastic tarps into shelters as we did not have a tent that was light enough for backpacking. By the time we had children of our own, we had a nice four-person tent and later we obtained a small pop-up trailer that allowed us to sleep up off of the ground. About four years ago we upgraded to a slide-in camper for our pickup. It provides a good combination of luxury and utility. We have a bed that we can leave made up, room to cook inside if the weather dictates, a refrigerator and even a bathroom with a shower. Mounted on our four-wheel drive pickup we are able to go anywhere we want, including remote out-of-the-way locations. It suits us well.

But the camping trip we're planning for this summer can't be as spontaneous as some. We need to be in specific places on specific dates and we will be wanting camp sites at the height of the tourist season, including Canada Day and the July 4 weekend. So we have decided to make campground reservations to assure that we have places to camp.

Our proposed trip will take us to state parks in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan and provincial parks in Ontario. We also plan to stay some nights in U.S. National Forest Service campgrounds and one night in a Canadian National Park. That is at least five different reservation services, some of which offer online reservations, others requiring telephone calls. Despite their names, “American Express” appears to be preferred for payment in Canada and “Visa” for payment in the United States. One advantage is that by pre-paying for our camping sites, we will have less expenses during the actual month of travel.

In the midst of all of what seems to us right now to be excessive paperwork to plan a camping trip, we discovered a delightful and refreshing bit of information about one of our proposed campgrounds. The Hattie Cove campground in Pukaskwa National Park does not accept reservations. The web site says, “Our campground is very rarely full. Historically, the weekend we are most likely to fill up tends to be the first weekend in August - Civic Holiday. Sites are occupied on a first-come-first-served basis.”

For me, this discovery was a delight. We will be on vacation, we don’t have too many miles to travel that day and we will arrive early enough to get a camping spot. If, for some reason, we don’t there are other options. At least one night of our vacation will be free from reservations, deadlines and specific details that have to be planned in advance. We are planning an adventure, we ought to be able to have a little uncertainty in the trip.

We know that with the exception of weekends, most of the campgrounds in the hills are similar. You can arrive and find a place to camp without reservations. And we know remote locations in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho where we wouldn’t think of reservations. There are many different kinds of trips in our life and each has its own character.

Making reservations more than two months in advance for a camping trip is something I never thought I would be doing. Camping trips are, by their very nature, casual and informal. Rigid schedules are for other activities. But we have to be realistic. The places we want to visit attract other visitors and the managers of public lands have to limit access in order to limit damage to the beauty we seek. We certainly don’t want all of the wild areas to be developed into campsites and the quite paddling spots to be overwhelmed with too many boaters. And we don’t warrant special privileges. If we want to drive the route around Lake Superior, we will need to make accommodations for the others who also want to see the natural beauty of the lake.

And it was fun to take a while to think about our trip yesterday. It provided a fun diversion from everyday chores. Anticipation is a large amount of the joy of many activities. Planning and dreaming increase the joy of the experience. Delaying gratification is not a burden, but rather a pleasure that takes some experience to appreciate.

And, after three days of writing about snow, it gave me a fresh topic for today's blog.

The snow is quickly melting though the Old Farmer's Almanac promises May snow for our area. If we get another blizzard, I can always get out my maps and brochures and campground reservations and anticipate a trip that lies beyond the spring snow.

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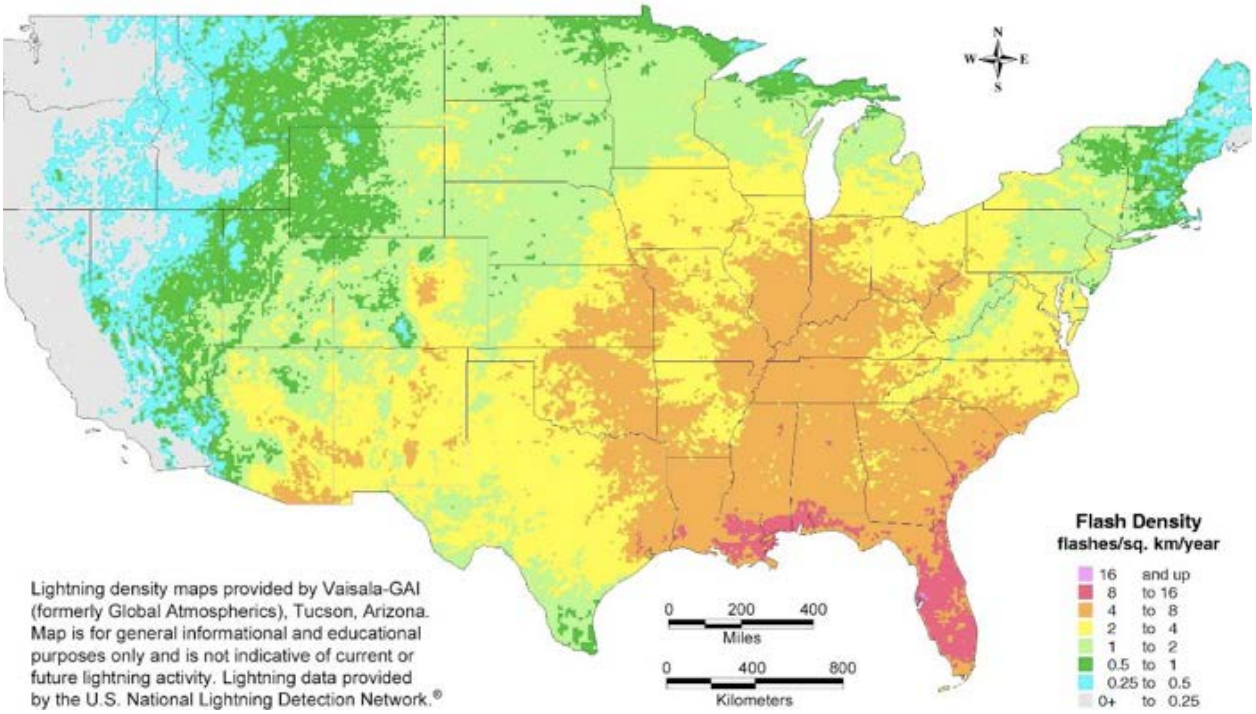
April 29, 2009 – Lightning



Back in the 1980's and 1990's, when we lived in Boise, Idaho, our neighbor across the street worked for a joint project of the USDA Forest Service and NOAA installing remote equipment for measuring lightning strikes. At that time, storm scopes were just gaining the technical sophistication to detect lightning and to make distinctions between air to air and air to ground strikes. The equipment at the center of our neighbor's project was installed on the ground in places where lightning strikes were likely and was able to count the number of strikes in a small area. It was, for the time, ground-breaking work and assisted the Forest Service in determining where lightning-caused fires were most likely.

There have been several technological breakthroughs in the intervening years. Now with doppler radar covering virtually all of the United States and computer mapping programs reaching sophistication, it is possible to create a composite map that shows, in general, where lightning is more or less common.

Looking at the map reminds me of an experience that I had during the fall of 1995. I was attending a meeting in Orlando Florida with youth and adults from across the Untied States. There was a thundershower in the area and one of the youth, from the Seattle area, was mesmerized by the storm. He stood outside under a covered entryway and watched for as long as he was allowed. The map printed above gives a different perspective on the phenomenon. It is likely that thundershowers were so rare in his part of the country that the experience in Florida was a brand-new one for him. For those of us who had watched many thundershowers, we had forgotten the attraction they have.

The experience came to mind last night as I lay in bed and listened the the thunder echoing throughout the hills. It occurred to me that I might get up and take a look out the window to watch the lightning, but I was too tired and I simply lay in my bed and listened with my eyes closed. It didn't take long before I drifted off to sleep just as the first raindrops began to fall on the roof. It is clear that a thundershower doesn't pose much of a threat for us. We have a safe and secure home and were lightning to strike in the area, it is likely that it would strike one of the tall trees in the neighborhood rather than a direct strike to our home.

It was good to hear the thunder last night. I think it is only the second thunderstorm of the year. We get mixed-up storms around here in the spring and most of us who have lived in the area for a while have memories of hearing thunder during a spring blizzard. Thunder snow forms in the clouds and often starts to fall as tiny pellets as the temperature drops. The storm begins like a hailstorm might, but the temperatures drop, the convection in the cloud slows, there is less lightning and soon it turns into a full-fledged snowstorm.

The one story that most school children can tell about lightning is the story of Ben Franklin's experiments with a kite and electricity. Scholars now tell us that it is unlikely that the actual experiment was conducted by Franklin. He had an understanding that lightning was an electrical phenomena, but both the experiment and its eventual write-ups vary significantly from Franklin's style. It is so common for a signature event to be stylized and exaggerated and later the story ends up in the history books instead of the actual events.

Regardless of exactly what happened, this much we do know. Ben Franklin wasn't killed by a direct lightning strike, an event that could have occurred had he tried the experiment with a kite and a key very often.

Lightning is another of those phenomena that is beyond our ability to control. Even with the sophisticated equipment we have to watch, measure, and map lightning, there is no accurate way of predicting when and where lightning will strike. While the map can report how often lightning struck in a particular area, the map is historical - it reports the past. That is significantly different from predicting the future. From the map, it looks as if central Florida would be a place to avoid for its frequent lightning strikes. But people have been living there safely for generation, and face other dangers far more likely and threatening than lightning.

What we can do is appreciate the beauty of lightning when it lights up the night sky and the sound of the thunder as it makes us feel small and insignificant in the scheme of the power and awe of the universe. As individuals we may be tiny when compared to the vast forces of the universe, but we possess consciousness and the ability to witness and to reflect on the meaning of the events that surround us.

Beyond the inkling of an idea for this morning's blog, there were no flashes of brilliance or insight in my mind as I lay contemplating the sound of thunder last night. Instead there was a calm enjoyment of living a life that is not so separated from nature that I would be unable to experience the grandeur of the world.

The precipitation fell as rain last night and the snow is almost completely melted this morning. We don't yet know what tomorrow will bring, but it seems that winter has lost its grip on our part of the world. Even if we do get another snowfall, we know that spring has arrived and summer is around the corner.

We have more thundershowers snowstorms in the next few months and it is a welcome change. What an amazing world we are allowed to witness as we travel through this life's journey.

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April 30, 2009 – Moments of Calm



Yesterday was a busy day. We had a lot of details in our schedules to juggle. There was a class to be taught, meetings to attend, a Bible Study, confirmation and much more. One of the meetings that turned out very well had caused more than a little bit of anxiety for me. My fears of angry words and confrontation were not realized, but I went into the meeting with a heightened state of readiness, prepared to intervene if necessary.

In the midst of the busyness of meetings and activities, we try to maintain a reasonable family life. We try to have one of us at home for every meal with my mother. While we don't quite make it 100% and occasionally have a companion come to assist with meals, a typical day sees the meals at our house as family times.

A life that is in constant motion, however, is an invitation to exhaustion. Stress can mount and become distress. Too little sleep results in poor performance during the day. Too many activities provides for too little time alone for thought, reading, prayer and contemplation.

So we have learned to seek the quiet moments when they are available and to appreciate and treasure them each day. Yesterday, after the meetings, a bit of sunlight remained when I returned home. Although there were plenty of chores yet to be accomplished, I took a few moments to walk out on the deck and watch the deer in the yard. The deer look a bit scruffy after a long winter and the recent warm days have commenced their annual shedding of fur. But the tender green grass in the lawn is inviting and it is healthy food for them. We should be seeing fawns within a month or so.

I took my camera outside with me, but the deer were in no mood for cooperating. As soon as I raised my camera for a picture they headed away from me. Pictures rarely capture the entire moment. My pictures are more like an index to my life - they are enough to provide a reminder of a good memory, but not enough to tell the story by themselves.

The treat of the moments on the deck yesterday were in part a result of warmer weather. It was warm enough to have the widows open and get the house aired out during the middle of the day. We al feel better when there is a breath of fresh air blowing through the house. Standing outside in my shirtsleeves was not something I chose to do during the recent spring blizzards. It has only been a couple of days since the last of the snow melted from the yard.

There is plenty to cause worry. The World Health Organization raised the alert level in the rapidly-spreading swine flu pandemic yesterday. In Mexico, the government is urging all citizens to stay at home for five days. In the southern United States, about 75 schools have closed to prevent he spread of the flu. Cases have been reported throughout Europe and as far away as New Zealand. In Australia passengers boarding and leaving airplanes are being scanned with thermal imaging devices to detect fevers and other unreported symptoms. AM Costa Rica challenged readers to create decorated masks to show the Costa Rican spirit while still using caution to prevent the spread of the virus. Health officials are clearly worried.

At church, there is a special event every Sunday for the next five weeks. We have graduations, confirmation, a special sunday to promote our summer camping programs and the festival of the Christian Home, which for us includes cradle roll recognition. There is a lot going on and the pile of undone work on my desk is significant. And today is the deadline for our monthly newsletter. Susan has two days of out-of town meetings at the end of this week and I have four days of out-of town meetings immediately following hers. We should have eight or so hours when we are both home between the meetings, but some of that needs to be devoted to sleep.

So we have to learn to find the calm when and where we can. We need to intersperse the energy-sapping activities with events and activities that give increased energy. Earlier this spring a small black injury provided me with an unexpected gift. My recovery and physical therapy require two times of exercise each day. Although the exercises don’t consume too much time, twice a day I find myself on the floor stretching and moving in ways that will protect me from further injury and strengthen my body. Just as athletes exercise for endurance, those of us with more sedentary jobs also are in need of that exercise. And exercise does increase my endurance. It is worth more than a nap.

I can never discount the restorative power of nature, however. Smelling the trees, standing in the sunshine, watching the beautiful creatures who are our neighbors in this place - these are life-giving activities. The quietness that is demanded of those of us who enjoy watching deer is good for us. Sitting still and quiet nurtures our spirits as well as calming our bodies. Whenever I pause to think of it, I am deeply grateful for the luxury of living in such a place surrounded by such beauty.

I'll take my moments of calm wherever and whenever I can get them. And I hope you are finding calm moments in the midst of your life as well.

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May 1, 2009 – Pandemic



Poster from the National Library of Medicine. www.nlm.nih.gov

A friend asked me yesterday if I was still going to make a trip planned for next week. The trip is for a writers' conference to be held in Arizona. I am excited about the conference and the work that we will be doing together over the next months and years as we develop new teaching and learning materials for the church.

I have paid some attention to the news of the outbreak of flu that has now claimed over 300 lives worldwide. I know that it appears that the current strain started in Mexico, where there have been the most cases, that it is easily communicated between people, and that the virus has spread around the world. I have read of the responses of health officials in several countries and I know about the five day ban on public activity in Mexico.

But it had never occurred to me to cancel my trip. I hadn't thought of it until my friend asked the question. Maybe my reaction isn't what it should be, but I am not afraid of the flu.

There are more than a few fear mongers out there. Someone who was touted as a financial expert was being interviewed on the radio and warning listeners to make sure that their homes were stocked up with groceries, that they had a reserve of cash, and were prepared for a temporary shutdown of all business in the United States. This person also recommended that listeners cancel trips, stay away from public gatherings, and avoid unnecessary contact with others. It sounded like that person had written a really good script for Y2K and since those fears were proven false, had kept the script for the next time when some level of public panic might be incited.

I confess that I am reluctant to put any stock in the advice of financial experts. I received my quarterly pension statement yesterday. The advice of experts has not provided any security in the investment market. Perhaps they have turned to giving advice on how to weather a virus that is spreading rapidly in order to draw attention to the advice they gave us about planning for our retirement.

Our church will be open for business on Sunday. And each successive Sunday as well. If the flu outbreak becomes severe in our community, we will continue to worship God. And if the ATM machines and credit cards stop working because everybody is too sick to go to work the church will survive.

I don't mean to take illness lightly. But I have no intention of living in fear.

Maybe it comes from having been born at the height of a worldwide epidemic. The peak in the number of polio cases in the United States occurred in my birth year. A couple of years after I was born the Salk vaccine became available. A little later, the Sabin oral vaccine was widely distributed. I remember taking the oral medication. I don't remember much trauma. I have seen the pictures of children in iron lungs and I have had several friends who have varying degrees of mobility disorders due to the disease. But I haven't lived in fear.

Of course, I am not in the group most vulnerable to the flu. The biggest risk of my getting the flu is that I might unknowingly share the virus with one of the many elders I visit every week. I've had the flu before. And I am in general good health and less likely to develop pneumonia or other more serious complications. I am sure to get a shot of flu vaccine every October because I am busy and don't want to have to lose work to being sick and because I don't want to be the carrier of an illness to the people with whom I work.

But I don't let the fear of "worst case scenarios" dictate my life. I'll listen to the news from health officials. And I'll follow the common sense procedures that we have been

taught: careful and frequent handwashing, the use of alcohol-based hand santizers before and after greeting people, covering every cough and staying home if I develop symptoms.

I wasn't raised in fear, but I was taught to wash my hands before every meal. I have no problem with common sense.

As far as I know, my trip will proceed as planned. The meetings are being held in a Benedictine Retreat Center. A monastery seems like a pretty safe place for prayerful work. And the work in which we are engaged will continue long after this current scare has passed.

And I wish you health. Wash your hands. Cover your face if you cough or sneeze. Go to bed if you feel sick. Seek medical treatment if symptoms get worse or persist. But don't let fear dominate your life or dictate your decisions. We're all in this together. And we will take care of each other.

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May 2, 2009 – Walk into the Light



It has become a tradition for me to join with friends for a little walk in early May and today is the day. We'll start at Old Storybook Island and walk to the end of the paved walkway past Cleghorn Canyon Fish Hatchery, then turn around and walk back. It isn't much distance for walking, but each step helps our community bring an important issue to light.

Every year in the United States, more than 32,000 people die of suicide. It is estimated that close to one million persons make a suicide attempt each year. Here in South Dakota, our incidence of suicide is higher than national averages, meaning that people are more likely to die of suicide here than in other parts of the country. As a member of the Pennington County LOSS (Local Outreach to Survivors of Suicide) I am too frequently called to provide information, referral and resources to a family who has just learned that they have lost a loved one to suicide.

But I do not walk because of statistics. While I am mindful of those who have died and of the simple fact that their number is too large, I walk because I believe in prevention. Education and public awareness can help to prevent premature death by suicide. For too many years the social stigma attached with psychological disorders, including severe depression, has kept us from speaking of those who suffer. Many victims of depression suffer in isolation and silence because they do not know how common their condition is. While some diseases such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease receive publicity and prompt the community to rally with fund-raisers and support for victims and their families, depression often results in a lack of attention and isolation from support

systems. Brain diseases are organic diseases as surely as the diseases that affect other organ systems. And depression is all to frequently fatal with dire consequences for family members who are left behind. Educating the public about brain disorders, their symptoms and treatment might help to break through the wall of stigma and allow more people to receive the treatment they need and deserve.

With teens, who often lack impulse control, delaying a suicide can be preventing a suicide. Time can provide an opportunity for significant changes in brain chemistry and thought patterns. Time can provide alternative solutions to problems that seem overwhelming.

Our local walk is a fund-raising event for the Front Porch Coalition, a group of individuals and agencies in our community who work to prevent suicide. Fund raising is important. The Front Porch Coalition has a part-time community services director and faces funding challenges every year. With the economy tightening and grant funding cut, the support of individuals in the community is even more critical. I understand the need for fund raising, but I do not walk to raise funds. Susan and I try to be as generous as we are able, and I ask a few family members to make donations, but I do not raise much money. I feel that it is wrong for me to solicit pledges in the church that I serve. My position as pastor creates an unfair pressure on potential donors. And I am not the world's best at asking others to donate, even when I believe deeply in the cause. So we put a few dollars in the kitty, but we would do that even if I didn't walk.

I walk in part for the indulgence of my memory. Over my lifetime there have been too many deaths. I go through the list and always have the same questions. Why? What could I have done to prevent this? Why didn't I see it coming? A few miles of walking allows me to focus on the memories of brilliant, creative, loving, giving people with whom I shared this life and whose lives were cut short too soon. I have pledged to never forget these people. And walking is an opportunity to remember.

But mostly I walk in solidarity with the other walkers. We are survivors. We have faced the worst grief imaginable and we continue to stand upright. On a day when our community clearly identifies those whose lives have been affected by suicide, I choose to stand with that group of people. We choose to defy the stigma. We choose to be public with our grief and with our quest for more effective treatment for those who suffer from brain diseases. We choose to walk in the hopes that public awareness might prevent at least one death. We choose to walk because we can never forget. We choose to walk because we believe in each other. We choose to walk because grief can be survived and hope is possible. We choose to walk because death is not the end.

There is a simple song that I sing to myself as we walk. I know the words in Swahili. Sia Humba is a traditional African song, born in the struggle for human dignity and freedom in countries that have known deep oppression. I know the words in Spanish as well. The struggles of Central America have made those countries appropriate places for people

to remind themselves of the call to walk in the light. And I know the words in English. “We are marching in the light of God.”

There is still much darkness in this world.

But we choose to walk in the light.

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May 3, 2009 – Pine Needles



Having grown up amongst cottonwood trees and lived in homes with deciduous trees for most of my life, when we took at look at our present home, I had a delicious thought: "Cool! All the trees are pine trees - not a single leave to rake!" It is not that I mind raking leaves, exactly. It just isn't one of my favorite jobs. I don't know why. It may be because most years it ends up being a solitary task. When Susan and the kids used to help rake leaves, I enjoyed it. But it didn't always work in our schedules for us to be available to rake at the same time. Maybe I don't like it because it is a dusty, dirty job. But that doesn't quite make sense. I get involved in all sorts of other dirty jobs and don't mind them at all.

Whatever the reason, I had this brief fantasy about a home in the pine forest where I wouldn't have to rake leaves. It lasted only until I actually moved into this house. Leaves are easier to rake than pine needles. And a few ponderosa pines can produce a lot of needles. These days I haul a minimum of two very full pickup loads of needles off of our yard each year. And you can't just let pine needles lie on the ground if you want to have a lawn. They are so acidic that they will kill the grass. Similarly, they can't be just added to the compost pile, because they are too acidic all by themselves. The only way for us to compost the pine needles that our trees produce on our own property would be to collect all of our grass clippings and probably haul in some additional organic material from other places. Since our city has a yard waste recycling program and the needles can be composed as part of the city program, I end up hauling them there. That means I get to use the fork to pitch the needles twice: first into the pickup and then from the pickup into the yard waste dumpster.

It is simple yard work. Every home owner gets involved in yard work. It isn't that bad. I can't explain why I procrastinate and complain about a few pine needles so much. But I do. So yesterday I raked, loaded hauled and delivered a load of pine needles from our yard. I still have more to get. The gutters need to be cleaned and I have an out-of-control pine shrub near our post light in the front yard that is in need of trimming each spring. So there is at least another trip to the yard waste container yet to be done.

But it feels good to have delivered the first of the spring loads. Yes, unlike deciduous trees, pine trees produce a load of needles in the fall. After I rake them, there is another load by spring. Not all of the pine needles let loose at once. It takes a good snowfall to get the trees stripped of the old needles. And I've never been tempted to rake the needles in the middle of the winter during the snow.

Of course the extravagance of needles is just one more sign of God's bounty. Through the incredible processes of plant biology the trees in our yard succeed in producing oxygen at the same time as they grow and stay green to keep our yard beautiful. They provide shelter for the birds, homes for the squirrels, and shade for our house. They smell wonderful each time it rains and shower us with pollen each spring. They produce barrels and barrels of pine cones each year. If I didn't mow my yard, it would soon be full of new trees planted from the cones of the existing trees. Left to its own devices, our yard would revert to a thicker stand of trees all on its own. The new little trees actually prefer the acidic soil, so leaving the pine needles on the ground provides rich soil for new trees to start. It is only my desire for a particular look in my lawn that requires that I rake the pine needles. Actually, raking the needles also helps to keep the green space around my home that is essential for adequate fire protection. Were I to allow the fuels to build up in my yard as they do in the forest, the next fire that came along might just decide to take my house along with the dead needles and grasses.

But the quantity of needles is truly impressive. Nature is not one to short change in any department. Exuberant abundance is the rule of the day in the natural world.

Today will be a day of separation from the natural world for me. I board an airplane at 6 a.m. to travel to Phoenix and from the Phoenix airport I'll ride a shuttle van to a monastery where I'll spend the next four days. There may be a few opportunities to go outside and walk on the monastery grounds, but we need to remain very focused on our work in order to be wise stewards of the funds that the church is investing in our project. We have a lot of work to accomplish in the next six months and it has to be well-coordinated. Although we have some sophisticated Internet tools to assist us, I have twelve writers whose material needs to be consistent and ready and this is our only face-to-face meeting.

But I am an early riser and I usually am able to get by on a bit less sleep than some of my colleagues. This might give me a chance to step out and breathe fresh air from time

to time. And we may find that taking a short walk together will make us more efficient as we tackle the work of the next few days.

And if that doesn't work, I'll have the memory of raking pine needles yesterday to remind me of the joys of the outdoors that surround me in my everyday life.

And the best part of raking pine needles is the feeling that you have when the job is done.

Maybe next week I'll get around to planting a few things in the garden.

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May 4, 2009 – Not South Dakota



A few minutes for a quick walk yesterday and the obvious presented itself. This place is in so many ways not like the place where I live. The Franciscan Retreat Center is on the northern edge of Scottsdale, Arizona. It is obvious that this a a desert climate. The vegetation is so different from home. The retreat center grounds are landscaped and filled with cactus and other plants that are strange to my eye. There are palm trees that reach to the sky with just a little green at he very top. You'd think that in the desert a tree that big might have a bit more shade. It is very beautiful.

The temperatures also indicate that I'm not at home. The high was in the low eighties yesterday - enough to feel quite warm to this kid from the north. And this is early spring around here. The temperatures get much higher once things really warm up.

At home I have the basic survival skills. Were I to have to spend the night in the hills, I know how to build a shelter. I know how to keep danger at bay. Here I am not so sure. Which of the lizards are edible and which are dangerous? Could I catch one in the first place? Rattlesnakes I know, but does it ever get cold enough around her to make them lethargic like happens at home? And there are lots of different insects, some of which pack a painful bite.

And I know nothing about finding water in such a place.

But I could learn the things that one need to survive around here. Like any other place, you learn to seek out the people who have the skills and get them to teach.

There are other ways that these few days are quite different than being at home.

The church gathered in this place is no less committed or real than the church at home. Our worship yesterday included communion just like the church at home. The words of the liturgy were familiar and the faith of the people is genuine. But in some ways we are the church gathered for a unique moment. We all have home churches back in a lot of different places. And our home places are varied and diverse. Chicago, Alberta, Washington DC, Minneapolis, rural New Hampshire, rural Iowa, California and more. There is one writer who lives in this area and even a guy from South Dakota. (That would be me.) And we have come together for a common purpose to work for the future of the church on a single project.

This isn't my first big curricula project. I've heard the rhetoric about doing something new and important before. I've heard people talk about how this project is truly new, "on the cusp," and "cutting edge." And each project has had a feel to it that made me believe those things. But I have also seen and participated in what will probably be the denomination's last major in-house print-based curriculum. In a way what we did those years ago was more of a signal of the past than of the future.

We do things differently now. These new resources will be collaboratively produced with extensive use of the Internet. And they will be distributed over the Internet. In a way it is hard to think of The Pilgrim Press - the nation's oldest continuously running printing house - engaged in a venture that will not involve much printing at all. Do you still call such a venture a "press" or does the institution finally need a new name?

We are a new community, brought together in part because of our skills and experiences. And w are engaged in a new venture, whose outcome is yet to be seen. Even so, we are also the church - constituted in this time and place for the purpose of worship and mission.

And there is much that I recognize in this gathering. There are the kind of people who are doers - eager to get on with the task and not so eager about all the meetings. They are here because they believe in service. They tolerate the meetings because they are a way to engage in the mission. There are the intellects, who are concerned with consistency of ideas and who are both quick to criticize and intensely loyal of ideas. They are reading the documents - though at this meeting their faces are buried in their laptops, not in stacks of printed pages. There are comedians and clowns who make us laugh and are good at being the center of attention. There are quiet servants who don't say too many words, but upon whom you know we will be dependent as the project goes forward. There are people who are led by their emotions and whose passion gives energy to the room and can sometimes lead us in directions we did not think we wanted to go.

And there are more. And the particular ones in this gathering of Christ's' church are not the same ones that we have at home. And yet I've had enough years in this wondrous church to feel quite at home here.

The issue is not that I have one church here and one at home. The issue is that these people here desperately need to be made aware of the church at home. If we fail to make the connections to local congregations and our need to serve them, we will fall short of our calling. And the church at home needs to be made aware of the church in this setting. We are not alone. We belong to a church that is much bigger than the gathering at 1200 Clark Street in Rapid City. We need to know that others care. And that we have much to offer to a world in need of the good news we experience.

My job is to make the connections.

Here in Arizona, I advocate for local churches like the one I serve at home. Here I sing the praises of a dedicated group of people who serve God at the place where the sidewalk ends - the home of not only that huge white outdoor cross, but also the biggest woodpile in town. Here I speak of the struggles of rural and isolated congregations in a state with a big geography and many miles between churches.

At home, I tell the story of the church in its national and international settings. I report on the work that we are doing. I remind people of the connections. I explain where mission dollars go and what work they do.

For a few days I need to be fully present to this process and these people. But I can and will never forget the people I serve at home. And when I return home I can and never will forget the task that this team of people share to do the work of the church.

In the first curriculum project in which I participated, one of the things that motivated me was the anticipation of seeing an actual book with a glossy cover and my name on the inside with the word "writer" next to it. Never mind the fact that those books have largely been recycled by the congregations that bought them. I kept a copy, to be sure, but is a fleeting treasure. This project will be even more fleeting in terms of my ego. My name may appear as one of a team of contributors, collaborators, writers and editors somewhere on a web site. It is unlikely to have more interest and impact to those who use the resources than the little copyright byline on the bottom of my blog pages. The truth is that it isn't about me. It is about the church. If we succeed in serving than our names don't matter much at all. If we are forgotten, our work will not have been in vain.

But perhaps I can be a bridge between two different settings of the church and through my skills as a communicator those two settings might grow in appreciation for and love of each other. I'm not in South Dakota, but I won't forget where my home is.

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May 5, 2009 – Desert Blooms



One of the things about spending time in a place that is unfamiliar is that is is constantly full of surprises. I had checked out the forecasts on various weather web sites, so I knew that I was coming to a place where the daytime highs would exceed 100 degrees even in May. And I knew that the countryside would be dry. This isn't my first trip to Arizona, but it is still a place where I have little experience.

What I wasn't expecting on this trip was all of the color. This place is definitely not monochromatic right now. The trees are a riot of color. There are more kinds of blooming trees than most places that I have lived. Red, purple and yellow seem to be the preferred colors for blooming trees and there are plenty of blossoms so that the trees appear to be exploding in color.

The cactus plants seem to prefer subtler colors. Though like some of the trees, some cactus tend towards yellow, pastels are more the norm. Pink blossoms top many of the spiny plants. I think that the timing of our visit is fortuitous. In a place where the temperature is almost always above freezing and the soil temperatures remain warm year round, the cycles of growth and dormancy are triggered more by seasonal changes in precipitation. The average annual rainfall in this part of the world is about the same as fell on the hills in a four-hour period causing the 1972 flood in Rapid City.

I am told that about half of the rain that falls on this place comes during the summer in the form of big thunderstorms. At that time, the carrying capacity of the land is not great and there are lots of streams, rivers and torrents in places that are normally dry. The

other half of the rainfall comes during the winter, such as it is, with gentle rain and sometimes overcast days.

Even though there has not been a huge quantity of rain, our visit, coming at the end of the winter's precipitation, works just right for the desert to show of its blossoms.

Even the blossoms of these plants have to be tough. They grow right at the top and boldly dare the hot sun to scorch them.

The room where I am staying has a tile roof, walls of thick adobe, and windows on the east and west sides so a breeze could blow through if there ever was a breeze. A ceiling fan keeps the air stirred. Sleeping with all of the windows wide open it sounds as if the coyotes have us surrounded when they start to sing. A voice comes from one place and another answers from the other side. They probably aren't as close as they sound, but certainly they are closer than our usual coyote song at home.

Just before time for me to get out of bed, the Gambel quail start to stir. I'm not good at describing sounds, but it seems to me to be about half way between a chicken and a pigeon. They don't really crow, but their sound has more syllables and more notes than an owl or a morning dove.

I didn't expect color and sound to be the primary messengers of nature's beauty. I'm not sure what I expected, but I suppose that the feeling of sunburn on my skin was somewhere in my anticipation prior to the trip. This is a place for sunscreen, but it is no hotter than the Dakota prairie in July and this time of the year things cool down at night just like at home.

It is a good setting for our meetings. The days are long and full and I need to work to stay focused on what others are saying and how they are participating in the process. I need to be ready to facilitate a session and then switch roles and become a recorder of the ideas we are sharing. So my glimpses of the setting of our meeting come in small doses - a few minutes to walk in the morning and an occasional break between meetings. Most of my breaks are filled with conversations that are relevant to our project.

Yesterday the only time I got out my camera was before breakfast, so the picture in this blog and those from which it was selected are nearly 24 hours old. But they are wonderful souvenirs of this trip. I will long remember the people who are shaping this experience. And I am obtaining six months of relatively intense work so there is no chance of forgetting the reason for this gathering. But the photographs will remind me that we are meeting in a place of incredible beauty. God is not constrained by the walls of the meeting rooms or the wakefulness of my colleagues. God is continually creating and surrounding us with new beauty.

We ignore this beauty at our own peril. Today I pray for the ability to look even more closely and see even more clearly the glory of this place.

May the beauty that surrounds you be something that you cannot ignore.

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May 6, 2009 – Homeward Bound



There is still much work to accomplish today. Our meetings go into the mid afternoon. But I am already saying good-bye to this place. I'll have my things packed into my suitcase soon. At the retreat center, we put fresh sheets on the beds after our last night, and before long, I'll have turned in my key. I haven't been here that long, really. Just three nights. Things are comfortable here, but it isn't home. But the time in this place has been important. Some tasks require focus. Despite all of the talk about multi-tasking, the truth is that I work best when I do one thing at a time. Here I am with a group of people who have all reserved a significant block of time to accomplish a significant task.

I know that when I return home, I will return to the world of everyday demands and a job that is often pulling me in many different directions. It isn't practical for me to expect to be able to work uninterrupted for large blocks of time. And my sense of the order of tasks needs to be flexible because my jobs involve other people who have lives and schedules of their own.

There may be some things that can be learned from the ways we have been collaborating at this conference. Thinking in terms of similar circles of collaboration to accomplish the work of the church may be helpful. I often find that time away provides a fresh perspective when I return to my home setting.

Right now, I am feeling very tired. The days have been long and very full. And the work that lies ahead is significant. I have had to be available to a circle of people who have lots of questions and who deserve support so that they can do their work. And so I have tended to relegate my personal space to the edges of the days, rising early and staying up late. I long for home and for rest.

But, of course, home has its own demands and rest is sometimes elusive.

The challenge is to maintain life in the present even when anticipating the future. I am ready to go home. I am homeward bound. But I am not yet home. And I need to find the joy and beauty and wonder of the place that I am. I even need to find the gifts of the time of transition.

So I will pack with care this morning. As I place each item into the suitcase, I will allow myself to think of home and those I love in that place. And then I will place my suitcase in the corner of the room and turn my attention to the thoughts and demands of this place. I know that later in the day my suitcase will be my companion as I travel to the airport and board the plane for home.

And I will take a few minutes for one more walk around this wonderful place. There is much beauty in this place that I have not yet discovered. And I am indeed fortunate to live in a time when travel is comparatively easy. To awake in Arizona and got to sleep in South Dakota requires travel at a pace that we take for granted but would have been impossible for most of the people who have lived on this earth.

As I walk I will be thinking about many people. My community continues to grow. For the next six months, a dozen writers living in a dozen different places will be on my mind. I will have the responsibility and the joy of receiving their work and editing it into the form for its publication to the churches. While I pray for these writers, we must also continue to be connected to the churches and not forget those we are called to serve. If we do our work at too large a distance, we will fail to produce the resources that real churches really need. Like so many other things in life there is a balance that must be maintained.

The birds have been up for some time. They are most active when the temperatures are cool at the edge of the day. I hear their calls through the open windows and know that a new day has begun. May I live in such a way that I appreciate and add to the beauty.

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May 7, 2009 – No Longer Ted



My flight from Phoenix to Denver yesterday afternoon brought a reminder of a short-lived adventure in aviation. The relatively new Airbus A-320 airliner on which we flew had the new blue and white United colors on the outside and United's new first class and business class plus seating arrangement. But there were orange stripes on the overhead cargo bins and the bulkheads in the airplane all had my name on them. There are at least 25 such airplanes in the United Airlines fleet these days, all about five years old, and all having replaced older and less fuel-efficient Boeing 737 aircraft in the United fleet.

Even though the aircraft are new, they are all sporting fresh paint on the outside. There was a time when my name, Ted, was boldly painted on the outside as well. Ted airlines was announced in November of 2003 and the first flights of the airline were in February of 2004. It was to be a new kind of budget airline, modeled after the success of Southwest Airlines and the new Frontier Airlines.

Ted airlines flew out of the Denver hub to popular destination cities. The airlines were originally fitted with all of the seating being the same. And the plan was to develop a fleet of aircraft that were all the same type of plane, thus reducing maintenance costs. Ted never was an independent airline. It's flights were all flown under United's certificates and licenses by crew under United's existing union contracts.

The experiment did not work for United. Rapidly rising fuel costs forced all airlines to cut back and the costs associated with maintaining two brands, two sets of advertising, two

fare schedules and the like provided an opportunity for United Airlines to cut costs by eliminating the Ted brand.

Ted is no more as an airline. The airplanes are no longer Ted. Which is not to say Ted is dead. In fact I am quite healthy and very much alive. And there are a number of airplanes in the United Airlines fleet that still have my name written in interesting places around the cabin interior.

It is interesting to note the changes. The plan of Ted airlines was to provide reasonably priced travel for passengers without distinctions between classes. Everybody had the same amount of room for their legs and feet. Everybody had the same amount of space in the overhead cargo bins. Everybody paid a similar price for their tickets.

The sense of equality was the first thing that changed after the airplanes were repainted on the exterior. Being some of the newest aircraft in the United Fleet meant that the former Ted airplanes were good candidates for a three-tiered seating arrangement with relatively small first-class compartments and business class seating with the same seats as economy, but more leg room. The extra leg room in business class was created at the expense of economy class, where the seats were rearranged with less room between rows. Passengers in economy class pay about the same fare was was the case on the old airline and get less space. And everyone is asked, upon check-in, if they would like to upgrade to a higher class by paying an additional fee on the spot with their credit card.

United also makes a big deal of displaying the class distinctions in the boarding area, seating the first class and business class compartments first and making those in economy wait until the others are settled.

I guess it works for the airline. But I won't be flying in any of those seats with the extra room and the preferred treatment in the boarding area. When I travel, the luxury is in the speed of transport. Every seat in the airline gets to the destination at the same time. Those of us with less leg room at the back of the plane aren't really suffering. We just pay less. We have no need for status or special privilege.

But I get a special perk each time I fly on one of those airplanes. It has my name on it. Even though the brand didn't work out and United has gone back to using the entire name on the outside of the airplanes, Ted survives on the bulkheads of the airplanes. And it will be several years before it is cost effective to re-decorate the cabin interiors and cover up the name.

The airline is no longer Ted, but I am still around. I occasionally fly on United Airlines, but have no particular brand loyalty. Most of my flying is paid for by the church and I try to get them the best value for the money on each trip. And as much as I enjoy airplanes, they are not the focus of my traveling these days. More important is the work of the

church that brings people together from different places to collaborate on shared mission and ministry.

And that mission and ministry is never about one person only. Each of us who participate are, in some sense, working ourselves out of a job. I try to do our work in such a way that one day the work can continue without being dependent on me. It never was about me in the first place. Every project in which I share will have the same future as the airline. The day will come when it is no longer Ted.

Chances are, however, that the memory and the name will linger a bit even after Ted is gone.

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May 8, 2009 – Picking Up Supplies



Part of my parents' farm machinery business was an inventory of general farm and ranch supplies. And one of my first jobs for which I was paid was sweeping the feed warehouse. We were talking last night, and I can't remember all of the details, but I believe that my starting salary was one dollar to sweep the warehouse. It needed to be done at least once a week, and I usually tackled the chore on Saturday. We used a coarse push broom and an aluminum grain scoop for a dustpan.

The smell of the feed warehouse was pleasant to me, but also distinctive. I used to get that smell when I stopped by Abys Feed and Seed to get salt for the water softener or food for the cats. But Abys has moved and there is a coffee shop where the offices used to be located.

There is still one store in town that has that same smell. Runnings Supply sells a wide range of products that are similar to the things we sold at Big Timber Farm Supply. They have feed and animal medicines, tack and tarps, garden tools and shop tools, seed and, this time of the year, a lot of live chicks. They've got different varieties of chickens, ducks, geese and turkeys all in stock tanks with warming lights over the top. This time of the year a familiar sound is added to the familiar smell.

They also stock gates and wire stretchers and posts and wire. They've got trailers and lawn mowers and post hole diggers and blades. There are chainsaws and splitters. But they also sell kids toys - the tough steel ones that look like real tractors and construction

machines. They've got jeans and coveralls and jackets and sweatshirts. And there is a lot more.

For months there have been rumors that the store has been looking for a bigger building and now it appears that they are in the process of making a deal to buy the old Target store in the mall. I understand their need for more space, though they have a lot of inventory that can be contained by a fence and doesn't need to be under a roof. But I can't imagine such a store moving to the mall. The article in the newspaper says that they will have to undergo air quality tests.

I'm all in favor of air quality, but I'd be willing to lay odds that if the store moves to the mall they'll be leaving the smell behind.

Now I'm not much of a mall shopper. I avoid the place as much as I can. And most of the things that I am interested in buying can be purchased in other places. Furthermore there are a lot of things for sale at the mall that I have no interest in purchasing. I do know which entrance to use at Sears to get to jeans and tools. But I'm having trouble imagining a feed and farm store in the mall.

I suppose it is kind of fun to imagine someone setting all of those chicks and a few rabbits lose in the main mall, but you know that is never going to happen. I can also imagine the chaos that could reign if ranch trucks with horse or machinery trailers start to mix with the aggressive shopping mall parking lot crowd. It might resemble a demolition derby. And if they are worried about the air quality report, they probably won't like it when a rancher with a load of heifers parks his trailer in the lot while he picks up a few things from the store.

I guess all of this is progress. I guess I should be glad that the business is successful and needs a bigger shop. And I certainly should be glad that someone has figured out how to use an existing building instead of building a new one while others sit empty. And certainly the mall needs good businesses to fill their space.

But I hope they don't gussy up the feed store too much. You don't need carpet to try on Carhartts. Fancy lighting only gets in the way of selecting the right tarp. Three or four 50# bags of feed will pretty much do in a shopping cart. Muffler clamps don't come with designer labels. And fifty percent of raising chickens is shoveling . . . well you know what I mean.

I reckon that if they move out to the mall, I'll go out there. I've got to buy cat food somewhere and I prefer to purchase it in a store where it isn't the biggest feed bag they sell. When you need tire chains, you need the real ones. And chicken wire works to keep the rabbits out of the garden for a while. But I really hope that they don't have to make everything pretty and fancy. Some things are better plain and ordinary.

And Fairpoint is a far piece to drive to pick up a fence post.

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May 9, 2009 – Dirt



I got time last evening to run the tiller through the garden. I didn't get the job done, but I loosened things up enough to add a layer of compost before tilling it one more time. After fifteen years of building up the soil, we have pretty good dirt in our vegetable garden. It didn't start out that way. The soil is rather thin and sandy around here, with lots and lots of rocks. It is good for growing pine trees and sagebrush, but for potatoes and lettuce, a different blend of dirt is required. Over the years we have maintained a large compost area and hauled in topsoil from several different locations. We get organic matter from some friends who raise horses and from time to time I bag the grass clippings from the lawn to add to the compost. Our household compost is also added to the mix as well as the stalks and other plant material from the previous year's garden.

There was a small garden plot in our yard when we bought the house, but the first time I ran the tiller through it I discovered that there was a layer of topsoil about six inches deep on top of the usual. Now, when I run the tiller, it digs as deep as it will go. I still have to pick a few rocks each time I dig, but there are a lot fewer than when we started.

The garden is getting more productive. I'm sure that it is not all do to having built up the soil. Much of the productivity comes from having learned about what grows well in this place. This year, we're making a big change. We won't be planting sweet corn. Although sweet corn and tomatoes are the two crops that I associate with vegetable gardens, the truth is that our place isn't quite right for sweet corn and our output of corn is always scanty. With lots of good fresh sweet corn at the farmer's market, we've

decided that the real estate in the garden is better invested in other crops. Some years we've had over half the garden in sweet corn for a couple of weeks worth of harvest. That same amount of ground will produce a lot of potatoes.

Of course, I'm being a bit eager. The soil temperatures are still a bit low. But sometime in the next couple of weeks, we'll get the garden in and a new season of growing will have officially begun.

And once again we will be impressed and delighted with the simple mix of dirt, seeds, water and sunshine.

The truth is that every plant and animal - all living things depend on these elements. Without dirt, we wouldn't exist. And there is more to dirt than meets the eye. I read somewhere that every shovelful of dirt contains more living organisms than all of the human beings who have ever lived. At the microscopic level, dirt contains a fascinating universe of living things. There are fungi that lay traps for tiny worms, creatures that eat other creatures, bacteria that can break down and eliminate toxic chemicals, and a whole universe of life and death and the recycling of the elements from which life is formed.

It only looks like the garden was static and lifeless all winter. Beneath the surface it was teeming with bacteria, fungus, mites and nematodes all going about their processes of eating and digesting, living and dying. The chemical properties of the soil were being adjusted by these various organisms. As organic matter in the soil was breaking down into its component elements, new organisms were beginning their life cycles.

Stirring up the dirt yesterday made for changes in the soil. Parts that had been isolated from the air and sunlight were turned up and the dirt on the surface was mixed with what lay deeper down. Parts of the garden that were more moist were mixed with dryer parts. All the while the creatures of the soil were at work, sliding on film of water that lies between the grains of inorganic matter, preparing the way for seeds that will soon be planted.

There are gardeners who are very precise in their work, taking samples of the soil and testing them before adding specific chemicals to change the nature of their soil. I'm less precise and less scientific in my approach. I take notice of the color and smell of the earth. I make some decisions about how many pine needles and how much grass to mix in with the other compost. I feel the soil between my fingers and break up the clumps with my tiller and my rake. I try to keep the garden roughly level and to provide enough moisture to keep the plants growing.

And I pull a few weeds. Not enough, but a few.

Somehow it all works and the earth produces food for our table. Harvesting vegetables from a backyard garden is like getting free food. By the time harvest comes, I have already justified the expenses on tools and seed. And I never keep track of the amount of energy I consume driving to and from various places to pick up supplies for the garden. No record of hours invested is ever kept.

But I do suffer from a condition that seems common to all gardeners. I tend to think about the future a lot. Here I am today imagining this year's harvest and I haven't planted a single seed in the ground. Fortunately there are a few perennials that yield even when I do nothing. Rhubarb grows on its own. But for the rest, I need to get to work.

For one who spends many of his days sitting at a desk clicking the keys on a computer, getting my hands in the dirt is a therapeutic adventure. We aren't technically dependent on our garden. We wouldn't stop eating if we didn't produce a harvest. It is an optional activity. But it is something that I continue to enjoy.

Happy spring! I'm glad it is time to be out in the garden.

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May 10, 2009 – Mother's Day



It is hard to write about Mother's Day without stating the obvious. And it is hard to write about it without a kind of sappy sentimentality. The topic has been approached so many times in so many ways that it is hard to say something fresh.

But I have been extremely fortunate in the Mother's department. The two women in our home, both mothers, are the best examples of that role I can imagine. And I had the good fortune to have a wonderful mother-in-law as well. Being surrounded by such wonderful women makes it easy to celebrate Mother's day. There is much to celebrate.

But we will have a calm day and a rather muted celebration around here. We are at a phase in our life where acquiring more things is not a priority, so gifts tend to be small and symbolic. And our children are far away this holiday, so they won't be joining in the celebration.

We're hoping our celebrations won't be anything like those of a family in Templestowe, a suburb northeast of Melbourne, Australia. The mother was lying in bed waiting for her two daughters to prepare her breakfast. She heard some shouting, but she was used to occasional bickering between the two daughters. The shouting, however, grew more intense and then she heard sirens getting louder and closer to the house. It turned out that the daughters had managed to set the kitchen on fire. Their dad had received second-degree burns on his hands and arms trying to extinguish the blaze and will be spending the night in the hospital. They probably won't forget this particular mother's day.

As I said, we're planning a more muted celebration. No sirens or fires, thank you very much. Perhaps a nice dinner at home after a busy day at church.

There are various versions of the origins of Mother's day. Certainly ancients recognized the importance of mothers and the role they play in the lives of all humans. But the modern celebration is often credited to Anna M. Jarvis, whose campaign for a day to honor mothers resulted in the official declaration of a day in 1908. Jarvis' work was based in that of earlier generations and the original declaration included the pursuit of peace. The idea was that the real way to honor mothers was to pursue peace and to end the killing of their children.

Fewer people remember the 1870 Mother's Day Declaration by Julia Ward Howe. The author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, sickened by the carnage of the Civil War, called on mothers to come together to protest war. She wrote in part:

"Arise, then, women of this day! Arise all women who have hearts, Whether your baptism be that of water or of tears say firmly: 'We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies, our husbands shall not come to us reeking of carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.'"

Howe proposed making July 4, the nation's birthday, an annual day for women to protest war and gather together to promote peace: "In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women without limit of nationality may be appointed and held at some place deemed most convenient and at the earliest period consistent with its objects, to promote the alliance of the different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, the great and general interests of peace."

Howe's Mother's Day eventually settled in July 2 instead of July 4. By 1873, women's groups in at least 18 North American cities observed this Mother's holiday. However, the early celebrations were dependent on Howe's organization and funding and most of them faded after she stopped footing the bill. Boston continued to celebrate the holiday for more than 10 years.

The initial plan had not worked out as Howe envisioned, but it laid the seeds for Anna Jarvis' campaign for the creation of a national holiday to honor mothers and to work for peace. On May 10, 1908, the first official Mother's Day celebration was held at Andrew's Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia and at a church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Sunday holiday caught on and is celebrated throughout the world to this day.

The truth is that we best honor our mothers not by the cards and flowers and gifts given on this day, but rather by the lives we live. Remembering the early plea for peace and for the end to unnecessary death of children is appropriate as we honor mothers everywhere this day. If we would truly honor them, we must work for solutions that bring about an end to violence against innocent victims.

Happy Mother's Day. May this day be a day of rededication to peace.

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May 11, 2009 – Stamps



A while ago we noticed that we had quite a few stamps of various denominations in a desk. Over the years, when the price of stamps had changed, or when we had purchased stamps of special amounts for some special project, we had kept a few. The dollar value of the unused stamps was pretty small, but for a few weeks it was entertaining to try to get the right amount of postage on a letter by combining the stamps. It is a good thing we got those stamps used up when we did, because I really have to stop and think to remember the correct rate.

The price of a one-ounce first-class letter goes to 44 cents today. We have a supply of the post office's "forever stamps," so we don't have to pay the increase until we use them up and purchase our next stamps.

The price of postage stamps gives one way to keep track of the overall increases of prices over time. The post office is prohibited from increasing postage rates at a rate that exceeds the overall inflation rate, so the price of postage roughly demonstrates the general rate of inflation.

The year I was born, the cost to mail a first-class letter was 3 cents. It had been the same rate since 1932, when the 2 cent price was raised to 3 cents. The price had been 2 cents since 1883, except for two years during the first world war when it was raised to 3 cents. I think that the price drop in 1919 after the war was the only decrease in the price of postage in the history of the US Postal Service.

When I was five years old, the price was raised to 4 cents and another five years later it went to 5 cents. Over the next ten years, the price rose to 8 cents before taking a 2 cent raise to 10 cents in 1974. The price had gone to 15 cents by the time I graduated from seminary and had made it to 22 cents when we moved to our second congregation.

When we moved to South Dakota in 1995, the rate was 32 cents. At 44 cents, we are mailing a lot fewer letters, but I doubt that the reason is the price of a stamp. There are simply other ways to communicate. Most of our bills are paid electronically and we use e-mail for a lot of our general correspondence.

But I still enjoy getting a letter from time to time and there is something pleasing about sending one as well. There are a few pieces of business correspondence that are best handled through the postal service, and they have good rates for sending packages to certain places, especially books and items to military APO addresses. The post office is in financial difficulties, but I hope they don't go out of business too soon.

More likely than going out of business, the post office is considering cutting back on the number of days that they deliver mail. We've become accustomed to six day a week delivery, but I suspect that we would quickly adjust to three or four day-a-week deliveries. After all, the correspondence that needs to be delivered quickly is sent electronically these days any way. The difference of a day in the delivery of a letter might not be all that big of a change.

There are folks who live in remote areas of Idaho and Alaska and perhaps other states who receive mail deliveries only once a week. They seem to get along perfectly fine with that service.

It would be nice if higher postage rates decreased the amount of unwanted mail that reaches our home, but I don't expect that to happen. While the letters we want to receive cost 44 cents to mail, bulk mailings have a wide variety of rates. I have envelopes on my desk that were received in the last few days that were mailed at 32, 14, and 10 cents. Sales flyers and fundraising appeals travel at reduced rates.

I've never gotten into stamp collecting, although the name of the hobby makes it seem exotic and attractive. Membership in the American Philatelic Society sounds like an impressive accomplishment. The closest we have to such a collection is that we have kept a few old letters with the cancelled stamps on the envelopes. We didn't keep them because of an interest in stamps, we just used the envelopes as a way to protect the letters.

It has never been about stamps for me. What is important is the connection with others. And although I like letters, I know that it is unlikely that our children will ever write many letters. They keep in touch with the technology of their time. They write e-mails and keep up with their web pages and we use our computers to have video conversations

from time to time. I don't know how long it will take for us to give up the postal service entirely, but its total demise doesn't seem imminent.

So I will continue to send letters from time to time and some of the mail I receive will be meaningful to me.

Now, if I could figure out how to use those three 60 cent stamps I have. They aren't enough for International air mail any more and they're a penny short of two ounces and I know I don't have any 1 cent stamps around here. . . . hmm . . .

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May 12, 2009 – Planting Trees



We planted a couple of trees in our yard yesterday. It seemed like an appropriate way to mark Mother's day. We've struggled with getting trees established in the yard. Some have done better than others, but hopefully these new trees will have an opportunity to take root and flourish. The area we live is a pine forest, with ponderosa pine, but we have chosen to plant Black Hills spruce trees when we have planted in our yard. Because we water the lawn, the extra moisture provides sustenance for the spruce. Black Hills spruce is native to the area and make lovely ornamental trees. The shorter needles and smaller cones of the spruce trees make them easy to distinguish from the pine trees. They also grow thicker branches and have a more traditional "Christmas tree" shape.

Planting trees is a hopeful gesture. When things go well, the plants will continue to live beyond the span of the lives of those who plant them. It seems an appropriate gesture to honor mothers, who invest their lives in the future.

Planting a tree is an investment in the future in many ways. Not only will the tree outlive the one who plants it in most cases, trees produce oxygen. Trees are critical elements in the earth's system for dealing with air pollutants. Trees remove carbon dioxide from the air during photosynthesis to form carbohydrates that are used in the production of the structure of the tree. They also remove other gaseous pollutants, including sulfur dioxide, ozone and nitrogen oxide by absorbing them with other components of the air as a part of their natural processes.

Although it is not a major factor in our yard, trees also help to stabilize soil help to keep soil pollutants from getting into the waterways. By slowing runoff in steep areas they help to keep groundwater from becoming saturated with surface pollutants.

There are a lot of benefits to trees. Of course a couple of trees in our back yard don't make a huge difference in the overall quality of life on this planet, but sometimes it is enough to be making a positive impact, even if it is a a small impact.

I spent most of the day yesterday engaged in physical work. In addition to planting trees, I mowed the lawn, hauled compost to the garden and tilled the garden again. The garden is ready for planting now. Soon we'll have the added chore of weeding. But it is good to have a chance to work outside. My work often involves sitting at a computer or spending time in an office and the fresh air and physical work have a way of renewing my energy and enthusiasm. I'm not used to such work and I'm a bit stiff this morning, but even that feeling is a good one. Stiffness can be a sign that I'm using muscles the way they should be used.

Yesterday people died in suicide bombings in Iraq and in Afghanistan. Yesterday the Shri Lankan government's attacks against the Tamil Tigers continued to have unacceptable civilian casualties, including children and patients in a hospital that took a direct hit. The world continues to be a place of almost unimaginable violence and tragedy. And much of the tragedy of the world is beyond our control. It is easy to feel helpless in the face of the overwhelming horror that occurs in so many places around the world.

But we could plant a couple of trees. We didn't fix the problems of this world. We didn't change the outcomes of lives. We simply planted a couple of trees as a way of making things a little better in our corner of the world. Hopefully others will enjoy the trees in years to come.

It is easy to become overwhelmed by life and to feel powerless in the face of the great horror and tragedy. But each day presents the possibility of doing some good. May we continue to choose to act for good as we go through the days of our lives.

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May 13, 2009 – Parts



When I was a teenager, one of the jobs that I enjoyed at my father's shop was assembling items that had been shipped. We often received boxes of parts for items that shipped better unassembled. Most of the time we assembled the items for our customers. It was a fun job most of the time. The parts were new, everything needed was in the box, things fit and the instructions were usually helpful. Assembling new equipment is quite different from repairing old equipment, where dirt and rust and sometimes damage make it hard to get bolts and nuts to turn and things don't always fit as expected.

These days it is more common for a customer to receive the box of parts and assemble the item itself. Furniture manufacturers found that they could lower the cost to the end user if that user were willing to do some final assembly. Online shopping and rapid shipping means that customers receive items directly from the manufacturer in the same containers as they would be shipped to a retail dealer. And strangely, or so it seems to me, customer service is decreasing in difficult financial times.

Yesterday I went to a local store to pick up an item that we had ordered for the church. We had decided that it was good to make the purchase locally even though the cost was more than 10% higher than making an online purchase. Local taxes support local government, and having local businesses is important to the overall health of our community. Sometimes the least expensive purchase in the short term contributes to long term problems. So we didn't feel bad about paying a little bit extra in order to get

the item from a local dealer. And we thought as we ordered it, this way we will have local service for our purchase.

When I arrived in the store, they handed me a box of unassembled parts. They were still in the container that had been shipped from the manufacturer. In other words we got exactly the same thing we would have gotten had we purchased online, except there had been an extra week's delay in shipping and the price was higher. I walked away with the box of parts wondering how many people would consider it a wise use of the church's funds to pay more for slower service and end up with exactly the same product.

It is not that I object to assembling the parts. As I said before, it is an easy and satisfying task to assemble such an item. It will provide a good break from my usual desk work. I suspect that I will have the item assembled by the end of the day today without having really taken much time at the task. And I know that a single item is not the only reason to support local business.

But it was just another item in a string of examples of poor customer service that I encountered yesterday. An advertisement ordered for the local newspaper was forgotten on the day it was supposed to run. The customer service representative offered me one extra day in exchange for two days that the add should have run. When I made an inquiry about the online advertising that was supposed to go with the ad, she said she would have to call me back. She never did call back. The newspaper likes to blame the Internet for its decline and what appears to be eventual demise. From my perspective the newspaper is declining because of a lack of basic objective journalism and a lack of customer service. If I have to go online to fact check the items I read in the newspaper, and if the newspaper continually treats its smaller customers like we don't matter, it makes me wonder why I bother spending money on it in the first place.

In another case, I made two trips to a local dealership to inquire about the spare tire for a trailer I had bought. The second trip was because there was no one who knew anything about it on my first trip. After more than a month's delay and not getting satisfaction from the local dealer, I called the manufacturer. The answer was, "Sure, no problem. I have a truck in your area every two weeks. I can deliver it directly to you." If it was that easy to get the wheel and tire, why didn't the local dealer make the phone call. Furthermore I obtained the wholesale price by going directly to the manufacturer which showed that on that particular item the dealer was marking up 100%. Pay more . . . what for?

I understand that in a shrinking economy there are fewer employees in local businesses and that they need to work harder. But the businesses that succeed in hard times, it seems to me, will be the ones where employees are trained in customer service. It wouldn't be difficult to train employees in basic manners and to teach them some attentiveness to customers. Small incentives could be offered to employees for

exceptional customer service. But the business must first set the example by making it a policy to offer something extra to the customer.

When the bookstore says, “We don’t have it in stock but we can have it next week,” they certainly must know that I can have it tomorrow by ordering it online. Adding the words, “if you need it in a hurry, we could have it here tomorrow for an extra shipping fee,” might keep them from losing the sale.

Offering assembly of items for free or at a reduced cost might help customers to see the value of a local business.

It is a tough position for the customers that local businesses fail to understand. We like the local businesses. We want them to remain in our community. Our community needs the jobs they offer and the taxes they pay. We want our town to be vibrant and its businesses to be successful. But the truth is that investing money in customer service training for employees would be wiser than the radio, billboard and television advertisements that encourage customers to shop locally. Instead of trying to make people feel guilty for an online purchase, demonstrate superior service. Positive reinforcement works better than guilt every time.

So, enough grumbling from me. I intend to continue to make extra efforts to make purchases through local dealers. I intend to ask them for customer service. And I will think carefully about the long term consequences of every purchase I make. I know these are hard times and I know that local jobs are important to all of us. Furthermore, I know that my complaints are minor. None of them will prevent me from doing business with these local stores in the future.

Besides I have a box of parts in my office. When I was a kid, an erector set was among the best imaginable gifts, because you got not only the gift, but the joy of putting the parts together. Sure we paid a bit more, but I get the joy of putting the parts together. For a few minutes today I can be a kid again. And that has its own value that no one can take away.

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May 14, 2009 – A Year Later



It has been nearly a year since the flood of June, 2008, devastated Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Near the center of the state, the city was overwhelmed with water. Many homes and businesses were damaged beyond repair. The flood, said to be a 500-year event, left almost ten square miles of this city of 110,000 people uninhabitable.

Old timers in our city know the devastation of flood. In June of 1972 the flood waters rushed through Rapid City. A wall of water destroyed homes and lives. The flood in Cedar Rapids was different. The waters rose slowly and there wasn't the loss of life that Rapid City experienced. But there was another difference that is evident nearly a year after the flood.

The Cedar Rapids flood occurred as the the nation was entering the worst recession since the great depression of the 1930's. As the waters of the flood dried up, so did the source of money that could be borrowed for rebuilding. If your home sustained $85,000 worth of damage, the $28,000 check from FEMA doesn't get it repaired. If the banks are not lending, the repairs cannot be made.

A year after the flood, businessman Doug Ward has raised nearly $350,000 from a wide variety of sources. Most of the money is in the form of promised loans. The problem is that it is estimated that it would take $1 million to get his A&W restaurant open at its current address. And even if he could raise the funds to open the restaurant, the once-thriving business would be standing in the middle of a nearly abandoned neighborhood.

Chances are that it would be a poor investment unless the restaurant were moved to a new location.

Despite assistance from the federal government, despite significant support from charities, despite investment by family members and friends, there are a lot of people in Cedar Rapids who cannot raise the funds necessary to rebuild.

The news headlines don't carry stories about Cedar Rapids today. We have a short attention span and there are other things that capture the imagination of news seekers. And the truth is that there isn't much new in Cedar Rapids these days - more of the same seems to be the rule of the day. Some people are finding jobs in other businesses. Some people are moving away. The money to rebuild just isn't there and it doesn't look like it will be anytime soon.

Sometimes, when I complain about the balance in my retirement account, I am rightly reminded that there are a lot of other people who have had significant losses in this economy. It is true. We're all in this together. But the losses haven't been evenly distributed. Some people have lost a lot more than we have. If you live in Cedar Rapids and lost your business and your home to the flood, the only thought you give to your retirement account is its critically low balance because you've withdrawn all of your savings in order to survive.

There are a lot of people for whom retirement simply is not going to be an option.

Yesterday's news contained projections about the ways in which the economic crisis has hastened the date when Social Security will become insolvent. The dream of a comfortable retirement with an adequate safety net that was enjoyed by one generation of Americans doesn't seem to be sustainable for the next generation.

But times change. And people are amazingly resilient. I have a hunch that Cedar Rapids will rebuild. The process will be much slower than anticipated. And there will be much more disruption than expected. But through a slow process over time that sturdy midwestern resolve will emerge. They may not build back bigger than before, but in some ways they will build back better than before.

That may be little consolation for Doug Ward. He's likely to soon be working for someone else. After nearly thirty years of being his own boss, it will take some adjustment. The restaurant will likely not be rebuilt. But don't count him out of the game. He is not complaining. He's experienced hard times before. His father died when he was 5. He dropped out of school after the eighth grade to go to work. He did whatever work he could get. The restaurant was the result of ten years of driving a Coca Cola truck and saving every penny that he could. The years of serving mugs of root beer to his friends and neighbors were good and they will be missed in years to come.

Doug Ward will find a job and he'll discover a new dream and set new goals. That's the kind of guy that he is. Hope never ends.

A year later Cedar Rapids doesn't make a very good case for the efficiencies of disaster recovery. But it does make a good case for the power of the human spirit and the strength of hard-working people. It is going to take a few more years. And there will be some monumental struggles. But don't count out Cedar Rapids - or any other town that is facing hard times these days.

People are stronger than the downturn in the economy. Not only will we survive, We'll emerge stronger and more compassionate from this chapter in our nation's history. We'll have our values readjusted and we'll once again discover what is most important. Then we'll roll up our sleeves and get to work.

That's the kind of people we are. That's the kind of neighbors we have. That's the kind of communities we are building.

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May 15, 2009 – Pipes



Regular readers of the blog will remember a lot of articles about organ pipes over the past few years. And The pictures may look similar to those who are not familiar with our organ. However, yesterday was another fun day in the long process of expanding and remodeling our church's pipe organ.

The picture may not mean much by itself, but it is a rack of organ pipes on the top of one of the new wind chests in the choir division of our organ. That rack is brand new and the pipes were inserted for the first time yesterday. When they were played, it was the first opportunity that we had to hear some of the new sounds that are being incorporated into our instrument.

The final push for the completion of the project is on. It is anticipated that we are within two or three weeks of a process that we began just over three years ago. For more than a year the pipes have been in large pipe trays waiting for the completion of the wind chests and electronic wiring. The pipe trays are large wooden boxes, ten feet long and three feet wide. They are shallow, but will hold a rank or more of pipes. A rented lift was used to raise them up to the choir loft where they were stacked to await the installation of the pipes. Now each day there is one or two empty pipe trays and more pipes in the chamber.

The process of building a pipe organ is complex and difficult. The new pipes for our organ are made out of aluminum. Each pipe is unique and different from all of the rest. Individual ranks have pipes of similar shape but different size to make each pitch of the

scale. Each pipe is made by hand, with small adjustments allowing for final voicing and tuning of the pipe. They are tested on a wind chest and voiced by an expert before being delivered to the church. Then they are re-voiced and tuned again as they are placed into the wind chests. Pipe by pipe, note by note. Our organ has 34 ranks with 58 to 61 pipes per rank. That is over 2,000 individual notes to play, voice and tune.

But before the pipes can be installed, the wind chests have to be made and installed. There is a hole in the wind chest for each pipe. And the chests have to be custom made to match the pipes. Each pipe has its own electronic switch that opens and closes a flap to allow air to enter the pipe. Those switches are connected by fiber optic cables to the organ console where individual keys on the keyboard correspond to the pitch of the pipe and stop tabs determine which ranks of pipes are being activated. An organist can control volume by opening or closing louvers on the pipe chambers or by adding and subtracting the number of pipes that are played in combination.

In our case, we have had an entirely new console manufactured. It is currently receiving the final coats of varnish and could be delivered as soon as one week. The temporary console with which we play the organ in the interim has only two manuals and 26 stop tabs. Our new console has three manuals and 77 stop tabs. As a result the temporary console cannot play all of the pipes currently installed in the chambers at the same time. To hear our new organ all at once will require the installation of the new console.

Sometime in the last few days of May or the first days of June the organ will begin to emit sounds that have never before been heard. Even though we have heard individual pipes, they have never been played in combinations.

Some of us have been imagining those sounds in our heads for a long time. Two years of fund-raising, and three years of construction have passed since we first began to go over lists of pipes and listen to the sounds of other organs. We had an Austin organ, manufactured in the early 1960's with a classic American organ sound. We wanted to retain that sound and add a choir division with more flutes, reeds and other voices that add a bit of French flair to the instrument. Brilliant and bright with a solid foundation of deep pedal pipes. And we wanted he ability to play other combinations of pipes for accompanying the choir and offering special music for voluntaries and other worship occasions.

Fans of pipe organs are hoping for a little more volume from the instrument, but volume was not our primary goal. Power is communicated through complex combinations of sounds more than sheer volume. And the deep base notes of the longest pipes in the organ provide an experience the moves listeners. Some sounds are physically felt as much as they are heard.

Like a live wind ensemble, a pipe organ delivers sound waves on columns of moving air. The experience of hearing sounds delivered on moving air is quite distinct from

hearing similar sounds delivered on static air. No recording and no devise that uses electric speakers can replicate the sound. Even sophisticated electronic organs with computer controlled delays in sounds, a “chiff” of a pipe valve added, and other features cannot provide the moving air that washes over the listener.

But, as I mentioned earlier, the new sounds of our organ have existed only in our imaginations so far. The moment of truth when we first hear the instrument played in combinations is yet to come.

But it is close.

Organist Angela Kraft Cross will be at that new console in rehearsal on June 11 and performance on June 13 - less than a month from now. Throughout the summer guest organists will be playing our instrument as we prepare for year of special events to introduce the organ to our congregation and our community.

Pipe organs come from a conviction that we are called to offer our highest and best to God in worship. The instruments are too complex and too expensive for individuals. They are custom designed and manufactured for specific rooms. Our organ has been for the purpose of worshiping God from the beginning. It is said that the pipe organ is one of the most complex and difficult instruments to master. It is played with both hands and both feet and the organist sometimes is reading six or more lines of music at the same time. Certain motions and actions have to be memorized because they occur too quickly for the brain to process while other actions and motions are also being completed.

So even before it is finished, we dedicate this instrument to the glory of God. And, like many other aspects of our religious life, we wait in faith for that which is yet to be revealed. And, from time to time, we hear a few sounds and get a small taste of the future that is unfolding.

There may have been quite a few blog postings about pipes in the past - and there will be more in the future.

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May 16, 2009 – Couples



Today is Neil and Melissa's wedding day. We have been planning their wedding for several months and they are well-prepared, so it should be a fun day of celebration for their families. Over the years, I have been allowed to officiate at a lot of weddings and, for the most part, it is something that I enjoy. Increasingly we have couples who come to the church seeking to be married who really don't have any background in the church and know very little about who we are and what we do. There are more than a few inaccurate perceptions and expectations. Part of planning for many weddings is instruction in what a church is, what is acceptable in the setting of worship, and why a church wedding isn't the way weddings are pictured on television.

But this is not the case for this couple. They have been involved in churches all of their lives and they made a point of getting to know and becoming members of our congregation well in advance of their wedding. They are from the same rural community and their families know each other well.

It happens that Neil and Melissa's wedding day is the actual day of the wedding anniversary of a couple who were married in our church in 1954. Late this morning, five hours before Neil and Melissa's wedding, a smaller group of family and friends will gather in our sanctuary to celebrate the renewal of marriage vows on the occasion of the couple's 55th wedding anniversary.

It is an amazing privilege to be included in both celebrations. Ministers often get to view the entire span of life and are included in significant celebrations from baptisms to

funerals and many occasions in between. And we are charged with finding words to express the significance of those moments. Words are the main tool of our vocation.

As I reflect on the two occasions for today I am aware of the many differences between the two couples. Different words are demanded for each couple. And yet, I suspect that they have more in common than initially meets the eye.

I think that it won't be difficult for the older couple to remember some of the idealism and joy of their wedding day. Much in life didn't work out the way they imagined it. Some parts of life have been more difficult and some of the things they feared were not as challenging as they expected. But there was a time when they were young and in love and believed that their love had the power to change everything. And I'm quite sure that they can remember what that felt like. Over the years they have witnessed many couples whose relationships did not make it to fifty-five years. There have been divorces among their friends and there have been friends their age who have lost a spouse to death.

Through it all they have remained together. And they have witnessed the power of love to heal. Despite the scripture read at their wedding, they have not always been patient and kind. There have been times when they have been arrogant and boastful and even rude. They have not always lived up to the ideals they shared on their wedding day. They have had to learn to forgive and to make changes in their lives and in their expectations of one another.

It is a significant thing for them to stand in the church today and to renew the vows they took more than a half a century ago. To look into the face of your beloved and say, "You are more beautiful and desirable than you have ever been. Marrying you has been among the best things of life for me and if I had life to live over again, I would choose to live with you." And they will mean it. And it will be true.

There is a part of me that wishes that there were some way to tell the younger couple, who will marry this afternoon, how incredibly marvelous it is to grow old together. The older couple is the age of their grandparents. And Neil and Melissa can't imagine what life has in store for them. They look into each other's eyes and they don't see the wrinkles that will one day develop and the effects that decades of living will have upon them. They cannot yet imagine how love can continue to grow and deepen as shared memories accumulate over decades of faithful living. Even if I tell them that the day will come when they will look in the mirror and barely recognize the face staring back at them, they won't believe me. Because they are young and in love and their whole lives are stretching out before them.

But my wedding prayer for them is that they will discover, in their own time, in their own way, the deep joy of growing old together. It is one of the best things in the world. And it is a rare treasure. I'd love to be there on their 55th wedding anniversary to listen to

them tell the stories of their life together. But that is a future that even I can't imagine. It will unfold in its own way.

There is something wonderful about the number two in the process of creation. Couples hold the power to create and love in unique ways. And through God's love two become one. How fortunate I am to be invited to witness the joy of that gift.

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May 17, 2009 – Camp



Today our congregation is celebrating Placerville. Placerville camp is relatively close to our church, just a few miles into the hills. It is a beautiful location alongside Rapid Creek with thick forest all around. The cluster of camp buildings provides sleeping, dining, worship and meeting space. But what is best about camp is the outdoor space. There is a gently sloping field next to the creek with open space for games. A foot bridge leads across the creek for access to lots of hiking and space for adventure. There is ample space for quiet personal meditation, a safe area for campfires and an outdoor worship area.

Our service today will focus on building excitement for campers to sign up, promoting the use of the camp by families and other groups in the church, raising awareness of the ministries of the camp, and raising much-needed funds to keep the programs of the camp vibrant and exciting.

I was a camp kid. My parents took to me church camp when I was only a couple of months old and we continued to attend camp every summer of my life. After Susan and I were married, we served as managers and cooks at the same camp for two summers during our seminary years. When we graduated, we became active in the camping programs of the conferences where we served. I have multiple drawers full of camp t-shirts.

My participation in camp goes far beyond the fact that it is a tradition - something that I have always done. I believe deeply in camp as a place for quality Christian education.

The outdoor setting combines with the intensity of residential study to create multiple opportunities for growing in Christian community, experiencing the awe of God's creation, and sharing the Gospel story. One week of camp is equal to or greater than the number of hours we get with many of the youth and children who participate in the church.

As children grow older and enter their teenage years, camp becomes an wonderful opportunity to try on new roles in the community and consider what kind of adult one is becoming. Public school settings can be filled with cliques and assumptions about an individual's role, abilities, and direction in life. Camp provides a setting of meeting new people and forming community in an intense an intentional way. Youth are freed to try on a new experience or a new role in the community without feeling like they will be labeled and have to stick with that designation forever.

It is in this setting that many of us have discovered our vocation. I am not the only one of my colleagues who sees a direct relationship between my summer camping experiences and my call to the ministry. Spending time with ministers in a setting that seems closer to everyday life than Sunday morning worship gave me an opportunity to get to know and admire pastors for more than their abilities in public speaking. I got glimpses of how they lived their lives and what their work meant to them. And I began to imagine that I might be drawn to that kind of work.

I suppose that one could argue that there are so many ministers with camp experience because we immerse ourselves in the life of the church and so have gone to camp as part of that immersion, but I think the link is more substantial. It is not just that so many of us have participated in camp. So many of us have had experiences at camp that led us to understand God's call for our lives.

The unique combination of intense community living and plenty of open space for quiet thought and personal reflection leads one to considering one's place in this world. The positive and uplifting nature of the program encourages imagining the highest and best for each individual. We are not all the same. Some people are not called to be ministers. Some are called to be teachers and physicians and builders and social workers and technicians and scholars. One can experience a call to many different vocations at camp.

But I am worried. Church camps are always run on shoestring budgets. We believe so deeply in what we are doing that we keep costs low. Money should never be a barrier that prevents a person from attending camp. And we believe deeply in quality programming, some of which can cost a significant amount of money. Those of us who are involved in camp committees and administration invest our funds in programs and facilities and trust God and the congregations we serve to keep the savings and provide for the future. It isn't that we are spendthrift, it is that we believe deeply that the funds should be invested in the camp and not sitting in a bank.

A downturned economy and hard times for our families makes camp seem like a bit of a luxury. And there is plenty of competition for church camps these days. Sports camp top the list of priorities for many families. And there are a host of other speciality camps that focus on everything from computers to quilts. Camp properties tend to be desirable vacation properties and cash-strapped church officials can be tempted to sell the property to provide for the everyday operation of the church. Our neighbors in the Northern Plains Conference sold their camp site years ago. Nebraska, Colorado and Montana have sites that are facing financial crises and there is a question in all three conferences about how much longer programming can continue.

Our camp is more stable financially and continues to operate within its budget. We do not own the land where our camp is located, but have a low-cost lease with the National Forest Service. Most of our programming is provided by volunteers, most of which invest their personal funds in providing camps. But the numbers of campers are not as large as they once were. And donations from local churches and individuals have declined in the face of the current economic situation.

Christian camping really blossomed during the Great Depression. When times were the hardest, church camps provided relatively low-cost vacations for those who would not have otherwise had such an opportunity. Property values were low and camp sites were not seen as particularly desirable locations for other uses. And people were generous despite having less resources themselves. I am not convinced that a downturn in the economy is bad for camping. It might just prove to be the opposite.

So today we will celebrate the camp that we have and promote continuing participation and support in our congregation. Placerville is not the only place to meet God and experience Christian community. But it is a wonderful place for those experiences.

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May 18, 2009 – Model A Ford



The story that I have heard from time to time is that my Uncle Randy, when he was dating my Aunt Teddy, had a Model A Ford with a rumble seat. On occasion he would take his date and her three sisters, one of whom is my mom, for a ride. The three younger sisters would ride in the rumble seat. This story has always been told with joy and made the idea of riding in a rumble seat a good thought.

Of course our family never had a car with a rumble seat. I think my first ride in a rumble seat was after I had become an adult and a friend in North Dakota completed the restoration of a 1932 Chevrolet that his in-laws had owned when they got married. He managed to find the car in a shed on a farm and completed the restoration in time for the celebration of the couple's 50th wedding anniversary. One item that he could not find for the restoration was the original key fob, which had fold-out wires for cleaning and gapping the spark plugs. I happened to find the correct fob among the possessions of my great uncle after he passed away. When I produced it, I instantly became a member of their family.

There was a car with a rumble seat in the parking lot at the church on Sunday. Ron Hill brought his restored Model A to church. We had our Sunday School picnic and there was a bounce house for kids in the parking lot and one of the members of our confirmation class brought two antique engines that he had restored. It was a fun day with good food, good fellowship and plenty of stories to be told. We had celebrated our church camp, Placerville, and the service had been filled with stories of camp and its meaning in the lives of our congregation.

I hadn't thought much about which parts of the day had affected which people until I got in the car with my mother and father-in-law, who are both in their late eighties. On the short drive to deliver Keith to his home the conversation was focused on the Model A Ford. Both of the elders had stories about Model A cars. And the stories they told were fun stories of good times.

Ford actually used the designation "Model A" on two different cars. An early Ford, produced in 1903-1904 was designated "Model A," but the car that is remembered today as the Model A was mass produced in the Ford Factory from 1927-1931, following on the heels of the successful Model T. On one hand, the timing of the release of the Model A was unfortunate. The Great Depression had the nation in its grip and there were a lot fewer automobile sales than had marked the 1920's. On the other hand, the timing meant that what cars were produced and got into the hands of consumers were, for the most part, treasured and well-maintained. There was an attitude of making things last that came out of the depression and it resulted in many Model A Fords having long and varied service lives. They were converted into pickup trucks and even farm tractors. And more than a few survived to make it into the hands of automobile restorationists.

Ron's Model A sure brought smiles to faces when he drove it to church yesterday. And for those who were teens and young adults during the depression, it sparked memories and stories.

The world has changed. There may be a few iconic cars that are remembered as classics from my young adult years such as the Ford Mustang or the Pontiac GTO, but both of those cars were produced in a variety of models over the years, with new body styles released each year. And there were plenty of other choices. I doubt if any single car will provoke memories for my generation the way the Model A does for our parents. When we were coming to age, the horsepower race and the shift to a consumer culture was producing a climate of constant upgrading and changing of cars. "Drive new every two," was the banner across the front of one car dealer in our town. There was a sense that technology was advancing at such a pace that anything that was five years old was out of date. There are a few automobile enthusiasts who have preserved and restored cars from the 1960's and you see a lot of cars from those years at car shows, but they simply don't have the impact on our emotions that the Model A produces for our parents. It seems as if everybody knew someone who had a Model A Ford.

It is always interesting to note what we save and what we discard. Our choices aren't always the best. Part of what makes antiques valuable is that not every one saved them. There are just a few examples of what used to be. When I look around my house, I can identify the antiques that we have received from previous generations, but I haven't got a clue what we will leave to future generations from our time. It may fall to future generations to decide what to keep and what to recycle. As handy as our 1999

Subaru has been, something tells me that it won't be drawing crowds in a church parking lot seventy years from now.

Far more valuable than the antique car in the parking lot yesterday, however, were the memories that it provoked. And we have some good memories and more than a few stories to tell. In the process of sorting and deciding what to retain and what to release, some memories and stories are definitely "keepers."

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May 19, 2009 – Recreation



The commandment about observing the Sabbath is very clear. And the warning includes the commandment not to take ourselves too seriously. “Even the Lord God rested after six days of creation.” It might just as well have said, “Don’t think you’re more indispensable than God.” Because it is easy to convince oneself that there is too much work to take a day off.

Truly observing Sabbath requires more than just taking a day off, however. There are plenty of chores that can be crammed into a day out of the office. And with computers it is easy to take a few minutes to check e-mail, respond to colleagues and turn one’s mind to work even when distant from the workplace.

Yesterday was a day off for me. I sometimes get two days a week off, but that hasn’t happened for a few weeks and won’t be occurring for a few more. There are simply too many things going on and scheduling weddings and other special events requires that I work on Saturdays. But I’m pretty good about observing Mondays as days off.

When I look at the day I had yesterday. I can think of four things that were recreational for me. Each provided more energy than it consumed. I went for a paddle in the morning. I baked bread. I took a nap. And I planted the garden. Well, I planted most of the garden. I’ve got a couple of rows of peas to plant and some supports for the tomatoes to put in place. I ran out of daylight last night as I was working in the cool of the evening.

Paddling a canoe or kayak is always a recreational activity for me. And yesterday morning I had the lake to myself. The water was glassy smooth. As I headed up the inlet to check out the beavers' activities, a pair of canadian geese went to work to lead me away from their nest site. They honked noisily and swam just ahead of the boat. If I came too close, they would splash and fly forward a few feet, just enough to stay ahead of me. They didn't actually take to the air and put a big distance between themselves and me until they were convinced that I had paddled safely past the place they were protecting.

On a calm, quiet morning, two geese can be incredibly noisy.

One of the beavers poked his head up to take a look at me, but sensing that I was no threat, they ignored me as I checked out their lodge.

Baking bread is very recreational for me. I do it enough that it doesn't require much concentration and baking has waiting built into the process. I proof my yeast with a little flour and water before mixing the dough, so there is a half hour for doing other things or reading a book while that occurs. Then I allow the dough to rise a couple of times, which takes more waiting. And it takes nearly a half hour to bake the bread. And kneading dough is very therapeutic for me. I can allow my mind to wander and think whatever thoughts come naturally as I push and turn the dough.

And a nap . . . well, what can I say. I'm a pretty good napper. I can wake from a short sleep feeling refreshed and energized.

Normally I like working in the garden, but it was pretty warm yesterday, so I waited until evening and I didn't really allow enough time to get the garden in. It always takes me quite a while to lay out the garden, deciding where to put the rows, what to plant in each row and the like. Tomatoes, beans and peas require some extra support, so I have to plan ways to hold up the plants. And I use some water-filled plastic devices around the tomatoes to help give the young plants a boost. Filling those takes quite a bit of time and effort. And it isn't quite full summer yet, so it is pretty dark by 9 p.m. I'll get the garden finished one evening this week.

Last week was cool, so I think my timing on planting was about right. Some of the crops could have been planted last week, but it was too early for the tomatoes. Our growing season can be a little short for some crops, but we keep adjusting what we plant thinking that we'll come up with just the right combination one of these years. Of course I bought too many seeds and I can always imagine an even larger garden at this time of the year, but for this year our little plot will be sufficient. And we did increase the garden area over last year by quite a bit.

So, all in all, it was a day of recreation for me. It is interesting that the commandment reminds us that God rested from the work of creation and we sometimes have to take a

day off to make time to participate with God in the on-going work of creation. I slept well after my day's activities and I'm ready to return to the office this morning. That, it seems to me, is a good sign.

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May 20, 2009 – Warm Days



Even with the sophisticated tools available to meteorologists today, predicting the weather is a bit of an art and there can be inaccuracies in forecasts. And for some of us, who tend to ignore the weather forecasts except when planning a trip or special event, the weather comes as a surprise. After a cool week last week, this week began with high temperatures. I found myself wearing short sleeved shirts when I should have been wearing long last week and yesterday I had on a dark long-sleeved shirt and ended up using the air conditioner in the car as I drove around town.

Widely varying temperatures are a part of the hills. We have experienced dramatic shifts in temperature in very short times and there can be huge differences in relatively short distances in the hills. The forecast calls for temperatures at least ten degrees lower today and highs in the upper sixties for the rest of the week. Yesterday's 90 degree day was an exception, not the usual weather for May in the hills. Except that "the usual" is the result of drawing up averages, and hot or cold days can occur at any time of the year around here.

What makes the newspaper are the extremes. After the record temperatures and intense fires of the summer, Australia is beginning autumn with record flooding in Queensland. The two areas are far apart and there is a lot of Australia that experienced a relatively normal year, but the hardships caused by extreme weather are what make the news and people living in far-away places get the impression that the whole country is subject to dangerous weather conditions.

The crab apple trees in the church yard had a strange spring. With all of the spring snow followed by high temperatures they produced fewer blossoms than usual. Some of them looked like they were blooming on one half of the tree and skipping the blossoms on the other half. Despite the heavy spring snows, the porous soil that surrounds the church has dried up. A volunteer was working on the sprinkler system yesterday. The hole he dug showed how dry the soil has become in the past couple of weeks. None of us know how that will change. We could have more rain and cooler temperatures like we did last spring. Or it could turn hot and dry and rise fire concerns early in the year. We've seen that kind of weather in recent years as well.

My enthusiasm has matched the blossoms on the crab apple trees. Some days I've really got spring fever, rushing to do outdoor chores and longing for summer recreation. Some days it seems like summer is coming too quickly this year. My emotions are mixed and tend to run hot and cold rather than seeking an average.

Perhaps there are some who can live so fully in the present that they are unaffected by the shifts in weather, but I am not one of them. I have a memory and recalling other years is one of the tools I have for making sense of this world. And I have been given a deep sense of hope. I anticipate the future with joy and am open to being surprised. I rarely just take things one day at a time.

I love the blossoming trees even though they remind me that I still have allergies to certain tree pollens. It appears that this spring will be a mixture in terms of allergies: not as bad as some years and not quite as good as others.

The weather could change any day. Knowing that things change keeps me on my toes and keeps me interested.

May we all learn to find joy in whatever weather we receive.

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May 21, 2009 – Joyful



A friend asked me yesterday, “Are you always like this?” “Always like what?” I responded. “Always upbeat and positive?” I hadn’t thought about it much, I guess. I didn’t know exactly how to respond. The setting was a group of colleagues who are relatively close. We are able to speak frankly of our jobs and their frustrations and we know a little of each other’s family lives as well. We have been meeting for regular Bible study for years and have seen each other through a lot of different seasons and situations.

I am a happy person. Life has been incredibly good to me. And I think that as I have grown older I have developed better ways to deal with conflict and stress in my life. But I am not aware of being somehow more upbeat and positive than others. I just am the way I am.

The list of things for which I am grateful is long. I live in a beautiful place. Almost every morning I am greeted with spectacular sunrises. I have taken so many pictures of sunrises that I hesitate to use them in my blog for fear that doing so would be so repetitious that readers would become bored. But most days I am struck with the incredible beauty of this world. As I sit at my computer this morning, I can hear the birds singing to greet the new day. There are many who are not able to live in such a beautiful place.

I have been blessed with family. My parents provided a home of love and security and challenged and supported us to go into the world to pursue our dreams. I discovered the

love of my life at an early age and have a wonderful marriage. We have two children who have brought so much to our lives and who continue to delight and amaze us as they move out into the world.

I have been fortunate in my vocation. Not only do I have a calling that I love and a job that is meaningful, I have been blessed to be called by congregations that are supportive of ministry and engaged in reaching out to the world. Over the years I have heard more than a few horror stories about ministers mismatched with their congregations and even a few tales of congregations that were abusive in their relationship to their pastors. These things have never happened to me. I have been called to serve faithful, honest and fair people.

My life has been remarkably free from pain. Recently I experienced a back injury and I'm not fully recovered, and there are a few activities about which I have to be careful. And the normal process of aging has left me with some bumps on my finger joints and some days my hands announce their presence with stiffness and some pain. But for the most part, I do not live with anything that might be called chronic. My health has been a tremendous blessing.

I could go on and on with the list of good things that are a part of my life. And often I do when I am giving thanks to God.

It isn't that my life is without stress. It is easy for me to become over committed and I have a tendency to accept more tasks that time would allow. I am as good about worrying about our children or our aging parents as anyone. Some days I drive as many as sixty miles just going back and forth between the office and my home balancing the care of my mother with the demands of my job. I can read my pension statements and my retirement savings have taken a hit in the recent economy that is as bad as, but no worse than, others in a similar position. I know I won't be able to retire as soon as some. There are mornings when I am tired and the thought that I need to work at least a decade more than my father did makes me more weary.

But I rarely spend much time or energy worrying about the stress in my life. Exercise and activity seem to be effective for me in treating depressing thoughts. I have never experienced the illness of depression. I have done enough academic research and taught enough classes on stress management to know that stress is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. It is just when there is too much or too little stress that it turns to distress. My stock answer to "Busy day?" is "It beats unemployment." I would rather have the stresses of my life than to have too little to do. Boredom seems like a real waste of human energy to me.

Life is good. And I have received many blessings.

Last evening I stood on our front porch and watched a rainbow that followed a gentle spring shower. I had just planted the last of the vegetable garden and the timing of the rain couldn't have been better. The tomato plants have been in the ground enough to start to show signs of recovery from the stress of transplanting and most of the activity in the garden is taking place underground. There isn't even any weeding to be done yet. My mother was enjoying a new book that I had brought home to her, the cats were curled up and sleeping on the couch. There is undone work in my study and a garage that desperately needs cleaning. But those tasks were put on hold last night. The rainbow was fare more beautiful than the picture I was able to take.

The ancients were quick to interpret the rainbow as a sign of God's favor. In the time of Noah God gave the rainbow as a sign of covenant. "I will be your God and you will be my people." The terms of the covenant are simple. God did not promise an easy life, or wealth, or power, or recognition. God did not offer an exemption from pain or tragedy or confusion. God did not suggest that there would be no disease and God did not promise that life would be easy. "I will be your God and you will be my people." "In the midst of the tragedies and stresses of this life, I will not abandon you." "In the face of danger and disruption and change, I'll be there." It has been a good deal for God's people from the beginning. The stories of our people record incredible pain and suffering, displacement and dispossession. There were times when we were refugees and other times when the decisions we made led us into slavery and oppressive governments. But the stories of our people also record wonderful moments of the certainty of God's presence. They tell of life that triumphs over death, beauty that overcomes chaos, deep joy that endures grief. The rainbow reminds me of so many stories of our people.

So the answer, I guess, is yes. I am always like this. At least I am always a child of God and God will never abandon me. I have sung "Joyful, joyful, we adore thee" at a funeral and meant every word.

Jesus promised, "You will know joy and that joy no one will be able to take from you." May you know that joy today and each day of your life.

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May 22, 2009 – The Trailer



We love to travel. And we have traveled in many different ways over the years. We've gone backpacking, carrying everything we need on our backs. We've traveled long distances with one or two suitcases. We've done a lot of car camping with a tent, a portable stove and lantern. For many years we had a small pop-up camper that we pulled behind our car. It had a stove, an ice box, plenty of sleeping space and a small dinette. In recent years we've acquired a slide-in pickup camper that has plenty of amenities for luxurious camping. We have a solar panel, batteries and inverter on the camper so we can charge the computer's batteries when we travel.

The only problem with the camper is that even though it is a pop-up style, it is a long ways from the ground to the top of the camper and I like to take a canoe or kayak along when we go camping. Hauling boats on top of the camper requires hauling a ladder so that I have a way to get up there. No problem. We have a ladder that is easy to take with us.

This year we acquired a trailer that will haul a lot of canoes and kayaks. We don't intend to take all of our various boats with us on any long trips, but the trailer will work to take a couple of boats and the boats that are loaded on the lower levels of the trailer can be loaded and unloaded without much strain.

The temptation, however, is to begin to take too much with us. The trailer will easily accommodate the large tool box that is usually in the back of the truck, but which we remove when we take our camper. A couple of space pods will provide a place for life

vests, paddles and wet gear that sometimes have shared the cab of the pickup with us. We could easily take a spare bottle of propane and save ourselves the trouble of finding propane dealers in remote locations.

One could haul a lot of stuff on that trailer. Lawn chairs, a barbecue grill . . . the list goes on and on. If we strapped a rocking chair to the top of the camper, we could look like the Beverly Hillbillies going down the road.

One way to measure a vacation might be to think in terms of what one takes along. We wouldn't consider a vacation without a few books. And, of course, we need clothing. And if we are traveling away from public accommodations, we need food and water. A place to sleep is nice with enough blankets to keep us warm. A boat for a little recreation and to explore waterways.

Another way to measure a vacation is to think in terms of what one leaves behind. Part of the purpose of vacation is to remove oneself from the normal routines of everyday living. There are definite advantages to traveling lightly. The less one carries, the less there is to lose. The less worry in a vacation the more freedom to explore new experiences. We have family members who have traveled around the world with a backpack. They do not report of their adventures in terms of what they left behind, but rather in terms of the new things that they have seen, done and learned. There are definite advantages to traveling light.

As is true with most things in life, the key is striking a balance. And each person and each situation has a difference balance point. The amount of gear required for several weeks away from civilization is different than the amount required for visiting in cities. Mounting an expedition to the top of Everest requires different gear than taking day hike along an established trail. Each trip requires an analysis of what should go along and what should be left at home. Just because the trailer can haul an item doesn't mean that we should take that item along.

I've had vacation on my mind more than usual this spring. Part of the reason is that we are planning a rather large trip with our camper. Part of it is that our trip is being taken in conjunction with the United Church of Christ's General Synod, which means we'll be traveling at the height of tourist season. As a result we have had to make campground reservations and do a fair bit more advance planning than is our usual style. Whatever the reasons, there is a fair amount of anticipation of this trip.

Advance planning allows one to make more careful choices about what to bring and what to leave behind. I'm sure we won't need as many canoes as are pictured in today's blog. I'm thinking that the trailer means we won't need to bring a ladder along on this trip. There are other choices that we will make before we depart on this trip.

Life is like that. There are things we keep that are valuable and meaningful. Memories, experiences and stories can add to the quality of our lives. It can be meaningful to discard old grudges, worn-out ideas, and past hurts. There are things we can leave behind without regret as we journey through this life. And there are other things that can add much to a life.

The trailer is an add-on. We can unhook the truck from the trailer and travel without it. There are places we want to go where the trailer will not go along. And there are times when we will leave the truck behind when walking is the best way to see what we want to see. Hopefully we will achieve the kind of balance that allows us to enjoy our vacation without creating problems for others.

Maybe our lives are like that too. Sometimes we bring more of ourselves to a situation and sometimes we bring less. Not every story is appropriate for every occasion. May we find the grace to sort through our lives and keep the things we need and lighten the burden of the things we should leave behind.

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May 23, 2009 – Climbing



There is something about a unique geological feature that invites people to climb to the top. Devil's tower is one such place. Experienced climbers find the monolith to be challenging and on most visits to the place one can see climbers on the rock. It is a sort of test of the will and ingenuity of humans in the face of a huge challenge.

But a little over a week from now, on June 1, climbers will once again be asked to voluntarily refrain from climbing at Devil's Tower. Every June since 1996, administrators at the monument have asked climbers to refrain from climbing and have offered alternative sites for rock climbing in the Black Hills. This is out of respect for Native American traditions and ceremonies that take place at the monument.

The popular name of the feature is based on a misunderstanding of Native traditions. The Lakota name for the feature is Mato Tipi, the home of he bear. There are many stories about the rock including one that describes the ridges on the sides of the rock as the scratch marks of a giant bear. The name "Devil" was applied by Europeans to several features that Dakota and Lakota people found to be infused with spirit. Misunderstanding the concept of spirit, the newcomers gave those places the name devil. Devil's Lake in North Dakota got a similar name. In Lakota lore, however, there is no devil. The concept of a negative and powerful being who directs evil is not part of traditional native thinking.

The name aside, it is important to understand that different people have different approaches to the feature. Native Americans regard the tower as a sacred site and many of them feel that recreational climbing desecrates the tower. June is a month of many ceremonies and cultural activities at the tower.

The ban on climbing is not absolute. It is voluntary. Unlike the closure of some climbing routes due to prairie falcon nesting, there is no enforcement of the June ban. In fact the ban only reduces climbing. About 85% fewer climbers are seen on the rock in June. That means that 15% continue to climb despite the request that they refrain.

Strict enforcement is not desired. One hopes that people would show enough respect for others and their religious traditions to voluntarily refrain from climbing. What is desired is respect. And respect cannot be legislated or enforced. It must come from within each individual.

It reminds me of a dilemma in central Australia, where there is another amazing rock. Uluru, also known as Ayers Rock rises out of the red desert and is a beautiful and awesome feature. It is sacred to the aboriginal people, the Anangu. They do not climb Uluru because of its spiritual significance and they strongly encourage visitors to respect this by making a conscious decision not to climb. But it is not the Anangu way to force others to observe their traditions. They make a polite request and are more concerned about the motivation and the spirit of others than they are about their behavior. Even though Uluru is administered by Anangu, the climbing route is not closed. They prefer that visitors, out of education and understanding, will choose to respect their law and culture by not climbing.

As a result, hundreds of visitors climb the rock every day. The Anangu word for white skinned people is “ants,” because they swarm over the rock like ants. But the Anangu feel great responsibility for the safety of guests in their land. They feel a great sadness when a person dies or is hurt.

Respect must be earned and it cannot be forced. But it is frustrating when people don’t take time to learn the cultural significance of a place and who, despite requests to the contrary, continue to climb without concern for the spiritual traditions or religious practices of others.

Please visit Devil’s tower if you are in our part of the world. It is strikingly beautiful and you will gain a sense of a very special place. If you take time to walk around the tower’s base, you will begin to understand how it could have come to hold such significant meaning for native people. If you visit, please take time to view the displays and to read the stories of the place. Try to understand that it is more than just a unique feature of geology - it is a sacred place with great significance to indigenous people.

Perhaps the monument has much to teach us about the nature of respect. It is a lesson worth learning.

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May 24, 2009 – Confirmation



After Christianity became an official religion of Rome in the mid 300's the expansion of the church was so rapid that there weren't enough bishops to provide leadership. It became common for people of all ages to participate in baptism ceremonies and then later, when a bishop came to visit, the baptisms were confirmed by the touch of a bishop. Over the centuries that practice developed into a tradition of baptizing infants into the faith and family of the church and later inviting them to go through the rite of confirmation as an affirmation of their baptism. The theory was that once children reach the age of making their own personal commitments, they can take responsibility for their membership in the church in a new way. The practice bears some connection to the Jewish rite of Bar Mitzva (for boys) or Bat Mitzva (for girls). This ceremony is a rite of passage that acknowledges the transition from childhood to adulthood. It includes the public reading of scripture as well as special prayers.

In the Christian church, various forms of preparation for the rite of confirmation have grown up. There are congregations where the preparation is primarily academic, requiring years of study and the proof of a certain level of understanding of doctrine, tradition, scripture and church governance. In other congregations the emphasis has been on a particular catechism, or set of questions and answers that outline the basics of faith. Other congregations focus on relationships within the church with mentors being assigned to those preparing for the rite of confirmation.

Over the years of our ministry, we have gone through several different approaches to preparation for confirmation. We have tried weekly classes, retreats, and other ways to

get significant time with youth as they learn about the church and grow in faith. We have worked with mentors and guides who get to know the youth individually and share their journey of preparation. We have never come up with a single method of preparation that is right for all of the youth we encounter.

One of the realities is that church and participation in church may represent a smaller part of the lives of young people than it did for their grandparents. While we would like to have the church be the center of each life, there are many who view church as one among many different organizations and activities. Especially in ministry with children and adults, we discover that it is not just the young people whose priorities place other activities above participation in the church. Their parents also have priorities for their children that emphasize other areas of life. We often hear from parents that homework or sports events or even social activities such as concerts and dances are more important than church.

So it is difficult to design programs of preparation that are meaningful and attractive to youth and their parents.

But all of that is behind us for a few moments this morning. We have eleven youth who are ready for the rite of confirmation. We have eleven carefully-crafted individual prayers prepared for the moment when each kneels in front of the congregation and pledges their life to Christ. We add their names to the official roster of members of the congregation, but we understand that confirmation is not about increasing the numbers of people in our particular church. Confirmation is about mission work. We will send these young people out into the world to share their faith with others. We expect that most of them will participate in other congregations when they are adults. We give them our blessings and prayers and understand that membership in the church of Jesus Christ is membership in a body that is far bigger than a single local congregation.

Still, it is a significant moment of celebration for our congregation. We have watched these young people grow and mature in their faith. We have prayed for their health and safety and have rejoiced in their accomplishments. And now, with the offering of simple gifts, we say to them that we place the future of the church in their hands. While there are many years in which we will continue to share the work of the church, we acknowledge that these people will continue to provide leadership in the church beyond the span of our lives.

It is an emotional moment, a sacred moment, and one we do not take lightly.

As the sun rises on this new day, it seems to be an important day in the lives of these young people and an important day in the life of the church. We know that the future will not be the same as the past. We know that each new member changes the nature of the entire church. We know that the future is in God’s hands and not our own. So we

anticipate new things that are yet to be revealed. We wait for the unseen to be come visible.

And we pray. Without ceasing we pray. The words of our prayers for these confirmands will soon be forgotten, but we pray that the actions of this day will remain a part of their lives forever.

One by one they will kneel and we will lay our hands upon them as a symbol of the connections that reach from the most distant past to the farthest future. They are a part of our identity and centers of meaning in an often-confusing world.

It is, indeed, a day of hope.

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May 25, 2009 – A Musical Bridge



In music, a bridge is a section of music that connects two other portions of the same piece. Often the bridge contrasts in tempo and melody from what has come before and what will come after. Yesterday, we saw music used as a bridge between cultures and peoples in a dramatic fashion.

Emotions can run high in relationships between natives and newcomers in South Dakota. Before the coming of Europeans to this part of the world, there were constant changes in the plains tribes. Most were semi-nomadic, following the buffalo herds and moving their encampments on a regular basis. When Dakota, Lakota and Nakota people moved into what is now the Dakotas they were probably responding to pressures from other tribes to the east who, in turn were responding to pressures from European settlement on the east coast of the United States. However they arrived, the plains lifestyle and the buffalo culture suited them. And the Lakota became the last of the Native tribes in the United States to accept reservation life. Reservation life has never suited them well. There have been plenty of conflicts since the death of Crazy Horse.

In 1973 the conflicts erupted into violence on the Pine Ridge reservation. There are plenty of folk around here who remember those days and who are quick to offer judgement of others.

So we are careful to be polite to one another. And we are aware of the tensions and emotions that we have inherited from the past. Occasions where we can reach across

cultures are treasured and carefully nurtured. But we rarely let our guard down and show our emotions.

Yesterday was an emotional day for the musicians of the South Dakota Symphony's chamber orchestra, the Porcupine Singers, and those who gathered to hear them make music together. You could hear the emotion in the voices of the speakers as they paid verbal tribute to each other. You could sense that there were new and treasured connections.

In the picture above, Melvin Young Bear, keeper of the drum and lead singer of the Porcupine Singers has his arm around Jeffrey Paul, principal oboist with the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra. It is not a connection that one might have expected a few years ago. The Porcupine Singers are famous throughout the Pow Wow circuit and across Indian country as keepers of traditional songs. They have incredibly high standards for vocal excellence and consistency in their drumming. They sing in Lakota, keeping the language and the culture of their people alive. The South Dakota Symphony is a bastion of high-brow culture. They perform at the Washington Pavilion in Sioux Falls wearing tuxedoes and honoring 400 years of western European music and culture.

The Lakota Music project brought the two groups together. Initially their meeting was simply a cross-cultural experience with one ensemble playing and the other listening. Then they would reverse the roles and more music would be presented. This original four-hour sharing led to more opportunities for collaboration and finally to the commissioning of two compositions for the two ensembles to perform together. Over the last week the groups presented five concerts, wrapping up with the final concert in our sanctuary yesterday afternoon.

The concert was a significant point on a long journey of reconciliation. The musicians had been working very hard and they were emotionally exhausted after their tour and performances. But the emotions that we experienced went far beyond exhaustion. It was evident that real connections between individuals and families had been made.

And some of us were fortunate to have been there to witness this musical bridge.

Today the sounds will be different, but no less important. The drum will be played in its natural setting, outdoors. As the singers present an honor song the audience will once again be a mixture of cultures and heritages. In place of the symphony, a lone bugle will sound taps. There will be speeches and remembrances as people gather to honor the service of those who have gone before at Black Hills National Cemetery. The cemetery can trace its roots to the placement of U.S. Calvary in the Black Hills for combat with Lakota warriors, has become a place where all races and all cultures are honored and remembered with respect.

Somedays we ask ourselves if we are making any progress in our quest for peace with justice for all of God's people. New wars and conflicts continue to claim the lives of young warriors. New injustices befall new innocent victims. Despite the lessons of the past, we continue to make the mistakes of the present. Our human decisions are imperfect and our human solutions rarely are permanent. Peace is an elusive dove that seems to be forever beyond our grasp.

But there are moments when we experience healing. There are moments when we rededicate our lives to finding ways to live and work and celebrate together. Yesterday's concert was one of those moments.

May we continue to learn to make music together.

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May 26, 2009 – Birthday Memories



We've had a couple of family events in the last couple of days to celebrate the 89th birthday of my father-in-law, Keith Ricketts. Keith is descended from a family who have had long lives. His father lived to 92 years old and his mother to 100. Since my own father died when I was relatively young, I have had more years with my father-in-law than I got with my father.

Not everything can be measured by counting years. But longevity in years can add up to a lot of memories. Keith's mother had cameras and developed her own pictures before he was born, and he enjoyed photography throughout much of his adult life. In addition there were occasions for studio portraits to be made at various points throughout his life. There is a pretty good collection of photographs that span the decades. And we really enjoy looking at those photographs - partly because the photographs usually spark some storytelling.

Keith came into his teens during the great depression. Those weren't good years for North Dakota dryland farms. At one point they lost the farm to the bank, but a special state program allowed them to buy it back again. It was too dry to produce much wheat in those days and they tried a lot of different ways to earn a living from the farm including a few years of commercial turkey production. Eventually Keith was able to pursue post-high school education and earned certification as a master electrician - the work that supported his family and earned his retirement.

Always interested in helping others learn, Keith became an instructor in the electrical apprenticeship program and was honored for a lifetime of service to vocational education. Electricians have lots of stories about their work, which can involve everything from climbing poles to repairing microwave ovens. In the early part of his career, Keith helped bring electricity to rural areas that previously had none. He wired homes that were built without electricity and helped hook up a variety of work-saving appliances. Over the years he worked on a radar base that was part of the U.S. Missile Defense System, he sold appliances, he installed and repaired commercial restaurant equipment, and discovered a variety of ways to tell people that they had just ordered a service call when all that was wrong was a burned-out light bulb.

And there are so many other stories. Decades of service in the church have left Keith with experience in many different church projects. He has mowed the lawn, run the sound system, served on almost every committee. He was a charter member of a brand new congregation and helped in the construction of the church building and later an addition to that building. He became friends with ministers and invested hours upon hours promoting and supporting church camp. He helped patch together the appliances in the last years of a “temporary” camp kitchen and installed the appliances in a new one when it was built.

There are stories of winters with massive blizzards and summers with intense heat. There are family stories about vacations and moves from one place to another. All of his sons-in-law know how to pass a butter dish and how to receive it without having their thumb jammed into the butter - and all have forgotten on occasion to the delight of their father-in-law. Keith is descended from a long line of practical jokers and his laugh is infectious.

It’s good to have birthdays from time to time. Celebrations are important. And it is a treasure to have stories to tell and memories to share. As he finishes his ninth decade of living there are some days that seem a lot like the other days. Activities in the assisted living center sometimes closely resemble the activities of the previous day and the previous weeks. A special occasion is much appreciated as a change of pace. And occasionally something happens that adds to the list of stories to tell.

And memories are not all that are collected. Over the decades there has been a reasonable share of grief. The deaths of family members and friends each leave their mark. And there are plenty of Keith’s contemporaries whom he has outlived. The death of his wife four years ago changed his life dramatically and set in motion the events that resulted in a move to another home. His short term memory isn’t as keen as it once was and he can’t be as independent as he used to be. Moving to an apartment and from the apartment to the assisted living home means that many possessions had to be left behind, given away and sold. A birthday brings to mind the losses one has experienced as well as the memories one has collected.

We are the fortunate ones. Ot our siblings, we somehow have become the ones who are able to live close to our parents for this phase of our lives and theirs. We didn't move back to the homes of our childhood, our parents moved to where we live. In this mobile society, people often move multiple times after retirement. As live goes on changes continue.

It was fun to get out some of the old photographs and to tell some of the old stories. How lucky we are to be able to celebrate birthdays each year. And how fortunate we are for each day we have together. Families are indeed one of the great gifts of this life. I'm glad we have occasion to pause and say "thank you" from time to time.

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May 27, 2009 – Learning to Recognize Emotions



Photo courtesy of Autism Society of America.

People who work with others who have been diagnosed with some form of autism have long noticed that those who have the disorder often fail to recognize others' emotions. It is not that they are insensitive or don't care, it is that normal signals such as facial expressions do not register as emotions. Some have even theorized that those who are somewhere on the autism spectrum experience fewer emotions or find their emotions in a narrower range than others.

Asperger's Syndrome, a mild form of Autism is often first diagnosed because parents and others observe a lack of social skills. Those who have Asperger's Syndrome frequently don't know when those around them are angry or sad. They often evaluate social situations without many emotional components and are confused by the reactions of others to circumstances where logic might dictate a different response.

Parents and teachers who work with those affected by Asperger's syndrome are challenged to find innovative ways to facilitate learning how to recognize others' emotions. Due to a unique partnership between a non-profit organization and a popular media franchise, there is now a new tool. Autism Spectrum Australia (ASPECT) has teamed up with the producers of Thomas the Tank Engine to produce a new online

game that helps players learn to recognize common emotions such as happy, sad, angry, surprised and scared. The game seeks to help learners recognize the similarities between the individual's emotions and those experienced by others. It uses simple and exaggerated facial expressions on the the engine to indicate emotions. The game can be explored at the ASPECT web site: www.autismspectrum.org.au.

The choice of Thomas the Tank Engine is based on a study that was conducted in the United Kingdom that identified Thomas and friends as more fascinating to autistic children than other television characters. One of the reasons cited for this preference is that the characters in the show have clear facial features, the pacing of the program is appropriate and the stories are easy to follow. Thomas and his friends are particularly stimulating and motivating for children who have been diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum.

Each time a child plays the game she or he is presented with a different sequence of emotions and asked to identify happy, sad, angry, and other emotions. The game presents a series of engines and asks the player to choose the one that displays the desired emotion. The developers of the game have attempted to create a focused simulation that takes advantage of the single-mindedness of autistic children to help them identify signs of emotions that later can be recognized in social situations.

The game is relatively new and the research in the use of the game is incomplete, but early signs are very positive. The web site contains a version of the game that can be played by children and a link to a simple survey that can be taken by parents to assist with the research.

The partnership between ASPECT and HIT Entertainment, owners of Thomas & Friends, covers more than a single game. The popular television program will work to promote greater awareness about autism spectrum disorders in the general community and has developed a set of stickers designed to generate donations to support ASPECT and the work of the organization.

A teacher, in a conversation with me, once described children who have disorders on the autism spectrum as simply experiencing fewer emotions. "It is like a child with a box of eight crayons, when some other children have 64 colors." The description isn't quit accurate because it is not so much that there are fewer emotions as the differences in the way the brain processes emotions means that the expression of an emotion by another has to be greatly exaggerated in order to register in the complex brain processes of those who live with autism. The Thomas and Friends game takes advantage of both ways of thinking by offering a limited choice of emotions and characters with greatly exaggerated facial features.

There is no guarantee that a child who masters the game will be better at recognizing emotions in other humans, but early indications are that the game does help with general social skills and the development of a degree of empathy.

May is Autism Awareness Month and as the month comes to an end it is important to pause and to think of the challenges faced by friends in our community who live with autism every day. Perhaps a new game and a famous character can help to raise awareness of autism for each of us and to invite us to invest more deeply in research to help families who live with autism.

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May 28, 2009 – Playing Pipes



Flutes and pipes were a part of several ancient cultures and there is evidence that people have been playing sounds by blowing air through tubes for millennia on every occupied continent. Many different cultures have stories about the origins of flutes and their use to make music that stirs human emotions. In Lakota culture the flute is an instrument to express love beyond the power of human words. Both Roman and Greek mythology speak of pipes or flutes as instruments of the gods.

There are several different systems for varying the pitch of a flute or pipe. One is simply to have multiple pipes of different girths and lengths. By stopping one end of the pipe and cutting the pipe to a precise length, a specific tone can be achieved. Another system uses a solid rod inserted into the pipe that can be slid in and out varying the effective length of the pipe. Yet another system involves drilling holes into the side of the pipe that can be stopped by holding fingers over the holes to control the flow of air.

It is not definitely known where the practice of tying together multiple pipes originated, but the practice is ancient. Both Greek and Latin have names for such instruments. The common name “pan flute” or “pan pipes” comes from the rustic Greek god Pan. The number and size of pipes varied, but there is a practical limit to the ability of a single human to hold pipes and to produce the air to blow through them. In Roman times there was a significant breakthrough when a simple set of mechanical bellows was attached to a set of pan pipes allowing for somewhat constant air pressure and more volume of air than a set of human lungs can produce.

The instruments began to grow in size and complexity as musicians added new pipes with different sounds. Experiments with different reeds and woods that could be hollowed were followed by the use of metal to form pipes. Different pipes had different mechanisms for voicing and tuning. As the instruments grew, specialized chambers, sometimes with louvers to control the flow of air and sound in and out of the chamber, were constructed. Before long these organs had grown too large to be portable and permanent installations were begun.

The history of the development of the pipe organ in western music corresponds roughly with the development and expansion of Christianity. Both spread from Rome throughout Europe and both added complexity and variety as they grew. Churches became places for the construction of larger and more complex organs.

Once wind chests were developed, the ability to add different tubes and pipes to the instruments expanded greatly. Mechanical controls were designed to manipulate leather stoppers that could be opened to allow air to enter the pipe and closed to silence the pipe. As the instruments grew in size and complexity, so too did the control systems. Keyboards were developed to correspond to the pitch of the notes. Because humans can control not only their hands, but also their feet, pedal boards were developed to add to the number of different options for playing pipes. For centuries these control systems were purely mechanical, with some assistance from compressed air to move especially large devices.

The first use of electricity in pipe organs was directed towards the creation of air. Air pumps and compressors were developed to provide a constant flow of air to the instrument. Without the need for humans to power the bellows, musicians were freed to manipulate different controls.

In the middle of the twentieth century electronic organs were developed that used speakers to produce sounds. These instruments are common today and sophisticated electronics have been developed to produce a wide variety of sounds. Electronic organs never replaced pipe organs, in part, due to the differences in sounds produced. An electronic organ creates a sound wave that travels across static air towards the human ear. A pipe organ delivers its sound waves on columns of moving air, changing not only the pitch of the sound produced, but also the air pressure and movement upon which the sound travels. In addition, pipe organs produce a distinct sound for each pipe while an electronic organ pushes multiple pitches through the same speakers.

The advent of electronic organs did, however, create a rapid period of advance in the controls that are used to play pipe organs. Electronic controls meant that the console from which the organ is played could be farther away from the pipes as not everything had to be mechanically linked. Electromagnets at the bases of the pipes were connected by wires to the consoles. Early organs had giant “umbilical cords” filled with thousands of wires running from individual controls to individual pipes.

The development of microcomputers further advanced the ability of humans to control organs. Multiple levels of memory could be programmed into keyboards and stop tabs to allow organists to set up combinations of action prior to playing a piece of music and then switch from one set of sounds to another at the touch of a button. Fiber optic cables allowed for tremendous amounts of data to flow from the console to the instrument over very tiny connections.

On Tuesday, our congregation accepted delivery of a new state-of-the-art console to play our organ. The console has a full pedal board and three keyboards or manuals to control the four divisions of pipes in our instrument (Pedal organ, swell organ, great organ, and choir organ). The console also has controls that allow different divisions to be played in different combinations from different keyboards. It has multiple levels of memory that allow different organists to set up their own combinations without disturbing those set by other organists. It has a digital display to assist with programming the console. 72 stop tabs allow for different ranks of pipes to be played in many different combinations. There are controls for the louvers on the chambers, the air compressor, and other components of the instrument as well. There is provision for the addition of new stops and new capabilities to the organ in the future. The console is a marvel of contemporary computer technology.

This console controls approximately 24 ranks of pipes that were designed into the Austin organ installed in our building in 1961 plus an additional ten ranks of pipes that we have added in a new division. A rank is generally 56 to 61 individual pipes, with some specialty ranks having more or fewer pipes, depending on how they are used. In addition our instrument also has chimes, which are solid cylinders of metal that are struck by small hammers controlled by electronic switches.

It has been just over three years since we placed the order for this instrument. A significant amount of construction was required to prepare the camber, install the wind chests, modify the air handling system and have the console custom built to our specifications. It took a couple of days of programming, tuning and voicing before we began to hear new combinations of sounds yesterday. There are still many days of work remaining to get the instrument balanced and all of the pipes tuned and voiced to work together.

But we have begun to hear the new sounds. And the sounds are glorious. The things we had only imagined are beginning to take form in music. The delivery of the console was a major milestone in the journey towards a completed organ.

A pipe organ is always a work in progress. There are always new pipes and new sounds that could be added. There will always be new ways of voicing and controlling pipes to produce additional combinations of sounds. And the artistry of individual organists can make the instrument sound very different at one time than at another. Our

organ will never be “finished.” But we are approaching a time when construction will slow and practice will being to learn how to get the most music out of our instrument. It is an exciting time.

We’ve invested a lot of energy, money and time in this project. It is one of the projects that will continue beyond the span of our lives. Yesterday one of the consultants who had been brought in to help with voicing and tuning made the comment, “that’s the thing about pipe organs - it takes forever to tune each rank and then re-tune them together.” I responded, “that’s why we installed the organ in the church - we have forever.”

May the music continue.

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May 29, 2009 – Blossoms



Spring is definitely settling in. The hills are green and the pastures are starting to blossom with a wide variety of plants. Things are looking pretty good around here.

Lots of the things that bloom in the open country have relatively tiny blossoms. One has to look carefully to see the beauty that is all around. I have never taken the time to get good at plant identification, but I enjoy looking at the wide variety of plants that grow all around.

This year we have a lot of delicate purple flowers growing in the yard. The blossoms look like clover, and I suppose they are some variation on that plant, but the foliage isn't quite the same as the sweet clover that is so common. I'm sure that a plant expert would tell me that there is nothing uncommon about the plants at all. But they add a tiny splash of color to an otherwise mostly green landscape.

I suppose that the little bursts of purple are sufficient to attract honey bees for pollination to keep the plants growing and spreading in their territory. Although we usually mow all of the yard, I've decided to leave a small area uncut for a while so that I can watch the flowers grow. Allowing the plants to grow a little taller may reveal other flowering plants as well. Our neighbors have an area that they don't mow and it sports all kinds of flowering plants including coneflowers and small sunflowers.

The intricate detail and beauty of the flowers continue to delight and amaze me. A botanist might be able to explain some of the reasons for the wide variety of plants and

the mechanisms for the subtle differences between various plants. But I seem to be satisfied to simply enjoy them without fully understanding all about them. Sometimes there is sufficient pleasure in just looking at things without fully understanding what one is seeing. I'm that way with the flowers. I don't need to know their names or how they are related to other plants in order to enjoy them.

The forecast shows a chance of showers throughout the next few days, so things will continue to stay green and blossom for a while at least. Each year is different from the last and the exact amount of rainfall in any given area is fairly unpredictable. So far our spring has been delightful with plenty of moisture to keep things growing. The forest seems to be recovering from the years of severe drought, though there are still large areas of trees that have been killed by insects. The cycles of life are much longer in the forest. It seems that the hills have patience for things that require a century or more. And centuries-long timing is short for the geological processes of the hills.

Plants can have a more dramatic effect than the short cycles of blossoms and growth that we observe. There is a dialogue of soil and rock and plants that surrounds us every day. The pine trees that surround us drop their needles onto the soil. The needles are acidic and when melting snow or rain carry the acids from the needles into the ground, it helps to break down the rocks. Many of the caves that dot the hills began as layers of sedimentary limestone. The limestone had fissures and cracks through which the acidic water from the surface flowed, slowly breaking down the rock until caverns and passageways began to open up beneath the ground. The limestone, as it breaks down, neutralizes the acid in the moisture leaving the water in the underground aquifer clean and neutral.

Part of what makes this areas soil good for growing things is this long-term dialogue of water and pine trees and limestone. The color of the flowers varies in response to the amount of acid in the soil. In many cases the same varieties of plants produce different colors of blossoms in response to the pH of the soil. Adding different soil nutrients can change the color of the blossoms.

The universe that surrounds us is incredibly and delightfully complex. It is amazing to think of all of the interconnections and relationships between the various parts of the world. Increasing our understanding of the natural world seems to increase our appreciation of it as well. The things that we normally take for granted become fascinating when we take time to study them and think deeply.

Each flower blossom is an invitation to careful meditation. Unfortunately, in the quick-paced lifestyle that most of us have chosen, there is too little time to simply lay in the grass and ponder the beauty of a flower. We tend to stay in motion and taking time for a simple prayer requires a discipline that we don't always display. I hope that I can take the gift of spring flowers as an invitation to slow down and become more intentional about the life I live.

Don’t expect dramatic changes. Many processes in nature require a lot of time. Maybe changing one’s lifestyle requires generous portions of time as well. But life is short. We humans don’t have the eons of geological time. May we continue to find deep joy in the moments that are ours. And may we never forget to give thanks to God for the beauty of this world.

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May 30, 2009 – Ice Cream



It is a sure sign of spring. Last evening, after dinner, we did some work in the yard and then decided to head to town for an ice cream treat. It has been a regular entertainment for us for all of our married life. When our kids were small I would tell them that occasionally the car would just decide all by itself to go to Dairy Queen and there wasn't any thing we could do about it. Of course we didn't want to change it. Our whole family loved ice cream cones. I can remember when our daughter was a tiny baby and we went to an ice cream store. I was holding her in one hand and an ice cream cone in the other. She would fuss because she wanted the ice cream, but when I held it to her lips it was too cold for her and she would fuss because she didn't like that cold. So I would take it away and she would fuss for more. Pretty soon we were all laughing. She got over not liking the sensation of cold ice cream.

One of the fun things about going out for ice cream is watching the people who come and go. Our family is quite different than it was a decade ago when we had two high school students. Now our grouping was two folks in their eighties and two in their fifties. We sat in a booth with a walker parked close by. In the booth next to us was a family of five. I assume it was parents with two boys and one of the grandmothers of the boys. Those two boys were really well behaved. They came into the restaurant, went into the booth and sat down while the adults ordered the treats. They sat up and ate their treats politely and then wiped their own hands and faces with napkins. A couple came in with a four or five year-old girl. She was so excited that she kept bouncing up and down as they stood at the counter and waited for their ice cream. When she was handed an ice

cream cone, she stopped bouncing and held it in both hands. But the excitement kept bubbling up. She spun in a circle as she walked with her parents to their car.

When Susan was a child, her parents owned and operated a Dairy Queen franchise for a few years. She can remember that each year they had a special treat day when the whole school lined up and each child received a small ice cream cone. And her father was the owner of the ice cream store! WOW! Imagine having a dad like that! It certainly would be the source of great status for any elementary school child.

Every trip to a place that sells ice cream cones brings back a flood of memories for us. We went out for ice cream when we were dating and when we were newly weds. Ice cream treats were a special part of the years of raising our children. When we visit them or they visit us as adults we still love to go out for ice cream. And it is a fun outing for us to share with our parents as well. A few more decades and I may be a resident in a nursing home eagerly awaiting the opportunity to go out for ice cream with a friend or family member.

Having ice cream at home is a wonderful thing, but it isn't the same thing as going out for ice cream. We don't have a soft-serve machine in our home. Not that I haven't thought about getting one, but so far expense and mess have prevented that. And there isn't the same flow of people to watch in our home as we find in the places that serve ice cream. Besides its good to just get out of the house and go on an adventure, especially for our folks who no longer drive themselves and don't get out and about quite as much as they'd like.

We're getting pretty good at eating our ice cream slowly. Resisting the urge to gulp it down increases the pleasure. We can stretch a few ice cream cones into a half hour of sitting in a booth talking about life and watching other people go by. And the last bite of ice cream tastes every bit as good as the first one. Sharing an ice cream treat is one of the ways we have of slowing down the pace of our lives for a while. We sometimes make too many commitments and schedule too many meetings. An evening to just enjoy life is good for us and a very pleasant experience.

So if you're looking for us on a summer evening and we aren't at home, check the local ice cream stores. There's a soft spot in our hearts for Dairy Queen, but we've been known to eat ice cream in almost every place in town that serves it.

No, we don't have a magic car that automatically turns into the ice cream store of its own will. We actually have to make the decisions, choose the destination and drive the car to the places we choose. But we've practiced the run to the ice cream store enough that I rarely take a wrong turn. And when I do, we discover a new route to get where we are going.

Ice cream cones are not inflation-proof. We can remember when they used to cost a lot less than they do today. But they continue to be a good value for the money and one of the things that we don't plan on eliminating from our budget anytime soon. See you at the ice cream store!

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May 31. 2009 – Volunteer



Despite our desire to keep things simple, our church has some rather complex systems. We have a large building with a commercial boiler system filled with pumps and valves and an electronic control system that is operated by a computer in our office. There are complex and expensive commercial appliances in our kitchen. We have an expensive copier/printer in our office. There are plenty of things in the operation of our church that are far from simple. And most of those things require maintenance.

Maintenance costs can be expensive. Skilled laborers and parts all involve costs that can quickly add up. One of the ways that we seek to save money from the operation of the church and free up funds for mission and outreach is to use volunteers to make repairs when possible.

We've had a fairly complex repair underway in our church yard for more than a week now. Our underground sprinkler system has been in place for several decades and some of the components have become worn out from years of use. The electronic valves that direct water to various parts of the system sometimes fail due to the buildup of sediment, corrosion and other factors. Because the system is old, repairs sometimes are more complex than simply removing an old valve and replacing it with a new one. New valves may not line up directly with the old plumbing. Joints in the plumbing have been cemented which requires cutting out some of the old pipe and replacing it with new in order to make a clean, leak-free connection. Most of the connections require that the pipes be thoroughly dried and cleaned in order to get a leak-free union.

And the whole system has been buried, so in order to work on it, one has to dig a hole in the ground, remove the dirt, work down below the surface and, when all of the repairs

are made and it is certain that no leaks remain the dirt and sod have to be replaced. The process also requires knowledge of electronics and wiring to make the necessary connections for the valves to be controlled by the sprinkler timer.

The site of the current repair is on the corner where I turn into the area of the parking lot where I leave my car when I am at work. My job requires a fair amount of coming and going, so it is not uncommon for me to pass the place five or six times a day. I can watch the progress. And I can remain aware of the number of hours that one faithful volunteer has been working on the project. Most of the tools are carried in the trunk of his car, with some of the digging tools kept in a shed on the church grounds. On hot days, there is a fair amount of set-up, as he uses a tarp to provide some shade for his work and the tarp has to be secured so the wind doesn't take it away.

Most days I get to work before our volunteer arrives, but yesterday, he was already at work when I arrived at the church. And yesterday was Saturday. This isn't a one-hour-a-week volunteer. He has been working on this project every day for a week, now.

Some of the tasks that we do with volunteer labor take longer than they would if we employed professionals because they don't always have the right tools and parts, or at least it takes time to get all of those things together. And we allow more flexibility in a work day than most employers. And volunteers are not charging for their labor, so we have the luxury of time.

The simple fact is that we could not afford to operate our church without the gifts that volunteers bring. Our operating budget would need to be three or four times the size of the current amounts if we had to pay for the labor that is required to keep our facility open and in full operation. And most of our outreach and mission is undertaken entirely with volunteer labor. Some of the tasks that are accomplished get more attention and some get less, but volunteers don't work for recognition or praise. They aren't motivated by the tokens of thanks that we offer. They work because they believe in the cause and volunteering is a way to support the things that are important to them.

I'm grateful for the volunteers who keep our church in operation. Their faithfulness and dedication impress me every day. In a few days the repair to the sprinkler system will be complete. The volunteer will move on to other tasks and projects in other areas of the church. I won't be as aware of his work as I am when I pass him several times a day. But he'll still be working. And he will still be doing jobs, like plumbing, at which I have little skill.

How fortunate we are to have people that match our jobs and jobs that match our people.

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June 1, 2009 – Pine Pollen



One of the sure signs of spring in our neighborhood is the pine pollen. There is no shortage of the stuff. As pollen goes, the grains are fairly large and the yellow color makes it easy to identify. And it is everywhere. A little rain will make rivulets of pollen on the driveway and in the streets. A car left out overnight gains a contrasting color. Some of the pollen will blow off when driving, but it is sticky enough for some of it to survive sixty miles per hour. It works for the pine trees. They seem to do very well around here.

There are folks with allergies who suffer at this time of the year, but it is very rare for peoples allergy problems to be caused by the pollen from the pine trees. The pollen is simply to large to the the cause of the symptoms. And there is plenty of other pollen in the air. It is just that the pine pollen is so visible that it gets the blame. An allergist once told me that it is the pollen that is so small you don't see that causes problems for people.

Some people believe that pine pollen is a natural beauty enhancer and it is included as an ingredient in some facial creams. Chinese herbalists prescribe pine pollen as a therapy food and beauty enhancer. In some places pine pollen is collected, compressed into capsules and sold as a dietary supplement. One Internet advertisement for pine pollen capsules claims the following benefits:

Enhanced metabolic function of the skin and nourished hair roots, adjusted endocrine system, improved constitution, raised immunity, improved stamina, improved heart, Improved metabolism and regulated weight, Accelerated liver activity and

regulated bile secretion, regulated endocrine, inhibited atrophy of sexual glands, regulated prostate function for men, cold prevention, lowered body fat, nourished brain, increased strength and stamina.

From reading the advertisements, it seems that if one only consumed enough pine pollen, one would have very few problems at all. I mean who can resist nourished hair roots, regulated weight and lowered body fat? I had no idea what a treasure is out there on my driveway.

I probably would have never thought of eating the stuff. I've run my finger across the car windshield and turned it yellow, but I've never stuck the finger in my mouth while it was covered with pollen. And even though there is a lot of it around, I don't have the energy to collect it to a container or process it to sell to others.

It is just one of those things that is a part of living where we do that doesn't really require much action. I get out the hose and wash of the porch and deck. And I wash the cars from time to time. Some of it gets into various filters and those need to be cleaned or blown out with compressed air. But for the most part we ignore the pollen.

The pine pollen is, for me, a sign of the abundance of nature. There is simply more pollen produced than is required for the trees to propagate and maintain health. Nature doesn't stop at just enough - sometimes there is an exuberance of nature that cannot be contained.

If we left nature to itself, there would be a lot more pine trees. Mowing stops seedlings before they become trees. The natural process is interrupted by our sense of what looks good around our homes. We tend to want to choose where the trees grow. On the other hand, left to itself, the natural cycle would produce periodic fires that clean out underbrush and occasionally wipe out whole stands of trees. Photographs of the hills before settlement show that there were fewer trees than there are today. One of the theories is that prior to settlement the hills had very large fires that cleared entire stands of trees as well as periodic smaller fires that cleared stands and consumed fallen trees.

What this would would be like without humans is a purely intellectual exercise. The reality is that we are here and we participate in the natural processes. We have an impact on the plants and animals that surround us. And, like other parts of this universe, we are capable of reproducing at high rates. Human overpopulation and crowding is a reality. And our impact on this planet is dramatic.

But we have an advantage over the pine pollen. We have awareness of the world around us. We have eyes to see and minds to remember. We possess the capability to look at the world and reflect on its meaning. We can appreciate the beauty and enjoy the abundance of nature. That awareness gives us special responsibility to care for the rest of nature and to consider carefully the impact of our actions. We are capable of

making choices that result in good or evil. We can learn from past actions and even, on occasion, correct mistakes that we have made.

We get to choose whether or not we eat the pine pollen. For now, I'm going to let the stuff lie where it has fallen. Aside from washing it off a few places like the cars and decks, I'll let nature recycle the elements in the pollen through the natural processes. Who knows, if it is that good for humans, imagine what it might be doing for the garden. If there is some deep lesson to be learned from pine pollen, I haven't yet learned it. It just is. And it seems worthy of note even though it doesn't have a big impact on my life or the lives of others.

Enjoy the pollen if you can. It won't be long before pollen season has ended and we go on to another topic of conversation.

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June 2, 2009 – A Simple Boat



Several years ago, shortly after having moved to South Dakota, I built a small solo canoe. I had a book about constructing lightweight canoes that had the lines and measurements of a "Wee Lassie," a small canoe that has been constructed with various materials in a variety of variations for more than a hundred years. At the time, with a new job and a couple of kids facing college, there wasn't a lot of excess money in our family and I sought to build the canoe without spending too much money. I built the forms and strongback out of scrap lumber and I began to frequent local lumberyards, going through their fence-grade cedar looking for a few boards with fewer knots than the others.

I ripped the strips on a 50-year-old table saw that I had inherited from Susan's grandfather. The rip fence slipped a bit from time to time, so I secured it with a couple of large C clamps. I did install a new blade and it did a good job of cutting the strips. I didn't have access to a planer, so variations in the width of the strips had to be sanded out later. I rigged up a router table of sorts to cove and bead the strips. The first phases of boatbuilding involved very few dollars and a lot of sawdust. Because I was using low-grade lumber, there were plenty of knots and I had to cut them all out. There were few, if any, strips that were as long as the canoe. I set up a jig for a hand saw and another on a sanding disk to create scarf joints. I spent days scarfing the strips until I had enough to start attaching them to the form.

Little by little the canoe emerged. Because of the way I was building it, there was a lot of sanding involved and I ran my bare hands over every square inch of that little boat

again and again. By the time I had the hull formed, I knew every bit of the boat with great detail and had identified every flaw. Some flaws were corrected. Some I decided I could live with. This boat was only my second canoe project. I have a lot more tools and a lot more experience these days. But the results were pleasing to my eye.

The most expensive part of the project was purchasing the fiberglass cloth and epoxy to put on the outside and inside of the boat. I constructed the bulkheads, decks and gunwale system out of materials scrounged from a variety of sources. Some of the mahogany trim came from the church rummage sale. I did purchase a couple of sealed hatch covers from a boat supply store and when it came time to register the new boat vanity prevailed and I had a couple of brass plaques engraved with the serial number. I suppose I spent somewhere between $200 and $250 by the time all of the expenses were added up. I never kept track of the time invested. It was all recreation time and however many hours I spent cutting assembling and sanding were inexpensive compared to the cost of hiring a psychologist to teach me how to manage my stress.

I remember the first paddle of the boat. I took it to the lake alone, without any witnesses. I wanted to make sure that I had a sense of how it floated, balanced and paddled before I showed it to anyone. It handled like a dream. The simple hand-caned seat was in the right location and the single thwart made an acceptable backrest. I soon had acquired a double paddle which made it even more nimble in the water.

It is a simple boat. It is about 13’ long and weighs about 40 pounds. I can pick it up with one hand and carry the paddle in the other. Over the years I have paddled it in lakes and streams in a half dozen states and even paddled it in the Puget Sound off of Whidbey Island. It was on that trip that I decided to make my first kayak, but that is another story entirely.

As happens with other boatbuilders, I am sure, additional projects came along. I built another tandem canoe so that I could take family members along for paddles and I started building kayaks as well. I re-canvassed and repaired a couple of Old Town canoes. The wee lassie got hung from the rafters way in the corner of the garage. I think that it stayed there without being paddled for at least three years.

A little reorganizing and a trailer that enables me to transport canoes and kayaks easily and it was convenient for me to take the little boat for a paddle yesterday. Paddling that simple little boat I couldn’t remember exactly why I ever thought I would need any other boat. Except for its limitations in carrying cargo and passengers, the little boat has everything a person could want. It is stable, nimble, easy to paddle and a good platform to sit and take pictures of the world around. It is attractive enough to garner compliments from onlookers and swift enough to go almost anywhere. It displaces little water, so it can be paddled in very shallow areas where other boats cannot go. It has enough freeboard to handle light chop or a bit of whitewater in a river. It is very quiet on the water and allows a closer look at the birds along the shore and the beavers near

their lodge. Even the geese don't get too upset when I paddle by as long as I don't come too close.

The little boat, a paddle and a life jacket are all that are needed to have a great time.

There comes a point in every life when one shifts from acquiring to shedding possessions. I haven't quite reached that point. I still can imagine other boat projects and I have a couple of sets of plans that I keep studying. I suspect that I'll have something under construction by the middle of next winter. But there is a limit to the number of boats that any one person can use and store. Short of buying a barn or a warehouse, we've about reached that limit. So some of the canoes will need to find new homes sooner or later.

The wee lassie will be one of the last boats with which I part, I suspect. It is a good boat for an old man: light weight, simple and yet stable and easy to paddle. Sometimes the best things in life are the simplest. If I built sailboats I would spend hours stepping masts and rigging sails. If I build motorboats, I would spend hours working on engines. As it is, I have more time to be on the water in my boats because I don't build anything that is complex. Simple is a good match for me.

It was a delightful way to spend a couple of hours yesterday. Paddling the little boat was like having a conversation with an old friend. I didn't have to worry about making mistakes, I knew that we'd get along whatever happened. I returned to the shore refreshed and renewed and ready for the events of a busy week.

Life is good when one has a simple boat.

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June 3, 2009 – Blue Flags



One of my favorite late spring/early summer flowers is an iris that we call blue flag. Actually this type of iris grows in a variety of colors from deep purple to light blue and produces several different shapes of flowers. I'm not sure of the technical plant genetics, but it is a common plant in all of the places where we have lived and the plants are resilient, often growing and producing blossoms for decades after humans have ceased to tend the plants. I don't know if they also occur naturally in our area, but it is possible. The flowers grow from bulbs and blossom annually.

On the open prairie, blue flags often mark the place of a former homestead. Through the process of decreasing the size of Indian reservations, the land of the western Dakotas were late to open up for settlement. Although the Great Northern Railroad had made its way across northern North Dakota, other railroad service was also slow to come into the area. Much of the homesteading west of the Missouri River in the Dakotas took place after 1906, when the United States Government realized that 160 acres is insufficient to support a family in the plains and homestead allotments were increased to 320 acres. This meant that there were fewer homestead shacks out here than in the eastern part of the states. Still two homesteads per square mile meant that homesteaders could often see a half dozen or more other shacks on the open prairie.

A lot of the shacks were constructed by "land grabbers" - people who did not intend to live permanently on the land, but rather who intended to met the minimum requirement of the letter of the law to gain title to the land. Out here gaining ownership of the land meant filing claim to an available parcel, constructing a house (often a 10 x 12 shack),

taking up residence for a minimum of eight consecutive months, and publishing the claim signed by a minimum of four witnesses for several consecutive weeks. There was a fee associated with proving up a claim, but it was generally less than $2 per acre.

So even though there were lots of homesteaders who didn't remain residents of their land, most of the land had at least temporary homes constructed on them. The shacks are long gone these days. Years ago one used to be able to find some rusting tin cans, depressions where root/storm cellars were dug, and other evidence of occupancy, but most of those signs are gone these days.

At many sites, the iris continue to bloom.

When one thinks about the rigors and challenges of homesteading and about the social norms of the time, it is amazing how many women were involved in homesteading on the prairies. Roughly ten percent of all homestead claims were filed solely by women. There were single women trying to gain some equity, married women trying to add to the family's real estate holdings, sibling groups and widows who held out after the death of their husbands. In addition to the homesteads occupied solely by women, there were a lot more homesteads where women lived with their husbands on the land.

There was plenty of work on every homestead. Prairie life was tough. Supplies had to come from long distances. May homesteads lacked a water source and water had to be hauled, sometimes three or four miles or farther. One homesteader is reported to have said, "I'd dig myself a well if it didn't take so much time to haul water." Vegetable gardens often didn't produce enough food. Farming was attempted, but there are patches of prairie that never will produce as farms. Grazing sheep or cattle was a huge job in the days before fences.

But despite the hard work, there was time to make a little beauty as well. Families lived in relative isolation and they would invest a little time fixing up their homes. There were tar paper shacks with wall paper on the inside. And there were flowers planted around the homesteads. It is possible that the popularity of the blue flag iris was that it was free. Homesteaders would gather the bulbs from the open prairie and plant them into beds around their shacks. But the fact that they grow from bulbs meant that they would tolerate travel over long distances, so it is also possible that homesteaders brought varieties of iris from places farther east when they came out to homestead.

One can speculate on the history of the iris plants and some of the guesses may be accurate. What we do know is that the flowers that add beauty and joy to our lives grow in places where others have had the opportunity to see and enjoy them in years now passed.

Each year I look for the blue flags on the prairie and in the hills. And each year they give me pause to think about others who came to this place before I arrived. We tend a few

iris around our home. It is possible that they will remain after the home is gone. Who knows for sure. Our time on this earth is short when compared to some of the plants. But one of the things we are able to share from generation to generation is beauty and the appreciation of a splash of color.

May our lives never become so organized or our gardens so formal that we fail to appreciate the blue flags across the prairie.

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June 4, 2009 – Oatmeal Cookies



I like oatmeal cookies. For my tastes, I prefer ones with raisins but without nuts. I know that others prefer pecans or walnuts in their oatmeal cookies, but I'm happy with the basics. The recipe on the Quaker Oatmeal box is a good basic oatmeal cookie recipe, and for most of my life, I haven't been one to adjust recipes or make innovations. When I make chocolate chip cookies, I usually use the recipe on the chocolate chips. I have a tendency to eat a bit more than I should, and I have a bit of a sweet tooth, so it isn't a good idea for us to have too many cookies around the house, but I've been known to buy packages of cookies from the store, when I get a hankering for sweets and from a financial point of view, baking our own cookies makes more sense.

So, from time to time, I bake a batch of cookies.

Four or five years ago, the Good Morning circle at our church published a cookbook. It was one of those wonderful church cookbooks where people submit their favorite recipes. Church cookbooks are usually full of treasures, and this one is no exception. The recipes in the book have been tested by good cooks and they have submitted only their best ones. There are two good recipes for oatmeal cookies in that book, neither are the same as the one on the oatmeal box. One of the recipes makes a smaller batch, but is easily doubled. It is low in salt, doesn't have too much sugar, has a healthy dose of cinnamon, and uses the same amount of flour as oatmeal. The results are a good, basic oatmeal cookie.

The other recipe is titled, “The Best Oatmeal Cookies,” It might just be right. The secret to this recipe is soaking the raisins in the eggs and vanilla for an hour before mixing up the cookies. The raisins plump up and the cookies are delicious. I’ve baked quite a few batches of cookies using that recipe.

But there is something about the claim to be “the best,” that intrigues me. And for some reason a while ago, I began to experiment with the recipe and make small adjustments. I don’t know if it was arrogance - that I thought that I might be able to improve on “the best.” Perhaps is was a matter of individual taste - different people have different ideas of how they want their food. Whatever the reason, I have started to experiment when I bake cookies.

Since, I have a tendency to eat too many cookies, I started by reducing the amount of sugar. This helps make the cookie a bit more healthful and it helps me to eat fewer cookies when I sit down with a glass of milk or a cup of coffee. I had already been baking the cookies without the nuts and adjusting the dry ingredients in a cookie recipe that uses butter can result in a flatter cookie. So I started substituting shortening for part of the butter and adding more oatmeal to keep the dough dry and the cookies plump and moist.

I like raisins, so one day I thought, “What if I double the amount of raisins?” That worked pretty well, so the next time I baked a batch, I tried the same principle with the vanilla, which I also like, upping the amount from a teaspoon to a tablespoon. That batch threw off the moisture balance a bit, so I needed to adjust the dry ingredients a bit.

The recipe had gotten too complex for me to remember, so I began keeping notes, writing down what I had done on small slips of scrap paper that we use for our shopping lists. The cookbook began to sprout little slips of paper and I couldn’t always remember which one was the most recent. I started keeping my notes in the computer, updating the recipe with comments on how well various ingredients worked.

Since I like oatmeal, I started using the ratio of oatmeal and flour from the oatmeal box recipe instead of the one from “the best” cookies.

Then one day I thought, “I like brandied fruit.” I dug around in the back of the upper cupboard and, sure enough, there was some brandy purchased for some other recipe and forgotten. I added a small amount of brandy to the raisins as they were plumping up. Hmm . . . tasty. But that threw off the liquid to dry ingredients ratio again, so the next week I adjusted the ratios again. For several weeks, I baked a batch of oatmeal raisin cookies every week. I would put the raisins in to soak before I started baking bread and mix up the cookies while the bread was rising. The oven would be hot from the bread baking, so I’d go ahead and bake the cookies right after the bread.

The recipe isn't quite perfect, but it is pretty good. I don't know if others would judge my cookies to be up there with "the best." Mine are a little less sweet, have a lot more raisins, and I haven't got the texture down quite perfect yet. I thought about adjusting the oven temperature or the cooking time, but I've resolved to keep the temperature the same as for bread, which is a memorized recipe that I don't vary week to week. Maybe I've come up with a recipe for "pretty darn good oatmeal cookies."

The problem is that I've been baking too many cookies. We have a constant supply of cookies around the house. Even when I give cookies away, I'm eating too many cookies. I need to cut back. Too much of anything isn't a good idea.

The funny thing to me is that I never used to be one to experiment with recipes. I just follow the instructions in the book. And one might expect to become more set in one's ways as one ages. Innovation is often the product of younger people. Who knows what led me to start messing around with recipes - and to start with "the best," is probably not a prudent place to begin adjusting ingredients. I've often heard it said, "Don't mess with success!"

But it is entertaining to play around with the recipe, and it doesn't take much time at all. It's not good enough to publish in a cookbook, but I have started to share the actual cookies with friends.

I suppose that if I really want to get creative, I might do better to work on recipes for vegetables and other dishes that promote good eating and are more healthful for a family with a history of diabetes. The best recipe in the world won't do me any good if I have to give up eating cookies altogether. It isn't like dessert is essential to sustaining life.

I guess I'll leave the cookbooks to the real cooks and not worry about making my own recipes, but I may continue to experiment with oatmeal cookies from time to time. After all, I still have several church cookbooks if I ever need real recipies.

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June 5, 2009 – Ties



We keep working on the project of organizing old photographs, but it doesn't seem that we are making much progress. Part of the reason is that we keep running into photographs that spark memories and stories. Recently, Susan found a photograph from my childhood. It shows my father and brothers with me. We're all wearing white shirts, red vests, and dark ties. One of the five is wearing a different kind of tie than the others. Guess which one!

These days I almost always wear a bow tie when I wear a tie. Back then, I opted for the other kind - perhaps I was looking for a way to stand out from the others. I really have no memory of the occasion or why I was wearing the tie I chose. I doubt if it was because I didn't have a bow tie. And it certainly wasn't because one was easier than the other to wear. I'm sure that all of the ties in the picture are clip-on style. It is possible that more than one of the ties in the picture belonged to me and that as the owner of multiple ties I got to choose which one I wore and which I would loan to a brother.

These days I don't have to worry about what kind of tie to wear to stand out from my brothers. I'm sure that none of the rest of them have worn a tie in the past decade and I doubt if any of them have any bow ties among their clothes.

There are other subtle things in the photo which are interesting to me. Dan, the brother who is second from the left in the picture above, is the only one of the boys who is wearing a long-sleeved shirt. I'm sure that wasn't his choice. When you're third in line in a string of boys, you rarely get to wear clothes that weren't handed down from an older

brother. But there are similarities between our father an Dan to this day. Dad was a good salesman and he earned much of his living from selling airplanes and farm machinery. Dan has earned his living selling cars for most of his adult life. Dad bought an old auto court with several tiny cabins and fixed it up into a summer home for our family. Dan bought an old hotel and remodeled it into a home for his family.

Of course all of us boys have traits and characteristics that resemble our father. The top of dad's head doesn't show in the picture, but the pattern of bald areas on his head in that picture are almost identical to the way my head looks these days, although in that picture dad is a little younger than I am today.

I used to blame the fact that my ears stick out on my wearing glasses, but all of the guys in the picture have ears sticking out and only one is wearing glasses. I probably come by the ears naturally.

In the picture you can tell our ages by our height. The youngest brother is the shortest and each of us displays our birth rank by our height. These days we are reverse stair steps. The youngest is the tallest and I'm the shortest, though the difference between me and Vernon, the one closest to me in age, is so small that we have to stand back to back with a ruler on our heads to tell which is the tallest. Since I usually wear cowboy boots and he doesn't , I appear taller in family pictures.

Pictures like that one are always fun in our family because not only are we different persons with different tastes and different personalities, we also have different memories. I haven't looked at that picture with my brothers for a long time, but it is likely that each of us will remember different details about the picture. The picture hanging on the wall in the background is not familiar to me at all, another brother might remember it very well. I remember enjoying the times when we dressed alike. We did that a lot. Another brother might remember dressing alike with less fondness. We might tell different stories about why one of us is wearing a different tie.

But the picture reminds me of the passage of time. We're still two years apart. But in that picture, we're about 5, 7, 9 and 11. Now we're 49, 51, 53, and 55. Our lives have taken different directions. We live in three different states now, with the closes two living 200 miles apart. Only one, the youngest, stayed in the town where we grew up. Our educations, careers and families are very different. We've all been married. Two of us remain married with our first wives, two have experienced divorce. It is hard to count the number of children we have between us, because there are step children and blended families involved. The youngest brother is a grandfather. The rest of us haven't come to that place in our lives.

But all of us are fathers and each of us has passed on some of the qualities we received from our father. The way in which we have been fathers has been deeply influenced by our father. There is a bit of him in each of our children.

In a little more than three years I will be the same age my father was when he died. It looks like I will be granted a longer life than he had. But each of us has a limited amount of time in this life. We are all finite. None of us goes on forever. Amidst the rapid passage of time and in the face of the inevitability that our time will come to an end, it is good to have reminders of another time. We are all shaped by the events and the people who are a part of our lives. It does us well to recall those evens and remember those people.

All four of the other guys in that picture are important parts of my life today, just as they were when that picture was taken. And I am immensely grateful that I grew up in the family that was mine.

And it is fun to look at the picture - we were rather cute in those days. We've grown out of that cuteness these days, but we're still brothers.

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June 6, 2009 – Home



Our son and daughter-in-law are in the process of purchasing their first home. After a few years of being renters, they are ready to have a place that they can call their own and begin the process of gaining some equity in an investment. The downturn in the real estate market and special programs for first-time home buyers have helped make this summer the right timing for them to make this move.

Their process of shopping and making a deal has put me in a reflective mood. On the one hand, this isn't a big event in my life. They have taken all of the responsibility for their decision and while, they have consulted with us as parents, we have not been directly involved in any of the negotiations, decisions or arrangements. There is no small amount of joy in seeing the responsible adult our son has become and listening to his thoughts as he makes mature and wise decisions.

My reflections also have been about location. The home they are buying is in Olympia, Washington, 1182 miles from our home - two days' drive. For now we've ended up in two different states with a couple of states in between. Our daughter is living in England, so our family has quite a bit of physical space separating us from one another. And sometimes I wonder how we ended up in South Dakota.

When I was a child growing up I assumed that I would always live in Montana. It was where I was born, it was a beautiful place, there was plenty of space, and most of the people I knew lived in Montana. My grandparents on both sides of the family lived in

that state as well as most of my aunts, uncles and cousins. I didn't give much thought as to where I would live.

Even as I became an adult, I used to think that I would live in Montana. Sure, we left Montana to go to graduate school - there aren't any theological seminaries in Montana. And then, when we were ready to accept our first call to serve a church there weren't any congregations in Montana who were looking for pastors with our particular qualifications. So we moved to North Dakota for our first parish. First parishes are usually short-term calls as pastors acquire skills that cannot be taught in seminary and become ready to accept positions with more responsibilities and larger salaries. The average stay for first parishes is somewhere around four years. Since we had gone to four-year high schools, spent four years in college and four years in seminary, the pattern seemed clear. But we had an uncommonly good match with our first parish and we ended up staying seven years.

And we moved to Idaho and from Idaho to South Dakota. Do not pass go. Do not collect $200. No stops in Montana on our way. And we are very happy in South Dakota. We've been here for fifteen years. We serve a wonderful church and have a really nice home in a beautiful location. If you add up all of the years, I've lived out of Montana a lot more years than I lived in that state.

These days purchasing a home doesn't necessarily mean that it will be the place you live for the rest of your life. People sell homes in one state and move to another. We did just that when we moved from Idaho to South Dakota. But there is something that seems a bit permanent about our son and daughter-in-law purchasing a home in Washington. They like the place that they live and purchasing a home within walking distance of the place he works makes sense in many ways.

It is simply the case that we will live more distant from our children than was common generations ago. We have the good fortune of modern technology help us stay connected. We are much more able to travel than were earlier generations. And we have great tools to stay in touch. We are used to regular and significant conversations with our children via telephone and computer. We have a face-to-face conversation with our daughter over Skype at least once a week.

It isn't like the days when adventurous youth said good bye to their parents back east and headed out to the Dakotas to homestead and never again had a conversation with the folks they left behind. Often they didn't even know the fate of loved ones living in distant locations. Immigrants who came to this country left their families behind never to see them again. People have been exploring and leaving loved ones behind ever since Abram and Sarai left the land of their parents and headed out to the land that God would show them. I am descended from nomadic people. Although there have been branches of the family who settled in the same place for long periods of time, my direct descendants on both sides of the family rarely lived in the same place for more than two

generations since immigrating from Europe. There is a long trail of places where members of our family used to live.

Our time is limited. We are only here for a little while. And even something big like a home is not truly permanent if one looks at the scope of history. It is a dwelling place for a little while and then we live somewhere else.

Psalm 90 begins, “Lord thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.” Our home - the home of our people in all times - is with God. It is not a particular structure or a specific piece of real estate.

We are even calling the house that our son and daughter-in-law are purchasing “their first home.” In our minds they will one day sell this home and move to another one. In the parlance of real estate they are purchasing a “starter home.” Its small size and relatively low price may not meet the needs of their family in all phases of their life, but it is a good way to begin gaining equity as opposed to renting an apartment.

One of the theological commitments of our family of faith is that ours has never been a place-centered religion. Among the dramatic discoveries of our forebears is that God is not limited to any particular place and that when we move from place to place God is in the new place. We have been a people of history, not a people of place. As beautiful and as wonderful as some of the places we have lived are, there are new places and new beauty yet to unfold.

So to our son and daughter-in-law, “welcome home.” And the same message to our friends and to ourselves as well. Here we are at home for a little while. With God we have a home forever.

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June 7, 2009 – Holy Mystery



Today is Trinity Sunday. The Sunday after Pentecost is set aside each year to contemplate the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity. The problem is that the trinity is an intellectual concept that we use to think and speak about a reality that is beyond our powers of comprehension. We can think about God, but we cannot think God. We can entertain ideas about God, but God is far more than an idea. it is no wonder that the words of sophisticated theological arguments are often full of jargon and meanings that are different from the common usage of words. When we talk about God, we usually don't know what we are talking about at all.

This doesn't keep us from trying to talk about God. Because we have experiences with God - encounters with the Holy - that are very real indeed. Even though those experiences defy the power of language, we can't help talking about them. Our words fail to describe God, they can only point in the direction of God.

For millennia, our people have used wind as an analogy for God. God is like the wind. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word for wind is used to name the presence of the Holy Spirit. In his instruction to Nicodemus, Jesus reminds him that just as we do not choose the time or place of our birth, we are also not in control of experiences of rebirth. In the Gospel story, Nicodemus is clearly confused by Jesus' words. We are too.

But confusion is not a reason to abandon belief. Humans are constantly striving to reach beyond normal limits. Just because we can't understand a phenomenon doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to understand it.

Early in the life of the Christian church, people began to argue about the nature of God. Eyewitnesses had experienced Jesus as a human being. He wasn't somehow a "pretend" human being, or God playing the part of a human being. He was a real human being, flesh and blood, and mortal. He really died. Yet they also knew that God came to us in the form of Jesus. Some argued that if Jesus was fully human, he couldn't be fully divine. Some argued that if Jesus was fully divine, he couldn't be fully human. After much discussion, the mainstream of the church came to the conclusion that it wasn't an "either/or" situation. Jesus was BOTH fully human and fully divine. It makes sense, almost.

But even if that were resolved, so many of the members of the newly-formed church had not had the experience of knowing Jesus face-to-face. They knew the stories that had been told by witnesses. They knew the events that had been reported. Their experiences of encounter with the holy were less concrete than touching the hand of another human. The Holy Spirit was exciting and wild and unpredictable - and like nothing else they had encountered. "The sound of a mighty wind" or "tongues of flame" were combinations of words used to try to describe something that was clearly indescribable.

The doctrines that grew out of the early church speak of God as a holy trinity: God in three persons. God is creator. God is Christ. God is spirit. The creator is God. Christ is God. The Spirit is God. But Christ is not the same as the Spirit. And the Spirit is not the same as the creator . . . the words fall of into confusion. Because they are a human devise, a logical framework to speak about something that is beyond our powers of understanding.

Which leaves us with a significant problem when we try to pass the historic faith on to another generation. Our words cannot be the only tools used to convey the truths that we have inherited. Because our words are inadequate.

It may be that when our words fail, we are called to sing our faith. Since the 1860's we have been singing Reginald Heber's words set to John Dykes' tune:

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;
Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

We have not felt particularly compelled to explain the song. We simply appreciate the powerful connections of words and music that somehow express more than a sermon or a speech or a rational argument is able to express.

We sing:

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Words by Walter Chalmers Smith sung the ST DENIO, a Welsh melody from John Roberts' hymnal.

And:

Open my eyes, that I may see
glimpses of truth thou hast for me;
place in my hands the wonderful key
that shall unclasp and set me free.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Words and music by Clara Scott.

I enjoy the give and take of theological argument. I like to engage in discussion and debate about the nature of God. I spend quite a bit of time and energy trying to write about God.

But sometimes, even when you are a very verbal person like me, you have to sing your faith.

Today I am very grateful for the music.

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June 8, 2009 – Green



We've had several days of moist weather in the hills. Yesterday, in the late afternoon, I gave my lawn what I was calling a "Portland trim." It had stopped raining, but the grass wasn't really dry. I mowed it anyway. In places where there is a lot of rain, one sometimes has to mow the lawn when it is wet or it won't get mowed at all. Other than the clippings clumping a bit, I don't think it hurts to mow the grass wet.

The trees are going through their spurts of growth and everything is turning green. It is beautiful. And it is amazing, when one looks across the hills, at how many different shades of green there are. The trees are a darker color than the grasses and there are subtle variations displayed by individual plants. The black earth of the garden is sprouting a lot more green as the peas, beans and potatos break through the earth. Rows of Spinach and radishes are showing the color. It is a season of growing.

The word green has its roots in the Old English verb *growan*, "to grow." There is a fundamental relationship, as deep as our language itself, between life and growth and the color green. Green is not a primary color, but rather a mixture of blue and yellow. On a traditional color wheel, it is the compliment of red. Some animals that are green, such as frogs and lizards, have the appearance of being green because of a mixture of blue and yellow layers in their skin. Plants are green because of the chemical chlorophyll. There are many insets and animals that have green appearances because of adaptation to be able to hide in plants. But green also appears outside of the world of living things. In the minteral world, chromium gives various rocks a green color. Emeralds are gemstones that are green.

Culturally, green has a lot of different meanings. The color is associated with sickness. “You’re looking green around the gills,” is a phrase to mean that a person is looking like they are sick. But green is also associated with life, being the color of vegetation. In politics, green has been adopted by groups who work for environmental protection. In advertising, green refers to companies who have environmentally friendly products. In the United States, green is the color of currency and the color is associated with wealth. It is the color of prosperity. Green is a popular color in the flags of many countries around the world. Interestingly, the majority of the countries who use green in their national flags are near the equator, with more countries with green flage being in the southern hemisphere than the northern. Green is an especially popular color for flage in Africa and the Mid-east. The flag of Libya is completely green.

The meaning of green and the status of the color varies widely in different cultures and language groupings as well. Many Asian languages have no word distinguishing blue from green. Even though modern Japanese has a word for green, many other words reflect the ancient practice of making no such distinction. The word for the “go” traffic light is the “blue light,” and the leaves of trees are often referred to as “blue.” In Thai, the modern word for green also means “smelly,” indictating unpleasant associations with the word.

In many parts of the Middle East and into Africa the word for green is the same as or similar to the word for black. In Persian the word for green can also mean “dark.” in Sudanese Arabic dark skinned people are described as “green” instead of “black.”

All of this nearly trivial information about the color doesn’t change the simple fact that it is a a very beautiful color. And we are fortunate to live in a place with so much green. And I am grateful for the moisture that helps the plants produce this lovely color. Recent memories of dry years, brown fields and too much fie and smoke in the hills heighten our appreciation of the present greenness. And, of course, we do live in South Dakota, which means that whatever the weather is like right now, it will change. Cool temperatures and moisture in the air may be a description of this morning, but might not be the way it is this afternoon.

I’ve had green on my mind for a couple of days because of the beautiful color outside and because yesterday was the day that we began wearing green as a liturgical color. In Western Christianity, green is the color of Ordinary Time. For those of us who wear stoles when leading worship, we wear our green stoles more than any of the other colors. Starting on Trinity Sunday, green is the color all the way until the beginning of Advent, though Protestants often wear read for Reformation Sunday at the end of Ordinary Time. In the Eastern Church, green is also worn for Pentecost.

The orignins of green as a liturgical color are unclear, but it is known that vestments have diplayed green almost as long as there have been any such clothing. Green was

an important color in Rome and evergreens were important parts of Roman celebrations. Since Christianity had its first dramatic growth within the Roman empire, there are many Christian customs and traditions that have a connection to Roman culture.

So these days, I'm seeing green and I'm wearing green. It is a pleasant association. How fortunate we are to have eyes and brains that work together to allow us to perceive and appreciate the colors of this world.

May the green in our world be a sign for us to keep growing in this season of our lives.

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June 9, 2009 – The Crisis is Here



Yesterday Rapid City Regional Hospital announced that it will be closing its library entirely. Patient library services simply will no longer be available. The computers and a few journals and the room where the library is located will remain available, for a while, to medical staff. It is another in a series of cost-cutting measures undertaken as the hospital faces a continuing financial crisis.

I admit to being sensitive to such announcements. Our son is a medical librarian in another city. The cuts at the hospital are hitting a bit close to home for my tastes. The last major department cut in the hospital was the chaplaincy department. The hospital no longer has any professional chaplains.

Common wisdom in the community is that the painful cuts are required in hard economic times. The hospital doesn't have enough revenue and the only option is to cut expenses.

Budgets always reflect the priorities of any institution. Once the decision has been made that cuts must be made, the decisions about what cuts are made reflect the values of the institution. In the case of our hospital, there have been across the board salary cuts and cuts in benefits to employees which have affected all employees. The impact, of course, is much deeper on those whose only income is from salaries. There are other ways to gain income from the hospital. Many specialty services at the hospital are provided by group practices and specialty providers that are owned by physicians and others who work at the hospital. These are often seen as fixed costs. The nurse who inserts a flexible catheter in the arm of a patient may be an employee of the non-profit hospital. But that person might also be an employee of Infusion Specialties, a contract

service provider. It is almost impossible for a patient or a patient's family to know which services are provided by the hospital and which are provided by contractors. There is a complex web of non-profit and for-profit service providers at the hospital. The majority of for-profit service providers at the hospital are physician owned. Salaries aren't the only way to make money in the health care business.

Outside of all of the complex financial schemes which surround any enterprise as large as a hospital, there are more fundamental values that are reflected by the hospital's decisions. The recent cuts reflect an attitude about other professions that is frightening. Chaplains and librarians are seen as non-essential to health care. The assumption is that anyone can say a prayer or use a computer to look up medical information. The truth is that physicians and other health care providers are turning to far less qualified consultants. Instead of a chaplain with a minimum of a masters degree and several semesters of Clinical Pastoral Education, a volunteer who may or may not have had any formal education is called in. Instead of using a trained librarian to put the latest research in the hands of the doctor, a drug company representative who may not even know the names of other therapies is consulted. Anyone who has ever used the Internet knows that while there is a lot of information available it is not all of the same quality. And while doctors are highly educated, they have little or no training in theology or in computer-based research. The choice of which consultants they use affects the quality of the care provided.

There are hospitals with far smaller budgets that have well-educated professional clergy as chaplains and maintain competent library services. Those hospitals have made other financial decisions. They may not have a duplicate heart catheterization lab. They may not be in the process of converting their building from patient rooms to luxury private suites. They may not have multiple administrators with six figure salaries. They may not be heavily invested in physician groups and satellite medical practices.

The decisions and priorities of the hospital are set by a Board of Trustees. As a community hospital, the trustees are members of the community, although there was a dramatic shift in our hospital when the majority of the board shifted from at large community members to physicians who practice at the hospital. These days it is more difficult to find out who the members of the board are. Without a trained librarian, you won't find the list of the trustees on the hospital's web site. Significant care has been invested in decreasing public access to the members of the hospital board.

Actually if you go to the hospital's web site, the first tab is "payment." The word "care" only appears in a link to another web site.

It is easy for an outsider to criticize any organization and I am aware that the criticism in today's blog is not the whole story of an institution that has a large number of dedicated and faithful servants who work tirelessly to provide care to people. But it is undeniably true that being the nation that spends the most amount of money per capita on health

care has not bought us the best care. Increasing revenues will not change the basic values and orientation of the health care industry in our nation.

No matter what health care legislation is passed by congress, it is unlikely to change the simple fact that we live in a community that believes that some people are worth more than others. The average salary of one physician in our community is five times the average salary of a chaplain, which is a moot point now that there are no more chaplains. It used to be that churches were patrons of the arts, but the largest consumers of artwork in our community are medical buildings. There are examining rooms in medical practices in our community that have multiple pieces of original art. Two story “atrium” lobbies are common. The high cost of medical buildings is not just due to advanced technology. It is also due to a high degree of luxury.

The community raised a lot of money through donations to construct a hospice house that is not available to patients who are on medicaid, has no chaplains, and is the site of a very small percentage of deaths in our community. It is a service that is available to a few, not a service that is available to all.

Enough of my complaining, however. As I said earlier, it is easy to complain.

What we can do is to increase our participation in giving care. While there are times when professionals are needed and care must be purchased, we can give care to others without expecting reimbursement. We can increase the amount of care we provide for family members in our homes. We can increase the amount of care we give to our friends and neighbors. We can make more visits to those who are in the hospital and nursing home. Not every service of value has to be transacted with financial reimbursement.

Scientific breakthroughs have advanced medicine in our time, but the truth is that it was religious concern that has always been at the core of health care in our nation. Our community hospital has deep roots in a facility that was founded by a church. More hospitals and nursing homes have come out of prayerful congregations than any other source. The universities where the research is conducted and the doctors are educated were started by churches.

The solution to the crisis may not lie in the government or the universities or the medical schools. The solution may be in our faith, our commitment and our caring.

Enough ranting about the problem. The time has come for people of faith to become a part of the solution.

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June 10, 2009 – But Wait! There's More!



Frequent Worshiper cArd

A scene frequently played out in almost any retail store in Rapid City (and probably most other towns as well):

Clerk: "That will be $47.70."
Customer: "Is a check OK, or do you prefer that I use my debt card?"
Clerk: "I can take a check. Do you have a rewards card?"
Customer: "No."
Clerk: Would you like a rewards card?"
Customer: "No."
Clerk: "It doesn't cost anything and you can use it to earn valuable discounts and even cash rewards."
Customer: "How do I get the rewards?"
Clerk: "You just show us the card every time you shop and your rewards will add up. In addition, we send you a birthday gift each year."
Customer: "How do you get the birthday gift to me?"
Clerk: "It will come in the mail."
Customer: "So what you are saying is that if I give you my address, you'll start sending me lots of mail? I already get too much mail."
Clerk: "This is good mail."
Customer: "I'll pass on the rewards card."

I just checked my wallet. I have two hardware store cards, two grocery store cards, one bookstore card, and one coffee shop card. I also have frequent flyer cards from three

different airline companies, a punch card from another coffee shop, a stamp card from a car wash and a discount card from the place where I get the oil in my car changed. And I turn down more of those cards than I accept.

I get e-mail and regular mail from most of the places whose cards I have in my wallet. I don't know if I save much money, but the grocery cards get me to buy gas at certain stations and the hardware cards get me to keep coming back to the same stores.

All of this has gotten me to thinking. I think we need a frequent worshiper card for the church. A simple punch card will do. For every five times you worship with us you get a free pass on the collection plate. Just deposit your punch card instead of cash when the ushers pass the plate. Don't forget to pick up another card on your way out of the church.

But wait! There's more!

Save your cards for even more valuable rewards. After earning only 100 worship points, you are entitled to a reserved pew. Accumulate 250 worship attendance points and you are entitled to one free wedding. This offer good only to brides and grooms, not transferrable, void where prohibited by law, mothers of the bride need not apply. 1200 worship attendance points and you can have a funeral at no cost to yourself. Soloist and luncheon not included. See in church display for details. 1800 worship points gives you a free pass to get off of any church board of committee - no questions asked, no excuses needed. Some restrictions apply read the fine print in the church bulletin.

But wait! There's more!

Present your frequent worshiper card for in-church discounts on classes, Bibles and other religious books, prayer shawls, crosses and a host of other special items. Tax not included. Show your frequent worshiper card at coffee hour and you are entitled to take three cookies instead of the usual one. Bring it to potlucks and take two plates through the line on your first trip.

And don't forget to check our our daily specials. We've got free worship bulletins at the door every Sunday, 15% of every prayer on Mondays, free advice from the pastor on Tuesdays, no charge choir rehearsals on Wednesdays, discounted Bible studies on Thursdays, free coffee for volunteers on Fridays and workdays most Saturdays.

But wait! There's more!

You frequent worshiper card entitles you to exclusive member benefits such as in-pew bread and juice on the first Sunday of every month, hospital visits, communion in the nursing home (with your choice of wine or juice), your choice of a favorite hymn once each year, and two-for the price of one baptism available to all parents of twins. Show

us your frequent worshiper card and you'll be invited to all Woodchuck Society splitting parties and deliveries as well as pay your own way trips to Costa Rica.

This offer is only available for a limited time. Don't delay, get your card now.

And don't forget! This offer is not available in stores.

Of course we have a lot more offers that are not available in stores. Like forgiveness for sins and fullness of life, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, and eternal life in God's realm which has no end - just for starters.

The truth is that the church isn't a business that is in need of marketing. And every time we try to treat it like any other business, we lose sight of our true calling. We are called to serve, not to win. We believe that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. We understand that a little child shall lead.

And we don't measure our success by counting members or dollars in the collection plate.

At its core, the practice of Christianity is not about member benefits or getting something for nothing. We worship and serve out of gratitude for God's goodness to us, not because of a desire for some reward. When Christianity is reduced to a system of rewards it becomes as silly and exaggerated as a frequent worshiper card. This is not to say that there isn't plenty of marketing going on in contemporary religion - there is. And there are plenty of practitioners of religion who promote Christianity in terms of what you can get out of it. The personal benefits of being a Christian have to be among the top themes in sermons.

But wait! There's more!

There is a faith to which individuals and communities are called to serve without expectation of reward, but rather out of gratitude for the many gifts of this life. There is a faith where individuals and communities worship not because it is an obligation, but because it is a natural expression of their faith. There is a path of service and sacrifice where disciples follow Jesus instead of their own desires. There is a meaning that is deeper than skimming across the surface of life wondering, "what's in it for me?" No membership card is needed, no scorecard is kept. It is all about relationship with God and relationship with the people God has made in the image of God. Discovering that faith is worthy of a lifetime of seeking and searching. Practicing that faith involves joy that is its own reward.

Every day I pray for the people who, through the grace of God, have come into my life. I don't pray that they find rewards in the terms of the world, but rather that they might

discover the peace that passes all understanding and the joy that no one can take away.

And just when you think it's over . . . But wait! There's more!

Really.

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June 11, 2009 – Moving Pianos



Volunteers have been some heavy lifting at our church in the past couple of weeks. Last week we moved a 6' grand piano from the church parlor upstairs to the balcony, where it replaced a smaller piano as the primary instrument to accompany our choir. Yesterday we moved a 9' concert grand from storage at a shop to our sanctuary, where it joins our 9' piano for a concert on Saturday. There is a lot of effort involved in moving these big pianos, and it takes expertise as well as just plain hard work.

It raises the question of how much of our church resources we invest in music. Music has long been a priority of our congregation and over the years the congregation has invested heavily in instruments including a pipe organ, several pianos, sets of hand bells and hand chimes, and choir directors, organists and others who produce music for the congregation.

Music isn't our only priority, however. We are primarily a mission church - what we do is serve others. We have a wide variety of mission and outreach projects and activities and we have dedicated volunteers who are willing to invest heavily in serving others through their direct hands-on work as well as generous donations.

Somewhere in all of the things that we do there is a balance, though we make no claims to having achieved the best balance.

There have been some tender feelings over some of the things we have done. There are dedicated and faithful members who wish we had made some decisions in different

ways. With all of the activity of organ construction and piano moving some other tasks have been put on the back burner. Scheduling our sanctuary has meant that not everyone has been able to have rehearsals when they wanted. We juggle and we try to balance, but we don't always get things perfect.

Yesterday was, in some ways, typical for our congregation. Volunteers helped move the pianos in the morning. The organ builders arrived in the late morning to continue tuning the organ in preparation for a concert. The office opened at its usual time. There were rehearsals scheduled in the early afternoon for singers and people were coming and going in preparation for the picnic of the Woodchuck Society. Around the edges, I spent some time with a member whose feelings had been hurt by the actions of another member, had a special service of healing for a member with significant health concerns and kept up with the usual routines of my life. By the end of the day I was tired, both physically and emotionally. Things were winding down at the church. The picnic was a great success as folk were finishing clean-up in the kitchen. I had elders to transport to their homes and was packing up my things to put in the car.

I walked through the sanctuary to listen to the organ. After weeks of tuning, the builders have taken to playing the instrument a bit at he end of the day when they are getting ready to go home. The sanctuary was dark and the organ builders and I were the only ones in the room. They didn't know I was walking through the downstairs as they were in the brightly-lit choir loft. One of them was playing "Fairest Lord Jesus" on the instrument, adding new voices with each verse. He started with a soft, flute registration on the choir division, then went through several different ranks of reeds as he added more and more ranks of pipe. After several verses, he moved his hands to the great division and hit the couplers so that he could play the entire instrument.

The sound brought tears to my eyes.

I have envisioned grand organ concerts. I have worked hard to put our congregation in a position where we can offer a wide variety of music to our congregation and to our community. I have poured over lists of names of organists and wondered who might best introduce the organ to our congregation and help them understand the purpose of all of the work and all of the expense.

And I forgot that the instrument isn't primarily for performance at all. It is about worship.

With no "audience," and without the complexities of technically demanding music that requires days of rehearsal, a simple hymn memorized by an organist decades ago, rang out in an empty room. It rang out because God is good. It rang out because God has given incredible talent to some people. It rang out because a large group of people have pulled together to create an instrument that no one person could afford on his or her own and that no single individual could build. It rang out because silence isn't the only way to pray.

And the music that I heard last night comes from pipes that have a service life of at lest 500 years. Long after my time in this place has ended, those pipes will continue to sing to the glory of God.

A lone voice or a simple instrument could have voiced the same emotions and carried the same meaning for its witnesses. Despite all of our efforts, it wasn't the organ that made the moment, it was the faith.

The life of the church and be a struggle and often it is. We are diverse people and we don't always see eye to eye. There are tender feelings and sometimes we take things personally that were never intended that way. We are human and we make mistakes and not all of our mistakes can be undone. We are finite and don't have enough time or money for all of the things we might want. We have to make decisions and prioritize our investments. As deeply meaningful as the path of discipleship is, it is not an easy road. Sometimes I am frazzled and weary and have to struggle to keep from making really big mistakes.

But it isn't about me.

It is about God. And God's call to serve others.

It is about worship. And offering our highest and best to God because God is the source of all that we have and all that we are.

The effort of moving pianos wouldn't be worth it if the reason were to impress an audience. Three years of organ construction wouldn't be worth it if the reason was to make us happy or proud or give us reason to boast. These efforts are meaningful only if they are offered to God and if they help others come to a life of service in the name of Jesus Christ.

Moving pianos and the Woodchuck society make good companions for a day. Faith and service. Hard work and well-earned rest.

Is it worth it? Absolutely.

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June 12, 2009 – Gray Skies



We've had several days of gray skies and light rain. The moisture is wonderful for the hills and things are very green around here. People who have been in this country for decades report that a couple of wet weeks in June is typical of the weather pattern that preceded the drought years. But in country where the sun usually shines, we aren't used to cloudy skies day after day. Many places around the world have entire seasons when it is cloudy almost every day. But we are used to seeing the sunshine and blue skies most days.

Yesterday was a sort of gray day for a family in our community. The matriarch of the family, after living a long and meaningful life, is coming to the end of that journey. She is in a local nursing home, receiving hospice care and as each hour passes she has less consciousness and awareness than she had before. Her family has gathered, children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. They are waiting for a death, which like all deaths, has a timing which is uncertain. It might be hours and it might be days, but no one is expecting that it will be weeks or months. These things happen on God's time and not our own.

There are some rich and valuable and meaningful aspects to their gathering. I have been visiting their mother for some time now, taking her communion, reading scripture and sharing a prayer. So I have a sense of familiarity even though I had not met her family face to face before yesterday. The stories that they have told me about their mother fit well with the stories that she has told. And they are experiencing the warmth of family love as they sit quietly and visit and remember. Like most families, the

memories are good. And in the years to come, those memories will become cherished friends.

The gray skies were an appropriate companion for the family gathered in that room. They had the curtains drawn, instinctively knowing that this was a private family moment and not a time when they wanted to have too many others looking in.

After leading a communion service with the family in the afternoon, I went back to work and saw to some other activities and events, but I stopped by the room on my way home in the evening. A son-in-law of the woman asked me, “Where is the line?” meaning the distinction between life and death. I responded that in my observation for many people it isn’t a line or a barrier, but a gradual process. I added that the distance between this life and what is to come is only great when viewed from our perspective - from this side. I suspect that to those who have gone before we are as close as we have ever been and that the separation that we feel when a loved one dies is not perceived as separation to God and those who are with God.

Sometimes life isn’t black and white. Sometimes gray is a good thing.

I suspect that when they look back on this season of their lives, they will discover that they didn’t lose their mother all at once. There were little losses as she became less independent and as she developed more and more health problems. There were little losses when she moved into the nursing home and their visits were more institutional and less like coming home. There were little looses when she didn’t remember things as well as she once had. Although there will come a day and an hour when her death has been completed, it isn’t so much that there is a line that is crossed as a process that has reached its conclusion.

Before the development of scientific methods, when the ancients observed death, they became aware that one of the differences between life and death was that living beings breathe. Breath itself was revered as sacred and that sense of the sacred was built into the languages of our faith. In both Hebrew and Greek the word for breath is the word for spirit as well. The human spirit and human breathing were seen as connected. And when a person stopped breathing, it was understood that the spirit had left that person. No longer was that person alive.

As our powers of observation and collective memory were strengthened, we began to observe other distinctions between life and death. For some time we have focused on the circulatory system as the center of our life force. We have begun to understand the role of the heart in keeping us alive. Doctors and others check for the presence of a pulse to determine life and death. A person is declared dead when there is no heartbeat. Even though there are some techniques that can re-start a recently stopped heart, we still think of circulation as a mark of a living person. And we have treated that

as a sacred concept as well. We speak of love being in the heart and of the feelings and concerns that we hold most dear as being “in our hearts.”

More recently we have learned of the role and function of the human brain in making us alive. Doctors even speak of “brain death” as a state where there is still breathing and circulation but there is no chance of consciousness ever being re-gained. And as we learn more about the functions of the brain we are discovering that many of the religious sensitivities and awareness of humans are functions of the brain to which we are genetically predisposed.

In future generations we will understand life and death even better as we continue to build on the knowledge of previous generations and add to it the discoveries of our own times.

But I doubt if we will ever come up with a complete understanding. Even when many more aspects of our nature are understood, we will never fully understand the complete nature of life and death. It remains a mystery. There are gray areas in our understanding.

There was mystery present in that room yesterday and there will be mystery when I check in on the family this morning. The vigil that they are holding will make them tired, but the love of family and friends will also add to the strength and resilience that they already possess. They will remember these days with mixed feelings. Some memories will be pleasant and others more painful.

This morning as I prepare for my day, the skies are clearing over the hills. There are a few clouds on the horizon but we’ll see blue skies and sunshine today. We really know that the fog will lift and the clouds will dissipate and clear skies will return. The apostle Paul wrote of that experience: “Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

I suspect that the vigil will come to a conclusion soon. We will put a date on the death of a mother and grandmother. We will plan a funeral and go on with our lives. But we will have to wait a little longer before we really understand this mystery. Gray areas will be with us for all of our lives until at last the evening comes for us and we enter into the rest of death itself. Then and only then will we experience the brightness of a new life and the glory of a new day.

For now, is is good to have a little gray.

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June 13, 2009 – Faded Dreams



Family photo. Restoration by Kenny Putnam, ImageUp.

Not many people know where Isabel, South Dakota is located. Even South Dakotans don't know. "That's up by Eagle Butte, isn't it?" "I think it's in Ziebach County." Yes, it isn't too far from Eagle Butte. Forty six miles isn't too far in that part of the country. But actually it is in Dewey County. It's about 20 miles to Timber Lake, the county seat. And Timber Lake is where most of the children from Isabel will be going to school next year, now that the school in Isabel has closed.

Life has never been easy in Isabel. The land is dry and farming is questionable some years. There have been some reasonable crops of dry land wheat and flax grown there. Mostly it is ranch country. Sheep and cattle have enabled a few folks to make something of a living in the area. According to the 2000 census, about a third of the people in Isabel live below the poverty line, with more than half of the children living in homes that are below the poverty line. The per capita income for the community was $7,919 in 2000. With 239 people living in 89 households, it isn't that big a town. There are plenty of sports stars who earn more per year than the whole town of Isabel.

People in Isabel are used to having to travel for almost everything. You have to go down to Dupree to find an automated teller machine. There is no funeral home in town. Grieving families call over to Mobridge or up to Lemmon when then need to bury a loved one. There is no minister that lives in town, though there are regular services at Holy Cross Church and at Isabel Baptist as well.

The Isabel Dakotan, the weekly paper, is hanging on for the present, though most of the advertisements come from out of town and most of the subscriptions are mailed to other places as well. It doesn't earn enough to support a family, but it supplements the income for its editor and publisher.

There used to be a lot more there. In the homesteading days, people had dreams of a thriving community. With a claim shack on every quarter section everyone had neighbors. And there were services and businesses getting started in town as well. Isabel had a hotel and hardware store and a grocery store. But as soon as the claims were proven, most of the people left town. One winter in that country is enough to make one think of warmer places. And there has never been a good way to earn a lot of cash in Isabel. The population peaked in the late teens and early twenties.

There is a bit of coal in the ground and the veins aren't very deep. Surface mining brought in a little income for a few and provided heat in a land where there weren't too many other fuel sources.

Sylvester Loveless Price came to Isabel and went into business. He arrived after the initial flood of homesteaders to open a pharmacy. Of course he had to broaden his interests in order to stay in business. He helped area families with a bit of first aid and his store became a contact point for folks to get the doctor when it was absolutely necessary. And when people reached the end of their lives, he helped make funeral arrangements, even made caskets for a while. He sold a lot of general merchandise as well as the medicines and compounds of a drug store. He put in a soda fountain and sold ice cream. He leaned to repair watches and clocks and sold a few of them as well. Whatever it took to earn a living for his family he gave it his best.

There were four children: three girls and a boy. It was hard work, but he got those kids raised. Well, mostly raised. The youngest was still in school when he died. And the great depression was raging and the dust bowl was devastating the rural areas on the plains. There was no hanging on to the drug store after he died. His widow took in laundry. His daughter worked hard at whatever jobs that could be found. During the depression everyone was poor. The Prices were really poor.

By the time of the war, there was only one member of the family left in Isabel. The oldest daughter had married a local farmer, coal miner, jack of all trades, and they had a tiny house on a small farm just outside of town. They made it to the end of the 1950's and then left the farm for the Rapid City Area.

The widow and the youngest daughter lived in a few different locations until ending up in Garrison, North Dakota at the time the Garrison Dam was being built. That's where the daughter met the man who became her husband and started her own family. She moved a couple of times with her husband, first to Libby, Montana, and later to Billings, Montana.

But she always thought of Isabel as home. Once they got to Billings she always subscribed to the Isabel Dakotan to get the news of the folks back home. She bought the county history books when they were advertised in the newspaper. Sometimes she would get an opportunity to go back to visit.

The drugstore was long gone. She herself had moved away. She had done a beautiful job of making a home for her family in another city. But somehow Isabel was still her home town. She saved clippings and entire issues of the Isabel Dakotan. And she had a few pictures that she treasured. One of those photos pictured Sylvester in the drug store. It was a reminder of something significant in her past.

I know because I married her daughter. And the picture is still a family treasure. And even thought I don't have any of the memories, I know some of the stories.

Our identity is not just a collection of our own experiences. We are shaped by the experiences of those who have gone before us and those we have grown to love. A great deal of what I know about the history and culture of rural South Dakota I learned from listening to family stories. And if I have any qualities that make it possible to endure hard times, I have gotten them from the stories of those who have gone before as well.

The official histories that are written up are tiny in comparison with the history that we carry in our lives. The stories we know would fill a book, but there might not be anyone else who would want to read it. Besides we've never written the book.

But someday that photo will be passed down to another generation and after that another. Who knows how long the stories will accompany the photo with sufficient quality for the photo to be treasured? One day someone will pick up the photo and not know the significance of the names on the back or the place called Isabel, South Dakota. They will just know that it is an old photograph.

Every old photograph has a reason that someone kept it all of these years. Every one tells part of the story of how we got to this place in our shared history. A few continue to be treasured and valued.

May we pass on the pictures and the stories to our children as faithfully as our parents passed them on to us.

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June 14, 2009 – Henri



Photo by Keven Dwyer.

There are some people that your feel like you have known for a long time, but you have never met face-to-face. Most of these people enter my life through their writing. Henri Nouwen is certainly one of those people in my life. I think that he is, in many ways, a mentor for a generation of clergy. Those of us who were in Seminary in the 1970's read has books as quickly as he wrote them. Some were simple reflections on the spiritual life. Books like, "With Open Hands," were reflective sermons. "The Wounded Healer," spoke to us of the quality of serving from all of one's life, not just the strengths that we have been granted by God. His journals of his sabbaticals gave protestants a feel for the life of a Trappist monastery, and a life of service.

While he was being a virtual mentor through his books, we knew that he was being an actual mentor for students at Harvard and Yale and that his lectures on pastoral ministry were shaping the character of ministry of our generation.

Part of the spiritual guidance that I have received from Henri Nouwen is that he wrote and spoke frankly about the process of writing as a spiritual discipline. I sometimes have trouble explaining to people the purpose of this blog. It is a means of communication and the words are written to be read, but it is also a spiritual discipline, the process of writing might be sufficient in and of itself. My motivation comes from my need to write.

Still, it is a struggle to write. There are days when I don't feel like writing. There are times when my words seem repetitious and I feel as if I have exhausted every topic that is within me. There are days when I would rater go for a walk or paddle a canoe before facing the computer and the blank screen waiting to be filled with words. There are days when I feel like my words are not very meaningful.

But there are also days when the words flow and I have to limit the length. And there are days when I feel like I am making connections with something very deep and very spiritual in this world through the process of writing.

In my writing I often feel very close to Henri Nouwen. I return to his books again and again. In "Reflections on Theological Education" he writes: "every time I overcome these fears and trust not only my unique way of being in the world, but also my ability to give words to it, I experience a deep spiritual satisfaction . . . What I am gradually discovering is that in the writing I come in touch with the Spirit of God within me and experience how I am led to new places."

Writing, when undertaken as a spiritual discipline does bring the awareness of the presence of the Spirit of God to one's awareness. There are times when I see things more clearly and sense God's presence more closely.

So I try to imitate Henri in my own imperfect fashion. This blog grew out of the journal writing that I started during my 2006 sabbatical, a journey that started for me with the re-reading of Henri's "Sabbatical Journey." I don't write books, and Henri never blogged, but I do write essays and I do write every day in a similar manner that I pray every day and I read scripture every day. These are all important elements in maintaining a spiritual balance for me. In these adventures I feel inspired and supported by Henri Nouwen, a man I never met face-to-face, a man who died all too soon, but nevertheless a man who has been a mentor and a companion on my journey.

Yesterday, as she rehearsed for a concert, Angela Kraft Cross told me of how Henri Nouwen had been a mentor and a guide for her spiritual journey. Angela Kraft Cross writes music. She is a gifted and disciplined pianist and organist. Her life has led her to more fully develop her skills as a composer. She has written several pieces for the organ and piano.

Last night, in concert, she played an homage to Henri Nouwen. Its title comes from his writing: House of fear, house of love. Nouwen spoke of the tendency of every human institution, including the church, to try to motivate people with fear. God doesn't work that way. God motivates people with love. Again and again Jesus invites those who would follow to release fear and anxiety and receive God's love.

Angela's composition was new to me yesterday. She has performed it before, but I had not been there to hear it and I have had to be in and out of the church during her rehearsals, so I did not hear the entire piece until the concert last night.

I am a preacher and a bit of a writer, but I am no genius like Angela Kraft Cross. My gifts lie in a different arena. Our paths have crossed this one time and may not cross for many years. We live in different parts of the country and our callings are to different activities. But last night, as she played the organ and I sat in the audience, I had the sense that we belonged to the same family - or at least the same community. I could sense Henri's influence on her music as surely as it has been an influence to my writing. The place of our connection, of course, was not Henri Nouwen, though we share appreciation and a sense of connection to his wonderful spirit. The place of our meeting is the Holy Spirit that is active and alive in this world. When we look deeply into ourselves, we discover that place that we hold in common with others. The holy that is within us is nonetheless holy.

And as I listened, I was reminded how the Spirit uses many languages to connect with people. Words alone are insufficient. Music, with its ability to engage our emotions, opens us to God's presence as well. Worship with out music is appropriate in some settings and at some times, but worship with music is more accessible to some of those who come to worship. The role of the musicians is as critical as the role of the preacher. This I must never forget.

In the preface to his book, "Holy Longing," Ronald Rolheiser dedicates his book to Henri Nouwen, saying: "By sharing his own struggles, he mentored us all, helping us to pray while not knowing how to pray, to rest while feeling restless, to be at peace while tempted, to feel safe while still anxious, to be surrounded by a cloud of light while still in darkness, and to love while still in doubt."

We are indeed fortunate to have the writings of Henri Nouwen and their power to inspire us. And, from time to time, we encounter others whose lives have been shaped by this remarkable man and his connections with the spirit within.

Thank you, Henri.

Thank you God, for the git of Henri.

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June 15, 2009 – Hail



We got hail late Saturday afternoon. It wasn't big, about pea-sized, but it hailed for at least 15 minutes and the ice piled up enough that there was still quite a bit of it left the next morning. It wasn't big enough to damage cars or the roof, but it really did a number with the garden. All of the plants in the garden look pretty sad. Some plants pretty much have the leaves stripped off of them. Others have holes in the leaves.

Our garden wasn't too far along. It has been cool this spring. So things will probably recover pretty well. The potato plants are pretty hardy and the peas and beans will probably be ok. I'm not as confident about the tomatoes, but I have three plants that were sheltered and they may have to be the mainstay of the garden this year. Since we will be traveling for three weeks now, we're going to be gone during the time when we should be working on the garden.

The flower beds didn't do too well, either. One of my favorite beds is a little triangle where Susan plants marigolds. They look pretty sad. The blossoms are on the ground and the leaves all show signs of damage from the hail.

But the power of the earth to recover from such events is truly amazing. A couple of weeks will make a big difference. With a little sun and moisture most of the plants are going to survive. We will be pleased when we return if there isn't another hail storm. It may be a good time to be gone so that we aren't looking at the little plants every day while they produce new leaves and blossoms.

Actually, we didn't have it bad compared to some other areas. Just a little ways to the southeast they got golf ball sized hail and there was significant damage to vehicles and roofs.

The weather has amazing power. We live in a part of the world where we are free from some of the most devastating storms. We don't get hurricanes and we are out of the path of most tornadoes as well. Even our winter weather is not as severe as it is for folks who live out on the prairies. The hills provide good shelter. But they also are a good incubator for thunderstorms and sometimes for hail. We can get a lot of rain in a short time when the thunderstorms park over the hills. Flash flooding is common in the creek beds and gullies. Still, compared to almost anyplace else in the world, we are fortunate in the weather that we receive.

Today is dawning bright and clear. The forecast calls for a chance of thunderstorms in the afternoon and evening for the next week or so. And with the amount of rain we've had the past few days there is a flood watch that remains out through tonight. Who knows, we may be in line for ore hail, but that doesn't happen too often around here.

When it was hailing there was a sense of inevitability about it. There is nothing that we can do about the weather. Once it stars hailing it is too late to put things away. Whatever damage that will occur is going to happen. Since we have a secure house we have a safe place to watch and wait. And watching and waiting is all one can do.

One of the tasks of maturing is learning which things one can change and which things cannot be changed. The famous serenity prayer, attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, is as eloquent a statement of this reality as i know: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

It is a good prayer for today and for every day.

A NOTE TO REGULAR READERS: We are leaving on a trip today. We will be camping for most of the next week. Although I'll be writing the blog every day, it probably won't make it to the web site until the end of the week or early next week. Postings will be irregular for about three weeks as we vacation and attend the General Synod of the United Church of Christ. Thank you for your patience.

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June 16, 2009 – On the Road (Sort Of)



Yesterday our launching from home seemed a bit like a comedy of errors. The process of leaving your home when others will be staying there is different from leaving it when it will be empty. We had to make decisions about what to leave in the refrigerator and what to take, and similar things. We were both tired from the activities of the past few weeks.

Then I started making mistakes. The first was that I backed up to hook onto the trailer with the camper raised. I almost never drive anywhere with the camper raised, but ten feet didn't seem like much of a journey. I was watching my mirrors carefully and I was backing where I had backed lots of time before. But with the top up the camper doesn't fit under the eve of the roof. I felt a resistance without hearing a sound. There were a couple of shingles on the roof that were messed up, the corner of the canvas on the camper was ripped, and two lift struts were bent. The repairs, though temporary, took more than an hour. I had to remove the canvas just to tape it with seam tape and then put everything back together. Fortunately the bend in the lift struts wasn't as bad as it first appeared and we will be able to take this trip with them the way they are and repair them later.

Then I pulled the trailer out of the driveway and backed it in so that I could shuffle the other cars around. On my way out of the driveway, I drug the hitch slightly on the ground. What are the odds that the electrical cable would be hanging directly under the place where it drug? (Actually they were quite good. I've since changed where the slack in that cable hangs). Three of the four wires were showing bare, so I ended up cutting

out the bad section and splicing in new wires. That's eight butt connections. Of course one of the bare wires was the ground, and the other two were the turn signals, so it didn't just blow one, but two fuses. Did I mention that for some reason that I do not know, the fuses for the trailer turn signals are in the fuse box on the dash of a Chevy Pickup, while the fuses for the power and other trailer connections are under the hood? I had to get out the owner's manual to find out where the blown fuses were located.

There were more errors, but nothing major. We finally pulled out of our driveway in the middle of the afternoon, just ahead of huge thunderstorms that were passing to the north of town. Heading northeast, we figured we might be heading into the path of the storm. But we had not planned on going far and our trip to Farm Island State Park near Pierre was uneventful, except for a routine stop near Wall to walk around the rig and inspect to make sure everything was going well.

The weather radio seemed to indicate that the storms would miss us, but the campground personnel weren't as sure. They warned of the possibility of 40 mph winds and hail. I was more worried about the tornado that had been sighted along our route of travel about an hour after we passed through. All of the severe weather missed our campsite. We didn't even get any rain. We had a pleasant light show of distant lightning, but it was dying down before we were ready to crawl in bed and there was no high wind or lightning anywhere near us all night.

I did have to get up this morning and make a couple of minor repairs to the camper. These things show up every spring and demand our attention. Usually we take a two-day trip just to find the places in need of repair, but there was no time for that this spring and I was eager to get on the road. Besides, with the trailer, we have a whole tool box of repair supplies and tools.

We had a wonderful sleep in our camper - stayed in bed an hour later than usual. Add to that the time zone change and we'll be hitting the road a bit late today. No worries, we don't have too far to go - we planned the trip that way.

It looks like we'll be traveling under overcast and maybe even run into a bit of ran on our way. We have the option of staying in our camper or in Susan's relative's cabin when we arrive in Detroit Lakes, so we'll see how it goes. If it is raining hard, we might just not set up the camper, or we might just feel better sleeping in our own place. It isn't hard to set up the camper and it is weather tight, so rain won't bother us at all.

We will easily arrive early enough to go for a paddle, but I don't know what the family has planned. It might be more important to visit with relatives than to go paddling this evening, but we will be camping on the shore of a lake, so there is definitely a paddle in store for tomorrow morning. Knowing that, I've decided not to paddle this morning - it will help us get on the road a bit quicker and I'm not quite out of "work mode" yet, so I'm eager to put a little more distance between us and home.

As we drive, I will feel the worries and concerns fade. There are lots of things at home that are worthy of our concerns and I have a lot of work to do, but vacation is about renewal and we all need to unplug from time to time. Furthermore, it is important to remind myself, from time to time, that the church is a strong and stable community filled with capable leaders. It is not dependent upon me to conduct ministry and remain a meaningful voice in our community. It is OK for me to be gone for a bit.

So today is about learning to be on vacation and letting go. In doing so, I hope to remind myself that God remains in charge.

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June 17, 2009 – Night Paddle



We arrived without problems at about 4:30, having driven through heavy rain for about 50 miles south of Fargo. From there on, there were scattered showers of heavy rain and constant light rain. After a good visit and a very pleasant dinner, we headed out to the cabin, arriving in time to settle in and relax. But it was raining and there is not too much level ground. I backed the trailer in next to their boat trailer and unhooked and we went into the cabin to wait out the rain. I didn't want to drive around too much on the wet grass, fearing that I might tear it up with the heavy truck.

The rain let up just as dusk was falling. I couldn't resist and so went for a little paddle. There were no other boats on the lake and only two cabins had lights turned on, so there was no danger in paddling after dark. It was calm and beautiful. A couple of mosquitoes were making their night rounds and met a sad fate upon landing on my arms and neck. It was fresh after the rain and the little lake is a great place for some peace and quiet.

I used to paddle at night frequently when we were involved with camps at Pilgrim Cove, near McCall, Idaho. But in South Dakota, I don't seem to get out on the lake in the evening very often. Sound does funny things on lakes at night. a duck way on the other side of the lake was easy to hear. I suppose that the sound of my paddle dipping might be heard all around the little lake as well. But with a wooden canoe and a wooden paddle, I'm not very loud.

A lake at dusk is a good place to reflect on the meanings of the day. Reconnecting with family members is important. Cousins that we do not see as regularly are still important in our lives. It is easy to recognize family traits and similarities in Susan's relatives. Getting to know them helps me to know her better as well. Hearing family stories helps me understand. This is the branch of Susan's family that moved northeast when they left Isabel, SD. Susan's uncle Kenneth was recruited by the local newspaper to come to town because they were looking for a watch repairman. The family jewelry store is now in the third generation as a husband and wife business.

I awoke to the sound of rain on the roof this morning and so have not been out yet. It looks like it might settle into being a rainy day. There is a fair breeze, and we are in unfamiliar territory, so I don't know what the day will bring for weather. We knew that we could expect some rain traveling at this time of the year, and we have plenty of books to read and things to do. At the moment it sounds like the rain is letting up , so I may go for a paddle later. The particular lake where we are staying is quite small and it would be fun to paddle all around the shore .

For now, it is good to have a lazy start for the day and memories of a pleasant paddle last night. We have traveled safely and are cozy and warm. It is good to take a break from the busy pace of the everyday.

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June 18, 2009 – Into the North Woods



There are certain images of Minnesota that those of use who live elsewhere carry. Maybe our ideas have been influenced by years of listening to "A Prairie Home Companion," on the radio. Garrison Keillor's stories of Norwegian bachelor farmers, Lutheran pot luck suppers, and life in the mythical town of Lake Wobegone have entertained a wide audience for a long time. They have given Minnesota a certain sense of attraction. Although we have been neighbors with Minnesota for much of our life, we have not spent much time here. We've driven through the state on our way to other places and we've made a few trips to Minneapolis, but we are not familiar with the state.

This trip is an opportunity for us to see and learn new things as we explore. Today we are heading north east. We'll be in Duluth in the early afternoon and continue a bit farther along the southern shore of Lake Superior.

Stopping here in Detroit Lakes has given us time to reconnect with family and time to adjust to being on vacation. Yesterday I paddled around the edge of Lake Six, one of the many smaller lakes in the region. It was a gray day and there weren't any other boaters out on the lake at the time. I saw a couple of pelicans and I was allowed to share the lake with a loon. Loons, with their distinctive call, are births that I associate with the north woods region of Minnesota and Canada. Since we don't have loons on the lakes at home, it was reminder that I am in a different place. Seeing the loon was a reminder that I am not at home and that I'm headed for a new adventure

We like to mark maps to show where we have gone on our travels. The marks on the maps up to this point in our travels indicate roads that we have previously traveled. Today we head off on roads that are new to us. We'll skirt the southern border of the White Indian Reservation, cross part of the Leech Lake and Lac Reservations as well as several state forests on our way to Superior. We'll cross into Wisconsin there and we won't really be visiting the north woods portion of Minnesota until after we've drive around the big lake. Although we're vacationing, we are also heading to the General Synod meeting and so will start with the southern shore and head farther north after Synod.

Paddling with the loon and hearing its call as we drifted off to sleep last night was a good reminder that we are in a new place and there is much to see and learn as we travel. Even though Minnesotans wouldn't consider this part of their state to be the north woods, it feels to us like we're in new territory.

There's fog on the lake this morning and before long we'll be packing up the camper, hitching up the trailer and heading off on the next part of the adventure. The lake is glassy smooth, just right for a short paddle, and the whole area is alive with bird song. There is not a pine tree in sight from where I am sitting and writing. I don't know the names of all of the trees, but can identify a few of them. It is obvious that this isn't one of the reservoirs in the hills.

It is good to be away from home for a while. It is good to be off on a grand adventure. And we'll be collecting stories to tell when we return home. We are fortunate to be able to travel and see so many of the wonders and joys of this world. My sense of gratitude for the people who support us in our work and give us the opportunity to take a vacation is substantial. My gratitude to God for the diversity, wonder and beauty of this world is overwhelming.

May I find words to express my gratitude.

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June 19, 2009 – Island on an Island



Madeline Island is one of the Apostle Islands in Lake Superior off of the Northern coast of Wisconsin. The local story is that the Apostle Islands were so named because early explorers thought that there were twelve islands surrounding a point of land that protrudes into the lake. There are, however, twenty-two islands. Maybe the early settlers couldn't see all that well, or perhaps they couldn't count. I suppose it is possible that they felt that the women who are often referred to in New Testament stories as followers of Jesus deserved status as Apostles. Whatever the reason, the twenty-two islands now are part of Apostle Islands National Lakeshore. They are a wonderful area to explore with small boats because of their relative proximity to the shore and each other. There are six light houses scattered across the islands.

The largest of the islands, Madeline, is served by a ferry system. Four ferries, ranging in size from ten to twenty-five car capacities make the tow and one-half hour trip giving hourly service throughout the day. The Wisconsin State Park System maintains Big Bay State Park on the Island, with camping, hiking, and lakeshore access in a beautiful location in the middle of the Southern side of the Island.

Madeline has about 220 year-round residents. The population swells to about 2,500 in the summer with tourism being the main activity. In the winter the lake freezes over. Ferry service is suspended and eventually the ice becomes thick enough for an ice road that is passable by automobiles. The tradition is to mark the ice road with recycled Christmas trees. In the time between the suspension of the ferry runs and the opening

of the ice road, some students cross the area on windsleds to attend school on the mainland.

At Big Bay, the main lake created a sand spit that became a reef all the way across the bay. The result was the formation of a lake on the island that has now become a bog as it fills with silt and plants begin to take over. Today's picture is of a small island that has formed in the lake. Eventually the lake will fill up and the island will become a part of the mainland. For now, there is an island in a lake that is on an island in a lake.

It is hard to get one's perspective. On a big island like Madeline, it is easy to forget that you are on an island. There are roads that take you from one place to another and areas in the middle of the island that are so densely forested that you cannot see Lake Superior. Although the island is only three or four miles across, it is almost ten miles long, so one can walk and even drive reasonable distances without sight of the shore. From the perspective of the hiking trail around the bog, it seems as if the little lake inside what used to be part of the bay is like any other small lake with shallow, boggy areas surrounding it.

I suppose that from the perspective of the scientists working at the International Space Station the entire earth is an island surrounded by the vastness of space. Although we seldom get that perspective, the truth is that the planet that we perceive to be so vast and enormous is really quite small when compared to other planets. And our solar system is a tiny island in the vastness of the Milky Way Galaxy. Our galaxy is a tiny part of a cluster of galaxies in the vastness of a much larger universe. It is all a matter of perspective.

In the vastness of God's universe, all humanity occupies a tiny island and this point we have not yet begun to travel to visit the other islands that are near us. What is more, we don't even know how many other planets there are in the vastness of the universe.

So it shouldn't surprise us that some of the early visitors to this region didn't know for sure how many islands there were. Unless one is flying in an airplane on a clear day it is impossible to see all twenty-two islands at the same time.

There is archeological evidence that there has been human activity for about the last 9,000 years. It has been about 15,000 years since the islands emerged from the latest ice age. Although there are many northern lakes that were formed by the action of the glaciers during that ice age, Lake Superior is so vast that scientists believe that it has been a feature of the continent for a much larger amount of time, enduring multiple ice ages and emerging from each as a substantial lake. It is estimated to be the largest repository of fresh water on the planet. Such a big lake deserves islands big enough for their own lakes and islands.

We arrived here in the late afternoon and have not yet had much time to explore, but today will be a day of exploring as we will camp in the same location tonight before leaving the island tomorrow. Who knows what other wonders we will discover as we hike and paddle in this beautiful place?

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June 20, 2009 – Tom's Burned Down Café



Island living has its challenges. There is too much to do in the sumer, and too little to do in the winter. After the tourists leave and the ferry service stops for the winter the residents of the Island settle in for a long wait for springtime. In a typical year the snow starts falling in November and bare earth isn't seen until April. Some people have their indoor projects and are eager for the solitude, but it can weigh heavily on others. Depression is common. In addition to the lack of activity, there is a lack of income. The island is a place of summer jobs, with few income-producing jobs that last year round.

Back in the 1950's St. John's United Church of Christ recognized the need. As the Medeline Island's only year-round congregation, it serves as a community church with a very broad range of theologies present at any worship service. The church has a large fellowship hall with a fireplace , kitchen and other amenities. It became a place where artists gathered and where they taught their arts and crafts to others. These days it is the home of Woods Hall Craft Shop. The Artist's Cooperative uses the hall in the winter as a weaver's and potter's studio. There are at least three large looms, potter's wheels and a kiln. There are also members of the cooperative who make jewelry, soap, carvings, dolls, candles and other crafts. In the summer, the hall becomes a retail store, selling the crafts that have been made by the members of the cooperative, thus adding to the income of the residents and also providing winter activity.

Island living attracts its share of quirky personalities. Most of the homes and real estate on the island are owned by people who live elsewhere and maintain vacation homes. This booming vacation economy drives up the taxes for everyone, making the

process of maintaining even a modest home for year-round living an expensive adventure. There are people who live on the island because that is where they were born or their parents lived there before them. There are others who were attracted to the island because of its beauty and who have learned to enjoy the isolation. The people who stay over the winter have got to get along with each other. Less than 250, usually closer to 220 people stay for the winter. They don't have to agree with each other. They don't have to enjoy each other. But they do have to figure out how to live together.

Sometimes the people with different personalities become so much a part of the fabric of the community that the locals want to share them with others. That may be the case with the owner of Tom's Burned Down Cafe. Most of the shops we visited included an comment or two about the establishment and an admonition to make sure that we visited the cafe before leaving the island.

It's not hard to find the cafe. It is in the middle of downtown, across from the art gallery, coffee shop, confectionary shop, and bicycle rental shop. It's right between a sports bar and Lori's Store, the Island's year-round grocery store. It occupies an entire village block, though the blocks in this village aren't all the same size or shape.

The Cafe's slogan, printed in the Island brochure is, "We're not just a tavern and an art gallery - we're an adventure! The structure looks like the name suggests. It is a huge tent covering a built up foundation surrounded by all kinds of junk, parts, appliances, projects and other items. There is a large sailboat around back that is undergoing restoration, though an extension ladder leading up to the deck is the only sign that any work is being done. There are several broken-down vehicles and trailers parked around the property. Some are used as weights to hold down the ropes that keep tension on the tent over the tavern portion of the establishment.

Tom's main winter-time activity, in addition to taking down the big tent and putting it back up each spring, must be painting signs. There are signs everywhere. Most of them contain aphorisms or brief sentences that comment about life in general, quote songs, or express a point of view. One local resident told us that the signs have "every kind of philosophy that you can see." I noted later to Susan that she didn't say, "every kind of philosophy that exists", or "every kind of philosophy that you might hold." Nonetheless there are a lot of different points of view on the signs. Perhaps one of the most interesting is right by the stairs that lead to the deck: "Sorry, we're open." It's not difficult to get the impression that the owner enjoys the part of the year when there are no tourists better than the summer.

The music coming from Tom's Burned Down Cafe is mostly from the 1960's. We never met Tom, but it is easy to imagine a Hippie who tuned out during the 1960's and never came back.

The interesting thing is not that there is a quirky personality in town, but that the town has learned to celebrate that person. The super neat fancy resort next door with is immaculately trimmed lawn and decorative planters filled with bedding plants has learned how to co-exist and even thrive next door to what looks, quite frankly, like a junk yard. If you live on an island, you have to learn to live with the other people who are on the island. On Madeline Island they not only live with Tom's Burned Down Cafe, they celebrate it and send each visitor in its direction. It has become one of the Island's "must see" attractions.

We're not Island people. Our home is in the hills, far away from any large bodies of water. And we've grown used to being able to travel when we want and to having jobs that last all year round. But visiting the island is a wonderful adventure and we enjoy getting a taste of the life that the people who live here share. As I mentioned in yesterday's article, the whole world is a sort of an island if you look at it from the right perspective. Maybe we need to learn to live with an celebrate our most quirky personalities as well.

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June 21, 2009 – Sunset



Last night was the first night that we were far enough east to watch the sun set over the lake. One doesn't have to go too far because the sun is nearing its most northern point as observed from the earth. We are camped near Presque Isle in the Porcupine Mountains in Michigan. Our camper is parked on a high bluff overlooking the lake with a gorgeous view out the windows. We could have watched the sunset from inside the camper, but we sat outside taking in the night air.

The Presque Isle River makes a dramatic trip to the lake. The last mile has three major waterfalls and there are hiking trails on both sides of the river as well as a suspension bridge near the outlet and another bridge a little over a mile upstream. We were able to walk a loop and look at the waterfalls from both sides of the river. Vacation, fresh air and a day with quite a bit of hiking put us in a mellow mood after supper and we sat and watched the sunset. It was a beautiful way to end a good day.

This world is filled with amazing beauty and diversity. There are countless perspectives from which to watch a sunset and even if one watches from the same vantage point, the arrangement of clouds and other items makes each one unique. Each river or stream charts its own course and no two are alike. Each tree has its own pattern of leaves and responds to a breeze in its own way. We have been fortunate to do a lot of traveling and we never see any repetition of scene.

Yesterday we watched a mother duck with six duckings in the river. There were rapids and cascades all around them. The water was much too swift for a person to be able to

stand up. Most creatures, were they to get into that water, would be swept over the waterfalls and drowned. The ducklings, too young to fly, were paddling around with their mother, discovering eddies along the edges where they could rest and making their way in a world that holds many dangers for them.

A look at the trees that grow next to Lake Superior is a good reminder that although we've enjoyed beautiful weather, this can be a place of violent storms. Superior is a big lake and everything about it is big, including the weather. In the winter when the surface of the lake freezes and blizzards sweep across the surface that is free of any form of obstruction or shelter, the trees on the shore become the first obstacle that is met. Because the waters lap at their roots, they often have exposed roots and little which gives them stability. It is only their flexibility and the support of other trees that allows them to keep standing.

We haven't witnessed the big waves that arise during storms. Late fall is supposed to be the time of the worst weather. Old timers report that there are November storms that make the waves so high that no ship, no matter how large, can survive the storm without finding safe harbor. The bottom of the lake is the resting place for hundreds of ship wrecks of all sizes attesting to the violence of the storms. In the open ocean, when the wind increases the waves get bigger but they also start to space themselves out, with more space between waves. In the confines of the lake, there is no similar effect. When the waves get big they are also frequent and the direction of the waves is less predictable, especially within a few miles of shore. Much of the shoreline is ragged and rocky and very dangerous for ships. When the barometer starts to fall, prudent mariners head for safe harbor as quickly as they can. There are a thousand stories and hundreds of sayings that warn of the weather on the lake.

But this place of violent weather is also a place of incredible beauty. Camping in the stands of hemlock, cedar, ash, maple and oak one quickly develops a desire to come back in the autumn to see the fall colors. Even knowing the potential for violent storms, the beauty of that season must be amazing. It takes a hardy soul to winter in the north woods, but the rewards of beautiful moonlit nights with the northern lights giving their display and stars too numerous to count must be incredible.

As we travel we are aware that we are only temporary visitors. Our home lies in another part of the world - itself amazingly beautiful. Our South Dakota license plates announce to all who look that we are outsiders - summer visitors who will never know that full story of this place. The locals are gracious and willing to share their home and we are delighted to see a bit of it. There are too many trails for the time that we have and too many roads that could be explored. We will see a bit of this place and then journey to another.

We will leave with deep appreciation for the lake and its incredible beauty, grateful for this opportunity to have seen it.

As I write the sun is rising on a new day, one that will see us travel to yet another place and look at things from a fresh perspective. May the sunset find us grateful for the gifts of this day.

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June 22, 2009 – Copper Harbor



The Keweenaw Peninsula juts out into Lake Superior from the Michigan shore. At the very end of the peninsula, on the north side, is a protected harbor that could provide safe refuge from Superior's dramatic storms. The problem is that there is a reef of submerged rocks around the harbor and the channel through which a ship of any substance could pass is very narrow. A set of lights has been devised to give a visual guide to mariners. In addition, there is a lighthouse at the entrance to the harbor to show the location of the harbor from a greater distance.

The harbor provided more than a safe refuge over the years. Fort Wilkins was established at the peninsula in 1844. Although it was only active as a military post for two years, a complex of many buildings was constructed on the site. True to its name, Copper Harbor was close to extensive copper mining activity and a small rush of exploration after the establishment of the state of Michigan. It was also a place where early steamships could dock to take on additional coal to fire the boilers.

The first shipwreck in Copper Harbor was the John Jacob Astor, anchored in the harbor and offloading supplies for the fort. A strong blow came up from the north and the Astor's anchors couldn't hold the ship. It was broken up against the rocks of the harbor. Over the years there have been many other wrecks, including a large steamer that had over 200 Ford automobiles on its deck, bound for Duluth. Although listing badly, the ship did not roll all the way over and when the lake froze, they were able to unload the automobiles and drive them across the ice and eventually to a train station where they

were loaded onto a train and shipped back to Detroit where they were repaired and eventually sold.

It is easy to romanticize the life of a lighthouse keeper, living in a beautiful and isolated location, faithfully tending the light, climbing up and down the stairs morning and evening, watching the storms from a safe vantage point. But the reality was a bit more harsh. The lighthouses were subject to periodic unannounced inspection where every item from the keeping of the light to the uniform of the keeper to the cleanliness of each room of the house was inspected. Reprimands were harsh and keepers were subject to dismissal if they accumulated too many negative inspections. Between those inspections, it was lonely at the lighthouse and some could not take the isolation. Lighthouse keepers were able to have wives and raise families at their posts, and many did. One keeper at Copper Harbor had six children born at the lighthouse.

The lighthouse service provided food for the keeper and his family, but the food provided did not include any fresh fruit or vegetables and the only meats were beef and pork, both preserved by salting. Most keepers supplemented their diets with hunting, fishing and gathering local berries. Some gardened, but often lighthouses were located in places where gardening wasn't possible. There were plenty of raspberries and blueberries at Copper Harbor and they could be canned for winter use.

Lighthouse keepers traded with local folks for other items, but lighthouses tended to be very isolated and there were few neighbors. During most of the time of Copper Harbor there was either the military post or copper mining activity to provide a community. And there were always two lights at the harbor and until the lighthouse was automated and converted to a gas light, there were always two keepers.

One real problem faced by lighthouse keepers was low pay. This was especially true for those with families. If they had any hope of sending their children away for an education, they had to devise ways to get more income that the keeper's salary provided. Most lighthouse keepers figured some way to supplement income. Commercial fishing was common, but it meant being away from the lighthouse. This meant that the wife and children became the real lighthouse keepers and a system of signals had to be devised to warn of the arrival of an inspector. Similar plans were required for the keeper to go hunting or on any other type of excursion that took him away from the lighthouse.

The original lighthouse at Copper Harbor, built in 1848, was poorly constructed and served for a very short time before it had to be torn down and replaced. The keeper's home was similarly constructed and there are descriptions of icicles hanging from the rafters in the winter. A new keeper's home was incorporated into the lighthouse built in 1866, heated with modern stoves with sleeping quarters upstairs. The keeper's family must have appreciated this new structure. It had a cistern with a hand pump that provided water in the kitchen as well as a cool food storage area off of the kitchen. It

was even furnished with a brick outhouse. The trip to the outhouse was the only outdoors activity required in the harshest winter days as the lighthouse was attached and could be serviced without going outdoors.

We arrived at the Copper Harbor lighthouse after a short boat trip across the harbor to the point. The State of Michigan has established a small museum and a variety of exhibits about the lighthouse and about copper mining in the area. We had a delightful time hiking around the point and visiting the various buildings.

These days there is a steel tower with an automated electric lamp on the top, visible from about ten times the distance of the original lighthouse. The post is still an active navigational aid for mariners, though it doesn't require an attendant to live on the site.

The lighthouse point provided a good adventure for a Sunday afternoon as well as an opportunity to think about the lives that others lived in years past. By comparison, ours is a luxurious life indeed.

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June 23, 2009 – Paddling Big Water



On this trip we are pulling a trailer with four boats: two canoes and two kayaks. All four boats have been in the water in the past week. Each has a different function. The two canoes are both primarily for calm waters. One is a solo canoe and the other a tandem, for two paddlers. The bigger boat actually would easily carry a third person if we had reason to do so. We will be using the canoes primarily on the many little lakes that surround Lake Superior. Not all of our campgrounds are right on the shore of Superior and we will continue to have opportunities to paddle smaller lakes as we go along. One of the kayaks is a light-weight factory boat, suitable for rocks and other obstacles. It is on this trip because it is small enough to attach to a backpack and be carried long distances. My first paddle in the big lake was in this boat because the lake was a bit of a hike from where we could park. The other kayak is a stable wood-strip boat in which I am comfortable. I've paddled it in both the Pacific and Atlantic oceans off of Canada and the United States as well as the Puget Sound and the Bay of Fundy. I have a larger sea kayak that I built for big waters but that I left behind. I have sort of wished I had that boat for a couple of paddles on this trip, but I'm not missing it too much. None of our paddling is covering large distances or carrying loads.

Superior is known for big storms and big waves, so our paddling will be restricted to calm days and protected areas. Today we will be touring the pictured rocks area, a 40-mile stretch of the coast that is best viewed from the water. We will be riding on a tour boat to cover the distance in a shorter amount of time and with the added safety of the big boat.

However, one of the goals of the trip is to paddle nearly every day. So far I've found opportunities to paddle in the mornings and evenings most days. Paddling is good exercise and a beautiful way to connect with the natural world. In my kayak I am sitting right at the water level. It is easy for me to look down and realize how clear the waters of the giant lake are. I can look out towards islands and other features and get a sense of the vastness of the world's largest fresh water lake. The wooden boat and wooden paddle are very quiet in the water and I am allowed a close look at the wildlife. So far on this trip the wildlife has been primarily birds: loons, mergansers, wood ducks, mallards, pelicans, Canadian geese, seagulls, and a couple of eagles. The water birds often have chicks swimming right along behind them. If this lake seems big to me, it must be impossible for a tiny duckling to comprehend the size of the water in which it is swimming. For this phase of its life the lake is the entire universe to the little bird.

For centuries paddling canoes along the shores of the lake was the primary form of transportation for those who wanted to go long distances in this area. During the fur trade season, the Voyageurs used birch bark freight canoes, generally 36 to 40 feet in length. The canoes were capable of holding numerous packs of trade goods or furs, depending on which direction they were going. The technology was borrowed from the natives. Bark canoes had been built by numerous tribes for hundreds of years before the arrival of Europeans. The first Europeans were impressed with the shape and speed of the canoes. Used to rowboats, the canoes were lighter, more maneuverable and much faster. They could be designed to carry heavy loads. It was not uncommon for a freight canoe to haul a half ton or more.

Canoes are remarkably capable in the wind as well, their sleek form allows them to be paddled into the wind with little wind resistance. They are capable of handling waves as high as half of the length of the boat, although it would take expert paddlers to prevent theme from turning breech to the waves and being rolled. The rule of thumb is to get off of the water when a big storm comes. Early paddlers spent plenty of stormy days on the shore waiting for better weather.

The Voyageurs navigated by sight and dead reckoning. Although compasses were common on larger vessels of the time, most Voyageurs did not carry compasses. They became familiar with the shoreline and its features, naming thousands of landmarks and prominent features along the shores of the lake. Fog is common, and it was a problem for the Voyageurs. There are stories of canoes spending a day or more paddling in circles as their crews became disoriented in heavy fog.

I will be a fair-weather paddler on this adventure and I have no trips planned that require me to make a certain distance in any given amount of time. My paddling is for play and recreation only. But I go out prepared. I wear a quality life jacket and carry a rescue line, knife and signal whistle with me even if I am paddling in water that is not over my head. I remain within sight of another person or close enough to the shore for a self-rescue

should I encounter unforeseen circumstances. I tend to paddle just after sunrise or just before sunset when the winds are at their calmest.

I think of the Voyageurs and others who have paddled this water for a living as I paddle. They were incredible strong and had developed the strength and skills to travel great distances each day. When a portage was required they could carry a 90-pound pack on their back and help carry the canoe over their heads. Then they'd go back for another load. It wasn't uncommon for them to carry two or three 90-pound packs per paddler. They learned to feed themselves from the supplies they carried and the food they could harvest from the land and lake. Their canoes were turned on their sides for a shelter for sleeping and waiting out the storms. They carried everything they needed with them.

Our version of travel is much less efficient. Although we have our sleeping and eating quarters on the back of our truck, we need to stop for fuel almost every day and we stop at grocery stores a couple of times per week. Although our truck will carry more weight than even the largest of the voyageur canoes, most of what we are carrying is our camper which provides our place to stay each evening. And were we to encounter any problems, we'd be quick to summon assistance. The voyageurs needed to be able to make all of their own repairs - there was no one to call if help was needed.

There are hundreds of stories, books and poems about this great lake. I have read a few of them and am collecting experiences to write a bit more about this incredible body of water. By the time we finish our circle of the lake, I'll have seen it in many moods and experienced its water from may different perspectives, but I will be far from familiar with it. Even as we travel, we wonder what it might be like to tour in the fall with all of the colors of the leaves or to visit in the winter when the lake is so solidly frozen that there are ice roads for automobiles across stretches of open water.

We are fortunate to be able to visit this place and experience the water. And I am grateful for the opportunities to paddle.

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June 24, 2009 – Pictured Rocks



Yesterday was the last day of the first phase of our Lake Superior tour. We are camped along the shores of Whitefish Bay, not far from Sault Ste. Marie. Today we will head toward Grand Rapids and the General Synod Meeting. We haven't yet traveled half way around the lake, but we have traversed the southern shore from west to east. After General Synod we will return to Sault Ste. Marie and head north into Canada as we continue our trip around the lake.

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore was the first national lakeshore. It was formally set aside in 1966, after a period of acquisition of the property by the federal government. There were a few private cabins that were purchased and moved, but otherwise the only effect of the nationalization of the land has been to provide access to the general public. The national lakeshore has several hiking trails, a great 40-miles of lakeshore of sea kayaking, waterfalls and many other attractions. There are a few roads that provide access from land, but the way to see the shore is by boat. Since our time was limited, we took a 3 hour cruise out of Munising to view the pictured rocks. There are miles of beautifully colored rocks, sea caves, arches and other features. The cruise gave us a good way to sit back and photograph the coast.

The experience was quite different from paddling canoes or kayaks. We sat up high, more than twenty feet above the water level, and our speed was about ten miles per hour. The twin turbocharged Cummins diesel engines rumbled beneath where we were sitting, but they were well enough muffled for us to hear the call of the seagulls and enjoy the ride.

The management of a lakeshore is different from other types of lands. I suppose that the park service needs a boat or two to provide safety and rescue for stranded kayakers and rangers with skills in handing wind and waves. They have to have general land management skills as well, with a diverse set of plants and animals that live in the area. There are several well developed hiking trails that lead to waterfalls, high rocks and other features. Trail maintenance is probably similar to what it would be in the national forest.

About half way up the national lakeshore is a wide beach named Mosquito Beach. Nearby the Mosquito river empties into the lake. Both are appropriately named for this region. Even with our strong deet insect repellant, we have gotten lots of mosquito bites on this trip. We had been warned about the mosquitos and flies in the region and have lots of good netting and repellant. But there are a lot of mosquitos. One of the bottles of repellant we have claims that it “makes you invisible to bugs.” Even being invisible, we run into plenty of bugs. The sheer numbers mean that a few are bound to randomly run into you even if you are invisible to them. A single mosquito can be incredibly irritating if it has gotten into the camper and is flying around at night. It makes one almost wish it would bite rather than be flying around with that high pitched sound that makes it impossible to sleep.

But a few insects can’t keep us from enjoying this beautiful region and this magnificent lake. And the lake’s cold water is a good place to soak feet and ankles for a few minutes to make one forget about the mosquito bites.

We shift gears into General Synod with mixed feelings. By tomorrow night we will be in an hotel, with access to the Internet and we will be reconnected with the world. There will be lots of e-mails to answer and a lot of business to conduct during the General Synod. We’ll have to get out our work clothes after a week of living in the camper. But it will be a good adventure in its own way.

We feasted on lake trout for dinner, purchased from a commercial fisherman in Munising. We have some smoked whitefish for lunches for a couple of days. By the time synod is over, there may be a few berries available and the local fruit stands will be offering their wares. As we watched the sun set last night we were dazzled by its beauty and reminded once again how fortunate we are to be able to see this place and have this adventure.

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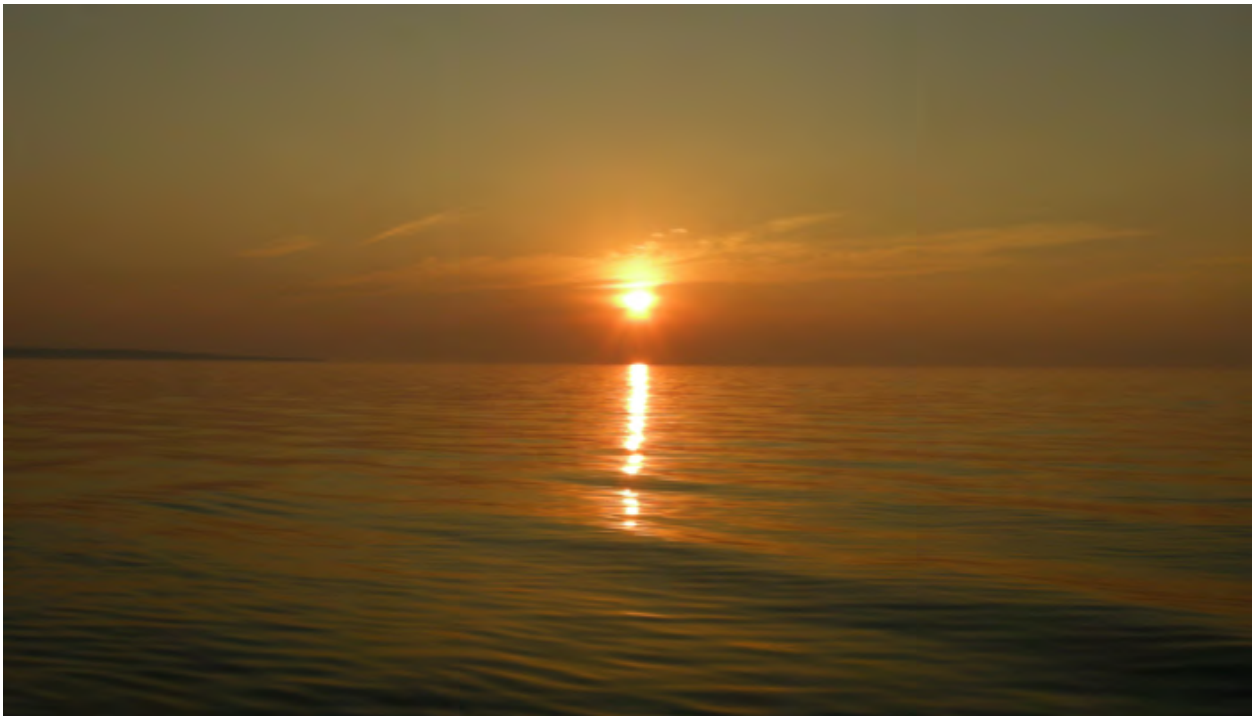
June 25, 2009 – New Horizons



The last time the United Church of Christ held a General Synod in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Susan was a delegate. It was 1971. We had just completed our freshman year of college. Back in those days, the UCC didn't have an official designation of young adults, so she was a youth delegate, being under the age of 30. It was one of the first synods where there was a requirement that a certain portion of the delegation be under the age of 30 and she was elected to a term that included only one General Synod, representing the Montana Conference.

I spent the summer working in Montana. I was heady with the success of having made good grades in my first year at college and eager to return for a second year. On June 15th, I turned 18, which was old enough to obtain what was then called a "chauffeur's license," which allowed me to drive a semi truck. Our little company only had one semi, and most of the year I drove a strait truck with a roll back tilt bed hauling farm machinery in to the shop for repair and delivering it back to farmers and ranchers. I also delivered new purchases to their homes. I remember delivering quite a few lawn and garden tractors as well, which went to their new homes in the back of a pickup truck equipped with a folding ramp in place of the tailgate.

I was saving my earnings for college, but when I felt I could spare a dollar here or there, I was at the airport, enjoying the freedom of flying. Each birthday had been a milestone for several years. At 15 I got my driver's license, at 16, I soloed in an airplane, at 17 I got my private pilot's license, and now at 18, I had my commercial driver's license. I could get up early in the morning and make a 500 - mile flight in the airplane, and get

home in time to make a delivery with the truck before noon. When we needed parts in a hurry and they were light enough to fit in the airplane, Billings was only an hour away.

General Synod was only a few days, as it is now, but for Susan it was part of a bigger adventure. She rode to General Synod with the family of a minister in our conference who had relatives in Chicago and the trip to and from Synod took a couple of weeks. General Synod was a different kind of gathering in those days as well. Resolutions were hotly and angrily debated. There was a sense of protest and unrest in the air as the war in Vietnam continued. There were calls to end the draft and to get the United States out of the War. The Civil Rights movement had made some real progress and changed the nature of the church, but there was still a great deal of injustice and more changes were coming.

At eighteen, I waited eagerly for the draft lottery, knowing that it might affect my fate. I knew that I was headed for theological seminary and probably could have opted for a deferment, but I had chosen instead to qualify for alternative service. Unknown to me that summer, the draft was to end and no one in my birth year or any year since has been drafted.

I don't remember the resolutions passed by General Synod. I do remember feeling that I was somehow a part of it, in a very small way. My girlfriend was a delegate and although it would be two years more before we were married, we had a sense that we were going in that direction.

After General Synod we were the only two campers at our conference's young adults camp. The camp proceeded anyway, without much of a program beyond half days of work and afternoons of discussion with the same minister with whom Susan had gone to synod, one of the ministers who would two years later co-officiate at our wedding.

So we have returned to Grand Rapids for another synod and we are looking at the United Church of Christ from a different perspective. Quite a bit has happened in the last 38 years, 31 of which we have served as ordained ministers in this church. General Synods have come and gone and most have conducted their business without our participation. At this meeting we'll run into a few colleagues and classmates who have attended most of those synods. We'll find that while we have a great deal in common, we have led quite different lives. Our entire careers have been serving local congregations. We have never served as Association, or Conference Ministers, nor have we served the church's national setting aside from a little free-lance work from time to time. We've done a little service on various boards and committees but have never made a name for ourselves in the denomination.

On the other hand, we are one of only a few of the members of the clergy couples group that was formed in the 1970's who are still married and still serving the church. Most

have left the ministry. Others have divorced. We've stuck to the path upon which we began and it has been a good journey indeed.

This General Synod will make some decisions that may move our church toward new horizons. While justice issues remain important to us, we will also be struggling with issues relating to the size and efficiency of our structure. We are a smaller church than we were 38 years ago and we need to have a national structure that reflects that reality and is efficient with the resources that are provided by local congregations. New times call for new ways of organizing ourselves and new leadership. At this Synod we will elect a new General Minister and President for our church. In some ways our denomination is like a congregation. Our identity is shaped by the leadership we choose. One person can have a big effect on the directions we go. Additional decisions will be made about how leadership will emerge.

It is interesting to think about the people in their twenties who are attending this synod. How will the church seem to them thirty or forty years down the road? What will they identify as the most significant challenges and the greatest opportunities that the church has faced in their time?

Each occasion in the life of the church seems to us to be momentous. I hope we have the wisdom and insight to keep our eyes on the future as we meet and deliberate and choose this week.

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June 26, 2009 – Synod in the City



One of my first reactions to General Synod XXVII is that it is noisy. We've been camping in isolated locations and have been sleeping to the sounds of the loons for a week. Nature's sounds can be loud when there are storms, but most of the time they are gentler and easier to absorb. The freeway that runs past the high rise hotel in which we are staying has a constant roar of passing cars and trucks. The seams in the concrete result in a thump-thump of tires, the hill to the overpass means that vehicles are braking and accelerating. The demands of the city require a lot of big trucks to deliver the goods needed. Our hotel is modern with all of the conveniences and we don't hear our neighbors very much, but the continual sound of the air conditioning fan makes it hard to sleep.

As is our custom, we are eating some of our meals in our room, but others are being consumed in restaurants that are larger than our usual. Last night we ate in a building that must have a dozen or more specialty restaurants in it. Each seemed to have its own music and the entryway was filled with competing rhythms and tunes - a cacophony that would surely have resulted in a headache if we had lingered.

General Synod is a large gathering and requires a large conference center. The DeVos Center in Grand Rapids is huge. The entryway and display halls have 50 foot ceilings and it is obvious that everything, from entry doors to the coffee vendors, is designed to move people through quickly.

My mind has to work overtime at events like this. I'm always scrambling to come up with a name. Most of the faces are familiar. But I have met the people in a hundred different contexts. Some are members of a board with whom I serve. Others are from my home conference and, like me, look a bit different than they did 40 years ago. Others are from the other conferences where we have served churches. Some are from our seminary. Some are colleagues with whom I've shared a great deal of ministry. Some have served at the opposite end of the continent or in other countries. We do a lot of looking at name tags at events like this. Even seeing a familiar name requires a lot of energy to come up with the shared history and the contexts of our meetings. Without name tags, there are a lot of pleasant smiles and conversation that shies away from making introductions or naming names.

The contrast with the north woods is startling and I'm having a bit of trouble switching gears. I don't have any trouble knowing where I am. I don't wear bow ties and blazers when we're camping. And there is the constant noise in my ears to remind me of where I am.

General Synod is the place where the church gathers every two years to make decisions about the directions our church will be taking. Over the years, General Synods have made momentous decisions such as the location of the offices of our national setting, and the size and shape of our national structures. General Synods have been courageous in taking stands for justice. Many of the major initiatives of the church such as the anti-slavery movement, the ordination of women, conversations on racism, and inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the leadership of the church did not come from General Synod. They started in local congregations and later were affirmed by the church in its national setting. But General Synod is viewed as a place of decision and action. And the noise and hustle and bustle of the synod reflects that sense of urgency about decisions to be made and actions to be taken.

One of the major areas of debate in this synod will be the future structure of the national setting of our church. We have, for all of the history of the United Church of Christ, been a family of corporations in our national setting, with each having specific roles and authority. There has been no single entity where power and authority has been centralized. This has made for decentralized authority and strong local congregations with the ability to control their own decisions, but it has also led to a structure that is unwieldy and inefficient. We have been debating proposals for a single national corporation for some time now and the debates will continue in this meeting.

The problem with all of this debate and decision making is that the church is often at its best when it is engaged in quiet contemplation. And quietness is not the mood of synod. Even worship is louder and bigger at synod. Quiet contemplation and personal prayers are reserved for the edges of the days, early in the morning and late at night and the edges of the assembly, in nooks and corners and out-of-the way places. But I can't help

but think that the true direction of our church will come from the quiet and prayerful moments rather than from the bold motions and actions of the floor of debate.

I am not a “mover and shaker” at an event like this. I won’t be consulted by the people in power and it is unlikely that I’ll be invited to the back room meetings where the details are hashed out. I am here mostly as a witness. My role is to observe the actions and interpret them to the congregation I serve at home. Sometimes I need to voice the concerns of our congregation and others like it, but more often I am a listener and an observer. It is a role that is very different from the one I assume in our congregation’s life. But it is easier for an observer to be diligent in prayers and make room for quiet contemplation. It may be that what I have to offer to the assembly is not my words, but my silence. In all of the noise, a bit of quiet is a treasure.

The prophet Elijah, when he was on the run, hid out in a cave and looked for the voice of God to give direction to a life that was filled with fear and anxiety about the future. He contemplated just giving up on the the life of a prophet. He contemplated the end of his own life. He couldn’t see what it was that God wanted him to do or where God wanted him to go. He hid. He looked for God’s voice in the rush of a mighty wind, but no voice was heard. He listened for God in the rumbling of an earthquake, and heard nothing. He imagined God in the fury of a great fire, but could not sense the presence. It was only in the quiet after the dramatic events that he heard God’s clear direction in the still small voice of calm.

May I have ears for the still small voice of calm amidst the noise and excitement of Synod this year.

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June 27, 2009 – Inspiration



We live in tough times. And the speakers that we heard yesterday sought to be realistic about the challenges that we face as a church. There is no hiding the fact that church membership has declined in mainline denominations. There is no hiding the fact that the current recession has had a big impact on the funds available for church ministries and that the recovery is going to be slow for church institutions. The two persons presented for election as members of the collegium of the church both gave speeches that might have been termed grim in other circumstances, but in this time, they were received as realistic and solid.

But they weren't inspiring. They didn't lift us to new heights in our relationship with each other and with God. They didn't fill us with a sense of possibility. They didn't create a sense of hopefulness about the future of the church. By the time we had gotten through the business of the day at 9 p.m. last night, I had resolved to accept that this wouldn't go down as one of the events in which I was inspired to reach for new frontiers in ministry. It seemed at that point that my energy, excitement, and passion for the church was focused on what is going on in Rapid City and a local church that regularly inspires me with its dedication to mission and service, with its love for excellence in music, with its renewing energy for children's ministry and its ability to adjust to our changing world.

At 9:00, we moved into our worship for the evening. After a couple of opening songs and a brief litany, the choir of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois began to file onto the stage. It is a big stage and we were seated long way back. But Trinity has a big choir. A youth from Trinity Church, Sonsiris Tamayo, read the first eight

verses of the Book of Revelation with a clear voice and careful phrasing. The choir sang an inspirational anthem, and Rev. Otis Moss III, senior minister of Trinity UCC began his sermon with a prayer.

It was late. It had been a long day. There were many in the hall who were just ready for worship to be over so they could go to their rooms and get to bed. But it became our moment of inspiration. With rapid-fire delivery and a cascade of words that swept from poetry to technical theological language, Rev. Moss lifted the gathering of nearly 4,000 until we were experiencing hope and joy together. He challenged us to take seriously our responsibilities for the children and youth of our communities - not just those we call our own, but all of the children. He challenged and pushed us to speak out for justice and to stand up for the right.

The core of his message was simple. If God is the Alpha and the Omega, then only God has the authority to place a period. Only God holds the power to say it is over. And the story of our people teaches us again and again that when we try to say something is over, there is more that is yet to come. Pharaoh thought it was over when he sent his army to capture the people of Israel and they were cornered on the shore of the Red Sea - but it wasn't over and God intervened for the freedom of our people. The imperial power of Rome thought that it was over when Jesus was sentenced to die and his crucifixion was carried out - but it wasn't over and God intervened to bring new life. Over and over again in the story of our people when we thing things are over - God brings new possibility.

If God is the Alpha and the Omega, then God holds the power of the omega. We humans do not have the authority to place the period, because the sentence isn't over.

Of course, my feeble remembrances and few words in today's blog don't come close to the inspiration that we felt last night. But know that we were inspired.

One of the realities of age and experience is that it is easy to fall into cynicism. I've been to enough General Synods now to be suspicious of leaders and to know that not every promise made in a synod speech can be faithfully kept. I have seen enough plans and programs and have lived through enough restructuring processes to know that the decisions and resolutions that seem momentous at the time are often not the things that shape our life together. I am skeptical by nature and am filled with questions at almost any gathering of the church.

But I am not immune to inspiration. God's Spirit can still blow through my life and lift me to new heights. Hope is still possible.

The truth is that our church has never been limited by the number of people in the pews or the size of the budgets we pass. Our biggest limit has always been our imagination. And when our imagination sags, we are in need of inspiration.

General Synod is just getting started. There are some big discussions ahead. There are some important votes still on the agenda. There are actions that need to be taken, elections that need to be held, and votes that must be registered. But I suspect that in the scheme of things the votes and the elections and the actions will have less effect than the power of inspiration that we felt as we worshipped last night.

God is not done just because we think it is over. And God is not yet through with this "heady, exasperating mix" that we call the United Church of Christ.

I'm just glad I was there to experience that moment. I'm glad I didn't head to my room early and skip the late night worship. Maybe God is not yet finished with this old fool, either.

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June 28, 2009 – Celebration



Our relationship with the church, like our relationships with people, goes through high and low points. Last night was a high point for the church, we celebrated the ministry of John Thomas, our General Minister and President. His service to the church has been exemplary and distinguished. He has been one of the most articulate and prophetic leaders in the ecumenical movement during the years of his service. And he has led our church through some very difficult times and some challenging decisions. The evening's celebrations, however, reminded me of a couple of the low points in my journey with this church.

A little over ten years ago, I served on a search committee that was given the task of nominating the first General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ. Our church had gone through a restructuring process that had taken about three General Synods to conclude business. We were hopeful of a new structure that promised a team of leaders and a new sense of cooperation between the various bodies of the church. We were hopeful that there might be broader diversity in the church's executive leadership.

The search committee was one of the finest and mist diligent committee on which I have ever served. The members of that committee remain, for the most part, close friends of mine. Together we went through an adventure that was meaningful and powerful. There were four search committees working at the same time. One was to name the new Executive Minister for Local Church Ministries, one the Executive Minister for Wider Church Ministries, one the Executive for Justice and Witness

Ministries, and our committee was to name the General Minister and President and the Associate General Minister for the church. For one of our meetings, I hand carried paper weights, made from Black Hills granite, carved from Crazy Horse Mountain and hand painted by the children in our church school with creatures of the hills, for every member of each of the search committees. We felt connected to our congregations, to the work we shared, and to each other.

We committed ourselves to a consensus process that was prayerful, careful, and deliberative. We opened ourselves to God's direction at every step of the way. We understood that we were not choosing the executives for the church, but rather making nominations that would need to be ratified by the boards of the groups that were then known as Homeland Ministries, World Ministries, the other existing commissions and instrumentalities, the executive council, and ultimately by the General Synod. We entered into our task with as much care and diligence as possible. We accepted nominations, designed applications, read profiles, screened candidates, interviewed references and finally narrowed our search to five persons. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a whirlwind week of meetings.

Finally, with a lot of prayer, we selected the candidates for the two positions. One decision came relatively easily, the other took more deliberation, prayer and study. At the end of our committee's work, we were convinced that we had identified the candidates that God was calling to this work at this stage of the life of our church. It was an historic decision. Both of the candidates we recommended were women. If our nominations were confirmed, it would be the first time in the history of our church that our executive would be a woman. We were confident of our choices and sure that God had spoken through our prayers and our processes.

Students of the history of the United Church of Christ know that one of the candidates recommended by that search committee was not confirmed. Her name was never presented to General Synod. Even though our committee and the candidate were convinced with no doubt that this was the person called by God to this position, our nomination was rejected by one of the church's corporate boards.

It was, I believe, the lowest point in my relationship with the church. Even though my work with the local church was exciting and meaningful, it seemed to me that this church that I love was more caught up in political battles and petty squabbling for power than discerning God's call. I was furious with the board that rejected the nominee and I felt that their action had been taken lightly without regard for the individuals involved. I knew that I would remain a part of the United Church of Christ, but I also knew that I would never have the same respect for the processes of our church in its national setting. I began to wonder if I would live to see the day when a woman would serve as general minister and president of the denomination I loved - the first denomination to ordain a woman minister in 1853 - the denomination that ordained my partner and wife -

this denomination for the second time in my life was rejecting the leadership of a woman in its most executive position.

A new search committee was formed. John Thomas was selected as the nominee and confirmed by the other bodies, including General Synod. His nomination process was no less deliberative and no less prayerful than our process had been. He was installed, along with our candidate for associate General Minister. The two have served side by side for ten years. Last night, as we prepare to vote on the nominee of another search committee for a new General Minister and President, two thoughts came to my mind. One was a tinge of disappointment that the nominee is once again a man. Even thought he is clearly qualified and worthy of election, there is a glass ceiling in our denomination that has not yet been shattered and that may not be broken in the span of my career - or in my lifetime for that matter. The second thought was that now Edith Guffey, the second person nominated by our committee becomes the longest-serving executive officer of the church in this new structure - the only position on the collegium of officers that has not seen a change in the person serving.

Times change. Pains heal. We live in a different world. I now am a member of the corporate board at which I was so intensely angry a decade ago. The church has not crumbed under the leadership of a different person than the one I felt was called. And I have seen many examples of prophetic and courageous leadership from John Thomas. I am convinced that the Holy Spirit was at work in our very human processes and that God provided the necessary leadership for our church. Even the pain and disappointment of rejection has healed and the anger is long gone.

But there was one more moment in the service. As a part of the litany of leave-taking that our book of worship recommends for the conclusion of every pastoral ministry, there is a point where the person who has been serving apologizes for mistakes made and the church accepts that apology. Then the church apologizes for mistakes made and the minister accepts the church's apology. I was moved more deeply than I expected.

Shortly before General Synod two years ago, I faced a very difficult challenge involving a member of the congregation I serve and our Conference Minister. I wrote a carefully worded message to John Thomas appealing for action and intervention from his office. Although I received a well-crafted message in response, the action was disappointed. We were left to struggle through the problems that we faced alone without the level of support from our church's national setting that we needed and expected. As is typical, we bumbled through the crisis. We hurt some feelings. We lost some members. One of the young people I confirmed into membership of our church has not returned to worship in our church since that event. We survived the incident, but we were not as graceful nor as pastoral as we should have been. It was a failure of the church and the leadership from our church's national setting that was sorely needed was blatantly absent. While the disappointment of a nomination that was rejected had nothing to do

with the person John Thomas, now I felt as if John had personally failed to provide the leadership needed.

The apology offered last night was genuine. And my acceptance of that apology was also genuine. We are human. We carry the treasure of Christ's gospel in these imperfect human institutions. We make mistakes. We hurt one another without intending to do so. And we experience the grace of God's forgiveness. And we are called to start freshly.

Last night we once again experienced that Grace. We apologized, we were forgiven, and we have prepared ourselves to walk forward into the future to which God calls us. God continues to provide leaders for our church. We will elect a new General Minister and president at this meeting. And we will support the work of that officer and we will accept his leadership.

There is an old hymn that we did not sing last night but that is in my head this morning:

"We will walk together, side by side, we'll walk in the way. Traveling shoulder to shoulder, into God's promised new day."

We are still walking together in this beloved church.

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June 29, 2009 – Reunion



One of the qualities of church meetings for people like us who have attended a lot of them, is that of a reunion. We see friends, some of whom we have known for decades in a variety of settings and we are eager to catch up with the events and news of their lives. For the last few days it has been hard for us to estimate how long it might take for us to walk a few blocks down the street or even across the room because almost every group of people has someone with whom we enjoy talking. We are often stopped multiple times for greetings as we attempt to enter the hall for a worship service.

It must feel completely different for first time attendees. Most of us know that there are reunions and there are reunions. Attending a family reunion of the folk with whom we grew up is a fun and relaxing time. There is no need to impress these people. They have known us since we were children and have seen us at some of our most difficult states of life. It is entirely different to attend a family reunion as the brand-new son-in-law where every face and every name is new and you are trying to figure out who is who an how all these people are related. It can be exhausting.

Synod has both types of people in attendance. For some of us this is a familiar setting filled with familiar people. For others is is an exhausting and confusing jumble of strangers. It is the same event, but how it is perceived can be very different depending on who you are and who you know.

Because I grew up in the United Church of Christ, there are still a number of people who send greetings to my mother or who share a story about my father. There are a number

of people who know us from our years in North Dakota when our children were infants and are surprised to hear the news of their adult lives. There are folk who knew us in Idaho and all of us have grown at least 14 years older since our last conversation. There are folks who we see at every General Synod, but only at General Synod so we have two years news that needs to be updated.

And there are people who we have know in a variety of ways and settings and who we meet at irregular intervals throughout our lives. Barbara Brown Zikumund ("BBZ") was a professor in our Seminary when we were students. We have known her in a wide variety of settings over the years. We have served on committees together We have shared some of the triumphs and tragedies of church life together. We have read her books and she has read some of our articles. We have shared e-mails and conversations. Over the years we have collected a lot of common friends: other students, others in the church. Each time we get together we have to fill each other in on the lives of our mutual friends as well as our own lives.

In 2006, BBZ served our congregation as a visiting scholar for a month when we were on sabbatical. So now, when we get together, we have to fill her in on the stories of the people of our church. Kathleen Batchelder, who was our parish coordinator during the time that BBZ was serving our congregation is now a seminary student and BBZ was important in Kathleen's decision to go to seminary. Other families became friends with BBZ and her husband when they were in Rapid City and she is genuinely interested in the life and health of the congregation. We have many stories to tell and much news to share.

And there are others. It is, for us, a joyful reunion and we genuinely enjoy seeing of friends and colleagues from around the world gathered together.

But our days are so filled with people and rich conversations that we come to the evenings exhausted, almost as if we had eaten only cookies during the day (which might not be too far from the truth at General Synod). The richness of reunion and the constant telling of the stories of our life in the past few years is almost too much.

I do better with people one at at time or in small groups than 4,000 at once. There have been so many conversations left dangling as another person comes up and another greeting cuts off the conversation already in progress. There have been so many stories half-told and then repeated again and again. There is so much new information that we come to the end of our days overloaded. "Had you heard about so-in-so's illness?" "Did you know my mother died in January?" "Have you seen the pictures of my new grandchild?" We try to cram two or more years of living into a few days, that also need significant time for hearings and committee meetings and plenary sessions and worship and keynote speakers and deliberation.

It is hard to make the distinction between the personal and the professional after 30 years in the ministry. Yes, ministry is what we do, but it is also who we are.

So today's picture for the blog is mostly for our friends at 1st Congregational United Church of Christ in Rapid City, South Dakota. BBZ is well and she is absolutely excited and bubbling about her new project, a hidden histories project about the Christian side of the Congregational Christian church. She remembers you all fondly and has asked about how the life of the church is going. We have tried to tell her as much as we are able in a series of conversations and, of course, we have made a glowing report of the wonderful church that you are.

One of the things we keep discovering as we speak with colleagues from around the nation, is how unique and wonderful our home congregation is and how fortunate we are to be members of that congregation and to call Rapid City our home.

It's fun to be at the reunion, but even before it is over we are thinking with joy and anticipation about our return to home.

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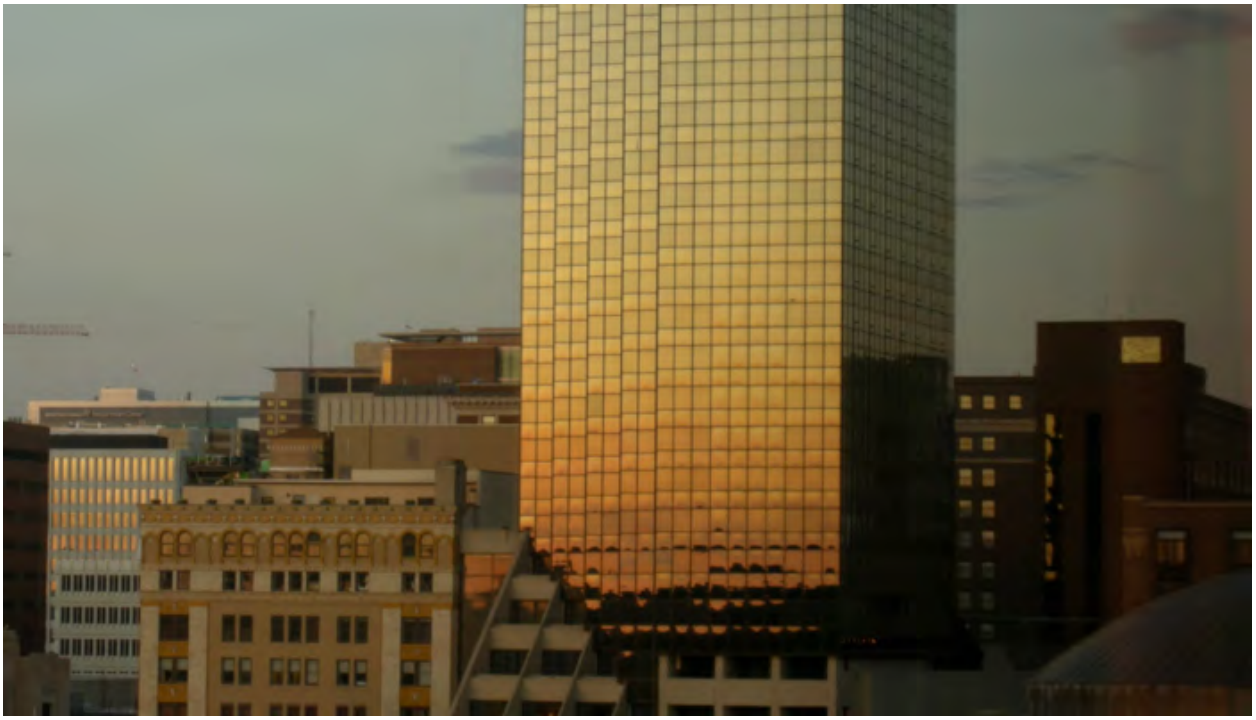
June 30. 2009 – Shining



We don't spend much time outside at events like this. Susan and I are lucky that our hotel is not part of the convention complex. We are staying across the river from the place where the synod is being held. There is a shuttle bus service, but so far we have enjoyed the pleasant walk. There are footbridges across the river and a small park space in front of the Gerald Ford Presidential Museum that makes the walk very pleasant. Many of the synod participants are housed in the giant Amway Grand Hotel complex, which occupies an entire cit block and includes two different historic buildings as well as a gleaming modern steel and glass tower. There are sky bridges connecting the hotel with the DeVos Center. The meetings, receptions, dinners and other functions are held in the DeVos Center or the hotel, so it would be possible for one to spend the entire time indoors.

I've avoided the sky bridges even when traveling between the various buildings, as I need to get outside from time to time and breathe the air and feel the reality of the weather. The first couple of days were really hot, but the weather has been more comfortable for a couple of days, now.

Although it isn't my natural environment, cities have their own kinds of beauty. Grand Rapids is located where it is because of the river that flows through the city. It was near flood stage when we arrived and the city's river walk section has been closed throughout our time here, but we have been able to watch the waters recede and see the mood of the river change.

At one moment in the evening, I happened to get a glimpse of the sunset, such as it was. There are too many buildings for the sunset to have a prairie appearance, but it is a bit like being in the hills, with the sun going down on a horizon filled with objects of differing heights. And, when I looked East as the sun set in the west, there were bright sunset colors shining from some of the buildings. It had its own kind of beauty, that is only partially captured in a photograph.

It occurs to me that we are like the building. There are moments when we are able to reflect the beauty and glory of God. Choosing to be a disciple of Jesus means that we occasionally are able to deliver a healing touch and speak a loving word. That doesn't make us Jesus, it simply allows the light of Christ to shine through us. Sometimes we are fortunate for another to be able to experience the love of Christ through our words and actions. Like the colors reflected off of the building, the source of the beauty is elsewhere, but we re allowed to be wrapped in that beauty for a few moments.

I presume that the mirrored surfaces of the buildings reflect all sorts of images. From the right angle, it might reflect a backwards image of the freeway that is just across the river, or the streets below. But because we are so short and the building is so tall, what we see most of the time is the sky. And the sky is filled with an amazing variety of colors and moods. In the short time that we have been in Grand Rapids we have experienced clear, sunny days, gray cloudy days and even a dark and ominous thunderstorm. Although I was not outside during the rain, I did see the black cloud and the way that its presence dulled the normally shiny surface of the building.

Being a person who lives in more open country, I am aware that the reflections, pretty as they are, are far from the realities that exist if one could see them. The raw power of a boiling thunderhead in the open prairie is an entirely different experience than a moment of decreased light as one runs between various buildings. The glory of horizon to horizon sunsets is grander than a pattern of blues, purples, pinks, oranges and yellows reflected off of a building.

We too reflect God's love imperfectly. Our peace pales in comparison with the peace of God. But for some, the reflections that we share are the only experiences of God they have yet experienced. Much of this life is lived with glimpses of God. The ancients used to say that to look on the face of God was to die. God's glory is too intense for us to be able to experience directly. Later our people learned that to die is not the end, nor is it the worst thing that can happen. And we began to understand that there is more beauty, glory, and brilliance yet to be revealed. The occasional glimpses that we experience provide hints of the greater glory that is yet to come.

There have been moments of goodness in the midst of all of these moments. There have been times of inspiration and acts of kindness. We have felt a sense of unity at times and we have been inspired by the lives of service that we have celebrated. Our meeting has provided glimpses of God's goodness and Christ's compassion. But they

are only glimpses. This meeting isn't heaven. God's realm doesn't run on Robert's Rules of Order. God's peace is far more vast than a moment of silence in the midst of a busy day.

But the reflections that shine in this place are enough to sustain us and to remind us that we are called to greater glory. God yet has much more to reveal and much more to be made known.

So we shine in the ways that we are able, knowing that we ourselves are not the source of the light. And we look to Christ in the hope of more that is yet to come.

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July 1, 2009 – Synod Conclusions



Yesterday, we were waling across a bridge and both Susan and I recognized the facade of the old Civic Auditorium, site of the 1971 General Synod. The building is almost totally surrounded by the newer, much larger, glass and steel DeVos Center, but the facade is still right there and looks just like it did in 1971. We had been walking by it all week, but hadn't recognized what it was. It helped to give us a sense of where we have been. Among the transformations in 38 years is a real clean-up of the riverfront and a renewal of the river to its role as a prominent downtown feature.

The synod concluding worship was, like other synod services, very meaningful. The communion liturgy was well done and there was a powerful blending of music. We sang the hymn "Joyful, joyful we adore you," in two styles: We started with the organ and traditional pace for two verses and then the house band picked up the pace and we sang in jazz style. The organ joined the band for the final verse. It is difficult to describe, but the effect was powerful. One of the things that we are bringing home to our church from this experience is a new hymnal supplement, "Sing Prayer, Sing Praise" and new ideas about music and worship.

The process is exhausting, and we are very tired. But it has been good. There will be many things to report after we have had time to think about all that has happened. There were no really big controversial decisions made by synod this year. The ministry issues constitution and by laws changes carried no surprises for us and should serve South Dakota's ministry situation well. It will take a bit of adjustment to the new language, but that won't be a problem for our churches. The governance proposal adopted by the synod is genuine progress in a process that will take another four years

to implement. The mood of the synod was not as divisive nor as combative as we have witnessed some years.

Worship is what I will remember the most. We have heard great preaching, great music and well-crafted liturgy. This is one place where we get new ideas for worship in our home setting and I will find ways to share some of these ideas with the folk at home. Of course, everything needs to be adapted. We don't worship with 4,000 at home, and we don't have a house band or a six screen video projection system. And we don't want those things. Still, there is a hunger for continuing change and adaptation of our worship to keep it fresh and meaningful to old and young members of the church.

I am grateful we have planned vacation as transition between synod and home. It might seem strange to take a two-week vacation in two parts, but it will serve us well for this trip. There are some committee meetings today and we won't make it back to Lake Superior tonight, but we have a campground on Lake Michigan reserved and will be camping alongside Superior again tomorrow night.

We have a couple of bags and a box of resources that we have gathered at the displays. With extra things to take home, it is good to be driving instead of figuring out how to work those items into airline luggage or find a way to ship items home.

Lunch yesterday was the Association of United Church Educators' annual founders' banquet. I served on the national coordinating committee of AUCE for eight years, so it was another opportunity to connect with friends and colleagues. The wooden cross that was presented to the honored founder was made of purple heart, a hardwood that is found in Costa Rica. I've had a special appreciation for purple heart and we had purple heart crafted into our new organ console at home as a symbol of that connection, so the cross had a meaning to me that wasn't apparent to the recipient. I know that craftsman who made the cross and may contact him for some of his work in the future if we have a special need.

This morning we move out of a motel room we have occupied for a week and back into our camper. A couple of trips should do it. Once we get on the road, we'll find a grocery store before dinner. Our canoes are at a friend's place about 70 miles up the road and we'll make a quick stop to pick them up.

There is too much of synod to take in and to report. I'll try to put more synod reflections into the blog as time passes. For now, into the wilderness we go to pray, to be renewed, to see the world freshly. May our retreat give us strength and energy for the ministry that lies ahead.

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July 2, 2009 – Fresh



Natives of Michigan's Upper Peninsula tell us that this is one of the coolest springs on record. Aside from a few warm days in June, most of the days have been below average in temperature. This has made for pleasant traveling for us, and before this week, uncrowded campgrounds.

The Fourth of July holiday is one of the most important times in this region to earn cash income. Visitors from around the world come for the camping, fishing, boating, sightseeing and other outdoor activities. One of the things that visitors love to do is to stop at the local fruit stands for fresh fruit. Of course there are crops such as apples that no one expects to be mature yet, but this is berry season and people who have been coming this way for years are stopping at the fruit stands for berries and hoping that there may be a few of the dark, tart, Michigan cherries available. The supplies are limited because the weather has not cooperated.

But we did find several fruit stands with fresh strawberries and a couple of pick-your-own places that had strawberries. The season is starting and none too soon for the producers because with the Fourth of July landing on a weekend, the holiday traffic won't be as spread out as it gets when the holiday is mid week. The coming weekend is a big one for everyone in the tourist industry in the Upper Peninsula.

We have the joy of fresh strawberries in our camper. They are ripe, but not too ripe - just right. We simply ate strawberries with no preparation other than cleaning for desert last night and this morning promises strawberry topping for pancakes - a great way to

start the day. We bought just a few, knowing that we'll be passing other fruit stands today and will have other opportunities to taste the local produce. There are good chances of having fresh lake trout and fresh strawberries for supper.

The people who lived in this region in the end of the nineteenth century were mostly employed in mining and timber cutting. Mills dotted the shorelines around the area, mostly smelters that melted down iron into bars or "pigs" of about 100 pounds each. Those iron pigs were then shipped, usually by boat, to foundries and manufacturing facilities in cities that were often also on the shores of one of the great lakes.

Mill towns were dirty places, with soot and charcoal smoke from the continually-burning furnaces, the smell of too many outhouses in too little area, and men who worked in grease and grime for 12 hour days and returned to bed too tired to do more than wash their hands and faces. The laborers' cabins didn't have cisterns and so water was carried from community wells and baths were rare luxuries. The mills provided schools for the children and most had a company store that sold the essentials of house keeping and staple foods.

Whenever the furnaces were shut down for maintenance or other reasons, the workers would supplement their food stocks by hunting and fishing. The country is abundant with game. In addition, wives and children grew gardens in the summers. Even the best-stocked company stores couldn't carry fresh fruits and vegetables very often due to the distances and costs involved in shipping. But hunting, fishing and gardening produced supplies of fresh food for all who lived in the region. This had, after all, been the way of living of the indigenous people who had inhabited this region for millennia, since shortly after the last ice age receded.

Although people now cultivate berries in carefully-planed commercial operations, Raspberries and blueberries are native to the area and grow in great profusion without any effort except picking the fruit. Natives and immigrants alike knew where there were hillsides of berries fresh for the taking. Of course this was also known by birds and bears and other animals, so there could be a bit of competition for the freshest berries.

As we bit into the fresh, juicy strawberries last night, we remembered the brave people who lived in this land long before our visit. We will never be natives in this area. We will never know the best berry-picking spots as well as the folk who live here. But we are fortunate that they cultivate a few acres here and there with berries and we are fortunate that we have arrived in time to taste the freshness of this season's first harvest.

We are enjoying the return to fresh food after a week of eating meals in restaurants. We had some great meals and even some fresh fruit during Synod, but in our own space we prepare the kinds and amounts of food we enjoy. n

Since fresh berries and home-cooked food was so delicious to us last night after just a week in the city, imagine how good fresh berries must have tasted after a winter of rapidly-depleting and increasingly stale stocks from the root cellar.

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July 3, 2009 - Gulls



We have returned to the shores of Lake Superior. We are camped at Brimley, near Sault St. Marie. This morning we'll cross the bridge into Canada and make a stop at the Canadian Bush Plane Museum before heading up the coast to a Provincial Park. We don't have too many miles to make today, which will leave time for sight seeing, reading and paddling.

All around the lake we have seen thousands of gulls. They eat insects and small crustaceans that are washed up by the waves. We've seen farm fields with hundreds of gulls in them, but aren't sure what they are eating there. Hopefully they eat pests without damaging crops. There is the famous story of the flocks of seagulls that saved early Mormon settlers from starvation by eating a huge infestation of grasshoppers in the early days of the settlement of Utah.

Gulls are such graceful flyers. On a windy day they can almost hover and they fly with few flaps of their wings, so their flight appears effortless. The unique shape of the wings and their ability to control the wing tips separately and the way that their webbed feet work in unison with their tails for pitch control make them excellent slow flyers. But they can be amazingly quick when speed is needed. They are able to make progress in the face of strong winds and seem to relish flying into the wind. Then, with the raising of one wing they turn downwind and soar for great distances.

Unlike swallows and other birds, gulls primarily feed while walking long the shore or in another setting. They don't seem to catch much of their food in flight, but rather use

flight to get to the places where the food is and then walk as they are eating. When we go for a walk on the beach, the gulls hop and walk ahead of us until we get too close and then take to flight for a few minutes to put distance between themselves and us. Often they will simply fly around us so we are walking away from them. We have seen some of the tiny lake creatures that they eat, but they also appear to be eating small creatures that we don't notice as we walk along.

The simple fact that birds exist and are capable of flight is an amazing part of this world. They have developed specialized structures such as hollow bones and feathers and specialized muscles that allow them to take to the air. There are many different types of wings, specialized for different kinds of flight. And birds have developed incredible powers of vision that make it possible for them to find food while at great distances from their prey. Gulls and a host of other birds are amphibious, as well, being able to swim in the water, fly in the air and walk on dry land. They can transition from swimming to walking and from walking or swimming to flying and are capable of landing both on the water and dray land.

And they have given wing to our imaginations as well. Many of the developments of aircraft have come from observation of birds. The scientific principle that is behind flight, Bernouli's Principle, states that when air is forced to split around a curved surface, the air that has to travel the most distance will create a low pressure area while the air that travels slower will create a high pressure, thus the object will rise in response to the differential of pressure. The shape of a gull's wing invites imitation. It has a large, graceful arch capable of maintaining lift as long as their is sufficient air moving across the wing. Thus the gull can fly without flapping its wings when facing into the wind.

Today will be a day for thinking about aviation and flying. I grew up with a mountain pilot for a father and I have read a lot about the bush pilots who continue to serve remote communities around the world. In Canada, aviation continues to be an essential service connecting people, especially those living in remote communities not served by roads. The Canadian Bush Plane Museum is famous among pilots and other fans of aviation as having one of the most complete collections of bush planes. There is also a movie that, according to my pilot friends, is not to be missed with spectacular footage of airplanes flying into and out of very remote locations as well as the spectacular scenery of remote Canadian areas.

I'm sure that I'll be taking the memories of watching gulls flying as I visit the museum today. And I know that generations of pilots have watched the birds for hints about human aviation. There are unique needs of bush flying that are different from normal airline flying. Speed and the capacity to move large amounts of people are not as necessary as the ability to operate from short and rough runways. Bush planes serve small populations and so rarely need to be too large, but they need to have the capacity of handling a stretcher in a medical emergency and then making a quick transition to carrying bulky items such as mail or parts for machines. Bush pilots much have

extensive knowledge of local terrain, weather patterns, and other items. And for most of the history of bush flying there was no GPS satellite navigation. What was called “flying by the seat of your pants,” was really a great deal of knowledge of local features and the ability to keep track of one’s location while flying over miles of territory that looks the same to an untrained eye. There is a lot of forest in the north country and options for landing an airplane are few and far between.

Gulls are good bush pilots, landing in a wide variety of locations and found in very remote places. Like many other things found in nature, they provide inspiration for human efforts and human possibilities. May we continue to share the joy of learning by observing the beauty of this world.

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July 4, 2009 – Splash



We are camped at Agawa Bay in Lake Superior Provincial Park. It is the campsite that is farthest East of our adventure. The past couple of days have been chilly, with highs in the low ’60’s. But the sun came out in the afternoon and so I decided to take a little paddle. The waves here are fairly large. It isn’t the same effect as tides in the oceans, though there probably is a small tidal effect with the world’s largest fresh water lake. We don’t notice daily variations in the water levels as one would at the ocean. But the wind stirs up the water and on the Eastern side of the lake there is quite a pit of surf, even in protected coves and bays.

That makes launching and landing a kayak or canoe a tricky adventure for a novice who doesn’t have experience with the waters. If there is any slope to the beach at all, the waves wash over the bow of the boat as one launches and until the stern is off of the peach, the bow stays down. My first attempt to launch here resulted in several gallons of cold water washing into the boat before I could paddle away from the shore to the rolling water. I paddled around a bit with the water in the boat, which was heavy enough to make the boat a bit harder to handle and cold enough to make the sitting a bit unpleasant. I came back to shore and got a spray skirt, which keeps the water out of the kayak. This allowed me to launch without filling the boat with water, though there was considerable water on the spray skirt and I got splashed several times.

I was using my smallest boat because it is made out of a tough plastic and resists scratching on the gravel beach. With the troubles I was having launching, I didn’t want to risk scratching up one of my wooden boats. So I bounced around a bit in the waves

and had to be careful to keep the boat aimed at the right angles to the water to prevent turning breech and rolling the boat. Still, after a short time of not launching boats, it was a fun paddle. The water was active enough that I didn't pull out my camera to take any pictures, but I got a fresh view of the shoreline.

Landing the boat the first time was a simple race. I paddled in on the surf and as soon as the bow touched the shore, I stood up and stepped out of the boat. The second landing was less graceful. I tried the same plan, but there was the added step of needing to pull the release on the spray skirt as I stood up. With the paddle in one hand, I pulled the spray skirt release with the other as I was standing up and another wave was pushing the stern of the boat toward shore. Sure enough, the boat turned sideways to the wave and filled with water as I stepped out and fell down in the water. We both got really wet. It must have looked amusing. There weren't many witnesses, except Susan and the sea gulls.

The Voyageurs would have laughed at my antics. They used large, freighter canoes, usually with twelve paddlers and a lot of valuable cargo. They launched and beached their canoes in waters that were much more rough that any in which I have paddled. Every launching of the big canoes involved someone wading in the water and most of the paddlers learned to keep their feet warm even when they were wet. Maybe the smell of wet wool softened the smell of the sweat as they worked hard, usually paddling 12 hours per day.

The eastern shore of Superior is also the land of spectacular sunsets, though we'll be watching sunsets over the land for the rest of our trip because of the northern arc of the sun at this time of the year. Last night's sunset was a chilly treat. We bundled up and sat on the beach and watched for a long time as the low clouds took on all sorts of colors. In addition to the joy of watching the natural beauty, we had the joy of a slower pace that allowed time for sitting, relaxing, and enjoying without having to worry about what time it was or having to return to work to be done or chores to finish.

One thing about living in the camper, housekeeping is light duty. There is only one narrow strip of linoleum to sweep, though it sometimes needs to be swept multiple times a day, especially when we are camped on sandy shores. We use fewer dishes in cooking as we prepare simpler meals. There are no carpets to vacuum, no outdoor maintenance tasks. Our little home on wheels is good to go with just a few minutes to drop the top and hook up the canoe trailer.

Today is July 4. Canada will be full of tourists from the United States who are taking their vacations on the holiday weekend. We will be staying in Pukaskwa National Park, a short journey from our present location. The park has only one campground and it doesn't take reservations, The web site says that the campground rarely fills and we will be arriving early, so we are not worried about finding a place to stay. We'll just do our driving in the morning and save the afternoon for hiking, exploring, and enjoying the

new place. The Canadian shoreline is the least developed on Lake Superior and Pukaskwa is among the most remote locations on the lake. The short drive will be beautiful and we are looking forward to getting a bit farther from the crowds - a mood that is a bit different than some July 4 celebrations. We probably won't be looking at fireworks or having a picnic with friends, but we will be celebrating the holiday and the concept of Independence. Maybe there is a bit of irony in celebrating Independence from England while camping on Crown land. We'll be thinking of the ice cream social on the church lawn this evening and know that is where we would be if we were in Rapid City.

Happy Independence Day. May the day find for each of us a way to celebrate a degree of independence and freedom.

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July 5, 2009 – Cove



Pukaskwa National Park of Canada is located in the northeastern corner of Lake Superior. It is mostly a wilderness park, with little access by road. At the northern tip of the park is a campground located on a tight cove in the lake. A series of points of land jut out into the lake, providing several harbors between the places where the White River and the Pic River flow into the lake. Playter Harbor, and Pulpwood Harbor are separated by Campbell Point. Located off a narrow channel from Pulpwood Harbor is Hattie Cove, a very protected bit of water that behaves, for the most part, like its own lake. The narrow channel connecting it with Lake Superior is situated almost at a right angle to the prevailing winds and it is sheltered by high headlands. The cove entrance is too tight for large boats, but it provides an excellent place for canoes and kayaks.

We paddled around the cove in a tandem canoe yesterday. There is an island and several other features that make the paddling interesting on the very calm water. I also took a kayak out through the entrance into Pulpwood Harbor for an extended paddle. I paddled around the headlands to Horseshoe Bay and got a taste for the bigger water of the main lake. It was bright and sunny, although temperatures were in the low sixties, so things were not too warm. Pukaskwa provides a wonderful place for paddlers and for reflection.

Our lives need a few sheltered coves and calm places. Like the lake, life can be filled with turmoil and turbulent currents. And sometimes we feel like we are taking a beating by forces that are beyond our ability to control. But there are a few protected places in this life where we can let down our guard and just be ourselves. Home is one of those

places. Church can be one of those places. Like the tight cove off of the main lake, home can be a refuge where we are protected from the wild vicissitudes of life.

Like the various harbors and coves that surround Lake Superior, not every home is the same as every other. And not every home provides safety for each of its inhabitants. Tragically homes can be places of hurt and violence for some. But I have never experienced that terror. The places I have called home have been places of safety and refuge - and good places to take a break from the wilder and ore exciting parts of life. And I have had the good fortune to have discovered several different homes on this life's journey. A cabin by the river, an apartment in Chicago, a parsonage in North Dakota and private houses in Idaho and South Dakota have all been protected homes for me. Not every one was the same size, but size is a poor measurement of the value of a home.

This trip has been a time of some delightful paddling. I'm not too sure how many lessons in life can be learned by paddling, but the simple process of slowing down to the pace of human-powered transportation does give a fresh perspective and the opportunity to explore the world in more detail. The break from the everyday enables me to think about the things that matter most and to sort out the priorities for action when I return to work. I know that there will be some hectic and blustery days when I return, but this vacation has provided a little cove of quiet as I prepare for the next stages of the journey. Today will take us to one of the larger bays on the lake, Thunder Bay. We'll be staying in Sleeping Giant Provincial Park, not in the city, so we'll avoid the hustle and bustle for a while before returning to the United States at the tip of Minnesota sometime tomorrow.

Before we leave this campsite, I'll head out with the kayak once more to explore the cove and to test the waters of the lake. Since this is new territory for me, almost everything I see is new and a fresh discovery. A short distance from our campsite takes me to places where there are no other people and few signs of human habitation. I get to see the lake as it was discovered by others in previous generations. I hope to leave it in the same pristine condition that I discovered it. As I paddle, I think of the Ojibwe people who used the lake as their primary mode of travel. They knew where the best blueberry patches were located and where to find animals to harvest for food. They learned the patterns of the fish in the lake and what times were best for netting fish to smoke and preserve. Their canoes were made of birch bark and lasted for a few seasons before they were allowed to rot into the ground and a new canoe was made. The designs and shapes of the canoes were handed down for generations and they were stable, safe, quick and light on the water.

My life has given me the gift of much wider travel than was possible for the aboriginal people of this area. I've traveled around the world and experienced a wide variety of cultures and experiences. I have hiked in the desert of Australia and the mountains of Switzerland. I have lived on the plains and traveled to the coasts. I have eaten the food

of many different places and cultures. My life would have been unimaginable to the natives who lived for so many generations in this place. But times change. People change. And the world changes. We each live in our own generation and in our own time.

Ours is a good time. It is good to be able to travel and see the world. But it is also good to refresh my body and restore my soul on calm waters. Today I am grateful for short distances to travel and calm waters to paddle.

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July 6, 2009 – Giant



We camped yesterday at Sleeping Giant Provincial Park on the Sibley Peninsula across from Thunder Bay, Ontario. The formation known as the sleeping giant is visible across Lake Marie Louise from our campsite, but we have been told it looks more dramatically like the torso of a reclining man when seen from the other side.

We have read and heard several versions of the Ojibwe legend of the sleeping giant. Both have to do with silver, the coming of European settlers and the enmity between the Ojibwe and the Dakota. The Dakota got their common name, Sioux, from the Ojibwe. When the pressures of settlement on the East Coast combined with the natural wanderlust of the Dakotan people, they began to move north and east from earlier tribal homes. When they reached the area around the great lakes, they were known far and wide as fierce warriors. But they lacked the traditions and skills of canoe-making and surviving in the land of the big water. They preferred to hunt the game rather than fish and they rarely used canoes and when they did the canoes were usually stolen rather than made by Dakota. The "Allies," as the Dakota called themselves, became known as "Snakes" in the Ojibwe language. The Ojibwe word was hard for the early French fur traders to pronounce, and it became Sioux. The name stuck and now is used by some bands of the tribe to refer to themselves.

The story of the giant begins with Nanabosho. We have also seen the giant's name spelled Naniboujou. Nanabosho was the protector of the Ojibwe people. He was the son of Kabeyun, the west wind, and a human mother. He led the Ojibwe to the north shore of lake Superior to save them from their enemies, the Sioux (Dakota). Nanabosho was a powerful protector, and he was able to protect the Ojibwe from the Sioux, but he was not able to protect them from the white skinned people. So he told the people that they

needed to hide from the whites and keep far away from them. This could be accomplished only if the whites never found out about the existence of silver in the ground on the islands of the north shore of Superior.

There are various stories about how the knowledge of the silver was leaked. In one story a chief of the Ojibwe became proud and had weapons made of silver. When the chief was killed in a battle with the Sioux, his weapons were captured and the Sioux warriors told the whites. In another story, the secret was told by an Ojibwe to two white men who were later drowned in a storm. In some versions of the story, the storm was created by Nanabosho, and making such a storm was done in disobedience of the Great Spirit. The silver was worthless to the Ojibwe, but Nanabosho knew that if whites found out about the silver, they would take the land from the Ojibwe.

However the story is told, it ends with one of the characters being turned to stone. In one version, it is Nanabosho who is turned to stone as punishment by the Great Spirit for causing the storm to drown the white men and the Sioux guide. In another story the man turned to stone was a great Sioux scout disguised as an Ojibwe warrior. However the story is told, it ends with the giant turned to stone and lying on his back forever watching over the location of the silver.

Silver Islet, just of the tip of the peninsula, was at its time, the richest silver mine in the world and despite its remote location and the challenges of mining silver in the midst of the lake with its fierce storms, it yielded large amounts of silver.

These days the Dakota, Lakota and Nakota peoples have moved to the west and a bit to the south. The Ojibwe live mostly on the northern shores of the Great Lakes, and share some of the traditional territory of the Cree, with whom they share some words and other features of their language. And settlers from around the world, many with light skin, have come to live in most of what is now known as Canada and the United States.

Through the planning and leadership of the Ontario Provincial Park System, large amounts of land have been set aside for public use, giving access to all. Sleeping Giant Provincial Park is one of those parks and we have been welcomed here to spend the night, paddle in Lake Marie Louise, and view the sleeping giant. Yesterday we drove down to the tip of the peninsula and looked out at the lake. Today we will drive around to Thunder Bay and look around there before returning to the United States at Grand Portage, where there is a museum and many displays honoring the voyageur tradition. Of course, since the exhibits includes a world-famous collection of canoes, we will be spending some time looking around. We'll camp in that area tonight.

And we will hear and collect some more stories that recall the history and the features of this land. The silver, however, we will leave where it is.

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July 7, 2009 – Cascade



Our collection of pictures has a lot of images of waterfalls. We've hiked in to see waterfalls all across the United States and Canada. Each is unique and has is own beauty. Last night we camped along the Cascade River, near its outlet into Lake Superior. In the last mile of its trip to the lake the river is in almost continuous cascade. There are numerous waterfalls ranging from a couple of feet to more than twenty feet.

The Minnesota shoreline of Lake Superior, from Grand Portage in the Northeast to Duluth, was the location of a lot of fur trading. The Northwest Company established a major trading post at Grand Portage. It was the site of an historic carrying trail that connected the extensive lake and river system of the Northwest to the Great Lakes. The Northwest Company's system involved using large freighter canoes, 35 to 40 feet long with seasonal employees from Montreal to come up the Great Lakes each summer. There they would meet the traders who had been working year round in distant locations. The traders often lived with the native people and exchanged trade goods such as iron pots, mirrors, beads, guns, knives, and a variety of other implements for furs. During the height of the fur trade, beaver pelts were prized and used mostly for making fashionable hats worn by wealthy European customers.

Prior to the Revolutionary War, the system of trade made it necessary for residents of the United States and Canada to be in continual exchange with Europe. The British government did not allow the establishment of textile mills in the colonies, so raw materials were imported to England and Scotland and manufactured goods were

exported. This constant flow of goods provided income for traders and those in the transportation business.

The height of the fur trading business was relatively short lived. The Revolutionary War changed the relationship between the United States and Britain. The Northwest Company moved its trading posts north across the line to Canada. Intense competition between the Northwest Company and the Hudson Bay Company resulted in decreased profits. Over trapping of some areas combined with increased independence of native trade partners to drive up the price of beaver pelts. Changes in fashion caused a decrease in demand. The incredible costs involved in shipping demanded incredibly low prices for the furs and when the prices rose, profitability fell.

But during that brief period of history, there was an intense period of sharing of technology and knowledge between natives and European settlers and visitors. The entire system of trade depended upon native technologies. Toboggans, canoes and snowshoes were essential to travel in the north woods. Native knowledge of geography, medicinal plants, and buckskin clothing were also essential to the trade system. Europeans brought a variety of trade goods. Especially sought-after were firearms and metal cooking utensils. The French traders usually learned native languages and often lived with and married into native families.

The cascading rivers that enter Lake Superior are reminders of the ancient trade routes. Kitchi Onigaming - the Grand Carrying Place was the most famous. Just a little ways away the gunflint trail is another. These trails are use by contemporary canoe explorers, often making the trek from the boundary waters to Lake Superior. In the fur trade days, they provided connections for more extensive travels as far away as Great Slave Lake and the Athabaska river system. Although there was not single northwest passage that allowed large boats to traverse the continent, there was a system of trails and rivers that allowed extensive trade.

So as we explore this final leg of our travels around Lake Superior we recall some of the history that has been a part of this place. The meeting of cultures is always a rich exchange. There is much that happened in this region between natives and those from Europe. Not all of the exchanges were positive. The introduction of alcohol into native communities has had devastating effects as have some diseases that were unknown before the arrival of Europeans.

But like the Metis families that descend from the common practice of intermarriage, the cultures have become intertwined in ways that cannot be separated. We now share this place with its incredible resources and challenges. Like the cascading waters rushing to the great lake, the flow of history cannot be stopped. Sometimes its course can be altered, but we are all a part of a great flow that moves forward from our heritage into an unknown future. Along the way there can be incredible turmoil, but there is also incredible beauty.

So we will continue to look at the waterfalls and appreciate their power and beauty as we ride this cascade of history-making which is our own generation in the story of humans on this earth.

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July 8, 2009 – Stout



I am trying to figure out what it is with picnic tables in Minnesota. It appears that these people have a need for incredibly over-built picnic tables. On this trip, we've been in South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and Ontario. But only Minnesota has the penchant for picnic tables that are strong enough to serve as foundations for a home. There is only one word for these monstrously heavy pieces of outdoor furniture: stout. I'm not talking about sturdy. These things go way beyond sturdy. I'm talking about half-sawn logs of more than a foot in diameter, and rock foundations set on concrete footings. I'm talking about "lift-'em-with-a-crane-and-load-'em-on-a-semi" stout.

I thought that it might be because of the over-sized stories that come from the Minnesota north woods. Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox are immortalized in several larger-than-life sculptures throughout the northern part of the state.

Another theory is that the tables are built in a fashion that makes sure they stay put where they have been set. It isn't that the wind would move them about, though there are some rather stout winds in this part of the world. It is more the tendency of Minnesotans to gather in rather large families and pull all of the picnic tables in any given area together to spread a buffet.

I also thought that perhaps Minnesotans prefer stout picnic tables because they themselves are, well . . . stout. There is a tendency among some of the folks in this region to range rather larger than the skinny little models who pose for the pictures in the clothing catalogues that keep coming in the mail. Even the Land's End catalogue has skinny people in the pictures.

But I suspect that the real reason that these tables are so stout is that they are designed to hold a lot of food. Have you ever seen what a Minnesotan takes on a picnic? We're used to a few sandwiches and a thermos of coffee. These people spread out a table cloth and get out the fried chicken, tater tot hot dish, four kinds of jello (at least one with marshmallows and one with whipped topping), scalloped potatoes, sausage and cheese, kippered herring, smoked whitefish, three bean salad, coleslaw, and lemonade by the gallon. These people serve french fries with gravy. And that is just for "a little lunch." Did I mention bars. No picnic is complete without at least four kinds of bars and if there is any dry ice available at the store they make a dessert by layering ice cream bars in a cake pan, covering with whipped topping, drizzling on chocolate sauce and cutting into squares.

No wonder they need stout picnic tables. They serve stout picnics.

I bet Minnesotans own more coolers per capita than any place outside of Australia. We've seen cars pulling cargo trailers filled up and covered with tarps heading out for picnics. The convenience stores have "buy twelve, get one free" specials on 20# propane bottles. These people don't just have a propane barbecue, they've got fish boilers and special pancake grills that are fired by propane. After years of extracting iron ore from the northern hills, they've got enough steel to make any number of cooking appliances. And if it can be fired with propane, they'll find a way to make it burn hotter or brighter or bigger.

It isn't as if they've given up indoor cooking. It is just that preparing food is too important a task for Minnesotans to be contained to any single room. I've heard that the leading cause of garage fires in Minnesota is propane-fired deep fat fryers for cooking a whole turkey at once.

Ok, so maybe I'm exaggerating a little. But there is no doubt that there are some really stout picnic tables in Minnesota.

We are just thirty five miles from Duluth and the completion of our drive around Lake Superior. It may be partly the fact that it is now past the Fourth of July, but the Minnesota north shore is the busiest and most populated part of the lake that we have visited. The campgrounds are all full and it is a challenge to take a picture of a waterfall without getting at least a half dozen people in the picture.

It has been a wonderful trip, filled with great memories. And now it is time to head home and get back to work. We're back in country where our cell phones work after days of intermittent service. The cafe's all have "free Internet" signs, though we've resisted hooking up. Although I'd love to post the past week's blogs, I'm reluctant to check my e-mail. There will be time enough for that this weekend as we get ready for Sunday's service and back into the swing of work.

A few more miles of driving along the lakeshore, a quick stop in Duluth and we'll be heading for home. We'll overnight somewhere to break up the trip, maybe a campground in Northeast South Dakota, but our attention will shift towards home. We're returning with a lot of photographs and a lot of wonderful memories - and more than a few places where we'd like to return if we ever get the chance. We planned two years for this trip and we weren't disappointed.

We've seen a lot of things we didn't expect to see. Who'd have thought it would take several trees to make a single picnic table?

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July 9, 2009 – Storms



We made it across the state line into South Dakota at about 4 in the afternoon yesterday. Wanting to get off of the Interstate and wanting one final campground before home, we headed up highway 12 to Aberdeen and on to Richmond Lake State Recreation Area. The campground had plenty of space, as is usually true mid-week according to the campground host.

We could tell we were back in South Dakota: “An approaching low pressure is pushing a surge of storm activity across the area later tonight. Strong to severe thunderstorms are possible after this system moves through later tonight.” We hadn’t consulted our NOAA weather radio since we left South Dakota. It seems that thunderstorm warnings are part of summer camping in Eastern South Dakota.

However, we were tired after a long day’s drive and ready to stop traveling. And we didn’t know how far we would have to drive to get far enough south to be out of the range of the thunderstorms. And the weather was beautiful throughout the evening with mostly clear skies and a light breeze We’re South Dakotans. We made a severe weather plan: “If we get severe winds or hail, we’ll drop the top on the camper and head for the shower house to wait out the storm. We’ll put our valuables in the cab of the pickup just in case we get a blow that damages the roof of the camper. Other than that, we won’t worry. We can set the wether radio to give us warning of a severe storm and we’ll hear it if the winds pick up or there is a lot of thunder and lightning in the area.”

With that, it was time for supper, a short walk, and a bit of reading.

By 9:45, the severe storm warnings started to be broadcast on the radio. A storm capable of producing golf ball-sized hail near Gettysburg, a tornado warning near Faulkton. Both of those were significantly off to the southwest, but both storms were tracking to the northeast. There was a severe thunderstorm watch of our area that continued until 4:30 a.m. The more we listened, the more watches and warnings were issued. At one point the weather radio interrupted the first-time reading of a warning with another warning.

It was obvious that if we stayed put we weren't going to get much sleep.

The simple solution, for us, was to drop the top on the camper and drive into Aberdeen and get a motel room. The camping fee made for an expensive site to have our supper, but it was less than we'd spend for supper in a restaurant and it is difficult to put a price on a good night's sleep.

By 11:15 we were in a motel room, with the camper and canoes in the lee of the motel, partly sheltered by the three-story building. During the night we heard wind, rain, pea-sized hail and lots of thunder. But we were safe and secure and slept without worry.

Chances are we would have been just fine in our camper. There was nothing in the weather that we observed outside of the motel that would have been a problem for us in the camper. The difference is that we didn't have to stay up listening to the alerts on the weather radio and trying to figure out which storm was tracking in which direction. It wasn't a very courageous decision for intrepid campers, but except for the time at General Synod in Grand Rapids, we hadn't spent any nights in a motel and we have been eating our own food prepared in the camper. Since we had a similar situation on the first night of our trip, I assume that making a different decision was due, in part to our travel weariness. Whatever the reason, we decided to stay out of the weather last night.

And, when I get a password from the desk for the wireless internet I will post the last week's blogs so those who check will be able to read them today.

It made me reflect, briefly, on the storms that have been endured outdoors by those who have gone before. The natives in this area camped in tipis that were very strong. A well constructed and well pitched tipi can endure winds up to 100 miles per hour. And they provided protection from rain. In the days of buffalo-hide coverings, tipis could withstand substantial hail as well. The settlers in their soddies and tar paper shacks sometimes didn't have adequate protection from either the rain or hail. It was a matter of how the shelter was constructed. When they did have sufficient shelter, they had to listen to the howling winds and the sound of the hail pounding on their roofs.

Severe storms, particularly tornadoes, cause significant damage to substantial buildings from time to time out on the plains. We are fortunate to have had to endure relatively few such weather systems in our lives. And we are fortunate to have strong shelter to which to turn when we decided to play it safe and come indoors.

We've got an easy drive home today and a bit of unpacking and settling in to do before returning to work tomorrow. This is a different kind of trip for us as sisters and their families, as well as an aunt, a cousin and her children have stayed in our home during our absence. And we expect to have my sister and mother arrive either just before or just after we do, so we'll be back to our usual pace of life right away. There will be extra laundry from the trip, the camper to clean out and get ready for the next trip and boats to store in addition to the usual chores of grocery shopping and stocking the house for the next few days.

Vacation Bible School starts on Monday, so there is much to do.

But it is good to be heading back to work and back to our regular lives. We've had a wonderful trip and are full of stories and memories, but each of life's adventures must draw to a close as the next one begins. The adventure of being caregivers to our parents and pastors to our congregation is a worthy one for the rest of our summer and beyond.

And we enjoy thinking about and planning travels. We talked about and planned this trip for at least two years. Who knows where our destination will be two years from now?

We are grateful for a night of shelter and safety, for comfortable sleep, and a wonderful home to which to return. It will be good to be home after weeks on the road.

As one adventure comes to an end, another begins . . .

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July 10, 2009 – Truck



In the spring of 2005, we bought a new pickup truck. I am usually not one for buying new vehicles. Over the years, I have developed enough ability to assess used vehicles and make deals that have worked for our family. Initial depreciation on a vehicle is high enough that when considering the total cost of ownership, it makes sense to let someone else drive the first 30,000 or so miles. But after most of a year of searching, I was unable to find the right pickup. We needed a heavy-duty pickup because we knew that we wanted to haul a camper and sometimes pull a trailer. The Woodchuck Society project was underway and we wanted the ability to haul a significant load of firewood. The used heavy-duty trucks that I could find were often abused, showing significant body damage or other major problems. Typical on the used market were trucks with mileage over 100,000 and uncertain histories. I did find a couple of trucks that had been used for RV hauling or farm work and not abused, but the price was almost as high as a new vehicle.

With the price of gas hovering in the $3 per gallon range and heading higher, sales of large vehicles slumped across the nation and the manufacturers responded with rebates, cash incentives and special pricing. The factors came together to make it look to us like purchasing a new truck was going to be our best value, so we took the plunge and spent the most amount of money we've ever spent on a vehicle--over double what we had ever before spent.

We still think of the truck as new and in many ways it is, but we have had some significant and long trips. With our son and daughter-in-law living on the west coast, it

has made the round-trip to Olympia Washington and back at least once a year. In 2006 we traveled extensively in British Columbia with the truck and camper. In 2007, we took it to the east coast and traveled from Connecticut to New Brunswick along the coast before returning home across the continent. This year we put 4,046 miles on the truck in three weeks, driving around Lake Superior. And there have been the trips to Eagle Butte and Wanblee and a couple of trips to more distant locations in South Dakota and Nebraska on church business and pursuing relationships with sister churches .

Our new truck now has 90,000 miles on it. But it is still working well for us. After we arrived safely home yesterday, we were talking about what worked and what didn't work on this trip. The list of what worked was much longer than the list of things that didn't work. Leading the list of things that worked was the truck. With routine maintenance and one new set of tires it has served us without any major problems. Each morning we would get up, start the truck and head to a new place. This trip we pulled the trailer with four canoes, our wet gear and a large toolbox of supplies and tools. The heavy duty hitch, trailer wiring, and other features worked without a problem except for a minor wiring repair on the first day that was the result of carelessness on my part, not a problem with the trailer or the truck. Having the truck to haul the camper that can be set up or taken down in minutes really simplifies camping for us. Our bed is made up and ready for us each night and and we have the ability to prepare our meals along the road as we wish. There is always a place that is relatively free of insects when the flies and mosquitoes are thick.

The list of what didn't work is pretty short. Our camper's refrigerator failed us on the trip. It is likely that the coolant needs to be recharged and the system checked for leaks and have any leaks repaired, but we weren't able to diagnose the problem while traveling and block ice is readily available, so we used the fridge as and ice box and didn't let it disrupt our trip. We'll get that fixed at home. We had a weld fail on the canoe rack. I had a drill and bolts along, so we were able to bolt the pieces together and continue without delay, but the weld clearly was not properly made in the first place. We'll get that welded and I'm sure that the manufacturer of the rack will pick up the bill on that, which won't be high.

There are many things that are changing. The days of first-come-first serve camping and stopping wherever you happen to be seem to be coming to an end. We stayed primarily at state and provincial parks, national forest service campgrounds and only camped once at a commercial campground. There was only one place we stayed, a remote campground in Canada, where there wasn't a sophisticated computerized reservation system in place. In South Dakota State Parks, every site is reservable and reservations need to be made before noon on the day of arrival. If campers arrive without reservations, campground hosts don't know which spaces are available and which are reserved, so even when a campground isn't full, it may not be possible to stay there. We had reservations most of the places we went and didn't have problems, but had some interesting conversations with other campers who encountered problems with

the reservation systems. At least a cell phone is required camping equipment these days and a computer with an Internet connection is becoming an asset as well.

But we still found lots of places without Internet connections and quite a few places where our cell phones didn't have signals. We only made on cell phone call from Canada on this trip. Getting away from the technology was one of he treats for us.

Today it is back to work and there will be plenty of work waiting. Stacks of mail, phone calls and e-mails to return. I've already been through the first sort on the e-mail messages and have a list of follow-up issues that will keep me busy into next week. There are quite a few tasks at home that are waiting as well, including staining the siding on the outside of the house and catching up with gardening. My sister and mother arrived last evening and we are getting back into the routine of caring for family as well.

Life continues and things keep changing. Our new truck has 90,000 miles on it and we've accumulated a few miles on ourselves. Like the truck, we seem to have a few more miles in us and it wouldn't take much to get us started thinking about another trip to take. Like Lake Superior there are other once-in-a-lifetime trips that we'd love to take someday.

But we have just returned from one of those great trips and we are happy to have had the opportunity to take it and to enjoy the beauty that this world offers. We are grateful to all of the people whose support made the trip possible and are ready to get back to the work that needs to be done.

Tomorrow's blog will have a picture from the hills and reflections on what it means to be home.

May your travels bring you as much joy as ours have.

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July 11, 2009 – Recovery



A little less than a month ago, as we were preparing to leave for our combined General Synod - vacation trip, a storm dropped pea-sized hail in our area for quite a while. I don't know exactly how long it hailed, but it was long enough that the hail was piled up a couple of inches thick in the yard and garden. We had set several hanging plants out so they could get the rain and the hail came on suddenly enough that I didn't get those plans brought under the porch for shelter.

All around our yard, things looked pretty sad after the hailstorm. Plants had torn leaves and bruises and they were laying flat against the ground. In the garden, the tomatoes looked like they might not recover. Other plants looked pretty sad.

On June 15, I posted a picture of smashed marigold plants and blogged about the hail. At the time, I mentioned Niebuhr's prayer and the simple truth that we need to develop the grace to accept the things that we cannot change. One of the ways that we develop that grace is by witnessing the power of this world to recover from things that seem, at the time, to be devastating.

One of the plants that was beaten badly by the hail is a shamrock that hangs in our kitchen in the winter and on our front porch in the summer. We've had the plant for a long time and we've noticed its ability to recover from abuse and neglect. We told the people who were watching over our house in our absence not to worry about the shamrock. "It usually recovers," we said. Now, about four weeks later, the plant is as

gorgeous as it has ever been. There are just a couple of leaves with brown spots, reminders of the hail, but most of the plant is green and lush and blooming profusely.

Shamrocks are special plants. One of the stories associated with the plants is that Patrick, missionary to Ireland, is said to have used the shamrock to teach the concept of the holy trinity to new believers. Whether or not the story is based in fact, the plant makes those who know the story think of the trinity whenever we see it.

This particular shamrock plant keeps demonstrating to us the power of the natural world to recover. Things that seem sick and broken can be transformed into health and wholeness through the power of sunlight, fresh air and water. Our lives are like that. We experience illness and other setbacks that can be discouraging and even make us question our future and the meaning of our lives. But time and a little attention can work with the natural healing processes of life to bring us to recovery. Many medical professionals describe their work as learning to work with the natural healing of the human body rather than attributing recovery to medical intervention alone.

All around our yard and garden there are signs of recovery. The garden is lush with the plants we intend to grow. It is lush with weeds as well, but a little time and attention will take care of the weeds and we will have plenty of food from the garden. I suspect that this won't be a great year for tomatoes, but the tomatoes love the hot weather and most of our hot weather is ahead, so we may be surprised by the end of August at what our tomato plants can do. I'll get them a little extra fertilizer in the next couple of days and we'll see what happens. It is looking like this will be a good year for potatoes and we should have some beans to eat before too long. Part of the joy of gardening is watching to see what happens. Each year is different and things often don't turn out the way one expects, yet the garden continues to produce food to eat and pleasure for those who work there.

We've gotten a couple of little showers since we returned home, so we haven't had to water too much, but our dry season is coming and we know that the yard and garden will need a bit of attention. This year we will be home the rest of July and all of August to make sure that things are in good shape.

The shamrock and the other plants still have much to teach us about the ways in which God works in this world. Certainly the power of life to recover from storms is one of the lessons. The ways in which three can be one and one can be three is another. The exuberance and joy of the blossoms is a third. And, I suspect, there are lessons that I have not yet learned from the plants.

How fortunate we are to live in a place that allows such intimate contact with nature. We are able to go out side and take a walk in the woods and watch the beauty and power of the natural world.

Two days after the hail fell, on the day that I wrote the blog about the hail, a doe had her fawn in our back yard, near our garden shed. We had been watching her closely since the evening before because she had been hanging around and reluctant to move. The new little deer never knew the power of the hail storm. Its mother's body shielded it from the wind and rain and hail. Now it is eating and growing and enjoying life. It is kept hidden most of the time, now, probably in the tall grass at the back of the neighbor's lot, where they do not mow. I've only gotten a couple of glimpses of the little one. But I know from experience that within a few months it will be nearly as big as its mother and in a couple of years, if all goes will, the fawn will be an adult, indistinguishable from other adults in the herd. Along the way we will get to watch the little one grow. Nature's abundance is a daily gift.

May we all recognize and celebrate the gift of recovery in our world and in our lives.

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July 12, 2009 – Fawns



Last night was the first night that we noticed the mother deer allowing their fawns to be seen. I guess they think they are old enough to be taken out in safe surroundings. The little ones are very frisky and are easily startled. Any sound from me and their little white "flags" go up and they head for the tall grass. Their mother will nudge or even kick at them if they try to nurse, so they jump and run from mom as well as being startled by the sounds of this big wide world. To us it looks as if they are being playful and dancing around.

They are really hard to photograph at this stage. I have to use a long lens, which is hard to hold by hand and they don't come out until the light is low in the evening. It is fun to see them and it made the evening seem like a joyous time. New life is surging.

One of the realities of the fawns is that they do not yet know what does and does not taste good. Marigolds are an example. The local lore is that deer don't like marigolds. The flavor isn't to their taste. And, later in the summer, the deer won't bother the marigolds. However, this morning there were several marigold flowers that had been bitten off and spit out. The little ones don't know that they don't taste good, so they take a bite and then change their minds. At this stage, no plant is safe. They will try anything. I wonder if the little ones don't have all of their sense of smell developed yet, or if they just have to learn what is food and what is not.

We never intentionally feed the deer or supplement their diet in any way. I've caught them eating under the bird feeders where the jays scatter the seeds, but we try not to

give them any supplemental feed. We don't know enough about the cycles of nature to go messing with them, and there is a problem with overpopulation of deer in our area already. While we love having the deer around to watch, we don't want to make things worse for them and we know that overpopulation can create problems for the deer and for the rest of us who live in this place.

It was good to get a treat just for being at home. After a vacation, the work load can be a bit overwhelming. Just sorting the mail, paying the bills, sorting out my mother's prescriptions and other tasks took more than four hours yesterday. Another couple of hours were consumed running errands and picking up things that we need for everyday living. By the time I got to the end of the day, I was tired and didn't feel like I had accomplished anything. A little treat to remind me of why it is good to live in this place was a gift for the evening. Sitting and watching the fawns was a delight.

Today will be a whirlwind of activity. I have the regular morning service, three nursing home services in the afternoon and an evening vesper service. In between those events, there are family chores, and quite a bit of catching up to do at the church. And Vacation Bible School starts tomorrow, so I'll have to be ready for that adventure as well. If I am not careful, I will forget how restful and restorative the vacation was in the first place. Whew!

So I look at the pictures of the little fawns to remind myself that life is good and that even in the midst of challenges there is great joy. This world is filled with amazing and wonderful sights and events that we are allowed to witness. What a treat it is to be able to see and to appreciate the beauty that is around us every day.

One of the ancient traditions for praying is to always begin and end with gratitude. The discipline of listing the blessings and joys of life helps to give perspective to any petitions or concerns we have. Even in the midst of grim circumstances, there are things for which gratitude is the appropriate response. Making a regular practice of expressing gratitude is an excellent pathway to joyful living. My lists of thanksgiving are long. I have been blessed with a loving family, meaningful work in a beautiful place, a great home, and a faithful and dedicated church. I have been given good health, wonderful neighbors, and peace in our corner of the world. There isn't enough space in one blog to list all of the blessings that I have received in this life.

The list of blessing exceeds the complaints that I might have.

Another technique for a maturing prayer life is to always pray requests for others before making one's own requests. If I express gratitude and then pray for others, the things that I might want or need often see trivial by comparison. The truth is that God really does supply the things that I need and I don't need to ask in order to receive.

So my prayer for today, like my prayers for many days is a song of praise for a world of beauty, wonder and awe. May I slow down and open my eyes to perceive the goodness that surrounds my every day.

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July 13, 2009 – Beaver



I grew up around airplanes. Both of my parents were pilots and although they later branched out into a farm machinery dealership, their first business was the operation of our local airport and providing aviation services for a wide variety of tasks from counting animals for the Department of Fish and Game to applying agricultural chemicals for farmers. Our operation was relatively small. Our specialty was operating light aircraft in mountainous areas at high altitudes. Over the years we operated aircraft by Aeronca, Stinson, Cessna, and Beech. Our workhorse airplane was the Piper Cub. We had several different versions of the cub over the years, ranging from 60 to 150 horsepower. The cub had a simple two-seat tandem arrangement, and was pretty good at getting off of or on to short, unimproved landing places.

We lived far from the ocean or lakes of any significant size, so we never operated airplanes on floats. But I read stories about Canadian bush pilots who flew off of the lakes that dot northern Canada. And I knew the name of the consummate bush plane: Beaver. de Havilland was a British aircraft manufacturing company. They had a branch in Canada which prior to and during World War II, manufactured the company's designs, often from parts and sub-assemblies that were made in England. After the war, de Havilland of Canada began to produce its own designs and named them for North American mammals. The company has been bought and sold by various other companies. At one time it was mostly owned by Boeing and currently is a part of Bombardier corporation. Many commuters know the Dash 8 commuter aircraft, but don't know the origin of the number 8 in its designation. It is from simple counting of the company's designs.

The DHC-1 Chipmunk was a basic training airplane. The DHC-2 was designed from the beginning to be a bush airplane and was one of the world's first STOL (Short Takeoff or Landing) airplanes. The DHC-3 Otter was a larger STOL airplane. The DHC-4 Caribou was the first small airline with twin engines. The DHC-5 Buffalo was the company's first turboprop similar in size to the Caribou. The DHC-6 was a twin engine version of the Otter. After that, they dropped the mammal names and went to the Dash system. The Dash 7 was a four-engine commuter aircraft with STOL performance. Operational costs were high and it didn't sell well. The Dash 8 has been a much bigger success as a twin-engine commuter without as much short field performance as the airplanes that preceded it from the company.

As a child and teenager, I knew that the Beaver was one of the most sought-after airplanes for backwoods performance. It was available on wheels or floats and there were straight skis and wheel skis available for the airplane as well. It was famous as the airplane of the north country. Powered by a Pratt and Whitney wasp engine with nine cylinders in a radial configuration, it had a distinctive sound. The airplane was big by our standards, with 450 horsepower and a wingspan of 45 feet.

The truth is that it would not have worked for our operation. We didn't have that much freight to haul, and our airport was 4,450 feet above sea level. While the beaver was famous for short field performance, it wasn't designed for high altitudes. Most Beavers spent their entire lives below 5,000 feet of altitude.

But it has remained one of the airplanes that inspired my dreams. Recently, while on vacation, we were able to visit the Canadian Bush Plane Museum in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. The collection of airplanes there is wonderful and includes CF-OBS, the first Beaver delivered to a customer. It sports a fresh coat of paint in the colors of the Ontario Forest and Parks Division. Mounted on a set of floats the airplane is tall, though it is somewhat dwarfed by the Otter and other large aircraft that are on display in the museum.

It sparked the return of some boyhood aviation fantasies. I bought a couple of books about the Beaver at the museum and read them with great joy.

I suppose that my life might have taken a different course. Growing up the way that I did, I certainly would have had the opportunity to pursue flying as a career. The business involves huge amounts of money these days and it has always been difficult to make a profit operating airplanes. True backwoods flying is almost a thing of the past as more and more communities have developed runways. Even Alaska's and Canada's most remote northern communities have airports. Most utility flying is done with multiple-engine airplanes these days and most commercial flying is done with at least two pilots to share the duties and to provide a constant check on procedures when operating such expensive aircraft.

There were a few solo pilots who earned their living flying relatively small airplanes in remote locations, but they are mostly a thing of the past these days.

And my life took a different course, one that I do not regret. Pursuing my academic interests was a full-time passion. I flew very little as a college student and did not fly as a pilot at all during graduate school. I returned to flying for a short period of time after I became a minister, but aviation is an expensive hobby for a minister and not a safe one unless it is pursued regularly and carefully.

I haven't lost my appreciation for airplanes.

I have never even taken a ride in a Beaver. I suppose I should buy a tourist hop from Harbor Air in Vancouver or Seattle when I am in the Pacific Northwest before the last of the Beavers are relegated to museum displays, but I don't think such an adventure is needed. I'm happy with the experiences I have had and don't need a ride in an airplane to fuel any fantasies about what might have been.

Every life has many different options. We can look back and point to a particular decision and say that it changed the course of our lives. In my case, most of those decisions have been very fortunate. I've been blessed with a good life and deeply meaningful work. I have had a job that has allowed me to be involved in my family in ways that are very important to me. And I have found joy in the life I have.

An occasional trip down memory lane by visiting a museum, reading a book or taking a ride in an airplane is enough for me. Like me, most of the Beaver airplanes are over 50 years old. Their owners are thinking about retiring them and replacing them with newer models. I suspect that some of the Beavers have another couple of decades left in them. I'm hoping that there are a couple of decades of good work left in me. We will see.

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July 14, 2009 – Vacation Bible School



I was trying to remember some of the details of how Vacation Bible School was run in my home church when I was growing up. My memories aren't entirely clear. I think that VBS was often held during one of the first weeks of summer vacation. At least I remember it being a sort of "in between" time after school got out and before summer vacation was in full swing. And I'm quite sure that our church held VBS during the morning. There may have been one or more years when we had VBS that followed a school schedule. At least I have a memory of taking sack lunches to VBS at one time.

I'm sure that the VBS programs in our church used some sort of curriculum and that the content had to do with teaching and learning Bible stories. There may also have been some information about some of the mission programs of the church. I think that we had a visiting missionary as part of our VBS one of the years when I was growing up.

But the truth is that I don't remember any of the themes that were presented, and I remember very little of the content. At least I don't make the connection between what was taught and my memories of Vacation Bible School. If there are Bible stories that I learned at VBS, they now have become a part of my general Biblical knowledge and I don't associate them with VBS.

What I do remember is that VBS was something that we did every year when I was growing up. And I remember the kids that were in VBS with me. I can remember the teachers, though I am not sure that I remember them as Sunday School teachers or

VBS teachers. They would have been the same people in a small church in a small town.

This week is Vacation Bible School week at our church. There is a lot of excitement and there has been a lot of setting up and getting ready for the daily lessons. We've got about 25 children enrolled in the program this year and their energy fills our building - a building that was designed to accommodate larger numbers.

I wonder what these children will remember from their experience.

As an adult and a writer of curriculum, I'd like to think that they would remember the key Bible passages that are incorporated into each day's theme. I've spent a lot of energy over the years thinking about the content that should be taught in Christian educational settings. And I often think of educational programs in terms of the content. But I suspect that for most of the participants in our educational programs, the experience is not primarily about the content.

For the children, it is all about the community. It is about finding a group of people with whom one belongs. It is about identifying friends, both children and adult, who can be trusted, and with whom fun can be shared. It is about being a part of something.

Ministers would like to believe that the choice of a church is about beliefs. We talk about the differences between congregations in terms of history and beliefs. We expect our members to choose churches based on those beliefs, and some do. But most people relate to a church in terms of a sense of belonging. If they feel included and part of the community, they can tolerate significant differences in belief. Purity of faith is not the most important factor in selecting a congregation.

I know this because what I remember about growing up in the church is not doctrine or interpretation or even which parts of the Bible were stressed and which were not emphasized. What I remember is the sense of belonging and the people of the church.

Belonging is a challenge in our culture. I grew up in a community where there was little change in the population. People tended to stay in our town for a long time. The kids in my class were the same kids year after year. There would be a few arrivals, and occasionally a few people would move away, but he majority of the members of my class lived in the same house all of the way through our school years. Divorce was less common and parents tended to keep the same job year after year. We all knew what jobs our friends' parents did. People made life-long commitments to the church and a family moving from one church to another raised eyebrows and created a "buzz." It didn't happen very often.

We live in a different world today. Families are more mobile and often move large distances. Families are frequently re-configured and there are many different types of

families. Jobs and careers change frequently. And there are very few people who think of joining a congregation as a lifetime commitment.

With all of the moving around, gaining a sense of belonging is more difficult for adults and for children. The challenge for a church is to provide a community that is immediately welcoming when one arrives, but also offers opportunities to become more deeply involved. Contemporary families don't want to have to invest years before they feel like they are a part of the community.

The challenge is that some things just take time. Some relationships need years and more to develop depth. Sometimes it takes going through hard times to develop a meaningful relationship. Families that change churches each time that something happens that is not to their liking, find that they have no single church to which they belong. They become observers rather than members. Then, missing the sense of belonging, they continue to search. And the object of their search cannot be found by going from place to place, only by setting in and making a long-term commitment.

Vacation Bible School won't solve all of those problems. It is just one week that is a part of a much larger program of congregational life. But we hope that we offer to the children and to the parents an entryway into a deeper relationship with the church. By adding the memories of this week to other church experiences, we offer the possibility of more depth in our relationship. Perhaps there are friendships that are being formed that will last and in the future there will be those who will be able to say to each other, "remember when?"

I still care about the content of our educational programs. But I know we cannot afford to ignore the culture as well.

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July 15, 2009 – Woodchucks



One of the projects that has gotten some of my attention recently is a video about The Woodchuck Society. It is a mission movement in our congregation that I'd like to document. It is also something that resists too much documentation. I think it has some important messages to teach about churches and how we go about mission and ministry in these times.

What can be said is that the project isn't about organization - or at least it isn't about creating structures. It doesn't have a committee, or meetings, or a budget. Yet it continues to grow and flourish and accomplish significant work in our community.

The members of our congregation know the basics well. It started with some folk who had extra firewood as a part of thinning trees on their property. They didn't want the firewood to go to waste and so they borrowed a trailer to transport some of the wood and invited others to come along for the delivery. It was donated to an energy assistance program on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The family kept cutting wood and soon there was another pile to be delivered. Over the years, more contacts have been made and partnerships have been developed. There are now people who handle distribution at Eagle Butte, on the Cheyenne River Reservation and Wanblee on the Pine Ridge Reservation. We have made additional deliveries to families when there was special need.

A typical delivery these days involves ten or twelve pickups and three or four trailers. We can deliver as much as 12 cords of dry, split firewood in a single day. Over the

years, the church has acquired a donated log splitter, a trailer, and lots of firewood. People now donate logs to the program. We have established a wood lot on the corner of the church property and have splitting parties from time to time to prepare firewood for delivery. We also deliver donated hats, mittens, gloves, coats and sweaters when we take firewood to our partners. The clothing donations come from as far away as Florida and California. Through friendships and other informal relationships we have a steady stream of knitted clothing arriving for distribution each year.

The basic plan is to use the resources that we have to help the people that we can. We don't expect to be able to solve all of the problems on the reservations. We don't expect to be able to bring full reconciliation after years of broken treaties and great distrust. We don't expect to create a model for others or a program that can be replicated. We just want to do what we can to help. And in our case that means resisting the urge to create formal structures. We intend for the people who are involved to be able to spend their time delivering firewood, not serving on committees and raising funds. What we have is what is donated, primarily in kind donations of pickups and gas to make deliveries. Occasionally we receive a large gift such as the wood splitter. We try to be wise stewards of the gifts and take good care of them, but the ministry isn't about those things. It is about making friends as we try to help others in the ways we are able.

I know that there are many missions that require a different approach. There are times when we want to help those who are in more distant locations and there are times when gifts of money are appropriate to respond to needs. Organization is required to prevent duplication of services and to learn from the mistakes of the past. Some mission relationships are decades and even centuries old and have a history that needs to be taught and traditions that need to be maintained. Our congregation continues to be generous with its financial resources and we still invest effort in fund-raising for outreach programs.

But it is good to have at least one program that doesn't need a planning process and operates without fund-raising activities. On occasion we have even turned down offers of cash donations for The Woodchuck Society, suggesting other places where the donors might invest their funds, and inviting them to participate by joining a splitting party, coming along on a firewood delivery, or even just baking a few cookies for a work day. Hands-on ministry that requires a generosity of spirit and time is the core of the project.

I hesitate to write too much about the project or to invest too much energy documenting our work. I've been editing a bit of video and trying to come up with a short way to summarize the work. I want to continue to tell the story in ways that invites participation and inspires other congregations to develop their own hands-on ministry projects. In the spirit of The Woodchuck Society, I want whatever I do to be done with the resources at hand and volunteer labor. It won't be a slick production, just a simple way to tell the story.

That is what the Gospel is all about - telling the story of how lives are transformed in relationship with Jesus Christ. We may not make a big splash in the news media. We won't have any billboards or advertising campaigns. We won't run focus groups or identify our target audience - we'll just go about trying to help others in the way we can with the resources that we have.

The phone calls keep coming in. Some have firewood that they want to donate. Others want to know how they can get involved. We'll be having several more splitting parties this summer. But there are no committee meetings scheduled.

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July 16, 2009 – Perspective



I'm not a big fan of television, and I don't watch it very often. And when I do watch television, I can be pretty critical. It's not that I am opposed to television, it is just that often my life has other events and activities that are more interesting to me than watching television. One of the things that strikes me when I watch television is that there is no distance in television. Using modern zoom lenses, the camera operators zoom right in on the subject, who often appears larger than life on the television screen. This effect must be even more dramatic on large screen televisions. We don't have one of those in our home. It seems rare, in contemporary television, especially news broadcasts, to see an entire person in the screen. We see lots of pictures of the head and shoulders of the person, and sometimes they even zoom in so close that we don't even see the entire head on the screen. In sports broadcasts, they rarely show the entire team. The production is geared to follow the ball, but in most team sports, there is a lot of important action that occurs quite a distance from the ball. In football, for example, it is difficult to follow the play because the camera doesn't show the line and down field action at the same time. If one is attending a game, one doesn't get the really close up view, but has a broader perspective on the game.

So much of life is a matter of perspective.

Recently I received a new wide-angle lens for my camera as a birthday gift. Our son and daughter in law are very thoughtful gift givers and they know how much I enjoy my camera. Since the lens is new, I've been taking quite a few pictures with it. Last night I

left that lens on the camera all evening for all of the photographs I took, as I teach myself how to frame pictures with the new perspective.

It is interesting to have a lens that allows a picture of an entire room instead of just one corner. Outside I am amazed at how often we fail to look at objects that are close. I stopped on my way home last night to take a couple of pictures of the hills. I was thinking that the panorama of the hills silhouetted at sunset would make a great picture. The distortion in the wide-angle lens, however, made the hills appear to be very far away - they were just a thin line on the horizon. Instead, my viewfinder was filled with all of the beautiful things that are much closer - the gentle rolling hills and stock ponds - and even the lush grass that was at my feet.

We are being treated to a wonderfully green year, with plenty of moisture. Since severe draught has characterized more than half of the time that I have lived in the hills, this year is filled with surprise and joy at the dramatic growth of grass and trees. Holding the camera in front of my face enabled me to see things from a different perspective.

I recently read a short book by Jason Barger entitled, “Step Back from the Baggage Claim.” The book is a set of motivational observations made during a series of airline flights that took him to the four corners of the continental United States. He flew from Columbus, Ohio, to Boston to Miami, to Chicago, to Minneapolis, to Seattle and to San Diego in seven days without setting foot outside of the airport. And he wrote a book about his observations about how people deal with the obstacles and delays of airline travel and how those observations might be applied to the obstacles and delays of everyday life. The opening metaphor in the book is the way that people approach claiming baggage.

You know the scene. Everyone crowds so close to the baggage conveyor that no one can see the bags coming and some of the people can’t see the carousel at all because there is such a crowd pressed too close to the device. It is apparent that if everyone would just take three or for steps back and approach the conveyor only to remove their own bag, the whole process would be easier and less frustrating for all. But there is something in the human urge to be first, or at least ahead of someone else, that keeps people all across the world from behaving in a simple way that would make their life better. So people crowd too close to the baggage claim and the process is harder for everyone.

There are lots of times when our lives would be improved by stepping back and looking at things from a different perspective. Sometimes just backing off can make a world of difference.

It makes me wonder if one of the things that adds to the stress of so many lives is that while we’ve embraced the technology of large-screen televisions, the cameras never back off and give a wide angle view of anything. The television picture is so “in-your-

face" that people never see the big picture on any issue or event in our world. Imagine a world in which the normal perspective on television was to present people at their actual size and to show events from the perspective of an observer. What would happen if the cameras would back off for a while?

In the meantime, I'm enjoying the wide-angle perspective this week. Maybe it is because I've only been home from vacation for a week. Vacation is another way to step back and gain perspective. Sometimes it is good to look at and think about your home from a distance.

Of course this whole essay would be different if the gift had been a telephoto lens. There was great wisdom in the selection of the gift. And for that I am very grateful. May you find ways to step back as you go through your life today.

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July 17, 2009 – Balance



Luke and Landon put on a little demonstration with their unicycles for the participants in our Vacation Bible School last night. They've been riding unicycles for at least a couple of years, and are getting pretty accomplished. They can mount their cycles in several different ways, pedal with only one foot, go forwards and backwards, and turn quite sharp corners. They can make the cycles bounce and turn in the air. The other children thought that their skills are "awesome." They are.

I never learned to ride a unicycle. I grew up around bicycles and have known how to ride a bike for most of my life, but although I've tried on a couple of occasions, I have never spent more than just a few minutes trying to learn to ride a unicycle. Luke told us that it takes a couple of weeks of practice to get at home on the cycle and after that it is a bit like a bicycle, the feel comes right back every time you return to riding.

It was impressive to watch their confidence with their cycles and their ease in demonstrating their skills for the other children. And the other children were obviously impressed with their skill. They were attentive to the demonstration and clapped enthusiastically when it was finished.

I often speak of ministry in circus terms. My most oft-used metaphor is juggling. Ministry involves many different tasks and one has give part of one's attention to each one. It also requires a rhythm of activity to keep everything going at the same time. The problem with the metaphor is that like riding a unicycle, I have never learned how to juggle. At least I can't perform the trick with multiple balls or bean bags. My juggling seems to be restricted to the many activities of my personal life and career. I am pretty good at caring for my family while caring for a congregation, preparing sermons, engaging in administrative tasks , writing and editing and pursuing several other projects at the same time.

But maybe I should start using the unicycle as my metaphor for ministry for a while.

We come from a 4,000 year tradition of radical monotheism. That is, in contrast the tendency of some other religious practices and traditions to explain the world in terms of multiple gods or deities, our tradition has been adamant in asserting that there is only one God. The power of the storm and the miracle of birth come from the same source. The bounty of harvest and the beauty of the rainbow have the same creator. The experience of God in nature and the experience of God in community are linked in a common God. We even go so far as to assert that our God is the same as claimed by other religious traditions.

It is a bit like riding a unicycle. There is only one thing that holds us up. And the one thing is constantly in motion. God is living and active. Sometimes God gets ahead of us and we struggle to keep up. The metaphor of balance works quite well for our life in faith. Of course, like all metaphors, it is imperfect. Like juggling, I can't ride a unicycle, so I don't know exactly what it feels like. And of course a unicycle can be mastered and such is not the case with God. God is always in control, even when we have the illusion that we are in charge.

It is a challenge of talking about God at all. Our language is limited and imperfect. Each time we try to talk about God, we fail to express all of the qualities of God. Our language falls short of the reality and no combination of words, no matter how well-crafted or poetic, can really give a complete picture of God. The Bible, while being truly inspired and unique among all other writings as sacred scripture, is, nonetheless, only one expression of faith. It is the best we have. It is not God. Worshipping the Bible is idolatry as certainly as is worshiping any other object. One's attention is focused on something that is less than God.

The best of our theology falls short of a systematic understanding of God. That doesn't mean that one shouldn't try to think and talk and write about God. It just means that one ought to have the humility to understand that God is even greater than the words we use to talk about God. Our human enterprises are imperfect, a pale reflection of the ultimate reality. The first letter to the Corinthians says it well, "Now I see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face-to-face. Now I understand in part, but then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood."

We can use lots of analogies and metaphors. God is like many different things. But we must always confess the simple reality that our analogies and metaphors fall short of the reality that lies beyond.

Maybe it is thinking about God that is like riding a unicycle. One needs to maintain a sense of balance. If one focuses too much on the ways that God is distant and different from us, one loses balance because God is also intimate and close and knows us fully. If one only speaks of God's power, one loses balance because God is also gentle and loving and compassionate. If one emphasizes God's judgment, one loses balance because God is also the source of forgiveness. Thinking and talking about God requires a good sense of balance.

It appears, from watching the boys ride their unicycles, that it requires a bit more attention than riding a bicycle. They needed focus in order to maintain their balance. Talking about God is similar. We need to pay attention to what we are saying and the impact of our words on others. Theological thinking is definitely a sport that welcomes and encourages amateurs. One doesn't have to be a graduate of a seminary to think theologically. But it is an enterprise that demands our attention and focus. Taking theological thinking lightly can result in skimming across the surface of faith and missing the depth that is present.

OK, so maybe it is a stretch to compare riding a unicycle with thinking about God. After all, I've never learned to ride a unicycle and I'm approaching the age where I should get to work at the task if I am ever to learn the skill. Those who say "it's never too late," aren't referring to riding a unicycle. As balance and physical dexterity deteriorate with age, the day will come when it is too late, or at least when the skill of riding a unicycle won't be mastered. I suppose that thinking about God is similar in that way as well. If one doesn't invest time in the present, there will be less time in the future to think about and understand God more fully.

I guess it is all a matter of balance.

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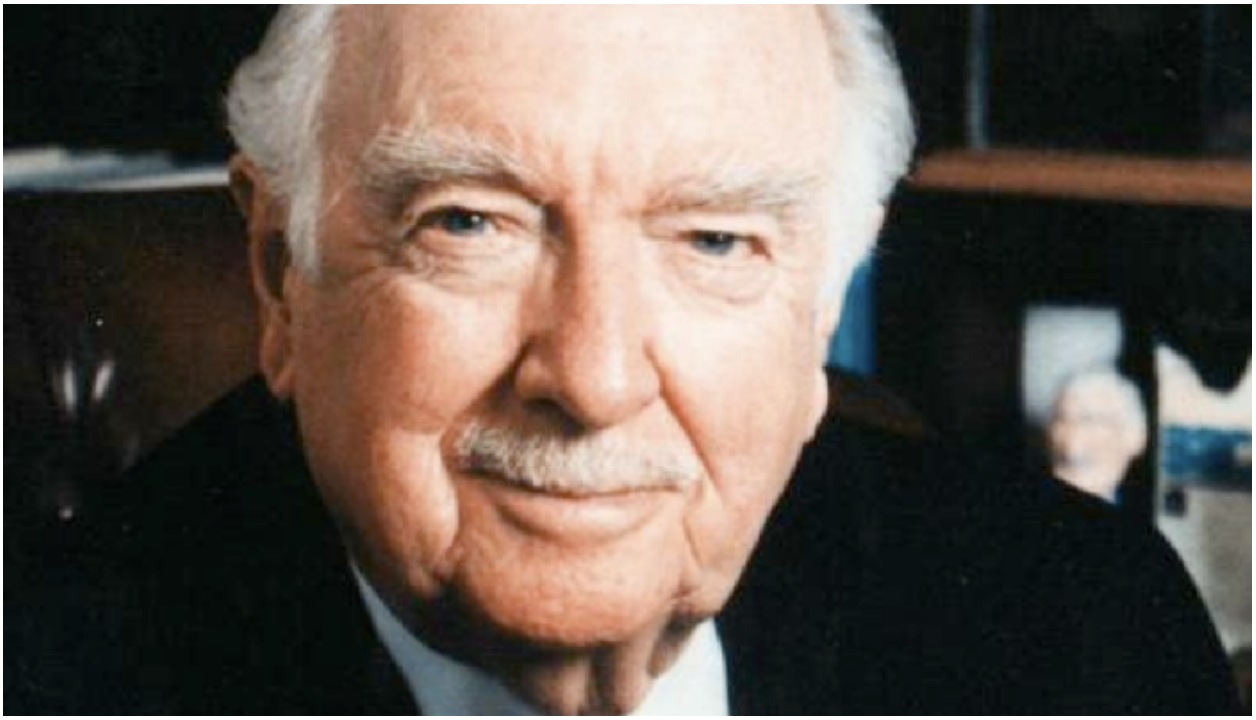
July 18, 2009 – End of an Era



40 years ago, we spent a lot more time than usual watching television because the astronauts were about to land on the moon. They had blasted off on July 16. The actual landing was July 20. Like so many events of that time in our lives, we watched the news on CBS and the coverage was anchored by Walter Cronkite. The times were different. Most people received their television by antenna. There were only three major networks. Our home had a bit of a bias for NBC, home of the Huntley-Brinkley hour. Chet Huntley was from Reed Point, twenty miles from our place. We knew his mother. Yes, the evening news was a full hour in those days. News was a larger part of television broadcasting.

For whatever reason, we were watching CBS coverage of the moon landing. It is one of those moments that one remembers. And we all remember Walter Cronkite's voice and demeanor in reporting the news. For one reason, he kept it up much longer. He was still anchoring the news a decade after Huntley retired.

It is said that the term "news anchor" was invented for the style of reporting that CBS and Cronkite developed around the coverage of the 1952 presidential election, where Cronkite provided studio coverage of both conventions with reporters on the convention floor feeding stories to the central news desk. In 1962, Cronkite took over as the host of the CBS Evening News, a position in which the nation watched him until his retirement in 1981. At that time, in a broadcast interview, he lamented the trend in television of shorter and less substantive coverage of all news events. He continued to produce

special reports for television long after his retirement and his voice continued to be “the most trusted voice in America.”

Even without the tabloid coverage and the star status afforded to contemporary media figures, we knew Cronkite. He broke down for several seconds after announcing the death of President Kennedy. The cameras stayed on him and we watched as he took off his glasses, wiped the tears, took a breath, and continued. His almost breathless coverage of the moon landing was punctuated with an audible sigh when the landing module was successfully on the surface of the moon. He said later that the landing had left him speechless despite all of the preparation and carefully written scripts. They went ahead and broadcast the silence The network wasn’t interested in projecting image. They were interested in telling the story and using a human being to convey the news.

Cronkite had worked with Edward R. Murrow the broadcaster who led CBS from radio to television. The Murrow style that was adopted by Cronkite included carefully crafted scripts and carefully chosen words. By using scripts to cover the news, there were fewer chances for mistakes and misunderstanding.

They took the news seriously and treated honest reporting as a sacred trust.

Cronkite must have been aware that he had the power to influence people. It has been reported that when he reported his opinion that the war in Vietnam could not be won, President Johnson said “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost middle-America.” Johnson’s decision not to seek re-election was heavily influenced by the way in which his presidency was reported by the major news networks. And Water Cronkite and the CBS Evening News were big factors in his decisions. He covered powerful stories for so long that we associated him with power. And we believed that he was telling us the truth. He was.

So much has changed. Just as television replaced radio as the major source of news for most people, the Internet has now replaced the television. When we want to catch the breaking news, we turn to our computers and not our television sets. Television is delivered by satellite and cable and there are so many different channels from which to choose that there is no one network that can gain the share of the viewers that was the case during the height of Cronkite’s career. For better or for worse, our attention span has shortened and we invest less time and less energy in catching up on the news. There are many more ways to find out what is going on, but we are, in general, less informed than we were a couple of decades ago.

It is the way of the world. Times change. People do not go on forever. We know that Cronkite’s generation is nearing the end of its time. Huntley died in 1974, the year I graduated from college. My father died in 1980. Cronkite, between the two in age, lived to the age of 92. He had been in failing health in recent months and we had not seen him on television for some time. Somehow it seems appropriate that his death occurred

during the 40th anniversary of one of the biggest stories of his time: the Apollo Moon Landing. As we look back, his face and voice are a part of almost all of the anniversary stories.

As he used to conclude the news, “That’s the way it is.”

But there is more to the story because we will remember the way it was. And even though we cannot halt the passage of time or change the reality of death, there are some things about the past that we miss. Walter Cronkite is one of the things we will miss.

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July 19, 2009 – Building



The lectionary that directs the use of Scripture in worship for many congregations has an alternative track during this time of year. The readings from the Epistle and Gospel are shared by all who use the Revised Common Lectionary, but the Hebrew scriptures and Psalm have two tracks. Individual congregations or groups of churches can choose which track to follow. Our congregation is on the alternative track this summer. This track allows for a more in-depth exploration of the historical books. Today's reading is from 2 Samuel and reports a discussion between David and Nathan. Nathan is David's advisor who often finds himself in the position of interpreting God's intentions for David and for Israel.

In this particular passage, David expresses his interest in building a great sanctuary - a religious house. He says that it is not fair for the ark of the covenant to be housed in a tent while David himself lives in a fine house constructed of Cedar. He proposes that a building at least as grand as the royal residence be constructed to house the sacred scrolls. Nathan, interpreting to David God's intentions, tells the kind that the timing is off, that God will not allow such a project to proceed. The temple will be built, but only after David's life.

It is a struggle that has engaged religious institutions for millennia. How much of our time, energy and financial resources should be invested in a building? Since God is everywhere it follows that God can be worshiped in any place. A special structure dedicated for a single purpose is not required for the worship of God. Furthermore, the

scriptures remind us that acts of charity and kindness, deeds of justice, and demonstrations of mercy are forms of worship that are acceptable to God.

Our congregation has benefitted from having a beautiful and very useful building. Our sanctuary is a fitting place for worship and it is equipped with instruments for beautiful music and a sound system to make it easy to hear and understand what is spoken. There are comfortable pews for sitting and beautiful windows that allow the light to fall in colored patterns on the room.

This year we celebrate 50 years of having this building as the home of our church. It is the fourth building that has housed our congregation in its history and the one we have occupied for the longest amount of time. It continues to serve us well and has the potential of being our church home for many years to come. It serves us well, however, as the result of continual investment. Maintenance has not been deferred. The maintenance of the building and the operation of its systems consume a large portion of our annual budget. And we have treated these costs as fixed costs - ones that cannot be foregone.

Because the energy consumed to heat the building is one of the largest items in our annual budget, we have begun to explore ways to heat the building more efficiently and cut costs by consuming less. It isn't an easy project. Many of the systems that would cut energy consumption come with high price tags and even though the long term costs would be lower, the initial investment could be high. How much money do we spend now in order to save money in the future?

Such decisions are made in the midst of ever-changing circumstances. The technologies for reducing energy consumption are changing. New boilers and other systems are far more efficient than those that were available a few years ago. But there will be even more efficient systems available in the future. When is the right time to make such an investment?

The stories of our people show us that such matters are not decisions to be undertaken by a single individual. Even when we were experiencing a centralized monarchy with decision-making power resting on the shoulders of the king, wise kings chose their advisors carefully. In David's case, Nathan was attentive to prayer and to the discernment of what God wanted as well as what the politics of the time demanded. It was the call of God that was given the most important role in the decisions that David made regarding a building to house God's law.

We, too, would be well advised to consider God's call carefully as we proceed with our decisions. The future of our congregation does not rest on what building we have or how up-to-date its systems are. The future of our congregation rests on our faithfulness to God's call. If we become obsessed with our building, our program, our comfort, our things we will lose sight of God's call.

Seven years ago, in the summer of 2002, we hosted a visit by Pastora Dorotea from our sister congregation in Los Guido, Costa Rica. Their neighborhood has a lot more children than ours. Their Vacation Bible School attracts so many children that the building is stressed to its capacity. In an impoverished community the church building is modest and tiny. As we walked through our building with Dorotea, she kept being amazed at how big and useful our rooms were. For those of us who had visited the church in Los Guido, we were aware at the huge luxury of space that we enjoy. At one point in our conversation we began to speculate on what it might be like if the building we have here in Rapid City could be replicated in Costa Rica. We weren't seriously considering such an idea, we were just saying things like, "If we had a commercial kitchen like this in Costa Rica . . ." or "Imagine having all these classrooms for Vacation Bible School in Costa Rica . . ."

It was a lesson that I have not forgotten. We are very fortunate to have such a wonderful building. And we have a responsibility to use it well for God's work.

Perhaps Dorotea is the voice of Nathan for our congregation. Whenever we become tempted to focus our attention too close to home, she calls us to remember our connections with other faithful Christians who serve in other parts of the world.

I have a friend who laments the temptation of churches to develop what he calls an "Edifice Complex." His pun carries a serious truth. When we focus too much attention on our structure - our building - we develop a disorder that can cripple our ministry.

As we face the decisions of managing our building and caring for the resources that we have been provided, may we take care to listen carefully for God's voice and call for our congregation.

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July 20, 2009 – Farewell, Teacher Man

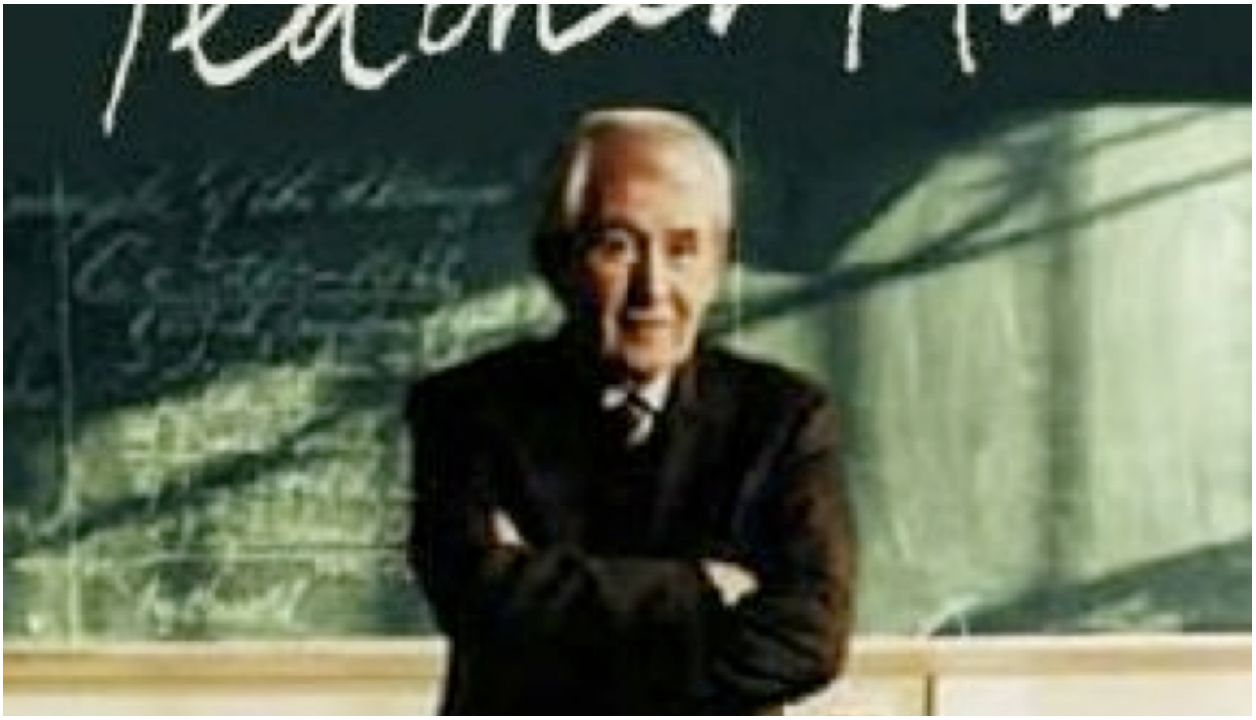

Photo from the cover of the book, Teacher Man.

Frank McCourt only wrote three books. I read all three, though not in the order that he wrote them. I'm not sure how I first discovered his writing, but most likely I read a review of one of his books - that's often how I discover books that I want to read. The book, *Teacher Man,* had me laughing and crying and amazed at the antics of a life of teaching in a challenging setting. McCourt had a knack for telling stories in a way that makes the reader feel like he or she is sitting in the classroom. Teacher Man is the report of thirty years of teaching in New York City Public Schools. It begins with the story of a fight the broke out in his classroom on the first day that he worked at McKee Vocational and Technical High School in 1958. A sandwich was hurled in the fight. Mr. McCord picked up the sandwich and ate it. The gesture got the attention of the students and opened the door for learning instead of wasting time.

His struggles to really teach in settings that were often extremely challenging resulted in creative assignments for students that never would appear in formal curricula. Discovering that his students were fabricating excuses for missing class, he turns the exercise into an assignment. Since it was the only place where he was witnessing any significant fiction writing from his students, he starts at that point and teaches them how to write by having them use their creativity to learn rather than to avoid learning.

The book has many stories about encounters with administrators and other "higher ups," who have escaped the classroom and spend their days creating forms and

guidelines, developing tests and snooping on teachers. His defiance of bureaucrats made me want to cheer for teachers everywhere who put up with so many pressures that distract from the real process of educating and getting students to think for themselves. I found myself cheering for Mr. McCourt in each encounter with administrators.

McCourt's other two books provide an understanding of the forces that formed this truly outstanding teacher. *Angela's Ashes,* his first book, is a chronicle of intense poverty and an examination of the intense grief of a mother who has three of her children die. But it is also the story of a survivor and the forces that give McCourt the qualities of dogged persistence that enable him to survive in a career that many others tried and abandoned. *'Tis* tells the honest, though often not pretty story of the adolescent and young adult who makes about every mistake in the book. He swears, he sleeps around, he drinks too much and he is a major contributor to a failed marriage. The book is well-written yet disturbing in the frank way that it tells a truth that is painful.

But somehow a true teacher emerged from all of those experiences. From the depths of poverty the world might have simply gained another alcoholic whose stories were known only to his drinking buddies. Instead we received a teacher with a gift of helping young people who themselves grew up in difficult circumstances that threatened to crush their spirits. And we gained a storyteller who crafted three books that I would recommend for every teacher to read. Even more, I wish that administrators and educational policy setters would read the books.

And now the story of Frank McCourt has reached its conclusion. There will be no more books. Another of Angela's children has died, but only after 78 years of living, almost of half of which were invested in teaching. His impact on his students has literally changed the world in ways that will continue to be revealed as the years go by. His books continue to carry the ability to inspire teachers and advocate for common sense from politicians and others who purport to shape eduction in our public schools.

"When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived it all." he wrote. "It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood." While Frank McCourt wrote eloquently about his miserable childhood, he didn't dwell there. Instead of becoming a victim of the misery in which he grew up, he became a gift to others by the way that he told the stories of his life. "I dealt with my past, and my future and my present by writing about it. And it's a gift. I wish everybody had it because it eases all kinds of distress."

Over the years, Frank McCourt gave that gift to so many high school students. Thirty years of teaching creative writing is a gift even more significant than the three books that tell the stories of his life. He inspired his students to deal with their past, present and future by writing about it.

Frank McCourt died yesterday at the age of 78. He was the kind of person who might have died as an infant, or a young child or a young adult. Somehow he survived. And we are far richer that he lived to tell his stories. His books will be wonderful gifts for teachers for years to come.

Farewell, Teacher Man!

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July 21, 2009 – Sheepherder



On Sunday, at the installation of the new pastor at Belle Fourche, Marc Stewart quoted Archer B. Gilfillan from his book, *Sheep: Life on the South Dakota Range.* I ended up borrowing the book after the worship service and have made my way through about a third of it.

Who would have thought that the definitive book about sheep herding in the west would have been written by an Ivy League seminary educated scholar with a broad knowledge of classical literature? Who would have thought that a man who chose to work as a sheepherder would be articulate and a delightful author? Gilfillan worked as a hired sheepherder near Buffalo, SD, from 1916 until 1934. The book was originally published in 1929 and was re-printed in 1993 by the Minnesota Historical Society.

Gilfillan devotes a chapter of the book to describing a sheep wagon. There were still plenty of sheep wagons in the country when I was growing up. Most of the ones I remember had rubber tires and sheet metal had been used to replace the original layers of canvas for the roof. The time of year-round living in sheep wagons had passed by the time I can remember. They were used for summer sheepherders up in the mountains on government pastures and some were used bunkhouses or even guest accommodations on ranches. A typical sheep wagon had a wood stove for heat and cooking, one bed at the far end, and a small table and chair for sitting. There was usually a window at one end and a door at the other. The door was usually split so the top half could be left open while the bottom half was shut. Screens covered the windows. There are plenty of flies and mosquitoes in sheep country.

I never worked on a sheep ranch, though we had friends who lived on the ranches in the area. Our town claimed to be the “Wool Shipping Capitol of Montana.” At one time our town handled more wool than any other in Montana. Over the years, the business changed and the wool warehouse was finally torn down when the Interstate highway came by. But we had some pride in our sheep herding heritage. The school mascot was the Sheepherder, a distinct contrast with the Cougars, Tigers, Broncs, Redskins, Wolves, Lions, Eagles, and other team names in our area. I didn’t think much about it when we were growing up - it was just part of the way things were.

Montana had some deadly fights between those who raised cattle and those who raised sheep. Sheep need to be actively tended when on pasture. If not, they will eat the grass in one place down to bare dirt. The herder needs to keep them moving from place to place. And a band of 1,000 sheep will quickly become three or four bands without the skill of a herder and a couple of good dogs. Sheep are also more vulnerable to predators than cattle. And there was intense competition for the federally-owned land that was available for summer pasture on grazing contracts. Since our town had one bar that was frequented by sheepherders and another that was the place cowboys hung out, I assumed that every town was the same and that sheep and cattle folks just didn’t get along all that well.

These days sheep are trucked from one place to another, but I remember the days when the way sheep were moved was on their own four legs. It was a kind of exciting day in the early summer when the bands of sheep were trailed through town on their way up the river to the mountains. There were two families that had permanent sheep camps up the river from our place and they coordinated the moving of their animals so that they didn’t get mixed in the narrow valley. It was kind of fun to be in a car that encountered a band of sheep being trailed. We’d drive through the band at a snail’s pace and the sheep would part in front of the car and then close in after it. They would be walking so close to each other that some of the sheep would panic and attempt to crawl up on the backs of other sheep to get out of the way of the car.

The herders used dogs to keep the sheep together and a series of whistles and yells to give instructions to their dogs. There was usually a boss on a horse, but some of the sheepherders just walked behind the sheep as they made their way up the valley.

The sheep wagon was at the rear of the band, sometimes drawn by one or two horses and sometimes pulled by a jeep or pickup. I suppose that the contents of the wagon jostled and rattled as it rolled along, but the journey was usually a slow one. On the other hand, most sheep wagons had at least one crack in a window pane somewhere, and the ones that did have a mirror, usually sported a crack in the mirror as well.

The Bible uses a lot of shepherd images. The 23rd Psalm is one of the most well-known, but there are all kinds of references to God as shepherd of the people of this

world. Jesus is also referred to as the good shepherd. As a result, pastoral names are also applied to my vocation. People often call me “pastor,” which means shepherd. There are a lot of images of Jesus with a few sheep in the background. Those comparisons sort of confused me when I was growing up. In our Sunday school books, the sheep were always clean and one might assume sweet-smelling. Real sheep are a bit different. Although we memorized the 23rd Psalm and knew that “The Lord is my shepherd,” we also know that real sheepherders had a tendency to be alcoholics. More than once in my growing up years, local sheepherders were held up as examples of what one might become if one didn’t study hard and succeed in school.

The lingo was simple. “Shepherd” was the biblical word that applied to God and Jesus. A “sheepherder” was the kind of person that lived on the edge of town and spend summers in the high country with the sheep. I remember thinking that they were separate professions.

The days of isolated sheepherders with their bands of sheep are passing. Sheep production is more carefully managed these days. Most of the pasture land is fenced and ranchers have four wheelers to help them move their critters. Sheep wagons are a thing of the past or something that is kept around the place as an amusement. There are plenty of used travel trailers that can be used as temporary bunk houses when they are needed.

The romantic image of “shepherds out watching their flocks by night,” may be far from an accurate picture of the reality, but there is something genuine and real about a person who earns a living from raising animals. I’m glad I grew up around such people and learned to respect them and their way of life.

Archer Gilfillan grew up back east and came out west to herd sheep. Who knows the reasons why he made the choices he did. I grew up out west and made different decisions with my life. Somehow we shared a bit of the same culture - enough to make his book a very interesting read for me. And perhaps there is some truth in a book about sheepherding that can be applied to a pastor’s job. At any rate I’m enjoying the book.

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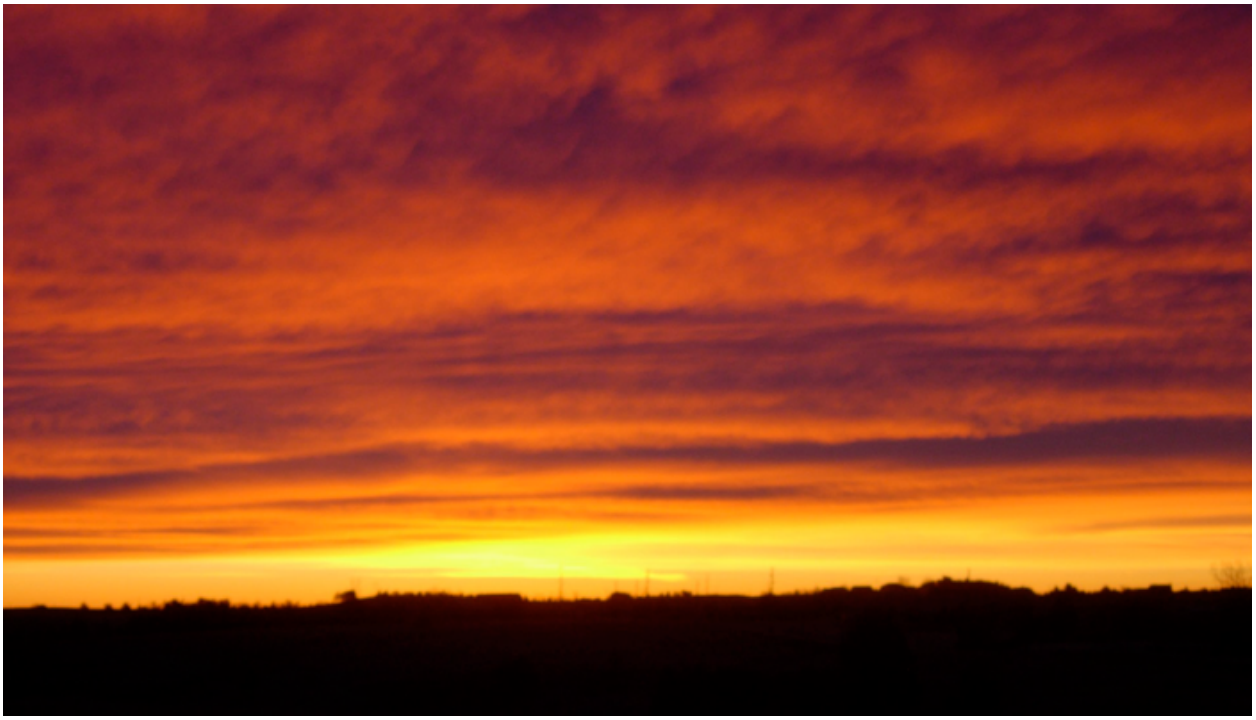
July 22, 2009 – The Pace of Life



The most beautiful sunsets around here require a few clouds in the sky. We have pretty sunsets every night, but the sky-filling colors come only when there are clouds to reflect the setting sun. Today's picture wasn't taken last night - it is from some time ago when I caught the sunset on my way home one evening. But I have been thinking of how many clouds we encounter in this life and how the ups and downs are a part of the beauty of life.

I shy away from giving too many details of my life in this blog. It isn't that I have anything to hide. In fact, the details of my life may be a bit boring for most readers. But I am cautious about telling stories that are not mine to tell. So much of my life is wrapped up in the lives of others and their stories belong to them and not to me. Since most of the readers of this blog are friends from our congregation, it is easy and natural for them to identify the people of whom I speak.

But I am tired this morning. The pace of work and life has been intense since we returned from vacation. A short reflection on yesterday might give a sense of some of the things that are going on.

A little after 7 a.m. yesterday, one of the saints of our church passed from this world to eternity. The event wasn't dramatic, but it was powerful for the members of her family who witnessed it. After 90 years of living, she had taken a serious fall last week. A broken arm and a broken hip caused her intense pain. She wasn't a good candidate for surgery with congestive heart disease, lung cancer, and a tiny, frail body. But on Friday

the surgery was completed in an attempt to alleviate her suffering. The pain did decrease, but there was little time or energy left for conversation or relationship with her family, whose vigil that had begun when she broke her hip continued until yesterday morning. After a few tears, there were plans to be set in motion, relatives to notify, a visit to the funeral home to be arranged, musicians to call, ushers and others to be asked to help and serve. Due to the family's complex schedules, the funeral will be Saturday. Due to the regulations of the national cemetery, the committal will be Monday. The two days I had set aside to catch up with work at home now have events scheduled.

At the hospital later yesterday I sat for some time with church members who have become friends as they continue to struggle with a serious cancer diagnosis. The treatment plan seems to make sense and there is reason for hope, but this is a deadly serious condition. I had some time alone with the couple. She sat at his bedside, held his hand and stroked his forehead as together they spoke of some of the triumphs and tragedies of 65 years of married life. At 87 and 88, they have seen a lot. The sudden death of a granddaughter-in-law in childbirth, the struggles of a great grandson who faced and overcome multiple problems from the moment of his birth and who now uses a respirator for everyday living, the ups and downs of ranch life, hard times and good times -- all kinds of things flowed together as they recalled the challenges of family life. They are realists and ranchers. They know about life and death. They do not expect to go on forever. They know that one of them will die before the other. They are willing to take whatever comes without regret. But they also are eager to continue living and appreciative for whatever time they yet have together. The shifts changed at the hospital while I was there and a new nurse's aid came in and introduced herself. She asked the patient how he felt. He closed his eyes and sighed and said, "mostly thankful." At first she didn't understand, so he repeated what he had said. I noticed a tear in the corner of his wife's eye. She wasn't the only one. Life is too precious to go on forever, but if I had the power to grant them an extra year or an extra decade I would do it without hesitation.

The news at the hospital isn't all bad. I had brief visits with to other couples in the hospital, both with a member recovering from a successful surgery. Hip reconstruction is a wonderful procedure that results in the patient having a substantial reduction in pain that is evident almost immediately. While tired and facing the rest of the summer for rehabilitation, the joy of having the surgery behind was evident. My visit in the surgical intensive care unit was a moment of gratitude. A very delicate and complex procedure to remove a small benign growth from right next to the pituitary gland at the base of the brain had gone just as planned. The patient was awake and alert and the substantial pain that was part of initial recovery was being well controlled. The prognosis is very good in this case, but the couple was exhausted after a day of tension and waiting.

There are times when my work is public and visible. I stand up in front of hundreds of people and lead worship and preach sermons. It still amazes me that I can do such a

thing. But much of the work that I do is not visible, nor should it be visible. Somehow, through the grace of God, I am invited into some of the most intense and personal moments of people's lives. Mostly I am there as a witness. I pray with individuals and families. I offer words of comfort and assurance from scripture. But much of what I do is stand as a simple witness to the dramatic events of life.

Late in the afternoon, when I had a few free moments before a meeting of the Department of Stewardship and Budget to review the church's financial condition, I checked my e-mail. A large curricula project in which i am involved is proceeding to initial review and the senior editorial staff needs to identify which components of the areas I am editing are ready to go to reviewers. There is at least six to eight hours of work that must be accomplished in order for me to get the information to them and I am the one who needs to do that work - before I go to bed tomorrow. This is work that will yield benefits to the church - but the benefits will not be seen for at least a year and then will not be fully known throughout the congregation. It is work that must be done, but which remains unseen to most of the people I serve.

But I am not blogging about this to complain. I have a good life and am blessed with wonderful work. I'm blogging on this topic in part because it is easiest to write about the things that are foremost on my mind and I can't spend too much of my time blogging today.

There is work to be done. And if I am a bit tired at the end of the day, that is part of the beauty of life. It takes a few clouds to make a beautiful sunset.

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July 23, 2009 – Lighthouse



On our recent vacation, we visited several different lighthouses that are located around Lake Superior. The lighthouses are maintained as public attractions, often containing displays about the history of mining, ore transportation and other parts of life along the shores of Lake Superior. For the most part lighthouses as navigational tools for shipping have gone by the wayside, replaced with more accurate guides for ships that travel on the lakes and oceans of the world.

The notion of a light in the midst of a dark night and the faithfulness of the attendant who serves long hours in an isolated location to provide for the safety of others are attractive ideas. And the architecture of the lighthouses is unique. They are photogenic: often clinging to rocky islets or outcroppings.

Significant technological development went into light houses as they were improved to make the light visible from great distances. There was a significant improvement with the development of Fresnel lenses, which redirected vertical light rays into a horizontal plane and focused the horizontal light into one or two directions at a time, with the light beam sweeping around as the lens rotated.

Churches have used lighthouses as symbols for years. Using the faith declaration, “Jesus is the light of the world,” a church is seen as a place that is called to share the light of Christ with the world. In Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus declared that his disciples are the light of the world and that those who follow are called to let their light shine and not

hide it. Through many interpretations and embellishments over the years, churches have associated with lighthouses.

Our church is located on a hill. We are on a small rise, with a taller hill behind the building. Viewed from the East, it looks as if we are nestled about midway up the hill. One distinctive feature of our property is a large white outdoor cross that is lit at night and easy to see from quite a distance. But it would be presumptuous for us to claim to be the only source of light in our community. There are many other faithful Christians who express their faith in different congregations and live in ways that bring light and life to others as well.

The coastlines required many lighthouses. A single navigational light can only warn of a single hazard. One light alone basically signals “stay away from here” pointing out the location of rocks, reefs, or other dangers. It takes multiple lights to mark a safe harbor on a stormy or foggy night.

Like all analogies, the lighthouse is an imperfect analogy for the role and function of a church. It only tells part of the story.

Lighthouses are seen as part of our history. Onboard radar and global positioning receivers with moving map displays, depth finders and other navigational devices are more accurate in helping ships to avoid hazards and stay on course. While some of the technologies are carried on-board, ships are still dependent upon external sources of information. But in today’s shipping satellites in orbit around the planet give the information needed to determine position.

There are some who say that churches are also fading as essential institutions in society. It isn’t a rejection of religion, but rather a sense that the institutions that we have formed are imperfect and serve for a limited amount of time. While attendance and participation in churches has fallen and the decrease is especially evident in mainline congregations, it doesn’t seem like we are facing obsolescence at any point in the near future. To those who note that many congregations have a predominance of elders, I point out that the population of elders is increasing and we aren’t likely to run out of retired people at any point in the near future. But even deeper, congregations still meet needs that are not being met by other elements in our society. The communal practice of religion is deeply meaningful and the support provided by congregations is important to a wide cross section of society. While we must change and adapt to our times, it isn’t yet time to turn all of the churches into museums and tourist attractions. We still have a vital function and a role to play in our communities.

So for now we haven’t adopted lighthouse images for our congregation. After all, our location is about as distant from a really large body of water as one can get. We know more about shepherd images than we do about coastal life. But don’t look for us to turn

off the light on our cross anytime soon. We're planning to be around to serve our community for many years to come.

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July 24, 2009 – Crowd



Our community has a summer outdoor festival each Thursday evening, with live entertainment and food served in the downtown area. A couple of blocks of a street are blocked off, a stage set up, and people gather to hear the music and enjoy summer outdoors. We don't often participate in the events. Living about ten miles from downtown, sometimes when we get home after a day's work we just don't feel like going back into town. And we occasionally have meetings that conflict with downtown events. But last night we headed back into town after supper because friends were performing and we wanted to hear them. And we haven't created enough opportunities for my mother to get out of the house and participate in the life of our community, so last night seemed like a good opportunity.

There was a wonderful crowd gathered to hear Kenny Putnam, Christine Albert and Chris Gage as they sang and played. Their music is always a delight. Chris Gage and Kenny Putnam have been playing together for decades and they have a style of working together that is delightful. We weren't disappointed by the music. And the crowd was a real cross section of our community. All ages from tiny babies to people in their seventies and eighties were literally dancing in the streets.

But it was a crowd. Everyone wanted to get a place where they could see the musicians as they performed. And a street is only so wide and after about a half a block it gets hard to see over the heads of the other people. We wandered around for quite a while, looking for a place where we could park ourselves. We were using a wheelchair to help my mom maneuver in the crowd and to give her a place to sit. A wheelchair is a

marvelous device and the crowd was very helpful. People would move out of our way as we pushed the wheelchair and helped us find places to stand. Still, being in a wheelchair in a crowd of people who are standing up often means that your field of vision is very limited. Finding a place where mom could see over the crowd was a real challenge. Finally, during a break in the band's performance, we found a place behind some people who were sitting in lawn chairs where she had a good view of the stage and she was able to see the performers during the entire second set of songs.

I have to admit I'm not much for crowds. I prefer small groups of people in more intimate settings. I enjoy being with people I know, but am not very interested in being part of a mass of people, especially when they are mostly strangers. But last evening's gathering seemed to bring out the best in our community. People were in a good mood and enjoying the music. And we had opportunities for brief conversations with a lot of our friends as we moved through the crowd of people. A free event, with no admission charge, attracted some people that I don't normally see at concerts. I recognized a couple of faces that I normally only see at the mission mixing with folks who I normally only see dressed in suits and ties. There were elders dancing with small children and a reasonable mix of natives and newcomers and as diverse a crowd as you can gather in a community with very small African, Asian and Hispanic populations. As crowds go, this was a pretty pleasant one.

And the timing was about right for our energies as well. We left home around 7 p.m. and returned just after 9. A couple of hours is a good outing for our family at this stage of our lives.

So we set aside the list of things to be done, let the weeds in the garden grow for another day, and left the lawn un-mowed for one more evening and enjoyed the simple pleasure of just being a part of our community.

The evening had its share of nostalgia as well. Chris and Kenny used to play with the Red Willow Band and the Red Willow band used to play a lot of songs by Tom Peterson. Chris and Christine have a new CD of Tom Peterson songs and they sang a few of them. It wasn't quite like listening to the Red Willow Band, but there was enough interplay of fiddle, guitar and bass to bring back some pleasant memories.

As I get older and my life seems a bit complex, I know that there are times when I want to shy away from crowds. There are just too many people, too many unfinished conversations, too many impressions to make. And it is not possible to fully relax with so many people. Some have expectations of what a minister should look like or do. Some have requests to make or news to share. And I can be quite happy sitting in my back yard watching the deer and not talking to anyone. Although I know that life is a mix of solitude and community, there is enough community in my life that I sometimes seek solitude when the rest of the community is gathering. I have some appreciation for those who hide in monasteries to pray.

So I was pleased to discover that I haven't turned into a total recluse who shies away from every crowd. There are times when it is good to be a part of the crowd. Last night was one of those times.

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July 25, 2009 – Point of View



Last week, I participated in the dedication of a new addition to Golden Living Bella Vista Nursing Home. The facility is our community's only service provider dedicated exclusively to providing care for victims of Alzheimer's disease. Due to a state-wide moratorium on building new nursing home beds, the addition was not the much-needed expansion, but rather an addition that increased services to a resident population that is stable. The facility operates with a waiting list most of the time. The new addition has a new room for physical therapy, an indoor courtyard, a new dining area and a modest lounge area for the people who live there.

The dedication ceremony was held outdoors near the northwest corner of the Bella Vista building. Bella Vista means "beautiful view" and the facility does indeed have a beautiful view. From their hilltop vantage point, I was able to look across town to our building and see it from a vantage point that is not common for me. A couple of days later I returned with my camera and took a few pictures from the hill.

Compared to the big box churches that are being built in many different locations, our facility isn't big. We don't have a gymnasium and our sanctuary is not designed to seat thousands. Still, it is a large structure for our neighborhood. Our sanctuary seats nearly 500 people and we have a large fellowship hall with a commercial kitchen, a parlor with a service kitchen, a large multi-purpose fireside room a half dozen class rooms plus a nursery, library, office areas and sacristy. There is a choir loft with additional storage and office areas in the balcony. We have enough room for our congregation. In addition, we have adequate parking for our facility, and a large lawn that surrounds the building.

That means that in our immediate neighborhood, which is a residential area, we are the largest structure and occupy a significant amount of space. And when I approach the building to go to work, it is evident that it is a substantial structure.

But when viewed from across town, our building fits well into its environment. Although it is at the top of a rise, other hills stand around and above it so that it looks like the church is nestled into the hills in a place where it belongs. It makes me wonder if the architect had spent any time on the hillside across town looking at the building site.

After fifty years, most of the people who see our building don't have any memory of what the area looked like before the church was built. Most of the homes that surround the church were built after the church building. The neighborhood is a desirable location to live with its beautiful pine-covered slopes just a few blocks from the downtown business area. The ridge to the west protects the area from the most severe storm winds and the view to the east is gorgeous. It is not a bad place to go to work.

Most of us go through life, however, without considering other points of view. We get fixated on how things look to us and don't spend much time thinking about how they look to others. Bella Vista is a short drive for me. I can visit residents whenever I have a few spare moments. We currently have two members who live in the facility and another who works there. It is nearby and accessible from my point of view. But from the point of view of he residents, our church may seem like a distant location. They no longer drive and cannot be allowed to even leave the facility without supervision. Many lack the skills to be safe walking along the road or crossing a busy street. They are dependent upon others for the freedoms that we take for granted.

For one of the people who lives there, the church is more of a distant memory than a present reality. When I stand with him at the window and point out our outdoor cross, he can remember that it is his church - or at least that he once attended the church. When prompted, he can sometimes remember that I am "that new guy" who is a pastor. But his clearest memories about church have to do with events that occurred 25 or more years ago. The church is much more of a pleasant memory than a present reality from his point of view.

For those of us who live in the more populated areas of our state, the ban on new nursing home beds makes no sense whatsoever. The need is evident in our town and there are many families that cannot find a space for their loved ones to live. People live in assisted living facilities who are in need of skilled nursing care and some families have to travel to other towns to visit loved ones because there are no beds in our town for them. I suppose the ban looks different from the perspective of an administrator of a nursing home in a rural and isolated area. As the population declines, there are fewer people to occupy the facility and less income to keep the organization operating. With health care costs rising at a rate that is significantly higher than other sectors of the economy, some rural facilities are facing decisions that may lead to their closing.

How things look depends on your point of view.

I'm grateful for the many opportunities I have to get out of our building and to look at our church from different points of view. I know that there are those who see our facility primarily as a venue for concerts, and others who know only the cross at the end of Clark street. There are folks who know something of our firewood project and others that know about us from our work with Habitat for Humanity. Those who call our church their own and who worship regularly in our community constitute just over 1% of the people in our city. Our market share, as they say, is not very large. But from the point of view of our members, our church looms large in their life story. For the family whose mother and grandmother's life will be celebrated at today's funeral, it will be the only place in town for a little while.

I'm glad I took a couple of pictures of how our church looks from across town. We're not the whole city, just one part, nestled in among many others. We are closer to our neighbors than we sometimes think and more dependent than we often admit.

My job will continue to take me to Bella Vista in all seasons of the year. I think I'll take my camera and get some images from other seasons. It's good to look at things from a different point of view.

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July 26, 2009 – Calm Waters



The Gospels report different versions of Jesus walking on the sea. In the Gospel of John, the disciples are rowing toward Capernaum at night. The sea is rough and there is a strong wind. After rowing three or four miles, the disciples see Jesu walking toward them on the sea. The sight terrifies them, but Jesus calms them. In Mark's Gospel, the disciples at first think that they have seen a ghost. In both versions of the story, the waves are calmed and the destination is easily reached.

I wasn't raised in a nautical tradition. I grew up far from any substantial bodies of water. We knew mountain creeks and rivers, but didn't have much experience with lakes and oceans. Our family would visit my Aunt and Uncle's place on Flathead lake periodically and they usually had one or more boats, but they were piloted by others and it never occurred to us to venture out onto the lake at night or when the weather was anything but perfect.

In my travels I have had opportunities to visit oceans and big lakes and I have found a great attraction to the water. The attraction of the water is the way that I got involved in building canoes and kayaks and the reason that I keep wanting to build more boats. There is something wonderful about walking along the shore of the water and there is something wonderful about going out onto the water in a boat. A canoe or kayak gives a great perspective on the water. Both afford the paddler the opportunity to sit low on the water and to feel the motion of the swells as the boat rises and falls. It is a wonderful feeling and a real delight to slip quietly across the water with little effort.

On occasion, I have had opportunities to paddle into the wind. Progress is slow, but the feeling is exhilarating with the feel of the wind on the face and the splash of water from the bow of the boat. But I am a timid boater. I travel near to the shore and I take my boat out of the water if the paddling gets too rough or the wind and waves get too high. I have never really scared myself in one of my boats. But I think I can understand a bit of how it might feel.

Rowing or paddling a boat is fairly complex, if you think about it. First of all, there is the process of the boat slipping through the water. The shape of the boat determines both its stability in the water and the ease with which it can be propelled through the water. In general, the more stable the boat, the harder it is to push it through the water. Secondly, water is rarely still. The water through which the paddler travels is in motion. In a river the motion is obvious. At least the general direction of the current is easily determined. In a large lake or ocean, the currents are less obvious, but exist all the same. Thirdly, the boat is not totally submersed in the water. Part of the boat is also traveling through the air. And the air affects the boat. A high bow that makes it easier to go through waves is exposed to the wind and the wind attempts to weathervane the boat - to turn it so it faces into the wind. The harder the wind blows, the more difficult it is to steer the boat.

These factors were known by the disciples more by instinct than by analysis. They had grown up in fishing families. Boats were a part of their lives. And much of the fishing on the Sea of Galilee was done at night, so the disciples were no strangers to navigation by dead reckoning. There were some features that they could recognize, but often at night on the open water the direction of the wind determined the direction of paddling and when the wind shifted, the boat would reach landfall off course and they would have to paddle along the shore to reach their destination.

Storms were an immediate threat to the safety and the lives of the paddlers. And storms could come up quickly. Their approach couldn't be seen at night. The disciples knew the feeling of being at the mercy of the wind and waves.

It is hard to tell which part of the story seems more miraculous to the disciples - Jesus being able to travel across the water without the encumbrance of a heavy boat, or his ability to calm the wind and waves. Both represented conditions that were unknown to the disciples. Rowing across the water was just plain hard work. Walking on land seemed easy by comparison. And rowing meant that one was at the mercy of the wind and the waves. The thought of being able to control them was pure fantasy for those who grew up fishing from row boats. There were a few primitive sales, but full understanding of the aerodynamics of modern sailing rigs was far from the most technologically advanced of the time. Sails were used for downwind travel. If you wanted to go into the wind, you had to row.

So the story became one that had to be told. The tellers of the story weren't interested in the details. Jesus' ability to approach them without a boat and his presence calmed the wind and waves. It was instantly a story worth telling. The analysis and theological reflection came later.

Those early disciples had an advantage over us in understanding the dynamics of their situation, however. They knew that they did not have the power to control the weather. The same is true of us, but we have found some ways in which our intervention and manipulation of weather has some effect. Human activities do have an impact on the climate, but just how significant that effect is remains to be seen. The bottom line is that we are not in charge of the weather, and there are many things in this world that are beyond our control. Modern scientists are hesitant to use God as the explanation for everything that they don't understand, but the choice of words doesn't change the fact that there are forces in this universe which are far beyond human control.

Contemporary people find it hard to picture a human being who could walk on water or an authority that could calm storms at will. Jesus is difficult to understand. God's presence in human form is challenging to understand. The very stories that made it easier for ancients to believe sometimes can make it more difficult for belief in this generation. The gospel writers didn't collect stories with the 21st century in mind.

But these are the stories that have been treasured by our people for so many generations. And we tell them without knowing all of the details and sometimes without fully understanding the events or their meaning. What we do understand is that God continues to surprise and delight people - our relationship with God yields amazement and stretches our ability to understand. Each encounter with God helps us see that this universe is far more vast and far more complex that our ability to understand. It is a miracle that we can understand even part of it.

I continue to paddle calm waters and I continue to meet God in that experience. Some of the stories of God are difficult to tell. They stretch the limits of language. Other experiences are easier to relate. But there is no doubt in my mind that God is revealed in waters wild and calm. Recognizing the presence of God brings wonder, amazement and joy.

May you discover wonder, amazement and joy today.

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July 27, 2009 – Not Quite a Salesman



My father-in-law is 89 years old. The last time he drove was nearly four years ago. The time has come to sell his pickup. We kept it for a while because he had some pride of ownership and because the pickup was used by various family members from time to time. The right time for the family isn't exactly the right time for the market. Sales of vehicles are down in general and although the pickup doesn't have very many miles, it is getting older in years. Add to that the fact that it is a 2-wheel-drive vehicle in 4-wheel drive country, it didn't exactly generate a lot of calls when I advertised it in the local paper recently. Still, it will probably sell quiet easily. It only takes one customer.

The truth is I'm not much of a salesman. I have a little understanding of vehicles, and I know how to look up prices on the Internet and discover a reasonable price. I have some experience with selling a few vehicles in the past. But selling isn't something about which I get excited and it isn't something that I look forward to doing.

I'm not sure why I've turned out this way. In other ways, I am quite a bit like my dad. And my dad was a good salesman. He had a sense of what people wanted and he kept his mind tuned to the market. He would often have a sense of where a trade-in would be going when he was making the initial deal. He had a mind for remembering the amount of money he had tied up in an item and the amount he needed in order to make a profit. He loved talking and visiting with people and met strangers easily. And he was successful as a salesman.

I have a brother who has made the majority of his living selling, mostly vehicles. He enjoys selling and has achieved quite a bit of success.

But I am, at best, a reluctant salesman. It is sort of strange, because I don't mind asking people for money. I will roll up my sleeves and go to work to raise money for causes in which I believe. And my technique is as straight-forward as my father's when he was selling farm machinery: be honest and upfront about the cost, even about the need for the business to make a profit to cover overhead. My philosophy of fund raising starts with telling the people what you will do with the money they donate, and then doing exactly what you said you would do.

There is a big difference, however. When I am raising money for a cause, I don't presume to know anything about what the donor is able to give. I don't try to tell someone how much they should donate. When you have an item to sell, the price is a critical factor - and sometimes it requires significant negotiation to arrive at a price. When I am raising money I focus on convincing someone that making a donation is a good idea and don't focus my attention on how much any individual donation produces.

In sales, the price is very important. I know the principles: set the price in a fair range and be aware of the market. Use the NADA guide to help determine the value. Leave some room for negotiation. Everyone enjoys feeling that they obtained a bit of a discount. Don't tell the customer what can or cannot be afforded, stick to conversation about what is a good deal and a fair price.

And there is a significant difference in this particular deal. The truck is not mine. The price obtained is not a part of my immediate family's finances. I feel an obligation to obtain a good price for my father-in-law. He deserves a fair deal for his truck.

Of course this responsibility doesn't rest on my shoulders alone. There are other family members who are willing to help. We'll be using the Internet to get the word out about the truck and we may not need to have much direct negotiations about price. The sale might not be to a local person.

But I'll be pleased when the deal is made, the truck is delivered and the check is deposited. It is just one more thing that is a normal part of life that needs to be done. And I ought to work on my skills as a salesman anyway. The inventory is rather high in our house. Although most of the possessions we have will be given to family members or donated to the rummage sale, there are probably a few other things that ought to be sold. And we've reached the life phase where we should definitely be thinking about inventory reduction.

I don't think I'm ever going to become much of a salesman. If I had to make my living from commissions, we might be getting hungry around our house. That's OK. I'm not expecting any commission from this sale anyway. And I definitely do believe in the

cause of my father-in-law, who is a wonderful person and the best father-in-law anyone could ever wish to have. I don't have any problems telling anyone that he deserves a good deal. And I know that this truck is lightly used and will make a good deal for the person who purchases it. I just have to find that person.

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July 28, 2009 – Using Time Wisely

Last night was a deadline for a team of writers to submit initial drafts of a number of components in a new educational resource that is under development at Pilgrim Press/United Church Press. The components that have been prepared by a dozen of those writers now are on my table for editing before going back for some revisions and becoming available around the end of this year. At the same time as I am working on the first edit, reviewers will be offering their reactions and suggestions. The process sounds complex and it is. The project has been carefully designed to encourage collaboration between writers, editors, users and others so that the resources that are developed will meet the needs of the congregations that we serve.

The next couple of months will require that I devote some significant blocks of time to the project each week. The work is complex enough that it won't work to try to spend a few minutes here and there. The writers have been giving large blocks of focused time to their tasks since may and now it is my turn to focus my attention and energy in order to keep the project moving smoothly and coordinate my efforts with the efforts of senior editors, publishers and other people who are a part of the project.

It is exciting to be back to work on a large collaborative project. I get a lot of energy and enthusiasm from my colleagues in this process and focusing my attention on resources for teaching and learning helps me to become a better teacher and to serve our congregation with renewed energy and enthusiasm.

The project demands that I be proactive about time management. Time is a limited resource. There are only 24 hours in a day. And no one is able to stay awake to invest all of them in working. Trying to extend the day and sleep less can result in less efficiency, increased mistakes, and a decrease in productivity. The job is to find the balance of recreation and work. I find that I need to find appropriate times for family, for personal time and space and for work. And with a job that has many different tasks and many different focuses, just managing my work time is a balancing act. Like other creative enterprises, one can't just stop thinking about a project at will. Sometimes

projects overlap and one task can inform another. Sometimes projects conflict and the demands of two divergent tasks pull one in different directions.

I have not always been an effective manager of time. I have wasted precious moments, and I have gotten mixed up in my priorities. The ministry is not just a matter of putting in lots of hours, one has to make choices about how those hours will be spent. I've not been one to shy away from work, but I haven't always gotten the most important job first in line and sometimes I work hard at projects and tasks when my time could have been better invested in another arena.

Just the process of planning can consume a significant amount of time and energy. And I have much more enthusiasm for doing a job than for making plans. Sometimes the best way to get things done is to just do them, even if the order of tasks isn't the most efficient.

The resources that I will be editing over the next couple of months focus on the practice of Christian hospitality. Hospitality is one of the strengths of the congregation that I serve, but sometimes we have been less than intentional about our hospitality. Occasionally we discover something that works by simply doing what comes naturally to us. I suspect that there is much that I can learn by doing the activities that the writers have created. Our church can benefit from these resources while they are still in development.

That may be an exercise in justifying the amount of time I'll be spending editing while still trying to keep up with the work of serving as pastor to a complex and exciting congregation. But I think there is more to it than my rationalizations. I really believe that part of the collaboration of the project involves the collaboration between our congregation and the publisher of the resources.

We always practice our faith in the context of living congregations that have changing needs and shifting priorities. We always practice our faith in the midst of people who have a wide variety of needs and circumstances. And life can be unpredictable. Illness can appear when not expected. Loss and grief can not always be predicted. The life of a congregation can bring surprise every day. In the midst of this reality, we are called to be a community of hospitality that reaches out with a warm welcome to people we have not previously met. Our ministry is constantly engaged with the existing congregation and the emerging congregation that is shaped by each new person who comes to visit and share our journey.

So these will be busy days. And they will be full days as I adjust to this new project and these new priorities for my time. My prayer is that my time can be invested in serving the whole church and that we not only become proficient in writing exercises to guide individuals and congregations in the practice of hospitality, but also in the actual practice of hospitality in the life of our congregation. Our faith has always been more

than just good ideas and thoughtful words. Our faith is always more about how we live than what we say. And yet words are important. Editing, revising, improving and working with words is one of the ways that the church is served.

As we go through this season of our lives together, I hope that I will continue to grow in wisdom, especially the wisdom of how to invest my time well in the work of the church.

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July 29, 2009 – Repairs



Although I enjoy building boats, my boatbuilding has its genesis in the love of paddling. My first boat was a direct result of wanting a canoe and not having the money to buy one. So I built one. That led to building another. Swamping the second canoe led to building my first kayak, and so it goes. Each boat has been built with paddling in mind. And I use my boats quite a bit. From time to time the smooth varnished surfaces are scratched by rocks and the boats suffer the indignities of being hauled around. And, once in a while, there is a repair that needs to be made.

The first kayak that I made is one of my favorite and most-used boats. It is built from plans by Nick Schade and is a great beginner's kayak: very stable and easy to paddle. But it was my first effort. The foot pedal system that I made for the boat didn't work out at all. The cam for adjusting it kept losing teeth and I ended up installing a set of commercial adjustable pedals after a couple of years. Another part of the boat that I now build differently is the coaming. The coaming is the rim around the cockpit. It has a lip on it so that a spray skirt can be attached to seal the boat around the paddler. The coaming also takes a lot of pressure because it is where the paddler places his or her hands when getting into and out of the boat. When I stand up after paddling, I usually push down quite hard on the coaming as I lift my body to a standing position. Sometimes, I place my paddle across the coaming behind myself and use the paddle as a lever against the coaming.

The coaming developed a small crack on our recent trip. The crack didn't in any way interfere with the paddling or the trip, but it has been on my list of needed repairs and

last night I took a few minutes and brought it into the garage for repairs. I'll also sand down the boat and give it a couple of coats of varnish while I have it in there.

Upon examination of the crack I discovered that my original laminations had not failed, as I previously suspected. As is often the case with glued wood, the glue held perfectly, but some of the fibers of the cedar split where they are glued to the more dense mahogany coaming. The repair is pretty straightforward, I used a syringe and a thin piece of plastic to work epoxy into the joint and then clamped everything together. When it dries, I'll sand of whatever excess epoxy I didn't get wiped up. Epoxy is hard and no fun to sand. Then I plan to reinforce the joint with a layer of fiberglass cloth imbedded in epoxy. The final product will look exactly the same as the original, but will be quite a bit stronger.

As is true with many boatbuilding projects, a bucket of clamps is important to get the job done. In order to get everything in the right place, I used a clamp every 1/2 inch around the affected area. It took more time to put the clamps in place than it did to work the glue into the affected area.

Clamps are interesting tools, and I've written about them before in this blog. There isn't much more that can be said than has already been written. They are supporting tools. They hold things together while other things work. Sometimes, like this repair, the clamps hold things in place while the glue dries. When I am bending wood, the clamps hold the steamed wood in the right shape while it cools and dries.

Clamps are always temporary. They are used in one stage of building, offering their strength to a task, and are later removed. The final product doesn't show off the clamps. When it is done properly all of the signs that clamps have been used are removed. The final product carries the memory of the clamps without showing them off.

And my clamps spend most of the time in a bucket. In fact I have several buckets of clamps, sorted by size and type.

Like boatbuilding, most of the tools that God uses in the life of our community are often not immediately visible. People notice the beautiful building but don't remember the sacrifice and hard work that enabled it to be there. Often they don't think of all of the work that is done to keep the building ready for use. Cleaning and maintenance are done when there are few people around. But they are essential to the life of he congregation. A well crafted sermon can involve hours of research. It is not uncommon for me to have a half dozen books open as I prepare for a worship service. Some of the work and research is done months in advance. We usually are choosing hymns and worship themes about three months before a worship service.

When someone notices how well things fit together, we feel like our work was time well invested. When things don't go as planned, we try to make corrections to avoid the

same mistakes in the future. I am most relaxed and natural as a worship leader when I am well prepared. Things that look improvised are often well rehearsed.

The shop of every boat builder needs a bucket of clamps. A few extra clamps are important for the moments when you are in the middle of a job and need just one more. A small repair never uses all of the clamps in the bucket, but it makes the builder glad to have all of the clamps.

This evening the clamps will come off of the boat and go back into the bucket. They'll take up extra space and I'll struggle to figure out where to put the bucket so that it is easily available, but out of the way for other jobs.

Perhaps as I remove the clamps one by one, I can think of the people who help support our church behind the scenes and give thanks for their work. It's good to have such an abundance of faithful workers.

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July 30, 2009 – Wildflower Garden



Last year, in response to receiving a free packet of seeds, I planted a couple of small areas near our back deck to wildflowers. I repeated the process this year, purchasing the seeds from a local store. The results are as fun as last year. I call the little patches our wildflower garden. The areas are attractive to the deer, so I rigged up a little flag with some loose cloth to startle the deer when the wind blows and that has so far protected the plants from being eaten.

The question in my mind, however, is just how wild can a patch of flower be when the seeds come from a packet and are carefully tended? Among the blossoms in the wildflower area are daisies. We also have daisies in our more formal flower beds around the front of the house. Of course we also saw daisies growing wild along the shores of Lake Superior in our recent trip. Those flowers are undeniably wild. I suspect, however, that it isn't quite fair to call the two patches near our deck truly wild.

I'm not sure of the source of the seeds, but I think it is likely that they are harvested from carefully cultivated plants. It certainly would be much more efficient and relatively simple to get seeds from a controlled area rather than going out into the countryside and harvesting seeds from plants that are growing naturally. And such a harvest would certainly affect the propagation of the plants in the wild.

The seeds are mostly for annual plants, though there are a few perennials among the mixture and some of he plants go to seed and contribute to next year's blossoms.

One thing that makes our wildflower areas unique is that I can't tell which plants are weeds until they begin to blossom, so there is very little weeding. And the plants are randomly arranged because I plant by scattering seed. The look is certainly less formal than areas where we have bedding plants.

But it is far from being truly wild.

It is fairly common for us to use language in imprecise ways. Labeling foods "natural" may or may not mean that they were grown in ways that are different from the foods that do not bear that label. "New and improved" is a marketing term that is often applied to products that are far from novel and essentially similar to ones that were previously available. "For a limited time only" seems to be code for "you'll be listening to this add for a long time." Terms like "heart healthy" or "cholesterol lowering" don't describe the qualities of actual foods being sold, but rather to the use of those foods in moderation and the elimination of certain other foods from the diet.

The list goes on and on and is not limited to the use of language in labeling or marketing.

Our denomination calls ourselves "The United Church of Christ," though we are rather loosely connected and often our diversity shows better than our unity. And the exclusivity of the pronoun "The" doesn't change the reality that other denominations are also dedicated to Christ. But then Presbyterian churches do not hold exclusive right to their mode of organization and Lutheran churches aren't the only congregations that carry on the traditions of Martin Luther. For that matter Baptist churches are not the only ones that practice baptism by immersion.

We seem to sort of know what we mean even when our words could be interpreted in a different manner. The use of imprecise language doesn't keep us from communicating and it doesn't prevent us from living lives of faith.

But I think it is good for us to examine our use of language from time to time. Sometimes, when what we say isn't really what we mean, it might be good to choose different words.

I don't think I'll abandon the use of the term "Wildflower garden." My friends and neighbors seem to know what I mean when I refer to those areas with those words. And I don't expect the producers of the seeds to instantly change the labels on their packages to "domestic seed mixture," or "mixed blooming varieties." I probably couldn't find the right packets of seeds in the store if they were completely accurate in their labels. I don't know the correct names of most of the flowers in those beds.

And I don't think I will abandon what seems to me to be a healthy skepticism of the language of advertising and the labels on items offered for sale.

Words are the tools we have for communicating and communication is essential to our lives. We do, however, need to realize that words are imprecise. Often miscommunication is the result of choosing the wrong words rather than having the wrong intentions. Care in choosing our words is important.

May we continue to search for the right words to say.

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July 31, 2009 – Play Ball!



There is plenty of news for baseball fans in our town this week. Tonight the city's two American Legion baseball teams, Post 22 and Post 320 will meet after both teams advanced in the state Legion tournament. Post 22 has a longer history, a bigger ball park and the home field advantage for the game, but Post 320 has lots of ardent fans and with high school sports there are lots of factors that come to play in any game. The game will bring out a big crowd and lots of enthusiasm. There are still some hard feelings over the very existence of the second American Legion team in our town and you can get strong opinions from talking to locals about whether or not the second team is a good idea.

In little league news the Harney team beat out Canyon Lake to advance to the Midwest tournament. The two teams met for the North Dakota/South Dakota championship. We new before the game started that only one team could win. Pitching was the story of the evening with Canyon Lake limited to only four hits in the 3-0 loss.

The newspaper, however, didn't report that our church league team emerged from the tournament Tuesday night with a second-place trophy. We're not the biggest church in town, so the process of fronting a good team year after year is a challenge. There are two divisions in church league softball in our town and a few years ago our team was moved into the tougher "A" division. We've fared well there. Tournament play was exciting, with our team pulling off a 12th inning victory to advance to the championship round undefeated. The other team had suffered a single loss in the double-elimination tournament so their victory in the first match up set the stage for a second game, our

team's third game of the evening. With two players laid up with injuries, a victory was not to be for our team and we ended up with the second place trophy - a great showing and a fitting finish to the year.

I confess that I am not the world's greatest sports fan. In fact, I'm not much of a sports fan at all. I enjoy watching a game from time to time and I follow local players in the paper, but I don't have the passion for games that some exhibit.

Our church team is the product of the dedication and work of others, with my support, but without much participation on my part. Our coach, Dick James, and a couple of players do the fund-raising, recruiting, and organizing that is required for our church to front a team each year. And the team members aren't all members of our congregation. The group from our church is too small to front a team, so we end up including people from other congregations who don't have a team. This year, I think we had at least a couple of Catholics, one Jew and perhaps a Lutheran or two on an eleven-man team. The purpose of the league is to have fun and to build connections between congregations and that goal is achieved each year.

I have noted that over the years the trophies are getting bigger. This year's second place trophy is significantly taller than previous first place awards. I was joking in the office that we'd have to get a new trophy case to display the hardware the team is bringing home. Of course we don't have a trophy case at all, but there is a display case in the fellowship hall where the trophies are shown.

The softball team illustrates one of the wonderful realities of life in the church. There are many places in our congregation where people make connections that are not dependent on pastoral leadership. I do little other than give verbal support to the softball team and it gets together, raises funds, recruits members, participates in events, and provides a connection to the church for folks who might not otherwise find their place in this institution. There are other groups within the church that are self-starting, self-managing and that are a part of the life of the congregation and require little or no leadership from the church's official structure.

And the truth is that there were more people involved in the summer men's' softball team than the Department of Worship's summer vespers program. The team played more games and drew larger crowds than the six worship services that were very lightly attended. Not that numbers is the appropriate way to evaluate the quality of worship, but there is a sense that it takes a certain number of participants to justify the effort that is invested. I am sure that the Department of Worship will evaluate the summer program and is likely to make significant changes before the season comes around next year.

The total life of the congregation is much broader than just the areas where the pastor is active. Meaningful relationships develop outside of official programs. The Holy Spirit's action is not limited by the actions of boards and committees.

So I’m sure the team will play ball next year. Who knows? Maybe the fellowship of the baseball diamond is fertile ground for faith to grow.

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August 1, 2009 – Two Topics



The first topic is simple. I resolved not to write any more blogs about cats. I actually don't know that much about cats and whatever I do know, I've already included in the blog. I don't want the blog to be so repetitious that I lose the half dozen readers that I have. Here's the problem: I include a photograph with each blog, and the most photogenic creatures in our house are cats. So I have a lot of pictures of cats that I've never put into the blog. Here's the solution: The photograph has nothing to do with the rest of this blog.

So I have been reading Hemingway again. It has been quite a while since I have read Hemingway. He really is a wonderful writer: *The Sun Also Rises, For Whom the Bell Tolls, A Farewell to Arms, Islands in the Stream, Garden of Eden,* and so many more wonderful books. And, in my opinion, the best short novel ever written - the book that defines the genre: The Old Man and the Sea. It is exactly right for a one-sitting reading on a winter evening or a summer afternoon.

Hemingway is not just a master of the short novel. He is also the master of the short sentence. And he wrote the best advice any writer could receive: "Do not worry. You have written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know."

He was an incredibly complex man: good writer, unfaithful husband, incredibly sick, incredibly wise, incredibly stupid all at the same time. He wrote books that are worthy of reading again and again.

The occasion for returning to Hemingway this week is the recent release of the restored edition of *A Moveable Feast.* It was the unfinished manuscript that he left at his death. The original edition was edited and released by his fourth wife, Mary. Although Hemingway had delivered a manuscript to Scribners, it wasn't ready for publication and the editors worked with Mary to produce the first edition in the spring of 1964, nearly three years after his death.

The restored edition has been prepared by grandson Sean Hemingway, who argues that this edition is closer to the way Hemingway intended. I am in no position to judge as I never read the original version. So I'm reading these words for the first time. It is a refreshing treat to read Hemingway writing about the process of writing. There is a lot more in the book, mostly reflections on living in Paris, but I am fascinated by his thoughts about being a writer.

It is interesting timing to be reading Hemingway this week because I am starting a new and major editing project. I've had most of the materials for most of a week now and I have only made the simplest of grammatical and spelling changes. The real job of editing the resources so that they emerge as a set of resources that are consistent and usable by congregations is a big job and I only have a couple of months to complete the process. I have made a chart. I have read the resources. I have mulled which order I should tackle the job. And I haven't done much of anything else. I just can't get myself started. Instead of writer's block, I seem to have developed editor's block.

Just in case the cure is the same, here is one true sentence: Hemingway uses shorter sentences than Christian Education writers.

Hemingway hand wrote his manuscripts. There are reproductions of his handwritten pages in the restored edition. They are easy to read, even with numerous cross-outs and margin notes. He had lovely handwriting. Chapter 1: "A Good Cafe on the Place St.-Michel," reminds me of reading a letter from a loved one.

We don't write like that much anymore. The project that I am editing is all done on a WIKI. The writers have entered their manuscripts onto a website where I will do the editing. The web site remembers the changes and shows the history of the writing process. The writers and my senior editors can go to the web site and see what I am doing at any moment - thus I need to be doing things right now in order to be a collaborative member of the team as well as to avoid letting the deadline sneak up on me and make an uncontrollable amount of work at the last minute.

I've spent some of each day this week working on the project. I've been reading, but I can't get myself going. Maybe what is needed is to edit one true sentence: "Christian educators could benefit from reading Hemingway." or "Short sentences speak clearly."

Both are probably true. Both might not be recognized by the writer of the original sentence, were it not for the simple fact that I'm that writer.

Perhaps the real inspiration from "A Moveable Feast," is not the wisdom and word smithing of Ernest Hemingway, but rather the courage of Sean to tackle the job of editing his grandfather's work more than four decades after the papers went into storage. It might be asked what inspired him to open those trunks or files or whatever devices held the original manuscripts. I imagine that this project involved more than a week of procrastination.

I'll be needing that courage this week. One week of procrastination may be understandable. Two is intolerable.

Having said that, I fully intend to head to the lake with my kayak this morning before I sit down to edit manuscripts. Here is one more true sentence. "It takes both hard work and inspiration to complete a worthy task."

Maybe that is why I keep taking pictures of cats who never work, only inspire.

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August 2, 2009 – Early Paddle



I got to the lake early yesterday. The mist was still rising and there was no wind. I had planned the night before to paddle early in the morning and I was on the lake a little after six. I wasn't the first one on the lake. A fisherman was already out, but for a little while it was just the two of us. I had put on my paddling jacket before I got into the boat because I was chilly carrying the boat from the car to the lake. After I had paddled for fifteen minutes or so, I realized that my ears and hands were chilly. I hadn't thought to grab a pair of paddling gloves. I wear them in the early spring and in the fall as well, but it was the first day of August - hardly a time known for being chilly.

Actually it felt good to be a bit cold. There will be some warm days this month. When I am really hot and trying to cool down, I wonder if I will be able to remember what it is like to be a little chilly.

There was a great blue heron standing on a log that slanted down into the water. I stopped paddling and allowed the boat to drift toward the bird. It tolerated my presence long enough for me to take a couple of pictures and then simply flew off and made a big circle. Usually they squawk, but this one didn't. I guess it didn't want to disturb the silence of the early morning. Soon enough the campers in the campground would begin to get up, make fires, cook breakfast, start generators, get ready for a day of playing. It wouldn't be long before the rumble of motorcycles would fill Highway 385. It is, after all, the first weekend of rally, the time of the year when motorcycles outnumber all other vehicles in the hills. And there is a strong preference for Harley Davidson bikes, with the deep, unmistakable V-twin rumble.

I seem to need quiet places and a bit of physical exercise to clear my head from time to time. The rhythm of paddling feels good. The motion is like stretching one's shoulders - a perfect morning exercise. I thought of Hemingway walking around the streets of Paris, trying to keep from walking by places that sold food because his stomach was rumbling and his pockets were empty because he had given up journalism to pursue writing fiction full time and the stories had not yet sold and he didn't want to admit that to his friends - or perhaps to himself - that he was worried. He justified the rumble in his stomach by thinking of other starving artists. "I learned to understand Cezanne much better and to see truly how he made landscapes when I was hungry."

We've had some times in our lives when we had less money, but I've never been hungry. Maybe I don't truly understand the great artists.

Of course there are other kinds of hunger. One can be hungry for peace and quiet, or for intimacy, or for meaningful work. One can be hungry for change. There are many hungers in this wide world.

Jesus tried to explain this simple fact to his disciples when they asked him to help them understand the feeding of the 5,000. They were wondering what had happened. He was trying to explain hungers that were deeper than a short-term lack of food. He wanted them to look at the big picture and take a long term view. They wondered where their next meal would come from.

The problem was not so much that the disciples were amazed at the miracle, but that they were expecting a miracle. You might even say that one of the reasons they were spending so much time with Jesus was that they wanted to see strange events. They wanted to be able to report to their family and friends that they had been there. They remind Jesus that Moses produced daily miracles and provided manna from heaven. Jesus responds, "I am the bread of life." The miracle is not found in the special, but in the everyday. Look at what you have right now - that is truly a wonder.

Just like those disciples of long ago, I have been given what it takes to get through this life's journey. I have enough time, enough space, enough resources. I do not need to pray for more, but rather to learn to see what is already present in my life. There is enough time to accomplish the things that I need to do. I don't need to ask for more time.

The miracles for which we often pray are far less important for a meaningful life than the ability to see the miracles that are already present. Jesus simply asks his disciples to see what they already have. is this not sufficient for any challenge, any task, any need?

"I am the bread of life."

Even though Jesus was soon to be crucified and the disciples were soon to experience the grief of the death of their friend, there would be enough. Even when it seemed that death had destroyed everything, it was not over. Even when he departed, Jesus did not leave them - or us - hungry.

Today we will celebrate communion in our congregation. The simple gifts of bread and the cup serve to remind us of a powerful truth that is at the core of our faith: we have enough. There is enough food to nourish our bodies and enough of Christ's presence to nourish our souls.

Sometimes it takes an early morning paddle or walk to see what has been there all along.

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August 3, 2009 – Rally



Photo of Sturgis downtown on Sunday morning, courtesy of the Rapid City Journal - www.sturgisrallydaily.com.

It is a bit difficult to explain rally week to people who have never been in the Black Hills during the annual Sturgis Rally. Today is the official start of the rally, but the bikes have been arriving for at least a week now. When they do the official count of the number of motorcycles at the rally, they quote numbers that could never be in any single community at the same time. The rally is an event that is too big to be contained in Sturgis, so we all have extra bikes in our neighborhoods and lots of extra traffic.

Every year there are articles in the newspaper that note that the average rage of the riders is getting older. Yesterday morning there was an article about the increase in sales of trikes - motorcycles with a third wheel that doesn't require as much physical strength to ride as a heavy road bike. We have noticed that there is less late night activity in our neighborhood. The week-long party is still going on at Sturgis, and I know there are plenty of all-night goings on, but they don't have any impact on us. We do hear the rumble in the hills and we do notice the traffic, but it seems to settle down when night falls.

What is hard to explain to people who haven't experienced the Rally is the way in which in has an impact on everything we do for a few weeks. And the impact, of course, reaches throughout the year. There are silly things like the simple fact that for a relatively conservative corner of the country, any length of hair and any manner or body art is relatively tolerated. Men with pony tails are more common here than they are in other parts of the country. And tattoos are so common that it isn't a surprise to see

them on any age person. But there are big impacts of the rally. I believe that we all are better drivers because we practice looking for motorcycles at every intersection and every lane change. Both of our children learned to drive in this area and both are very good drivers. They've been lectured about looking and then looking again. It isn't enough to think that there is no one there, you have to be sure.

But, sadly, the rally has its share of tragedy each year. Two riders died in accidents coming to the rally and there have been several accidents each day. We've seen the emergency personnel going back and forth all day long for several days and the helicopter ambulance has been busy. The helicopter gets more exercise during the rally because it can get around traffic in a way that a van or truck cannot. I think twice about every trip with the car because of increased traffic. That's probably a good discipline that I should practice every day of the year.

I've never been attracted to motorcycles. I rode a couple of small motorcycles when I was in high school, but since then have not felt a need to have one. I sometimes look at all the the fuss and expense and excitement of rally week and wonder what it is that makes people so strongly attached to their motorcycles. But I am sure that they don't understand my passion for canoes. One of the things that makes people so interesting is that we are so different from one another.

I do like the people who own motorcycles. There are some wonderful people who have become good friends who own and ride motorcycles. And the motorcycle rally is a good time to meet and welcome strangers to our town. They are, for the most part, really good people. And that's why I worry each rally because if there is an accident, there isn't much between the riders and injury.

I came upon a minor accident Friday evening. A single bike with a lone rider had gone off the road and ended up in the ditch. The rider appeared to have an injured leg, probably broken, but he had not hit his head and he was not in any kind of distress that seemed to be life-threatening. The ambulance was on its way before I arrived at the scene and there were plenty of folks to help. Soon there were a half dozen emergency vehicles and the victim was receiving excellent professional care. As I drove away, I breathed a hugh sigh of relief knowing that there was no serious injury in this particular accident.

We seem to have adjusted to the fact that each year there will be accidents and injuries and a few fatalities. I hope I never get used to that reality. I'd love to see a year when all the motorcycles came and went home without anyone getting hurt. It seems unlikely, however, given the combination of motorcycles, plenty of alcohol, crowded conditions, road construction, and summer weather in the hills.

For now we watch the motorcycles go by on Sheridan Lake Road from the comfort of our deck and cringe each time we hear a siren. And we enjoy talking to the riders in the grocery store, at the gas station, and all around town.

We don't notice a big increase in attendance at church. So far the congregations that have the most contact with the bikers are the ones that have free breakfasts or bike washes. The bikers who weren't sleeping in yesterday morning must have decided to go for a ride in the hills. At least we certainly had room for a lot more at church. Our congregation has plenty of motorcycle owners, but we haven't developed any outreach programs that are specifically aimed at the folk who come to town for the rally.

So we keep all of the bikers in our prayers. We pray for their safety and we pray that they will enjoy themselves and their visit to our corner of the world. We appreciate their business in the shops of our town.

Now, if we could just figure out how to get them to plan a visit to church as a part of their trip . . .

Be careful out there. We want all of our guests and our residents to be safe.

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August 4, 2009 – Peaches



The Colorado peaches have arrived in town. We try to buy as much local produce as we can, and in the summer the farmer's market is a good way to obtain food that hasn't traveled too far. But in the case of fruit, the journey must be longer. There are a few berries and apples that grow locally, but other fruits require different climates.

Every August the Palisades region in western Colorado produces peaches that are juicy, sweet, and delicious. I'm sure that many of those peaches are packed and shipped to far away places, but a few of them are loaded into pickups and other small trucks and distributed throughout Colorado and neighboring states. Around here, when you see someone selling peaches from the back of a pickup truck in August, chances are pretty good that they are just one or two days away from the orchards in Colorado.

There is nothing that is quite like a Colorado peach. These are juicy and just right. Susan got them on Saturday and it took a couple of days for them to get just right, but it now time to eat peaches in our household. These peaches are good for just eating with the juice dripping at each bite. They are also good on cereal in the morning and in a fruit salad with dinner.

Through the advances in transportation, there are often peaches available in the grocery stores. But the best of the best are distinctly seasonal. The true pleasure of a fresh from the orchard Colorado peach only occurs for us in August. It is a narrow window of time before which and after which we know the peaches won't be as juicy and flavorful.

I'm not sure, but I think that peaches are also grown in the Mideast. At least it makes sense that the writer of Psalm 34 might have just eaten a peach when these words were first uttered: "Taste and see that the Lord is good." It is hard to deny the goodness of all of creation when taking a bite of one of these peaches. Life is good and God has somehow endowed us with the facility to taste this goodness. I suppose that life could be sustained without the variety of foods that are available. It would be possible to be healthy with a diet that is far less varied than ours.

There is a difference of opinion on the best technique for eating a peach in our household. Susan prefers to gently wash the fruit and then just take a big bite, feeling all of the flavor and smell and sensation all at once. I maintain that the texture of the fuzz on the outside of the peach detracts, however subtly, from the experience. To get the best, I prefer to dip the peach in boiling water, gently remove the skin and then slice it into a bowl. Less mess, more pure flavor. There seems to be plenty of room in a joyful and committed marriage for a difference of opinion on how best to enjoy a peach.

There are lots of recipes for dishes that contain peaches. There are cobblers and pies and upside down cakes. Peaches can be grilled and baked and prepared in a lot of different ways. But the truth is that when peaches are ripe and good the flavor is so wonderful that they hardly need any embellishment. Just serving fresh peaches is a sufficient desert. A touch of cream or ice cream is good, but not required.

I am delighted with the way in which some little thing, like the arrival of Colorado peaches, can change the tone of an entire week. The weather is getting hot and we are starting to worry about high fuel loads and fire danger in the woods. The rally is in full swing and the traffic is really intense. I have a huge deadline looming and there is a lot of work to be accomplished. The house needs to be painted this fall and a new roof isn't far behind. The church is searching for a new choir director and we don't have as many applicants as we wish we had. There is fall planning that needs to be accomplished and a complex schedule that needs to be managed. We have all kinds of pressures and decisions and challenges to face.

But for now we also have fresh peaches. We got a whole box - 24 luscious pounds - well less than that now - they've been around for several days. There are plenty left. The week looks good for lots of wonderful eating and we've got enough to share.

Certainly all of those problems will be solved little by little, one at a time. The problems that cannot be solved do not need to define our lives. The things which are beyond our control will be endured or dealt with at the time. And there is no gain in worrying about "what if." I think that the time has arrived to eat peaches and enjoy the goodness of this life. "Taste and see that the Lord is good."

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August 5, 2009 – Calm



The technology of photography has changed a great deal in the span of my career. Knowing that there was a value in the use of media for Christian Education, Ross Snyder teamed up with Life photographer Archie Lieberman to lead a class in using photographs to assist people in identifying and understanding meaning. This was back in the 1970's when we were going to seminary. Participation in the class meant spending several hours a week in a darkroom, which was heavily scheduled. I found slots in the early morning that would work for me. I purchased the equipment and chemicals to process my negatives at home to save darkroom time for making prints. It was a complex and cumbersome process and involved using some rather toxic chemicals.

A few years later I learned to develop and mount slides and did a little color processing in a home darkroom.

These days I don't use film. My cameras record images digitally onto computer memory. The images are quickly and easily transferred to my computer where they can be cropped, adjusted, and otherwise edited. We have digital storage, on external drives, that hold 20,000 images and I add to the count almost every day.

A side benefit to this technology is that it is very easy to change the image on my computer's screen. These days, when I am busy inside on a variety of tasks that requires hours sitting in front of the computer, it is good to be able to take small breaks and look at a few images.

It will come as no surprise to readers of this blog that I often choose images of calm waters. The image that greeted me this morning and that accompanies this blog was taken early in the morning recently on the west end of Pactola lake between Silver City and Jenny Gulch. The lake is a popular recreational area, but the west end is a “no wake” area and the lake is big enough that one can have a section to oneself. All it takes is an early start. The other advantage to the early start is the beauty of watching the sunrise over the lake. The lake sits in a deep depression in the hills and so there is plenty of light long before the sun makes it high enough in the ski to clear the hilltops.

Mornings can be very calm in the hills. This time of the year we often have thunderstorms in the evening and the wind will pick up whenever we have convection clouds, which is almost every day. But mornings are typically very calm.

Looking at the image of the still, flat water with the glassy smooth surface and the reflection of the hills and trees, is a very peaceful feeling. It reminds me of my need to find calm and quiet spaces in the midst of everyday life. As much as I might like to paddle every day, it simply isn’t practical. Even though we live relatively close to the lakes, there are deadlines to meet, chores to be completed, and people who need care. I’m lucky in that I can often paddle weekly, sometimes a couple of times a week. And I have the photographs to remind me of the experience.

Paddling is a form of praying for me. I start by getting settled in the boat, stretching and taking a few gentle strokes to move away from the shore. For some reason, it is easier to arrange the spray skirt and arrange my gear while floating a few feet away from the shore. I can divert my attention away from the location of the boat and just sit and relax. After paddling for ten for fifteen minutes, I begin to clear my mind of the usual troubles and focus my attention on the things that are near at hand. Often I find myself paying attention to my breathing and counting my paddle strokes.

Meanwhile, my eyes are having a feast. I am able to look in all directions and from the perspective of sitting at water level beauty surrounds me on any lake or puddle. There is a sense of God’s closeness and care for this world that is a part of every place. Sitting on the lake, I become more aware of what is there all along.

Paddling doesn’t replace my need for communal worship. If anything, it heightens my desire to worship with others. There is a desire to share the goodness of paddling, but there is also a realization that being alone with God is only one part of a full and complete relationship. Often I experience God’s call for my life and engagement in the church when I am paddling. Sometimes, I can renew that commitment by a few moments of quietness looking at a picture of the lake.

The Biblical prophet Elijah often had trouble discerning God’s call for his life. He lived such an exciting adventure with show downs and battles with civil and religious

authorities. He was constantly on the move and often in trouble. Late in his career he discovered that he often missed the voice of God in the loud, wild and exciting times. Once, while holed up in a cave, he experienced an earthquake and whirlwind and a fire in close succession. He expected to discover God's power and presence in each of these natural phenomenon. But he did not. God's voice came to him in the calm that followed all of the other activities.

There are many ways in which I am not at all like Elijah, not the least of which is that I am no prophet. But I do remember Elijah's experience in listening for God's call when my life is filled with busy and overwhelming activity. Sometimes you have to seek out the "still, small voice of calm."

I am extremely fortunate to live in a place with such easy access to calm waters. I hope that others can also find places of calm in their lives.

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August 6, 2009 – Clouds



Most of our lives we've lived pretty close to hills or mountains. The tendency of the hollows to hold moisture in the early day, the wind to create mountain effect updrafts, and the uneven terrain to create uneven heating of the air all result in hills and mountains being excellent cloud factories. They don't have the moisture potential of the oceans, but oceans tend to heat evenly, so the clouds tend not to rise quite so high as they do when they develop over hills and mountains.

When I was studying for my private pilot's license, I had to memorize the different kinds of clouds and their names. The Black Hills would be a good place to take the pictures for illustrations for clouds, because in the course of the year we see excellent examples of all different kinds of clouds.

But the routine on hot summer afternoons is cumulus clouds developing into cumulonimbus. These are also known as vertically developed clouds. They are the product of thermal convection or frontal lifting, both conditions common in our area in the summer. Out over the prairies, these clouds can reach a height of 39,000 feet. With cloud bottoms in the 7,000 foot range in our area that is 32,000 feet of cloud with lots of vertical action within the cloud. Just the condensation of the water vapor within the cloud releases a tremendous amount of energy.

In the spring, these clouds are more likely to be really full of moisture. This time of the year they tend to have less actual water inside. When the clouds develop sufficient height, they can start to form ice crystals at the top which descend, collecting more

moisture as they do so and then re-ascend within the cloud. Enough trips and significant hail can develop. Lately, however, the clouds are forming without as much moisture. Instead of transporting water and ice up and down within the cloud, they tend to produce a bit more wind and sometimes incredible cloud to ground lightning. An August light show in the hills is at once beautiful and terrifying. We know that each lightning strike is a potential fire and without lots of rain to go with the storm, the likelihood of the fire spreading increases.

So, sometime around 4 p.m. every day, we start looking at the sky. Last night we weren't seeing the big dark clouds in the sky, There were some puffy cumulus clouds that might continue to develop as they move out over the badlands and the prairie. We might have been looking at thunderstorms for eastern Nebraska, but there wasn't much in store for us. We heard a few rumblings and had a small shower around bedtime, but we didn't have a real storm.

Watching clouds was a summer pastime when I was growing up. There were a few glorious summers after I was old enough for a paper route and before I started mowing a lot of lawns, when my work day was over by 7 a.m. each day. I had the rest of the day to explore, play in the river, build tree houses, read books, invent games, tease my brothers, jump on the trampoline and in general let the time pass at its own pace. There were many summer afternoons when we would lie on the platform of our treehouse looking up into the clouds. Sometimes I would imagine that I could fly among the clouds - a fantasy that faded when I learned how incredibly powerful cumulus clouds can be and what a good idea it is for light aircraft to stay away from them. Sometimes I just looked at the various cloud shapes and let my mind wander.

My eye is a bit more practiced these days, but the fascination with clouds hasn't diminished.

The plains are full of amateur and professional storm chasers who make a point to follow the big clouds using whatever tools they can to try to be in a position to photograph a tornado or witness its power and action. They have contributed extensively to our understanding of storm behavior and may one day produce the methodology for accurate storm prediction. The development of Doppler radar has advanced the science of predicting storms a great deal and NOAA's network of weather radio stations gives those with weather radios warnings and watches and other information in a timely manner.

But there is nothing that will substitute for watching the clouds without an agenda.

Two things used to encourage us to abandon our tree house when I was a kid, heavy rain and high winds. In my memory the latter was more frequently a cause for a retreat down the tree than the former. More often than not, however, we just watched the clouds until we got the idea to do something different. There were other scientific

experiments to undertake in those days, such as estimating the rate of descent of a filled water ballon and determining the angle of release when someone walked by the tree. We also invented several different forms of river rafts, usually involving inner tubes and rope.

Sometimes these days I look at the clouds and remember those days. And I wonder how many children in our summer camp, sports scheduled, lesson crowded society have time to just lay on their backs and look at the clouds. I hope that there are still significant numbers of them. The freedom to think what they want when they want and to invent projects and activities with limited resources and very little access to shopping all help to make them more creative.

And last night there really was a cloud that looked just like the head and face of a bear aimed right at the sun. By the time I got my camera it had disappeared. You'll have to take my word for it.

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August 7, 2009 – Gray Day



Yesterday was one of those days when things weren't working out as planned for a lot of the people visiting the hills. The day started out gray and foggy with scattered rain showers. It wasn't the best weather for riding motorcycles. The fog didn't lift until nearly noon. Mount Rushmore isn't as much fun when you can't see the faces. There was quite a bit of talk around town about one of the biggest concerts of the rally being cut short when Aerosmith lead singer Steven Tyler fell off the stage during the performance and injured his neck, back and shoulder. At least one of the concerts in their planned tour will be rescheduled to allow some time for the singer to recuperate.

When I stopped by the store to purchase a gallon of milk, I met a man whose dream vacation to Yellowstone National Park was being cut short. Their motorhome broke down outside of Rapid City and had to be towed for repairs. Yesterday was their third day of waiting. Without their motorhome they had no place to stay and the motels are all full with the rally crowd. They were camping in a "for sale" home that belonged to a friend of a friend of someone who worked at the shop where their motorhome was being repaired. The unexpected expenses and the lost days were forcing them to re-think their vacation. They had a loaner car from the repair shop and they had toured the Black Hills, which was not originally a part of the planned vacation. If the motorhome is finished today they would still have four days to visit Yellowstone and four days to drive back home. He was philosophical about the change in plans, but I could tell that he was disappointed.

For those of us who live in the hills, the gray day was a sort of mid-August treat. The cooler weather was a break from August heat, the moisture was welcomed by lawns and gardens throughout the hills, and the gentle rain was just what the forest needed as we face the potential of a dangerous fire season. The forest service got the upper hand on the small fires that were set by lightning the night before and the rain quieted the rumble of motorcycles for a couple of hours in the morning.

I am sure it is a matter of perspective. Had I been sleeping in a pup tent in an open field that becomes a campground with the addition of porta potties during the rally and awakened to mud outside the tent flat, a wet motorcycle, and not enough room in the tent to get on all of my rain gear before stepping outside, my day would have started in a different mood. Were I the organizer of a tour through the hills for 50 or more motorcycles trying to decide whether to cancel or postpone, I would have been in a different mood.

As it was, I took some delight in the change of weather. It didn't cramp my style at all.

At a meeting in the morning, a colleague said, "There always has to be at least one rainy day during the rally." His lifetime of living in the hills had taught him that the weather here is always unpredictable and that the people who get the most enjoyment out of this place are those who have flexible plans. The rally is such a big event, involving so many people, that it defies rigid scheduling any way. It is hard to predict how long it will take to drive across town, let alone know how much traffic one will encounter on any specific Interstate ramp or at any given intersection.

Several years ago I visited a man from Boston in the hospital who was recovering from a badly broken leg and other injuries sustained in a motorcycle accident. The accident had occurred on the Interstate ramp as he was exiting for Sturgis, so he didn't make it to the rally. It was his third failed attempt. Two years prior he had started out from Boston to attend the rally on an older motorcycle that was plagued with problems. He made it to Chicago before being forced to sell the motorcycle and take the bus back home. The next year he started out with a newer cycle and made it all the way to Wall, within 100 miles of Sturgis when the cycle broke down. Repairs couldn't be made during the rally, which he attended with a rental car. The end of his vacation forced him to abandon the bike and fly home. The bike was eventually sold and a new one purchased. It was the brand new bike that he was driving when he had the accident that resulted in his having to spend his vacation in the hospital. As I visited him in the hospital, I said, "You've certainly had your share of bad luck with trying to attend the rally." "I know," he said excitedly. "What could possible go wrong next year?"

Although I asked him to call me if he came back the next year, I never heard from him again and so I don't know the rest of the story. It is possible that he decided on another way to spend his vacation. It is possible that he had a problem free trip to rally the next year. I just don't know.

What I do know is that people are forced to change their plans all the time around here. The ones with the smiles on their faces are the ones who learn to adapt to changes. Life isn't always predictable. And there are plenty of things in life over which we don't have any control. We can't change the weather. Even in the areas where we do have control, we are prone to mistakes. We are human and we don't always make the best choices. A moment of distraction or inattention can create a world of troubles.

Life isn't about avoiding the gray days. It is about learning to enjoy them.

I hope your day is meaningful regardless of the weather.

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August 8, 2009 – The Beauty of the Skies



Folliott S. Pierpoint was a classics teacher who lived in southwest England. He was deeply involved in the Anglican church and was active in a traditionalist high church movement whose members were called Tractarians because of their research in ancient tracts and texts to authenticate the Church of England's roots in the early church. He published a couple of books of poems, the most well-known of which appeared as "The Chalice of Nature and Other Poems," and was re-published in 1864 as "Songs of Love." His lyrics were used in several hymnals of the late 19th century. His most famous hymn was written as a poem that is now known for its first line, "For the Beauty of the Earth."

Almost every English-speaking Christian has encountered this beloved hymn. And we all know the first line. It is the second line about which we are unclear. It appears in contemporary hymnals as "For the beauty of the skies," and "For the glory of the skies," in about equal measure. It also is printed in hymnals as "For the splendor of the skies." It is possible that there are different versions of the poem that came from Pierpoint's pen. He originally wrote the poem at age 29 and it was very popular within his life time. He lived another half century after the poem's first publication and saw it through several revisions and additions.

Although I don't know this for certain, I like to believe that Pierpoint himself had trouble coming up with just the right adjective to describe the skies. There are a thousand adjectives that could be used. At least around here the skies are lovely, charming, dramatic, exquisite, magnificent, grand, impressive, gorgeous, wonderful as well as

beautiful. As I added to my collection the pictures I took at sunrise yesterday, I realized how many pictures I have taken from the same vantage point of sunrises. It is a common experience for me to look at the morning sky and see the beauty as deserving of a photograph.

The skies around here can be powerful as was again demonstrated last night when a line of thundershowers produced 1 to 3 inch hailstones just east of Sturgis. Actually there was a line of hail storms that ran right through the Buffalo Chip campground and the Full Throttle Saloon - billed as the world's largest biker bar. Windows were broken, cars were smashed and dozens of motorcycles were damaged. At least two people were transported to the hospital with injuries from the hail. One man was unconscious after being struck in the head when a hailstone tore through his tent. Traffic backed up on the Interstate highway and there were several minor accidents during the storm. At least two highway patrol vehicles were damaged by the hail. Some of the vehicles on the Interstate were damaged so much that they had to be towed.

We live about 40 miles from the Buffalo Chip and we were completely unaware of the storm until I checked the news on the computer. We had been watching dramatic and beautiful clouds as the thundershowers went both north and south of our place. We got a pretty good light show from the lightning and a small shower, but no severe weather.

The adjective one chooses to describe the skies might change with wether, mood, time of day, and a thousand other factors. The five day weather forecast for Bath, England, where Folliott S. Pierpoint lived much of his life calls for cloudy skies with the only chance of a bit of sunshine coming late this afternoon. Otherwise they are in for a grey and rainy week. One suspects the weather was a bit different the day that Pierpoint penned his famous poem.

We get gray days and we have a bit of fog and occasional gloomy weather, but if I were to have to leave this place, one of the ways I would describe it is a place of beautiful skies. My collection of photographs demonstrates how enamored I am with the skies around here.

It is hard to know the full impact of beauty in our lives. From a strictly mechanical perspective, it is possible to sustain life with far less beauty. Decorations are optional in a lot of settings and people survive in cities where their only view of the sky is straight up. There are functional explanations of some aspects of beauty. Flowers have bright colors in order to attract insets who pollinate them and enable their survival. Butterflies have bright colors to be able to live amongst the flowers with reduced visibility to predators. But understanding the function of color doesn't explain the great varieties and subtle variations in color that appear in the natural world. Much of the beauty of this world is pure extravagance.

What is remarkable is that this world has creatures who can see and appreciate the beauty. I don't know how much the beauty of this world is a factor in the enjoyment of life for other living things, but it is a big deal for me. We human beings thrive on the beauty that surrounds us.

So, I don't have the right word to describe the skies. I sing the hymn with "beauty" "glory" and "splendor." And each of those words falls short of the dramatic wonder and awe that I experience simply by looking to the skies.

Certainly it is sufficient to cause us to raise a hymn of praise.

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August 9, 2009 – Fixing Things



I had a couple of hours yesterday to work on our camper. Part of the agenda was making repairs for the damage that I did to the camper when I backed it into the corner of the garage. I had to remove two lift struts, straighten them and re-install them. Then I had to prep the canvas, cut patches of new canvas, apply adhesive and glue down the patches. These patches had been temporarily done with duct tape in order for us to make our trip, so I had to make really sure that all of the duct tape adhesive was cleaned off before roughing up the canvas to apply the permanent adhesive.

The people who get the most enjoyment out of recreational vehicles are the ones who enjoy making repairs. You take any home, even a well-built brand-new home, and live in it and soon it will need repairs. Drive a home down the highway, over rough places, up into the hills and down to the beach and before long you'll have loose hinges and shaken doors and lots of other repairs that are needed.

There are shops with full time staff that repair recreational vehicles, but repairs are often needed when the equipment is far from any shop and the people who hire others to make repairs spend a lot of time driving back and forth to the shop.

As I worked on the camper, I made a mental list of a few of the repairs that I had made in the last week. There is a kayak in my garage with the keel removed waiting to have it re-bedded and seated. After that occurs, there will be a bit of touch up paint to apply and the boat will be ready for water tests. I fixed a drawer that had the bottom panel separated from the back. I put a magnetic door hold device back together after a bolt

had shaken loose. I swapped out the hard drive in a laptop computer. And laptop computers have really, really small screws. There are probably plenty of other repairs that have been made in the last week. Not bad for a minister. We have a reputation of being inept with tools and incompetent with repairs.

It reminded me of our Vacation Bible School in July that had the theme “Gadget’s Garage.” There were skits that used a garage project as an example of how God works in the world. We also had a room filled with tools and projects for the children to get hands on experience. Various members of the congregation made presentations on tool use, bicycle repair, disassembly, and other topics. The program was a hit. Making repairs is a part of life and learning to make repairs is seen by the children as part of growing up.

Another part of growing up, I suppose is learning that even though one gains good skills, there are some things that cannot be repaired.

Around the time I was working on my camper a motorcycle slid off an Interstate ramp in Rapid City and the driver was killed in the accident. We had been patting ourselves on the back because prior to that accident there had been no fatalities at the rally. Although there were two riders killed on the road on the way to the Rally, we had been spared fatalities at the actual event and were hoping to send all of the riders home without excessive injuries.

Surgeons and therapists can enable recovery from incredible injuries, but sometimes the damage is too great. Health care is not magic. Our bodies will take incredible abuse and survive, but we are not immune to injury and none of us will live forever.

In time the intense pain of grief that the family of the man who was killed are feeling will dull a little. The amazing process of grief will bring healing to them. People never get over significant losses like this, but they do survive them. Forever changed, their lives do go on and they become capable of living and loving again.

As humans we encounter limits. But we also discover that our limits are only the limits of our humanity. Things are not always what they seem. The end is not as final as it appears to us. It is one of the hardest lessons of our faith. We want a miracle. We want things to work out for us. We read the stories of Jesus bringing healing to sick persons and we want healing for the sick persons we know. And sometimes faithful people question their faith when healing doesn’t occur on their terms.

The most difficult lessons to teach our children are the big lessons about recovery in the midst of pain, healing at life’s most difficult points, and resurrection from real death. Love never dies. What we think is the end is not the end at all. These are hard lessons to convey and it takes more than one Vacation Bible School experience to learn them.

Our prayer is that we will teach our children enough that when the really big challenges occur they will be in a position to develop faith sufficient to meet the challenge.

Maybe that is why I enjoy repairing things when I have some time off. There are so many things in my work for which there are no “fixes.” I can’t repair grief. I can’t prevent loss. My job is to walk with the people I serve through whatever occurs in their lives as a symbol of the reality that we are never alone.

It is likely that the ability to fix things isn’t an important part of being a minister. More important, I think, is being honest about limits and helping people see beyond the human events to the great story of God’s relationship with the people of this world. Maybe we are more receptive to God’s presence in the moments when we are not able to fix the things that go wrong in our lives.

So our hearts go out to the grieving family. Hope won’t come easy for them. But I pray that they will somehow learn that this is not the end. God hasn’t forgotten about them. There is more grace and beauty, faith, hope and love yet to be revealed.

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August 10, 2009 – Elusive Rainbows



The weather of the past few days can be best described as “scattered showers.” It will be raining in one part of town and sunny in another. Sometimes it seems to be raining on one side of the house and not on the other. The total precipitation for the first nine days of the month is just over an inch, which is about double the normal for August. This isn’t our rainy season.

The little showers have provided a lot of glimpses of rainbows. Some are quite spectacular. But the winds have kept the clouds moving and it is hard to get a picture of the rainbows. Rainbows are difficult to photograph in the first place. Most of the ones we’ve seen in the past few days have been noticed while driving. By the time the car is stopped the vantage point has changed and what remains is a memory, not a photograph.

People have long interpreted rainbows as signs of blessing. In many different cultures, rainbows are seen as links or bridges between heaven and earth. Some stories tell of rainbows as the paths traveled by people going to heaven or the pathway of God coming to earth. Many ancient creation stories tell of the rainbow as a special sign from God.

The story of Noah and the ark, common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, designates the rainbow as the sign of a covenant, a holy promise, that God has made with people. God promises not to use catastrophic judgment to destroy all of the people of the earth. The people promise faithfulness to God. The rainbow is set in the sky as a sign of the

covenant that has been made and the intention of God to reconcile with people even when they fail to be faithful.

From a scientific point of view, rainbows are a product of the properties of drops of rain suspended in air and of the ability of the human eye to perceive color. Light from the sun is bent when passing through suspended moisture to cause a spectrum of light to appear in the sky. The colors appear in a multicolored arc with red on the outside and violent on the inside. The number of colors that are perceived vary with the conditions and the perspective of the viewer. Newton designated seven colors, which have been memorized by generations of schoolchildren: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. (Remember ROY G. BIV?)

In real experience, it is difficult to distinguish all of the colors from many points of view. The primary perception is more often of three colors that fade into each other. Red fades to yellow which fades to violet, with other colors in between. Variations in perspective as well as variations in our optical nerves change our perceptions. Although many people can look at the same rainbow, no two are seeing exactly the same thing. The elusiveness of the phenomenon presents a challenge to collecting accurate data for science. But scientists have had fairly accurate understandings of the phenomenon since the mid 1600's. The philosopher Rene Descartes published a study of rainbows in 1637. Struck by the fact that rainbows appear in smaller quantities of water, such as fountains, he concluded that the size of the rainbow as dependent upon the number of droplets of water one was seeing. Large quantities of droplets, such as in clouds create a larger bow. He also concluded that the shape was a product of the shape of the droplets themselves. The curved surface of the water bent the light rays in a curved fashion. He conducted experiments where he suspended various spheres and studied how sunlight reflected from them.

Subsequent observations and studies have revealed that variations in rainbows have to dow with the size and shape of the drops of water suspended in the atmosphere. In general large drops give bright rainbows with well defined colors and smaller droplets produce rainbows with overlapping colors. It is possible to see a narrow bow that is nearly white when light passes through fine droplets.

Patient and technically competent photographers have produced brilliant and beautiful photographs of rainbows. Our amateur attempts often result in dim images that do not convey the full brilliance of the experience.

Whatever the technical specifications of the rainbows, we've had a lot of glimpses of them as showers traveled through our area.

Beauty is often like that - elusive and short lived. It doesn't detract from the experience to know that beauty won't last forever. Things are no less beautiful when we know that we cannot hang on to the experience or the feeling. In fact it may be that shortness of

time adds to the intensity of the experience. Knowing that we can't always see rainbows gives us pause to notice and appreciate them when they do occur. Knowing that this life will come to an end gives us a sense of how precious the days and moments that we have really are.

So I keep trying to take a picture or two of rainbows, just to remember the experience. And, sometimes, I just look at a rainbow without trying to capture it, just enjoying the experience as it occurs. How grateful I am to live in a world with such beauty.

In my mind I carry an old proverb that I heard somewhere in my childhood. "Rainbow at night, shepherd's delight; rainbow in morning, shepherds take warning." I presume that in the northern hemisphere with the prevailing winds seeing the rainbow in the evening means that the storm is receding because the light source is from the west and most storms move across this area from west to east. Similarly seeing the rainbow in the morning means that one is looking west into the approaching storm.

So I'll add a line to the proverb to describe the phenomenon we've been observing the past couple of days. "Rainbow at mid day, change is on the way." It may not be accurate, but I suspect that the weather still has the ability to surprise me.

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August 11, 2009 – You are the stars, and the world is watching



Photo from etonline.com.

In Costa Rica, the Dia de la Madre is Saturday. The Costa Rican version of Mother's Day is a big deal in a country where mothers are the heart of the family. The day is probably second only to Christmas in terms of consumer goods sold to be gifts. But gifts can detract from the deeper meanings of the holiday. The truth is that one day a year simply isn't enough to offer our gratitude to mothers and grandmothers. And as people in Central America prepare for a day of celebration, they join with people around the world in mourning the death of one of the grandmothers of an international movement.

Eunice Kennedy Shriver, the founder and grandmother of the Special Olympics movement died early this morning. She was 88 years old. Her husband, her five children and their spouses and all of her 19 grandchildren were with her when she died, according to a statement from Special Olympics.

Even before she founded the Special Olympics in 1968, she was a tireless advocate for persons with disabilities. Growing up with a sister who was mentally disabled, she persuaded her family to break with the traditional silence around disabilities and to go public with their family's journey. Her work with and advocacy for people with disabilities wasn't the entire story of her life, but she gave a significant portion of her time and energy to making the world a better place for people with intellectual disabilities.

The Special Olympics movement began with a day camp in Shriver's back yard. That day camp, dubbed "Camp Shriver," grew into an international movement with the first

official Special Olympics held in Chicago in 1968. Mayor Richard Dailey commented after attending that event, “The world will never be the same after this.” He was right.

The news media will fill with tributes to this remarkable woman as news spreads across the land, and there is little that I can add here. But I am just one of millions of people who have been inspired by her to give a portion of my time as a volunteer working with and being inspired by persons who live with disabilities.

At the 1987 Special Olympics World Games, Mrs. Shriver addressed the athletes from around the world with these words:

“You are the stars and the world is watching you. By your presence you send a message to every village, every city, and every nation. A message of hope. A message of victory. The right to play on any playing field? You have earned it. The right to study in any school? You have earned it. The right to hold any job? You have earned it. The right to be anyone’s neighbor. You have earned it.”

It is the truth. We have many neighbors who live with disability as a constant fact of their lives. They contribute to the quality of our life together. They live and work and play in our communities as an integral part of the fabric of our society.

But it wasn’t always so. Families used to hide members with mental disabilities. Society created institutions that hid them away from the mainstream. The promise and potential contributions of countless individuals were hidden behind high walls and windows with bars. Though they committed not crime they were virtually incarcerated because of the ignorance of the community.

Such monumental changes do not occur without leaders. Such transformations in society do not happen without courage. Three of Eunice’s brothers chose politics as their avenue of service to this nation. Two of them were assassinated. The gifts of her family to our nation and to the world are immeasurable. But it is possible that the greatest legacy of the Kennedy family is the gift of opening the eyes of the world to the potential of our friends and family members and neighbors who have intellectual disabilities.

The family reports that Eunice’s exceptional leadership grew out of a very close bond and deep relationship with her sister Rosemary. When the world was shunning those with mental disabilities, Eunice listened to her sister. When the world was hiding those whose brains worked differently, Eunice was proud of her sister. She saw grace and beauty and potential where others saw tragedy.

Her perspective proved to be the truth that the world needed. It is not just the contributions of the geniuses who advance culture, it is the gifts of all of the people who bring us into the light of day.

The tasks to which Eunice Kennedy Shriver dedicated her life are unfinished. There is still much more legislation to write, support to be developed, barriers to be overcome. But like mothers and grandmothers everywhere, one of the gifts she gave to the movement she started was life. The movement will continue and will grow. As she said in that speech in South Bend Indiana so long ago, “You are the stars and the world is watching.” It never was about her. It has always been about the people.

Senator Ted Kennedy said of his sister, “She has made such an extraordinary difference in the lives of people around the world.”

Some people are a bright light against the backdrop of an often dark and cruel world. They shine in ways that gives light to others. Eunice Kennedy was more than a bright light. She enabled the light of a million stars to shine. And the world will never be as dark as it once was.

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August 12, 2009 – Meetings



Part of the life of a church is that we have a lot of meetings. In a congregation like ours, where the members are in charge of all of the decisions, there need to be meetings to coordinate work, plan events, adjust budgets, resolve conflicts and set priorities. During the summer, the number of meetings at our church decreases as some committees and departments take a summer break and others plan ahead to give members more time away from routine business. But even in our schedule of decreased meetings, there are some meetings that are necessary.

The Department of Stewardship and Budget meets monthly year round. Summer is an especially important time to monitor financial circumstances. Income decreases with attendance during the summer and many expenses continue throughout the summer. Cash flow can get tight in an institution where a couple of percentage points is thousands of dollars.

Our Church Board is the coordinating group in the church, and serves as a clearinghouse for programs and priorities. It is the place where various parts of the church connect with other parts of the church. I am often surprised at how people who are very involved in some parts of the church are largely unaware of what is happening in other areas. The Church Board is a meeting that tries to keep the big picture in mind.

Even so, meetings can get frustrating. It is not at all unusual for us to arrive at a meeting without the information we need to make a decision. Sometimes there are opinions that need to be shared even when the decision seems obvious. Often there are concerns

raised that were unknown before the meeting. The Board works off of a prepared agenda and we have a tradition of excellent leadership for our meetings. But leaders are often surprised by how much discussion a particular item on the agenda causes.

Much of the leadership of a church comes from people whose passion and energy is not focused on meetings. Most people would rather get involved and get the job done than attend meetings and talk about what needs to be done. Planning and policy consume energy. Engaging in hands on mission and ministry produces energy.

The best meetings are ones that have a clear purpose and an achievable agenda. When people leave the meeting they have a sense of having accomplished something. But not all meetings can be like that. Sometimes major and even minor decisions require a certain amount of talking and questioning before we are able to move forward. Sometimes what appears to be a single decision sets off an avalanche of other decisions.

At last night's meeting the Board received a report and a recommendation about replacing the church's dishwasher. The large commercial dishwasher in the church is now 50 years old and the current round of needed repairs will cost a minimum of $2,000. After considering several options, a recommendation was taken to the board that the dishwasher be replaced with a new machine, one that is designed for a lower volume of dishes. There were questions about the number of trays that could be processed in dishwashers for which the proposers were ready. Soon the group was discussing the condition of the tile in the kitchen, the layout of stainless steel counters and other features of the room. It was clear that we needed to do a bit more research to make sure that we were getting the right dishwasher and that it will be placed in the correct location. And raising the money for the dishwasher might involve raising money for additional kitchen projects. Within a couple of minutes we knew that we could not make a decision at the meeting. Still, there is a sense of urgency about the project. We are having trouble recruiting volunteers to wash dishes by hand each week. Even though the group knew they couldn't make a decision, they didn't want to just go on to the next item of agenda because they wanted to be sure that they were moving forward. The members of the board did not want to be obstructing the process of getting a new dishwasher.

It took a lot of talking and a plan emerged. Today e-mails will be sent, another meeting will be called, and we will move forward with the project. But last night a meeting that we thought would be over in an hour stretched out to nearly double that amount of time.

The people of the church are generous with their time. And we want to honor that generosity by not wasting their gift. Sometimes, however, things just take longer than we had imagined.

Building a community is an on-going process. We never get the process perfected. We are always learning. Christian community takes place with real people in the real world. We are constantly in need of forgiveness. So we live as imperfect people in an imperfect community and work together to make the improvements that we are able.

A colleague once commented, “Jesus only worked with the disciples for three years. Who knows what would have happened if he had needed to put up with them for a decade?”

I am grateful for the dedicated service of church leaders and I continue to look for ways to improve our processes. Some things, however, just take time. And some things just take another meeting.

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August 13, 2009 – Tree



For years, it was the tradition in our congregation for a family or a group of families to go out into the hills and cut a fresh tree for our sanctuary during Advent and Christmas. It was decorated with white lights and stood near the front of the room as part of our decorations for worship. For many of us, that was a wonderful tradition. A tree, in order to look good in that big room, had to be tall. Families would keep an eye out for nice looking trees all year round and usually by the time to cut the tree, we knew which one we would use. Several years, trees that had become too large for their location were removed from the lawns of members and donated to be the Christmas tree at the church.

Then one Christmas the fire marshall gently said, “You know, it is illegal to have a live tree in a public building that does not have a fire sprinkler system. I’m not going to be a scrooge and make you take your tree down just before Christmas, but next year, I will notice if you have a live tree.” So the tradition ended unceremoniously. A member of the Department of Building, Equipment and Grounds purchased the tall trees from the Christmas display of the store where she worked and we started the tradition of an artificial tree.

The problem is that we didn’t have the emotional attachment or enthusiasm for the artificial tree. There was continuing discussion about whose job it was to put up and take down the tree. We got haphazard about decorating. Last year the lights didn’t get put on the tree until the week just before Christmas. And nobody knew whose job it was to take down the tree and put it into storage for the next year.

So, after much discussion, the Department of Worship "adopted" the sanctuary tree. They decided that they would take responsibility for getting the tree up and decorated. Soon after they agreed to take on that job a volunteer surfaced in the church who wanted to be a part of the decorating. This volunteer has, in the past, donated some beautiful creche figurines for the sanctuary and enjoys both the season and the process of decorating. The department, eager to see something different, agreed to let the volunteer head up the decorations for the year.

Then we all forgot about it. Christmas is a long way away.

But the volunteer didn't forget about it. And she decided that it was time to get a new artificial tree for the sanctuary. She purchased and donated a new tree. She sent me an e-mail saying to look out for a box.

I didn't have to look out. It was impossible to ignore. The freight company delivered for large boxes weighing about 100 pounds each. They were shrink wrapped and sitting on a pallet in the entryway of the church when I arrived at work one morning this week. WOW!

Yes, WOW.

There are several reactions to this situation. One is a deep sense of gratitude. The generosity of the member who donated such a significant gift is overwhelming. It is a truly wonderful and large gift to the congregation. We will need to think carefully about how to thank her for her generosity.

Then I began to think, "Where are we going to store the tree when it is not in use." I even considered the possibility of just putting the tree up year round and having seasonal decorations to add to the tree. Well, that probably isn't the best idea. I took the question of storage to the Church Board and they discussed at length the problem of storage in general around the church. One member thought we ought to look into building a larger storage shed or a garage. Another thought that we ought to consider a modest addition to the building for storage. The meeting went on longer than we expected, and there was a lot of other business and everyone went home without offering a solution to the storage problem.

Sunday is coming and the entryway of the church isn't the right place for the boxes on Sunday. And even if we did leave them there, they would be in the way of the rummage sale that is coming next week.

The church staff contemplated the problem yesterday morning. We decided on a temporary location to store the boxes.

Did I mention that they weigh about 100# each. And they are big. I can load them on a hand truck and wheel them around the building, but I'll need to recruit help to take them up or down stairs.

It reminds me of the old advice, "Be careful what you wish for, your wish might come true."

At the death of King David, his son Solomon rose to the throne. Solomon had some different religious notions than David and he became king with a different relationship with God than his father. He decided that in addition to the advice he had received from his father, he ought to make a special offering to God and try to figure out how to be the king. So he prayed to God.

God answered, "What do you wish?"

Now there is a dilemma. When God is asking what do you want, what do you say. God has the power to grant whatever God chooses. Solomon needed to say the right thing.

The Bible not only reports Solomon's request, but it also reports God's response. God grants the request in part because of what Solomon didn't request. He didn't request riches. He didn't request a long life. He didn't request the death of his enemies.

He prayed for the wisdom to discern what to request.

It was sort of a trick answer to a tricky question.

God throws in long life and riches with a portion of wisdom. And Solomon has been known throughout history as a wise king. But his rule ended up being quite destructive to the things that are most important to Israel. His attempts to consolidate power and wealth and knowledge and religious practice into one place set up the circumstances for the in-fighting that eventually led to the downfall of Israel. His insatiable appetite to control everything was more than a problem for his wives, of which he had too many. It was a problem for all of Israel that festered and festered until Israel finally rejected the notion of monarchy forever a few generations later.

Be careful what you ask for. You may get what you ask and more than you can handle.

I doubt that a new Christmas tree, no matter how large, will lead to the downfall of the congregation. We've faced problems more challenging than where to store a few boxes. But it may be a good time to hold back on our requests of God.

Perhaps praying for the wisdom to discern what to request is the best prayer of all. That's what God thought when Solomon prayed it.

May God grant us wisdom to discern what to ask when we pray. Until then, I think I'll just pray my prayers of gratitude and hold off on the requests for a few days.

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August 14, 2009 – Sunrise



The sun rises every morning over the land where we live. There is nothing new about this. It has been happening ever since the formation of the planet. But most of the sunrises have occurred without witnesses. For eons the earth rotated and the light of the sun appeared to come and go as part of the planet faced the sun and the other part was away from it. Even after humans appeared on this planet, most of the surface of the earth remained uninhabited and much of the beauty that exists was unwitnessed.

Sheridan Lake, in the hills, has a much shorter history. For most of time the area where the reservoir is today was a rather narrow canyon with a small creek at the bottom. There was a small mining camp alongside the creek that was named Sheridan and was the first county seat of Pennington County. The county seat was moved to Rapid City in 1878, the same year the 1st Congregational United Church of Christ was organized in that place. The town of Sheridan was abandoned and, in 1939, an earthen dam was constructed and the reservoir began to fill behind the dam.

For most of the year, the view of the sunrise over the lake is hidden by the hills that surround the lake. Those in the campgrounds and the few vacation homes that are scattered around the lake experience the sun as coming up from behind the hills. To see the sunrise on the water requires a boat to travel out toward the middle of the lake. And one has to get an early start.

I was on the lake by 6 a.m. yesterday as the mist was rising. My little kayak and I don't require much fuss to travel to the lake and get launched. The day promised to be warm,

with temperatures into the 90's, but it started cool on the surface of the lake. I was wearing a jacket, something not needed in town. But it was easy to tell that it was the middle of summer. The lake water was as warm as it gets. The birds were getting in plenty of activity in the early morning. They'd be resting at midday.

It felt like I had the lake to myself. And, with a little imagination, it was easy to feel like I was the only witness to the glory of the sunrise.

Of course it is only an illusion. The earth is a big place and the sun is relatively close to the planet. Millions of people were watching the same sunrise, each from their own perspective, each in their own location.

Prayer is often like that. There is one God and the prayers of the people of the earth all are heard by one God regardless of the theology of the one praying. But there is a sense of intimacy that arises when one practices prayer regularly. It is easy to feel as if one is alone with God and that there is something almost exclusive to the relationship that is being formed. God doesn't play favorites. Everyone has equal access through prayer. God is as generous with love as this planet is with beauty. There is enough for everyone and more to spare.

Most days my morning prayers are a part of the routine of my home. I rise before the rest of my family, check out the news of the world, and make time to start my day with my attention focused on God. Some days, however, I head outside to pray. I sit on the deck, go for a walk and, this time of the year, head to the lake for an early paddle a couple of days each week. It is a truth that is older than the most ancient stories of our people. Since there is one God, it doesn't matter what place is chosen to pray. God is in every place. One can pray to God while in motion or from a new place and the same God is as attentive to prayer in any location.

A break in the routine is often good for a relationship. Certainly i benefit from moving my prayers from the basement of my home to the outdoors. In the basement, it is easy to focus on the needs of the world. I scan the headlines and read of the rising death toll in the Taiwan mudslides, the war crimes trials for former Congolese leaders, the fires raging in Northern California and the people evacuated from their homes, the deaths of famous persons, and so much more. My prayers are often a jumble of requests for people in distant locations with needs that seem to be overwhelming. Sometimes, sitting in my comfortable home, surrounded by the news of the day, my heart fills with requests for God.

It is good to head out to the lake for a simpler prayer: "Dear God, this is beautiful!" Praise and thanksgiving are always a part of my prayers, but they become the focus on days when I take time to look at the world from a fresh perspective. There are wonderful and meaningful prayers offered in churches and chapels. But it is also good to pray outdoors.

I have friends who will say things like, “My church is outdoors.” They love the beauty of nature and feel closest to God when they are hiking or skiing or paddling. They often skip the routine of weekly worship and head for the hills instead. I don’t see things the same way as they do. My church is not and has never been a place. My church is a people. And I need to gather with other people to worship God on a regular basis. Although we have the luxury of a beautiful and comfortable building, it is not the address or the building that makes us a church. It is the shared experience, the common history, and the mission and ministry in which we engage that make us a church.

I enjoy moments of solitude with God. But I also need the community of faithful people in order to discern God’s call for my life. There is more to a life of faith than pursuing my own interests and whims.

So I won’t be out on the lake on Sunday morning. I’ll be at the gathering place of my people.

Still, there are times, often early in the morning, when I am alone with God - or at least that is how it feels to me. And I treasure the solitude. Yesterday was one of those mornings. And the warmth of the morning glow is still with me a day later.

How fortunate I am to live in the midst of God’s people and yet be allowed moments alone to pray.

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August 15, 2009 – Rummage



The rummage sale is a week away and there are two classrooms in our building that are filed with donated items. I know that I blog about the rummage sale every time we have one and we have two sales each year. But the amount of merchandise is truly astounding to me. Furniture, appliances, clothing, books, household items, toys, tools - the variety is astounding. And there are many new items in original packaging in addition to lightly and well used items.

On Sunday we'll be setting up the display tables and starting on Monday a crew will be at work every day of the week next week organizing and pricing items. The sale will be held on Friday and Saturday and then we'll put the church back together for worship on Sunday. Each time we have a sale, it seems like a daunting task. And each time the work is accomplished with grace and we go on with our life together.

The rummage sale produces thousands of dollars for mission and ministry and the amount of income from the sale continues to grow. More importantly, the rummage sale provides opportunities for people to work together and for members of the congregation to engage in some hands on work. And the sale prevents useful items from being wasted or thrown into the garbage while providing items at reduced price for those who need or want those items.

The joke around the church is that we keep selling the same merchandise to ourselves over and over. The item that the television advertisement said "you can't live without this" turns out to be something that one can live without, so is donated to the

sale. It looks appealing, so someone buys it to discover, like the 1st owner that it doesn't work quite as well as imagined. The process is repeated again and again. I doubt if there is very much of that going on, however. In truth, we buy enormous amounts of consumer items every year and our houses fill up with all sorts of things that we don't really need.

I recently heard that the amount of real estate that is dedicated to rental storage is ballooning in the United States. The $20 billion per year industry is the fastest growing segment of the commercial real estate sector. We are reluctant to part with our possessions, even when we aren't using them. Acres of land is covered with storage facilities. I'm guilty. Our family has a garage-sized self-storage unit rented. We justify it on the basis of the fact that we are at an "in between" phase of life with our parents having moved out of their homes and our children just getting settled. The truth, however, is that our son and daughter-in-law have just purchased their first home and when we went over the list of items in our storage unit that they would like to have us bring to them, it is a short list that isn't going to reduce the inventory very much.

I'm grateful to the church for having a couple of rummage sales each year. The opportunity to donate items is good for our family. And it needs to be a recurring opportunity because sometimes it takes us a while to decide whether or not to donate an item.

Having fellowship and work space transformed into a retail sale for a couple of days twice a year, is, however, disrupting. It is much harder to get work done in the office during rummage sale week. There are lots of people coming and going, it is harder to make one's way from the front door to the office and there are a variety of requests for information that take time. And the phone has already begun to ring frequently: "Is that rummage sale this week or next?"

Our church has a good reputation for its rummage sales. There are a lot of people in our community who look forward to each sale and who recommend our sale to their friends. The parking lot will be filled with customers a half hour before the doors open on Friday.

We have had serious conversations about building additional storage space on the church grounds. It would be nice to have a large garage to store the rummage prior to the sale. It would avoid the disruption of having classrooms filled with merchandise. And there are many items such as clothing racks that take up substantial space in the building that could be stored elsewhere. Because our building is mostly on one level, we could use hand trucks and dollies to transport items. Currently the racks are stored in the basement and that means a lot of carrying up and down.

On the other hand, I have trouble keeping my garage at home cleaned up. Imagine having another garage at the church to empty out twice a year. Sometimes our

conversations make it seem like we are gluttons for punishment. Do we really want to take on the extra work that additional storage would mean? If we allowed donations of rummage throughout the year, would the rummage become too much for a couple of two-day sales? Is there a limit to the growth of our enterprise? Do we really want our rummage sales to get any bigger? They are all legitimate questions that deserve our consideration as we consider where we want to go as a congregation.

In the meantime, we've got to get those classrooms emptied out and the fellowship hall set up for another great rummage sale.

I expect to be blogging on this topic from time to time for years to come.

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August 16, 2009 – Remember the Firefighters



Photo by Mark Boster - Los Angeles Times

We have had the luxury of several seasons when wildfires were not as big a threat in our corner of the world. Yesterday, as we received much-needed rain, we were grateful to once again have the rain come to continue the recovery of the forest. Of course two years of good moisture means that the fuel loads are building up on the forest floor and an extended hot and dry spell could make conditions ripe for wildfire, but at the moment we are feeling safe and secure.

At the same time, years of dry conditions and huge wildfires in California have made us almost numb to the news of another wildfire in that state. But for the residents of 2,400 homes that were evacuated of which at least 300 are considered to be at immediate risk, there is nothing routine about the current fire. Over ten square miles have burned and there is a lot of fuel and continuing heat in the midst of the fire. With the forecast calling for high winds, high temperatures and a drop in humidity, conditions are ripe for the fire to make another run. Firefighters are stressed and tired and right now there is no end in sight. With containment only at 30% there is a lot of room for the fire to grow.

And the Lockheed fire, burning in the Santa Cruz Mountains is one of at least eleven uncontained wildfires burning across California. The state's budget crisis has resulted in cuts in services across the state, but officials continue to work with local and federal agencies to make sure that the firefighters have the resources they need to continue their work.

It can all seem far away to those of use sitting in the middle of the continent in a patch of forest that seems to be recovering from the worst years of drought. Even the raging bark beetle infestation is slowing as the trees recover health and show increased resistance to insect damage.

But we know, as we watch the images of the California fires on television or the Internet, that the Black Hills National Forest is capable of erupting in fires that could top the national headlines. We have seen fires destroy private homes and threaten communities. We have known the anxious feeling of scanning the sky and watching the smoke plumes grow. We know the sound of the water carrying helicopters and the retardant bombers heading to the fire lines.

Our hearts and our prayers go out to the firefighters as they work long days and catch a bite of food or a bit of sleep whenever and wherever they can, working in dirty and dangerous conditions to protect homes and communities and lives.

The glamor of being a fire fighter goes out within the first couple of days of assignment to a really big fire. Much of the work that needs to be done is intensely physical, carrying heavy loads by foot, walking and running up hill and down, balancing in difficult terrain, and the drudgery of working a shovel line or running a chain saw hour after hour. The risks are real. Fire and smoke are all around. Equipment is more prone to failure in tough conditions. Visibility is reduced and what roads exist aren't the best. And cutting trees is dangerous work in the best of conditions. The protective gear is hot and heavy. The places for sleep are makeshift and the breaks are few and far between.

I've known a number of fire fighters over the years. They all seem to be a bit fascinated with the behavior of fire, a bit addicted to the excitement and rush of adrenalin, and a bit attracted to the outdoors and a rugged life. They tend to be the kind of people who not only hike through the woods and sleep on the ground when they are working, but who hike through the woods and sleep on the ground when they are recreating. A friend in Idaho thinks that the life of fighting fires in the summer and working at a ski resort in the winter is the perfect lifestyle. In a slow fire season he picks up additional work serving as a guide for a white water rafting company. He spends so much of his life traveling and living out of a back pack that he doesn't quite understand the attachment that people get to a single home and living in the same place for years at a time.

But make no mistake about it. He would risk his life to save someone's home. He does it all the time. He has collected too many stories of close calls, of trees falling where they weren't supposed to fall, of parachutes drifting out of the drop zone, and vehicles becoming stuck or disabled by accidents.

There are a lot of folks fighting fire who love their jobs and can't imagine doing anything else. And that is a good thing for our communities.

So today as we rise to another beautiful sunrise and anticipate a lovely summer day in the hills and this evening as we feel the cool breezes and listen to the whisper of the wind in the pine trees, we need to remember the fire fighters slogging it out on the hand lines and developing strategies to fight the huge fires in California. We need to pray for their safety and for the weather to change and end to come to this long, hot fire season.

And I will also be remembering the anxious home owners, sitting the fire out in a shelter or at a friend's home. May the destruction of homes be held to a minimum and may the day soon come for the homeowners to return to their houses.

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August 17, 2009 – Practicing Hospitality



We think of ourselves as a friendly church in a friendly community. And that is how it feels to us. We have a warm feeling about the people who attend our church and we enjoy being with them. One of the joys of our community is the fellowship time following worship. We always have some sort of refreshments: coffee, tea, lemonade, cookies and such. And we enjoy sitting around the tables and visiting.

We rarely think about how that environment feels to a newcomer or a visitor. A lot of our visitors come to our building with family and friends and so they have a built-in companion for the fellowship time. They don't have the dilemma of where to sit because their companion chooses the table. They already have someone they know with whom to visit and who will help with introductions to other people. But some visitors discovered our congregation on the Internet or came on the recommendation of another, but arrived by themselves. They enter this rather large room filled with tables full of talking people, with the refreshments at the far side of the room, and it can feel less than welcoming. How do I fit in? How often will I have to introduce myself? Will anyone talk to me?

Yesterday was a typical day. We had our refreshment time in the midst of a day of busy activities. One of the things on our minds was the need to rearrange all of the furniture in the fellowship area to set up for this week's rummage sale. We wanted to get the furniture moved before we lost all of the volunteers who were in the room.

But there was plenty of hospitality to give and receive before we got to the fellowship hall. Our congregation had several visitors. Some were guests of families, others were attending for different reasons. Some of our guests decided not to stay for the fellowship time, so I was trying to visit with them and make as many connections as possible in the entryway of the church as we were saying good bye. A pastor isn't the best ambassador to visitors in a congregation like ours, because there are a lot of people who are wanting to speak to the pastor right after worship, and conversations tend to be relatively short and are often interrupted.

One set of visitors was a brother and sister pair who had just moved their mother to hospice house. The family has a long history of involvement with our congregation, but the brother lives in another city and the daughter has not been active in our congregation. Part of the reason for their attendance was to do some thinking about end of life issues with their mother. I managed a short conversation with them and set up a time to visit later this week.

But I had a long list of regular members with whom I wanted to touch base. One member had fallen and was able to come to church for the first time since the fall. Another member had a daughter visiting from Texas. Another is assisting with a mission project mid week and we needed to coordinate schedules. The list goes on and on.

Our plan was to allow people time to have refreshments and sit at the tables and after they had finished to have them help us put away the chairs and tables we use for that time. We had recruited teens and parents to help with setting up the larger banquet tables that are used for the rummage sale.

But things did not happen according to that schedule. Some people finished their refreshments and visiting before others. Some of the teens were eager to get their job done and started setting up tables. The chairs needed to be stacked in a place where the tables are usually stored. Chaos ensued. Some people were trying to finish drinking a cup of coffee and found that the table was suddenly gone. Others stood up to greet a friend and found their chair missing when they returned. People were carrying tables and chairs in and out of the room, Carts were being pushed around, and a general sense of excitement reigned.

The results were dramatic. The room got set up for the rummage sale and two classrooms full of rummage were emptied. The work that was accomplished in a couple of hours after worship usually takes a full day with a smaller crew. The organizers of the rummage sale were pleased with all of the work that was accomplished.

But I wonder what it must have felt like to a visitor. It might have felt like we didn't take time to sit and listen. On the other hand, it might have felt like we were an exciting and engaging community, filled with activities and pretty good at working together and

sharing the chores. It might have been just too noisy, too wild, and too crazy for a first time visit. People using walkers and wheelchairs for mobility, even long time members might have felt a bit left out with all of the lifting and carrying. People who like to get involved in doing work and prefer action to talking would have been right at home in the congregation yesterday.

That is the thing about hospitality. It is a fluid experience. Giving and receiving hospitality requires a great deal of flexibility for ever changing circumstances and a wide variety of people. Hospitality is not about learning a specific set of practices and then repeating them over and over. It is about paying attention to another. It is about understanding and respecting the thoughts, feelings, needs and concerns of others.

Making the transition from visitor to member is a more daunting task than just standing up in front of the congregation and repeating the covenant together. It involves becoming known and getting to know others. It involves discovering which activities, projects, ministries and missions are a fit for the skills, talents, generosity and enthusiasm of the individual. It involves the existing community opening itself to being transformed by new ideas, new perspectives and new ways of doing thing.

We didn't get it perfect yesterday. We might have made a few mistakes. That is another thing about our faith. We are practicing. We don't always get it right. We live our faith imperfectly in the midst of a host of busy activities. And along the way we try to learn from our mistakes and to hone our skills. I think we are making some progress. I think that our community is welcoming to our guests and we are learning how to walk with newcomers as they become members. We continue to need practice.

And living together in community gives us an opportunity to practice hospitality every day in a wide variety of circumstances.

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August 18, 2009 – Possessions



Last March some of the possessions of Mahatma Gandhi were sold at auction. It is unclear exactly the path these took from Gandhi's ownership, but sold at auction for $1.8 million were a pair of glasses, a pocket watch, a pair of leather sandals, a bowl and a plate. The sale outranged many in India and set off a flurry of activity to prevent more of Gandhi's items from being sold. The glasses, pocket watch, sandals, bowl and plate not belong to business tycoon Vijay Mallya, listed in Forbes in 2006 as number 746 on the list of the world's 1,000 wealthiest persons. He owns the company that makes Kingfisher beer and Bagpiper whiskey, has a fleet of vintage cars, a stud farm with 200 horses, many palatial residences, yachts and more. Now he owns a few simple possessions of a simple man.

The cost, probably, was not excessive for such a wealthy man. But it was far more than Gandhi had paid for the items.

The inventory of Gandhi's possessions at the time of his death has been reported in a variety of different ways and I am not sure exactly what the total inventory contained. I have seen many pictures that claim to show Gandhi's possessions. The watch and glasses figure prominently in those pictures, but I have seen at least three different styles of sandals, a couple of different sizes of bowls and plates of different materials. Some pictures include a few pieces of simple clothing, some include a spinning wheel.

It probably isn't all that important to know exactly what possessions he had. The world knows that he did not live extravagantly. His simple lifestyle did not focus on the

accumulation of possessions, but upon service to others. His values and integrity were the tools that he had when he frequently laid his life on the line for others.

This week's rummage sale has gotten me to thinking about the difference between the things we need and the things we want. I am not sure that I can always tell the difference between wants and needs. We are surrounded by so many possessions that we often take them for granted. We assume we need things that often are unnecessary.

Comparing my possessions to Gandhi's is an interesting mental exercise. Like him, I have a pair of glasses. They add a lot to my quality of life. Being able to see clearly enables me to do many of the tasks that are important to me. But I have a pair of prescription sunglasses as well. And I have other tools that enhance my vision, such as a pair of binoculars and a camera. I know that the camera isn't essential, but it is a pretty important part of my present lifestyle.

I'm not much for fancy watches. My lifestyle is too rough and I'm sure I would break an expensive watch as easily as I do the inexpensive ones I prefer. But I wear a watch all the time, rarely taking it off. If I don't exactly need it, I certainly have become accustomed to having it. If a watch fails or gets broken, I usually replace it within a day.

Gandhi had at least one pair of sandals. I have three pairs of boots and hiking shoes and dress shoes. I probably could live with a single pair of shoes, but choosing which ones would be a challenge. I brings to mind the old spiritual in which shoes were a luxury that could not be obtained in this life: "I got shoes, you got shoes, all God's children got shoes. When I get to heaven, gonna put on my shoes and walk all over God's heaven."

I have possessions that weren't available to previous generations. The computer I use doesn't actually belong to me. It belongs to the church I serve. But it has become such a part of my life, that it is hard to imagine not having it. I write a blog every day. I plan worship. I do all kinds of tasks on the computer, and one of those tasks is using it to order additional items for the church.

It would take days just to inventory my books, let alone all of my possessions. Although the value of all of my possessions does not add up to the price paid for Gandhi's glasses, watch, sandals, bowl and plate, the volume of space taken up by them would be considered a luxury to many - so much space and so little of it used for eating and sleeping. Anyone who knows me knows that I have too many canoes and kayaks.

I keep saying that I am at the point in my life where I need to be about getting rid of possessions, not acquiring more. We try to reduce the inventory of items around our house whenever we have an opportunity. The rummage sale is one of those opportunities. I have another box of items to take to the sale this morning. But there is a

lot left. And assessing the value of items, especially ones that are old or evoke memories, is difficult.

Like all humans, my needs are simple. But I don't live at the level of need. I live at the level of discretion about which possessions to acquire, which to keep, and which to give away. I haven't always made the best decisions, but I think I'm learning a little bit.

For now, I'm going to keep the glasses and watch and all of the pairs of shoes at least until I wear them out. And the books are staying, at least most of them. But I hope that I can become more discerning as I release control of more of my possessions and learn to live with less.

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August 19, 2009 – This I Believe



Yesterday, after I had finished my meetings and eaten supper, I worked in the back yard for a while, removing the canoe rack from the trailer and installing sides to haul wood. As I worked, I was listening to radio programs on my ipod. I have a tendency to collect quite a few programs and then listen to them in batches. Last night I was catching up on some of the programs from NPR's This I Believe series.

Based on a 1950's radio program of the same name, the NPR series invited people from all walks of life to share their personal philosophies and core values that guide their daily lives. The essays are brief, about 500 words long. NPR has been receiving and broadcasting selected essays for four years and the series has now reached its conclusion. I have found the essays to be inspiring and thought provoking. I purchased a volume of the contemporary essays and essays from the 1950's show and enjoyed reading them.

The NPR project has received tens of thousands of essays. A curriculum has been developed for assigning essays to middle school, high school and college students. The project has assembled a huge data base of the essays that is searchable by key word, location, and other criteria.

It is one of those projects that I have thought I would complete: writing my own "This I Believe" essay. After all, I write an essay every day. What could be so daunting about writing an essay on my beliefs. But I have not yet written my essay. Worse yet, today, I am writing about the process of not writing my essay.

I believe that the truly great ideas, values and beliefs of humans are bigger than any individual. Writing about my beliefs seems to somehow imply that I formed the beliefs or that I somehow own them. But the most important beliefs, it seems to me, take generations to form.

Take my belief in God, for example. I stand in the lineage of the great monotheistic religions that grew out of the area we now call the Middle East. When our forebears began to clarify their particular form of radical monotheism, the concept was new to the area. Most of the population held a wide variety of beliefs in a lot of different gods. It took the entire lives of Abraham and Sarah to plant the seeds of belief in the God of all creation, who is present in every time and place. Even subsequent generations of our people were refining that concept.

It took generations of living in slavery in Egypt and another generation of wandering in the wilderness for the concept of covenant to emerge. The notion of God having a deep investment in human freedom seems to us today to be basic to the understanding of God, but that belief was not obtained in a single generation.

The concept if incarnation - God with us in human form - was so radical that early Christian stories sound like Roman mythology or esoteric poetry. Reading the first chapter of the Gospel of John makes it abundantly clear that the author is using words to express something that is far beyond the capacity of human language. Simile and metaphor have long been the language tools of our faith. Unable to say what God is, we invest a lot of energy in saying what God is like and telling stories that illustrate God's presence and action in human history.

To say that I believe in God doesn't communicate to another the fullness of that meaning. Because some use the word to express a puff of emotion or a sense of connection with one who has died. Some use the word to express a rigid moral code or a structure of authority. People use the word God all the time, but it is often very difficult to know what they mean when they use the word. The name of God has been invoked to justify injustice, to rationalize killing, and to defend a wide range of destructive actions. The name of God is invoked to address phenomenon that are not understood, to explain the unexplainable, and to speculate about what lies beyond the limitations of this life.

It takes more than an essay to state what I believe. For my beliefs are inherited from generations of faithful people who have refined and developed them. One of our treasured stories is of Moses' encounter with God in a burning bush. In that exchange, God is presented as a constant throughout many generations: "I am the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob." But in the same story, when Moses asks, "Who shall I say has sent me?" God responds, "I am who I am." More precisely, because it is in the progressive tense, it should be translated, "I will be who I will be." We know that

Moses will not get Pharaoh to understand if he says, “I am sent me,” or “The one who will be sent me.” The term God is invoked in the exchange knowing fully that Pharaoh and Moses mean entirely different things when that word is used. Later in the story Pharaoh learns the power of the God of Moses without fully understanding what it is that he has encountered.

When I say I believe in God, there is a lot of room for misunderstanding.

Nonetheless, I believe in the process of writing clearly and succinctly. The discipline of a 500 word essay to express beliefs is a good discipline. And I need to write my essay. Or perhaps I need to write my first essay. Whether or not I submit it to the project is beside the point, I think. Given the discipline of 500 words, or about half of the number of today’s blog, I will have to choose each word carefully. Because I really do believe in God. And when I say that I know that there are lots of other people who say the same words and have an entirely different meaning. Clearly communicating is a challenge that remains, for the moment, beyond me. I will, however, one of these days, write the essay.

Who knows, maybe when I get my “This I Believe” essay finished I can get started on my “Three Minute Novel.”

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August 20, 2009 – Dreamtime



One of my college professors had trained himself to remember dreams. Each morning he recorded the previous night's dreams. By the time I was a student of his, he had over thirty years of dreams and was able to remember as many as a dozen each night. I am almost the opposite. I don't pay much attention to my dreams and rarely remember any detail about my dreaming. Once in a while I can remember a mood or a few faces and sometimes a place or setting for a dream, but I don't recall my dreams as complete stories or events. It seems as if I don't dream often. I know that my mind probably does dream, but I haven't developed a discipline of remembering.

I did, however, have a dream last night. As usual I don't remember details, but I do remember that I was dreaming of Uluru, also known as Ayers Rock. It is located in Uluru-Kata Tjuta National park in the center of Australia. We had the joy of visiting Uluru in August of 2006 as a part of a sabbatical reflecting on wilderness and faith. It was a wonderful trip and our memories of the places we visit are joyful companions as we go through our lives.

I suppose that last night's dream was inspired by a post card from friends who are visiting in Australia who will be flying to Alice Springs in a couple of days. When we visited, we flew into Uluru, rented a car and drove to Alice Springs and flew out of Alice Springs. We had a wonderful time hiking in Australia's red center during August, one of the coolest times of the year in that part of the world. I'm not a hot weather person, preferring the cool temperatures of our part of the world, but we did well in the desert and had no problems there.

In my mind is the way that Uluru looked when I first saw it through the window of a Qantas 737 as we descended toward landing. I had seen a lot of pictures of the rock and had wanted to visit it for at least three decades since we had become close friends with an Australian student and his family when we attended seminary. Finally it was real and it was bigger and more impressive than I had imagined. The evening of the day we arrived we stayed up until last light to look at it in the sunset and we were up before dawn in the morning to see the sunrise on the rock as well.

Dreams have a special position in the stories of our people. Several of our forebears, perhaps most notably Jacob, had dreams in which they received messages from God that shaped the story of our people.

Dreams figure prominently in the stories and traditions of the Anangu, aboriginal people of central Australia and custodians of the lands around Uluru. We didn't stay long enough to learn much of Anangu culture, but we did learn a few words and basic concepts. Tjukurrpa is most commonly translated as "the Dreaming." It is a collection of stories, knowledge, and laws about how people should live with each other and with creation. In my understanding, thinking of Tjukurrpa as a creation story is too narrow of a view. It is the total of inherited wisdom and knowledge that permeates the world view of the Anangu. There is something unique about the quality of dreaming that allows individuals to connect with a wider community, with all of history, and with all of creation. It is as if the individual releases individuality in the dream and becomes a part of the unity of all of creation.

I suppose a Jungian psychologist would use the term collective unconscious or collective subconscious to describe this concept. We all inherit the collective experiences of our ancestors as a part of our genetic makeup. We are usually not conscious of the depth of this experience that is a part of our reality, but we are nonetheless shaped by the experiences of those who have gone before. Our heritage shapes our present reality. One of the ways that we gain knowledge and understanding of the subconscious is through the analysis of dreams. The professor who taught himself to remember his dreams was the one who provided my first introduction to the work of Carl Jung.

I am not a psychologist. I go through life less aware of the depths of my subconscious and how it shapes my daily living than those who have dedicated energy to analyzing their psychological condition. But I live with a strong sense of having been shaped by generations of human experience and tradition. I am most aware of how my beliefs are shaped by my forebears. When I speak of God, I am conscious of how my understanding of God has been honed through millennia of human experience. I would not be able to even grasp the concept of God as a idea if it weren't for the thoughts and writings of those who have gone before. And the reality of God is far more than the human idea.

Somehow in my dreaming last night I was reminded that we do not exist in isolation. We are shaped by people and events that are far away. There is a thread that transcends the barriers of time and space. Our stories are interwoven with the stories of those in distant locations.

Australia is a big continent. Our friends who are visiting in Australia won't cross paths with our closest friends who live there. They won't be in the same place at the same time. But in my mind they are somehow connected because their lives have been important in our lives. It was delightful to wake this morning thinking of Uluru as more than a pleasant memory. Even though we are not there, it is a present reality in my life. And it is populated by people who are precious indeed.

So this morning's blog is a bit muddled and not very clear. Perhaps it has some of the quality of a dream. I write about things that I don't fully understand. And yet, for each person who reads this it becomes more than just my story. It becomes our story. And connects us to a community that is far broader than the circle of one consciousness. Those connections are precious indeed.

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August 21, 2009 – Volunteers



It has been a fun week to work at the church. The big event is the rummage sale. Twice each year the Women's Fellowship sponsors a rummage sale. The events have turned into all-church events with plenty of volunteers, many of whom are not active in other women's fellowship activities. Men and women, young and old, all participate in preparations for the sale. This summer there seem to be a few new volunteers who hadn't previously been as involved in the rummage sales.

And, of course, there is lots of rummage. The amount of merchandise that will be offered for sale this morning is impressive. From clothing to televisions, plants to books, pictures to jewelry, shoes to furniture - there is even at least one kitchen sink on the sale. Things are well organized and priced. There will be a line of customers by the time they open the doors.

In the midst of the activities of the rummage sale, we needed several volunteers to remove a large tree from the building site of a Habitat for Humanity home. The deadline ended up being this week because the stump grinder is a volunteer and he needed access to the stump. We didn't want to be taking volunteers away from the rummage sale, so recruited some members of the youth group who weren't participating in the sale. The showed up at the church and we all worked hard for several hours yesterday. We got most of the tree moved and the area cleared so the work at the Habitat House will not be delayed.

One of the things that the church has to offer is a network of relationships where people of all ages have opportunities to work and recreate together. There are a lot of activities and institutions in our community where people associate with others who are a similar age. I often use the example of the community YMCA, which has programs for all ages and has a strong family-oriented philosophy. But when families enter the YMCA, they quickly disperse into activities where individuals are mostly the same age. There are children's programs, teen programs, programs for men and women and seniors programs. It is fascinating to stand in the lobby of the YMCA and watch families come in together, then separate and head in as many directions as there are family members.

Like other communities, we have our share of organizations that target specific age groups: schools, senior citizen's centers, teen programs, after school programs, and sports programs.

There have been some studies of rapidly growing churches and there is some evidence that one way to build a growing church is to target a specific age group. Congregations where people of a certain age immediately feel at home and are surrounded by others of a similar age continue to attract more people of the same age. While this is appropriate for some churches, it isn't what our congregation is about. We don't want to be a church where everyone is just like everyone else. We like the diversity of our congregation with people of different ages, different socioeconomic status, and different ethnic and racial heritages. We are please to know that we don't always agree and that there is room for people with different political leanings and different theological interpretations.

But a church is more than a collection of individuals. We are also a community that provides care for one another and outreach to the wider society. And the two tools of worship and volunteer service are the ways that we build community. We worship together and we work together.

There will be a lot of tired people by the end of the rummage sale tomorrow. I know I slept really well last night after spending part of the day rolling and lifting logs. There is a certain pleasure in being tired if it comes after a day of meaningful work.

The hope is that along the way there are a few new friendships and a few new connections between people. A congregation is a culture - it is about relationships with each other. Our relationships take place within the context of our relationship with God. We love one another because we have been loved by God.

So today, like many other days, begins with a prayer of thanksgiving for all of the volunteers. And thanksgiving for a common task. We are fortunate that we have jobs that are too big for any individual to complete. That sets up the requirement that we work together. And working together is one of the ways that we grow in faith together.

Soon there will be a fair amount of confusion and a bit of chaos as volunteers struggle to meet the pressures of a large group of customers. There will be lines at the checkout tables throughout the morning. Volunteers will take turns heading to the kitchen for a quick break before returning to help more customers.

By Sunday the entire rummage sale will be over. The unsold items will have been delivered to area agencies that have their own sales operations. The fellowship hall will be cleaned and tables will be back in place for Sunday's activities. The clothing racks will be stored in the basement. And life will go on. Hopefully there will be some new relationships and some enduring friendships that have been forged. Because even after the rummage sale is over, we will still have a lot of work to do.

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August 22, 2009 – Seasons



There has been a chill in the air a couple of mornings this week. It hasn't been really cold, but one day it was chilly enough that I wore a long-sleeved shirt, a decision that proved to be a poor choice as the day warmed up. It is still summer around here, but there are a few hints that the seasons will change. Usually by the first of September, we begin to notice that the days are a bit shorter and the high temperatures aren't quite as hot. The relative humidity goes up a bit and the forest doesn't seem to brittle. This year we have had adequate moisture all year and the hills are as green as I have ever seen them in late August.

I am grateful to live in a place where we are aware of the seasons. With the increase in urbanization of the world, most of the population of this planet lives with less contact with nature and are less impacted by the changes in weather. I am also grateful to live in a place where the distinctions between the seasons are clear. Although our seasons don't follow the calendar, with three months devoted to each season, we do experience four distinct seasons with winters that are cold and snowy, springs that are cool and moist, summers that are hot and dry, and autumns that are chilly and brisk.

I have visited places such as the states of the desert southwest, where there is less variation between seasons and it might be argued that there are really only two seasons. When we visited the desert center of Australia we were told that the region does experience a rainy season, but not every year. It was as though the cycle of seasons wasn't quite connected to the flow of the year. They are, however on the same

tilted axis planet revolving around the same sun, so there has to be some connection between their experience of seasons and the year.

So it caught my attention when Tim Entwisle, chief of Sydney, Australia's Royal Botanic Gardens, recently advised that Australia "unhook" itself from the "arbitrary" four seasons inherited from Britain. Mr. Entwisle is proposing a six season year with the addition of "sprinter" at the end of winter and "sprummer" between spring and summer. Presumably these additional seasons would result in a shortening of the other seasons and a calendar that is less dominated by winter reflecting the diverse weather patterns of Australia which has tropical rain forests and deserts as well as temperate zones.

The concept is intriguing, but the proposed new seasons wouldn't fit our part of the world. Certainly the transition from winter to summer doesn't need additional seasons around here. Some years we make that transition in such a way that we hardly need one season. Our springs can feel just like our winters some years. We often go from winter weather to summer weather with little transition.

Where we could use an extra season some years is in the fall. We have glorious autumns in this part of the world. Often the daytime temperatures rival those of the summer, but it gets cold at night. The colors come out and it is an excellent time for all manner of outdoor recreation. The problem with adding seasons at that time of the year, however, is that the names don't blend as well on this side of the calendar. "Sumall" or "fanter" don't exactly roll off the tongue. And if we use the other name for the season, "sumutumn," and "autunter" aren't much better.

And once you get started, where do you end? How about twelve seasons - one for each month?

Mr. Entwisle of Australia even went so far as to propose that different regions should have different numbers of seasons to reflect their weather patterns. He proposes a national debate and a public competition to name the new seasons.

There is nothing particularly new about Mr. Entwisle's proposals. Native people have recognized different numbers of seasons for millennia. The Inuit people of the far north on our continent recognized six seasons: ukiuq (winter) upirngassaaq (early spring), upirnagaaq (spring) aujak (summer) ukissaaq (early fall, and ukiaq (fall). I have been told that Australian Aboriginals have eight seasons.

In our part of the world, the Lakota recognized four seasons similar to our modern designations. Four is a very important number in Lakota traditions and the four seasons are associated with the four sections of the medicine wheel and the four sacred colors. The Lakota also have names for each of the 12 cycles of the moon in the year, identifying most by the activities that are dominant in that season of the year. It is almost as if each of the four seasons has three divisions with distinctive activities for each.

Whatever we call it, it is still summer around here. But in the wee hours of the morning, there can be a chill to the air. It is just enough to remind us that time continues to pass and that the summer chores we've been putting off are in need of our attention.

And it is a good thing that there is still a bit of summer left. In another news story that I read this morning, it was reported that Finland, a country that sees more winter than we, hosts the world air guitar championships each summer. The winner was announced yesterday. I didn't even know that there was a world air guitar championship. But Finland still has many other summer contests yet to be held this year. Events include boot throwing, wife carrying, mosquito slapping, mobile-phone throwing, swamp football and sauna endurance contests, although it seems to me that they might get better results if they waited with the sauna endurance until winter. Maybe having too long a winter makes for some strange thinking when summer does come.

I intend to enjoy the rest of our summer and when autumn comes I think I'll enjoy that as well.

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August 23, 2009 – Simple Living



I have been thinking about simple living lately. One of the reasons is that I have finally gotten around to reading a book that my cousin and his wife wrote about their experiences leaving the fast-paced life of California behind and moving to Belize where they built their own house by hand and lived off of the land. They made that decision in the early 1970's and succeeded in raising two children and living a wonderfully fulfilling life. Now, with more than three and a half decades of experience they have written a memoir of the early years that also shares their philosophy of simple living with readers.

Their book is available at Amazon, Borders and a variety of different locations and can be ordered from the publisher's web site as well. http://www.treehouseperspectives.com/ Over the years they have made several trips north and we have had several opportunities to visit with them about their adventure and some of the many things that they have learned. They have forged an admirable lifestyle for their family and have been able to live in a way that is faithful to their values.

They aren't the only ones. I have also been following the blog of a Missouri couple who are in the process of selling many of their possessions and moving to a rural location in the Ozark mountains. Their plan is to live in a tipi for a year while they construct their home. Their blog can be found at http://hickoryhollowhomestead.typepad.com/homesteading/The Missouri couple, like all of us have a unique combination of luxuries that they will retain. While they will definitely be roughing it without indoor plumbing, central heat, and many other

amenities, they do intend to have solar electricity and wireless internet so that they can continue to blog about the adventure. They have a photograph on the web site of Bob sanding the tipi poles with a DeWalt random orbital sander - a top of the line power tool. I don't know how many power tools will be a part of their home construction. Everyone who follows such a path has to make decisions about what to keep and what to leave behind.

There is something that is appealing about making a radical change, selling off excess possessions and reverting to a simpler lifestyle. And I am most attracted to scenarios like my cousin's or the couple from Missouri. In both cases the change included a move to a more rural and isolated location and an increase in the amount of land that was available for the exclusive use of the people. I have a fair amount of survival skills, though there would be much to learn if I were to make the transition from occasional camping to living in such a situation.

There is a fair amount of simple living that occurs around us every day. People learn to live with fewer resources, less income and less consumption. They make do with the things that they have and they live within restrictions that some of the rest of us don't experience. Poverty has its own way of forcing simple living on people who might not choose such a way of life if they had an alternative.

It is the presence of a choice that makes the option of simple living attractive. We have a wide range of choice about where we live, what we buy, what we keep and what we don't keep. We have options in terms of making a living for our family. Not everyone in the world has such ability to choose. The simple rural lifestyle adopted by my cousin and attempted by the Missouri couple are admirable and to be praised. But such a lifestyle is not and cannot be an option for millions of urban poor in this world. The planet simply does not have enough real estate for each family to have several acres. Both couples have a luxury that many people in the world will never know: privacy.

But there is a great deal to be learned from people who have sought simpler ways of living. It is true that we consume more than our fair share of the world's resources. It is true that our way of living has many elements that are wasteful and that we need to make changes to eliminate waste and to make conscious choices about what is most important in our lives.

We won't be moving to a tipi. And we don't intend to move to a treehouse on the edge of a Central American jungle. Neither place is ideal for the care of elders with a need for significant health care. But just because we make different choices does not mean that we can't learn a lot from people who are pioneers in their own way and who have found meaning and truth in living with less. There are lessons to be learned that can be applied to our living and our location.

I intend to be a good student and to keep learning as we shed some of the unnecessary possessions and scale down our lifestyle to a level that is more sustainable. Sometimes you don't have to travel to have a grand adventure.

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August 24, 2009 - Under the Weather



There was a rain storm passing to the north of town as I arrived at the church yesterday. The view as I parked my car was stunning so I grabbed my camera and took a couple of pictures. The piles of logs have become part of the view from that end of the church, and I didn't think about them until I looked at the picture later. The smaller pile on the right in the picture is made up of pieces that have been cut to stove length and are ready to be split. The other pile is made up of pieces that are five to six feet in length, waiting to be cut into smaller pieces. Our splitting crew has about a half day's work at the other end of the church lot before they are ready to move to this pile to start splitting. There should be nearly 15 cords of split wood in the other piles by the time they move to these piles. The community has been generous and our crews have worked hard to get ready for firewood deliveries this fall.

I have never lived in a place where I had to be exposed to the weather for any extended period of time. I've had a couple of uncomfortable nights with inadequate tents when camping, and I've gotten wet and cold from time to time. But I have always had a home waiting where there is adequate heat and protection from the elements. We had a good furnace in our home when I was growing up and I've always had reliable heat in the homes where I have lived.

But there are people who do not have adequate shelter. The numbers are overwhelming. On any given night in the United States, anywhere from 700,000 to 2 million people are homeless, according to estimates of the National Center on Homelessness and Poverty. Accurate numbers are hard to obtain because people shy

away from being counted, and homeless people are often unseen. So perhaps it is best to use numbers closer to the lower side of the estimate. Even so, the numbers are incredible:

1. •at least 252,000 families with children without any home every night.
2. •at least 91,000 single women with no shelter every night.
3. •at least 49,000 unaccompanied minors with nowhere to go every night.
4. •at least 462,000 people with mental illness or treatable addictions who not only do not receive care for their illness, but who have no roof over their head every night.

One congregation does not have the ability or the resources to address this problem. We have participated in building a few houses that help move families out of poverty housing and make marginal housing available to those who have no housing. And we work to provide fuel to heat homes for people who do not have enough money to provide heat for their homes. We don't have a jobs program for those who are without work. We don't have an emergency shelter for those who are sleeping under the bridge. We participate in a feeding program, but we don't operate a soup kitchen full time. There are lots of things that we do not do.

We are not able to fix the problem.

But we can turn extra firewood into fuel to heat homes. It takes significant effort. Our donors usually have logs on the ground. We use volunteers to cut the logs into pieces that are small enough to haul on a trailer to our church yard. There they are cut into lengths that will fit into a stove and then split into pieces that can be managed. Along the way, we make a stack of logs and then a stack of pieces waiting to be split and then a a stack of split wood. After it is split and stacked, we stack it into trailers and trucks and then unload and stack the wood at a delivery site.

We do a lot of stacking.

It would be prohibitively expensive if we were paying for labor. But we do not. Because people genuinely care. People genuinely want to help. People are genuinely generous. Our volunteers continue to amaze us with their generosity of spirit. The problem of homelessness in our country is complex and caused by many factors. But it is not the product of people not caring. There are plenty of people who care. I know them. I have seen them put their time and resources on the line.

Yesterday's rain shower was brief and the day that followed was very warm. The danger of dying from a mid-day heat stroke is far higher than dying of cold and exposure in the middle of the night right now in our corner of the world. But the days are shortening and cold nights are coming. It happens every year.

The title of today's blog is "Under the weather." The term is an English idiom that means, "not feeling well," or "sick." The term comes from an awareness that weather can affect health. This is undeniably true for those who do not have adequate shelter. To be exposed to the weather without adequate shelter is to be sick.

So we'll continue to work to warm up a few homes. And we'll continue to work to bring a few people off of the streets. And we'll continue to work to provide alternatives to poverty housing. And even if we cannot solve the problem we will do what we can.

There is something very reassuring about having a pile of wood as a part of the view from my workplace. I hope I see that view outside of my window until the day when no one is cold or hungry or under the weather in our country.

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August 25, 2009 – Calm Waters



Often, when people think of kayaking, they think of whitewater kayaking. Expert paddlers, using very short and very maneuverable boats paddle in very wild waters these days. I have seen video of kayakers going over waterfalls and paddling through class V rapids. I do a different kind of kayaking. I enjoy a little river paddling, and I have taken my boats into the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers, among others. But I don't own a creek boat and don't have any experience with true whitewater paddling.

I built my first kayak after swamping a canoe in the Puget Sound off of Whidbey Island. No harm was done. We are waterproof for the most part and I always paddle with a life jacket. The waters weren't particularly rough that day, but big waters can have constant swells. Making a kayak seemed to make sense and it was a fun building project. That first kayak has been paddled a lot. I've had it in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans off of both Canada and the United States. It has been paddled in Lakes Superior, Huron and Michigan. I've paddled down rivers and across a lot of mountain lakes with that boat. It has taken me on many adventures.

But some days, I enjoy paddling the calm waters. I try to paddle about once a week in the summer. Yesterday was a good day for a bit longer paddle than usual. I was free from appointments. I had the usual list of chores that needed to be accomplished, but no crises on my hands. So I headed out early and launched my kayak from Jenny Gulch on Pactola Reservoir at 6:30 a.m. It was as if I had the lake to myself. I didn't see any other boaters during my entire paddle.

There have been several years of drought and low lake levels in recent years, but there is plenty of water this year. There is an area full of partially submerged willows and grasses at the end of the lake where Rapid Creek flows into the reservoir. You have to know where the creek lies in dryer times to know the path into the creek. Once inside the creek, there is a calm channel that goes on for a quarter of a mile or so before the water starts to get shallow and the current and rocks make it hard to paddle upstream.

Paddling gently on calm waters gave me plenty of time for reflection. In fact I was thinking about that word as I paddled. The lake was doing a good job of reflection in the early morning light. I took several pictures that have inverted images of the hills and trees in the water. When the sun rose high enough into the sky to be seen over the hills it made a reflection on the surface of the lake that was so bright it was hard to see other features.

The word has other meanings as well. A reflection is a serious thought or consideration. I suppose that this meaning comes from the interplay of mind upon mind. Sharing ideas with others and having them come back to the original thinker can provide important insight and a deepening of understanding.

I often reflect on the beauty and integrity of creation as I paddle. I think of the responsibilities we carry to be wise stewards and to use the resources of this world wisely. It is in our nature to think that we are more powerful and more significant than we really are and human impact on this world, while significant, is a very small part of the story of this universe. From an astronomical perspective whether humans live or die is of little consequence. If the entire human race were to be wiped out by some cataclysmic event all the universe would lose is a witness to the great processes of time and space.

And yet, as insignificant as we are, we are loved. And we are capable of receiving the love of the Creator and passing it on to others. We are capable of perceiving beauty and expressing that beauty in word and dance and art and music. The sentiment of Psalm 8 comes to my mind: “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have made, what are humans that you notice them and their children that you care for them?” In the vastness of the universe, I am a speck, a small thing. And yet I am granted the capacity to look at the great beauty around me and appreciate it. I am able to receive God’s love and express it for others to understand.

There are other reflections that come from paddling. I often can get closer to ducks and geese that I would if I were walking. Although the beaver have strict limits on how close I can come before their tails are smacked on the water in warning and they disappear beneath its surface, they do let me approach and watch from a distance. The eagles look down from their perches and sometimes swoop down for a fish and get remarkably close to my little boat and show me their magnificent feathers and wingspans. Fish rise to the surface and sometimes take an insect out of the air. A fleet of dragon flies

sometimes escorts me through the willows and grasses. The creatures who live in, on and near the lake are wonderful and it is good to have a sense of sharing the earth with them.

Sometimes I sort out problems as I paddle. I think of tasks that need to be done or relationships that need mending. I try to come up with creative ways to lead worship and guide our congregation. I think of the needs of our community and of new ministries in which we are called to participate.

And sometimes I just paddle. The simple, yet fascinating process of a boat floating on the water propelled by a paddle. I steer by varying my paddle strokes and by leaning the boat. The process is repeated so often that it is automatic. It doesn't require conscious thought and sometimes when I try to think about what I'm doing I become awkward and uncoordinated in my paddle strokes. My boat is stable and sleek enough that I can go where I want without excessive effort.

Yesterday's paddle set the tone for my day. I was a bit quieter and more reflective. I still had to do the normal tasks for a Monday. I put out the garbage, I baked bread, I did a few home repairs and I edited some text on the computer. I prepared meals for my mom and I did a little grocery shopping. It was a normal day. But there was a peacefulness to the day that I wish I could maintain. I know that there will be stresses and pressures this week. There are bills to pay, programs to plan, problems to solve. I put a picture from yesterday's paddle on the desktop of my computer to remind me of the calm that is so close. And I will try to carry that calm as far as I can.

But I know I will have to return to the lake to maintain my balance. I will need to dip a paddle into the water and float on it surface again and again. How fortunate I am to live in a place with calm waters.

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August 26, 2009 – Passing on the Faith



There is a long-standing and lively debate among Christian educators about how best to pass the faith from one generation to the next. Most of us are capable of making cogent arguments from several different perspectives.

I grew up in the world of ideas and intellectual thought. My Sunday School classes emphasized ideas. We learned history and we discussed moral choices. As I became more involved in my vocation, I pursued an academic education. College and Seminary were places where I thrived on the interplay of ideas. I studied the words of great thinkers and I engaged in debate and discussion to hone my ideas. We tried to get our theology "right," arguing about technical points and specific details. We brought to the study of scripture every academic discipline we knew, from archeology to language studies, to analysis of form and structure. While we were well aware of the difference between the idea of God and the independent reality of God, we fell in love with the idea - an elegant concept honed through generations of people who wee willing to think about God. From this point of view teaching faith is a process of teaching ideas.

As such, I have always held a bit of suspicion about those who experience faith primarily as an emotional experience. While I have intense emotions and my passions come into play in my experience of faith, I believe that faith is more than a puff of emotion and I am aware that human emotions are subject to manipulation. But there are people of faith whose experience is primarily emotional. The power of love and the overwhelming relief of forgiveness shape their religious story. From this point of view teaching faith is a process of setting up emotional experiences.

Throughout the history of the church there have been those who see belief as the center of faith. In order to be a person of faith you have to have the right beliefs. Creeds and statements of faith have been formed and reformed in order to provide ways to express commonly held beliefs. Denominations have been formed and split over common and different beliefs. From this point of view teaching faith is about teaching correct beliefs.

Sociologists of religion tell us that religion is primarily a social entity and that people are gathered together by behavior. They engage in common practices. Religion is primarily a set of learned actions. Ritual is repeated, prayers are memorized, practices are standardized. From this point of view teaching is about practicing behaviors.

And the thing that keeps the debate lively and ongoing is that none of these perspectives holds the complete truth. It is easy to make an argument against any one of these (and many other) approaches.

If Christianity were only a matter of ideas, those with the most education would be the best practitioners of the faith. Yet it is obvious that more education does not necessarily make a person more faithful.

If Christianity were only a matter of feelings, those who were most connected to their feelings would be the most faithful. Teaching would be a series of encounter groups and other processes where feelings come to the surface and are expressed. But we know that such things do not lead to deepening faith.

If Christianity were only a matter of beliefs. Churches would be filled with people with similar beliefs. The more than 50% of American Catholics who hold different beliefs on birth control and ordination of women than the Pope would be heading toward protestantism. And that is not happening.

If Christianity were only a matter of correct practices, the people who went to church most often would have the most faith. Most of us have experienced deep and meaningful faith in ones who have not lived their lives within the institutional church.

Thus the argument has enough substance to keep educators and theologians up at night crafting arguments to send to their colleagues. We've been doing that for a long time, at least since Paul began crafting letters to churches.

Christian Education does have some trends, we are currently moving away from teaching ideas as intellectual concepts and the school model for education. A renewed emphasis on the practices of faith is a part of some exciting work in resource development for Christian education. But the people who are working on the resources

are mindful of ideas and feelings and beliefs as they attempt to create activities that engage people in the practice of faith. It is not a one-sided approach.

And the question remains: How do we pass the faith from one generation to the next?

Of course the faith is bigger than this generation. Christianity will continue to be a vital part of human existence regardless of whether we are good or bad at teaching. However, we are called to excellence in our teaching and faithfulness in passing the faith to future generations. We continue to challenge one another and to struggle to grow in our understandings of how best to teach and learn the Christian faith. We continue to revise our teaching strategies and produce new resources for teaching and learning.

As is true in most fields, the experts in Christian education still have a lot to learn. And along the way we have some glorious conversations.

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August 27, 2009 – Living in the Forest



It is the time of the years when the yearlings are leaving their mothers and this year's fawns are showing a bit of independence. Young spike bucks, still in velvet, are occasionally seen looking a little lost as they wander by themselves through the woods. The older fawns are starting to lose their spots and some mornings I will see as many as five fawns in the yard with their mothers in the neighbors' yards or even across the road.

I have gotten used to the sounds of the little ones running away as I head out the door to pick up my morning paper. They are a little more jumpy than their mothers and their little hooves make a different sound on the driveway.

But I like to see the deer and hear their presence in the early morning. A group of fawns in the yard means that there is no mountain lion in the immediate vicinity. I have a similar opinion of the wild turkeys that travel through our yard a couple of times a day. I don't know how often a lion feasts on turkey, but I'm pretty sure that if the lion were in the area, the turkeys would be hiding.

We know they are around. There are plenty of stories of sightings, and the coyotes have left the hills that are south of our home and when we hear them singing at night they are farther away than they were a decade ago. I've seen tracks when hiking in the hills and a couple of winters ago I discovered a partially eaten deer carcass hidden in some underbrush.

Friends, who live about a mile away, sighted an adult male mountain lion in their yard. It didn't scare easily and had them just a little bit worried before it finally ran off. They live at the edge of a deep coulee in an area that is less built-up than our immediate neighborhood, but we know that the big cats are in the area. There have been several sightings and a couple of years ago a neighbor's dog treed a mountain lion less than a quarter of a mile from our home.

I'm comfortable living with such neighbors, but I don't have any desire to be startled by an encounter in the dark early morning hours before I've even pulled my shoes on my feet. We've read all of the articles about what to do when a mountain lion is sighted, but I'd prefer for that information to remain totally academic. I'd like to see a mountain lion, but I'd prefer to be looking out the window at it.

I've only seen one mountain lion in the wild in my entire life and that was a long ways from this neighborhood. I was in a car at the time and there was not threat. In fact, the lion disappeared into the forest very quickly and I wished I had had more time to look at it.

Problems with the lions in our area are usually in the form of the loss of family pets or an animal that spends too much time too close to human homes. The Department of Fish, Game and Parks has a crew that will remove a cat that has gotten too close for comfort and there is a hunting season on Mountain Lions in the hills each year. Opinions vary as to how many lions the fish and game people should allow to be taken each year. Some folks would like to see the hunting of lions eliminated, others think that there should be more taken each year. I'm unconvinced by either extreme. It seems that there are more lions than there used to be, so their population seems to be healthy and willing to sustain losses. But on the other hand the lions aren't a problem for us and the overpopulation of deer in the hills is evident. A few more lions may be just what is needed to keep things in balance.

But living with such powerful and potentially dangerous neighbors does invite caution and a bit of common sense. For the most part, I avoid hiking alone in the evenings or early morning hours. We keep our pets indoors and out of harm's way. The local advice is to always remain standing, to avoid running, and to hold hands and other objects above your head to make yourself appear even taller. The neighbor who spotted the mountain lion last week had a big advantage. He is already about as tall as I can reach with my hands over my head.

I am used to walking barefoot to get my paper each morning and it is starting to be dark again now when I make that journey. We have a good post light in the yard and I suspect that there is little risk, but it is good to see the deer in the morning and know that they'd make for better eating for the lion.

Living in the forest means learning to live with all of our neighbors, both human and otherwise. We appreciate the wild animals that wander into our yard and we enjoy watching them raise their babies. There is a real joy to the cycles of birth and growth.

I'd still like to see a mountain lion one of these days - just not first thing in the morning when I'm heading down the driveway for the paper.

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August 28, 2009 – Gardening



We are not great gardeners. Real gardeners invest a lot more time and energy. They pull a lot more weeds. They plan more. And most of them use more water and fertilizer than we. But we enjoy having some plants around and we try to nurture them as best we are able. And the process of having a few plants allows us to be outside in the pleasant spring and summer evenings with small tasks that don't get too overwhelming.

Regular readers of this blog know that Susan and I have differences in our styles. She has done quite a bit of research into what the deer will and won't eat. She has chosen perennials that are deer hardy and can survive the occasional bite from a young deer. He annuals are chosen for color and variety to minimize the loss to the deer. It is a constant process of experimentation. The deer don't have the same appetites every year. And what gets eaten varies by season as well.

I just built an 8' fence around the vegetable garden. The deer eat what they can by poking their noses through the fence. Anything planted more than a few inches from the fence is safe. The photo with today's blog illustrates the difference in our philosophies. Just before I got my camera, the fawn was actually standing in the flower bed munching on the greenery. We don't get too uptight about the deer. We enjoy having them for neighbors and we've decided that there are certain plants including roses and tulips that just aren't worth the effort in deer country.

We were traveling for much of June which is the wrong time to be gone for successful gardening in our area. We had help from a neighbor who kept our vegetables weeded

and watered during our absence, but a hail storm the day before we left meant that the garden needed care that we didn't provide. We've already had peas and potatoes and there are more potatoes in the ground. The radishes have all been pulled, but there are some carrots still in the ground. Not all of our tomato plants are going to produce well, but we will have plenty of tomatoes and one of the "big boy" plants is producing some of our biggest tomatoes ever. The sunflowers are taller than the fence and producing giant blossoms. They will be great natural bird feeders this fall.

I decided not to plant corn this year. We expanded our garden this year and hauled in a lot of new topsoil. The new dirt seemed to invite root crops and so we put in potatoes and onions. The farmer's market supplies us with corn and not growing our own frees up a lot of space in the garden for other plants.

The hills are starting to dry out and we are watering our gardens now. The grass is remarkably green for this time of the year. Normally we allow our back yard to go dormant when it gets really dry, except for a little area around the house. It is looking pretty good this year. As usual, our lawn is producing a banner crop of weeds along with the grass, but if I keep them mowed, it doesn't look too bad. The grass in the lawn is growing more slowly, but right next to the vegetable garden, where there is plenty of water, the grass grows much faster, which means it gets longer before it is mowed.

Our home is no showplace. We have neighbors who have much more manicured and fancy lawns and gardens. But it is a place where we can dig in the dirt and watch the plants grow. In a fast paced world where too many people are separated too far from the sources of their food, it is good to put a few things on the table whose stories we know. I've always had farmers and ranchers as friends and there is something about knowing the source of one's food that makes it taste better and feel safer. We aren't food producers. All the same, we do enjoy the food that we do grow in our own garden. And we feel better knowing the story of the food that we eat.

The grocery stores are becoming more aware of our desire to eat locally produced food and are doing a better job of displaying food so that we can tell its origin. And we still splurge from time to time and eat food that has done a lot of traveling. Just the other day I purchased a pineapple to serve with supper. That pineapple consumed more fossil fuels getting to Rapid City than I did driving to the grocery store. I once read that our decisions about what to eat have a bigger impact on the world's energy supplies than our decisions about what to drive. But a totally locally produced diet would involve a lot of chokecherries and beef or buffalo. And we've developed a taste for fish and chicken. We like to have fruit year round and enjoy an avocado from time to time. I suppose I could start snaring turkeys, but I think the folks at fish and game would have an opinion about that practice. On the other hand, I doubt if any of my neighbors would turn me in for taking an occasional turkey. We seem to have an abundant supply.

I don't intend to make the change to a subsistence diet. Being a hunter gatherer would take more time that we have or are willing to commit. We will continue to participate in exchange to get our food. We'll continue earning money and exchanging money for food. But we can be more aware of how our food choices affect others and try to be responsible with the decisions we make.

I'm already beginning to think like a farmer. I keep catching myself talking about next year. This year's garden may not be much, but wait until next year!

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August 29, 2009 – A Cup of Coffee



Shortly after we moved to Rapid City, our newspaper did an interview with us about the dynamics of being a clergy couple and the balance of home, work and marriage. At one point the interviewer asked about what we did for recreation and I quipped that we enjoyed going out for coffee and that we were still searching for Rapid City's best cup of espresso. That was nearly 14 years ago. Rapid City didn't have as many coffee shops as it does today. There were no Starbucks, no Dunn Brothers, no Bully Blends. But we enjoyed going out, from time to time, for a cup of coffee and a few moments to visit.

A lot has changed in those years. Our family has changed. Our two teenagers have become adults and have moved to other communities. Our parents have moved to our town. Our work has developed some routines, but other things have changed. In that time the price of a late at a coffee shop has more than doubled. Our salaries have not. I'm not complaining. We still have sufficient discretionary money to have a wide range of options, but we think a little more about the price of going out for coffee than we once did. The truth is that we may have found Rapid City's best cup of espresso - and it comes from the machine in our home.

I have several friends who seldom, if ever, purchase high-priced coffee shop beverages. They point out that even buying the most expensive beans the cost to produce a cup of coffee is less than 30 cents. It seems wasteful to spend $4 and even more to purchase such a thing. They are right. Having a cup of coffee in a coffee shop is more about ambience and culture than it is about paying for the cost of the beverage. I suppose that I could mention to them that the same thing could be said of purchasing a cocktail in a

bar, where the drinks are priced much higher than the cost of production. But my friends don't frequent bars, either. They are practical people.

The information I can find is that the current recession didn't affect the sales of coffee in the United States. Going to the coffee shop is a comfort and people don't scrimp on comfort when they are feeling stressed. The same thing is true of alcohol sales. We coffee drinkers don't like to have our beverage continually put in the same category as alcohol, but both are mildly mood altering, both are over-priced in retail sales, and humans can form additions for both. Drinking coffee, however, doesn't impair one's ability to drive a car and it has not been linked to crime or violence.

We had a delightful hour going out for coffee yesterday. The time was almost completely devoted to planning fall programs for the church. It was a working meeting, away from the phones and other interruptions that often are a part of our office. On a Friday afternoon, we were able to slip away from the office and find a corner in a coffee shop to go over calendars and to coordinate programs so that we will be ready to get the church newsletter out next week.

You could simply call it a business meeting. But it was pleasant to drink good coffee out of a real cup with a swirl of steamed milk foam on the top. I don't often drink much coffee in the afternoons these days, but sometimes it is just he right thing in the middle of a busy day.

There is no question that we paid too much for our coffee. Susan had a small pot of tea and we shared a pastry. With a tip, we had $10 less than before we walked into the coffee shop. And the ambience in coffee shops isn't quite what it once was. In our town they tend to be crowded and a bit noisy. Still it was pleasant and I left the shop without any regret about how the money was spent.

Our lives seem to need an occasional extravagance. Knowing that we could live well without the extravagance doesn't prevent us from wanting to indulge from time to time. It is a dynamic in almost every time I work with people who are living below the poverty line. They will be frugal and careful with their resources, but there will be an occasional expense that I simply can't understand. Often it is the purchase of an expensive television. Since I don't watch much television and have no desire for a new set, I have trouble understanding why anyone would spend their money that way. So it is helpful for me to have a luxury in my life that doesn't make sense. And if you added up going out for coffee over the period of a year it would come to the price of a television set. Knowing that I spend my money on a frivolous extravagance from time to time makes it easier for me to understand when someone else does it.

We've cut back a bit, but we still relish going out for coffee from time to time.

ON ANOTHER NOTE: Regular readers of this blog know that I have written about fire from time to time. We're keeping our eyes on the Microwave Fire, burning less than a mile from the tiny town of Mosier, Oregon. Susan's sister and brother-in-law live in a home on the edge of that town. They and the cats are safely evacuated to a motel in Hood River, but concern remains. Once evacuated, families will not be allowed to return to their homes until the danger has passed. The town has about 500 residents, many of whom were attracted to the area by the beautiful scenery and the great windsurfing in the Columbia gorge. The same winds that make windsurfing fun are now making firefighting difficult. Mosier is located at a point of climate change, with lush forests to the east and high desert to the west. There was little new news overnight, and we are checking regularly for updates. So far, there have been no reports of serious injuries to city residents or to fire fighters.

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August 30, 2009 – Still Waters



Psalm 23 is an iconic verse that has provided relief and reassurance to countless people. The Hebrew imagery, rooted deeply in the past, stands up to translation and differences in culture and historical setting. It provides a verbal description of peace as well as a reminder that God is the source of the good things that happen in the lives of humans.

Part of the vision of the Psalm is the presence of still waters. All living things depend upon water. Roughly 65% of our bodies are water. There are many documented cases of people living for weeks without food, but the human body begins to deteriorate quickly without a source of water. Dehydration affects circulation, the health of all body organs, and mental acuity. Even a small decrease in the amount of water in a human results in decreased mental function.

The Psalm originated in a desert culture, where low humidity and desert winds made survival impossible without a source of water. Knowing where to find water was essential to survival and the people knew it. To be led to a place of still water was to be allowed to continue living.

My life has been deeply influenced by waters. I grew up next to the Boulder River in south central Montana. (Yes there are at least two Boulder Rivers in Montana!) Our home was about two miles from the point where the Boulder flows into the Yellowstone, one of the longest wild and free rivers in the lower 48 states. I spent parts of my teenage summers at the River Ranch, on the bank of the Missouri. I've been wading,

swimming, paddling, and playing in waters all of my life. I've developed a healthy respect for the power of the river's current and learned how to work with the current and allow myself to be carried down stream as I cross.

These days the closest recreational waters to my home are reservoirs - lakes that have built up behind human-made dams. The reservoirs are an important part of the city's water supply. While the city does have wells, it continues to be dependent upon surface water to supply all of the needs of the Rapid City area. Without the reservoirs, the city cannot sustain the population that we have.

Across the West, water and water rights are the source of a great deal of controversy. There are entire sections of the federal court system that focus on water rights cases and dealing with disputes between various claimants for the water. In the dryer places, the level of contention and controversy rises. And it isn't just our country. One of the major dynamics in the Israel-Palestine conflict in the mideast is the presence of many long-standing disputes over water and the control of water rights.

Water is survival. Without it we perish.

And we live in a place with so much water that we are able to play in the water whenever we want. It is not uncommon for me to launch a canoe or kayak on a lake with no other boats at the moment. I can paddle up the streams that flow into our area lakes and have the area to myself. I can sit back and relax and allow my boat to float upon the still waters of the lake without another boat raising a wake or disrupting the water. Surely water is one of the blessings of my life.

In the Psalm, still waters are also a way of speaking of peace and the absence of war and violence. The psalmist goes on to speak of calm in the face of enemies and freedom from fear in moments of trial. How fortunate we are to live in a moment of peace in a place of peace. While not forgetting the violence that has been a part of the story of people on the plains, this is a good and safe place to live. We are fortunate to be blessed with peace.

So today I begin my day with the Psalm on my mind and a prayer of thanksgiving for the gift of water in my life. It is easy to take important things for granted. Sometimes it is a helpful discipline to simply repeat the songs and prayers of our people - songs and prayers that we have been offering for generations. These ancient words remind us of our place in this creation and our connections with other people and with God.

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul;

He leads me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD
Forever.

May you find still waters in your life today.

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August 31, 2009 – Wood Lot



I took a walk through the church's wood lot yesterday afternoon. Actually we currently have two wood lots - the first location proved to be too small and cramped to handle the amount of firewood that we will need to deliver this winter, so we have started new piles in another corner of the church's property. In the first area, almost all of the wood has been split and stacked. I haven't measured it, but I think it may be close to 18 cords ready to be delivered. If that is the case, it would be about half of the wood that is needed for delivery this winter. The small stack of logs that remain to be split in that area will take only an hour or so to split. We should have them done early this week.

There are all kinds of images that are associated with a pile of wood. This wood is all about providing warmth for people who have limited resources and who might otherwise be chilly in the midst of a cold South Dakota Winter. It is one thing that we can do. In the face of a lot of problems in our state, it would be easy to be overwhelmed. Most of our state was granted as a permanent home for Lakota people by the the Fort Laramie treaty. That treaty was abrogated shortly after it was made and the land was taken from the Lakota people. The courts have subsequently ruled that the seizure of land was illegal and awarded a substantial cash settlement to the Lakota people, but they have refused the cash and continue to pursue the return of the land. The land, however, has been through several generations in the meantime. There are people who have lived on the same ranches for more than a century now. There are people who purchased their land in good faith without any knowledge of the treaty violation.

There are no simple solutions to the problems of he land.

And there are problems of poverty. There are more people than jobs on South Dakota's reservations. It is difficult to start a new business because financing is scarce or non existent. High unemployment is exacerbated by alcohol and drug abuse. There is a sense of hopelessness that develops among some youth. Teen suicide rates are incredibly high. The high school drop out rate is unacceptable in a modern society. Cycles of poverty seem to be endemic.

There is a significant housing shortage in many places on the reservations. This results in people being over crowded into substandard housing. Old and poorly maintained homes can be dangerous for the people who live in them. Fires and other dangerous occurrences happen all too frequently.

There are a lot of problems in South Dakota. And we are not able to solve the problems.

But we also are not able to ignore the problems.

So we do what we are able. One of the things we can do is to cut, split and deliver a little firewood. By most standards, we deliver a LOT of firewood - about 36 cords last year. We do it without a budget, and without a structure. It is pure volunteerism in its simplest form. People who are able give their time. Some donate the use of their pickup trucks and trailers, providing gas to make the delivery trips. Some folks are able to participate in deliveries, but not in the splitting. Others can help with splitting but aren't able to lift the heavy logs. People do what they can. At last count, we are approaching one third of the total membership of the church involved in the project in one way or another.

Regular readers of this blog are familiar with the Woodchuck Society and the work it does. The name has special meaning. Societies are a part of Lakota Culture. In a traditional Lakota community one becomes a member of a society by invitation and only after having demonstrated ability and dedication to do the work of the society. Societies, even warrior societies are formed for the purpose of service to others. Society members pledge to risk losing every thing that they have, even their lives, in the service of others.

The Woodchuck Society is not about what we give up, however. It is the voluntary acceptance of a bit of responsibility to serve others without the expectation of anything in return. In a world filled with problems we choose a path of service. We are aware that it isn't the only path of service. Other people are doing good work. Other people are helping others. We do what we are able.

There are many kinds of prayers and many places to pray. Our congregation is blessed with a beautiful sanctuary and some wonderful instruments. We worship God with piano and organ and wonderful singing. We have opportunities to pray in the glorious beauty

of sunlight streaming through stained glass windows and to hear God's word in a formal worship setting.

But we are also blessed to have a wood lot. We are able to pray to God with the smell of freshly-split pine longs in our nostrils and the sweat of honest work on our backs. Being a bit of a bookworm who enjoys study and reading and writing, I am especially grateful for the good work of hauling a few logs and running a splitter from time to time. It feels good to stretch my muscles and pile a bit of firewood. I often feel like I'm receiving more than I am giving.

And most of all, I am grateful to be a part of a church that worships God not only in the sanctuary, but also in the wood lot and in the towns of our neighbors when we deliver the firewood. How fortunate we are.

And there is always room for another volunteer. We have been given the gift of hospitality through the firewood project as well.

So, sometimes, if I'm not answering the phone - I may be out in the wood lot. The firewood that warms our neighbor's homes also warms my soul.

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September 16, 2009 – Best Sellers
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September 1, 2009 – Slow Elk



Lewis and Clark, on their famous voyage of discovery, catalogued the birds and animals that they witnessed. They noted buffalo, or North American bison, in numbers too great to count. They wrote about the difficulty of hunting antelope, which they called “goats.” They noted that there were both blacktail (mule) and whitetail deer. They documented the difference between grizzly and black bears. They wrote of prairie dogs and foxes, coyotes and wolves. They documented big horn sheep and mountain goats. And they noted in their journals Elk or wapiti (cevus canadensis). However, I don’t know if there is any mention in the journals of Lewis and Clark of an ungulate that is common across the area they traveled, at least in our time.

I am, of course, referring to the ubiquitous slow elk (beef cowsis commonis), sometimes referred to by locals as sumer stock. (You know, some are brown, some are black, some are white . . .) In my travels around the black hills and the surrounding plains, I am often given the opportunity to view these gentle creatures in their natural habitat. The South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks does not have any information on the actual count of these creatures in Western South Dakota, but I’m guessing that they are quite rare, as there is also no mention of a hunting season for these beasts in any of the Department of Game, Fish and Parks official documents. The lack of an official season on them must indicate that there is an intention of allowing the herds to increase before allowing sportsmen to harvest them.

This is not to say that there isn’t an occasional animal taken by sportsmen. The most common explanation for the occasional killing of an animal by a hunter is: “I thought it

was a deer." They have also been mistaken for elk, bear, and perhaps even antelope, though how that could be is a definite stretch of the imagination.

Like many of the other large mammals of the plains, these creatures are ungulates. An ungulate is an animal that chews its cud. It has multiple stomachs and is able to swallow grass and other food quickly then later bring it back up to chew it properly. Evolutionary biologists speculate that this is the result of being victim to multiple predators. These creatures need to have the ability to eat quickly and be ready to run away from a predator at a moment's notice. Hence the development of a digestive system that allows them to swallow large amounts of un-chewed grass and grain, then have the ability to flee danger and return to the process of chewing at a later time, when a safe location has been found.

This ability was undoubtedly developed in the time when wolves were more numerous across the plains, as there are fewer natural predators for these animals today.

Unlike other animals that are often featured in zoos and wilderness parks, these slow elk are most commonly displayed at county fairs and stock shows. Often the animals that are put on display for public viewing are far more pampered and groomed than is common in their natural environment.

I confess that I have, when presented with the opportunity, tasted of these animals. I am pleased to report that their flavor is excellent and that there are cuts of meat that make for very fine eating indeed. They are like reindeer - not in flavor, but in the fact that the same animal, when domesticated has a different name. With reindeer are wild, they are called caribou, when domesticated they are known as reindeer. Slow elk, when domesticated are known as cows, though the particular animal in this picture would probably take offense at that designation since he is a steer, a condition that would take a great deal of words to explain. Suffice it to say that the general name for domesticated animals is "cows." North American native "cowboys" herd these critters across the open prairies, often riding four-wheeled ATV's and wearing colorful outfits. They speak a dialect of English that is easy to learn with a large variety of colorful words for the byproducts of grass left behind by their animals. Cowboys, who come in both male and female varieties, seem to have acquired a taste for Country music, which is basically hillbilly music with more pickup trucks, divorces and tragedies involving beloved dogs. Believe me it is an acquired taste.

My advice to all hunters preparing to head to the hills in search of trophies and food for their families this fall, is to be on the lookout for slow elk. Remember their protected status and don't even aim your weapon at one. Be sure of every target before you take your guns off of safety. And if you develop a taste for these fine critters, inquire at the local locker plant or meat processors. They may be able to put you in touch with one of the elusive cowboys and help you to get your hands on a steak, ribs or roast that you can cook on your barbecue.

These notes on the natural phenomena of the Black Hills are probably the product of taking a day off. Normally there is some theological reflection in this blog, but today's blog is a pure study in nature and the animals of the hills. Perhaps in a future blog, in order to return to the subject of theology, I could write about fish.

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September 2, 2009 – Sunflower



In our yard, sunflowers have to grow inside of the garden fence. I've planted them in several locations, but the deer will eat the plant before it blossoms if they can get to it. The sunflowers growing inside of our garden fence have the leaves that poked through the fence eaten off. I don't have many sunflowers. I just planted a dozen or so seeds along the edge of the garden for decoration and as bird feeders for later in the fall. But they are tall an dramatic plants and their yellow blossoms are now following the sun across the sky each day. One of the fun thing about sunflowers is that they all face the same direction. From one side all one sees is the green color of the back of the heads, with a few splashes of yellow that extend beyond the rest of the plant. From the other side there is a huge and brilliant blossom.

Technically that large flower is actually a head composed of a large number of small flowers. The outer florets are the ray florets. The florets inside the circular head are called disc florets - each of those matures into a fruit that we call sunflower seeds - an inedible husk surrounding the softer seed inside. It is amazing how many seeds can be packed into a single head. The seeds are arranged in a pattern of interconnecting spirals which make the head fascinating to study from a close distance.

Sunflower seeds can be eaten raw or roasted and are often sold lightly salted as a confection. Commercially produced sunflowers are also processed for the oil. Sunflower oil is used for cooking and also for producing margarine and biodiesel. The cost of sunflower oil is typically lower than olive oil and some varieties of sunflowers produce oil that contain a higher level of healthy monounsaturated fats than olive oil. After the oil is

extracted, the cake that remains is useful as livestock feed. Farmers growing sunflowers for oil production favor varieties with drooping heads. While not as attractive as the varieties favored by gardeners, these drooped heads are more difficult for the birds to raid the seeds.

The plants also produce latex and there have been some experiments using rubber from sunflower plants. This form of latex appears to be hypoallergenic and a desirable alternative to other forms of latex for producing medical gloves and other products.

But my sunflowers are just for show. I just like them. And I won't mind if the birds steel the seeds. If I am lucky, I'll harvest enough seeds to plant a few next year, which isn't much of a challenge. A single plant produces over 80 seeds and I only need a couple of dozen for next year's planting.

Sunflowers are native to the Americas and were first cultivated in Mexico thousands of years ago. There is evidence of cultivated varieties in the southern states of the USA that date back to the time before Christ. Aztec and Inca people revered the sunflower as a symbol of their sun god.

As soon as European explorers arrived in the Americas, they took seeds back to Europe and cultivation of sunflowers in Europe was very popular by the 1700's. One of the reasons for the success of the plant was its popularity for producing an oil that was not banned by the orthodox church for use during Lent. The religious association with the flowers was totally different than in the Americas at the time, but the plant still had a significance to the practice of religion.

Sunflowers are the state flower of Kansas, and they are easy to cultivate throughout the midwest. When we lived in North Dakota in the late 1970's and 1980's sunflower production was increasing on dry land farms as an alternative to wheat. Wheat prices remained low for more than a decade while the demand for sunflowers and their prices were rising. Sunflowers became a way for marginal farms to produce a small profit.

I just like to look at them. Their cheery yellow heads are a bright spot in the garden and a reminder of the beauty of this world.

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September 3, 2009 – A Little More Firewood



“Could you use a little more firewood?” asked John, the Habitat for Humanity construction manager. “We can always use firewood,” I replied. The large old tree was dying and had to be removed for safety. A local tree service sent a crew to take down the tree. The crew really knew their business and soon had most of the limbs removed. I stopped by while they were cutting. The man from the tree service asked if we had any equipment to move the logs. “Just a trailer,” I said. “We have to load everything by hand, so we’ll need small chunks, especially those thick pieces close to the base of the tree.” “No problem,” he replied. “We’ll leave it in chunks that a couple of men could move.”

We brought a crew of four. After about an hour’s work with a chainsaw to cut some of the logs down to size, most of the logs were removed in two trips with two pickups and trailers. Only the bottom five logs remained. And they are still there. I’ve tried a couple of different ways of estimating the weight of the remaining logs. I suspect that they range from around 900 to over 1,900 pounds. We’ll have to cut them up, but we may need to rent a chainsaw with a bigger blade to get the job done. When we finally get them into chunks small enough to split, there is quite a bit of firewood in just the remaining logs. They’ll keep a home warm for a long time.

But the job ended up being a lot bigger than I expected. I’m pretty good at getting into jobs that are bigger than I anticipate.

The entire process is caused by people trying to do the right thing. Habitat for Humanity was able to purchase the lot because it was a bit out of the way and would be difficult for a commercial developer to make a profit building a single family home. The tree was old and dying because no one had lived on the property for a long time and no one had the money to have it removed. The tree service donated their crew because they wanted to help Habitat for Humanity build homes. Because the crew was donated, they had only one day to get the job done and they had to quit when they ran out of time. And we were called by Habitat to remove the wood because we work in partnership with Habitat and they know we deliver firewood to people who need it.

We can always use a little more firewood, even when it isn't little.

Our Woodchuck Society is all amateurs. We have gained a few skills at preparing firewood, but as an all-volunteer organization with no budget, we don't have the equipment or expertise that professional crews have. Our crews prefer straight-grained pine, which splits easily and produces chunks of firewood that are relatively easy to stack. The harder woods provide good fuel for our users and burn longer than the pine, but they are difficult to cut and split and often produce knurled pieces of wood that are hard to stack.

But we'll get these logs cut up, moved, and stacked one way or another. It is just going to take more time than we anticipated. We pushed really hard to get most of the tree moved because we thought that the stump cutter was coming to remove the stump and now, two weeks later, I notice that the stump is still there. Lots of things take longer than anticipated when you are working with volunteers and companies that are donating equipment and labor. There are plenty of builders that construct homes faster than Habitat for Humanity.

But speed is not the primary goal of Habitat. Eliminating poverty housing is a long-term goal that isn't solved by building one or ten or fifty houses. It is going to take a concentrated effort over decades. There have already been lots of delays. And there will be a lot more.

One of the lessons that I have to keep learning - a lesson that doesn't come easily for me - is patience. Not everything in this world comes on my terms or in my timing. And the truly great endeavors of this life are bigger than life itself. Being involved in something that cannot be accomplished in a single lifetime is a meaningful process precisely because it doesn't hinge on one person. It isn't about me.

Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity is not going to eliminate poverty housing from this world. And the Woodchuck Society is not going to prevent people from being cold in the winter. But we will do what we can. One house at a time. One family at a time. One load of firewood at a time. The problems we seek to address are bigger than our ability to solve.

Were we not motivated by faith we would have given up long ago. There is plenty of faith in our ventures. We need to have faith in each other, because there are few, if any tasks for an individual working alone - our jobs require teamwork. We have to have faith in the future, because subsequent generations will have to pick up the mantle and go to work after the course of our lives are run. And we have to have faith in God, from whom the call and authority for ministry comes.

One of the slogans of Habitat for Humanity is “building on faith.” It is very meaningful to me. That’s what we are doing: building on faith. And some times we cut and split firewood on faith as well.

I know it will take faith. I’m not going to move those logs by myself.

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September 4, 2009 – Reading and Writing



Note: *For some reason I am feeling a bit introspective today. So what follows is a rambling trip through the way I think, at least the way I am thinking this morning. I doubt if it will produce any theological conclusions. It is just a trip through my state of mind at the present.*

What I am reading these days:

1. 1. *The Evolution of God* by Robert Wright. Robert Wright is a brilliant philosopher who writes in a very readable manner. He is the author of two other best selling books, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny,* and *Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life.* Since my college years, I have loved philosophy, especially the philosophy of religion. Of course Wright hasn't written a book about the evolution of God. He has written a good book about the evolution of the IDEA of God. The human perception of God and our ideas about God do evolve. I am enjoying the book and the ideas it evokes very much. The problem is that I cannot read the book when I am sleepy, which is often when I have time for reading. If I fall asleep while reading this book, I need to back up several pages to get back into the flow of the ideas that are being presented.
2. 2. *Cold: Adventures in the World's Frozen Places* by Bill Streever. A great book on everything you wanted to know about cold and more. He writes about the world's coldest places and the creatures that live there as well as stories about successful and failed expeditions to the world's coldest places. He describes the dynamics of freezing and of reviving people who have come close to dying from freezing. He explains the origins of the three major temperature

scales and introduces us to their inventors: Daniel Fahrenheit, Anders Celsius and Lord Kelvin. There is no problem with reading this book when I am sleepy. In fact I think that it would work to read this book in the wrong order. Every page has some interesting tidbit or trivial fact in it.

3. 3. J Macgregor's *A Thousand Miles in the Rob Roy Canoe*. Had there been a best seller list in London in 1866, this book would have made the top of the list. It was immensely popular as were a whole host of books about canoe adventures that were written in the second half of the 19th century. People who weren't able to travel loved to read of the adventures of those who did. A thousand miles, even by canoe, isn't a very long distance these days, but Macgregor has given us over 200 pages of wonderful description of adventure. The problem with this book is that this kind of reading feels a bit indulgent to me - the sort of thing one ought to read on vacation or a day off. So I try not to give too much time to reading it. Besides it is just the kind of book that gives pleasure stretching it out.

What I am writing these days:

1. 1. Seven sets of "Sermon Seeds" for Clergy Journal. I've been writing some of these each year for about five years. They are printed in an annual minister's planning guide. Here's the silly part. I don't use sermon guides in preparing my sermons. I have no idea whether or not my ideas are useful to anyone. I guess the editor likes them. I keep being asked to write more. We work a long ways ahead on these. My deadline is next Friday for sermon notes for June of 2011.
2. 2. A book project on end of life counseling, death notification, and leading funerals. I've got a little more than 50 pages down and I seem to be momentarily hung up. I'm about a third of the way through the outline. Once I get going, I am capable of writing ten pages a day, so maybe I'll finish it in my lifetime. I suspect that it has limited interest and probably won't ever be published, but working on a serious manuscript is a good discipline for me.
3. 3. A short story about aging and memory loss. I forget what it is about. Just joking. I think it is finished. I'd love to write some more to go with it.
4. 4. A blog - written not as a blog, but as a daily essay. My favorite form of writing. They ramble a good deal and some days I have five or six readers. Still it is a good discipline and it makes me feel like a writer.

I'm also in the midst of editing a major work for United Church Press. I didn't write any of the materials, but editing is a lot like writing and sometimes my writing is a lot like editing. A dozen writers have prepared 700 descriptions of learning activities to teach the Christian practice of hospitality in a wide variety of settings to people of all ages. I'm putting them together for consistency, looking for duplications, trying to evaluate age appropriateness, clarity of instructions and the like. I'll make my December 31 deadline, but I may be a bit frazzled between now an then.

I also preach an teach and try to be a pastor. This week I'm working on a funeral that will be co-officiated with a Unitarian pastor. I think she thinks I'm a fundamentalist. At least she doesn't trust me and is worried that I might say the wrong thing. Earning her trust is a real challenge. The good news - the woman whose memorial service we will co-celebrate was a fascinating, pioneering, and wonderful woman who crammed more into nine decades than four or five of her peers. And her children are delightful - what a joy to work with people who can grieve and love and laugh and cry and be honest and faithful and doubting and intelligent and very human all at the same time.

So, in my spare time I split wood and repair canoes an kayaks and run the rototiller and mow the lawn and do a large number of activities that allow my mind to think about the things that I am reading and writing. Yesterday I became a plumber when the water line to our refrigerator ice maker decided to fail. I mopped the floor, too.

When my brain becomes really scrambled there is going to be a lot of interesting stuff in there to mix up in creative ways. I should be able to bore almost any audience at the drop of a hat. And I own a lot of hats.

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September 5, 2009 – Our Town



I think that tourists entering Rapid City expect that the I-90 connector will lead them straight through town. It looks like it is a straight line from the connector to Highway 16, the road to Mt. Rushmore. But looks can be deceiving. Yes, there are buildings in the way. In fact the two streets do not line up. Traffic has to make a left and then a right turn to get from one street to the other.

Of course this is no surprise to those of us who live here. Nor are we surprised to know that there is a lot of town on the west side of skyline drive, the ridge of hills that divides our town in such a way that newcomers don't realize how much city there is on the other side.

There are lots of things in our town that aren't quite the way they first appear.

The Upper midwest has a reputation for being ethnically homogenous. It is true that there are a lot of people of European and Scandinavian descent in our community. But not everybody. Of course we have a lot of people who are Lakota, Nakota and Dakota - and a significant mix or Native Americans from other tribal backgrounds. We have friends who are Navaho, Ojibwa, Hunkpa, and Anishinaabe. Assuming that all of the Native Americans in our city are the same is as silly as assuming that Norwegians and Swedes see eye-to-eye on every interpretation of history. Our community has African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics. These groups, too, have come from many different communities and cultures. There are people whose families came from India

and Pakistan, from China and Japan. There are dozens of languages that are spoken in our town.

Western South Dakota has a reputation for being politically conservative. The Republican Party often captures the majority in elections for state wide and national leaders. But the majority doesn't describe all of the individual people in our town. There are people who are so Libertarian that they can sound like anarchists. There are people who are so liberal that they are disappointed with the conservatism in the Democratic party. If you listen to the folk in our community, you can find almost any political opinion that you can imagine.

Yes, there are a lot of people who identify themselves as Lutherans. But that doesn't begin to tell the story of religious diversity in our community. There is a funeral at our church on Tuesday at which I know there will be Southern Baptists, Assembly of God, United Church of Christ, Unitarian Universalist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Lakota traditional, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and agnostic participants. There may be many other varieties of religious perspectives as well. When I am invited to pray in public, I often am mindful of the wide diversity in names for God and ways of praying that are a part of our community.

Things are not always the way that they first appear.

Visitors to our town during the first week in August might think that we all ride motorcycles. Locals know that not all motorcyclists are the same.

Sociologists have long observed that there is a tendency of people to move into communities that are relatively homogenous. Large cities develop neighborhoods that are predominantly of one ethnic background. Some sociologists have speculated that the increasing polarization of the United States into "red states" and "blue states" is in part the product of people moving to live in areas where there are more people who agree with them politically. There are also several studies that show an increasing tendency towards age segregation. Retirement communities, some gated and very exclusive, tend to exclude younger residents. Excellent schools attract families with children into their neighborhoods.

Our town is aging like many other communities in the upper midwest. And the combination of a relatively small number of professional and manufacturing jobs and a large number of businesses in the service sector makes Rapid City a desirable place to retire and a difficult place to launch a new career. But to describe us as all being the same age is simply not accurate. There are plenty of young families and people of all ages in our town.

And there are a lot of us who enjoy the diversity of our town. We don't want to speak only to those with whom we agree. We don't want to recreate only with those who are

our own age. We don't want to have any one political party or religious group dominate the others. We welcome neighbors whose ethnic heritages are not our own. Living in a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious community is appealing to many of us.

I will admit that we who treasure the diversity of our town don't write as many letters to the editor of the newspaper as those who are less tolerant of different points of view. But even those letter writers have an appetite for argument and need an opponent in order to make their letters interesting.

There are lots of wonderful things about our community that take time to be revealed. Not everything is immediately obvious. And that makes living in this place a fascinating adventure. I've lived here fourteen years - not long compared to natives. But it is the longest I have lived in any community in my adult life and in just a few years it will be the longest I have lived in any community in my lifetime. Perhaps age is settling me a bit and I am less prone to wandering than I once was. However, I prefer to think that this place is so fascinating that it takes a long time to get to know it. Certainly I am making new discoveries about our town and its people every day.

Even though I can navigate through downtown and know how to find the major landmarks, I still can get mixed up on the streets of our town. There are streets that I have never driven on and neighborhoods where I have never walked. There is much left to explore and discover. There is more than meets the eyes in our town.

And that is probably true of any town in this world.

We welcome you to visit our town. We'll try to show you the best hospitality that we are able. But don't expect for everything to be easy and obvious. You may get confused trying to get from one place or another. There are plenty of locals who can give you directions. And if you like the joy of surprise, our town has plenty of surprises to share.

And no, I don't know why the two streets don't line up. There was an excellent opportunity when a flood wiped out a huge section in the center of the town. The streets could have been connected with just a little more park on one side than the other. But it is too late now. It wouldn't be worth the disruption. It might require moving a high school. It isn't going to happen. And he disconnection means that visitors are more likely to stop and take a look at our town. It's worth the time.

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September 6, 2009 – Salvation



The debate over health care, health insurance and various reform proposals has been unexpectedly intense in the United States. I suppose that we shouldn't be surprised. Attempts at health care reform, dating at least back to the Kennedy administration in the 1960's, have been met with significant opposition. And the current climate of talk radio, blogs that circulate without any fact checking, and intense partisanship tend to polarize our political discussions. Health care produces intense emotional reactions for a variety of other reasons as well.

Long before the existence of health insurance, before the advent of modern, scientific medicine, people often viewed illness as a form of punishment. At one point in the Gospels, Jesus is asked, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" when presented with a victim of illness. Mental illness, in particular has been judged to be some form of punishment by many people for many generations.

There are many different ways to look at sin and salvation. Throughout the history of people on this planet, there have developed many powerful ideas about a form of justice that lies beyond the experience of this life. Such ideas grew out of the observation that reward and punishment do not seem to always be fairly distributed. To use the title Harold Kushner's book, we wonder what it means "when bad things happen to good people."

Sin and salvation have been portrayed in at least three major models throughout history, and there are probably many more. There is the economic model: wealth and

poverty. Salvation is having wealth, punishment is living in poverty. People observe that wealth and poverty are not always distributed fairly. Stories develop over a belief that this injustice will someday be set right. These notions have led to descriptions of heaven as a place of incredible wealth: streets paved with gold, gigantic mansions, gates of pearl. Another model is a social model: community and loneliness. In this model, salvation is living in community and punishment is being banished from community. In this model, heaven is a place of reunion, where one is reunited with loved ones and surrounded by an extended family. Punishment in this model is being banished to lonely places and cut off forever from those one loves. The third model is the medical model: health and illness. In this model, heaven is a place where there is no suffering or pain and hell is a place of relentless pain. The pain of burns is often used as the nature of eternal punishment.

Of course most descriptions of heaven mix up all of the models.

We may not use the language of ancients. We may be a little better about attempting to blame victims for their illness, but we still think in those terms. People develop heart disease because they are overweight is another way of saying they are punished for the sin of gluttony. We don't use the same language, but there is still an element in the public debate that asserts that part of the reason there are so many sick people is that they don't take care of themselves - they are being punished for the things they have done wrong. When we are pushed, we know this is not true. We know that people become sick through no fault of their own. We know that disease strikes people of all walks of life and all levels of virtue. But old ideas die hard and they influence us even when we are not aware of them.

Our national health care debate becomes more complex because we have the economic model and the health model intertwined. Treatment for illness is distributed through an economic system where people pay to have their illness treated. In this model, treatment and finances are limited commodities which are exchanged. Health care providers do not have any income until illness is present. No one gets paid for people staying healthy. So illness and poverty and health and wealth are all interconnected. Even though most people believe that those who do not have money should receive treatment, there is an underlying sense that there must be some reason that they don't have enough money. They weren't prudent enough to purchase proper insurance, or they didn't qualify for a job with benefits.

We seem to be quick to accept a system where some people have all the health care they want or need and others do not. The cost of health care as a percentage of wages varies widely depending on what kind of job one has. Coverage for a family can be as small as 2% of personnel costs and as high as 50% of personnel costs. That is a huge difference. We are aware that the system is unfair, but we don't know the right ways to make changes.

And so the debate continues. Some believe that they are arguing for justice - championing the victims and standing up for the powerless. Some believe that they are discussing philosophy of government with debates over the desirable size of government programs and the role of government in the process of regulation. Some believe that they are discussing simple economics, stressing the size of deficits and the costs of interest. Some believe that they are discussing the advance of science, advocating for further research and advancement in methods for treatment.

But to my ears, the debate often sounds like an old theological argument about sin and salvation. When discussing sin and salvation from a medical model, it is easy to identify the doctrine of original sin: Everyone will one day experience illness. Our bodies are frail and our lives are finite. Pain and illness are components in every life. And the process seems to accelerate as one ages. No one escapes. Since all experience illness, all are in need of healing. The theological doctrine is “since all have sinned, all are in need of salvation.”

I think we are, in realty, engaged in a national theological debate in which we are being overly careful to avoid theological language. In the midst of that debate values like compassion and forgiveness will play a major role. May we not forget them as we continue to participate in the conversation.

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September 7, 2009 – What is She Thinking?



Photo from Chuck and Sybil Rounds.

Our friends are visiting their granddaughter in Australia. Of course they are enjoying their son and daughter-in-law as well, but the center of attention for all is Chloe, who is just over two months old. Yesterday they sent us the gorgeous picture that accompanies today's blog. She is a beautiful baby, and, according to the experts (our friends) she is exceptionally intelligent.

In the photo, she is staring right at the person with the camera with those beautiful dark eyes. It made me think of our children when they were little. Parents, and grandparents I presume, can spend a lot of time looking into the face of a baby. It isn't all because of being tired, though there is less continuous sleep at that phase of your life. There is something genuinely fascinating and captivating about this little person and, because she cannot talk, there is always the question, "What is she thinking?"

I've studied a bit of developmental psychology and I know that there are some theories about the mental processes of infants, but it is impossible to know exactly what babies re thinking. The memories of our own infant experiences become buried amongst other memories. People just don't have clear memories of the first year of their life, so getting a sense of what babies are thinking before they develop language is not based on eyewitness reports. There re a few tools that psychologists can use. EEG is very safe and acceptable. In the case of infants, they don't even have to attach the electrodes with adhesive - they can sew them into a little cap and watch the blips of tiny synapses firing to their heart's content. Researches introduce stimuli such as sounds, tastes or

visual images, or having a parent appear and disappear from the child's field of vision and to see what activity goes on. From these studies we know that infants undergo a transition a couple of months after birth from primarily sub cortex brain activity to increasing activity in the cortex. It is as if the vision and auditory centers begin in the sub cortex and later are transferred to the cortex. This follows the evolutionary pattern of the brain. The sub cortex is older from an evolutionary point of view and the cortex is a newer area of the brain.

But the bottom line is that no one, including scientists who focus all of their research on infant development, knows what a baby is thinking. We speculate. We theorize. It is the best we can do.

Charles Fernyhough is a developmental psychologist who has written two books about his own daughter, *A Thousand Days of Wonder: A scientist's chronicle of his daughter's developing mind* and T*he Baby in the Mirror: A child's world from birth to three.* The books combine scientific research and a sense of objectivity with the deep love and subjectivity of a father. The books present as good a window as I know into the experience of an infant as she or he is starting to tune in the world. In addition to letting readers know what science teaches about a baby's developing mind, he freely admits what we do not know as well.

Take vision for example. Hockenbury claims that all babies are myopic and that it takes months of experience before they begin to be able to focus their eyes. Everything is fuzzy to them and they rely more on smell than on vision. It sort of makes sense. Vision is a sense that cannot be used prior to birth. A rudimentary sense of smell and hearing can develop in utero and babies are born with some limited experience hearing and smelling, even if they haven't yet developed the ability to process those sensations. Fernyhough reminds us that the lens of a baby's eye is absolutely clear, where as our lenses have yellowed with time. The yellowing of the lens means that it filters out some of the blue. To a baby light is so bright that it may be the biggest shock that they experience.

The immature brain doesn't process sound in the same way that a more mature brain does, either. There are lots of over and under tones that our brains filter out, as well as echos and other parts of sounds. Babies seem to be experiencing all of those sensations at once, so the world is louder and filled with echoes to them. Another thing that is interesting from the EEG studies of babies is that the synapses in their brains don't always fire in the appropriate location. A visual stimulus might trigger activity in the auditory centers of the brain. A sound might trigger a taste response. We don't know exactly how this is perceived, but we are relatively certain that the information processing isn't yet sorted out for tiny babies.

What we do know is that whatever they are perceiving, however the world works to them, whatever they are thinking, babies are intensely relational. They respond to other

people in their world. They show genuine delight in the experience of familiar others. They might not have the processing to recognize the visual appearance of a familiar person, but they have enough total experience that some people, such as parents are recognized in some fashion.

And we know that relationship is critical to infants. Those who are deprived of relationship do not develop normally. And when a baby develops sticky fixation, a condition of staring intently at a single object that may be caused by a temporary loss of vision control as processing shifts from sub cortex to cortex, they are more likely to fixate on faces, not on doorknobs or toys or other objects.

I'm fascinated by the picture. I printed it so I could study it a bit more. You can see the activity in the hands and arms and imagine that the feet are kicking as well. But the baby is not looking at herself. She is looking at whoever is holding the camera. You can't help but wonder, "what is she thinking?"

I guess we'll never know, really. But that doesn't stop us from wondering.

I think that Charles Fernyhough, in selecting the title for his book, was thinking of the infant's experience. A thousand days of wonder certainly is a good way of describing the initial experiences of the infant. But the title could apply to the adults in the child's life as well. For mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, grandparents and aunts and uncles it is also a thousand days of wonder - wondering about what this tiny person is experiencing. And in the wonder is definite delight. What a wonderful thing this baby is!

Each year, we Christians recall the birth of Jesus and think about the significance of God becoming human - as an infant. It is a mind-boggling thought. We more likely think of God in terms of the vastness of the universe - the heart beat that pulses with the expansion and contraction of the entire universe. It takes a shift in perception and in theology to pause and think of God as an infant. But there is no less awe in each infant than there is in the vastness of the universe. There is no less wonder, no less mystery, no less opportunity for discovering depth upon depth.

While I am drawn to scientific explorations and expanding our understanding of the processes of this universe, I am well aware that science teaches us not only what we know, but also what we do not know. There is much that is yet to be learned, much that is yet to be understood, and much that is beyond the capacity of our minds to fully perceive. Like newborn infants, our senses can experience more than our brains can process. Living in the mystery is a wonderful experience and it sets us on a life-long journey of discovering and learning. Even when there is much we have learned and a few great truths to which we can become dedicated, there is even more yet to be learned.

I may never know what she is thinking. It is still a worthy thought and an engaging wonder.

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September 8, 2009 – Harvest Moon



We were treated to a spectacular moonrise last night. There were quite a few clouds in the sky, and a bank of clouds lay on the horizon, so the moon had to rise a bit before it became visible, showing through a break in the clouds. I suppose that one of the things that made it so dramatic was the simple fact that I happened to be looking. The moon wasn't quite full, it was waning and about 88% visible. I had missed the full moon, which occurred Friday night. I'm not sure that it is technically the harvest moon, but I think of the September full moon as such. But this year it is early in September and so the next moon, in early October might be the true harvest moon. Or it might be the hunter's moon.

The names for the full moons vary with time and place. I announced as I came in that it was the "corn" moon, which is the name I learned for the August full moon. But the August full moon can also be called the sturgeon moon, the lightening moon, the grain moon and the dog days moon. Perhaps it would be good to call it the barley moon, which is sometimes a name applied to the August full moon and sometimes to the September full moon, barley being one of the grains that is harvested a bit later than others. The names of the months vary from culture to culture as well, but since Roman times, a lot of the world has gotten used to the names that are most familiar to us.

The race to the moon was a part of my childhood and adolescent years and we paid close attention to it. I had autographed pictures of astronauts and we would watch each space launch on the television regardless of the time of day that it occurred. Early morning in Florida is even earlier in Mountain time, where we lived, but we all got up to

watch. When Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin took that first moon walk, I assumed that it would soon become a regular occurrence. I never thought that there would be a long time when our attention would be elsewhere and no travel to and from the moon would be taking place. I expected that human travel to other planets would have followed within a decade or so. I'm sure that I didn't have a real sense of the cost and complexity of such ventures. I was caught up in the power of a national goal that had been set and achieved. It was one of our ways of honoring President Kennedy after his assassination - we honored the goal that he led us in setting.

Who would have thought that in my middle years most of the news about moonwalking would have to do with the untimely death of an entertainer who never left the earth? Life has a way of unfolding in unforeseen directions.

Whether or not there are humans walking on its surface, the moon holds a lot of fascination for me. It looks so different on some nights than on others - it can appear to be closer or father away depending on its position in the sky and atmospheric conditions. The phases of the moon have enough influence that I am usually aware of where we re in its cycle.

The full moons of the autumn have a long association with romance as well. The evenings remain warm and farm work slows at this time of the year - a perfect set up for the pursuit of romance. There were several Tin Pan Alley songs released a century ago that referred to the role of the moon in romance. The most famous is "Shine on Harvest Moon." It's hard to tell who actually wrote the lyrics to the song as when songs were sold in those days, the name of the songwriter was changed to the current owner of the printing rights. The 1908 version was printed with lyrics by Jack Norwich. John Kennick's Who's Who in Muiscals credits Edward Maddena and Gus Edwards. Others claim the words were written by David Stamper, songwriter for the Ziegfield Follies. Norwich was the husband of Nora Bayes, who brought the song to fame, but Stamper was her pianist from 1903 to 1908. It's possible that several people had a hand in shaping the lyrics:

Oh, Shine on, shine on, harvest moon
Up in the sky;
I ain't had no lovin'
Since January, February, June or July.
Snow time ain't no time to stay
Outdoors and spoon;
So shine on, shine on, harvest moon,
For me and my gal.

The months in the chorus have been sung in several different orders. The 1908 version was published with "January, April, June or July." It has also been recorded with April, January, Ju-une or July," and the way it appears above.

Whatever words are sung, the moon inspired recalling a song that has been a part of our culture for a century, now. And the evening inspired lingering outside for a little longer than usual just to enjoy the beauty of the day and a few pleasant memories.

In the midst of an often too busy life, there are some joyous moments when I just pause and take a break. Often such a moment is inspired by the incredible beauty of this universe. How fortunate we are to be able to look into the sky and see the moon and the stars and think of our place in the vastness of the universe.

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September 9, 2009 – Driving on the Left



As a public service, I thought it might be important to note a news item that you may have missed. This week the nation of Samoa switched from driving on the right side of the road to driving on the left. According to Samoalive News, the switch officially began at 6 a.m. on Monday. Cars driving on the right side were directed by police to cross over. There were teams of police dispatched to every intersection around the island's urban area. Other officers were sent to rural villages to direct traffic and warn drivers.

Samoa was a German colony at the time that automobiles first arrived, and, like Germany, they began driving on the right side of the road as more vehicles arrived and traffic rules became necessary. Since most Samoan drivers have never known anything different the reason for the change may not be immediately evident. Driving on the left is the dominant pattern in the South Pacific and many Pacific Islands including Australia and New Zealand. Both of those nations have high populations of Samoan immigrants who drive in their new adopted countries and regularly return home for visits. All vehicles in Samoa are imported and the country already has a mixture of vehicles designed for right-hand and left-had driving. It is estimated that as the years go by, there will be fewer vehicles where the driver sits on the left because importing vehicles from other Pacific Island nations will be less expensive than importing them from Europe or the United States.

The change was not universally accepted by Samoan citizens. In fact the case was argued all the way to the Samoa's Supreme Court. The anti-switch group organized under the name People Against Switching Sides (PASS). They warned of the dangers of switching sides and predicted that accidents would increase dramatically. So far,

however, it appears that the switch went smoothly and Samoa is headed for joining its neighbors in driving rules and customs.

By and large the switch didn't seem to garner much attention here in the United States. I didn't see it among the headlines in local news or any of the domestic Internet sites from whIch I gain the news each day. I might not have noticed it except that we have had the opportunity to visit England and Australia, two countries where cars drive on the left. I've driven in both places without problems. Our daughter is currently living in England and although she had some fears about making the driving switch, has adjusted quite well. Like most people who have learned to drive on the right, staying on the correct side of the road isn't much of a problem. More challenging is learning to look in the right direction before entering an intersection, remembering which lane is the fast lane on the freeway and finding the turn signal while driving. In Australia they joke, "Do you know how to tell an American driver?" "They turn on the windshield wipers before every turn." I know I kept doing it.

Driving is a combination of memorized actions and maneuvers practiced in an environment that demands conscious thought and close attention to what one is doing. The circumstances change and attention and rapid reaction are demanded in order to insure safety. More dangerous than drivers who have developed habits about driving on one side of the road or another are drivers who are distracted by the use of their cell phones or other devices. Just last week I had a close call with a pedestrian who was talking on a cell phone and who walked right out into traffic against the red light in a busy downtown area. Fortunately no one was hurt, but it scared both of us. Stories abound of distracted drivers using their telephones. Last night after a meeting a member of our congregation reported about a motorcyclist who was driving one-handed while reaching into a back pocket to pull out a cell phone and make a call. People like that end up on the wrong side of the road from time to time.

So be careful out there, friends. It is a dangerous world. Vehicles are traveling at high rates of speed by people with varying amounts of attention. It takes more than being sure that you are on the correct side of the road - you also have to be prepared to react to unpredictable and often irrational behavior of other drivers. No matter which side of the road is the local custom, drivers and passengers are precious cargo and keeping them safe is no easy task.

And if this is the first time you've heard about the switch in driving habits in Samoa, remember that you read about it here first. This blog is not only a rambling theological commentary, but also a source of news that often gets missed. It is one of the advantages of writing a free form essay every morning. The number of potential topics is limitless. Who knows? Yesterday I wrote about the moon. Today it's drivers in Samoa. Tomorrow I may write about something closer to home.

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September 10, 2009 – Sunrise



One of the clear memories from my childhood is the sound of my father's boots as he came up the stairs. My bedroom was at the top of the stairs and my bed was right by the door. Some mornings he would pull on his boots and then come up the stairs to see if I wanted to go with him. I don't ever remember not wanting to go with him. After he touched my shoulder he'd say something like, "If you want to come, I'm getting ready to

leave." I could get out of bed and dressed before he made it to the back door and I'd be sitting in the front seat when he drove away from the house.

Breakfast was usually at Alameda's Cafe, a tiny lunch counter that might have a couple of truckers and a few others. We'd have eggs and sometimes pancakes. I always wanted a short stack: three plate-sized pancakes, but Dad was a big proponent of eggs for breakfast. "You need protein." We'd see first light as we drove up airport hill. By the time we got the airplane out of the hanger, checked over and fueled the sun would be up. Most days there was little breeze, but we almost always took off towards the northwest with the sun behind us. One of the enduring images in my mind is of that first turn, looking back upon the sunrise from the front seat in a Piper Cub. On the super cubs, the windshield continues with a clear plexiglass panel above your head. The sunrise stretched as far as you could see in any direction. If we were heading out for fire patrol, we'd fly south, up the Boulder, with the sun on our left. We'd fly past the hole in the wall and over into paradise valley to catch whatever mountain wave lift was left next to Emigrant Peak. We'd have enough altitude that we could see Yellowstone Falls just after passing over Mammoth Terrace. Old Faithful and the Lodge are easy to pick out from the air and the Lake signals the southern edge of the park. We didn't always fly the same route because we'd circle or take a second pass if there was anything suspicious. Campers would be lighting their fires and you had to know whether or not a puff of smoke could be ignored.

By the time we headed back north the sun would be making its way above the higher mountains. The height of granite peak is very close to the service ceiling of the cub and once the day got some heat to it the winds would start to swirl and get tricky. Pilots who fly for years in the mountains develop a healthy respect for them. "There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots."

Some days we'd pick out the sight of a mountain goat. Most days we could see a moose and there were always lots of antelope, elk and deer.

I've never lost my love of sunrises.

The place where I work these days has a small gravel parking lot off the east end of the building, which is on the eastern slope of a hill. There are few places that are better for viewing sunrises. If I get to work in time, the sunrise behind the cross is an unforgettable sight. If I get a slow start, I watch the sunrise from home and on the drive in. If I'm too late I get the direct sun filling the windshield as I drive down the hill. One of the treats of this phase of my life is stepping out of my car and standing for a while on the edge of the hill and watching the colors unfold.

Sunrises are dispensed free of charge and available to all. In our part of the world there is no cost for a view to the east. I know that some city dwellers have the view blocked by other buildings, pollution and the curse of living in a place where they never turn off

the lights. And I know that there are homes tucked on the west slope of hills that are aimed at the sunset and never get to see a real sunrise. But for those of us who want to watch the sun appear in the morning, the view is free and there is plenty of room for others to look from their vantage point without ruining the view for the rest of us.

I suppose that one of the qualities I appreciate about sunrise is the solitude. I usually have the church yard to myself. I know I used to feel privileged, when I was a kid, to be awake when much of the rest of the town was still sleeping, like the view was private. In those hours it seemed to me that I had my father all to myself.

Sometimes I am amazed to think: the sunrise is beautiful whether or not anyone sees it. The joy of the morning is there whether or not we open our eyes and take a look. The glory of the silver and gold and orange and yellow of the sun's first light are there even when we are distracted and paying attention to something else. It is a free gift, whether or not we take time to appreciate it.

This morning it is still dark as I write. There is a faint glow on the horizon that promises as sunrise in a half hour or so. I may not make it to the church in time. But it is autumn, the sunrises will be later each day for a few months now and before long I'll be arriving in the dark. But I live with the promise of a fresh sunrise every morning.

Today is a new day and I'm anticipating a spectacular view. Time to get going on the things that need to be done. But I'll pause, from time to time, to just look at beauty freely offered.

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September 11, 2009 – Eight Years Later



Photo from Visibility 911 blog

There will be plenty of remembrances, a day of service in New York City, solemn ceremonies and prayer services today. It is the eighth anniversary of the attacks that destroyed the World Trade Towers in New York City, damaged the Pentagon in Washington D.C. and resulted in the deaths of all of the passengers in another airliner that was crashed in Pennsylvania, presumably a failed attempt at another Washington, D.C. target. There is little that I can add to these events. For the families of the victims, the tragedy never ends. The death of a loved one alters your life forever. The event has become imprinted on our national psyche and is one of the events by which we describe our nation.

When the attacks occurred, there were frequent comparisons with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1942. People said that they always remembered where they were when they heard the news. In that sense, I guess the comparison is valid. I remember first hearing that a plane had crashed into one of the towers on the car radio as I drove my daughter to school. Later we watched in horror as the tape of the plane hitting the second tower was replayed over and over. We were in a conference room at the school. Still later, we watched the film of the towers toppling from a television wheeled into our office.

But there are also significant differences between the events of eight years ago and the events that prompted the US entry into World War II. The attack on Pearl Harbor was made by another government. War was the result. War is something that happens

between two governments. The United States did not just enter the war in the Pacific, however, it also entered the war in Europe.

And, in comparison to today's wars, events unfolded quickly. It was just two years and eight months from the attack on Pearl Harbor to the surrender of the Japanese and the official end of the war. A national effort of unprecedented proportions had been accomplished. People had sacrificed and saved and invested in war bonds and the nation had accomplished its military goals.

I grew up in a different generation. The war of my age cohorts was fought in Vietnam. No one knows the official date of the US entry into that war, which was never officially declared as a war. Perhaps it was 1959. Sixteen years later, in 1975, the United States finally officially withdrew from that war.

The events that have unfolded since the attacks of September 11, 2001 have been confusing and not clearly focused. First of all, the identity of the attackers was unclear. There was no nation state to blame. The individual attackers came from a variety of countries, mostly Saudi Arabia, a strategic partner of the United States and a source of much oil imported into our nation. The identity of the individuals and groups involved in planning the attacks was a little more clear. The organization Al Queda and its leader Osama Bin Laden claimed responsibility for the attacks. But they did not represent a nation and the location of their headquarters was unclear. The President of the United States spoke to the nation of a global war on terrorism and he seemed to have the approval of the nation to launch attacks in Afghanistan and later in Iraq. The Taliban leadership in Afghanistan was toppled, though there are plenty of insurgents with dramatic violent capabilities. In Iraq, the government of Saddam Hussein was toppled and he was arrested, tried and executed. But the violence continues. Two wars and eight years later and there is no sense that our nation is more secure or that justice has been achieved. Although there have been plenty of speeches about an exit strategy from the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan continues to escalate with no end in sight.

One might simply say that we live in a world that is far more complex than the world of our parents. But to say that would be to inaccurately simplify the challenges faced by previous generations. To say that circumstances are different is true, but the times were equally complex during World War II. The United States has maintained a continual military presence in Europe and throughout the South Pacific including Japan since the official end of that war.

And for the families of the victims and the participants in the fighting, the war never ends. War changes the lives of all of its participants forever. That is as certain as the events of September 11, 2001 changed the lives of the families who lost loved ones.

So it is appropriate to pause on this day and remember. It is appropriate to express our compassion and concern to the grieving families. It is appropriate to express our resolve to stand with them and even our passion to seek justice.

But it is also a day for self-examination and evaluation. What changes need to be made in our policies, procedures, and involvements in the world? What actions provide more security for the world's citizens? How can the the substantial resources of our military and our government be invested to bring about a decrease in suffering? There are no clear or simple answers to these questions. But they are the questions that are worthy of our energy and our national investment.

The true memorial to the victims of the attacks on September 11, 2001, will not be a structure or another building or a monument erected in some city plaza. The true memorial will be the lives we live and the ways we seek to protect the most vulnerable members of every society. The true memorial is the one that is most elusive in our time - and perhaps in every generation. It is the gift of peace - not just for us, but for all of God's children.

Today is a good day to pray for peace.

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September 12, 2009 – Shaped by Water



Much of my growing up was next to the Boulder River in Montana. I was a teenager before the bacteria content in the river got high enough that we stopped drinking directly from the river. In my later teen years we heard about people getting giardia from the water in the high country. I was an adult before I owned a water filter. I enjoy following rivers and creeks and stopping to look at the waterfalls and rapids. We lived for seven years in southwestern North Dakota where water requires much more work to obtain. Wells have to go deep and often the water from wells has a lot of mineral content. Water softeners and other filtration systems are installed in most homes.

But I've never gone thirsty. We've always had access to a supply of clean drinking water. For much of my life I haven't thought about it. Much of the world, however, is experiencing or facing water shortages. The problem isn't so much a shortage of water as it is a shortage of clean water. Water is a solvent and many different things can become dissolved in water. Surface water can be contaminated by industrial pollution, the overuse of fertilizers, human and animal waste.

It could become a giant problem. In fact, some people have predicted that the lack of clean drinking water will become the world's leading health problem within a few decades. The problem has been getting the attention of inventor Dean Kamen. Though his name is not recognized by many, one of his inventions is well-known: the Segway personal motorized scooter. Though sales of the Segway weren't as dramatic as originally predicted, it did receive a lot of publicity. Personally, I never found the scooter to be attractive. With the number of obese people in the world, an alternative to walking

for able-bodied people just doesn't appeal to me. But Kamen used similar technology to create the Luke - one of the most advanced prosthetic arms ever made available. The arm is not yet available for use by persons who have lost an arm. The state-of-the-art bionic arm has not gone into clinical trials due to a lack of funding. At this point, it is hoped that some people may be able to use the new arm relatively quickly, but it is evident that the cost will place the life-like limb beyond the reach of most persons.

But Dean Kamen is a creative inventor and he has moved on. His current project is an attempt to create a way to transform almost any liquid with water content into a supply of safe drinking water. The project is called "slingshot" in memory of how David tackled the giant Goliath. Seeing the problem of water shortages as a giant, Kamen is trying to come up with a solution. The device he invented really works. The portable, low-energy machine is designed to purify water in remote locations. For a couple of years the devices have been used in field trials in rural areas of Honduras and the machines have run as planned.

Slingshot shares a problem with other inventions by Kamen. These machines aren't inexpensive. Currently it costs several hundred thousand dollars for each machine that is produced. Even if funding and engineering could be developed to go into mass production, the projected $2,000 per machine cost will be beyond the reach of many of the world's poorest people. Like the segway and the Luke, this invention seems to be a solution to a problem that simply costs too much to become commonly used.

Not that Kamen should stop innovating. His ideas may emerge in new forms, and the discoveries he is making are likely to find application in new places. Some of the technologies employed in the Segway, for example, are finding their way into scooters and other mobility devices for people who with disabilities.

Right now, the places in the world where shortages of clean drinking water are most acute are places of extreme poverty. An expensive, technological solution to the problem will require substantial investment by those who themselves aren't yet experiencing thirst. So far, Kamen has based his arguments for the machine on his belief that the problem of polluted drinking water will spread to all parts of the world and that solving the problem now is key to preventing world-wide shortages and price wars.

I am awed by the creative genius of the world's inventors. And I hope that they continue to work on problems such as drinking water. But I am skeptical that expensive technologies alone will provide the solution to the world's most vexing problems. Certainly we need to find ways to prevent the pollution of drinking water as part of our solution to this problem. Simpler and less expensive filters and other water cleaning devices will also be needed. Machines such as the slingshot may offer more to large urban areas than they do to rural and isolated areas. Portability may not be the most important feature as the world becomes increasingly urbanized and poverty continues to be a problem of large cities.

Our lives are shaped by waters. And the lack of clean drinking water holds the potential to shape the history of life on our planet. Even if we don't accept Kamen's solution to the problem, he will have accomplished a great deal if he succeeds in convincing more people that the problem is real.

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September 13, 2009 -The Face in my Window



In the late afternoon yesterday, I was working in the basement of our home and I noticed a deer outside of the window. She was eating some grass that was growing outside the window. I crept closer to the window and realized that she wasn't seeing me. Somehow the light was reflecting off of the window in a manner that made her unaware of my movements. I got my camera and took a dozen or more pictures through the window. The window screen shows up in the pictures, but they record the memory for me quite well. It is an amazing thing to be two or three feet away from a wild animal without it knowing of your presence.

We see the deer a lot and get to know individuals well enough to recognize them when they wanter through our yard. From a distance, they are beautiful animals with graceful bodies and long, slender legs. They eat quietly in the yard and occasionally lie down and chew their cud in the tall grass of the neighbor's place. But they are wild animals and they like to keep their distance. They move away when I walk outside to pick up the newspaper or check the garden. They will run if I make a loud or sudden noise. The young ones are especially jumpy, their white tails going up at the slightest motion or sound.

Yesterday's experience afforded me a different perspective. I was close enough to see the places where the animals fur was matted and full of cockleburs. The burrs probably are not even noticed by the deer as they tend to stick on the outside of the thick fur. The seeds are tiny and they will rub or drop off soon enough. Those seeds are expert travelers. The cocklebur is a member of the daisy family that was once a tropical plant,

but now has spread throughout the world. Those seeds have hitched rides on all sorts of animals. I'm not overly thrilled with the prospect of having them planted right outside my basement window, but there is no way I can avoid a little weeding even if the deer didn't come so close to the house.

The deer in my window is a sign that the animals have become acclimated to their human neighbors. When we moved into this house 14 years ago, the home was only 9 years old and the subdivision across the street was just being built. Since we've moved out here, nearly 500 homes have been built within a couple of miles. The hillsides and forests that once were undeveloped and natural homes for the deer and turkeys are not dotted with homes. Somehow the incursion of so many homes has not had a negative effect on the population of the deer or turkeys. We see more these days than we ever did. Some of our other neighbors have moved farther away. We rarely hear the coyotes up close these days.

With increased numbers and more homes and with a few less predators, there are plenty of deer than have gotten used to living with people. The doe in my window yesterday is either three or four years old. She was born after most of the building in the immediate neighborhood. I suspect that she sleeps in the neighbor's yard year round. Sometimes she will bed down under the trees in our back yard. The eating is pretty good for her. We have plenty of grass and the grass next to the house gets watered so it stays green when other plants are drying out and going dormant. The road poses a potential risk and each year several animals are hit by cars, but so far she has survived and eluded contact with a car. She has never known a world without humans and their homes, so it seems perfectly natural to her that I mow the lawn and keep a tall fence around my garden. She knows that my compost pile is a source of some things like corn husks that she finds to be very tasty. She was calm enough to have her fawn within easy sight of my back deck and although the little one was difficult to spot for the first few weeks of life, she has not been bothered by my wanting to take an occasional picture of the little one.

Living with animals is one of the joys of life. I've never had an acreage or raised domestic critters. If you don't count several house cats, our home has specialized in human habitat. I'm sure that sheep and cows and horses are as interesting as the wild animals, but I don't put any work into the care of wild ones. I'd feel a different sort of obligation to ones I intentionally kept at the place. We tend to think of animals as having human attributes, something that probably is not the case. The deer doesn't think like I do and probably does more by instinct than by rational thought. She'll keep her fawn with her for about a year now, but after that the animal will be on its own. I don't think deer go in for family reunions and often they see their relatives as competition for food.

Their life is harsher and more dangerous than we think. They spend the stormy weather out doors. An injury like a broken leg is pretty much a death sentence for a deer. Chances of it living until the bone is mended are very slim. But perhaps the harsh

realities of life and death are another reason why having animals in our lives and paying attention to them is good for humans. We are not exempt from the same realities. Our faith gives us a hope that is unknown to the animals. There are differences. But there are far more things that we share in common.

So I am grateful for the face in my window. It is fun to get to know one's neighbors even better than before. I don't reckon I'll get too attached to this critter. I know that there will be more in the years to come. Yesterday's visit was a treat and the pictures will remind me of our encounter. And I'll remember that outside that window is no place to plant sunflowers.

How fortunate we are to live in this place and have such interesting neighbors.

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September 14, 2009 – The Piano



Yesterday was a wonderful day, full of worship, fellowship, music and more. But it was also a very long day. I left for the church before 6 a.m. and it was nearly 11 p.m. when I got back home. The fall fair at the church was a muted success, with activities moved indoors because of the weather. The music was wonderful and the entertainers were appreciated. One of the joys of the morning for me was that just as we were leaving the sanctuary the youngest children were on the outside flagstones blowing bubbles. The sun had peaked out and children chasing hundreds of soap bubbles was a delightful greeting at the end of our service. The barbecue was also moved indoors and attendance was a bit lighter than anticipated, but we had a fun morning and the congregation enjoyed the events.

My afternoon was filled with services at three area nursing homes. The services are a bit too close together to afford much time for visiting, but I do services at all three locations each month, so I know and enjoy many of the people who share worship in those places. Even though we didn't get long visits, the joy of seeing one another was a treat.

I'm normally tired after a single worship service. I put a lot of energy into a concentrated amount of time. I think that most ministers have a reputation for Sunday naps, and I am no exception. But yesterday wasn't a day for naps. Area piano students were coming to the church to practice and then to play music as the community gathered for a concert of the Black Hills Chamber Music Society. Featured artists for the concert were John and Mary Walker, who played piano duets. The Society was instituting a new program

of having students play in the entryway before concerts and during intermission. The students are matched to the program of the concert, so we had two pianos in the entryway for duets.

The main program was played with four hands on a single piano.

Our congregation's main sanctuary piano is now 4 years old. In 2005, we had an opportunity to pick up a 9'2" Blüthner concert piano. It was a bit of a financial stretch for the congregation and we had several fund-raising events to come up with the money. The piano has proven to be an excellent match for our room. Last night the Walkers made it sparkle. Their performance was brilliant and the audience was appreciative.

People, including performers often are not familiar with the Blüthner piano. There aren't many of them in the United States. Julius Blüthner began building pianos in Leipzig in the German province of Saxony in 1853. It was a god place to be in the classical music business, with a rich tradition of vocal and orchestral music dating back to the 12th century. Blüthner had almost no marketing strategy other than showing his pianos at concerts and other gatherings where the instruments were played. Sales and production grew quickly and the instruments won high praise. The company weathered World War I and the financial crisis of the late 1920's and early 1930's with little decrease in production. In fact one of the most famous Blüthner pianos of all time was the aluminum framed, parchment-covered grand piano what was custom designed for the airship Hindenberg. It was the instrument used for the first piano concert broadcast from the air and the instrument entertained passengers as the airship crossed the Atlantic Ocean. The piano was destroyed in the famous fiery crash of the giant ship.

Control of the company passed from its founder to his son-in-law in the 1930's. As Germany entered the second world war, the factory was nationalized by the government and piano production became a sideline as the steam-powered machinery was used to produce a variety of war-related items. The factory was hit by an air raid in 1943 and burned to the ground. It wasn't until 1948 that production could be resumed and then it was very limited due to a lack of suitable materials. The East German socialistic system made it difficult for the company to engage the world market and the pianos that were produced mostly went into the local market.

During all of these years, family members continued to build pianos. Ingbert Blüthner-Hassler, third generation piano builder, received his master piano maker's certification in 1958 following an apprenticeship in England and finally managed to get the firm back into family control in 1990. Export of pianos began in the early 1990's and the piano that is in our sanctuary was manufactured in 2004. It is considered to be a world class instrument equal to the finest piano in any concert hall in the world.

The story of the piano's journey from the Leipzig factory to our church is a different story for a different day.

Last night, it was a beautiful ending to a long day to sit and listen as the piano sang with all of its strength and glory. I sat in the balcony where I had an excellent view of the cross and banners as well as the piano, but I confess that for much of the concert I wasn't concentrating on the visual image at all - I was listening intently to the music. The excellent acoustics of the room, the brilliance of the piano and the mastery of the artists combined to make it a concert to remember.

It is hard for a church to justify the extravagance of expensive musical instruments. There are many needs in our community that might take precedence over music. The value of the piano could probably fund two homes in partnership with Black Hills Area Habitat for Humanity. There are many other worthy mission projects that want for funding. It is hard to justify the luxury of spending so much money on ourselves.

The expenditure is not just for ourselves, of course. The majority of people at the concert last night were not members of our congregation. Music is an important outreach program of our church - one of the ways we connect with our community. Furthermore, art is not an extravagance. It is essential to sustaining our humanity.

Mary Walker, one of last night's artists, has pioneered an exciting new program in her community that we are hoping to replicate. She has observed that classical music training is often reserved for children from homes with significant income. Children of poverty often do not get private lessons or access to expensive instruments. Working in partnership with boys and girls clubs, she has identified children that otherwise would not have access to lessons, teachers, instruments and music. Their program offers free lessons and access to community-owned instruments for students that would not otherwise have an opportunity to learn to play the piano.

Music, like many other resources is an untenable luxury if it is hoarded and kept to oneself. It is only justify-able if it is shared. May we share the blessings of music that we enjoy in ways that serve our community today and long into the future.

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September 15, 2009 – One Year Later



Photograph from CEO World Magazine, www.ceoworld.biz.

Yesterday was the one year anniversary of the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers - the largest bankruptcy in U.S. history. It is easy for me to remember the date because it is our daughter's birthday. I don't write about financial matters much. It isn't my area of expertise. One of the reasons that it isn't my area of expertise is that I don't have much passion for money. It is good to be able to have a home and meals to eat. I like to buy gadgets and things from time to time. But money is just a medium - a way to get things or to do projects. Having money just to have money has no meaning to me. I don't have any aspirations to be rich. Still, I know that ignoring money can be dangerous. It needs to be managed. Bills need to be paid. Priorities must be set. Discipline is required.

The interesting thing about the current financial crisis, which has been called "the worst recession since the great depression," is that the experts were wrong in so many ways. Huge banks got caught up in investment schemes that they didn't even understand. They banked enormous amounts of money on and expectation that the economy would continue to expand. Reals estate was viewed as a sure thing. The value of houses was expected to go up and up and up. We all know the world doesn't work that way. But that didn't stop our economic experts from behaving as if unlimited expansion could be sustained indefinitely.

So a huge bank went broke. There were no customers to bail them out. The U.S. treasury did not step in. And the reaction was nothing short of panic. Other banks quit lending money. Stocks plummeted. Sales slowed. Unemployment began to rise. News

of other bankruptcies of huge corporations began to become a daily diet. Governments on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean stepped in to shore up the economy with huge bail-outs. A few eyebrows were raised with stories of executive compensation and golden parachutes, but there was remarkably little finger-pointing and blaming.

One year later, the experts are all writing their analyses of what happened. There were plenty of articles on the Internet yesterday and there will be more to come. Experts are asking, “What have we learned?” and “Is the recession over?”

The recession isn’t over for the families who lost their homes. It isn’t over for the average US wage earner who is only able to work 33 hours a week, an effective pay cut of nearly 18%. It isn’t over for the people who lost their jobs. And the net effect of the financial crisis may mirror the existing trends in the U.S. economy - the rich get richer, the poor get poorer and the number of people in the middle class become fewer. The gap between those who have wealth and those who do not is even wider.

It is easy to criticize. There has been plenty of vitriol for the “winners” in this situation. But the truth is that It would be easy for people to criticize me and the decisions I have made. I’ve made plenty of financial mistakes. There is a good reason people don’t turn to ministers for investment advice - it should remain that way.

But I wonder if the biggest lesson isn’t quite different for a person like me. Maybe the truth is that I have become too much of a consumer: buying too many things that do not have lasting value, putting too much stock in material possessions. The true worth of my life is not in what I own or the size of my retirement account. The true meaning of my time is not measured by what things I buy.

Perhaps the recession is an opportunity of unprecedented proportions. No, I don’t mean that now is the time to buy undervalued commodities to later reap record profits, though there will be some who will do that. What I mean is that it may be an opportunity to re-evaluate our lives, re-order our priorities, and re-align our loyalties.

I don’t think the financial commentators are really asking the right questions. The question isn’t “How can I get enough money so that I can retire without financial concerns?” The question should be, “What is the role of meaningful work in all of my life and how can I find in work that is meaningful at every age?”

The global economy is incredibly complex and incredibly fragile. Bailouts of the size that we have seen in the last year cannot be sustained and it will be decades before we know whether they were the best course of action. There are a lot of factors that are beyond our control.

When things shake down, faith, hope and love are not commodities that can be exchanged. They are not dependent on any particular economic system. They cannot

be removed by foreclosure or crushed by speculators. They do not yield wealth in the terms of this world. But faith, hope and love carry the most enduring value.

In the time of Jesus, there were plenty of people who were waiting for the Messiah who expected a new king of the world to arrive with wealth and power and glory. They failed to recognize a baby, born weak and vulnerable, into an impoverished family. Jesus never accumulated wealth. He was not called in to consult with heads of state. He didn't have any retirement savings and he never owned a house. He wasn't transported in luxury. And he proved to be vulnerable to the cruelties of an unjust system. When they whipped him, he bled. When they crucified him, he died. When they thought they had gotten rid of him, they were wrong. I choose to be a disciple of the resurrected Christ. I do not expect wealth or power or public acclaim. I do have treasures of faith, hope and love.

It is enough.

It is more than enough.

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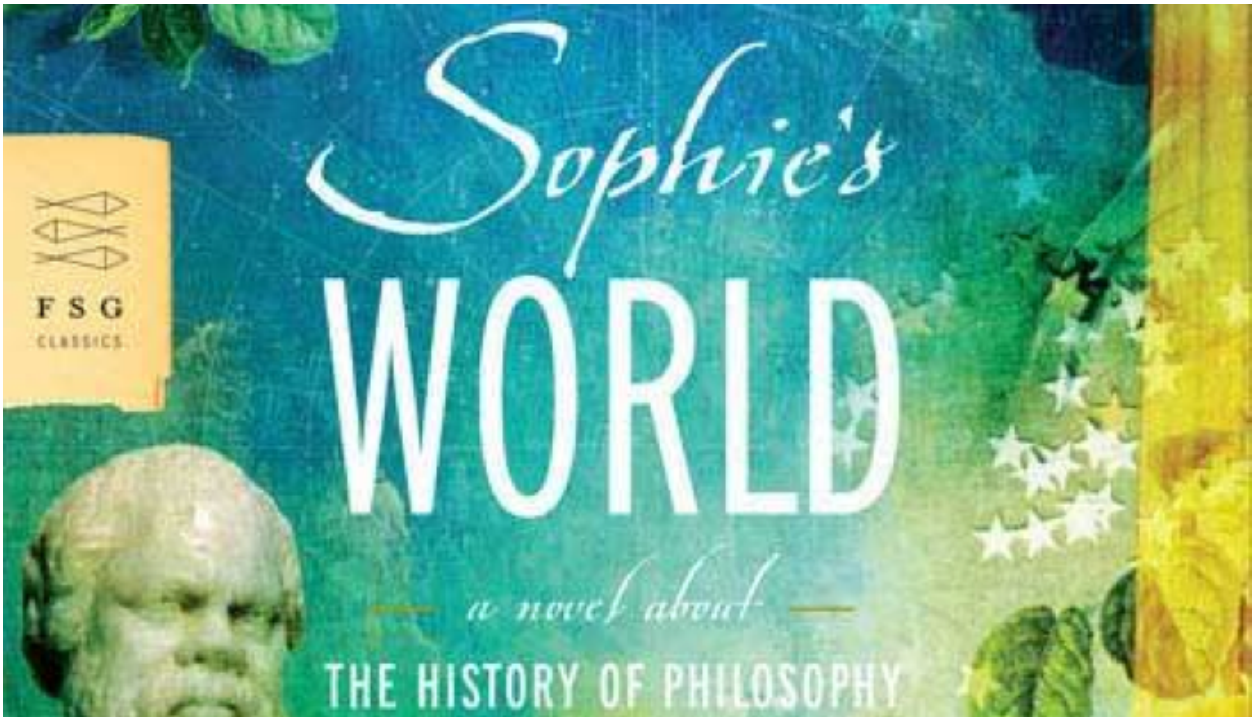
September 16, 2009 – Best Sellers



Every once in a while, I get distracted reading lists. News.com.au had a list of the best-selling fiction books of all time and I went through the list. As usual there were some surprises, but I wasn't surprised by the fact that I have read most of the books on the list. I'm not sure what it means to make a list of best-selling books. Recently I was talking to a publisher who said that the trick to a best-seller is to get people to buy the book, not necessarily to get them to read it. I didn't know what he meant, but he went on to say that if people enjoy a book, they will purchase copies as gifts for others - the others may or may not read the book. The publisher doesn't care - they are in the business of selling books. But I doubt any books make the all time best-seller list unless someone is reading them.

The list I was looking at is supposedly the all time best-sellers for fiction writing.

One of the surprises, for me, was that *Sophie's World* by Jostein Gaarder made the list. It has sold 20 million copies. I enjoyed the novel a lot, but it is essentially a book on the history of philosophy. Yes, there is a bit of fiction. The girl Sophie finds secret notes that engage her in thinking about how her ideas fit into the ideas of others. In the end, it turns out that these are messages from her sea-faring father. But most of the words in the book are simply the history of philosophy - a topic that I love, but not one that has created many best sellers.

I was surprised to see Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* on the list (Number 16 with 40 million copies sold). I guess I thought its popularity was confined to a single decade. On the other hand it was really marketed strongly at the time.

I wasn't surprised to find J.R.R. Tolkien's books on the the list. *The Lord of the Rings* was number 2 at 150 million copies and *The Hobbit* came in at #4 with 100 million. He probably wouldn't have been surprised that the #1 spot went to Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities.

Another expected book was Antoine de Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince* (No. 6; 80 million). But I was a bit surprised at the number of children's books that made the list. There are quite a few: *Love You Forever* by Robert Mursch, *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter, *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White, *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell, and *Ann of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery. And I wasn't surprised to find one of the Harry Potter books on the List. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deadly Hallows* was number 15 at 44 million copies sold.

There are other classics of children's and youth literature as well: Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* (is this fiction?) and J.D. Salinger's coming of age novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*.

One wonders what the list-makers were thinking, calling the *Hite Report on Female Sexuality* fiction. I haven't read the book, but thought it was research-based. And I doubt that Rick Warren would be pleased to see his 40-step guide to Christian Living with over 800 footnotes, *The Purpose Driven Life*, on a list of fiction, though he may be pleased with his income from 30 million copies sold.

It's no surprise that Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* made the list (No. 7 at 80 million copies sold). He also has a second novel on the list: *Angels and Demons* is number 18 with 39 million copies sold.

Agatha Christie got one of her mysteries to the list: *And Then There Were None* is number 3 with 100 million copies sold.

There are quite a few that are often found on recommended reading lists: *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo, *1984* by George Orwell, *The Thornbirds* by Coleen McCullough, *100 Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* made the list at number 20 with 36 million copies sold. I'd like to know how many of those were printed in Russian and how many in translation.

I guess it shouldn't surprise me that books that I have read and enjoyed would be read and enjoyed by others. And there are some classic pieces of literature that every

educated person should read. My list of favorites would be different and I would recommend some novels that haven't made best-seller lists. Dave Eggers *Zeitoun* should be a must-read for people trying to make sense of post-Katrina, post-911, multicultural America. I think that Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* defines the genre of short novel. There are a lot of classics that aren't on the list. If I got started on making a list, it would take pages and pages. What I think I am trying to say is that popularity is only one measure of the success of a piece of fiction. A story can be well-told and important to read and painful at the same time. Some stories appeal to a limited market, but are nonetheless stories that must be told.

While I got the list from my daily routine of reading on-line newspapers, it is interesting that what caught my eye this morning is not a story about the phenomena of on-line reading, but rather one about selling books. I don't know what the future holds. I'm led to believe that there will be fewer paper books and more reading through electronic readers. Libraries won't be buildings, but collections of downloadable resources. I don't know, but I do feel lucky to be living in a time when I can still hold a book in my hands, feel its heft, smell the ink on paper and read something tangible. And I feel fortunate to live in a time when almost any book I would ever want to read is just a click and a couple of days from being in my hands at a reasonable price.

My collection of books will one day be a problem for someone. Before the end of my life I'll probably live in an apartment that is too small for so many books. But for now, I'm delighted to be surrounded by books. Having more than the number of shelves in my office and home is a great luxury for me. Having at least a dozen that haven't yet been read is a sort of security. I know I'll never be bored.

Who knows what the best-sellers of the future will be? What I do know is that I've got a good chance of reading some of them before they make the all-time lists. And as we read and purchase books, we affect the lists.

Keep reading. It is one of the great pleasures of this life.

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September 17, 2009 – Finishing Projects



I have a lot of unfinished projects. I'm better at starting things than I am at getting them finished. It provides a built-in cure for boredom. I always have something to do. The list of things that needs to be done always exceeds my time. If I am having trouble focusing on one project, there is always another that is waiting for my attention. Sometimes I make lists of the things that need to be done. It is satisfying to check things off of the lists, but new items get added more quickly than old ones get completed. My style is sometimes reflected in the church that we serve. As a community we enjoy starting new projects. When we get together, our minds are capable of thinking of hundreds of good ideas. I encourage congregational members to tackle their projects, start new ministries, and develop their ideas. I enjoy having a room in the church that has on-going quilting projects in one corner, a cabinet for a stamp art group, a weekly meeting of the watercolor society and is also the place where our church board meets. And all of those functions are secondary to the room's primary function - it is a classroom for our educational programs.

From time to time, however, we do bring projects to conclusion. For two years, our youth room has been a work in progress. The youth wanted to paint the room. It was a good idea. They envisioned a mural and got help in making their vision a reality. Other walls were painted with other decorations. It took a lot more work days and a lot longer to get the room painted than they expected, but they were persistent and, a lot of pizza later, the painting was completed. The next step was new carpet for the room. We got hung up on that step for quite a while. We waited for one cycle of the church budget, hoping that we might be able to squeeze the funds out of the Church School equipment

line item, but the timing was wrong and there was no expansion in the budget for new items. We considered asking the congregation to tap a reserve fund, but carpet didn't seem like a priority for that fund. The youth are good at raising money, but we firmly believe that too much youth ministry focuses on youth raising money for themselves. We have been proud that our program is almost totally focused on raising money for others. Our youth have won the Big Brothers/Big Sisters "Bowl for Kids' Sake" award for the youth group that raises the most money for their projects more than any other youth group in our town. And we aren't the largest church in our community. So we did what other families do when the funds aren't available - we lived without the carpet.

Then a memorial gift, designated for youth ministry arrived. We spoke with the family about several possibilities, but the carpet project seemed to be the best match for the family. And they were delighted with the thought of having a picture of their beloved mother and grandmother hanging in the youth room. The committee reviewed the project, bids were solicited and the order for the carpet was placed yesterday. Laying the carpet means that we will be removing all of the furniture from the room again. We had it all out of the room when the youth were painting. That gives us an opportunity to return to the room just the items that are needed. The end of this particular project is in sight.

Of course it is a youth room. To the younger youth in our church it already seems like the room has always looked that way. It won't be long before someone suggests that we paint the room again.

And, in typical church fashion, the same evening that we voted the final approval for the carpet for the youth room, we voted the first phase of a kitchen upgrade project that will include new tile for the floor and a new dishwasher. The task force that was commissioned to prioritize the projects in our kitchen came up with a long list. We are making a modest start, but if we do every project on the list, it will take years and I'm sure we can think of other things we want to do as the time goes by.

Another task force is taking a look at ways to decrease our building's energy consumption. Some ideas are simple, like replacing lightbulbs. Others are a bit more complex, like replacing all of the exit signs. Others are big, like replacing the boiler. Others are monumental, like re-insulating and re-roofing the building. We know from the beginning that this will be another long-term project. We won't be doing everything at once.

This fall marks the 50th anniversary of our congregation's move to this building. At that time, the decision was made to sell the old church building and to start over with a larger facility, built from scratch. It was a bold and expensive move. The building that we left behind has continued to serve as a church for all of those years, but it is home to a congregation that is considerably smaller than ours. The building that our congregation constructed has served us well and it will be our home for many more years. We've

made some upgrades. Though the 1959 building was mostly accessible and on one level, state-of-the art bathrooms needed to be replaced with rooms that accommodate wheelchairs and other special needs. There has been a lot of paint spread in the last 50 years, and many of the rooms that originally had tile on the floor have been carpeted. Hallways have been carpeted and then the carpet has been replaced.

It makes sense that we should invest in energy efficiency, increase accessibility, and keeping our kitchen useful to the church. The initiative that prompted the kitchen project was our decision to stop using disposable cups for coffee hour. That meant doing more dishes and prompted the need to replace our 50-year-old machine. The flooring needs to be done before the dishwasher is replaced and one thing leads to another. It is less expensive and less wasteful to stop using disposable cups, but that is only true if one takes a long-term view. In the short-term we need to make an investment.

So there are a few more projects that are being started even as one is getting finished. I'm sure that I'll see the completion of many more projects as the years go by. But don't ever expect us to run out of projects.

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September 18, 2009 – Outside the Comfort Zone



When we are preparing people for their first trip to Costa Rica to visit with our sister church, we talk about moving out of our comfort zone into the mission field. Spiritual growth often comes from doing something that is new or unusual and finding oneself in a place that is not familiar. It is easy to talk about. We inform participants that in Costa Rica we will be riding the bus through impoverished neighborhoods. At the church we will be in rooms full of people who do not speak any English. When we walk down the street as a group, we will be identified as foreigners. Many of our first-time participants in mission trips find themselves outside their comfort zone filling out customs forms or standing in line at immigration control.

I've watched how people can grow when they are willing to step outside of their comfort zone for years. I've been with youth traveling by airline for the first time. I've accompanied delegations to distant locations and new experiences. I think that the gospel compels us to step outside of our comfort zones. When we surround ourselves only with the people and experiences that are familiar, we leave little room for growth. Jesus was constantly stepping across barriers - talking to widows and orphans and people whose lives were scarred by disease. He reached out to those who were outcast by society and he shared meals with folk who raised the eyebrows of his disciples and critics alike.

Stepping outside of one's comfort zone is a form of spiritual pilgrimage. Sometimes it doesn't involve a big trip. It can be as simple as looking the pan handler in the eye and offering a warm greeting instead of passing by as if that person didn't exist. It can be as

simple as stepping out from behind the counter at the soup kitchen and sitting at table with the folks who have no other place to go for dinner that evening. It can be as simple as reaching out to an estranged relative with an apology or an invitation.

Outside of the comfort zone we realize that the world isn't all about us. There are many people in this world with many different experiences. Serving God's people has little to do with making them like us, and a lot to do with understanding how God speaks to different people in different circumstances.

We are careful to remind our pilgrims that we do not go to Costa Rica to bring the Christian message - Christianity has been a part of Costa Rica for as long as it has been a part of the United States. Christopher Columbus visited both places. We go to Costa Rica to experience the faith that is already present in that place and to share with sisters and brothers in faith our unity in Christ. We go as witnesses to the work of our sister church. As we support the work of that community, we learn to do it their way instead of trying to convert them to our way.

I've made several trips to Costa Rica. Each involves a few steps outside of my comfort zone. Officiating at a wedding in Spanish was a challenge. Donning a baptismal gown and wading into the pool to officiate at immersion baptisms was different than our usual. Teaching young people a new set of urban street awareness and helping them to avoid becoming victims of theft keeps me alert.

But I don't have to go that far to get outside of my comfort zone.

Last night we attended the Chamber of Commerce's annual awards banquet. It isn't my usual crowd. After 14 years of living in this place, I am comfortable in our church and comfortable addressing out congregation. I know what to say in that setting and I know how people will react. I have also formed a wide circle of friendships throughout the community and have participated in many arts events, cultural activities, and civic programs. I've stepped out onto the stage of the Civic Center Theatre in front of a sold-out audience of nearly 1,800 people to speak to them about Habitat for Humanity and introduce the musicians of a fund-raising concert. But I'm not very good at social hours. I'm clumsy at balancing a drink and a hors d'oeuvre while trying to shake someone's hand and visit pleasantly. I prefer sitting down and spending time with someone to working the crowd for a few two and three sentence conversations.

And I squirm when I am the center of attention.

Last night I was outside of my comfort zone. When called to the stage to receive an award, I was wishing that someone else would be called first so I would know what was expected and I could imitate their behavior. No such luck. I was first to go. Do I make an acceptance speech? It was the first for the presenter of the award as well. I stepped off of the stage and then was called back to make a short speech. Other award recipients

had written scripts, I was not similarly prepared. I stammered and said something. I hope that the other people in the room weren't as embarrassed as I was.

I survived. I posed for all of the pictures with a smile on my face. And I was really glad to get home.

Part of the award is the placing of my portrait in a gallery with 63 other people who have contributed to the arts in our community. Four people are honored each year, I think because there are four faces on Mount Rushmore. At any rate, last night was the 16th Rushmore Honors award. All of the portraits were on display.

I was in Grand Rapids, Michigan attending the General Synod of the United Church of Christ when I learned that I would receive the honor. It was a busy time and I told the organizers that I would be available for the ceremony. And then I didn't think about it for a long time - until the photographer called to schedule the portrait sitting. When I thought about it, I couldn't help but wonder, "What am I doing up there with those other people?" There are folks who have donated hundreds of thousands of dollars and others that have raised millions. There are artists that have enthralled audiences and created lasting works of art. There are directors and performers and people who have served on boards for decades. I realize we live in a rather small town and know each other pretty well, but the faces in the Rushmore Honors portraits are of famous people, easily recognized by the people in our town. The kind of people who are friends with the mayor and the governor. I'm a preacher and a canoe builder that is more at home in a kayak than a tuxedo.

But last night I realized that being with those people is part of what I really enjoy about living in the place where I do. I live in a community where an ordinary person like myself can sit down over a cup of coffee or lunch with an artist whose creative genius will be remembered for generations. They let a guy like me get up close and personal with the entertainers who thrill and inspire us. I can't play the fiddle, but I can sit and talk with Kenny Putnam. I have no idea how to sustain a multi-generational multi-million dollar mountain carving, but I can talk with Ruth Kiolkowski about reconciliation between Lakota and settler families. I wouldn't be trusted with a baton in front of a symphony, but I can sit next to John Knowles at a chamber music concert and share sublime moments. I can't tune a piano and should never play one in public, but I can discuss pianos for hours with Mike Edwards and the two of us have moved more pianos than can be counted.

And there was a moment in last night's ceremony that helped to remind me what it was really all about. The slide that was projected showing my portrait had a phrase that was new to me. It declared our congregation to be "Rapid City's Arts Church." I am undeniably proud to be a member of a congregation that takes the arts seriously and supports art for the entire community. And it reminded me that the event isn't about me or what I have done, but about what it means to belong to a church that lives its life in

the center of the community. Pastors come and pastors go, but 1st Congregational United Church of Christ has had a solid presence in promoting and supporting art in the life of our community since the community was formed. I stand in the lineage of Mabel Robbins and Zona White and Mildred Calhoun who brought the first grand piano to our community so that the subtle sounds of Chopin could be performed live. That piano is still used every week by our choir. They brought not one but two pipe organs to our city so that Bach might be more than a recording, but a living experience. They played Gershwin with the symphony and worked to support music education programs in our schools. They insisted that sculpture be commissioned for the dedication of our building.

Certainly a community needs more than one church that supports and promotes the arts. And we are fortunate to have many. But it is an honor to serve one of the leading congregations, even if it means and evening of feeling like I was outside of my comfort zone.

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September 19, 2009 – Convention



Long before there were any Europeans on this continent the Black Hills were a place where people gathered. Easily identifiable features such as Mato Tipi (Devil's Tower) and Paha Mato (Bear Butte) made it easy to rendezvous with people from distant locations. The hills were the site of a wide variety of religious ceremonies and celebrations. Late summer through early fall were times of gathering. In June young men would head alone into the hills in quest of visions to determine the direction of their lives. At the end of the summer, sun dances were held in many different locations.

As the fur traders moved across the prairies, the hills were an easily identified geological feature that aided in navigation and setting the places for meetings.

The tradition has continued to the present day. One of the things about living in this place is that we receive a lot of visitors. Our town is filled with hotels and meeting rooms and we are used to guests arriving from around the world. Much attention is given to the area's largest annual gathering, the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. Next summer will mark the 70th rally that gathers hundreds of thousands of motorcycle enthusiasts for a week of races, displays, shows and events. In 2000 attendance was estimated at 754,844. The week doubled the population of our state.

But there are other conventions and many smaller gatherings. Last week I noticed a poster for an event that I probably won't be attending. This weekend Rushmore Plaza Civic Center will host the first annual Black Hills Tattoo Convention. The poster announces that "Rushmore Hall will come alive with live tattooing." Not only have I

never had the urge to get a tatoo, I've never had the impulse to watch someone else get one. But if that is something you want to do, this is the place this weekend.

I will admit that I have seen some amazing tatoos and there must be some incredible artists who are able to create such images on the skin of another person. The convention will feature a gallery. I was uncertain whether the gallery will be a display of photographs or if live people will be displayed. Advance publicity for the event said that the gathering features such a wide variety of artists that it is the place to get the tattoo of your dreams. That may be a clue that it isn't the right gathering for me. I can't remember ever dreaming about a tattoo.

But the poster says that the one and only Lizardman will be performing throughout the event. It shows a man with a lot of green tattooing on his head and face. I'm not sure what the performance entails, but he will be live on stage tonight for people who just don't want to miss such a thing.

Tattooing has been a part of several different cultures for a long time. The first European explorers to visit the islands of the south pacific in the late 1500's described tattoos observed in the Marquises Islands and other locations. A couple of centuries later, Captain Cook returned from the Marquises with a man from Tahiti whose body was covered with tattoos. The arrival of the visitor created quite a sensation and people traveled long distances to see the man.

In those areas tattooing was a sacred art, performed by shamans with a comb of needles carved from bone or tortoiseshell attached to a wooden handle. Needles are dipped into pigment made from soot, water and oil. The needles are then placed on the skin and the handle of the comb is tapped with another wooden stick, causing the comb to pierce the skin. The name tattoo comes from the sound of the stick tapping the handle of the comb.

Tattooing with traditional tools was banned in French Polynesia in 1986 by the Ministry of Health due to the difficulty in sterilizing the wooden and bone tools. Tattooing continues in the area, but modern tools which can be sterilized in an autoclave have replaced the wood instruments. The sound of an electric motor vibrating a steel needle doesn't evoke the word "tattoo" to describe the sound. The Black Hills Convention poster promises "Traditional Polynesian Tattooing Exhibitions." I don't know if that means traditional tools being used. Perhaps there will be information about the ancient symbols that have been used for hundreds of years and the meanings that are attached to those symbols.

I think this is a rather big event. A half dozen area hotels are advertising special convention rates, and Rushmore Hall at the Civic Center is a big room with a lot of space for displays and vendors.

I suspect that the crowd will dress a little differently than some of the other convention crowds that we see. There should be a lot more short-sleeved or sleeveless shirts than the Stock Show, for example. On the other hand, I'm sure there are plenty of cowboys with tattoos.

As I said, I have no plans to attend the convention, but I do appreciate living in a community that welcomes guests, even when our guests have different lives, goals, and sensibilities than our own. There should be plenty of local fans of tattoo art to make our guest feel that their trip was worthwhile.

I am curious about one thing. I wonder what activities will take place int he children's corner. The poster says, "Due to adult subject matter all children under the age of 16 must be accompanied by a parent or guardian." It also says, "While you enjoy the ink, we have activities for your kids to enjoy." I hope Lizardman isn't performing in the children's corner. That might be scary enough to cause the kids to have dreams of tattoos.

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September 20, 2009 – Marriage



I'm not sure how many people remembered it in South Dakota, but yesterday was "Talk like a Pirate Day," me hearties. Yes, the annual observance, perhaps made famous by columnist Dave Berry, is observed by fun-loving and pirate-liking people across the country every September 19. Aarrr! People who are really into the celebrations not only talk like pirates. Avast! They even dress like pirates. Guidebooks such as *Pirattitude: So You Want to be a Pirate? Here's How!* and *The Pirate Life: Unleashing Your Inner Buccaneer* exist to help those who discover that their pirate vocabulary is lacking.

Avast, me hearties! There's even a "Talk Like a Pirate" web site that gets millions of hits. And if you are really into the lifestyle, you can subscribe to the full-color Pirate's Magazine.

Anyway, as I said, the holiday didn't seem to receive much recognition in the hills. Maybe we were distracted by the tattoo festival.

I wasn't talking like a pirate during the wedding of our secretary and office administrator. Jo has been working at the church for a dozen years and we've shared some of life's ups and downs with her. Not long after she came to work at the church she was divorced and she worked hard at being a responsible single mother. A few years ago a huge hail storm parked over the area where her home is located and hailstones took out the skylight in the kitchen. The rain caused quite a bit of damage and their family had to move out of the house while repairs were made. Members of the church rallied around her and supported her though out the process.

So it was a delight yesterday to gather with her on a happy occasion and to join in the celebration of her marriage. We've gotten to know her husband as he has spend considerable time at the church and has even volunteered on Woodchuck splitting days. It was a delightful ceremony in a beautiful outdoor setting with friends gathered from all over.

Over the years, I have officiated at a lot of weddings. I have to admit that I don't always enjoy weddings. We get a lot of requests for weddings because we have a beautiful church and people often are thinking about the setting and the backdrop for pictures when selecting a location for a wedding. But from our point of view, the commitments made and the service itself is far more important than the setting. From my perspective, too many weddings are about show, with families spending thousands and sometimes tens of thousands of dollars trying to impress their friends. The church is just one small element in a much bigger scheme.

It's not that the church needs to be the center of attention. But if the focus is showing off, people can easily get distracted from what is most important. A marriage is far more than a ceremony. It is a lifetime of commitment and faithful loving. I tell most couples with whom I work that I won't be "marrying" anyone at their ceremony. I will officiate, but I'm already married and happily so. Their marriage is something that they will be making every day for the rest of their lives, not something I create with a signature on a form from the registrar of deeds office.

Some of the couples really get it. Others look at me and nod politely and, as soon as possible head for the photographer or the caterer or the dress shop where they can talk to someone whose priorities are more similar to their own.

There was a slightly more serious and even, at times, somber tone to yesterday's celebration. It was filled with joy, to be sure, and there was plenty of laughter and a bit of gentle teasing, but there were also some serious moments. Our congregation has watched Jo's children grow into adulthood. We were there for their confirmations and yesterday was a new step in their maturing. As their mother humbly asked for their love and support, she renewed her commitment to always offer her love and support to them.

The groom, who has known the grief and loss of widowhood, understands the depth of commitment the couple was making. He was surrounded by friends who had been with him through some of the real ups and downs of life and who were there to support him once again as he undertakes a new adventure.

I really believe in marriage. Despite the statistics, despite the high rates of divorce, despite the pain that I have witnessed when promises and lives are broken, I still believe that living in a life-long, committed relationship is a wonderful way to live. For

someone with a personality like mine, it is the right way to live. But as an officiant, there is only so much that can be said in a ceremony. There is a lot more that couples have to learn for themselves. I try, but it is nearly impossible to tell a pair of starry-eyed twenty-somethings about the joys of growing old together. I try, but it is difficult to help others understand that trust is one of the most wonderful things in the world. It is also very fragile and it must be earned in a lifetime of faithfulness.

So we weren't observing Talk Like a Pirate Day yesterday. What we were doing seemed, to us, to be much more important. We came to surround the couple with our love and prayers. May both be continued as they travel this life's journey together.

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September 21, 2009 – Traveling



Despite all of the modern technology, we still need to get together face-to-face from time to time to do the work of the church. I am learning to do a lot more with the computer, e-mail, telephone and am even learning how to do audio and video conferencing, but there are some parts of relationships that require us being together in the same time at the same place.

In our United Church of Christ, that means meetings in Cleveland. I am here today for the annual meeting of the denomination's educational consultants. For the past 15 or so years we have been gathering once a year to coordinate planning for the denomination's educational programs. This meeting is especially busy because we are in the development stage of new resources and there is a national gathering in February to introduce those resources to the conferences. Our group will be planning and leading that gathering. I also have set up meetings with the senior editorial staff of the resources to discuss some of the issues related to the areas of those resources where I am involved in producing activities.

It may be the sour grapes of an old curmudgeon, but I don't enjoy traveling by airline as much as I once did. The things that are done to create the illusion of security are a bit of a hassle. We wait in lines, remove our shoes and belts, pack our bags knowing that they will be searched. I am all in favor of safety for the traveling public, but ours is a system that is always reacting to the last threat instead of anticipating the next one. The people who tried to smuggle explosives onto an airliner in England have been sentenced and we wait in line watching security officials confiscate water bottles and

send parents back to dump out their baby's bottle. Much of what happens at TSA checkpoints is about creating the illusion of security. The illusion is important, to an extent. We do need to feel safe in order to travel. But some rules and regulations are not explained and simply make travelers feel out of control.

The new regulation with this trip that I hadn't heard before, is that no personal items can be placed in the seat pockets of the airplane. I was traveling light, with a small computer case that fit under the seat in front of me and a book. The flight attendant was specific in giving instructions that we could not place our books in the seat pockets. It wasn't a problem, it just doesn't make sense. I have no idea how that might compromise safety in any way.

From Denver to Cleveland, there was a family with a 2 1/2 year old daughter who sat in the seats just ahead of mine. The little one had an Elmo doll with her and was very well behaved, obviously enjoying being the center of attention and having both of her parents doting on and enjoying her. I never got it quite straight whether they were going to or from grandparents' home, but I think they were on their way to visit grandparents. It was a happy trip for the family and her bright smile as she peeked over her daddy's shoulder brightened my day.

As we got off of the airplane a little after 10 p.m., she was sleeping and her father carried her while her mother struggled with their carry-on luggage. I was tired too, only a short cab ride away from a hotel room and a comfortable night's sleep, but knowing that I had to stay awake and alert to safely navigate the final steps of my journey.

The airlines carry very precious cargo. Our flight contained a reasonable cross-section of our society: business people heading for meetings, sales people heading for contacts with clients, parents and children, grandparents and young adults. Each has a unique story, a unique set of circumstances. Keeping them safe is a clear national priority. But the most important aspects of safety may not be things that can be achieved by inspection points and long lists of rules. Trust comes from getting to know one another and connecting with the stories of those who surround us. Our encounters with other passengers are too brief to really get to know their stories and politeness and fear dictate that we are careful when talking to others.

Just as we need to spend time face-to-face in order to do the business of the church, we need to open our lives to the personal experiences and realities of others in order to travel safely. There is as much safety in the time we spend waiting for the airplane to board as in the security lines. In the security lines, we look at the back of the heads of our fellow travelers. In the waiting lounge, we look at their faces.

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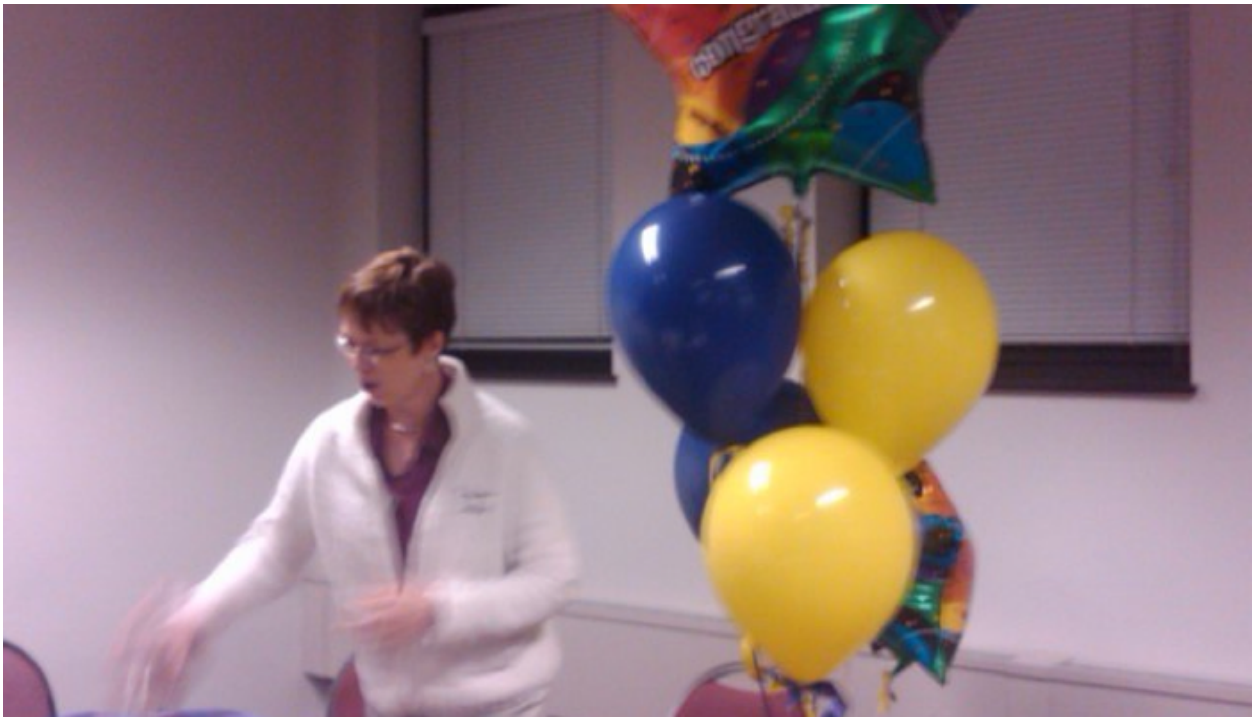
September 22, 2009 – Celebrating with Colleagues



Life affords a wide variety of different relationships. Yesterday was a day of colleagues. The word colleague has similar roots to the academic institution: colleague. It comes from Latin and the term means to share life and work. In contemporary English we usually focus on the shared work aspect when we use the word colleague. A colleague is someone who is engaged in a common body of work. But the original term also had a colleague of sharing life. There was a time when colleges were primarily residential institutions. They were created because there is an efficiency to sharing the tasks of providing meals and shelter. A group of people in a dormitory allows for less energy to be put into housing than a series of individual independent dwellings. A dining hall serves food more efficiently than a group of different kitchens. The idea was that most of the energy of the group of people needed to be invested in research, teaching and learning. Therefore there needed to be an efficiency to the rest of life that allowed for most of the hours to be dedicated to academic pursuits.

Over the years colleges have changed a great deal. Many contemporary colleges in the United States are doing away with their food services and going to apartment style living for all students and teachers. Our focus on the individual and our desire for privacy have led us to a different attitude toward living and working with others.

The colleagues with whom I am meeting this week are people with whom I do not share much of life. We are together only once or twice a year. What we have in common is our work and our attention is focused on that work. We share common goals, common

tasks, and common responsibilities. And when we get together we tend to work long days.

But we cannot avoid learning about and caring about the lives of our colleagues. We've been working together for many years. We've seen changes in families, divorces, marriages, major life-threatening illnesses. We've watched each other's children grow up, even when our window on that reality has been a handful of snapshots shared once a year. We've told stories of our family life over meals and around the edges of meetings. We feel like we know each other even though our lives are lived in different places all across the nation.

Last night we had a little party that we've been planning since summer. One of our colleagues had a book published in May or June. Some of us felt almost as proud as if we had been the author. The topic of the book is right in the center of the work that we share. Some of our common ideas have been invested in that book and are reported in the words our colleague wrote. We couldn't be happier. So it made sense to have a celebration. As parties go, it wasn't very dramatic. We had a cake, some balloons, and most of us brought our copies of the book for her autograph. We laughed and told stories and enjoyed being together.

For 500 years, publishing has been a major part of collegiate life. Professors are expected to publish. Writing words that have some permanence is a highly-held value in our circles. An author is celebrated and revered. But the truth is that we all know that the world is changing. Publishing is a tricky business. Our press, the oldest on the North American continent, is struggling to stay in business. Some of the books that we publish are almost printed on demand. We are in the process of down-sizing our warehouse operation. We will have less inventory, fewer titles, and more of our publication business will focus on online activities from selling books to electronic distribution of the work of our writers.

So an actual book, with a cover and pages that smell like ink, is an occasion for an aging group of educators. It is a reminder that we stand in line with colleagues that have come before us.

And, perhaps, it is also a reminder that we stand in line with a new future. Our meeting has been focused on the introduction of new resources for education that invite an entirely new way of thinking about teaching and learning. The book itself is a discussion of a new way of thinking that leads us away from traditional school models for Christian education.

So last night we paused in the busyness of our meetings and in the midst of a rapidly changing and often difficult to understand world. We had a simple party. We enjoyed being together. We celebrated accomplishment. But the party didn't last long. We had worked too hard and the day had been too long for any of us to want to stay up late. We

have too much work to do today for any of us to stay way from our computers and papers for very long.

As tempting as it is to rest on the accomplishments of the past, it is the challenge of the future that beckons us. As colleagues who share study and work, we are aware of how much there is to be learned. We have only just begun to understand the process of faith formation and the passing of the core truths of our faith from one generation to the next. We are aware that our task is too big for any one of us alone. It is too big for one generation of teachers. We hope that in our time we will be able to add one small bit to the larger conversations of our faith. The book seems to us to be such an addition. Those of us who did not write it felt pleased with the accomplishment of our colleague.

And the cake tasted good, too!

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September 23, 2009 – Dust Storm



Photo by Stefanus Herryanto from news.com.au

Australia, especially the provinces of Queensland and New South Wales, has been experiencing one of the largest dust storms on record the past couple of days. Conditions are expected to improve in the next day, but there are chances of more dust storms blowing across the country later this week. The dust is so think that it has obscured visibility from Sydney to Brisbane and beyond. Photos from the area show colors from pink to orange to yellow as the huge clouds of dust from the center of the nation blew across the country and into the ocean. Particulate levels in the air reached 1500 times their normal levels - the highest on record. The cloud was nearly 375 miles across and it traveled nearly a thousand miles before reaching the coast. As storms go this is a really big one. As dust storms go it is definitely one for the record books.

Life seemed to go on pretty much as usual despite the storm. Traffic was slowed due to reduced visibility and air traffic ground to a halt at major airports across the region. On the the city's largest freeways was temporarily closed as workers cleared accumulated dirt from the tunnels. Ferry service in the Sydney harbor was temporarily suspended. Workers, most wearing some kind of face mask, scarf or filter across their noses and mouths continued to head for work. Health officials advised people to stay indoors as much as possible until the air clears.

A lot of different factors came together to create the conditions for the storm. Record droughts during the past years has baked the deserts in the center of the nation. Dry conditions have resulted in several years of record fires that have left hills and valleys

without trees to disrupt the wind flow and filled with ash that is easily picked up and blown around by the wind. High winds allowed the storm to move rapidly across the region.

Many Australians are used to dust storms, but this is one of the words most have ever seen. They awoke to strange scenes and colors outside of their windows. The dry, hot and windy conditions are adding to the danger from fires that are burning in several wilderness areas across the provinces.

Further south, residents of Melbourne's south-east suburbs reported hearing loud explosions as an earthquake and mild aftershocks shook the area. No serious damage was reported, but houses were shaken. In Berwick, where we visited in 2006, the shaking reached three on the Richter scale.

It is a day that will go into the record books as one of the strangest. It must have seemed a bit like armageddon as the howling winds provided the most obvious sounds and the stars were invisible in the night sky due to the dust in the air. After a day that was filled from dawn to dusk with dust, some residents reported being awakened by the sound of silence as the winds died down during the night.

Although there was some damage from downed trees and roofs damaged by the wind and ambulance services have reported an increase in calls from asthma sufferers, things appear to be returning to normal the day after the mazing storm.

Regular readers of this blog will recognize the weather as an occasional topic. I am interested in phenomena that illustrate how much of this vast universe is beyond the ability of humans to control. Although our decisions and behavior can have far-reaching consequences, the truth is that human actions are a tiny piece of the total picture of this universe. There are many things that occur that we cannot control or manipulate.

But what we can do is to observe, document, and reflect on the meaning of events. Our senses are tuned to noticing things that might not be perceived by other creatures on our planet. Our technologies enable us to hear of events that are far away and to look at images of our planet taken from space. We can get a bit of perspective from a long heritage of human observation of the planet. And we try to arrange the experiences of this life into a meaningful pattern. Scientists analyze and document storms and track their movement across continents. Meteorologists attempt to predict future movements of storms and document the conditions that lead to them. We record our observations and study the records of previous generations.

Here, at least at one point in the vastness of the universe, are sentient beings who are looking out and trying to make sense of its vastness and powerful phenomena. We don't have many of the answers, but we have gained in understanding. Each new discovery

leads to more questions, but we do draw some conclusions that we can hold in common.

Folks in Sydney and cities across Australia will be cleaning up lots of dust in the next few days. They'll be sweeping and shoveling and trying to help things return to normal. And they'll be telling each other stories of the dust storm of September, 2009. Some of those stories will be told for generations as we continue to seek to more fully understand this fascinating planet on which we live.

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September 23, 2009 – Scary Times



I have made some very special friends by hauling canoes on the roof of my vehicle. Strangers will come up an talk to you if you have a canoe on the roof of your car. My first conversation with Eleanor Bray was at a gas station where she was getting gas for her car and I had two canoes on the roof of mine. That conversation led to my doing a complete restoration of her 1947 Old Town OCTA Canoe, but it also led to her daughter and Angela Kraft Cross performing an organ concert in our church. It led to a friendship that has connected us through our love of the outdoors, of canoes, of music, and many other common interests.

And I want to believe that people who enjoy canoes are somehow special. Of course we are like other people. There are all kinds of people who own and enjoy canoes. But we tend to like quiet. We tend to be contented with going slow. We tend to like to look at things and to let our minds wander. We tend to tread lightly and leave little sign behind when we travel.

I just finished reading a story about a canoeist that I have never met. Dave Eggers is not the canoeist. He is one of the most promising English non-fiction writers of our generation. Our son gave us a copy of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, his memoir of losing his parents and of raising his little brother. I picked up *What is the What,* his account of the story of one of the children swept up in the warfare in Sudan and the traumatic and dangerous path that led him to the United States. He is a talented writer who does his research carefully and who has the courage to tell the truth when no

one else is talking about the subject. I picked up the book not because of the title or the subject matter, but because of the author.

The man with the canoe in the picture is not the man with the canoe about whom Dave Eggers has written. His man with a canoe was arrested when a team of men armed with assault rifles broke into a house that he owned one day. He was there with three acquaintances, including a tenant who was renting the home from him. He was a citizen and a prominent business owner with multiple properties, many employees and hundreds of clients. He was taken to a make-shift holding center where he was held outdoors in cages made of chain link fence surrounded by armed guards and bathed in floodlights round the clock. There was no chair, and no bed in the holding area. The pavement was dirty and he was not allowed to touch the fence. Prisoners who touched the fence intentionally or by falling asleep were pepper sprayed repeatedly. From there he was taken to a maximum security prison where he was held in isolation for 28 days. He was strip searched repeatedly. He received no medical attention although he had a severe infection in his foot. He was not allowed a phone call. His family did not know whether he was alive or dead. He was told verbally that he had been arrested for looting, but no formal charges were ever brought, no hearings were held, and no access to a lawyer was provided. When his release was finally secured he was finally, after much effort, able to retrieve his identification card. The money that he had at the time of his arrest was never recovered. He lost 20 pounds during the time of his incarceration and required immediate medical treatment upon his release.

The men who were seized with him were held longer. One was in prison for five months, another for six months and the third for eight months. None were ever charged with any crime. None received any hearing or judicial procedure. None were allowed to contact any one in any way during the time of their incarceration. The house where they had been at the time of their arrest was left unlocked and exposed to the elements. All of the personal property that had been in the building was removed and never recovered. The canoe also was taken.

This was not in Germany during the second world war. This was not in the Soviet Union during the height of its military power. This was not in Sudan during its lawless times. This was not in Cambodia after the Vietnam War. This was in the United States of America in 2005. The men were citizens with no criminal records or history. The powers granted to the federal government in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001 combined with the chaos that followed the path of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans set up conditions where our nation lost its protections for its citizens and its commitment to human rights. The man in Dave Egger's book had remained in New Orleans after he had sent his family to safety to care for the properties he owned and managed. He had used his canoe to rescue several stranded persons and to care for pets left behind in the storm. He never carried any items of value with him in his paddles around the flooded city. He never entered a property illegally and never engaged in any form of

looting or theft. He was living in a home that he owned and visited his rental property daily because it had a working telephone.

I read the book with horror. I have known that such stories existed, but had not previously read such a well-researched and well-documented account. In those dark days after the storm people died because our government was more interested in setting up make-shift jails than rescuing stranded people. The suspension of basic constitutional rights prompted by the fear that followed the September 11 acts of terrorism almost cost us our constitutional democracy. Once innocents can be made to disappear, the power of the government is unchecked.

This is not a political issue. Democrats and Republicans alike believe in the constitution and its basic commitment to protect the rights of citizens from unlawful arrest and detention without trial. This is not an issue of ideology. Conservatives and liberals share a basic commitment to human rights and an abhorrence of governments that abuse their powers and trample human rights.

But it is our issue. This is not some foreign government whose values we oppose. This is our government and we the people are ultimately responsible for its actions. We might call the circumstances in New Orleans in 2005 an anomaly, but we dare not ignore what happened. We must urge our legislators to restore the right of habeas corpus to all who are incarcerated. We must return to the protections of our constitution. We must not allow our fear to result in the detention of people without cause. We have come very close to losing our democracy when our government can arrest and detain innocents and hold them without anyone even knowing that they have been arrested. Officials acting on behalf of our government seized property without cause and did not return it.

Dave Eggers will not receive any income from this book. All author profits will go to the Zeitoun Foundation, formed earlier this year to aid in the rebuilding of New Orleans and to promote respect for human rights in the United States and around the world.

Read the book. Check out the facts. Decide for yourselves. We cannot afford to pretend this didn't happen. We can't afford to allow it to happen again.

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September 25, 2009 – Too Connected?



I like gadgets. I was early to switch from a paper calendar to a hand-held device years ago. Over the years I have spent way too much money on various calculators, phones, personal digital assistants, mp3 players, and other devices. Some have proven to be very useful in helping me to get work done, others have not. I am amazed at the capabilities of these things and like playing with them and discovering their capabilities.

But there are times when a person simply needs to put the devices down. I tell people that I encourage them to call my cell phone, but they should be prepared to leave a message. I don't allow my cell phone to interrupt conversations and there are times when I just don't answer it. I don't leave the e-mail program launched on my computer at all times. I check e-mail several times a day, but I don't allow it to interrupt other work that I am doing at my computer.

I enjoy being able to use Skype to have a video conversation with our daughter in England. I like having a phone that will take pictures and send e-mails. But there are limits. And, as our society adjusts to the impacts of technology in our lives, we need to discover where the limits lie and how they should be observed.

Since the beginning of 2008, 23 employees of France Telcom have died by suicide and another 13 have made serious attempts. Company officials are investigating what has gone wrong with their corporate culture to create such a string of tragedies. Union leaders are calling for a government investigation of the company's corporate culture. France Telcom is one of Europe's largest telecommunications providers and the

formerly government-run business has been privatized in recent years. There have been plenty of work-related stresses for employees as the corporate culture is revised, new management styles are introduced, and job descriptions are altered. The current global economic downturn has contributed to a sense of urgency for many business matters for the large company.

Suicides are complex individual matters and often come in relationship to brain disorders and other disease processes. It would be wrong to start pointing fingers and assigning blame. The number one priority for the company and related companies is to get serious about suicide prevention. A professionally-staffed constantly-available telephone crisis center is important. Training in community resources is essential. Support groups can be very helpful. There are many things that companies can do to be pro-active in the face of the threat of employee suicides.

It is interesting to note that several of the suicide notes at France Telcom mentioned the pressures caused by employees being constantly available through mobile phones that are capable of sending and receiving e-mail messages. Employees felt that they never got a break from their work and had to be constantly available, regardless of the time of day, to respond to business concerns. Chief Financial Officer of France Telcom, Gervais Pellissier, spoke directly about pressures caused by technologies that enable work to encroach on personal lives: “When you were an average employee in a big corporation 15 years ago, you had no mobile phone or no PC at home. When you wee back home, work was out.”

Home computers and smartphone devices make it possible to be engaged in work around the clock with no breaks when one goes home. Constant connection creates pressures that are not healthy. Some workers have dubbed the “BlackBerry” smart phone “CrackBerry.” There is significant evidence that workers can become addicted to the devices and are unable to take a break from checking e-mails without some form of outside intervention.

Businesses are only beginning to take seriously the ways in which new devices and new ways of working can have an impact on the personal lives of employees. Studies have revealed that addiction to devices can be as severe as other forms of addiction and that in some cases formal counseling and intervention from others is required in order to break unhealthy patterns of behavior. It is easy to remind employees that the devices have an “off” switch and that they should take a break from constant communication. It is more difficult to actually take that break. With constant pressures to accomplish more work, a highly competitive workplace, and the fear that missing a communication might mean losing one’s job, meaningful changes require a shift in corporate culture not just a change in personal behavior.

We know that our world is undergoing a dramatic change as we shift from print-based communication to electronic communication. Even the language is changing as a result

of the introduction of increasingly sophisticated electronic devices. Change produces stress. And stress can be a factor in serious illness.

The string of tragedies that has occurred at France Telcom points to the need for increased counseling services in the workplace and other measures to assist workers in making the changes required by this cultural shift. While we cannot slow the pace of change in our world, we can develop coping skills that enable us to remain healthy in the midst of confusion and change.

In the meantime, I continue to play with my smart phone. The key word, however, is "play." When it gives me enjoyment, that is one thing. When it becomes a burden and interrupts my life it is a different matter entirely.

So if you are calling my cell phone, be prepared to leave a message. I may be in the midst of another conversation and unable to answer the phone. It is also possible that the phone is in my sock drawer and I'm out on the lake in a kayak taking a break from gadgets and seeking the personal space and solitude that are required for a healthy life. And for what it is worth, even though my phone will receive and send e-mails, if you click on the e-mail link in this blog, you'll have to wait until I'm at my computer and have my e-mail program turned on. I don't feel the need to be in touch with everyone at every hour of the day and night.

Be careful out there, friends. This is serious stuff. If you are feeling out of control and need help, help is available. Program this number into the speed dial on your Blackberry or other mobile device: 1-800-273-TALK (8255). It is the national suicide prevention hotline. It might be the most important phone number of all.

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September 26, 2009 – Buffalo Roundup



The Black Hills are an amazing place to live. So much is available in such a small amount of space. We have dramatic hills with wonderful hiking, beautiful reservoirs with delightful paddling, badlands with an entirely different feel and look, and lots of wildlife. If you've seen a herd of buffalo in a recent movie, chances are you were looking at the Black Hills. The buffalo herd at Custer State Park is managed at about 1,500 head. As such it provides a look back to the days when thousands and thousands of buffalo roamed the prairies of the midwest. The days of the massive buffalo herds are gone, but the Custer State Park herd provides a reminder of the ways things used to be.

Although the buffalo are given free range in the park and adjacent public lands, the herd is not left unmanaged. Without wolves, it would be impossible for the herd to achieve balance in the hills. The size of the herd is managed by an annual sale of buffalo. Vaccinations are given to prevent diseases that can spread from buffalo to cattle. In order to make all of that happen, the buffalo are rounded up once a year and driven into corrals where they are counted, vaccinated and sorted. This practice has been going on for over 40 years and the annual buffalo roundup attracts visitors from around the world. It is one of the few places in the world where one can hear the sound of hundreds of buffalo running across the prairie.

Scholars like to use the term "American Bison" for the animals because they are more closely related to the Wisent or European Bison than to the Asian or African Buffalo. But both words, bison and buffalo have similar origins meaning "ox-like" and

the use of the term buffalo to refer to the North American animals dates back at least a hundred years prior to the introduction of the other term. Besides, that is what we call them around here. For what it is worth, we pronounce coyote with a silent “e.” None of the coyotes in South Dakota speak Spanish and when someone pronounces the “e” at the end we know they aren’t from around here. They probably can’t pronounce Pierre, either.

Buffalo are the largest land animals on our continent. They are impressive. The big bulls get your attention right away and they can run a lot faster than one might think. Every few years we have an incident where a tourist gets too close to the animals in the park and ends up getting stepped on or gored. Like all wild animals, buffalo need to be respected. During most of the year the buffalo spread out across the park and it is easy to show visitors a few examples by driving around the park.

Long before French fur trappers and traders gave the name buffalo to the animals, Lakota people called them Tatanka. Tatanka literally means bull buffalo, but it is generally applied to all of the animals and it refers to a way of life in addition to the animal. Buffalo provided the basis for life for plains Indians. Their food, clothing, shelter, household items, tools, and weapons came from buffalo. No part of the animal was wasted. Tatanka was also a source of inspiration and ceremonial activities. Following the herd was a way of life for centuries.

The intentional elimination of the great buffalo herds was directly related to the domination of North American Indians and movement of immigrants, many from Europe, into the plains. It is difficult to know for sure how large the herds were prior to the decimation of the great herds. Estimates of the total number of buffalo range from 30 to 60 million animals. At one time there were fewer than 1,000 animals surviving.

So the 1,500 animal herd at Custer State Park is the largest in any place, and when the animals are driven together the ground shakes and the sound is a reminder of the way things used to be on the plains.

The buffalo roundup is a real festival this day with pancake feeds, an arts festival, a chili cook off an lots of other activities scheduled throughout the weekend. The main roundup begins on Monday morning and those who want to see it need to arrive early to get a good place to view the herd. For obvious reasons, park officials need to keep viewers back at a safe distance when the animals are being driven to the corrals.

Many plains states use the buffalo as a symbol of their geography and culture. I have heard that people in Wyoming were upset when Kansas came out with their design for the state quarters. Kansas ended up with the buffalo and Wyoming with a bucking horse and rider. South Dakota has the largest herd in the nation, but we went for a design featuring a pheasant and Mount Rushmore. The truth is that the buffalo never paid much attention to state lines. Prior to the formation of the individual states, the range of

the buffalo was the entire plains. The people who made their living following and hunting the buffalo weren't constrained by political boundaries, either. The boundaries came after the herds were decimated and the people who lived off of them were impoverished.

Autumn is a great time to visit South Dakota. And the annual Custer State Park Buffalo Roundup is worth watching. It is a bit of our culture that we like - something that distinguishes us from others. Come, visit, and enjoy. You can even call them bison, if you want. But don't expect us to use that word. And while you're here, you can catch the sight of a coyote chasing a jackrabbit. But whether it is a college game or nature's splendor on the plains, don't expect us to pronounce the "e" at the end of the word.

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September 27, 2009 – Watching from a Distance



Photo from Reuters News Agency

For some reason, I remember the Philippines as being one of the places where our church is active. In my childhood we had visits from missionaries in the Philippines who told us of agricultural projects and other ways in which the church was helping to improve the lives of people there. As a young teen I helped strip down a combine and prepare it for shipment for use as a stationary harvester. My father's business donated the used machine and we helped raise funds to pay for shipping. As a young pastor I served in southwestern North Dakota and often heard of Lloyd Van Vactor, a local man who had become a minister and then a missionary and who was kidnapped and held for some time in the Philippines before finally being successfully released. Our church's experience in Turkey paid off as we had several people who were skilled in working in interfaith situations and negotiating with muslim extremists. Lloyd's book, Twenty Longest Days, is an account of his captivity. Upon retirement, the Van Vactors lived in Spearfish canyon and we would see them at church events from time to time. I have several friends who have visited the country as part of training for mission work and I have enjoyed hearing of their experiences. Over the years I have developed friendships with many from that country. Ihave long paid attention to news from the Philippines, though I have never visited that country myself.

The news coming in from the Philippines today is pretty grim. Manilla and other cities on the island of Luzon have taken the brunt of tropical storm Ketsana. Manilla experienced 13.4 inches of rain within a four-hour period Saturday. Average rainfall for the month of September is 15.4 inches. Rivers are swelling and 280,000 to 300,000

homes have been flooded. People have been swept away by the raging waters. So far, officials have confirmed 51 deaths with an other 20 people listed as missing. BBC World News Service has dramatic footage of people holding onto floating debris being swept under a bridge. thousands are stranded on roof tops and on the tops of city busses that are strewn about in the waterways that until recently were city streets. Water is flowing over the tops of dams in some areas. Officials fear that the dams themselves will fail causing another round of severe flooding. Travel by automobile is impossible and urban water and power systems have failed. Officials are rescuing individuals by helicopter, but that task could take days with the number of people who are stranded.

Residents of the Philippines are no strangers to rain and storms. An average of 20 typhoons and storms hit the islands every year. Officials estimate, however, that this is the worst flooding that the islands have seen in more than 40 years. Casualties and disruption will be more intense because the nation's largest urban areas bore the brunt of the storm. Approximately 80% of the capitol is under water. One government official estimated that over 4,000 people have already been rescued from rooftops and upper story areas of their homes. In some places, ropes were strung so that residents could make their way through waist-deep water to places with more shelter.

Philippines President Gloria Arroyo appealed for donations and called for calm: "I am calling on our countrymen, especially residents of metro Manilla and other provinces in the path of the typhoon, to please stay calm, follow the instructions of local officials and civil defense authorities." Officials have ordered a complete evacuation of Cainta, in Rizal provence east of Manilla. The town is completely under water.

Church World Service has personnel in the Philippines and maintains some stores of emergency supplies near Manilla. The CWS web site does not yet have an update on the storm. At this time we don't know what response the agency has been able to put in place. The immediate concern in the Philippines is direct rescue of those stranded. As people arrive at temporary shelters, distribution of water and blankets will be essential. Food pantries and soup kitchens will need to be established and distribution of tents will probably be required as people face the prospects of not being able to return to their homes until basic services such as water and electricity are restored.

For now we are watching from a distance, hoping that the emergency response of the Philippine government and that of Church World Service and other non-governmental agencies will be successful in saving lives and preventing further casualties. We keep the people of the Philippines in our prayers as the events unfold.

There is a sense of helplessness that comes from watching dramatic events unfold so far away. But that feeling is minor compared to the sense of helplessness experienced by those who are stranded by the flood waters. The latest news says that the rains have stopped for now and that rescuers are having much success reaching people who have spent some time stranded without food or water. Even people who live in high rise

buildings and are in no immediate danger of being washed away by flood waters are living without electricity and running water. People are pulling together and offering assistance to one another, but additional supplies will be needed int he days and weeks to come.

The floods remind us of the need for constant generosity to One Great Hour of Sharing so that funds and supplies can be available whenever and wherever needed. Our prayers for the people of the Philippines continue.

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September 28, 2009 – Changes, Changes



Shortly after Susan and I moved to Rapid City, we were interviewed by a newspaper reporter interested in the dynamics of a clergy couple who worked for the same church and balanced work and home life, raising children while both parents worked full time. One of the questions was about how we found time for personal conversation with the continuing need for conversation about work and family life. I commented on the fact that we enjoyed going out for coffee and that we were searching for Rapid City's best cup of espresso. A couple of area coffee shops responded to the article by sending us coupons for a free cup of coffee.

At the time the popularity of specialty coffee shops hadn't quite reached rapid city. Although Starbucks was expanding in larger urban areas, there were no franchises in Rapid City. Caribou Coffee and Dunn Brothers had not yet come to our city. Black Hills Coffee had a roaster in town, but wasn't doing much retail sales. We moved here just before the parking lot kiosks started to appear around town. We found that some of the best places to go out for coffee and conversation were hotel coffee shops with prices that were more reasonable than specialty shops and a quiet atmosphere that allowed conversation.

Back then Aby's Feed and Seed, on 5th street, was just that: a feed store. It was a good place to purchase pet food and garden supplies and salt for the water softener. And it smelled like a feed warehouse, which to a kid whose first paying job was sweeping a feed warehouse, is a pretty good smell. I was proud of the fact that our town was small enough to have a feed elevator in its middle. Rapid City felt like the right size of town.

But times change. And a lot has changed in Rapid City since we arrived. The empty hill across the street from our house is now a subdivision. To the north of our neighborhood, Red Rocks boasts a golf course and high end homes. The number of homes on Sheridan Lake Road has increased enough to produce a tripling of traffic by our back yard. Some buildings have been home to two or three businesses in the time that we've lived here.

And Rapid City residents found out that they were willing to pay premium prices for specialty coffee. The city's first Starbucks was a kiosk in a grocery store, followed shortly by a mall location. Now there are two stand-alone shops that seem to be busy most of the time. Other coffee vendors have moved into town, bringing the familiar names from the cities with them. One of the unique shops that we have enjoyed is Bully Blends Coffee and Tea Shop. It opened in the front office area of Aby's Feed and Seed after the feed store left downtown. It was independent, without the marketing and appearance of a chain store. The interior was comfortable and, for a while quiet. They served specialty teas as well as good espresso and their baked goods were fresh and tasty. We enjoyed an occasional visit and from time to time, I arrange a meeting with a colleague of church members in the shop. For a short time last year, we hosted an event for older youth called Caffiene + Christ that were opportunities for informal Bible study and conversation.

Now we hear that Bully Blends is leaving the funky space of the former grain elevator and moving to a couple of shops on Main Street. Their location will be about five blocks closer to the church, more reasonable for walking. And the business will continue to expand. They already serve lunches, beer and wine at their old location. A dinner menu is expected after they move.

But our lives are changing, too. It isn't just that shortly after moving to Rapid City I purchased a good espresso pump an discovered that one of the best places to get a good cup of coffee in town was my own home. It isn't just that I've become a bit more cost conscious and spending $4 or more on something that only costs 25 or 30 cents to produce doesn't make much sense to me. It is that we are aging and our family dynamics are far different than they were. No longer is ours a home with two teenagers. Those teens have grown up and moved away to their own relationships and lives. We are more likely to make ourselves cups of coffee or tea and sit down in front of the computer to video chat with our kids than to go out. It used to be that our kids were close by and needing our attention and our parents were far away. Now the situation is different. Susan's father and my mother have moved to Rapid City and we spend part of every day providing care for them. Our children are father away.

But we still work at the same church and still have the joy of being in constant contact as professional colleagues as well as marriage partners. If anything, the challenge of how and where to have personal conversations is greater than it was when the

interviewer from the newspaper asked that question. When we go out to a coffee shop to discuss plans for our home life or coordinate our calendars for work, we are likely to run into church members, colleagues, members of community boards, and others. There will be many conversations in the span of a half hour sitting over a cup of coffee. And all of the coffee shops have internet access. It is possible to take work with us and keep right on going as we sip our beverages. Finding a quiet place for a single conversation requires a bit more creativity.

It is not an impossible task. A walk in the park or a hike in the hills affords plenty of space. We can take a canoe to the lake for a paddle. But we have to manage our schedules to make it all happen. And sometimes it feels like we are heading in different directions all of the time. Life is a bit of a juggling act with many concerns, pressures, needs, activities and relationships that must be held in balance. Sometimes we are graceful. Other times we are a bit clumsy as we engage in the process.

But this is just one phase of our life together. After 36 years of marriage we are sure of one thing: life will continue to change. The demands of this time of our life are different than those of a decade ago. Another decade and our life will have different challenges and concerns.

I'm sure that people who have lived in Rapid City for decades longer than we have can tell many more stories of the changes that have swept the city. Of course the flood transformed the appearance of the town. But there have been many other changes. Land that was once pasture has become developed as subdivisions and retail areas. The mall has competition from other upscale shopping areas. Downtown continues to experience revitalization and upgrades. Changes follow changes.

But the elevator on 5th street still is standing. Rumors have it that more renovations are underway for a new use of the space. And just north, across Omaha street the big elevators still receive truck loads of grain and load into train cars. The street takes a bend to go around the massive concrete towers.

One thing about all of the change, life doesn't have time to become boring. And we remain hungry to spend time together.

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September 29, 2009 – Lugnuts



Back in the late 1970's and early 1980's, when we lived in North Dakota, I was a member of our community's volunteer ambulance squad. I never completed my Emergency Medical Technician Training, but I did complete North Dakota ECT certification. And I was a pretty good driver and was able to back the ambulance with its cube box accurately using mirrors. So I ended up driving the ambulance when it was my turn to take a shift of being on call. This was in the time before we had pagers or cell phones, so being on call meant having to stay home and be available by telephone. If we went to visit friends, or if I made a call, I had to call the dispatcher and tell her or him where I could be reached.

I went on quite a few calls and had quite a few experiences, some of which were not very pleasant. In those days the drinking age in South Dakota was younger than in North Dakota. Living four miles from the South Dakota line meant that people in their late teens would drive to South Dakota for legal drinking and then attempt to drive home. Some of those accident scenes were no fun for anyone involved. I remember driving 150 miles to Bismarck one dark night with an infant that kept forgetting to breathe. Since we had to stop the ambulance every time they assisted the baby's breathing, the trip was long. We completed the trip safely. I have a card with that baby's heel prints on it - and a picture of her at when she was in the 1st grade. We drove over a hundred miles in a different direction one night with a man whose hip was broken because he had to be treated in a Veterans Administration Hospital - the surgery could not be done in another hospital because of the way in which veterans benefits are

administered. There are more stories to be told than would be appropriate for today's blog.

Those days were after the first round of high gas prices and shortages of the early 1970's. People were buying small cars to save on fuel. U.S. auto makers were slow to respond with small cars and when they did, the quality was poor and the safety was often poor as well. In those days we drove a Ford Pinto. I remember that people in my church used to joke that the Ford dealer had to see the Pinto to us - after the news of the explosions in rear-end collisions and the problems associated with Firestone radial tires, the only person in town who would dare drive a Pinto was a minister. It might have been funny, but I knew that the Ford dealer's daughter had a pinto that was quite similar to ours. The truth is that we were just learning to become aware of highway safety. We had seat belts and we used ours, but most people didn't. There were no air bags and no federal safety ratings on cars. Consumer Reports did accident testing, but not all makes and models were available in their ratings.

Back in those days, we had a saying. "Lug nuts win." What it meant was that in a collision, the vehicle with the most lug nuts was probably the largest vehicle and the one to sustain the least amount of damage.

I thought of that saying yesterday when I was sitting in my little Chevy Cavalier parked face to face with the pickup with which we haul our camper. I park the two vehicles like that often and so I've seen that view of the pickup many times, but somehow it struck me how unfair a collision between those two vehicles would be. The car would probably go right under the truck. It doesn't look like there is much that would prevent the truck's bumper from getting to the car's windshield.

We responded to an accident once with an even greater disparity between the size of the vehicles. When we first arrived at the scene, we didn't even see the car. It was completely beneath the tractor of the semi that it had hit nearly head-on. Only a bit of the trunk and the taillights were sticking out from under the truck's bumper. It took us more than an hour to extract the victim.

There have been a lot of strides in vehicle safety since those days. All of our cars are equipped with air bags and breakaway bumpers and crush zones. We have ABS braking systems that decrease the possibility of out-of-control skidding in hard braking situations.

But the business of driving cars is not without risks.

The good news is that the number of highway fatalities is decreasing in the United States. Last year, there was a dramatic drop of nearly 3,000 - probably due to a radical decrease in the number of miles driven due to the high price of fuel. High gas prices also resulted in slower speeds for those who were driving. But the trend toward fewer

highway deaths is part of a bigger picture. 31,330 people died on in traffic accidents in 2008, down from 34,502 in 2007. The 2007 number is over 20,000 fewer deaths than the record year, 1972.

While the overall decrease in highway accident fatalities is encouraging, there is one statistic that remains alarming. The number of deaths in motorcycle accidents increased again in 2008 capping a decade in which the number of motorcycle deaths doubled. Over 5,000 people died in motorcycle accidents last year. Lug nuts make a difference. Bigger vehicles provide more protection for their occupants. And one can't get much less protection than a motorcycle.

So be careful out there. We value every one of you. Statistics are meaningless when the victim is a member of your family or a personal friend. One death is too many.

By the way - the pickup has eight lug nuts per wheel and the car has five. Hmm - that's a dozen fewer when I'm driving the car. But the car gets double the gas mileage of the pickup, so it is unlikely that I'll return to driving the pickup for everyday errands. Life is full of compromises. The good news is that when I drive the car I am less of a threat to other drivers than when I drive the pickup.

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September 30, 2009 – Remembering Forest



He was only five years older than I, but a world more famous. He was descended from famous stock, the most famous being his father who was a United States Senator. This Frank Forest Church was number four in the line. His son is number 5. Number 3, his father, was U.S. Senator from Idaho and ran unsuccessfully for the Democratic nomination for U.S. President in 1976. He nearly was chosen by Jimmy Carter as his running mate after he withdrew from the race. Frank Church III married the daughter of Idaho governor Chase Clark, so the son inherited politics from both sides of the family.

The father, Frank Church III, was a Presbyterian. The family had been Presbyterian for generations. Forrest (IV) headed for the ministry, then turned his focus to academic scholarship, then became a pastor. He graduated from Harvard headed for service in the Unitarian Universalist Church. He served the same congregation for more than 30 years. He grew up in Boise, Idaho, but lived his adult life in New York City. He was the author of more than 25 books, including a book about the relationship he had with his father.

It would be easy to say that he was too young to die. But of course no one is too young. And none of us will live forever. Though it must seem that way to his mother Bethine, who outlived three of the Frank Forest Churches that she had known, her father-in-law, her husband, and now her son.

It has been easy for me to pay attention to Forest over the years. For a decade we lived in Idaho where his family was constantly in the news. It made sense for me to pay

attention to the minister son who was ordained the same year as I. I read several of his books and found him to be an intellectually honest, direct and clear author. His career as a pastor has been stellar. At the time of his death, he was still serving the same congregation that he went to serve in 1978 when he was ordained. That congregation grew from an average worship of less than 100 to over 1,000 people in attendance. They have been active in a wide variety of outreach ministries including pioneering outreach to persons living with AIDS. All Souls Church was active in serving persons with AIDS before many people knew the disease existed. In the mid- 1980's, when the disease was feared, they placed advertisements in busses and subways saying, "Aids is a human disease and deserves a humane response."

Forrest was famous for his sermons. Like his father, he was an inspirational speaker who had a charisma that attracted people to his words. He could hold the attention of a large group of people as he explored complex theological and historical concepts with them. It is rare for a sermon to make the annual anthology *Representative American Speeches*. Forest had eight of his sermons selected for those volumes. His sermons were filled with good humor and even the sermon in which he announced he had cancer and was terminally ill was interrupted with hearty and genuine laughter. He was a master of aphorisms, some of which have been quoted over and over by the likes of me: "God is not God's name. God is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each," and "The opposite of love is not hate but fear," and "Want what you have, do what you can, be who you are." Perhaps his most memorable aphorism will become his epitaph: "The goal of life is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for."

Even after receiving his diagnosis, and in the midst of debilitating chemotherapy treatments, Forrest completed two more books. *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow* has the same title as the sermon in which he announced his illness to his congregation. *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* is due out from Beacon Press sometime in the next month or so.

No generation is truly aware of who its great theologians will be. Theology is a slow process. When the subject of study is one that has taken generations to emerge it also takes generations to reveal which words and thoughts are truly lasting. But I think that Forrest's books are worth watching and re-reading for the next century or so while we wait to see who the great theologians of our time will be. His theology was not mine. There are several major points of disagreement. Were we to have the opportunity to debate I am sure that we would have both left the conversation unconvinced and unconverted by the arguments of the other. Yet I respect his genuine scholarship and his articulate writing. He was a great communicator and he forged a bond with a congregation that is truly unique in any time - and remarkable given the struggles and trials they faced together.

It is important to be honest as we remember. Forrest was far from perfect. Two deep scars marked his life: his divorce and his alcoholism. Though he continued to live successfully and productively as a recovering alcoholic, he almost disappeared into the bottle right in front of his congregation - the fact that he continued to serve the same congregation through such significant and life-altering problems is remarkable. The fact that he was honest to talk openly, sometimes even from the pulpit, about those things, marked him as a human being with genuine problems and struggles.

His son Frank wrote of his father, “My father wasn’t beloved because he was a larger than life pulpit-legend; it was because he battled and accepted his failures, successes and his humanity with such transparency and inclusion that despite the obvious pain, suffering and trials he endured, he was healed emotionally, spiritually, and personally by everyone around him.”

Here is a truth about the life of the church that is often missed by those who are outside of the community: We gather together not because we are whole, but because we are broken. Only by confessing our brokenness can we be made whole. Forrest Church’s most valuable contribution to theology in our age may not be the books he wrote or the sermons he preached, but rather the life he lived. Broken and confessing. Weak and admitting. Ignorant and able to declare it. And through the grace of God he became whole and strong and wise.

Still, we lost him too soon. There were more books he could have written. More sermons he could have preached. More humanity he could have shared.

So here is one more aphorism. This one isn’t Forrest’s. I first heard it said by Roy Blount, Jr. but I offer it in Forrest’s memory: ‘Tis better to have been good an over than rotten and gone on too long.”

As the world comes to terms with what we have lost in the death of Forrest Church, we live in anticipation of the day when we realize that what we have left is enough. For love never dies - even death cannot take it from us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

NOTE TO REGULAR READERS OF THE BLOG: We leave today for two weeks’ vacation. I will be writing each day but will not have Internet access some of the days we are on the road. If you don’t see the blog at your usual time, check back the next day. I’ll try to post every few days. I’m sorry for any inconvenience this may cause.

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October 1, 2009 – The Rainbow at the End of the Day



There are lots of legends about rainbows. Some say that there is a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Yesterday it was the rainbow that was the reward. It appeared late in the afternoon of a very long day. Now, where do I begin to tell the story?

There is something about me an vacations this year. We divided our vacation into two blocks this year. Both began with my making relatively serious mistakes. The good news is that my mistakes haven't resulted in any injuries. Yesterday, we planned to leave home around 10 a.m. with our camper and our canoe trailer. We were headed first to Big Timber, Montana, to leave my mother with my sister. Then the plan is to go on to Olympia, Washington to visit our son and daughter-in-law and Susan's sister and husband. We planned to stay in our camper and do a little paddling along the way. Now we have a new plan, similar to the old one, but it involves leaving today - hopefully a bit earlier than we did yesterday.

To make a long story short, we finally had everything and everyone loaded up at about 11 a.m. and we headed out of town. I had had the top up on the camper earlier in the morning as I loaded things. I was pleased with the repairs I had made over the summer, patching a small tear in the canvas, repairing the lift system, and repairing the refrigerator. We had furniture to take to Susan's sister loaded on the trailer and treasures for others in the camper.

We turned off the Interstate at Whitewood and headed for Belle Fourche. I short distance after turning off the Interstate, I noticed that the wind was picking up and we

were getting big blasts from passing semis. A change in the sound of the wind prompted me to stop to check the camper. I discovered that we had gone topless. The roof of the camper was completely gone. There appeared to be no other damage - the things we had loaded in the camper were all OK - the mattress was on the bed, but there was no roof.

It was about a mile back down the road, a couple of hundred feet or more from the highway, floating in a stock pond. We managed to get it to the edge of the pond and unload the one cupboard that had gone with the roof - the cups in the cupboard weren't even broken.

Fearing that the camper is totally destroyed, it was a grim party that drove slowly back to rapid city and unloaded everything. The next step was to figure out what to do with the camper. A local dealer graciously allowed us to unload it inside his shop while we decided the next steps.

It was nearly 4 p.m. when I headed back to retrieve the roof. I knew that the rancher wouldn't appreciate the donation and it was clearly my responsibility to pick up my mess. By that time I had determined that the cause of the roof loss was my failure to properly latch the roof to the camper. When I lowered the roof I was distracted and thinking about other things and I never hooked the latches. I was feeling pretty glum. Here our camper that we have had for five years is destroyed and it is clearly my fault. The "should-of, could-of, would-of's" were coming pretty quickly. But life doesn't have a rewind button. And I had a mess to clean up.

I was unable to drag the camper roof even a few feet, so I had to find the gate into the pasture, drive the pickup close enough to reach with some heavy straps that I had brought plus a come-along winch. Finally I drug the top far enough away from the pond so that I could drive the truck up to it and load it. It is in remarkably good shape, considering what it has been through. The skylight and the solar panel were broken, wires were ripped off and the shower curtain had seen better days. The cupboard will have to be replaced. But it is in one piece.

It was raining as I was loading the top. I was nearly in tears and feeling pretty sorry for myself. It was muddy in the pasture and I was filthy. The day had turned out to be a disaster and it was my fault.

The view of the rainbow on the way home was spectacular. The picture does not do it justice. There was a full horizon-to-horizon bow and about half of the second arch clearly visible and right down the highway as I drove. There is beauty and promise in this world even on the hard days.

By the time I got the top into our storage unit, it was dark outside. Today I will call the people who are storing the camper and ask them to hold off doing anything until after

our trip. It is possible to rebuild the camper and perhaps that is what I should do. I'll do some checking on the price of getting new canvas and the hardware to attach it. I can re-wire the roof myself and a skylight is relatively inexpensive. If I decide to trade or sell the camper, it doesn't need to have a solar charger. But those are decisions for another day.

Today we start fresh. We are uninjured, and nothing other than the camper is lost. Our camping supplies are safely stored in our house, our clothing packed into suitcases, the furniture and treasures loaded into the back of the pickup and the boats on the rack on the truck. If we run into any slippery roads we won't have the trailer and we will make good time. We can stay in motels a few nights and stay in our son and daughter-in-law's house when we get to Olympia. Only one day of our vacation was lost and no one was injured. I have no idea what would have happened if that roof had flown into the path of another vehicle.

In some traditions, seeing a rainbow grants the viewer one wish. I suppose the obvious one is that I wish that I had remembered to fasten and secure the latches on the camper roof. But I'm not going to get that wish. And if I only get one wish, maybe I should wish I had gotten to see that roof sailing through the air. It must have been like a giant kite. You can't believe the distance it went!

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October 2, 2009 – Wind



Big Timber, Montana, my home town, is known for being a very windy place. When we were growing up blown over mobile homes were common. Most people who have lived in Montana know that Big Timber is a windy place. The wind whistles down the east slope of the mountains. At the gates of the mountain, near Livingston, the canyon narrows and the wind accelerates. The wind always blows in my home town. And wind doesn't bother me.

I've lived in Chicago, known as the windy city. And the part of North Dakota where we lived was so windy that on a rare day when the wind stopped blowing it took the pressure off of the state line, it would sag up north of town, and we would be in South Dakota.

The only place we ever lived where it wasn't constantly blowing was Boise, Idaho. It was a good place to live, but it was a weird town when it came to weather. I used to miss the wind. The air would get stagnant and I would just want the wind to blow. And the trees were so wimpy that when the wind would give a little puff, the branches would fall off. The place would never have a real thunderstorm, either. There would be two flashes and one rumbly clap of thunder and then it would be over.

Anyway, I'm used to the wind. I can tarp a load so that no part of the tarp will ever flap in the wind. It doesn't bother me to drive in the wind. Which is a good thing, because yesterday I drove in the wind all day. We headed out from Rapid City and the wind was blasting us hard from the side and moved around to the nose of the car. The roof rack

was whistling and so we got plenty of wind noise - more than when the camper is on the truck.

Did I mention that I grew up in a windy place? In Big Timber it is so windy that people just stand upwind from their house and throw sand in the air. If you throw enough sand you don't have to scrape your house - it will be sandblasted. Of course, in order to paint your house you have to stand upwind from your house or you'll be painting the neighbor's place (or their car, their boat, their dog, etc.)

Anyway by the time we got to Belle Fourche the wind was blowing so hard that some of the construction barrels alongside the road were from Edmonton, Canada.

It was blowing so hard that Colony, Wyoming had blown down to the state line. By Alzada, the wind was blowing so hard that we saw semis driving at the speed limit, something that I had never seen in Montana in my 56 years of life.

Did I mention that I grew up in a windy place? When it was windy we didn't bother to use the runway at the airport. We just took the airplane out, faced it into the wind and opened up the throttle. Of course some days it was so windy that we couldn't get home flying into the wind.

Anyway on our trip we noticed it was getting windy somewhere between Alzada and Howe when we saw round bales blowing across the road like tumble weeds. At Boyles it was so windy that the rumble strips had blown to the middle of the road and the stripes had all blown off of the road and were drifted up against the snow fence.

Did I mention that I am used to the wind? One time the state put up a wind sock and a sign warning of gusty winds. They blew away. We think that the wind once blew 110 miles per hour. We were watching the wind gauge to see how fast it would go, but the gauge blew away.

Back to yesterday's drive. At Broadus, the wind was blowing so hard that they were serving Canadian beef. They weren't too confident about it. Serving foreign beef sort of goes up against their principles. But this heifer blew into town with at least three bed sheets and a whole lot of clothesline wrapped around her. The brand inspector said she came form Lethbridge, Alberta, wherever the heck that is. The owner didn't want to come down to get her and no one had a better idea so they cooked her and served her. The hamburger that I had tasted really good.

Did I mention that I came from a windy place? I remember when two guys down at the county shop rigged a sail on a bridge beam to smooth roads. It worked so well that they graded roads in four counties before they finally sent the sheriff to pick them up.

By Ashland, the wind was blowing so hard that the antelope were using deer for wind breaks. At Lame Deer, the wind was blowing so hard that the students from the community college had all blown across the street to the casino and the patrons of the casino had blown down main to the drunk tank. Although I must admit that the locals didn't think that there was anything unusual about it.

Did I mention that I grew up in a place where the wind blows? I remember when Mr. Johnson decided to make a Margherita. He was so proud of it that he took it outside. There were so many ice crystals blowing off the top of his glass that the cat thought it was snowing and darn near froze to death. It reminded me of the time that we thought someone had given us one of those Garfield dolls for our window until the neighbor came over and retrieved their cat who was being firmly held against the window by the force of the wind.

When we got to Hardin, the wind was blowing so hard that it was blowing the sugar beets out of the trucks. If you think dodging hailstones is hard - these babies are the size of cantaloupes and hard as rocks.

By Billings, the wind was blowing so hard that the workers on the Reinvestment and Renewal construction project were being paid in Japanese Yenn. By Columbus the state had changed the speed limit to 55 mph going West and 95 mph going East.

But the strange thing was that the wind started to die down as we approached my home town. By the time I pulled off the Interstate I had to roll down the window and drive fast to hear the sound of the wind. It was so calm that I could barely sleep. It is positively eerie.

My theory is that the wind was blowing so hard yesterday that it blew the wind out he town.

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October 3, 2009 – Passes



There is an old saying that goes something like, “Girls never make passes at guys who wear glasses.” Or is it: “Guys never make passes at girls who wear glasses”? We have both worn glasses for so many years that I have no idea which is the correct version. The truth is that we made several passes yesterday.

Actually, if you count Camp’s Pass, we started making passes the day before. But the only way that little hill got the name of a pass is that it must have been named by a sheepherder who had spent at least five years in southeastern Montana before he saw those silly little hills covered with scrub pine trees.

But yesterday, we made some real passes. We started with the Bozeman pass. At least that’s the local name for the route out of the Yellowstone Valley through the mountains to the headwaters of the Missouri. The pass was first documented by Jim Bridger and it is also called Bridger pass by some. It is not far from the route taken by William Clark on the return of the Lewis and Clark Expedition when he took part of the party to the Yellowstone River while Lewis led the rest up the Missouri. The two halves of the expedition were reunited where the two rivers come together near the present day border of North Dakota and Montana.

As mountain passes go, Bridger isn’t much of a challenge. The highway grade that was built with the Interstate in the late 1960’s eased the grade and it is a gentle, winding climb to a cut at the top and then a slightly steeper descent into a narrow canyon. The whole pass can be accomplished without taking the car off of cruise control. Trucks

have to gear down for the grades, but traffic moves smoothly on the Interstate where there is plenty of room to pass.

We crossed the continental divide at Pipestone pass, above Butte. It is a longer climb than Bridger, but the road is wide and traffic moves slowly. Towards the top the curves are too tight to take at 75 mph, but an average speed of 65 for the whole pass is not a problem. Trucks stop at he rest area at the top of the pass in part because they have been climbing for a long time and the drivers need a break. Years ago, there were barrels of water alongside the road and it wasn't at all uncommon to see a half dozen vehicles stopping to cool and add water to the radiators on the long climb. These days our vehicles barely see a rise in temperature as we go along.

The view from the top of Pipestone and during the descent on the western slope is dramatic. The Big Hole valley stretches out in front with more mountains on the horizon. The city of Butte looks best from a distance and the open pit, where the copper mine used to be seems to be nestled among the hills. Things look differently up close, but from the top of the pass, you can imagine how early explorers felt when looking down on this incredibly beautiful scene.

The Interstate is not our preferred route out of Missoula, but we were trying to make up some lost time, so we stayed on it. It has been several years since I have driven Lookout Pass. The road on the Montana side of the pass is getting pretty rough. It winds enough that it is appropriate to slow don a bit, but again, there is plenty of room to pass. The Interstate follows the route of the old Mullen Trail, one of the longest and most arduous mountain passages in the West. The Oregon trail passed far to the south. Lewis and Clark made their first attempt to cross the mountains to the south of Lookout, on Lost Trail Pass, but when they got over the top, they couldn't find their way through the steeps of the snake river in what is today Idaho. They returned over Lost Trail to near the site of present day Hamilton, Montana and headed back north. With Nez Pierce guides they found their way over Lost Trail pass and eventually to the Columbia basin and on to the Pacific.

For us the view included a good look at the massive mine reclamation projects going on at Mullen, Idaho. The old lead and silver mines left tailings and other debris and there were problems with heavy metals leaching into the water. The clean up project involves some massive earth moving. It also provides jobs in an area that has seen hard ties with the closure of the mines and the decrease in the timber industry.

We made Fourth of July Pass in the rain. It was so cloudy and rainy that Coeur d'Alene Lake looked gray. There were not boats out on what is one of the prettiest lakes in the northern rockies. We didn't stop in the town - we rarely do. We don't play golf and have no need to rub elbows with the very wealthy people who like to shop in the trendy boutiques and eat in the pricey cafes.

We headed out across the plains west of Spokane. Harvest is complete in this area and the columns of field dust were all part of preparing the land for next year. There is some winter wheat grown in the area and the drills will be in the field soon. The elevators were all full and we saw piles of wheat, some covered, some uncovered, next to many of the elevators.

The descent down into the Columbia and the climb back out are as steep and arduous as any of the passes we crossed. There are three lanes on the uphill side of the Interstate. The big trucks have to work hard to climb and are slowed to 25 or so miles per hour for the climb. Most of the trucks pause at the top. It is dry country and in the summer the climb is hot and the scenery not all that spectacular, but at the top the country begins to change. There are lots of irrigated fields with sweet corn and peppermint and huge amounts of alfalfa grown. We passed giant hay warehouses, where the hay is loaded into shipping containers and exported, mostly to Japan. With the scare over mad cow disease, more cattle are being feed in Japan and they actually import hay. It must make the price of beef incredibly high. The idea of shipping hay half way around the globe is mind boggling, but these were huge operations. We even saw one place with Japanese letters across the front of a storage facility. Such a thing would have been alarming to people 60 years ago.

Our last pass of the day yesterday, Snoqualamie, is the site of a road re-construction project. The traffic was backed up all the way to Cle Elum and I think we spent almost an hour in bumper to bumper, five mile an hour traffic before getting past the construction site. I don't know what possessed them to work on one lane each way at the same time. In our part of the country they put both directions of traffic on one side and repair the other, but this technique meant that the traffic had to drive within a few feet of the workers - not the best of situations. The traffic was delayed for about an hour, but the slow pace meant that we could take time to look around. Most of the time we were following a load of blueberries in open-topped containers. I kept wishing that the traffic would stop long enough for me to get out and go talk to the driver of the blueberry truck - maybe he would have sold me some of the berries, but we never got the chance to talk.

It was a lovely drive and a good day. And at the end of the day, we were both still wearing glasses, but we had made several passes and we're still very much in love.

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October 4, 2009 – Sabbath



Early in our shared journey our people learned the importance of learning to take a day off. The ten commandments, the cardinal rules of how to be a free people, don't say "All work and not play makes Jack a dull boy," but they do say, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work - you, your son and you daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it." (Exodus 20:8-11) The message is so important that it is repeated about 15 chapters later in Exodus and again in the 5th chapter of Deuteronomy. It speaks not only of the need for rest, but also for the need for organization to get all of the work done. It also addresses the issue of causing others to work - that too is forbidden, whether it be your children or a slave or an immigrant in your land. Even animals are to be given a day of rest. The rule also addresses our tendency to think of ourselves as indispensable. We aren't. Working without rest is a form of idolatry - of thinking that one is better than God.

The rule is spouted by preachers all the time. More often than not sermons try to enforce the sabbath not so much as a day of rest, but as a day of institutional maintenance."The Bible commands you to go to church on Sunday." Notice that the commandment is for a day of rest, not for a day of worship - or a day of putting your money in the offering plate. In our fast-paced world Sunday may be the only day that some family members are allowed to sleep in, even a little bit. The obligation to attend church may come as just one more thing on a long list of obligations. In that context, it is hardly a day of rest. Because we also need to set aside regular time to worship God ,

congregations need to provide both opportunities for members - worship and rest. In today's world that may mean offering worship at another time in the week as well as Sunday morning.

Pastors may be the worst at disobeying the sabbath commandment. Sunday is no day of rest for the typical preacher. I usually arrive at the church by 6:30 a.m. and there is a long list of things to do and almost constant activity until I go to bed that night. Leading worship is a stressful activity and there are a lot of responsibilities that need to be executed all at the same time. Most ministers claim to take another day of the week as a day off, but there are often weeks when we squeeze in some church activities on our day off. This is not because someone else forces us to do it - it is because we love our work and because we aren't organized enough to get all of our work done in six days.

This morning I did not set an alarm. I rarely do that. I slept in until nearly 7:30 a.m. - that's 8:30 at home. I don't think I've slept in that late any day for at least three or four years. I must have been tired. The stress of traveling and of the loss of our camper, has meant that even when I have been in bed I haven't been truly resting.

Today is World Communion Sunday. For the first 20 years that I was a pastor, I could not have imagined taking that Sunday as a vacation day. A pastor's place is with the congregation when the sacraments are celebrated and an important festival day like world communion means I should be with my congregation. But if worldwide communion is to mean anything, it must mean that we are joined in communion with God even when we celebrate in different places.

This sabbath day is a reminder to myself. I need to re-learn how to take sabbath and how to honor the commitments of our people. I need to organize my work so that I can complete it in six days.

The picture with today's blog is of my sister-in-law with their camper. Our original plan was to be camping with them this weekend a few miles from where our son and daughter-in-law live. Our new plan is that we are staying with our kids while they are camping. Had we been camping, I would have been the first in the campground to be up. I would have had coffee ready when the others rose and breakfast available shortly afterword. But in this setting, someone else is preparing breakfast. I should understand and receive it as the gift that it is. It is a sabbath gift.

I don't expect to become a different person. I still like getting up in the morning and I still am in love with the work that I do. But today it is good to be reminded once again that the only way to true freedom is through the commandments - including the one about taking a day of rest.

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October 5, 2009 – Capitol



Our ministries have taken us to several states. We grew up in Montana, went to graduate school in Illinois, served in North Dakota, Idaho, and South Dakota. The state capitols of those places reflect the mostly prairie nature of the states. Montana' capitol is located in Helana, with beautiful mountains for a backdrop, and Boise, Idaho also has mountains for a backdrop for the capitol building. But none of those states has an across the water view like the Washington State Capitol in Olympia. Situated at the southern end of the Puget Sound, the capitol building shows off well as it is reflected in the waters.

We come to this place because of our family. Our son and daughter-in-law live here. But we are struck with the great beauty of this place. The Puget Sound affords a safe place for paddling adventures for a guy whose experience lies mostly on rivers and lakes that are a long way away from the ocean. For me it is an adventure just to launch my boat into salt water and experience the rise and fall of the tides. There is plenty of paddling to keep me happy within sight of the state capitol building.

I know that there are a lot of politics that were involved in the locating of the capitols of the various states, but most of the states where we have lived there was some attempt to locate the capitol near the physical center of the state. The one exception was Idaho, whose capitol is easily accessed by folks in the southern part of the state, but a long drive for those in the North. When weather is bad, it is not uncommon for folks in Idaho's panhandle to drive through Washington and Oregon to get down to the capitol.

Here in Washington, the center of the state was not the chosen location for the capitol. Located about halfway between the northern and southern borders of the state, Olympia is nearly at the western border. It's 384 miles one way from Anatone in the southeastern corner of the state, and 428 miles one way from Metaline Falls in the northeastern corner. There are people in the northeastern part of the United States who would find such distances to be unimaginable. But folks in the west are used to traveling and people consider these distances to be within a day's drive.

The Washington State Capitol building looks very much like other capitol buildings. Growing up in Montana and now living in South Dakota we have a sense of how a state capitol should appear. Both of those buildings were built from the same plans, and although some different materials were used the shape and size of the buildings are the same. The Idaho capitol building is a 3/4 scale replica of the United States Capitol building in Washington, D.C. The Illinois capitol also has a dome situated between two wings. The place we lived with the most unique capitol building is North Dakota, where the state capitol is a 19-story art deco skyscraper. It is the tallest building in the state and is known as the skyscraper of the prairie. The North Dakota capitol is the newest of the capitol buildings of the states where we lived. It was built in 1932 and 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, following a fire that destroyed the previous capitol building.

States need places to conduct the business of government, and it is interesting to view the places where they gather to make decisions. We have toured state capitol buildings in many of the states we have visited and find it interesting to note the similarities and differences. We are all shaped by the land that surrounds us and we are also shaped by the laws that we choose to govern us. Each of the states in the United States shares a commitment to citizen involvement in the legislative process and builds capitol buildings that are accessible to the citizens and open to the public. We have found that visitors are welcome in such places - something that says a great deal about our way of governing ourselves in this nation.

We are enjoying our visit to Washington's capitol. But I don't think we'll take the tour of the capitol building this trip. We are more interested in spending time with our children and doing a little paddling in the Puget Sound. And as I paddle, I'll look up from time to time to see the building that the people of Washington chose for the seat of their government.

Now, if they had left the choice to me, I might have gone for a place in the center of the state. For example the community of George comes to mind. Not only is it located in the center of the state, it's residents have a sense of humor that one has to admire. It is the only city in the nation to have the full name of a U.S. President. There are plenty of cities that have last names of presidents. Most states have a city named "Lincoln." But to have the first and last name of a president is rare. Of course it is something that could

only be done in the state of Washington, as no other state bears the name of a U.S. president.

We are enjoying our break and our time with family, but we know that this place is not our home. Before long we will be returning to South Dakota with memories and pictures and stories to tell.

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October 6, 2009 – Found My Honey in the Pumpkin Patch



In my young adult years, I struggled with a variety of allergies. It was a typical case of hay fever. I didn't suffer a great deal, but there was an extended season of congestion and discomfort, so I made an appointment with an allergist and went through the skin tests and found out that my allergies were primarily to airborne plant pollens. I received a series of desensitization shots over a period of a couple of years. I know some people for whom this process was unsuccessful or at least the success was limited, but for me it was the solution to the problem. I rarely experience allergy symptoms and the treatment took place twenty-five years ago. One of the things the allergist recommended was that I incorporate local honey into my diet. He said that the evidence was incomplete, but there was some indication that eating the pollens contained in honey would continue a natural desensitization process. I don't know the status of the scientific evidence on this treatment, but I am convinced that it works. I have a bit of honey almost every day and my allergies have not returned.

I try to keep honey from local beekeepers on hand. In the early years of our time in Rapid City this was easy because I had two local bee keepers in my congregation. But times change. One of those bee keepers passed a way and the other has gone out of the bee business. Still, it is not hard to find local honey. There is a bee keeper who sells honey at the farmers market. When I can't find local honey, I can purchase a bit of honey from western Colorado that seems to be as effective. Even if there is no scientific evidence of the effectiveness of this treatment, it has a placebo effect for me and I remain free from symptoms.

Yesterday our son took a day off to spend time with his parents and after a morning of visiting and doing a few small household repair chores we went to a local farm that grows pumpkins. They have quite an extensive operation geared to folk who want to come and spend a couple of hours. In addition to the field pumpkins, they bring in pumpkins from other fields and place them out in their field, so there are always thousands of pumpkins in the patch. They have a betting zoo with young lambs and piglets and calves and colts. They have a play area for children with a smooth track and pedal tractors for the kids to ride. They have lots of wheel barrows for carrying pumpkins and children around the area. There is a hay maze and a corn maze and a whole area with farm products for sale. They have squash and sweet corn and pumpkins of many different varieties. There are apples and carmel apples and a whole area of home made candies. They sell jams and jellies and salsas and popcorn and fresh flowers and recipe books. It is a well-run and fun operation. And it is an inexpensive afternoon of entertainment for our family. We found the place looking for a campground a couple of years ago and yesterday was our second visit to the place in October.

And they sell honey. Of course it is not local to the place I live, but it is local to the place I am visiting. We picked up a jar for our son and daughter-in-law to use in their home.

They say that spring is the time when thoughts turn to romance, and I am sure it is true, but in our family there have been several autumn weddings and the beautiful fall season is a time of thinking about love and tis role in our lives. Our son and daughter-in-law will celebrate their fifth wedding anniversary in a few days. They met when they went off to college, so the fall is also the season of their meeting five years earlier. Fall is a time to remember the process of falling in love and to renew commitments in their lives. Being with them reminds us of the power of love and commitment in our lives and the joy of finding a mate with whom to share a lifetime of adventures.

Some people might not find a visit to a pumpkin farm to be a romantic adventure, but our family has always been a bit out of the ordinary in the first place. It was a delightful excursion as we looked for tall and short pumpkins that weren't too big and wandered through the pumpkin patch without any specific agenda other than talking with each other and enjoying one another's company.

Psalm 34:8 invites the faithful to "taste and see that the Lord is good." The mixed metaphor might seem strange to some. How can vision come from tasting? Or does the passage invite both tasting and looking? But for some of us the experience of God's goodness is a multi-sensory experience. It involves all of our senses. The gift of love certainly fills all of our senses and engages all of our being. And human love is a reflection of the gift of love that God gives.

So I found my honey in the pumpkin patch yesterday. And it was a delightful experience. Who knows where I might find my honey next? May you find the experience of love in your life and may you taste and see that the Lord is good.

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October 7, 2009 – Peaceful Paddle



The Puget Sound was as calm as I have ever seen it yesterday. Midday low tide was at about 2:30 p.m. and I launched from Boston Harbor near the time. There was no wind and I was in the mood to paddle, so I started off by just paddling for a couple of miles. I didn't stop to take pictures or even to rest. The State Capitol was in the distance at the southern end of the sound and I paddled toward it, knowing that I wouldn't go the entire distance. There was one harbor seal hanging around the marina who poked his head up to look at me, but who wasn't interested in coming too close. Later I saw a second seal who was similarly shy. Seagulls and flocks of ducks were the other companions I had for my paddle.

There must have been a hint of a breeze on the western side of the sound. I saw a couple of sails, but the boats weren't going very fast. A work boat passed by near the center of the channel and I waved at the crew.

This part of the sound is lined with houses, so one doesn't have the feeling of being the first to discover this place that comes with paddling in more remote locations. Still, there is a sense of time alone and time with the beauties of nature as one paddles on the sound. I have paddled on the sound several times over the years and find the mood of the water to be different each time. It doesn't take much wind to blow up a light chop on the surface of the water and often there are swells that have traveled the full length of the sound. The mood yesterday was one of calm. It was a bright, warm autumn day. The leaves are just starting to turn colors along the shore. And everything on the shoreline was reflected in the clm water as if I were paddling on a mirror.

Although I am greatly enjoying this break from the busy activities of my usual life, I was aware that it is not as calm and peaceful everywhere. There was a sense of special privilege to be paddling in such a beautiful place. In order for me to make the paddle my sister is providing special care for our mother, many people at the church are taking on special duties and doing extra work. I know that there are human dramas playing out in the life of the church in which I would be involved were I there. And there will be an intense flurry of work when I return.

But yesterday was a perfect day for a peaceful paddle on the Puget Sound.

I know that I am a stranger when I paddle in these waters. I don't know the names of all of the various ducks and other aquatic birds. I can identify a pelican and I know a duck from a goose, but there are lots of critters that are unfamiliar to me. And I find that it is difficult to judge distances on such big water. Of course I always paddle along the shore and stay well clear of the lanes used by the big boats, but there is much to learn from these waters.

There was a tug boat towing a large barge heading north. I could hear it a long way off, the big diesel engines running at a steady pace. For a while after I turned around I tried to keep up with its pace, but it was moving too fast for me to match its speed for long. Still it took more than a half hour for it to pass from sight. It left behind a wake that stretched across the sound and gave me a few gentle swells in which to paddle. I could get a little bit of surfing effect on the swells and speed up slightly as they passed under my boat.

Every time I slide into a kayak I am reminded that I am stepping into a 5,000 year old tradition. The people of this area have been paddling small boats on big water for a long time. They made their boats from the animals around them, often forming the frames from bones and covering them with the skins of seals. Certain refinements in shape evolved with years of paddling and hunting from boats. A kayak gives a perspective that is impossible in almost any other kind of boat. In a kayak the paddler sits right at the water line. It is as if one were sitting right on the water. Other boats elevate their passengers above the surface of the water. The sensation is very comfortable. With a tight kayak and a spray skirt, it is almost as if the boat becomes a part of one's body. It moves with movements of the hips and legs and a slight lean allows the boat to carve a graceful turn in the water.

Even with this perspective, my eye level is two or three feet above that of the water birds and the heads of the seals that poke out of the water. Theirs is an experience of being in the water while I float on the top of it. But we share the same medium and my point of view is much closer to theirs than that of the captains, engineers and deck hands riding on the 90 foot and longer tugs that pull the barges around the sound. My

little boat can create a tiny wake as I paddle, but it isn't even enough to make the ducks bob up and down.

As I paddled back into the marina and picked up my boat, I had a deep sense of gratitude. I was grateful for the heritage of native boat builders who made it possible for me to copy the shape of their boats. I was grateful for the creatures who shared the water with me. And I was grateful for all of the people who are working hard to give me a time of vacation. Most of all I was grateful to be in such a beautiful place on such a beautiful day. The memory will linger for a long time.

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October 8, 2009 – Wooden Boats



For most of the history of boat building, wood has been the material of choice. It has a good strength to weight ratio, is easily workable with relatively simple tools, and is readily available in most parts of the world. Probably the first boats were variations on dugout canoes, made from a single log. Later, as boats became more refined in shape, other techniques were employed that enabled the building of different shapes.

Wooden boats have provided the means to ship thousands of tons of materials around he world. It is only recently that other materials have begun to be common in ship building. Steel is the material of choice for large ships these days. The development of the modern steel industry has made it possible to build larger ships than were practical with wooden frames and hulls. In the last 50 or so years, composites such as fiberglass and carbon fiber embedded epoxy have more common.

Still, there are a lot of boats built out of wood and wooden boat builders and owners like to get together and share their work and ideas. There are numerous gatherings and festivals for wooden boat owners and builders held around the world. In 2007, Susan and I were able to visit Mystic Seaport in Connecticut on the eve of the annual Wooden Boat Show held at that place. We wandered through displays and vendors and looked at the wide variety of boats and boating equipment that were on display.

The west coast has two big wooden boat events each year. The Wooden Boat Classic is held at Victoria on British Columbia's Vancouver Island. And the Wooden Boat Festival is held each year at Port Townsend, Washington. Port Townsend has become

a gathering point for people who enjoy wooden boats and there are several businesses dedicated to building, maintaining and providing supplies for wooden boats. It is a good place to purchase speciality woods and other supplies needed to build boats.

Wooden boat enthusiasts come in all kinds and their craft are all sizes and shapes. Tiny canoes, kayaks and rowboats have fans who are enthusiastic as any. But wood is the material of choice for classic motorboats and huge motor launches. Sailboats from tiny prams tot historic tall ships are all part of the wooden boat community.

Susan and I spent the day at Port Townsend yesterday, walking up and down the docks and looking at the various wooden boats that were moored there. We visited the wooden boat foundation's headquarters and purchased a specialty saw at a ship's chandler. There were a couple of tall masted wooden ships and several sleek and beautiful small boats. We saw row boats and toured the headquarters of Pygmy Kayaks, located right on the harbor.

But there were other kinds of boats too: one of a kind boats designed for simplicity and ease of building. One looked like a wooden box with a little bit of a bow, a mast set far forward like a cat boat rig and a small mizzen on the rear to assist with steering. I wondered how it sails and wished that the owner were nearby to ask questions. I suspect that such a craft gets plenty of attention at the annual festival.

I made the mistake, in conversation with a wooden boat enthusiast, of referring to the Mystic, Connecticut event as the wooden boat festival. I was quickly corrected. "That is the Wooden Boat Show," the speaker declared, "Only Port Townsend has a Wooden Boat Festival." I asked what was the difference and learned that at Port Townsend they have a beer garden with all of the local breweries selling their wares. I'm not sure that the wine sipping east coast elitists would recognize it, but the implication is that west coast boating is a pursuit of common folk. My experience is that wooden boat enthusiasts are mostly down-to-earth practical people no matter where they are found. And wooden boats tend to soak up whatever cash is available, so their owners are seldom among the monied elite.

Being in Port Townsend in the early autumn isn't at all like attending the festival, but there was plenty to do and see for someone who likes boats and boating activity. We had a lunch of fresh fish at a waterfront cafe and later found a local shop that had fresh oysters and coho salmon to take home for supper. The weather was beautiful and the day was a delight.

I refrained from purchasing any additional sets of boat plans and didn't even go into the lumber yards looking for cedar. There are many projects that need to be tackled at home before I start building another boat. But I got a lot of good ideas and took a lot of pictures of boats to remind me of the details of their construction. With our son and daughter-in-law living so close, we'll be coming back again soon, I'm sure. There is a

Wooden Boat Festival in early September each year and one year we might work things out to attend.

Boat building is a lot about dreaming and thinking about ideas. It is not just a process of construction, but also the process of imagining what might be done and how to solve a particular problem in a new and innovative way. Stirring the imagination is a critical part of the process. So yesterday was about stirring my imagination, gathering ideas and allowing them to sift and sort in my brain as I purse other more pressing demands. Then, one day I'll start another boat and the ideas will find expression in my work.

In the meantime I have lots of pictures to remind me of a beautiful day spend in Port Townsend. This vacation is being a time of rejuvenation not only of my body and spirit but also of my imagination.

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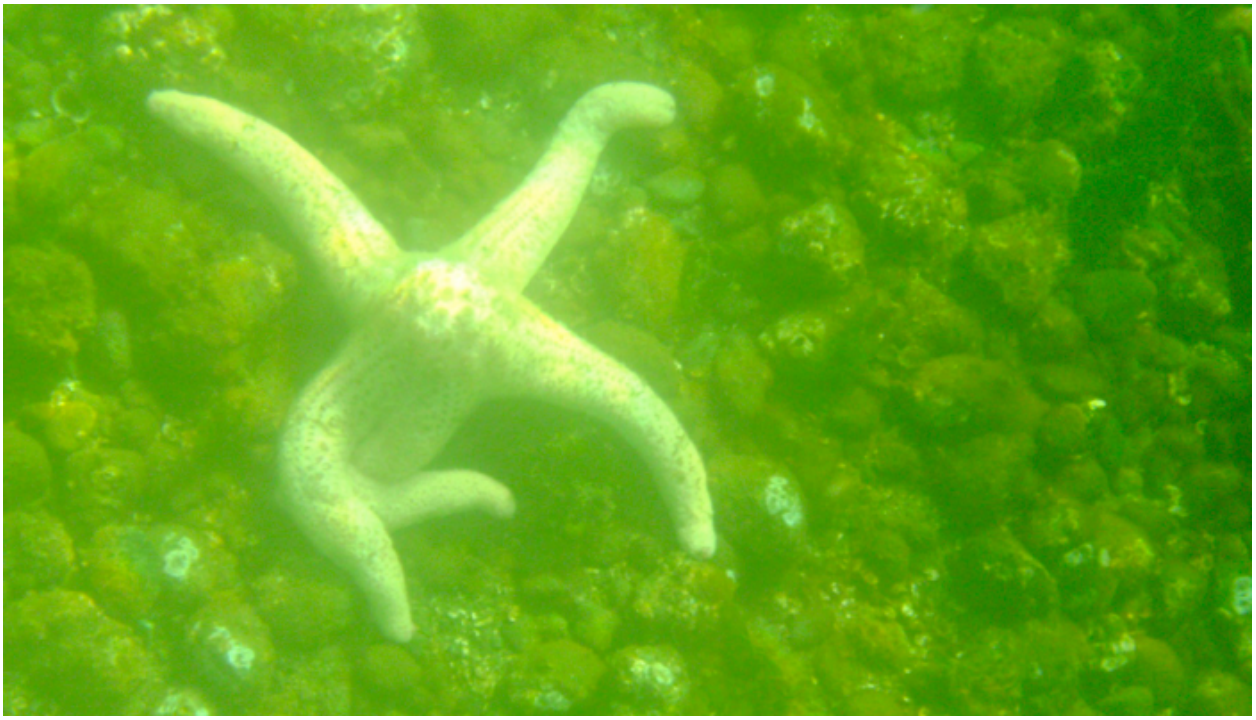
October 9, 2009 – Seeing Stars



I have never lived near the ocean. The closest we ever lived to the ocean was Boise, Idaho, which is over 500 miles from the Oregon beaches. So the ocean and the creatures that live in it have always been a bit exotic for me. Over the years we have visited a number of aquariums and marine education centers and have learned a bit about some of the creatures that inhabit the oceans, but each time I visit a place near the big waters there is much for me to learn and discover.

I have long enjoyed peering into the water. As kids we spent our summers with a mask and snorkel looking at the trout and other creatures that lived in the river. The waters of the river were very cold and there was at best a couple of months each summer when one could stand to spend any amount of time in the water, but when the weather turned hot we were in the river, splashing, playing and looking. And there was a much longer season when we were fishing the river and trying to figure out where the fish would be.

So it is natural for me to look into the water as I paddle. There are many places in the Puget Sound where I am paddling in deep water and cannot see the bottom, but sometimes I paddle over an area where there is a clear view. The calm waters of the past few days have made it easier to look at the bottom. The shore is littered with clam, oyster and muscle shells and the there are lots of barnacles and other sea creatures that can be seen from the boat.

Yesterday as I paddled I came on an area where there were hundreds of white starfish on the bottom. Our previous experiences with starfish have been exploring tidal pools

along the shoreline at low water. The starfish are intent on staying where they are in such situations. I hadn't had a previous opportunity to watch them in a place where they wee free to move about.

These creatures are also called sea stars. I am not sure of the distinction between the names, but I believe that scientists prefer the name sea stars because the creatures are not technically fish. They are echinoderms. At any rate, these creatures are graceful in their underwater environment. They have an external skeleton that protects them but they do not move like a spider, walking on legs with joints, but rather by a hydraulic system forcing water out of a variety of openings that allows them to propel themselves across the floor of the ocean. They eat oysters and a variety of other shell fish. They have two stomachs, one of which can be extended out of the central disk of the star allowing the fish to digest food that otherwise would be too large to fit in its mouth. They are able to regenerate an arm if one is lost.

I know that the creatures come in many different colors and we have seen several different colors in the tidal pools along the north pacific as we have walked along the shore. Yesterday, however, the stars that I was seeing were white. There were several different sizes, with the smallest being four or five inches across and the largest being three or four times as large. It was difficult to know the exact size because I was looking through three or more feet of water an the water does distort sizes somewhat.

I have a camera that can be immersed in water. It is the product of ruining a conventional camera a few years ago when I tipped a kayak while carrying a camera that was not designed to get so wet. My technique for photographing the sea stars was to stop my kayak over a group of them and hold the camera in the water alongside the boat. Aiming was a guessing game, but I got a couple of pictures that show the creatures. However, I was unable to get a picture that gave a sense of the large number of sea stars that were in the area where I was paddling. I didn't count, but I am sure there were hundreds. Because I have no other experience, I am assuming that what I was seeing was typical and normal for this area.

We live in a world that is incredibly complex and beautiful and filled with all sorts of amazing creatures. There is a sense of awe that comes from just observing this world and noting the various creatures with whom we share its land and waters. I'm sure that locals get used to the sea stars and pass over them without giving them a second thought, just as we pass by turkeys or deer simply accepting them as part of our world. But to me, an occasional visitor, it was fascinating to watch the creatures as I floated above them. I spent quite a bit of time trying to get a photograph that would help me report the experience to others.

A week from now I will be back at home and busy with the activities of my normal life. The ocean will be 1200 miles away. The sea stars will go on with their lives without my being there to observe. But the memory will linger and will become a part of a lifetime of

experiencing the beauty and awe of nature. How fortunate we are to have eyes to see and brains to appreciate the beauty of this world. How fortunate I am to be allowed to travel and to see the wideness and variety of life.

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October 10, 2009 – Toolbox



When I was five of six years old, I received a set of tools for Christmas. There was a saw, a hammer, and a pair of pliers, a brace with three bits and a slotted screwdriver. I also received a tool bench that my father had made. It had a vice and a single drawer that was large enough to hold my tools. I also received a supply of scrap lumber and a box of assorted screws and nails. Not long after I received my tools, my grandfather helped me with one of my first building projects. We laid out and measured and then cut three rectangular panels from a piece of 1x6. Then we cut two end pieces that were the shape of a square plus a triangle at the top. At the top of each triangle we drilled a hole. Then we put together a box out of the parts like long house with no roof. Through the holes at the top of the triangles, we threaded a piece of closet rod. It was my first tool box. My grandfather and father told me about the importance of keeping my tools organized and putting them away.

Over the years I have had a variety of tool boxes. When I was in high school, I saved up and bought a two-drawer tool chest to keep my mechanic's tools. It had a drawer for metric wrenches, another for SAE and the top had room for my sockets and ratchets. I still have that tool box and it is used for the same kind of tools. Of course I have collected several other chests and boxes over the years.

One of my prized possessions is a chest that I made a dozen years ago. It has a large top compartment and three drawers, all lined with felt. In it I keep the wood planes, chisels and other cutting tools that I have collected over the years. It contains my grandfather's and my father's wood planes, along with a set of medium-quality chisels and it is also where I keep my sharpening stones.

I am a bit of a gadget collector, so I have various carts and tool stands around my garage that also have drawers and places to keep tools. Most power tools these days come with hard plastic cases and I have several of them holding routers, drills, a hand planer and my skill saw. There is also my job box for Habitat for Humanity and a large steel toolbox that rides in the back of my pickup or on the front of my trailer. Then there are two or three 5 gallon plastic buckets with fabric liners to keep tools organized. One has sheetrock tools, another general carpentry tools. I have a special bag in which I keep my special Japanese saws and a couple more buckets with c-clamps and spring clamps. Certainly no one would need more tool boxes than I have.

Yesterday, when looking for a few home improvement items with our son, we saw the most incredible tool chest in my experience. It was between four and five feet wide and about two feet deep and nearly six feet tall. The large storage area at the very top was just above my eye level and too high for me to reach to the back without a stool. There were sixteen drawers that were all on smooth glides. The exterior finish was stainless steel, so it gleamed in the store lights. The heavy duty casters had spring shock absorbers so it would roll smoothly on any reasonable surface, though I suspect this kind of tool chest never ventures from the smooth concrete of a garage. In fact it can't get too far from a plug in, with its integrated 4-outlet power supply, built in stereo with ipod dock and mini-refrigerator. That's right, it even has a small refrigerator! I suppose some of the lower drawers could be used for silverware and glasses, but suspect that the refrigerator is used mostly for canned beer.

I wasn't tempted to buy the tool chest. At nearly $1,500 it actually isn't as expensive as a top of the line SnapOn chest that is nearly a thousand dollars more. But I suspect that it is more than a thousand dollars more than the combined amount I have spent on tool boxes in my entire life.

The quality of craftsmanship is not determined by the value of the tools or the boxes in which they are stored. One of the finest cabinet builders I ever met was Clarence Erickson. Clarence never had a tool box that came from a store. All of his boxes were hand made and the were works of art. I remember the beautiful box in which he kept his

hand saws. The joints were all dovetailed, cut by hand and there were a series of slots so that the saws all fit in their own places. He also had a felt-lined compartment for his 2' level in that same box. The level was a work of art itself, made of laminations of dark and light hardwoods. He had made all of it except the purchased level glasses, which he had carefully inset so that everything was absolutely square. It was the only level he needed whether framing a house or setting cabinets. I never saw him use anything longer. And his work was absolutely true and level.

Of course the shiny stainless steel cabinet would look out of place in my garage. My mechanic's tools often go in the box with a fair amount of grease on them. I wipe them down after I use them, but they are used hard. And almost everything in my garage is covered with a layer of sawdust most of the time. Furthermore if it doesn't have cat paw prints on it, it probably lives in someone else's house.

I wasn't even interested in owning the cabinet. I have no need for such a thing and no place for it either. And I certainly have other uses for money that are more important. Actually I am amazed that they could find even a single customer for such a tool box.

One thing is for certain. Refrigerators have a limited life span and they don't last as long as quality tools. My grandfather's chisels and planes are perfectly functional for me and will be good for several more generations if they are kept sharp and rust-free. I have a brace and bits that will be good to go long after the motors have burned out of all of the power tools I own. And the hand-made wooden tool boxes that I have will be around long after someone has taken this modern chest to the salvage yard to have the steel recycled.

I used all new brass hardware when I built the box for my grandfather and father's tools. I didn't scrimp on hinges and handles and drawer pulls. And I used new wood. I didn't cut the dovetails in the drawers by hand like my grandfather would have done. They were done with a jig and a router. But they fit well and are carefully glued. I suppose I've got twenty five or thirty dollars invested in that tool box.

I wouldn't trade it for the stainless steel monster that we saw at the hardware store yesterday.

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October 11, 2009 – Home



Our son and daughter-in-law were able to purchase their first house this summer. This trip is our first chance to visit them since they moved. Every family faces the challenge of building a home - not the structure, but the cultural unit. A home is more than a particular set of rooms. We all require shelter. It is one of the basic needs of all humans. But most of us are given the privilege and responsibility of going beyond the basics of shelter. We are able to create home that is a meeting place for other people - a place to gather for conversation and the sharing of ideas. A home can be the center of human culture and the exchange of ideas.

As they near their fifth wedding anniversary, Isaac and Allison are getting established in their careers. They have both completed graduate school and begun jobs in their chosen fields. They have gathered friends from their school and work environments. And now they are setting some of the patterns of their life together. It has been an extraordinary privilege to visit them in their new house as they make it their own.

After they completed the purchase of their home, one of the first things they did was to paint most of the interior of the home. The new colors and fresh paint marked a new phase in the life of the house. Its former owners had moved away and its new owners were making choices about color and furnishings. After they moved in, Isaac and Allison hung some of their favorite pictures on the walls. One of the things we did on this trip was to bring a painting from our home that belongs to Isaac. He has not lived in the same place as his painting for a decade as he attended college and graduate school and lived in a series of different apartments. But now that he has a home, he is able to

have his painting in his own place. Similarly, Allison has a painting that came from her grandparent's home and now is a part of their new home.

Part of building a home is experiencing art together. Ross and Martha Snyder write of "visiting art together until a few great images and a few great words have common meaning for both of you. And both of you know that this is so." The choices we make about what art we bring into our homes reflect some of the basic meanings of our lives.

On this trip we have had the opportunity to experience even more of this home-building process as our children hosted a small gathering of friends yesterday. Their dining table became the center of a gathering where good friends shared good food and the fellowship of conversation in a relaxed atmosphere. It was a privilege to be a part of the preparations and then the gathering - meeting the colleagues and friends of our children and observing as they played host. We were included in conversations that ranged widely from professional topics to events of the day and plans for the future.

One couple is planning a wedding for next summer and are considering a honeymoon in Costa Rica. Because Costa Rica is a place that is dear to our hearts, we were able to speak warmly about our friends there and encourage their adventure. Another friend is writing papers and completing work in his final semester of graduate school and anticipating graduation and the launching of a new career. Other friends spoke of the struggles of raising their grandchildren at a phase of their lives that they had envisioned as being a time of "empty nest."

I was struck by the wide range of ages and interests that our children had gathered together. Each family is a unique culture that involves a wide circle of relationships. Our children's gathering yesterday included colleagues from their two distinct professions and brought together people who would not have otherwise met.

Our visit to our children's home is coming to an end. We will head for home tomorrow morning. A week passes all to quickly and we have our own work and responsibilities waiting for our return. Winter has come to South Dakota during our absence and there is work that needs to be done on our home and gatherings of our friends and colleagues that need to be planned. But we have enjoyed our visit with our children as they enter this new adventure in their lives together - building a home and a culture where people can gather, friendships can form and family grows.

In Habitat for Humanity as a part of each home dedication we speak to the new home owners about the transformation of a house into a home. The generosity and dedication of volunteers can create a structure. Together we can erect a building. But it takes a family's presence to transform a house into a home. Watching our children build their home reminds us of what a treasure we have in our own home. It renews our eagerness to return to that place and invite our friends to gather there. We have our own artwork

and furnishings that have meanings that are unique to our life stories and there are items that hold common meaning for both of us.

One of the joys of our home has been that it has been a place for the meeting of different generations. First our children lived in our home and now my mother lives there. It has been more than just a place for us - it has been the place where people of different ages share life and joy together.

How fortunate we are to have the challenge and opportunity to continue to build home together.

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October 12, 2009 – Winter is Coming



We head for home today. We've got a couple of long days and one short day before we arrive back in Rapid City. That timing should work well with the weather. It is cold and snowy in Rapid City, but the forecast is for things to warm by mid week, so we should have good roads all of the way. We will be stopping at my mother's summer place to drain the water and get it ready for winter. It is the first winter in several years that no one has been living at the place during the cold months. We never spent the winters there when we were children and closing the place was an August ritual, usually the weekend before school started. We'd switch out of our cutoffs and get back into jeans for school. It took a week or so to get used to wearing shoes after a summer spent in the river.

I've always had a kind of nostalgic feeling in the fall. Autumn was the season of moving for us during our academic careers and we got used to saying good bye in the fall.

Out here, you can sense the change in the weather. There has been frost on the ground the past two days and out in the harbor, people are moving their boats. Some of them are coming out of the water for winter repairs, others are being moved to permanent moorage locations.

Back home, winter came suddenly this year. One day the high was 81 degrees, the next it was windy and 40 and the following day there were snowflakes in the air. But we were gone, so we stretched out a few more autumn days and a few more paddles in the

kayak. I know that I will need to be prepared to shift gears and switch seasons as soon as we get home.

So it is good that we have the drive and the time to make the switch in seasons and in pace of life as we prepare to return to the world of work. The mood is one of some sadness because we have enjoyed our vacation and our visit. It will be hard to say good bye and we'll have to do so in a hurry as our kids head off to work. But the mood is also one of anticipation. The church year has an accelerating pace in the fall as we cruise through the end of Pentecost to All Saints, Reformation, Thanksgiving and Reign of Christ. Advent will be here soon and there will be that wonderful rush to Christmas with all of its celebrations and awe and wonder.

But it takes hard work to get there. There are tasks to be done. We need to deliver firewood to our reservation partners so folk can have a warm winter. We need to clean up and till the garden. There are air conditioners to button up and hoses to drain and summer things to be put in storage. There are screens to take down and storm windows to put up. And as we go through the chores, we make our mental preparations for winter as well. Our minds and our bodies need to shift gears and prepare for a new season.

Living with the seasons has always been a delight of my life. I have had the good fortune to live in places where there are distinct seasons and dramatic changes in the weather from summer to winter. I enjoy the variety and changes. And I think that the passing of seasons helps to measure the passing of time. We each have a limited amount of time in this life. We do not go on forever. And the passing seasons help us to mark the time that has passed and anticipate that which is yet to come. The tribes of the plains often counted winters as a way of measuring the span of a person's life rather than keeping track of birth days. A person who has survived many winters is one who has gained wisdom and should be respected as an elder in the community.

There is a host of great art and music that notes the passing of the seasons. From Vivaldi to Frankie Vallie and the Four Seasons, musicians have sought to express the delight and wonder of the passing of seasons. There is a famous Currier and Ives print that is called the four seasons of life that tries to compare the span of a human life to the passing of a year. Van Gogh painted a series of paintings that he called the four seasons. The Autumn painting in that series is a simple depiction of a couple digging potatoes. And that reminds me of another task that remains. We left our potatoes in the ground as we cleared our garden before leaving on this trip.

One of the challenges and joys of life is that we are finite. We do not have unlimited time. We need to develop priorities and make decisions about how to invest the time that we have. Our adults lives have been filled with the challenges of juggling our responsibilities to our work and to our family. Both are important to us. Both are worthy of our time. And sometimes there isn't enough time for all of the things we think are important. We have to make choices. The choice to squeeze a vacation and a visit to

our children into October has consequences, but it has been important to us as well. There is much work that we need to accomplish when we return and less time to do it all. But it has been more than a year since we last visited our son and daughter-in-law and being here reminds us that such distance between visits is too long for our family. It has been so good to spend time with them and share their lives in this place.

So the drive will be therapeutic over the next three days. It will give us time to make a mental journey from autumn to winter, from vacation to work, from the home of our children to our home. And when we arrive we know that the journey will have just begun.

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October 13, 2009 – Deer Eyes



This photo was NOT from yesterday's drive. It is an old photo that I had in my collection. I don't think I took it, and have no record of the source.

We drove over Lolo pass in the dark last evening. It is one of the realities of traveling in the fall, it is hard to get a long day's travel into daylight hours. We got a good start and were on the road before 8 a.m., but we decided to travel on US highway 12 instead of the Interstate, in part just to take a different route than the one we took on our way out to Washington. We had also experienced long construction delays on the Interstate as crews rush to complete their work before winter weather sets in. It was down to 28 degrees and lightly snowing when we went over White Pass and although the temperature was back up to the mid forties in the Yakima valley, many of the fruit vendors were not open. We were trying to make miles anyway and didn't stop much. There was a long stretch of road construction on the Idaho side of Lolo Pass, with about 25 miles or so of 45 mph, but no places where we had to stop and wait for equipment. The crews had things buttoned up for the evening by the time we passed. It was cold at the top of Lolo pass, but there was no snow.

From dusk on we had to keep our deer eyes out looking for animals on the road. In addition to deer, we were in elk, bear and moose territory on part of our drive. The drive was uneventful and we didn't see any animals on the road, but we knew we were driving on a road where we needed to be prepared to stop quickly. We make a pretty good team, both of us looking carefully into the edges of the road as we drive and I'm pretty familiar with the road so know about when to slow for curves when the headlights project off to one side of the road more than the other. There is, however, a certain kind of tension that comes from such a drive and Lolo is remote country with a long stretch of

highway with no towns or services. Drivers have to be prepared to be on their own over the top, especially at night.

But, as I said, our journey was safe and without incident. We didn't even see game as we drove. By the time we had reached the Montana line, I was starting to get tired and so we stopped at the town of Lolo, where highway 12 meets highway 93. Our drive today will be a bit shorter, about 380 miles, and nearly all of it will be at Montana Interstate speeds. I'm sure that we won't be getting the gas mileage that we achieved yesterday, which was pretty good for our pickup - about 3 mpg more than if we had been hauling the camper and pulling the canoe trailer.

The distances we are driving on this trip aren't all that great - about 400 miles per day, but the shorter days mean that we can't get all of our driving into daylight hours and our choice of roads sometimes means lower driving speeds, most notably last evening's drive. I'm sure that there are people who would wonder at the sanity of choosing to drive over a remote mountain pass with construction when an Interstate highways provides a shorter route. But we had changed our plans and driven the Interstate on our way out because we were short of time, having left a day later than planned. And we simply enjoy driving on two lane highways at lower speeds than rushing down the Interstate to make time. It has been our experience that we can still cover a lot of miles in a day and see a lot of beautiful scenery simply by getting off of the Interstate. Over the years we've driven all of the passes between Idaho and Montana, even the ones where the roads aren't paved, and we enjoy seeing the country.

Yesterday's drive was beautiful with fall colors and a definite twinge of winter as we topped the passes, especially White Pass, near Mt. Ranier National Park. We never saw the top of Ranier and barely saw the top of St. Helens as the clouds were wrapped around the peaks, but the leaves have turned colors and there is plenty of red and yellow mixed in with the evergreen and the rivers and creeks are a joy to see.

The steelhead run is on in full swing. It seemed to me to be a bit early for steelhead in the backcountry, but the river was filled with fishermen, mostly in drift boats from Lewiston until we finally ran out of light. The Clearwater and Lochsa are great rivers to fish for steelhead and the experience is not one that is soon forgotten. I haven't fished for steelhead since we moved from Idaho and it was an infrequent experience in those years, but I have landed a couple of very memorable fish. Steelhead are relatives of rainbow trout and have a similar appearance, but are much larger. They are spawned in the late fall in the gravel beds of mountain streams and then are swept on spring waters all the way to the ocean where they spend their lives until returning at the end of their lives to spawn. The hatcheries clip the dorsal fin of their fish so that a fisherman can easily identify native fish. All natives are released as quickly an carefully as possible so that their spawning is not interrupted. After all of the struggles they have endured climbing around dams and journeying hundreds of miles from the ocean, they deserve to be allowed to finish their journey. Hatchery fish can be kept and make excellent

eating. About three quarters of the fish come from the hatchery, but fishermen need to be ready to release a native fish. Because of this, fishermen have gotten good at estimating the weight of released fish. A 36” long fish with a girth of 22 inches will weigh between 22 and 23 pounds. There are fish in the 30 pound range that are over 40 inches long. And they put up a real fight. Fishing with lures from a drift boat, it is common to use line that changes color every 50 feet so that you have a sense of how far the fish is running. After hooking a fish, the fishermen count the colors as the magnificent creature makes its initial run. When it finally begins to tire or makes its turn, one has to be ready to reel in the line as hard as one can. Too much slack and the fish will escape. The fish will reverse direction in the stream and go by the boat in a rush that requires an additional giving of line to keep it from breaking.

One November I landed two steelhead int eh 20# range in one day and went to bed with aching arms as if I had worked all day long. And there are people who fish for steelhead with fly rods. I suspect that landing one fish by that method is a day’s work.

Compared to the epic journey of the steelhead, our drive yesterday was nothing remarkable. We had it easy and did not have any difficult obstacles to overcome. And we probably wouldn’t mark this trip as the journey of a lifetime. But we had a pleasant drive and a good transition from visiting our kids to today’s meetings with family members and tomorrow’s return home.

We went to bed tired, but happy and today is a new day for another adventure.

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October 14, 2009 – Cold



I have been colder in this life than I am at the moment, but things are a bit chilly here at the moment. Winter has come to Montana. Locals don't think that this is too early, in fact the people in Red Lodge remember that they had nearly four feet of snow fall on October 14 last year and they only have about three feet at the moment and the forecast is for temperatures to warm. It will all melt off before winter settles in for good. Still, when they measure the snow in feet instead of inches, you know that you are talking about serious amounts of the stuff. There were at least three days when it snowed significant amounts last week.

Our arrival is significantly behind the storms. We have had no slippery roads and no inconvenience in our travel.

We are spending the night in one of the summer buildings at my mother's place. Years ago, the place was a motor court with six or seven small cabins surrounding a central lodge with a shower house. It was very run down and my parent's acquired it at the tax sale. Over the years, we have made improvements, including a new log home, new showers and improvements to the cabins including shingles and siding. But it has always been a summer place, without heating systems or insulation for year-round use. The new log home has insulation in the roof, electric baseboard heat and a wood stove for extended season use, however, and my brother managed to spend several winters at the place. The log home is where my mother and my sister are staying and have stayed for the last two weeks while we were on vacation. However there isn't room there for more people to sleep.

We're huddled up in one of the cottages with an electric space heater and a lot of blankets. It isn't a bad place to sleep - it's plenty warm in the bed, but it's chilly when one gets out of bed - it brings back memories of camp from my childhood. People used to live like this all winter long, but we have gotten used to a slightly higher level of comfort.

My oldest sister lives like this year round. While her home is very warm and comfortable, they heat with wood and do not have a septic system so use an outhouse. They go outside in the cold weather all the time to get wood and use the facilities. And they are healthy and happy and enjoy their life. d

Still, I am chilly as I write this morning.

It is, like our grandparents taught us, good for us. The effect of a cold blast of wind in the face early in the morning is more stimulating than a cup of coffee. People who learn to live with cold are alert and awake and energized. When your body is cold is starts to protect itself and it starts to use calories to keep warm. By the time one is cold enough to start shivering, the use of calories goes up enough to start to address the extra calories that we carry around as fat. I'm carry enough extra fat that spending more time in cold places would be good for my overall health. It was discovered that some of the people who died in failed polar expeditions actually starved to death. Their body's need for calories in the cold environment went up so much that they did not have enough provisions and could not take in enough calories to sustain themselves over the long wait for rescue. Parties that had sufficient supplies or who were able to gain additional food through hunting and fishing had a higher survival rate.

It is, as my father used to say, all in your mind. Well, technically, cold isn't all in one's mind - it is a whole body sensation and the entire body makes physical reactions to the cold, but the ability to endure colder temperatures has a lot to do with mindset. A person's mind will tell that person to get out of the cold long before there is any threat to well-being. We can tolerate much colder temperatures than we think. Our bodies will adjust to temperatures that are much cooler than we might find comfortable without any distress. When we decide that we enjoy cold, we can be more productive and enjoy temperatures that are much cooler. There is a fifteen to twenty degree difference in the range of temperatures in heated homes in cold country. Some people are comfortable with their home at sixty to sixty five degrees and others like their homes to be near eighty, with the low seventies being the norm. Those of us who have some responsibility for heating in institutional buildings know that we will occasionally get the complaint that it is too cold and that it is too warm at the same event. Different people have different senses of what is comfortable. Cold is, in part, a mental attitude.

I'm quite sure that we keep our house warmer than we used to. We try to keep my mother comfortable and her life is less active than it once was. We have adjusted to the

higher room temperatures because we made the change gradually and because they are only a few degrees warmer than the way we once kept our home.

So, I won't say I'm cold this morning. I'm a bit chilly. And even if I feel a bit of discomfort, I know it is temporary. Tonight I will be sleeping in my own bed in my own home. This place will be buttoned up for the winter and will not be a place where people sleep until summer's heat returns next year.

More importantly, it is good for me to feel this sensation. The temperature in this cabin is similar to that of many homes in rural and isolated locations on the Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge reservations. People there are in need of firewood to make their lives bearable and we have a lot of wood to deliver. And winter has come - the time to be on the road with the wood has arrived. There is much work to be done before those people have the fuel they need to sustain life this winter. They are in chilly places with the quilts piled on tonight and my one night in a chilly cabin is a good way for me to be reminded of why we work so hard on the Woodchuck Society projects.

So stay warm out there, but don't be afraid of a little cold. It is good for all of us.

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October 15, 2009 – Maybe I Just Don't Get It



We had a neighbor when I was a kid whose name was Mr. Haggar. I don't really know much about him, but I know that there were rumors among the kids about him. There was a hedge around part of his yard and we believed that he certainly didn't want kids playing there. He had yelled at us a couple of times and kind of chased us back home from his place. On Halloween night his home was dark and I never stopped at his house for "Trick or Treat." I suspect that my impressions of him were inaccurate. He probably was a good person with a kind heart and it is possible that he liked children. Sometimes we draw conclusions that are not accurate. But in my memory he was a bit of a curmudgeon who didn't want to encourage children to hang around his place.

I was thinking about him because I'm felling a bit grumpy about Halloween this year. And I wonder if the neighbor kids think that I'm a bit like we thought of Mr. Haggar. Of course there are some obvious differences. Except for that awkward stage when their parents let them drive 4-wheelers and they are too young to have driver's licenses, we encourage the neighbor kids to play in our yard and since our neighborhood doesn't have fences between yards, the yards all kind of run together anyway. And we turn on the lights and have treats available to hand out on Halloween evening.

But we don't make a big deal out of Halloween. It is one evening and then it is over.

We came home from our trip to see that neighbors across the street had added to the decorations that they put up before the end of September. In addition to the large

inflatable pumpkin, the gallows with a mannequin hanging, the hanging ghosts and skull lights, they have a dozen or more fake headstones in the yard. And they have rigged a fog machine to spray fog at their front door every few minutes. And it is only the middle of the month. Clearly for that family Halloween is a major holiday that deserves the time and expense of a month's worth of yard and house decorations.

Now to set the record straight, we don't go into yard decorations for any holiday. Our house doesn't sport a lot of lights and decorations at Christmas, either. We prefer to celebrate with our family and have never gotten into hanging a lot of lights on our house or entering the neighborhood's lighting competition. We enjoy the pretty decorations that others put up and have nothing against them, but we prefer to center our celebrations around the church and our family. We like to go to the hills and cut a fresh tree and decorate it with decorations that we have treasured for years. We invite in a few friends and keep our celebrations low key.

But even if we were into decorating the outside of our home for Christmas, we certainly don't see Halloween as one of the major holidays of the year. It is fun when it is a celebration of children and we enjoy sharing treats with neighbor children, but there is something kind of creepy about adults who get carried away with their celebrations.

For some reason, one of the clergy groups to which we belong has decided to have a halloween party and has invited participants to come in costume. That is just not my kind of party and I was surprised that a group of clergy wanted to invest their time and energy in that particular type of event. I'm thinking of attending dressed as a clergy person. Or perhaps I'll attend as a goofy guy in a bow tie.

I believe in resurrection. But I don't believe in ghosts and goblins and haunted places. I believe that cemeteries are sacred places for the honoring of those who have died and the grief of those who are living. I don't think that they exist for entertainment or a brief adrenalin rush that comes from being scared. In fact, I don't think cemeteries are scary places. They are peaceful and meditative places for me.

I wonder how it feels to the families who have buried loved ones in the last year to see a pretend cemetery in our neighborhood and have a neighbor who believes that grave markers are a decoration. Maybe there is no real connection in the mind of the decorators between death and grief and the holiday. Maybe they don't see their decorations as anything but a fun way to celebrate. I don't know. I haven't pursued a conversation with them.

I know that there are cultural differences in the celebration of All Saint's day on November 1 and All Hallow's Eve or All Soul's Day on October 31. In Mexico and other Central American countries, All Soul's day is also known as El Dia de los Muertos, or the day of the dead. The center of the celebrations are gatherings of family and friends to pray for those who have died. It is part of cultural expressions of grief and loss. In the

time before Spain conquered Central America, indigenous people of Olmec, Aztec, Mayan and other tribes had rituals celebrating the deaths of ancestors. There is evidence that some of these traditions go back thousands of years. I that time it was common to keep skulls as trophies and display them during rituals as symbols of death and rebirth. After the coming of the Spanish and the introduction of Christianity, All Soul's Day included some of the traditional elements and El Dia de los Muertos is a bigger celebration, covering three days with November 1 celebrated as a day of the innocents in memory of children who have died and on November 2 the Dia de los Muertos focuses on adults.

But there is a big difference between three days of prayer and a month of decorations and the incessant generation of artificial fog.

Maybe I'm becoming a grump. But the truth is that I just don't understand it. I don't find a fake hanging or a fake cemetery as improvements to the neighborhood. At any rate, our neighbor has every right to put up the decorations and enjoy the celebration.

I just don't get it.

(NOTE: For readers who follow our family's travels - we returned home safely from our vacation last evening - all are well and except for a slightly grumpy old guy we are back into the swing of life at home.)

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October 16, 2009 – Quince



This past summer our son and daughter-in-law bought their first house. It was a big event for them and for us. We are proud of their completion of graduate school, their success in their careers and pleased that the current incentives for first time home owners worked in their favor. But I noticed one thing right away when they sent us the pictures of the house. There is a palm tree in the front yard. And when we went to visit, we found out that they have not one, but two palm trees. Apparently the climate in Olympia, Washington, though temperate, doesn't get too cold for palm trees to survive. These are large, well-established trees.

No one to my knowledge in my family has ever before owned a palm tree. Now they also have a cedar tree, to which I am partial and a huge hundred-foot-tall Douglas fir tree behind their home. It rains more in their climate than ours and they have some really impressive trees.

But a palm tree! Seriously, I believe that my grandfather and great grandfather, struggling to eek out a living from a dry land farm near Minnewauken, North Dakota, could never have imagined any of their offspring ever owning a palm tree. Heck, there weren't all that many trees altogether on that place.

When we went to visit the new house on our recent vacation, we discovered that there is a lot of landscaping and several trees on their property. They have an apple pear tree in the back yard. An apple pear is an exotic fruit that is really a variety of pear, but looks like an apple. The origins of this variety of pear is in Asia, specifically in China,

Japan and Korea. However, they adapt well to other locations where pears are grown. I suspect that our kids will have a similar problem to ours when we lived in Idaho. We had a pear tree in the yard, but there was a constant contest between us and the squirrels over the pears. The squirrels would begin to nibble on the fruit before it was ripe and we seldom got a nice pear from our tree. It would have been one thing if they actually ate the pears, but they didn't, they would take a few bites and often knock them out of the tree and we would find the damaged fruit in the yard.

The other fascinating tree in their yard was producing a lot of fruit when we arrived. It is a quince tree. The fruit look similar to a pear, but are firmer in texture, closer to that of an apple. The tree is a quince. The quince is in its own genius, so is not the same as any other fruit. It is native to Asia and has been cultivated for centuries. It appears that cultivation of quinces pre-dates the cultivation of apples. There are several places in ancient literature where a fruit is translated into modern English as "apple," that the fruit may have in fact been a quince. The fruit in the Song of Solomon may have been a quince. Plutarch reports that a Greek bride would nibble a quince to sweeten her breath before entering the bridal chamber. It is likely that references to "golden apples" in Roman and Greek mythology are in fact references to quinces. There are recipes for cooking quince in the Roman cookbook Apicius. They are stewed with honey and even combined with leeks in one recipe.

The fruit in our kids yard are quite bitter. Local recipes call for using a lot of sugar in cooking quinces. One recipe we obtained specifies that the weight of the sugar be equal to the weight of fruit to make a sauce.

Because of the bitter flavor and easily available varieties of apples and pears that grow well in many parts of Washington, quinces are relatively rare. One fruit vendor at the Farmer's Market in Olympia told us that quinces were in danger of extinction. There are fewer and fewer orchardists who cultivate the plant in the contemporary world.

Quinces are used to make jam, jelly and quince pudding. It is interesting to note that the term "marmalade" comes from the Portuguese word for quince: marmelo. In some areas of the middle east the cores of the fruit along with the seeds are dried and then later soaked in water to produce a type of cough medicine. And, like many other fruit, quinces have been used to produce wine.

The plants are relatively common throughout Europe, although they do not mature in more northern climates and the short growing season in England is not very successful due to a lack of summer heat. It appears that the abundant fruit on the quince tree in our kids' yard is due to an unusually hot summer in Western Washington this year.

One of the reasons that the plant is relatively rare in the United States is that it is very susceptible to fireblight disease. The quinces that are sold in specialty stores in the

United States almost all come from Argentina. In Latin America the gel-like substance surrounding the seeds is used to shape and style hair.

So the yard of our children is filled with exotic plants, many of which have names that I do not know. It is part of the flow of life that our children go places and live lives that we ourselves do not experience. In the span of a few generations a family can move from dry land wheat farming in the Dakotas to a home in Washington where the yard is filled with plants that the great grandparents never saw or tasted. The quince tree is just a symbol for me of the changes that are a part of life. Each generation has experiences and adventures that are different from the preceding one. And sometimes, when we are lucky, we get to witness the new lives that our children are forging. They are not us. They will not live our lives - they are finding their own way in the world.

And just as the quince is an ancient fruit, sometimes our children re-discover ancient truths that we ourselves had forgotten. Faith, wisdom and the pursuit of truth are multi-generational activities. We do not accomplish them in the span of a single lifetime. Our children remind us that we are not alone and that ours is not the last generation of humans to experience this life. Unlike the quince, which is bitter, the activities of our children sweeten our lives.

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October 17, 2009 – Fearing the Flu



Photo by Ernest Coleman, Cincinnati Enquirer taken at Cincinnati Children's Hospital.

The latest reports indicate that the distribution of flu vaccine will continue to experience delays this year as officials scramble to provide adequate supplies of the vaccine. There is a good possibility that we will continue to see high rates of infection throughout this year's flu season. Health officials estimate that 95% of flu cases are of the H1N1 or "swine flu" variety. H1N1 is a form of Influenza A that has reached pandemic proportions worldwide.

There have been plenty of cases in our city. Rapid City School officials say that absenteeism is down to about 10 percent this past week, compared to nearly 20% the previous week. They cite the 4-day weekend as helping students to recover their health and return to school. There are no statistics available about how much of the absenteeism is due to the H1N1 virus, but officials suspect that it is the leading cause. Area hospitals and clinics are providing flu tests for patients, but many are recovering without medical care through self-treatment or family administered care.

I don't in any way mean to downplay the seriousness of the flu, but I remain concerned that the fear of the flu is leading some in our community to panic and make irrational decisions.

The fear is real in area nursing homes and retirement communities. Some area nursing homes banned visits from persons under the age of 18 in September and at least two have instituted a ban on all visitors except immediate family. Worship services and other activities are being cancelled. At Westhills Village, where the annual Halloween celebration has provided a safe celebration for children and much-needed interaction

between residents and neighborhood children for 20 years, there will be no children allowed in the buildings this Halloween.

While there is no doubt that illness rates are up in area nursing homes and retirement communities, there is little evidence that visitors and intergenerational activities are the cause. Conversely, there is little evidence that banning visits will have any effect on the rates of illness.

Here are the facts:

Seniors aren't having the serious complications seen in younger adults and teens. Researchers believe that similar viruses circulated in the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's. As recently as 1969 the annual flu has contained strains similar to the current H1N1 outbreak.

The vulnerable populations for this particular epidemic are pregnant women; children, teens and young adults ages 6 months to 24 years; and adults 25 - 64 with chronic health conditions such as heart disease, asthma and diabetes.

The gastroenteritis that is circulating in nursing homes is probably viral in origin, but it is not H1N1 and it is far more likely that nursing home residents are contracting the illness from each other or facility staff than visitors.

One more fact is critical:

Depression is the most common chronic disease in nursing homes. It affects more nursing home residents than heart disease or diabetes.

No one wants the residents of nursing homes to be exposed to unnecessary illness. It is well understood that this is a particularly vulnerable population. But there is substantial evidence that the most common illnesses that are found in nursing homes have to do with the isolation of residents, not contact with others.

It certainly appears that the fear of the flu has become a more important factor in the decision to ban visitors than actual scientific evidence. Fear can make people act in irrational ways.

There are a lot of sick people in nursing homes and the fear that it will get worse is real. H1N1 infection rates among school children is high. While it makes good sense for all ages to refrain from visiting nursing homes when they are ill, banning healthy persons from visiting out of the fear of a flu epidemic in nursing homes seems to be an unnecessary over reaction.

The simple truth is that too many visitors is not a problem from the perspective of most of the residents in area nursing homes.

Medical directors at nursing homes are not selected for their knowledge of mental illness and its effects. The shortage of psychiatrists in our community means that most mental illnesses in nursing homes either go untreated or are treated by family practice or internal medicine physicians. While doctors and nursing home administrators fear an epidemic of flu, I am deeply concerned about a possible outbreak of depression.

I am well aware that mental illnesses do not spread from one individual to another in the ways that bacterial or viral infections spread. But isolating persons suffering from depression is the opposite of the treatment that is needed. The presence of untreated depression is more likely to create vulnerability to viral and bacterial infections than exposure to visitors. The bacteria and viruses are already present in the facilities. And a ban on visitors will not stop new infections from entering the facilities. There are plenty of vendors, care-givers, housekeepers and others who provide a regular interchange of pathogens from the wider community.

Telling seniors that children are dangerous only heightens the prejudices that are already present in our community. Telling children and teens that it is dangerous for them to visit elders sends exactly the wrong message in a community that is already too quick to separate people based on their age. Infection rates are high in our community because we put all the people of a single age together institutions, not because of activities that mix age groups.

I doubt if I will be getting a flu shot this year. At least I will not be getting one early. My age and general medical condition do not place me among those who are most at risk. There are simply others who are more in need of the vaccine until production and distribution are ramped up to make sufficient supplies available. By then I suspect that the flu season will have passed. There have been other years when I have not gotten a flu shot. And I have gotten the flu before. If I become ill, I will stay at home and follow medical advice until I recover. And, because of the nature of this strain of flu, I will stay at home at the earliest onset of symptoms rather than risk infecting others.

But I am not going to stop shaking hands with people in the church. And I am not going to intentionally stay away from people who are in need of contact with others. I have no choice about visiting or leading worship in the nursing homes that have banned such activity, but I want to be first in line to visit as soon as the ban is lifted.

Stay healthy. If you become ill be aggressive in the treatment of your illness. Do not be afraid to seek medical treatment. But don't allow the fear of illness to separate you from your family, your community or your life.

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October 18, 2009 – The Woodchuck Style



I am feeling a little overwhelmed these days. Just back from a vacation, I am trying to get my household organized after the disruption of the vacation, catch up with work at the church in the season of the annual stewardship drive and lots of other activities, and prepare for a meeting of the Board of Directors of Local Church Ministries in Cleveland, where I will be serving as chaplain.

In the midst of all of this activity, life goes on as normal at the church. There are many activities and functions at the church that do not require my direct action - they go on with leadership and involvement of volunteers.

Today I am thinking of the contrast between the way our congregation's Woodchuck Society works and the working of the LCM Board. It is an unfair comparison. They have vastly different jobs and compositions. Yet some comparisons are inevitable simply because I participate in both organizations.

The Woodchuck Society is all about good people doing good. We have neighbors in our state who are in need of firewood to heat their homes and churches. We live in an area where there are extra trees that need to be cut to thin the forest for fire safety and broken and naturally fallen trees need to be removed from people's yards. So we cut and split the firewood and deliver it to those who need it. The operation started at the home of one of our members and then began to involve others who had trees that needed to be cut. Various pieces of equipment were donated along the way, most notably a heavy-duty trailer and a log splitter. We also borrow an additional log splitter

and the pickups and trailers we use to deliver the wood belong to church members. The whole operation is conducted without an organizational structure, without meetings and without a budget. We use what has been donated and we have no need of additional equipment or finances. The principle is simple: encourage generosity of spirit and of time, make connections with the people whose needs we serve, and keep it all simple.

The Board of Directors of Local Church Ministries is the inheritor of the work of centuries of multiple ministries organized to serve the church from a national setting. A huge part of the work of the board is providing resources to Conferences, Associations and local congregations. Educational and stewardship resources, a system of connecting pastors seeking new calls and congregations seeking pastors, resources for new and renewing congregations, financial support for church buildings, resources and support for colleges, universities and seminaries, the running of a national headquarters building and a hotel to provide hospitality for church meetings - the work of the Board requires a lot of meetings, numerous sub-committees and task forces, a sizable budget and dedicated staff persons who make the work of the Board their full-time occupation.

We have been planning worship for the Board's meeting for a couple of weeks now with a lot of e-mail messages going back and forth. The collaboration has been good. The input from several different persons with different perspectives has resulted in worship plans that are meaningful and will serve the board well. We know how important it is for such an organization to focus its work with worship and prayer. But the truth is that the planning takes a lot more time than the actual worship. The task is complex. People are coming from all across the nation with different experiences, needs, personalities, gifts and talents.

It is not that the Woodchuck Society doesn't need planning. There are significant logistics involved in delivering 36 cords of firewood with caravans of pickup trucks. Meals need to be served, prayers need to be offered, local partners need to be contacted to assure delivery to homes, drivers need to be given instructions and trucks and trailers need to be loaded. But most of the planning and logistics are handled in informal conversation during the fellowship hour following worship and through phone calls between friends. Roles can be flexible with individuals assuming different responsibilities depending on who is available at any particular time.

I think that many Christians find themselves more at home in the Woodchuck style than in the setting of a board meeting in Cleveland. There are dedicated church people who thrive on meetings and who have great skills to keep boards functioning and operating smoothly. But there are also a lot of people who simply want to get work done and who like their volunteer time to be dedicated to hands-on work. Most of our people are not interested in recognition or position. They prefer to serve in meaningful ways and to have the attention focused on the needs of others rather than their own.

The church, of course, needs both styles of leadership and service. A gang of volunteers with pickup trucks won't ever produce lessons for Christian education classes. On the other hand a conference of writers gathered on the 9th floor of 700 Prospect Street in Cleveland will never deliver the firewood to keep people from freezing during a harsh Dakota winter. Boards of Directors are needed to set policies, develop and oversee budgets and provide planning. Hard working volunteers are needed to build homes, deliver firewood and organize rummage sales.

There is room in this wonderful church for all kinds of leadership. And some of us need to be prepared to switch roles and do different tasks at different times. I'll be boarding a plane for Cleveland on Thursday and playing the role of chaplain to the Board for a few days. But I will also be thinking of the Woodchuck Society and how much I enjoy splitting and stacking firewood. Of course my life is not all splitting and stacking firewood. I might have a different opinion of the project if it were the thing I did 40 or 50 hours per week.

I am grateful that my life has room for many different kinds of ministry and service. And I pray that my enthusiasm will attract others to choose paths of service. I'd be glad to feed your name to a nominating committee. If you'd prefer, the Woodchuck Society has a splitting party set for Tuesday morning.

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October 19, 2009 – What is Real?



Sometimes I enjoy being the center of attention. I stand at the back of our church each Sunday and greet worshipers as they exit the sanctuary. Sometimes people just shake my hand, but most of the time they have a few words to say. Other times I may have a question to ask or a comment to make to an individual. But most of the folk shake my hand and say something positive about their experience in worship. Yesterday was a fairly typical Sunday. I had a reasonable sermon, not too complex and not too long, yet with sufficient preparation and a reasonable idea to share. I heard typical comments, like “well done,” and “thank you for the sermon.” One church member who had been sitting with his wife and his adult daughter said, “My daughter really loves your sermons!”

I enjoy visiting with the people and I don’t mind that for a little while I am the center of attention and that there is a line of people waiting to shake my hand. But there is another part of me that feels just a little bit phony when people give me words of praise. It is true that I work hard at my job and I put a lot into worship preparation. But there are a lot of people involved in producing a meaningful worship service and it is not just what I do. Even the preaching task involves leaning on the shoulders of others. I read commentaries and study the scriptures - the preaching task is not about coming up with new ideas, but rather accurately presenting timeless ideas and concepts in ways that connect with the present situation. It isn’t me that people should be praising at the door - it is God. It isn’t the sermon that people should be remembering - it is the scripture.

I always feel strange about public recognition. While I enjoy receiving awards and honors, there is always a part of me that knows that there are others who work harder, contribute more and are more deserving of the award than I. It is nice to receive an award, but it is important to remember that I am not somehow better than others.

Because there is always an internal dialogue and a bit of self-questioning that goes with public recognition, I find it difficult to understand those who seek the spotlight. And it is even more difficult to understand those who perpetrate a hoax in order to gain recognition. Last week the world watched as a large mylar balloon made its way across Colorado at a speed of about 25 miles per hour and at heights where no one would survive a fall, believing that the balloon contained a six-year old boy. When it was determined that there was no one aboard the balloon, some worried that the boy had fallen from the balloon. Before long the story was that the boy had hidden in the garage and fallen asleep while adults searched for him. The family held press conferences and appeared before cameras. Then, in an interview on Larry King Live, the six-year-old, when asked about why he hid, turned to his father and said, “You guys said we did this for the show.” Authorities now believe that the entire stunt was an elaborate hoax in which the boy’s parents, Richard and Mayumi Heene conspired to bring attention to themselves and to their family.

They’ve been promoting themselves and their family for years, trying to get in the spotlight.

There is a picture of the family, taken when now six-year-old Falcon was just a baby, in our daughter-in-law’s photo album. After graduating from college, Isaac and Allison moved to Los Angeles seeking jobs in the entertainment industry. One of Allison’s jobs was work on a TV pilot that later failed called “Box Time Playhouse,” written by Richard Heene. After that she worked for a short time for Richard Heene’s production company. She only worked there for two weeks. Bugs, screaming baby, zero cleaning and other dynamics made the position untenable and she left knowing that there had to be some other way to make a living.

Richard and Mayumi Heene met in a Hollywood acting school and they have been trying to get in the spotlight ever since. The family participated in a reality show, “Wife Swap,” whose premise is that families swap mothers for a time as a way to learn how to be a better family. In the show Richard is a science obsessed dad who takes the whole family storm chasing - a role not based on a long-term love of science, but created for the purpose of attracting the show’s producers and securing a place in front of the cameras.

It appears that the ballon stunt was another piece of fiction created to draw attention to themselves. People will pay a lot for a story and they don’t always care whether or not the story is true.

So I don't understand what would make someone want to create an elaborate hoax just to draw attention to themselves. If I feel a bit phony when someone pays me a compliment, imagine how it must feel to know you had made up an untrue story to draw attention to yourself. But I really don't understand how someone can place their six-year-old child in front of the cameras, equipped with a lie and expect that child to participate in your phony story. Talk about the sins of the father being born by the son! How will this child ever learn what is real?

The problem is not one of telling a story. Fiction can carry great meaning. In fact some novels tell the truth better than non-fiction. Well-written stories can carry deep truth. But when the fiction is created for the purpose of leading people away from the truth it can be destructive to all involved.

Margery Williams wrote a children's story called The Velveteen Rabbit. I wish that Richard Heene had decided to read that story to his children rather than involve them in his own fiction.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"I suppose *you* are real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

"The Boy's Uncle made me Real," he said. "That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always." From The Velveteen Rabbit or How Toys Become Real by Margery Williams. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc.

I don’t care whether or not my children are ever in the spotlight or are made famous by the presence of television cameras. But I do hope that we have somehow taught them what it means to be real.

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October 20, 2009 – Living Longer



I recently read a prediction that approximately half of the babies born in the United States today will live to the age of 100 years. Longer life spans are a product of advances in nutrition and knowledge about prevention of certain chronic illnesses such as heart disease. But longer lives also are the product of advances in medical technologies. Artificial joints offer patients decades of relief from chronic joint pain. Replacement valves for human hearts are available and the surgery is becoming more common.

But the truth is that human bodies still wear out. We have a member of our congregation who is 108 years old and approaching her 109th birthday. She is blind, nearly deaf and would be totally bedridden except for the ability of caregivers to use a special lift to transfer her from her bed to a wheelchair and back from her wheelchair to her bed. She is still capable of some communication with her caregivers and a few friends and family, but her daughters are themselves growing quite old and are less able to travel than was once the case.

A person receiving a hip transplant today, say at age 65, can expect about 20 years from the artificial joint before it will need to be replaced. That means facing major surgery at age 85, an entirely different thing than the procedure at age 65. There have been some remarkable advances in materials in hip replacements and a new hip made of a cobalt-chrome metal socket and a ceramic ball will soon be available. This new joint promises a life cycle of 50 years - sufficient for most recipients of artificial joints. Similarly long-lasting knees should also be available in a few years.

Heart valves come in both mechanical and from donors such as humans or pigs. A new technology involves using enzymes and detergents to strip away the cells from the donor valve. After the remaining scaffold has been transplanted, the body takes over and repopulates it with new cells, eliminating the danger of rejection. Human trials are underway in Brazil and about 40 patients have received valves and the results are promising.

A related technology may provide ways to help the bodies of burn victims replace skin by using a similar scaffold to support new cells. It is possible that regenerative technologies can reduce the dependence on donor organs and provide the means for renewal of human organs using cells produced by the individual's own body.

Of course such technologies are a long way off, but for those babies born today - there is a century ahead for medical advances. When one looks at the medical advances in the past century and considers the increasing pace of new developments, it seems that almost anything might be possible to extend life a century from now. And some people who are alive today may live well beyond current limits.

Most frightening when considering such a future is the simple fact that to date, knowledge and understanding of brain functions has lagged behind the understanding of other parts of our bodies. What happens if we learn to preserve the physical body while the brain continues to deteriorate? Does the future hold an increase of elders living with chronic brain diseases, some of whom lose contact with memories or awareness of their situation?

There are costs to living longer. The most obvious one is simple financial cost. Artificial joints and regenerative technologies are expensive. On a pure cost/benefit analysis the number of vaccinations and other modest technologies that might extend life for many might seem to be a better buy than a single high-tech hip procedure. But cost is only one of the factors that we consider in health care decisions. In our country we have, for the most part, been willing to support extravagant costs for dramatic therapies even when private insurance and public funds mean that the costs are shared by people who are not recipients of the procedure. When a family is making care decisions for a loved one, cost rarely enters into the discussion. There is virtually no expense that we would spare if we could extend the life of someone we love.

But there are other costs.

The death of a loved one to sudden and traumatic illness such as a heart attack, aneurism or massive stroke may be decreased through advances in medical treatment and technologies. But the loss will still occur and in some cases the sudden loss will be replaced by a long, indefinite process of deterioration with small losses that are spread out over a long span of time.

A friend recently said, “A heart attack used to be a way to end one’s life with dignity intact. Now there is little chance of dying suddenly at the peak of productivity and dignity - almost everyone has to become totally dependent and fade for years and years.” I’m not sure that a heart attack victim is allowed any more dignity, but at least the final moments are compressed and not spread out over many years. And I have seen people who have suffered a heart attack, received medical care and lived decades of productive and meaningful lives.

In a way, I am as interested in the treatment of chronic illnesses as I am in technological fixes to acute problems. There are certain diseases that one has to learn to live with. A cure is not currently possible, but with effective treatment the disease can be kept from totally disrupting life. Diabetes, some gastrointestinal diseases and brain diseases are all conditions that a patient might endure with the support of medical treatment without finding a cure. Perhaps it is an even greater test of human dignity to face living with a disease than dying of one. I have known and witnessed great displays of the power of the human spirit from people living with chronic conditions.

Most people in my parents’ generation are living longer than their parents and the actuarial tables predict that we will have a longer life span than our parents. It is likely that our children will live longer than we.

But I hope that we don’t get so distracted by the length of life that we forget to invest our energies in the quality of life. Even if technology permits life spans that are measured in centuries rather than decades, the value of each human will be measured in the quality of love that is shared rather than the quantity of years that are endured.

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October 21, 2009 – So Much Based on Imagination



Photo courtesy of the British National Maritime Museum.

Every once in a while a proponent of atheism will offer a criticism of religion that dismisses theology for a lack of empirical evidence. The argument goes that since the existence of God cannot be proven by scientific method, one must assume that God does not exist. The argument, in various forms, has been presented in recent years by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Paul Kurtz and others. It is an old argument - probably even older than modern scientific method. The argument has not proven to be persuasive among religious people, and does not result in much conversion away from religion. Faith is not evidence-based and while many faithful people are as serious students of evolutionary biology and cognitive science as are these critics of religion, they do not find faith to be incompatible with modern scientific thought and philosophy.

I do not deny that imagination is a critical component in religious thought. To put it simply, God is beyond the ability of the human mind to be fully comprehended. If we stretch our imaginations as far as possible, we fall short of the total concept of God. Even after hundreds of generations of development of the concept of God, the idea of God is incomplete and imperfect. It is a way of talking about something that lies beyond our ability to perceive and comprehend.

What makes the arguments a bit silly, in my opinion, is that all human thought is based on imagination and assumptions that cannot be proven by scientific method. These scientists in their criticism of religion fail to note that contemporary science is also based in a set of assumptions that cannot be proven. A simple example is that evolutionary

biology is based on measurements of time that are arbitrary. While the concept of time comes from the observation of the movement of planets, the divisions of time are purely arbitrary. Yes, it takes approximately 24 hours for the earth to rotate. But why is that amount of time divided into 24 equal parts and each of those hours divided into sixty minutes, which in turn are divided into 60 seconds? A decimal system for measuring time would be as accurate but the numbers would be very different.

Space is measured in equally arbitrary scales. Is the metric system preferable to the system of inches, feet and miles? The mathematics of the metric system are a bit simpler, but both systems of measurement are based on arbitrary assumptions. Inuit kayak builders based all of their measurements on body size. The kayak of a larger person was larger than that of a smaller one. Yet their designs have proven to be sea worthy and as capable as contemporary craft produced with computer guided precision.

Temperature, a measurement that is critical to our understanding of science is also based on arbitrary assumptions. The use of the Fahrenheit, Celsius or Kelvin scales depends on the particular set of assumptions that are made. There are literally hundreds of other temperature scales including the Newton, Romer, Delisle, Leyden and Dalton scales. To state a particular temperature as an absolute truth ignores the vast amount of interpretation and numerous assumptions that are involved in assigning any number to a measurement of temperature.

125 years ago this week, 41 delegates from 25 nations gathered in Washington, DC for the 1884 International Meridian Conference. The purpose of the meeting was to decide from which place time and space should be measured. At the end of the conference, the decision was made by a vote. 22 countries voted for Greenwich, England as the location of the prime meridian. One country voted against. Two countries, France and Brazil, abstained from the voting.

Ever since that conference the majority of the world and most of its scientists have used an imaginary line that stretches from pole to pole and passes through England, France, Spain, Algeria, Mali, Burkina Faso and Ghana as the zero point from which the Earth is divided east from west. This imaginary line, now known as the Greenwich Prime Meridian, is the basis for the commonly accepted 24-hour clock. The common agreement on the placement of the imaginary line allows for consistency in the measurement of time across the globe. Prior to the establishment of the prime meridian, many countries and even individual towns kept their own local time based on the sun's passage across the sky. At that time there were no international rules governing when the day would start or finish. The contemporary system, which allows transportation schedules and international communication to occur in a timely fashion, is all based on imagination.

The line could have been drawn anywhere on the surface of the planet and the system would work as well as long as there was common acceptance of the same zero point.

Our measurement of time and space on this planet is based on common agreement about the location of the prime meridian.

The decision about the location of the meridian was not based on scientific evidence. It was a political decision. The British proposal won out over proposals for Washington DC, Berlin and Paris because the British delegates were able to gain the majority of the votes at the conference. Their argument was based on the fact that Britain was the leading publisher of navigational charts and therefore there were more maps based on the British prime meridian than those based on other meridians as the zero line.

Scientists who are quick to point out the political elements of critical religious conferences such as Nicea, often are less eager to point out the political elements of key scientific conferences.

Almost every human endeavor is based on the use of the human imagination to interpret experience. Contemporary mathematics is at least honest in naming imaginary numbers, but similar concepts exist in contemporary physics. Even historical studies such as geology and biology are based on assumptions that come from the human imagination.

This is not to say that there is anything wrong with using scientific method. It has produced a lot of good and helped to alleviate much human suffering. Of course human imaginations have used scientific method to produce weapons of mass destruction as well as advances in medical treatment. We are flawed creatures. No human endeavor is inherently pure and good without the potential for evil consequences. The criticism of religion because of the evil that has been perpetrated in the name of religion is as silly as the criticism that it is based in human imagination - as if science had not been used for evil and suffering.

The truth is that science and religion are not diametrically opposed. Even religion's harshest critics are making religious assumptions and expressing faith that is based in human imagination. And there are plenty of people of faith who are fully engaged in scientific research and teaching.

So as people around the world celebrated the 125th anniversary of the Prime Meridian yesterday, we acknowledge that our way of measuring time and space are based on human imagination. Furthermore, human imagination is one of our best qualities. May we continue to use our imaginations to better understand this vast and complex universe. It is my conviction that such study will lead us to a better understanding and a closer relationship with God.

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October 22, 2009 – Cleveland



Cleveland is the home of the famous Cleveland Clinic, the Plain Dealer newspaper, the Cleveland zoo and Cleveland State University. Cleveland hosts the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. And Cleveland has sports teams including the Indians, Cavaliers and Browns. Cleveland is the home of the United Church of Christ's national offices. Cleveland is my destination today. Sometimes I have trouble wrapping my head around the amount of travel that I do. In my first decade of serving as a pastor of the United Church of Christ, I visited the national headquarters of our denomination once. Now I travel to 700 Prospect Avenue in Cleveland Ohio two or three times a year. In Cleveland, I usually stay at the Radisson Gateway Hotel, right across the street from the Cleveland Browns stadium. The stadium holds 73,200 people. The hotel is much smaller. The hotel belongs to the United Church of Christ and enables us to offer hospitality to visitors to our church's national setting. Sports teams and fans also stay at the hotel from time to time. There won't be a home game during my visit this week. And the baseball season has ended for fans of the Indians.

I don't go to Cleveland to attend sports games. And I have never visited the Cleveland zoo or the Rock and Roll hall of fame. Sometimes the only time I get outside is when I rush outside during a break to get a bit of fresh air. With the hotel connected to the office building, there is a temptation to just keep meeting around the clock. The church invests a lot in each of my visits and I feel obligated to work hard to make that investment worthwhile.

Today I am traveling for a meeting of the Board of Directors of Local Church Ministries, one of the corporations that provide mission and ministry for the United Church of Christ. I can't remember why, but in earlier years, I campaigned for a seat on the board. I saw it as an opportunity to advocate for local congregations and especially for educational ministries within our church. From that perspective, I haven't really been very effective. During my time on the Board, investments in education have plummeted. As revenues decline, the board continues to live within its means, but it is a painful process that has seen major declines in staffing and in monies available for programs. The United Church of Christ no longer has a team of staff persons working on education. Education has been incorporated into a team that is also responsible for congregational vitality, new church starts, parish life and leadership and a host of other programs and ministries.

I continue to try to be a voice for education, but sometimes I feel like a lonely voice.

This week I will serve as Chaplain to the Board. I have been working with a team of worship leaders and musicians to plan meaningful worship for the board. Our new General Minister and President, Geoffrey Black, who just began his duties on October 1, will be preaching tomorrow morning. We will share Holy Communion on Saturday afternoon. There will be good music, meaningful liturgy and lots of opportunities for us to experience God's presence in the beautiful Amistad Chapel. And it truly is an honor to be asked to serve as Chaplain.

But I can tell you this much before I even leave Rapid City for Cleveland. I will be missing my home, my family, and my church all the time I am in that place. Some people are cut out for church hierarchies and for service in the church's governing structure. I am not one of them. I know where I belong. And it isn't in Cleveland. I am a pastor and my place is with my congregation.

Which begs the question, "Why go to Cleveland so often in the first place?" I don't have a good answer other than the simple fact that we are all connected. The work of our church's national setting is not somehow different and distinct from the work of a local congregation. We are connected. What happens in Rapid City affects life in Cleveland. The decisions made in Cleveland impact our congregation in South Dakota. If it weren't for delegates from rural Western states, people in New England states wouldn't know that there are congregations that aren't in the same time zone as their conference office and people who drive hundreds of miles for a committee meeting. If it weren't for delegates from urban states, I wouldn't know about places where our denomination is the largest and where we have a church in every town.

We need each other to be the church. And right now the church needs me to be willing to go to Cleveland from time to time. And so I will. But I go to represent the people of South Dakota and I go eager to come back home.

I won’t be purchasing any souvenirs, but I expect to return with stories.

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October 23, 2009 – Urban Church



The United Church of Christ has some of its roots in New England where there is a broad mix of communities of many different sizes. There are churches in small towns, rural areas, and large and small cities. We have more congregations in the Northeast than in other parts of the country. In contrast, South Dakota really doesn't have the same type of population distribution. Although we have congregations in the major towns of our state, the towns are fewer and farther between than in some other parts of the country. So when I visit our church in larger cities, I realize how different our place is from the way that many people - and many members of our church live and work.

The center of our church's national presence is Church House, located at 700 Prospect Ave. in downtown Cleveland. It is definitely an urban setting. There are a lot of members of our church, who when visiting Church House, find themselves in familiar surroundings. They are used to city traffic, navigating by freeway signs, finding places where one pays for parking, and negotiating city streets. Despite regular visits, I always feel like a bit of an outsider in the city. I'm sure that other people can sense that I'm not as at home in the city as others. Whether riding the train or walking on the sidewalk I'm more alert and vigilant than I would be at home. I've never had any troubles in the city and I have not found myself in situations where I do not feel safe, but it is not the place where I feel most comfortable and at home.

We lived in a city for four years. We attended seminary in Chicago and our only really private space in that huge city was a small apartment. There I was at home, but there wasn't much space to that home and everywhere else, it seemed, there was a constant

stream of people. I know that people who spend their lives in cities become uncomfortable in the open spaces of the South Dakota prairie, but the empty roads seem more at home and hospitable to me than a city location. I like being alone. I like having my own space.

But I have learned to visit the city and I don't find being here to be frightening.

This morning I have been thinking about how the experience of church might be different for a city dweller than a rural person. Being at church is so much about being with other people for us. We get together and we enjoy being together. Our worship service invites us to sit together, to greet one another, to pass the peace, and to feel ourselves as belonging to a community. This is true in urban churches, as well, but I think in a city there are more folks who go to church seeking a bit of private space for meditation, quiet, and personal reflection. It is not that we don't need such things, but we have many other opportunities for space and quiet and reflection. I can find those things with a walk in the woods or a paddle at the lake. They are easily and readily accessible to me most of the time.

I think that it is more difficult for people in urban areas to find private and quiet places. In such a setting a church that provides a prayer chapel or another place for quietness is offering a real gift to its community.

Amistad Chapel is the worship center at Church House. It has been carefully designed to fit into its unique setting. One wall of the room is nearly floor to ceiling glass looking out on the city sidewalk. There is a slight tint to the windows so it is a bit easier to see out from inside the room than it is to see the activities on the inside during the day. As we sit and pray or share in worship, there is a vague awareness of the coming and going of city life just outside the walls of our building. We can see the cars and people as they go about their business. Yet it is quiet in the chapel and the furnishings are simple with lots of wood and glass and other materials to help us focus our attention on God. It is a wonderful space for worship.

It is very different from home, yet in that place I am at home.

One of the joys of traveling is experiencing the simple reality that Abraham and Sarah discovered so many generations ago. There is one God in all the earth. Changing locations does not mean changing gods. I know it sounds simple and obvious from a theological standpoint. But in experience, we almost expect more to change than needs to change. Wherever we find ourselves on this life's journey, God is with us. In cities and towns and alone in the midst of the Dakota prairie, God is there.

On the street outside of Church House there are banners on the lamp posts that speak of the extravagant welcome offered by the United Church of Christ. They invite people to become involved in the church. All of the banners have the web site of the church on

them. Some of them invite people to become active in i.ucc, an online church community. I am not sure that it is obvious to the people walking down the street that this church to which the banners invite them is right on the other side of the glass - inside the building they are passing.

We experience Christ in the points of our meeting - in the moments when we gather for worship and in the moments when we make meaningful connections in conversation. I suspect that there is a genuine sense of community for those who connect over the Internet. But I wonder how they share worship. There is something very important about being with other people that I have not experienced through online communication. I'm not ready for the virtual church to be my only church experience, and suspect that I never will experience it as community in the same way that face-to-face community is so important to me.

So my thoughts ramble in many directions as I prepare for worship in Amistad Chapel this morning. What is clear to me is that there are many different experiences of church in this world. Mine isn't the only way to experience church. But there is only one God. What connects us is not the appearance or location of the buildings in which we worship but rather the activity of focusing our attention on God, who is present in all of our activities.

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October 24, 2009 – Emerging Church



For Jews, Christians and Muslims, the Bible begins with seven simple words. It takes ten words to say that sentence in English, but in Hebrew, it is just seven. And, translation into English requires changing the order of words as well. We say, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” In Hebrew, the words are “Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim ve’et ha’arets.” The first word, bereshit, sets the time: “in the beginning.” It is a bit more complex than that, because the single word carries so much weight in the text, but “In the beginning” is not a bad translation. The second word, “bara” is the verb. The first verb in all of sacred text for so many of the world’s believers. The challenge of translating that word comes, in part, from the fact that Hebrew and English do not have the same number of tenses - time never quite works out right in translation. It helps English speakers to think in terms of two times: 1) things that are not yet finished, and 2) things that are finished. Bara is the progressive tense; that is, it describes an action that is on-going, that is not finished. Our faith begins with creation that is not yet finished. In the beginning, God started creating and from that time God has continued to create. You can see the challenge of translation - I’ve consumed a paragraph in English and still haven’t captured the full meaning of the first words of our scriptures.

But it is important for us to recall that our faith begins with creation. And it is equally important to recall that the creation that was present at the beginning is not over - it continues.

Every embodiment of the church is not just what is happening right now, it is also the church that is emerging - the church that is yet to come. One of our speakers yesterday led us in a brief comparison of the “existing church” and the “emerging church.” We know that there is something new emerging in our common life. We know that the future will not be the same as the present. And we have some hints about what is emerging, but that which is yet to be is not yet fully known. There are general characteristics that we can describe: the existing church has significant national structures that produce resources for local congregations. The emerging church has a smaller national structure and local congregations take more responsibility for developing and finding resources for their mission and ministry. The existing church has a strong sense of denominational identity. The emerging church blurs the lines between denominations. The existing church pays a lot of attention to theology and the world of ideas. The emerging church focuses on mission and the world of action.

These statements are, of course, generalizations and subject to grave misinterpretation. And the truth is that we do not fully know what is emerging. “Bara:” God continues to create.

But it is clear to me, that I belong to the existing church. That does not mean that I resist the future, or that I fear it. It is simply true that my place in the church is this time and the church has a wonderful future that stretches long beyond my time on this earth.

I love the existing church. I enjoy being immersed in books and words and ideas. The smell of ink on paper, the heft of a real book with a quality binding in my hands makes me feel connected to my world. I enjoy my visits to our church’s national headquarters. My spirit is buoyed by worship in Amistad Chapel. I thrive on networking with colleagues in face-to-face meetings. I am proud of the history and heritage of our church.

Increasingly I am seen as an elder in these meetings. The new class of directors who make up one third of the board, are mostly younger than I. It is not a bad thing. But I know that my role will not be to lead the charge into the future, but rather to fully participate in the present.

That first sentence of the Bible gives equal weight to that which has been and that which is yet to come. Create is the verb for God at the beginning and create continues to be God’s primary verb. The creating is not over.

It is exciting to watch the newness emerge.

OK, sometimes it is scary.

Piano improvisations and projected words make me wonder if we will lose the organ music and arranged choral harmonies that I love. Computer-based networking and

twitter tweets make me wonder if we will lose the standardized spelling and complex sentences that have been the craft of my life. I can understand that not every written word needs an editor, but I can't quite imagine a world where no words are edited, re-written, and crafted with care over time. And I can't imagine life without the joy of conversation. No amount of technology will take that away from my world.

I don't know how I made the journey from being one of the young people in our church. I still can't think of myself as an elder. But I have collected several decades of experience and I do remember events that now are referred to as "history." I recall when our denomination's headquarters moved from New York to Cleveland twenty years ago, and sometimes it seems like yesterday to me. This place that seems old and venerable to the younger members of our board still feels new to me.

Bereshit bara Elohim. In the beginning God is creating - and God continues to create.

A new church is emerging. And it belongs to God every bit as much as the existing church. And I belong to both churches.

Because they are the same church. That verb, "bara" declares from its place as the second word of the Bible that we do not have to choose between that which has been and that which is yet to come.

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October 25, 2009 – Away on Sunday



Sunday is not my favorite day to be away from home. My worshiping community is 1st Congregational United Church of Christ in Rapid City, South Dakota. It is where I prefer to be on Sundays. But I am not there today, and I have been away from the congregation a bit too much this year.

Vacations are important. And when you are the "go to guy" who has lots of questions and issues that come your way before and after each worship service, it becomes necessary to take a break. But today is different. I could be at home. I would be at home except for the structure of airline ticket pricing. It seems that every airline ticket is different and that no one, including airline employees understand the prices. I work with the church's travel agency when arranging tickets for church travel and the agent quoted me a price of nearly $1,100 for the ticket. It was just too much. I asked if there was any way to get to this meeting at a lower price. It turned out that I could save the church almost $600 by staying over and traveling on Sunday. The savings isn't quite that much because of the price of the motel room, but it is still over $500 less in total expense for the church. So here I am, in Cleveland, waiting to get on an airplane that will take me home - but not in time for worship with my church.

The meeting was carefully designed and scheduled so as to not take Board members away from their local congregations. Our Board's business is the strength of local congregations and providing leaders for them. But we live in an imperfect world and there are plenty of things in this world that are beyond our control - including the scheduling and pricing of airline travel. We simply have to balance wise stewardship of

the church's funds with the need to have meetings and the need of church leaders to be in their congregations.

I have enjoyed good worship this week. One of the joys of a visit to Church House and Amistad Chapel is the beautiful Bedient Pipe Organ. As pipe organs go, it is small. It has about a dozen ranks of pipes in a cabinet, played by tracker mechanism. What that means is that the connection between the keyboards, pedals and the pipes themselves is mechanical. Tracker organs require significant pressure on the keys to make a sound. They are a real workout for an organist, requiring physical strength as well as dexterity.

The Bedient Organ company is located just south of Lincoln, Nebraska and has developed a reputation for its tracker organs. All pipe organs are custom built- designed for a specific space. When a pipe organ is moved it requires a re-design and installation process. Once installed, however, a pipe organ lasts for many generations. No other worship instrument comes close to the long service of a pipe organ. Part of the attraction of pipe organs for churches is their sense of permanency. But there is more to it than that. Organs, in many ways represent the highest and best that we can offer to God. They are by nature instruments that are designed for groups to own. Although a few wealthy individuals do own pipe organs, the instrument really is at home in a church where many different organists can play the instrument and where it is always heard by others, even during rehearsal times. Playing an organ requires both hands, both feet, and a lot of brain energy. Organists read three or more lines of music at the same time and translate the notation into precise movements of hands and feet. And it is all done in rhythm with exact timing. It takes a lifetime of practice to become a competent organist.

On this trip I was chaplain for the meeting and so chaired a team of worship leaders who planned and conducted two services in Amistad Chapel. Our church is in the process of introducing a new song book, *Sing! Prayer and Praise.* The book features some music that is best accompanied by piano and although there are many songs in the book that will be accompanied by the organ, not all of the arrangements for instruments are completed. So we didn't hear the organ too much on this visit. We were, however, inspired by some gorgeous prelude and postlude music.

But one of the worship moments of the trip didn't center on the public worship services. Yesterday our agenda was shifted and the time of our worship service was changed. There was a break about mid-morning and I rushed to the chapel to make arrangements for the change in worship time. I was sitting in the chapel, reading through my notes and looking for a couple of phone numbers when I heard the organ. Kevin Peterson, a junior at St. Olaf College, was practicing the organ. He is a member of our Board and was using the break as an opportunity to explore the instrument. Because the chapel has several pillars we couldn't see each other. We were sharing the same space but weren't in conversation.

As I listened, I put away my notes and I let go of my panic and sense of being upset by the change in worship times. I was reminded that God is always available for us. We don't have to follow a precise schedule in order to worship.

Today I am away from Rapid City as my congregation worships. But I will not be away from the congregation. I will be thinking of them and praying with them as they gather. The love of God transcends distances. Even when we are not in the same physical space, we can share the same spiritual space. I know the service that will be held in Rapid City. I wrote most of the words that will be read by the various lay leaders. I remember the sound of the voices of Jodi and Becky and Ted. I am confident that their leadership will be meaningful to the congregation.

But I will miss them a bit. And I hope they miss me a bit as well. And it will be February before I have to be gone from my congregation on a Sunday again.

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October 26, 2009 – Home



Yesterday as we were settling in for the flight from Minneapolis to Rapid City, the flight crew was introduced over the p.a. system. A man across the aisle from me commented on the fact that we had a female captain on our flight. I said that I've been flying with a woman for a captain all of my life and showed him a picture I have of my mother when she received her pilot's license a year or two before I was born. We had an uneventful flight and arrived on schedule at the Rapid City airport on time.

All of my flights on this trip were uneventful. Flying has become routine. This is not to say that we haven't noticed some changes with the various mergers and bankruptcies in the aviation business. The last two trips that I have been made to Cleveland have been on tickets issued by major airlines. One trip was on United, connecting through Denver, the other a Delta/Northwest flight connecting through Minneapolis. All legs on both trips were on Canadair RJ aircraft operated by regional carriers, Skywest and Mesaba. It wasn't long ago when a flight from Rapid City to Minneapolis would be aboard a DC9 or an Airbus A319. The size of he airplane is not a problem for me. The seats are as large in the smaller aircraft and noise levels are similar. And airspeeds in the RJ craft are similar to larger airliners. The thing I notice the most is that there is rarely an empty seat on an aircraft and the airlines are almost constantly offering special deals to those who will take a later flight. I guess that this is good because airlines cannot make money flying around empty seats. Having the equipment the right size for the number of passengers is a good idea. I can't say that I understand overbooking, but apparently the airlines have experienced so many "no-shows" that they cannot assure a full airplane without selling extra tickets.

One thing I have noticed is that the traveling public remains confused about luggage. There had been a huge trend towards people carrying on all of their luggage. Most travelers switched to luggage with wheels that they could move down the concourses. And many travel with bags that are designed to fit into overhead bins. But there are always some who push the limits with over-stuffed bags and extra bags. The rule is two bags per passenger, but I've seen lots of people break that rule without any apparent consequences. Then there was a phase when the airlines got strict about enforcing carry on restrictions and encouraged people to check their bags. This made for pleasant traveling and hassle free loading of the aircraft, with much less crowding in the aisles during loading and unloading. But now the airlines are charging to check bags. On the trip I took this week, the cost to check luggage would have been $40 or about 10% of the ticket price. I was traveling light with just one carry on bag, so I checked it at the ramp for each leg of the flight. I didn't have to wheel it into the airplane, but I also didn't have to pay the fee.

So with just a book and a very small briefcase, I watched the antics of people trying to stuff their luggage into the overhead bins, which on smaller aircraft are smaller. One woman might have been on a shopping trip. In addition to her suitcase and an oversized purse, she had a shopping bag that itself would not have met the airlines's size limits. It must have been filled with soft items such as clothing because she was able to get it in the overhead bin by stuffing and stuffing. It took here quite a while, but somehow she did it. Of course that meant that the next passengers didn't have enough room for their bags and one had to ramp check his bag which forces the traffic in the aisles to back up. The airlines allowed 15 minutes for loading passengers, instead of 20 minutes that they used to allow. But the passengers took 20 minutes, which meant that push back from the terminal was usually about 5 minutes late.

It was interesting to look and observe human nature, but no problem for me. I think that people who are really hassled by airline travel sometimes bring the problems on themselves by not being prepared or by getting upset over little things. We are all going to arrive at the same time, so we might as well relax and help one another load the airplane and get settled. The silly rush to be first on or off of the airplane is meaningless. It won't result in that person arriving at the destination any earlier than anyone else. A helping hand or an act of kindness might mean that everyone gets to the destination a bit earlier.

The main thing is that we traveled safely. And it is good to be home and know that I don't have any trips scheduled for several months. Despite the inconveniences of travel, I still enjoy a trip on the airlines and continue to be amazed that I am able to cover so much ground so quickly. To get up in Cleveland and be home in time for dinner is really something to me.

And flying above the clouds is a treat. The change in perspective is dramatic. While it is grey and perhaps raining below, we were flying in the brilliant sunlight above a carpet of white clouds. The low sun angle of this time of the year provided lots of shadows among the clouds to reveal a wide variety of textures. And for the duration of the flight, there is little that passengers need to do. We can read or doze or have conversation as we choose. For a little over an hour all we have to do is sit. While it may not be the most comfortable chair, it is adequate and though we complain about crowding, it isn't as crowded as a train in India or a bus in Central America. In fact airlines in the United States, despite having more seats and less space than once was the case, still provide more room than the airlines in some places. I remember visiting the Boeing assembly facility in Everett Washington and seeing the difference between an airliner bound for service in Australia and one bound for service in China.

And the airliners give us the gift of traveling to distant locations in relatively short times. The price of this form of travel is a bit of standing in line, a bit of waiting, and an occasional hassle with misplaced luggage or re-arranged itineraries due to mechanical problems or weather. All in all it isn't a bad way to travel and we arrive on time more often than we experience delays. A lot of whether a passenger enjoys the experience is in the attitude of that passenger.

Of course having been gone means that there is no shortage of things to do today, and I need to turn my attention away from traveling to the things that need to be done here. Life goes on.

I guess the first step is to get unpacked.

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October 27, 2009 – Launch Day



Photo by Red Huber, Orlando Sentinel

As I write this morning, NASA is about an hour and a half away from the scheduled launch time of the Ares 1-X rocket. If all goes according to the plan, the rocket will lift off from the Kennedy Space Center at 8:00 a.m. EDT this morning. According to NASA's Jon Cowart, the mission is running about a half hour behind at my last check of the web site. This should not be a problem, as there is about a four-hour window for this launch. If for some reason the rocket is not launched today, attempts can be made on subsequent days. The Ares 1-X is a prototype of what some at the agency believe will be the next generation space launch vehicle. This rocket is not identical to the proposed Ares 1, which will have a five stage booster. The test vehicle being launched today has a four-stage booster. The area for the fifth stage as well as the crew module and other part of the rocket have been simulated with sizes and weights identical to those that would be a part of the final rocket.

The Ares 1-X is the first flight in a program to develop a launch system for human spaceflight. The rocket, if successful, will be used to launch the Orion crew exploration vehicles as well as the Altair lunar lander. These space vehicles are being developed for U.S. human space flight after the Space Shuttle fleet is retired.

I remember growing up and entering my teens in a time when we carefully watched every space launch. I could name all of the original seven astronauts and kept in mind their names as the program progressed through Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo missions. Then, like now, I lived in Mountain Time where it is two hours earlier than the

time at Cape Canaveral. On launch days we were allowed to get up earlier than usual to watch the launches. There was always a sense of excitement about each launch. So much was unknown in those days and the risks were real. But there also was a sense of destiny - people were on their way to exploration of space and that exploration would be undertaken by sending humans who would return with data and experiences to report.

I was fully confident that, after landing humans on the moon, flights to neighboring planets would follow closely behind. If you had asked me in the late 1960's about what the U.S. Space Program might look like in the 21st century, I am sure that my description would have included multiple space stations and permanent research settlements on the moon and Mars. There was a certain naiveté about my attitude at the time. The price of such ventures was so beyond my ability to comprehend, that I assumed that money would somehow be made available without understanding the huge costs involved.

And, at that time we were unable to imagine how history would unfold with events such as the falling of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union as a world superpower. We were unable to envision much of what has unfolded on the stage of world history in the first decade of the new century.

Still, I admit that I am excited about the launch of a new rocket. I haven't turned on the television, but I have been checking the NASA blog that is updated every ten minutes or so, for news on the launch progress.

The question for politicians and leaders in our generation is what level of funding for research and new technology is appropriate for such ventures and how space exploration fits into the overall priorities of an already over-extended government. The 1960's effort to land humans on the moon experienced nearly total support and operated at times as if it had an unlimited budget. Subsequent explorations have been more realistic.

It is a complex set of circumstances to consider. Space flight has benefits that are realized by those who will never travel into space. Everyday products such as the lubricant WD-40 and the re-usable adhesive Velcro were developed as a part of the space program. Medical advances such as remote heart and breathing monitors, now in everyday use, were first produced in relationship to the space program. The quality of our lives has a direct connection to innovation and the development of new products and ideas. The challenges of space travel create an environment of innovation and discovery. Still, no society has an unlimited budget. Spending without restraint does not lead to the best research. Knowing that mistakes are costly and that they may affect the success or failure of the entire program prevents wasteful speculation.

The costs of other government programs will have an impact on how much space exploration we pursue as well. Unless we find ways to control spending in other areas,

there will be less available for research and exploration. There has been plenty of talk about returning to the moon and other human explorations beyond the moon. There are others who say that exploration can be advanced more through the use of robots, rovers and other non-human devices. I suspect that the future holds a combination of unmanned and maned vehicles.

So today is a day of exploration and adventure. We are set to learn a little more about how space vehicles work.

I thought about waiting to post the blog until after we know whether or not the launch proceeds, but then I'd be tempted to wait until we knew whether or not the launch was a success and soon I would have delayed the posting enough to affect the other work I need to accomplish today.

So I'll stop with the Ares 1-X standing on its own. The service structure has been rotated and the only thing holding the rocket are the pyrotechnic hold-down bolts that will be blasted away to release the rocket at launch. In less than an hour the rocket should rise from the launch pad. It will make the news, but won't dominate the news the way that earlier space launches once did. There will be plenty of other news to occupy the major news agencies. But many of us will be paying attention to the rocket and the exciting promise of discovering even more of this wide universe.

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October 29, 2009 – Blessed Father Damien





Last night I attended a gathering of clergy where some of the members arrived in costume. The invitation was for members to come dressed as their favorite saint as the group intended to play down Halloween and emphasize All Saints Day. One of the members arrived dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, with leis and a bishop's mitre. Until he introduced his character, I knew almost nothing about Father Damien and his ministry in Hawaii in the midst of a leprosy epidemic.

Father Damien De Veuster was a simple man. His parents were Belgian farmers, but he received a call to become a priest. Part of the public profession of his final vows when he joined the Sacred Heart Fathers in France was a religious custom where his superiors covered him with a funeral pall and told him that only by accepting death could he discover life. In the traditions of his order, he traveled where the superiors of the order requested and in 1873 found himself as a part of the groups efforts to bring catholicism to the Hawaiian Islands.

The government of Hawaii, in an an attempt to address a rapidly-spreading outbreak of Leprosy, had isolated lepers by removing them to the island of Molokai. There they lived in poverty, without adequate shelter, clothing or other basic requirements of life. Medical care was sporadic. The natives had a great deal of distrust of the medicine of European settlers and the government doctors had a great fear of contracting leprosy. One visiting doctor removed bandages with the tip of his cane and never approached a victim any closer than that stick's length. Another left medicine on an examining table to avoid any possible contact with the victims of the disease.

Father Damien, however, seemed to embrace the mission. When he first arrived, there was a small chapel, but not place for him to live. He took up residence under a pandanus tree beside the little church. It was said that he shared his home with cats, dogs, sheep and a variety of smaller creatures including centipedes,scorpions, ants, roaches and fleas. While trained in normal precautions to avoid leprosy, Father Damien never betrayed fear of the people of Hawaii who suffered from the disease.

Conditions at Kalawao were desperate. Victims were constantly coughing and their bodies were disfigured. The diseased left victims with fetid breath and their bodies exuded a powerful odor. Sometimes on visits, Father Damien had to cover his face with a cloth. At other times he had to visit briefly and go outdoors frequently to catch a breath of fresh air.

Slowly he organized the people into work parties. They added a rear wing to the chapel. They constructed cottages for victims and a rectory for the priest. He was a good carpenter and construction supervisor. He intended to restore a sense of personal worth and dignity to the people, and that process often involved administering sacraments to the sick and dying and arranging funerals. He helped the natives develop a cemetery. It was fenced to protect the graves from pig, dogs and other scavengers. Together they constructed coffins and dug graves. They arranged for proper funeral ceremonies and sponsored a musical group that played funeral processions.

He learned how to assist people in washing their bodies and bandaging their wounds. He tidied rooms and changed soiled bed linens. With assistance from the lepers they built a home for the lepers' children. When the colony expanded from Kalawao to Kalaupapa, he organized crews to build a road. They blasted rocks from the shoreline and opened a docking facility for ships. They learned to farm and raise animals. He taught them to play musical instruments.

He advocated for the leprosy patients with government officials and hounded leaders for funds to support the colony. The stories of Father Damien began to spread. Support from his work developed far away from Hawaii and in protestant as well as catholic circles. The London Times organized a successful fund drive. He got in trouble with the Hawaiian government for bringing such attention to leprosy. He got in trouble with his superiors in the Sacred Heart order because they thought he was giving the order a bad image.

In December 1884, just over 11 years after arriving on Molokai, Father Damien experienced no sensation of pain when he soaked his feet in hot water. It was the first symptom of the disease that surrounded him that would quickly take his life. The colony that he helped establish, however, continued to serve the people of Hawaii. Joseph Dutton, a soldier who survived the Civil War followed by years of hard drinking, showed up on Molokai's shores in July of 1886 and stayed for forty-five years without ever leaving the colony. He served the lepers of the Baldwin Home for Boys until his death at 87 years of age in 1931. Others came and served the colony in a variety of ways.

Research has provided effective treatments for leprosy, now known as Hanson's Disease. With proper antibiotic treatment, the disease can be overcome. The isolated colony at Molokai is no longer needed to separate victims of the disease from the rest of society. Over 1,100 people have worked at the colony since Father Damien and Father Damien was the only worker to ever contract the disease. The contemporary battle to

end the stigma of the disease is also being won. As the residents of the colony, some of whom have made it their home for more than 50 years, die from natural causes, the role of the colony is diminishing. Soon there will be no colony on Molokai.

But the memory of Blessed Father Damien will remain.

And I might not have learned the story had it not been for a silly costume party.

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October 29, 2009 – A Bit of Snow



When I was two year old, my parents decided that a remodeling job was in order for our family home. By removing half of the roof of the house and replacing it with a much flatter section of roof, what had been a rather tight attic could be expanded into a second story for our home with extra bedrooms and a much-needed additional bathroom. The project had been planned for some time, but the pressures of the seasonal work at the airport meant that there just wasn't time to do the job in the summer. Early spring seemed to be the best time and when the weather turned warm in February the project was begun. We lived in Montana and the weather didn't hold. Snow fell with part of the roof removed and caused some real challenges with the construction. Even with tarps spread over the exposed rafters, moisture leaked into the house.

I really don't remember any of the details. In fact I know the story more by the frequent re-telling than by my actual memory. I have some memories of later stages of the project, when my grandfather was helping with finish carpentry upstairs, but I really don't remember the weather challenges of the phase when part of the roof was off of the house. We survived. The project was finished, and our family moved on to its next adventure. Within a few years we had enough kids to keep the house full.

I'm enough like my father to not be very scared of weather. Pay attention to the weather. Be safe. But don't let the weather disrupt your life.

So we have a little snow this morning. The brunt of this storm went south of us. Denver got hammered yesterday. There are places in the high country of the Rockies that got 4 feet. Snow in October is not that unusual around here. The timing wasn't the best for our home painting project, but the forecast is for temperatures to reach the forties by Friday. This snow will probably melt off over the weekend and we should be able to get the painting completed before long. It won't take too much time. Three or four days with no precipitation and temperatures above 40 degrees will let us complete the project. The house is all prepped and the painter's trailer is parked in the yard ready to go when the weather clears. I will do the painting on the decks myself, so I need the warm weather and a day off of work to get that done. It might take me a bit longer, but I have some of the priming done and everything is scraped and ready to go when the snow has melted from the deck.

There are plenty of folks around here who plan ahead and get their houses and decks painted during the summer. But we didn't get the job done this year and the painter was available last week, so we went ahead knowing that our project would probably be interrupted by the weather.

The snow is pretty.

There will be some slippery roads this morning and people aren't used to driving in the winter weather, so it will be good to be cautious and allow a bit of extra time for driving. But I don't expect this particular snowfall to be too disruptive. We went ahead with our regular Wednesday schedule at the church last night and don't expect any snow cancellations from this storm.

We don't suffer much with the weather around here. We have 4-wheel drive vehicles and the county is good about plowing the roads. Our homes and places of work are weather tight and life can go on without much disruption even when there is a bit of snow. There are lots of people in Western South Dakota whose jobs require them to work outside most of the time. They have good warm clothes and most have dependable equipment.

I am hoping that firewood supplies hold out on the reservations. We have a large supply of firewood at the church that has not yet been delivered. There have been plenty of years when we made our deliveries in November and we've planned deliveries for November 14 and 21, but looking out at the falling snow makes me grateful for a warm home and I hope that we don't have neighbors who are short of fuel.

This is just a little storm for us. The forecast calls for highs in the 50's next week. Chances are we will have the paint on the house and decks and still have time to get the garden cleaned up before severe weather sets in. After all, I don't have the roof off of the house. This isn't a major project, just routine maintenance.

I keep my eye on the weather and check the forecast daily. But I'm not one to allow the weather to dictate my life. I've got a snow shovel and there's a snow blower ready to go in the shed if I need it. Life goes on and we live in a place where we get a little weather from time to time. A major storm might shut things down for a day or so, but a little snow isn't going to hurt things that much.

So stay warm wherever you are and be careful out there - there will be a few first-time winter drivers on your morning commute. Keep your eye on the weather, but don't let it control your life. There is a lot of fun to be had and a world of beauty to be seen when the snow falls in the hills. We need the moisture. It won't do any good to complain about the weather anyway.

And you know, the shingles on the roof do need to be replaced . . . Don't worry we'll wait until spring to tackle that job.

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October 30, 2009 – Things I Don't Understand



illustration from entertainmentearth.com

There is a theological theory that attributes anything that people do not understand to God. Sometimes called "God of the gaps," the simplest form of this way of believing is to point to any unexplained phenomena and say, "it is the work of God." In the times before the development of modern scientific method, there was a certain rationale to such a theory. People understood that God is greater than any human venture and that God is not fully understood. It followed, then, that things that were not understood by humans must be the domain of God. In more contemporary times, the term "God of the gaps" has been used as a derogatory term for a naive or incomplete theological understanding. Henry Drummond was a 19th century evangelist who chastised Christians who point to things that science can not yet explain - "gaps which they will fill up with God" and urged them to embrace all nature as belonging to God. From Drummond's perspective, understanding God working through scientific processes such as evolution provides an understanding of God that is infinitely grander than thinking of God as an occasional wonder-worker. Dietrich Bonhoeffer took a similar position in his letters and papers from prison. He wrote " . . . how wrong it is to use God as a stop-gap

for the incompleteness of our knowledge. . . . We are to find God in what we know, not in what we don't know."

Although it is part of a far more complex theological argument, I'm with Bonhoeffer. I see plenty of evidence of God in the things I know and understand. And I don't see much evidence of God in the things I don't understand.

There are plenty of things I don't understand.

I don't understand why Barbie dolls are so popular. I can imagine why people purchase them as gifts for children, even though I think there are toys that are more appropriate. But I have no idea why adults purchase the dolls for collections. It makes no sense to me that Mattel, the maker of Barbie, is coming out with a new Ken Doll, "Sugar Daddy Ken." According to the online seller that is now accepting pre-orders for shipment in April for the $69.99 doll, Ken is wearing a "dashing jacquard-patterned jacket with a light pink polo shirt and crisp white pants." He has a mop of silver hair and a fake tan as well as a floral swim suit, flip-flops, sunglasses and a bottle of water. Oh, yes, he also has a little white dog named "Sugar." Mattel says that the name of the doll comes from the dog not some reference to a "Sugar Daddy" who is an older man with a younger lover. Yea, right.

I don't understand the huge amounts of money involved in sports entertainment. I find watching kids from our community play baseball to be more interesting that watching the world series on television. How did the New York Yankees come up with the figure of $33,000,000 as salary for Alex Rodriguez? How could any person believe that he "earned" such a salary. Does a combined player payroll of $208,097,414 make the Yankees better than their world series rivals, the Philadelphia Phillies, who are paying a mere $111,209,046 for players this year? Their highest paid player, Ryan Howard, will only be paid $15,000,000 this year. If Rodriguez were able to take the pay cut to Howard's pay level for just one year, the difference would eliminate poverty housing in the Black Hills by building over 250 new homes. Translated into vaccines for children, the difference could save millions and millions of lives.

I don't understand the idea of "reality TV." I'm not a fan of television in the first place, but I have some appreciation for the work of talented script writers and cinematographers and actors who work to produce entertainment. I have no idea what is entertaining about creating a fantastic scenario and placing people in that setting without a script to see how strange they can behave. There doesn't seem to be any "reality," in the whole idea. And as for the reality shows that depict races and other adventures, I understand an attraction to testing one's limits through bicycling, swimming and running. What I don't understand is why people want to sit passively and watch when they could go outside and take a walk or paddle a canoe for themselves.

Putting high salaries and television together, I don't understand why Justice John Roberts, chief of the highest court in our land, is paid $217,400 per year and Judge Judy is guaranteed $32,000,000 per year through 2013. Is she worth 150 times the salary? Of course I don't watch her show, so I don't have all the evidence. I don't actually watch many proceedings of the Supreme Court for that matter. I guess I would concede that A-Rod might be worth more than Judge Judy, but neither seem to make contributions to society that compare to what a teacher offers. In South Dakota, the average salary for a public school teacher is $34,709.

Of course there are plenty of other things that I don't understand.

But I don't see much evidence of God's wisdom in those things I don't understand. The gaps of my understanding seem to have much more to do with human stupidity than with divine wisdom.

So, for now, I'm not buying a "God of the gaps" theology. I find more evidence of God in the efforts of researchers and the discoveries of brilliant minds than in unsolved mysteries and misunderstood phenomena. The dichotomy between science and religion, in my mind, is false. Studying the universe will lead even the most skeptical of observers into a relationship with that which lies beyond. Seeking to understand the things we cannot fathom does not diminish the role of God in this universe. On the contrary it gives us insight into God who is even greater than we had previously imagined.

So I have no intention of ordering a "Sugar Daddy Ken." I might, however, try to make an extra $70 donation to my church as a special gratitude for the simple fact that I live in a house where no one wants to own such a doll.

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October 31, 2009 – Hospitality



From http://hospitalityethics.blogspot.com

I've been working on a fairly large editing job over the past few weeks. The project is a new set of resources for teaching and learning about faith practices. The section that I'm editing is about the practice of giving and receiving hospitality. We use the term "hospitality" in several different ways, with a variety of different emphases. In general, we think of the relationship between a guest and a host. When churches think of hospitality, they often focus on how visitors are welcomed and the process that an individual goes through from being a visitor to being a member. In the wider society, the word hospitality often evokes images of the business of hotels, restaurants, casinos and resorts. In such environments, providing food and lodging for visitors is a business transaction in which services are exchanged for money.

Our modern term has its roots in Latin. In Latin *hospes* and *hostis* are related terms that originally meant stranger. The terms gave rise to contemporary words such as

hospitality and host, but they also gave rise to the modern words hostile and hospital. There are many ancient stories about extending protection to an enemy. In those stories, the host offers protection and sometimes life-saving aid, often in a situation where such a response is not expected. There are many stories in Latin and Greek history where the host provides guidance to the visitor so that the visitor can make it safely to the next destination.

We rarely think of providing health care as an act of hospitality. And when we think of extending hospitality, we don't often think of he relationship between enemies, either. But both of these concepts are included in the historic meanings of the word. Offering sanctuary and shelter to an enemy may result in a decrease of hostility, but it is not done without risk. Such actions may result in the strengthening of the enemy's position. There are many ancient stories that conclude with benefit coming to the host because of the act of hospitality offered.

In harsh environments the welcoming of a stranger can often mean survival for the stranger. Finding water, food, and shelter might be the difference between perishing in the wilderness and survival. Traditions of hospitality developed from desert living have become incorporated into Biblical stories and our faith.

Often when we think of hospitality, there is a part of us that focuses our attention on the possible benefits of the relationship for us. The hospitality industry welcomes tourists because they provide jobs and income. Churches welcome guests because guests may become members and share in the mission of the congregation. Certainly there are many relationships in which guest and host both benefit from the relationship.

Our faith tradition is filled with stories where hospitality is offered without any expectation of benefit or reward on the part of the host. We teach that the way that guests, visitors, or strangers are treated reflects on the host. In the best of our traditions, the difference between host and guest is minimized and there is an equalization of power and a recognition of common humanity.

Last night our congregation took our turn serving at a local shelter for homeless persons. In some ways serving at the mission has become routine for us. The recipes are well-tested, the procedures are outlined in notebooks. The jobs of purchasing groceries and preparing the meal follow similar patterns each time we serve. Often when we serve, we make an appeal for cupcakes to the congregation and the meal's dessert is prepared in the homes of members and brought to the church. This time, youth in our church baked and decorated cup cakes as one of their activities.

Several youth from our church joined in serving the meal last night. Meals are served cafeteria style in a rather crowded kitchen. The line of guests stretches out into the hallway and the servers get a brief conversation with guests as they pass through the line. After the trays are filled, the guests move into a dining area and the servers remain

in the kitchen. The exchange is brief and often the conversation is focused on the food that is being served. The setting does not lend itself to the formation of lasting relationships. There are a few people who eat at the mission who we have come to recognize through the process of serving many meals over the year, but others remain strangers throughout the process.

We often experience the practice of hospitality in places where the relationships are fleeting and there is little chance of achieving equality between the host and guest. But brief exchanges and simple acts of kindness can make a big difference.

In our Christian tradition we often think of the story of Jesus birth in Bethlehem as a time of incomplete hospitality. Luke writes that Jesus was laid in a manger “because there was no room for them at he inn.” We visualize Mary and Joseph being forced to take shelter in a barn after discovering the pubic accommodation to be filled with other travelers. But the reality might have been quite different. Joseph and Mary would not have had money to stay in public houses, and there would not have been such facilities available in the first place. They probably appealed to relatives and the reference to the “inn” is probably a reference to the guest room in the house they visited. That room being full, the baby was born in the common room. Instead of being treated like guests, the mother and her newborn child were treated like family.

As we plan for Advent and our annual remembrance of Jesus’ birth it may be a good time for us to think about how we welcome and treat guests. The Mexican tradition of Las Posadas pays homage to the journey taken by Mary and Joseph. Neighborhood parties prepare participants for the coming of Christmas. The season of Advent is an opportunity to think about the giving and receiving of hospitality.

May our church become a place of shelter and healing for strangers as we grow in our ability to extend hospitality.

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November 1, 2009 – All Saints, 2009



Illustration by Judith Gwyn Brown from the cover of her book “I Sing a Song of the Saints of God” (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1981)

There is something in human nature that leads us to often think of God as distant and different. God is not us, we think. And somehow we push that thought to emphasize the distance between God and ourselves. But Christianity is a religion that, at its core, emphasizes the closeness of God. In Jesus, God comes to humans in human form and shares all of the experiences of human life and death. The dramatic vision of John in the Book of Revelation includes the image of heaven descending to earth. In that vision heaven isn’t some distant place where humans go after they die, but rather a radical transformation of this place.

We tend to think of distance and difference when we think of saints as well. Part of the distance may come from the process of canonization in the Roman Catholic Church. This is a legal process that begins with the investigation of the life of a candidate and ends with an official entry of the name of the person into the catalog of saints invoked during the celebration of Mass. The distance also comes from our own judgments about our lives. We hear the story of a saint and we say to ourselves, “I couldn’t do that,” or “I couldn’t live that way.”

In the early days of the church, the beatification of saints was a local matter. A local bishop proclaimed someone a saint based on that person’s faithful living. That person was revered locally and lifted up as an example for others. It is only relatively recently that the process became more complex. More than three centuries after the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, (an event associated with All Saints day because Martin

Luther posted his famous 95 theses on All Saint's Eve in 1517) Pope Pius IX convened the First Vatican Council in 1868. It was at that council that the idea of papal infallibility was formalized. And it was at that Council where the process of entering saints into the official Roman Catholic catalog was formalized into a multiple-step process that was eventually codified into canon law in 1918. Earlier Popes had tried to take control of elevation to sainthood, but there were many different stages in the development of the idea.

It was Vatical Council I that decided that in addition to heroic virtue and miraculous power, a saint must have performed at least two miracles.

The process resulted in some Christians coming to the conclusion that saints are people who are very different from ordinary people.

The Protestant tradition has been much different. There is no centralized authority in protestantism that controls who is and who is not named a saint. In fact there has been much teaching about how each Christian is called to live a life of virtue and service.

The hymn "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God," by Lesbia Scott, has been a part of our All Saints Celebrations for many years. The hymn, first published in 1929 makes references to specific saints, but returns to the basic affirmation that each person can become a saint.

1.I sing a song of the saints of God,
patient and brave and true,
who toiled and fought and lived and died
for the Lord they loved and knew.
And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,
and one was a shepherdess on the green;
they were all of them saints of God, and I mean,
God helping, to be one too.

2.They loved their Lord so dear, so dear,
and his love made them strong;
and they followed the right for Jesus' sake
the whole of their good lives long.
And one was a soldier, and one was a priest,
and one was slain by a fierce wild beast;
and there's not any reason, no, not the least,
why I shouldn't be one too.

3.They lived not only in ages past;
there are hundreds of thousands still.
The world is bright with the joyous saints

who love to do Jesus' will.
You can meet them in school, on the street, in the store,
in church, by the sea, in the house next door;
they are saints of God, whether rich or poor,
and I mean to be one too.
Words copyright © 1929 by Lesbia Scott.

We'll be singing this hymn in our worship this morning, with words slightly modified at the publication of the New Century Hymnal. Lesbia Scott was born in Willesden, England in 1898, and attended Raven's Croft School in Sussex. She married John Scott, a naval officer who later became an Anglican priest and served a parish near Dartmoor. Mrs. Scott was active in amateur theatre and religious drama. She also was a prolific writer of religious dramas. She lived a long life and died in 1986. It is said that she wrote the hymn for her children. Her hymn has been in several hymnals since the 1940's. Judith Gwyn Brown did a series of illustrations in a wonderful picture book for children published in 1981.

Thinking about and teaching our children about saints is one of the ways that we might make God's presence seem closer and more intimate. Ordinary people have been able to perform extraordinary service when they saw a need and responded in faith.

As the hymn says, "the world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus' will."

God is not distant. Heaven is not some far away place. Saints are not dramatically different from ourselves. As we celebrate All Saints Day today may we be reminded that our faith is about things that are very close. Our faith is about the people we meet everyday.

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November 2, 2009 – Chamber Music in the Church



There is a long history of churches serving as patrons of the arts. The relationship between art and religion goes back to the earliest of times. People used their imaginations to express the things that mattered most to them. Their faith was high on the list of things worthy of their artistic expression. Over the years churches have invested their funds in architecture, music, and visual arts. There have been times when most of the working artists received all or part of their income from religious institutions.

The support of the arts is different in our time as most arts agencies are independent nonprofit corporations who receive funds from a variety of sources, including direct donations from members of the community and grants from governmental sources such as the National Endowment for the Arts.

Our congregation remains active in supporting and promoting the arts in our community. We have a rich heritage and a long tradition of such support. Two of our congregation's early musicians, Mabel Robins and Zona White literally went door to door in our neighborhood to raise funds for the first seasons of our community concert series. They volunteered their time and performed in the early years of the community's symphony orchestra and other musical groups. Our church's choir formed a group of community singers that eventually gave rise to the Dakota Choral Union, our town's community choir.

Yesterday afternoon, our church was the venue for a concert of The Musical Offering quartet, the oldest chamber music group in the St. Paul-Minneapolis area. The concert was one of five concerts held in our church each year sponsored by the Black Hills Chamber Music Society. The Chamber Music Society has had a member of our congregation on its board of directors since its founding and after holding concerts in a variety of different places throughout the community has settled on our church as its regular home. This is due in part to the excellent acoustics of our sanctuary and the quality instruments that we maintain for worship and community use. There are two wonderful pianos in our sanctuary. The 6' Baldwin was the first grand piano brought to our community. It was kept in the home of the Robbins family and used for community concerts for years before coming to our church. A few years ago we had the action upgraded, installed all new strings and had the cabinet refinished. The 9'2" Bluthner was a new purchase by our congregation in 2005. The piano's excellent tonal qualities and delightfully responsive action has earned it a reputation as the finest concert piano in our community.

Our building is home to the Black Hills Watercolor Society and an occasional venue for visual arts shows and displays. A unique partnership with the watercolor society has resulted in a portion of the proceeds from the society's annual show and sale supporting our Costa Rica Sister Church relationship.

In addition to the Black Hills Chamber Music Society and the Black Hills Watercolor Society, our church hosts a wide variety of musical events including the Young Vocal Artists Competition, the Black Hills Piano Workshop, the Suzuki Strings, the J. Laten Weed Honors Orchestra and other groups. Members of our congregation continue to provide significant leadership in the Black Hills Symphony, Dakota Choral Ensemble, Bells of the Hills, Black Hills Community Theatre, Black Hills Concert Association and the annual Allied Arts Fund Drive. Recently our congregation was honored by the Rapid City Chamber of Commerce as "Rapid City's Arts Church."

Of course the primary mission and ministry of the church remains focused on worship and service to persons in need in our community. The same congregation that is so involved in the arts is the congregation that will send caravans of pickups and trailers to deliver a dozen cords of firewood to Eagle Butte and an equal amount to Wanblee during November. It is the same congregation that serves regularly at the Cornerstone Rescue Mission. It is the same congregation that supports United Campus Ministries through financial gifts and volunteer ministries. It is the congregation that offers leadership to our Association, Conference and the national setting of our church through volunteers and financial contributions. Music and the arts aren't the only things we do.

But there is a unique relationship between the arts and the other activities of our congregation. The arts are not just a "frill," or optional "extra." They are at the core of our life together as a congregation. The arts inspire us and lift our spirits to a closer relationship with God. They invite us to use our imaginations to reach beyond the

everyday and to imagine the beauty and glory of creation. They challenge us to offer the highest and best of our expression to God. There are moments in the midst of a concert or the viewing of visual arts when we connect with something that is far beyond our own time and place.

In my opinion, yesterday's concert belonged in the church. The music of Bach and Beethoven was written for church settings. The haunting cello lines of Glazunov express the depths of the human experience. There were moments in the concert that were worshipful and respectful of the place and of the presence of God that we often feel in that place.

So we will continue to be a congregation that is deeply involved in the arts in our community. It is not the only thing that we do. The arts do not distract us from service to others. Rather we are inspired and called to even greater service when we offer the beauty of human offerings to God.

May the music continue.

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November 3, 2009 – Hunter's Moon



Autumn is a fun time for moon watchers in the northern hemisphere. The same phenomena that causes the sun to be higher in the sky in the summer and closer to the horizon in the winter has the opposite effect on full moons. The full moon rises and sets directly across from the sun, so in the north the moon is highest in the sky in the autumn and winter. When the full moon is close to the beginning or ending of a month as it was last night, there is some discrepancy as to the name of the moon. I call it the hunter's moon, following on October's harvest moon. But other names for this full moon include Frosty Moon and Beaver Moon.

Of course, on the other side of the world, in the southern hemisphere, folks are looking forward to summer. The first really warm days are beginning to hit Sydney, Australia and summer is looming for folks in that part of the world. In that part of the world, the moon is following a low path across the sky, covering the arc of the late autumn sun. This full moon in the Southern Hemisphere is called the Flower Moon.

We've never gotten into star gazing in our house. We enjoy looking up at the night sky and there are several major constellations that we an identify, but we don't own a telescope and haven't made stargazing a priority for our lives. The moon is harder to ignore. Even when our lives are busy with many different priorities, we seem to recognize the phases of the moon.

Late yesterday afternoon as we were picking up a few items in the yard after a pleasant autumn day, the rising moon was large and full on the horizon, almost like a sunset,

without all of the brilliant colors in the surrounding sky. Throughout the evening the moon tracked high overhead and it is still relatively high in the sky this morning as we await the sunrise.

I have never traveled north of the Arctic Circle, but up there folks are getting ready for some short days and long nights. From that perspective, the moon mimics the midnight sun, staying visible in the sky for 24 hours. In such a place, where there are so many hours of darkness each day, I am sure that people are intensely aware of the phases of he moon.

Each year there are more lights in our neighborhood. In the short 15 years that we have lived here there has been a lot of home construction and a lot of people put up intense lights for their homes and yards. I guess they don't know that if you turn on a bright light you will only be able to see the things that are in the circle of light and your eyes will adjust so that you can see nothing beyond the illuminated area. If you go out without any lights, your eyes will adjust to the moon light and animals and other objects in the shadows will be come more visible and less likely to startle you. The combined effect of all of the lights is that the night sky is less visible. Stars are harder to see. Just finding a place in the shade to snap a picture of the moon this morning was a challenge.

Before the coming of European settlers the people of the plains thought in terms of seasons when they marked the full moons. The thirteen moons of the year were assigned to the four seasons, with three to spring, summer and autumn and the four for winter, the longest season. The first of the cold and dark moons was Wanicokan Wi - the moon when the deer shed their horns. It is a little early for that in our country and it might be that this moon should be called Waniyetu Wi - the moon of the rutting deer. Dakota elders sometimes used a turtle shell, which has thirteen large scales on it, to teach the order and progression of the seasons to their children.

In Lakota traditions, each moon is 28 days long and there is something sacred about each day: two days for the Great Spirit, two days for mother earth, four days for the four winds, etc. One day of each month was for the two-legged people, the same number as given to the eagle, the buffalo, the sun and moon, fire, water and rock. People lived closer to the natural world in those days. In Lakota tradition, the season of cold and dark moons was also a time for storytelling and teaching. Short days and long nights meant extended periods of wakefulness when it was dark outside. Sitting around a fire and telling the traditional stories and teaching them to the younger generation was a natural activity when it was dark and cold outside. It was also a time for increased rest and people spent more time sleeping than they did during the summer.

We, of course, are less connected to the natural world. Our outside areas are illuminated with yard lights and we tend to keep going regardless of the amount of light. Our days follow the sweep of the hands across the face of a clock more than they follow

the path of the sun across the sky. We probably get too little sleep in all seasons and have little variation in the amount of sleep that we get based on the time of the year.

Our lives take place in our own moments of history. We can remember earlier days and some people can adopt the traditions and ways of earlier generations, but we live in the time of cell phones and schedules and computers and constant connection. All the same, I enjoy the bits of connection with nature that we have. I enjoy the changing of seasons and the motions of the moon and the sun across the sky. I mark seasons with a calendar but also with the temperature outdoors. I feel fortunate to live in a place with four distinct seasons and I am often surprised by the weather in the hills.

Regular readers of the blog will remember that I was a bit unprepared for last week's snow. But that snow quickly melted and we finished the painting of the house yesterday. Only the porch and deck remain to be painted a task that will be accomplished in some of the nice weather that remains ahead this fall. Winter will come and we will be ready - mostly. We'll turn our attention to indoor activities and there is no shortage of projects to capture our attention and fill our time. Maybe we can be attentive enough to invest a little more time teaching children and telling the stories of our people this season. Advent is just a few weeks away. Whether we mark the beginning of the year with the First Sunday of Advent or wait until New Year's Day, there is a sense of newness that comes in the depth of winter. We wait with anticipation. And waiting is a good discipline in an impatient world.

May we find something sacred for every day of this and every moon of our lives.

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November 4, 2009 – What's with the Bow Tie?



As far back as I can remember, my preferred outfit is a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. When I was a kid, you could substitute a pair of cut offs in the summer. And when I was a kid, I wore tennis shoes whereas I prefer a pair of boots as an adult. That's it. I think I could be pretty happy with all white socks in the drawer and the same outfit every day.

My mother tells an entirely different story. She says that I always liked to get dressed up. She remembers my enjoying wearing a tie when I was relatively young and enjoying a sports coat or suit. And I have to admit that her memory is not wrong. When I was in college I wore dress slacks with a shirt an tie most days. And for much of my working life I have worn a suit an tie. So there might just be some truth to the statement that I enjoy getting dressed up.

But really, I just don't enjoy having to decide what to wear. I don't enjoy shopping for clothes at all. When I need a new article of clothing, I prefer to go to some place where I have previously bought clothing. The process of figuring out a new store just doesn't capture my attention. There is a men's clothing store here in town where I have bought a couple of suits and some slacks and other items of clothing. It is an old-fashioned store with a clerk dressed in a smart suit with a tape measure in the pocket. They don't have a huge inventory, but the clerk will guide your selection of a suit or a pair of slacks,

measure you and then have clothes that fit ready for you to pick up the next day. The process doesn't require many decisions if one simply accepts the advice of the clerk.

I have a professional job and when I started my career, slacks, a dress shirt with a tie and a sports coat was the standard "uniform." A dark suit was a good item of clothing for funerals. I began my career in a small town where I didn't dress up for daily work and often wore slacks with an open collar shirt during the week, with a tie on Sundays. I didn't have to own too much clothing and I didn't have to think too much about what to wear.

When I moved to a larger church in a larger town, I started to wear a tie everyday. For fifteen years or so, that is what I wore. All black socks in the sock drawer works as well as all white. The trick is to have the socks all the same brand so that you don't have to be precise in finding mates after washing the socks.

Then in 2001, I went on sabbatical for the first time. After that sabbatical, during which I almost never wore a tie, I started to go to work without a tie some days. It was still dress slacks or kakis and a dress shirt. Then in 2006, I went on another sabbatical. After that trip I started wearing jeans to work from time to time. I try to keep nice clean jeans and I have a couple of pair of black jeans that look a bit dressier than faded denim. I usually wear a button up shirt and try to maintain a sense of professionalism, but the tie as everyday dress has gone by the wayside. Who knows what might happen if I ever went on another sabbatical.

The truth is that dress for pastors has changed dramatically over the span of my career. I used to know what a pastor would wear. Now my colleagues come to work in jeans, in clerical collars, in nice suits and in t shirts. There is no standard dress for ministers any more. That leaves me having to decide for myself what to wear and I really don't care that much.

All of which says nothing about the bow ties. Five or six years ago I started wearing a bow tie from time to time. Now I almost never wear a regular tie. I don't remember making a conscious decision, I just started doing it. When asked about the bow tie, I have a couple of standard answers. I often simply state the truth - they are easier to tie than the other kind. Despite the air of superiority assumed by some who wear bow ties, the truth is that the knot is the same as the knot in a pair of shoe laces. The tie can be tied without thinking about it and without a mirror. Another answer I give is that when you have a belly the size of mine, a fashion accessory that is shaped like an arrow pointing to your least attractive feature is not a good idea.

But I guess I like bow ties because they have a slightly comical nature to them. It's hard to take yourself too seriously when you are wearing a bow tie. Bow ties evoke images of clowns.

And they are definitely less intimidating to young children. As fewer and fewer adult males wear ties as a part of their everyday attire and our society gets more causal about dress, there are fewer and fewer ties in church each week. For the most part, the fathers of the children in our church don't wear ties very often. And so when children meet me on Sundays when I'm dressed up, I definitely don't look like someone they have known. But the bow tie is somehow less threatening than a regular tie. At least that's the way it seems to me. I don't want to be the kind of old curmudgeon who frightens children.

Increasingly I find that I don't know what is appropriate dress for an occasion. I will go to a board meeting dressed in a suit an tie and look around the room to find that I'm the only one dressed that way. In a group of my colleagues, I am often dressed more casually than others. But at meetings of educators, I am often told that I have over dressed for the occasion.

It just doesn't mater to me that much. I don't care if I get it right. I own some comfortable jeans and have a drawer full of t-shirts. I've got enough work shirts for winter when short sleeves are too cold. And I own a couple of goofy bow ties for occasions when I need to dress up. And what I wear seems to be of more interest to others than it is to me.

So here is the truth. I've got enough drawers in my bedroom to have two sock drawers. One has white socks and the other has black. I haven't yet achieved the goal of only having two kinds of socks and never having to search for a mate, but I'm making progress. If the store would quit changing what kind of socks they put in the bargain bin, I'd make it.

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November 5, 2009 – Ensemble



I attended the rehearsals of our bell choir and adult vocal choir last night. There are frequent schedule conflicts and I am often in the building when the groups are practicing, but rarely get to sit in. I've never spent much time ringing handbells, so I just watched that rehearsal, but I enjoy singing and participated with the choir in their practice.

As I was driving home after the rehearsal I recalled a conversation from earlier in the day about music in the church. The earlier conversation had to do with our annual community Thanksgiving service. The tradition has been to have a large combined vocal choir with members from the choirs of he participating churches. Last year, when we hosted, the combined choir had over a hundred voices. Our choir usually sings from a choir loft, which is limited to about fifty persons, so we set up choir chairs in the chancel of the sanctuary and enjoyed a full sanctuary for our worship.

This year there was a bit of confusion about the host for the event and several of the participating pastors and choir directors have planned out of town events and will be away on Thanksgiving eve, the time we hold the service. At the planning meeting, the pastors agreed that it would be a good experience to offer a blended service that gave the praise bands of participating churches an opportunity to provide music. Our congregation does not have a praise band, but has been very open to a wide variety of musical styles, so I agreed to the plan. It seemed to make sense and work in a year when we had no volunteers to coordinate the mass choir.

At the meeting yesterday, when we were going over some of the details, we started to count the number of participants in the combined praise band. There are probably fifteen to twenty persons from the participating congregations who will be in the group. The difference between that number and a vocal choir of over a hundred, when you count the family members who come with the musicians, could translate into a vastly smaller attendance at the service. It is significant enough to have some of the pastors concerned.

There is no good way to change our plans, and I am sure that we will have meaningful worship. There is a huge value in worshipping together and the cooperative efforts of the pastors from the congregations is important in our community. But it is interesting to note that the projection is for smaller numbers.

Congregations tend to turn to praise band music in order to appeal to a wider audience. Not everyone wants to hear classical choir music. The organ is often criticized as an instrument for contemporary worship. And yet, the bottom line is that a praise band almost always means fewer people involved in leading worship. It is a smaller ensemble.

In our congregation, when the bells are ringing, there are generally 35 to 40 people in the choir loft. If each of those persons brings one other person to worship with them, we are assured of a congregation of 70 to 80. Of course there are still over a hundred people in worship who are not directly connected to the worship leaders, but having worship that is led by larger ensembles does have an impact on attendance. A praise band of five or six individuals creates a different draw, and in come cases can “pack” a sanctuary with people who come to hear the music that they enjoy.

The truth is that there is not single type of music that is right for every worship situation. The dichotomy of praise music verses classical music, sometimes termed “contemporary” verses “classical,” is false dichotomy. Folk and light rock music may be contemporary, but also may be leaning heavily on ancient roots. The classical choral repertoire includes brand new music that is currently being written. Both genres of music involve people of different ages.

When congregations present music as “either/or” decisions, they set up a false division.

Certainly our congregation hasn’t got everything figured out when it comes to music. We have many members who would like more upbeat music and a wider variety of accompanying instruments. But I suspect that those who predict that traditional choirs will disappear from churches are a bit premature in their predictions as well. There is room in most congregations for a wide variety of musical styles and approaches.

Last night there were ten ringers and a director involved in the bell choir. At one point, I counted eighteen persons at the vocal choir. With directors and the organist, that’s

about thirty people who are coming to church for meaningful events twice a week. It is a significant group even in a large congregation.

I have no objection to the use of praise bands and other styles of music, but I seen them as an addition to worship, not as a replacement for traditional musical styles. It is unfortunate that the community Thanksgiving service will be using the praise band approach as a substitute for the traditional choir instead of an additional musical offering. But it is the way most of the participating congregations work. They have multiple services, with different musicians for the various services. They think in terms of the “traditional” service and the “contemporary” service. The community service has been “traditional” in the past but will be “contemporary” this year.

I’ll be there. I may even try to be a part of the praise band. But I will also miss the combined choir. Perhaps next year we can figure out how to have both kinds of music in the same service.

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November 6, 2009 – Shadow of the Cross



One of the architectural features of our church is a large outdoor cross. It was one of the first purchases of the First Congregational Trust when the trust was established and it won design and fabrication awards when it was first erected. It is a distinctive steel structure, painted white and lighted at night by a floodlight at its base. It is one of the identifying features of our building. Many people who have never visited the church will recognize its location when we say, “It has a large white cross.”

My office is located near the east entrance to the building, where the cross stands and I often park near the base of the cross and enter and exit the building at that end. Over the years I have collected dozens of photographs of he cross. It is especially beautiful at sunrise with the bright colors behind the cross. I’ve also gotten a few pictures of the cross from across town or down the street that give a different view.

Many evenings in winter, when it is dark as I leave the building, all I can make out is the faint outline of the cross, which is illuminated from the other side, but dark on the side toward the building. With a nearly full moon, the cross has been a dim shadow this week. It is bright and readily visible from the east, but from the west, it is difficult to make out its form.

The cross is a mixed symbol for Christianity. It is at the same time a symbol of mortality and a symbol of resurrection. It is a bit of a mystery how the church ended up with the cross as one of its predominant symbols. This was not the case of the early church. It took several centuries before the cross gained common acceptance as a symbol of

Christianity. Early Christians preferred the shape of a fish or other symbols for their faith. The cross was a Roman instrument of torture and not a pleasant or attractive shape for those who had witnessed the brutality of a Roman public crucifixion.

But the cross illustrates a unique feature of our faith. Christianity does not focus on getting its believers out of the harsh realities of this life. Our faith is based in a savior who came to us in human form and shared all of human life, including the pain of death itself. Ours is not a faith that promises that there will be no unpleasant experiences. It does not promise freedom from pain, or release from work, or escape from human commitments. We are given the promise of forgiveness and of God's continual presence. There is no experience in this life that we must face alone. God is always with us. In Jesus we have the clear demonstration that there is no human experience that God would avoid.

So I find meaning in the cross that has a bright side and a dim side as well. Although I am sure the designers of our cross never intended it to be viewed at night from the dark side, those of us who do see that perspective are invited to think of the cross from a much broader perspective. In a world filled with "pretty" crosses worn as jewelry and decorating buildings, it can be meaningful to consider the dark side of the cross as well.

Today our congregation is preparing for a funeral to be held on Saturday for one of the pioneers of our community. We will be allowed to celebrate a long life, well-lived and a death that was reasonably peaceful and free from pain. We have been given the gift of 90 years worth of memories and contributions from this woman. She was a community leader, a mother, a valued church member, and a fascinating person. There will be a few tears as we say good bye, but there is also a sense of triumph and joy in having been privileged to witness such a wonderful life.

At the same time, families are receiving notification and planning funerals for thirteen soldiers who were the victims of what seems to be a very strange and unthinkable outburst of violence. The shootings took place in a medical building where soldiers gather without their weapons. Some of these soldiers were anticipating going into war zones, but yesterday was a day of peace for them in a place that is safe and secure. Except yesterday it wasn't. The best training and security seemed unable to anticipate and prevent the violent deaths of innocent victims. It is possible that we will never understand what happened. With the information that we have at this point, it just doesn't make sense.

But our faith does not remove us from either of these experiences of death. Christ, who was undeniably present at the death of our church member, was every bit as present at the passing of the victims of the shootings. Our faith invites us to look for the meanings of the lives that were prematurely cut short and to recognize the triumph of God's gift of life even in the most horrible and unthinkable of circumstances.

Some days our attention is focused on the dark side of the cross. But the bright side does not cease to exist even when our perspective prevents us from seeing it.

That cross is a powerful symbol that is deeply meaningful on the bright days and the dark days as well. It is only a symbol. Our faith does not require the physical presence of a huge piece of steel and more than it requires fancy jewelry or colorful vestments. Our faith does not require institutions and buildings in order to be alive. But we practice our faith in the context of traditions and gifts of previous generations. I am grateful for the cross as a symbol of the deeper promises of our faith.

It is like the picture with today's blog. It is barely a picture - one can't make out much other than a hazy light in a field of dark. The picture isn't the cross - it is just a reminder. The cross isn't our faith - it is just a reminder.

But it is a powerful reminder indeed.

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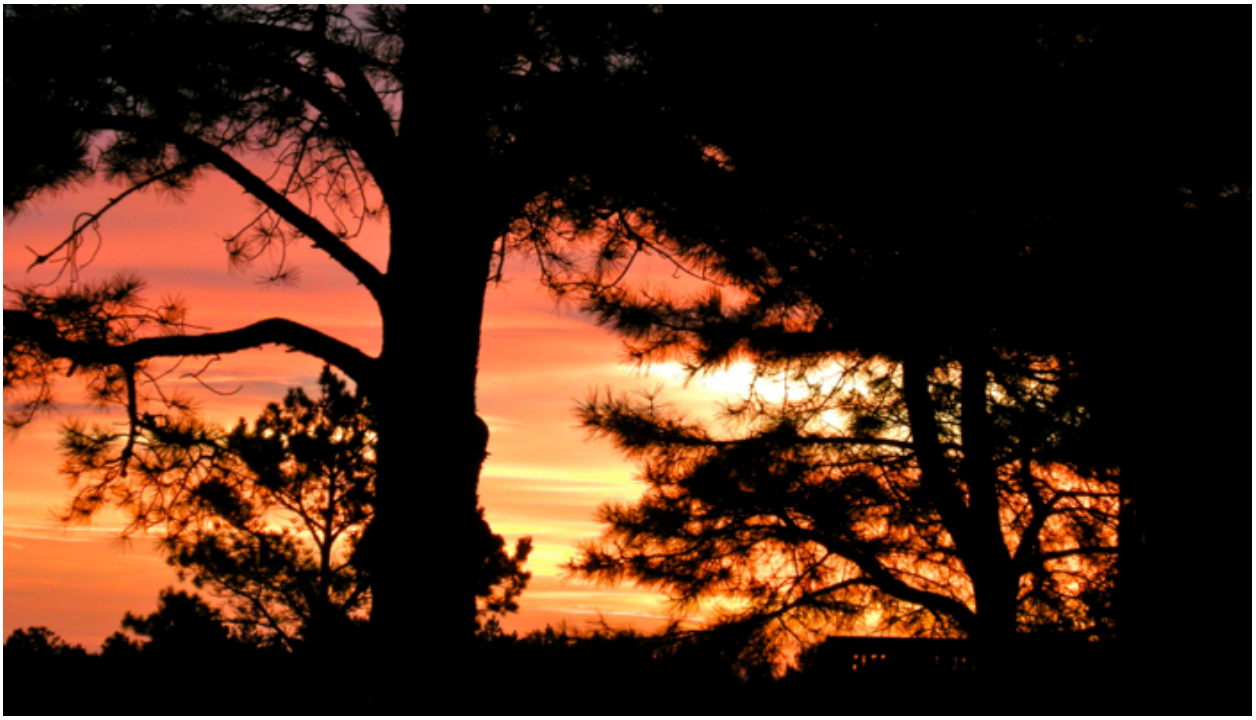
November 7, 2009 – New Every Day



There has been more than a small amount of repetition in my schedule the past week or so. Actually, I am a bit of a creature of habit and so I like the repetition. I rise at about the same time each day, read the headlines from a few web sites, check out the newspaper headlines, do a little work and get dressed for work. At this time of year, I usually get to drive into the sunrise to work. We get incredibly beautiful sunrises around here. The sunrise pictures that I take tend to show the yellow, red and orange pretty well. They don't show the pinks, purples and all the other colors that often adorn our skies in the morning.

Once I'm in my office, I try to do as much desk work as quickly as possible so that I can focus my attention on people when they start coming to the church. I do most of my calling in the afternoons. This week I've been gearing up for a busy weekend. I have a funeral today and tomorrow starts with our regular church service. The ban on nursing home visitations has been lifted slightly, so I got permission to resume services at three nursing homes. The Department of Education has a fellowship event in the late afternoon. So I'll be running most of the day.

Sometimes, I linger in bed - never very long - five minutes or so - and I wish for a few moments that I might sleep a bit more. But then the day gets going and I forget that feeling rather quickly.

The truth is that despite the routine, every day is fresh with new challenges, new opportunities and new adventures. It is like the sunrise. Only those who never look at

them think that sunrises are the same every morning. My day begins with newness every day.

And I think of those who have no routine in their lives at the moment:

The people of Afghanistan and the members of the security forces serving in that country never know when the next bomb is going to go off or who will be the victims.

The families of the victims of the Fort Hood Shooting and the residents of the community surround the base must be waking with a sense of shock and grief and the knowledge that they have lost something that cannot be recovered.

There must be a similar sense of shock for those who worked in the office building in Florida where a gunman left one dead and five injured.

Residents of the coastal areas in New South Wales in Australia aren't sleeping well at all and the waters rise and they face flooding for the second time this year.

The people of the Philippines are cleaning up after yet another devastating tropical storm in a year when storm after storm after storm has been pounding the island nation.

They have downgraded the storm from a hurricane to a tropical depression, but whatever you call it, it has drenched Nicaragua and Honduras. It could regain strength and is threatening parts of the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico.

This world is filled with people whose lives are anything but routine. A little routine in my life is a good thing.

Routine doesn't mean that the same thing happens day after day. Each day's actions influence the next one. When I decide to put in a little extra time in the evening, I have a slightly smaller work load facing me the next day. When I invest in relationships with people, there are more people to help share the mission and ministry of the church. And the pace of my lie is directly influenced by the decisions and commitments I make.

The surprises in my life are more often good than frightening, more often wonderful than painful, more often joyous than sad. It is like the sunrise. It is not that we don't have cloudy days, it is just that there are more glorious sunrises than gloomy foggy mornings. And even the fog is mysterious and wonderful in the hills.

I snuck away from the office for a couple of hours yesterday morning and finished the painting on the north side of our house. Now all of the remaining work is on the south side where the sun is warmer and the light better for painting. And the good thing about

painting is that the progress is visible. It is easy to see what has been completed. The sense of accomplishment grows with each investment of time.

As I prepared to write this morning, I went through about a year's sunrise photographs. Yesterday's pictures were the only ones taken from the east end of the house looking through the neighbor's gorgeous old pine tree. I usually take sunrise photos from the porch on the north side of the house - it's where I go out to greet the morning each day. But the painting project had me walking around the house and looking yesterday and I got a new angle on a familiar sight.

Life really is new every morning. A song of praise and thanksgiving is in order.

"God has created a new day, silver and green and gold.
Live that the sunset may find you worthy God's gifts to hold."

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November 8, 2009 – Too Dependent on the Technology



I first noticed problems with my computer on Friday. The video display was completely blank and after a couple of redstart attempts, I ended up taking it to the shop, where it promptly recovered and began working normally. In a brief conversation with the technician, I learned that this wasn't totally unheard of and that it was most likely a power management situation and wouldn't recur.

But recur it did.

I had gone back to work on Friday and worked successfully through the day Saturday, but Saturday evening the screen was again blank and I could find no way to make the computer work. I went to bed with the computer shut off and was convinced that there was some kind of hardware problem, perhaps a faulty video card.

But life is rarely simple. And computers, though simpler than life, are fairly complex machines.

In the morning, I had video display, but the machine wouldn't boot. I booted it from a system disk and found out that my hard drive was somehow corrupted. So as I write this blog entry it is going through a restoration of the hard disk from a backup, a process that is going to take a bit of time and that will result in the loss of several important files that I had on the hard drive because I haven't been as diligent about

regular back ups as I should have been. My computers have been so reliable in recent years that I have grown lax in my backup strategies.

Some lessons not only have to be learned the hard way, they have to be re-learned when new problems arise.

It is likely that little will be lost, as I have a variety of data backups in a variety of places, but the process of getting the computer back in order is going tot take a lot of time and time is a commodity of which I am very short at the present.

It seems that re-thinking my over-dependence on technology is appropriate, and if I intend to turn this experience into a time to learn. So I am writing this morning's blog on another computer - an older one that we use at the church that is stripped of much of the advanced computing software. It has a good word processor, and basic Internet access, but I'll have to await the repair of the other computer before I have access to the web-authoring software.

I actually do know how to write with a pen and paper. And I can write neatly enough to read my writing, but it is something that I rarely do. Much of what I want to have written will need to be edited and the process of editing is much easier if I have the basic writing entered into the computer. With flash drives and other technologies, it is simple to move digital files from one place to another. I can even use my cell phone as an instrument to move files around.

It wasn't always this way.

When I was working on my professional paper for my D.Min. degree, the process was one of typing. Typing had to be done in a specific format and mistakes needed to be corrected. While there was an approved technique for correcting a mistake of a couple of letters, editing of any substance required re-typing the paper. As a result, I typed that paper over and over again. The process is one of writing, being edited, submitting to peer review, editing again, submitting to the review of one's advisor, editing again, and finally submitting the paper to a panel of professors and engaging in an oral defense of the paper. In that process I did a lot of typing that was basically copying my own words. I got to know my paper very well. As opposed to the things I write on the computer, I was very familiar not just with every word, but how each paragraph fit onto a page. After several drafts of the paper, I could catch my mistakes in typing by noticing which words were at the end of the line. Only old coots like me will remember having to return the carriage manually for each line.

I don't know that our modern world is better or worse. It is just different. The average academic does a lot more research than we were able to do when I was in graduate school. We had access to excellent libraries, but an interlibrary loan took

a week. We often restricted our research to the periodicals that were available int he university library. Now, through the internet, it is possible to search tens of thousands of articles with a few key strokes. Finding relevant source material is far less difficult and performing a literature search can be done from one's home without even going to the library. On the other hand, there is a lot more data that needs to be sorted. And there is a lot of information available on the Internet that is not accurate.

I don't intend to reject modern technology, just do a little re-thinking. My quality of life should not be dependent upon a machine. And despite the brilliance of the engineers who designed the computers and software we use, they are still machines that lack human qualities.

Maybe I should write an essay by hand from time to time. It's worth considering.

POSTSCRIPT ADDED MONDAY MORNING - in the way of the world and the passing of the generations, the solution to my computer problems began with a call to our son on Sunday evening. I remember when he first went away to college and would call me with computer problems and I would talk over the solutions with him on the phone. Our roles have reversed. He helped me assess the basic problem with the computer, get it booted to its start-up drive, make a fresh backup of all of the data and get back going. The machine will still need to go to the shop for a bench test to make sure that everything is working properly and there may be a few repairs required, but the immediate crisis is over and I am back in business with the blog. And I have resolved to get back into a regular pattern of data backup if for no other reason than to avoid the feeling of panic that I might have lost some of the work I have done. Ah technology . . .

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November 9, 2009 – Campfire



The Department of Education held a family fellowship event at the church last night. It came at the end of a long day of rushing about for me. After worship, I was set to lead an adult discussion, but there were no takers on the topic. Our Church's Wider Mission didn't compete well with the freshly-baked cinnamon rolls in the fellowship hall. And we had shown an OCWM video at the beginning of worship, so there were plenty of people who had a reasonable understanding of the topic. Still, it was a bit discouraging and added to the computer problems of the morning, I was a bit discouraged.

But we were able to do our regular nursing home services, which was a real bonus. For a month we have had a total ban on all visitors, including pastors, at several area nursing homes out of a fear of the spread of the flu. The ban was lifted slightly last week, allowing for worship services. The stretch of time without visitors meant that I got a hearty welcome at all of the nursing homes and my meditation seemed to click and to get better with each presentation.

But it was a rush from the third service back to the church for the fellowship event. I had earlier laid out a campfire in a pit that had been dug by one of the youth from the congregation and inspected and approved by the battalion chief from the fire department. I rushed back to the church to help with the event and arrived to find only a couple of members of the Department in the building at ten minutes before the scheduled event time. I was prepared for another disappointment.

But I was wrong.

People sometimes just don't come early to such events. By the time things got going, there were 42 people participating in an evening of cooking hot dogs and marshmallows over the fire, hay rides, board games and lots of other activities. The day cooled quickly as the sun went down, but that only seemed to increase the excitement with the campfire. People huddled around the fire and told stories of other campfire memories. Grandparents helped grandchildren. And there were plenty of sticky fingers and happy faces.

I associate campfires with summer. I grew up with a fire pit on our property and although we had a kitchen, it wasn't often used for summer evening meals. We had all sorts of different foods cooked around the campfire. When the weather started to turn cold and the time came to return to school, we went back to eating supper indoors.

But there was a tradition of a huge bonfire to kick off high school homecoming activities. And I know that this tradition was shared by other communities. So there are plenty of adults who think of a bonfire as a fun autumn activity.

We didn't attempt a bonfire of the size that we used to have for homecoming. We would have never gotten away with it these days. A fire permit allows for a fire ring of no more than three feet across. And it specifies a maximum height for the flames. All of which was no problem for last night's activities because we had a lot of children who we wanted to keep safe and we were cooking around the fire. Small fires are usually better for cooking than large ones.

Of course I forgot to take my camera with me to the event. But I did snap a few cell phone pictures. This morning when I sorted through the pictures I decided that there are several that can be used for reporting on the event. And I saw several people with cameras at the event. But my favorite of the pictures isn't one of the clear ones. It is the grainy and dim picture above. The pair in the picture aren't a mother and daughter - at least they aren't each other's mother and daughter. They both had other family members at the event and gathered around the fire, but the event invited a conversation between the two of them as they cooked hot dogs for supper. One of the things that I enjoy most about about fellowship events at the church is watching relationships develop between the people.

There are lots of changes taking place in the contemporary church. It is hard to predict which events will draw a crowd and which ones will not. Our church, which has been defined by its programs for some years is less focused on programs. As we move to being a more mission-centered church, outreach and specific projects become more of a focus. People are more attracted to stand-alone events than to programs that require a commitment to regular trips to the church. Things that used to work are not as popular. And new ideas sometimes are quite successful.

Of course a campfire isn't a new idea. But we haven't had such an event at the church for a long time, if ever. We have lots of campfires at Placerville Camp, but to have one at the church wasn't something we'd done before. And we had gotten used to believing that Sunday Evenings just didn't work for programs. You can't draw a crowd for a Sunday evening event. That old "rule" obviously didn't apply last night.

Once I got a moment to change my clothes, the campfire turned into a wonderful way to end a busy day and a great opportunity to watch as God continued the work of new creation of our community. As we say good by to some of the old ways, it is fun to watch new ways emerge. It's too early to tell whether or not a fall campfire will become a tradition, but last night's event was just the right idea for this moment in our congregation's life.

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November 10, 2009 – Books and Books



I think that we are making progress in the process of making more use of the Internet. Despite the frustrations of this week's computer glitches, the machines are basically reliable and we are increasing the church's web presence. The new integrated calendar is working well for us. And we are setting priorities for additional ways to use the Internet to keep lines of communication open within the church.

This blog and my personal web site are a bit different. They started as a hobby and I try to keep them on that side of my life. I write the blog not because I am seeking a large group of readers, but because I need to write. It is a sort of an exhibitionist journal, I guess - a set of daily ramblings that for whatever reasons I make public. The blog may be a way for people who are looking at the church to get to know me better, but most of the readers of the blog are people who already know me.

Since it is my hobby, my personal web site has areas that work better than others. I designed the web site to be a way for people to get to know me and a way to provide information to people with whom I shared part of this life's journey such as classmates and colleagues who now are in other parts of the world. So I included my academic CV so that people could check out what I had published or what I've done to further my education since we were together. I also include some photo albums to show some of the things we have done. I started the web site before I knew anything about facebook and other social networking sites, and I still am not very skilled in those sites.

One of the areas on my web site is a place where I intended to post brief reviews of books as I read them. I thought it would be fun and since reading is such big part of my life I thought scanning through the list of books I have read might be an interesting way to get to know me. The problem is that I read books way faster than I write the reviews. I don't mind writing a few paragraphs about a book I have read and it usually doesn't take much time, but at the point when I finish a book, I'm usually more eager to pick up another book than to head to the computer and start writing. So the books are piling up and even when I write five or six reviews in a week, there are always more that I intend to write.

But the truth is that I'm not very organized about my reading. My desk at home and the one at work are covered with piles of books. Most of the books are ones that I have already read and that I haven't decided what to do with them next. I am sure that the number of books coming in greatly exceeds the number going out.

It isn't that there is a lack of good things to do with good books. There is a local charity that holds an annual book sale. Some of the books could be donated to the church library (where part of the job of organizing might fall to me!). Other books could be sold at a book store. And there is a great online book swap site where one can trade books. I haven't gotten into that site yet, but it holds a lot of possibilities - as soon as I get organized. And people who know me well aren't expecting me to get organized anytime soon.

In this landmark book, *Childhood and Society*, Erik Erikson developed a set of psychological challenges that each person needs to accomplish on the way to maturity. Infants need to learn basic trust over mistrust. Other ages have other stages and tasks. The book, like all theories of developmental psychology, has flaws and it is easy to challenge some of the assumptions that Erikson makes. But it remains a very good model for understanding human behavior and the tasks of teaching and learning. According to Erikson's theory, I am at the point where I am shifting my attention from the things that I make or produce to integration of the various facets of my life. From his perspective, my main developmental task at this stage of my life is sifting and sorting.

Not only do I need to sort books, but also pictures, memories, stories, possessions, ideas, relationships, and much more as I try to make meaningful sense out of all of the experiences of my life. As has often been true since I first read Erikson, it seems to make sense that that is where I am with my life. The only thing that is a bit troubling is the knowledge that on Erickson's chart, this is the last stage - the task of sorting and integrating will be my life's work for the rest of my life. It isn't a stage that I'm going through, but rather a stage where I will remain.

Erikson is probably right. I have plenty of stuff to sort. And it is time to start getting rid of things that I no longer need. I certainly have more than I need.

So if you are looking for me, I'm the one behind all the stacks of books. And as I sort I keep running into volumes that I have not read and I have to stop to read another book. And, increasingly, I run into books that I need to read again. Reading Erasmus, for example, is a vastly different experience in my fifties than it was in my twenties. I'm not sure that I was mature enough to understand what I was reading in those days.

So I'm going to get started at sorting out all of these books.

But first I need to read this one and, well, actually, I need to read all of the books in this pile, and in that one . . .

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November 11, 2009 - Work



Illustration from University of California, Santa Barbara Student Health Services.

There is a verse from Psalm 127 that I have often quoted at Habitat for Humanity events. It is meaningful for groundbreaking ceremonies and for devotions for work groups.

“Unless the Lord builds this house, its builders labor in vain.” We usually just quote this little bit of a passage in the context. It seems appropriate and the psalm changes topic quickly and ends up extolling the value of having many sons, comparing them to arrows in a quiver.

But it was the second verse of the psalm that caught my attention when I was reading it earlier this week: “In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat – for he grants sleep to those he loves.”

I have always been an early riser. And I have it deeply engrained into my understanding of the world that putting in a few extra hours at work is a good thing.

I remember having a sense of privilege about early rising when I was a child. My father was an early riser and getting up early afforded some special times with dad when the rest of the house was sleeping. Sometimes he would take my flying, or out to a café for breakfast, or just to work with him. Getting up early meant that I got my father all to myself for a little while. I liked that. I taught myself to get up and get going in the morning. It is something that I have continued to do all of my life.

In my role as a pastor, I can accomplish a lot of paperwork and other parts of the job that require concentration by getting up early. I do better with writing and intense cognitive tasks first thing in the morning. I am a bit more efficient with my time.

This is not to say that I never get sleepy. I get tired just like anyone else and there are mornings when it is hard to pull myself from bed. But there is an advantage to being tired. It makes it easy to go to sleep when the time comes. I've long been good at taking a nap when one is needed and I don't have trouble falling to sleep at night.

And I am enough of a bible student to know that there are some translation issues with the last bit of the verse, which might also be understood to mean "for while they sleep he provides for them," rather than "he grants sleep to those he loves." Neither translation, however, quite matches my understanding of life, which has probably been more based on the non-Biblical aphorisms of "God helps those who help themselves," and "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise."

I don't think the Psalmist's intent was to instruct people not to work for their living.

I suspect that the vanity in that verse has more to do with the motivation for working than it does with the act of working itself. Excessive literalism applies to the poem might lead one away from understanding of its true meaning. "Unless the Lord builds this house, its builders labor in vain," is not intended to mean that people should cease the activity of building. In fact the verse is making a specific reference to the temple at Jerusalem and the need of all of the people involved in that project to understand that there is a big gap between God's realm and the structures and institutions that humans construct. Sometimes we confuse ourselves into thinking that we are building God's kingdom and the psalm reminds all that God's presence cannot be manipulated by shows of wealth or power.

Working for one's own gratification is a similar vanity, according to the Psalmist.

The truth is that what makes life meaningful is being engaged in something bigger than oneself. Having a home is worthy of our efforts, but making sure that there is adequate housing for all of God's people makes one feel a part of God's work. Feeding oneself is good, but working to end hunger evokes a sense of being a partner with God. The Bible is not as quick to question what we are doing as it is to ask why we are doing the things we do.

Toiling for food for myself simply isn't a task worthy of the gifts that I have been given. God calls me to do more.

So I continue to get up early in the morning. And I continue to sleep well when the time for rest comes. And there is no end to my work in sight. Many of the things that are worth doing will take more than a lifetime to accomplish.

When I am at my best I am able to see that it isn't my work at all.

The best work in the world is God's work.

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November 12, 2009 – Veteran's Day Every Day



I decided not to write about Veterans Day yesterday. I wanted to watch and observe our community and to think for the day before I wrote. I don't have too much to say, really. I am not a veteran. The day is reserved for honoring others. I am the son of a veteran. My father was one of those that Tom Brokaw referred to as "the greatest generation" in his book. Without going into the presumptuousness of that appellation, my father did serve in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II, primarily as a service pilot and an instructor. He served all of his time within the United States, but he did leave the service with a purple heart.

There was a parade in downtown Rapid City yesterday as well as ceremonies in a couple of places. One area congregation invited service people to attend in uniform on Sunday. On the one hand, one might say that the Rapid City community is pretty good at honoring its veterans. But I suspect that we aren't that much different from other communities.

We are a community that is partially dependent upon an Air Force base, so we are practiced at honoring those who are currently serving. And we do like parades. There are plenty of bumper stickers and magnets on cars with "support our troops" themes.

But there are definite variations in how veterans are treated. Currently there is a surge of support for veterans of World War II. As they age and we feel the regular loss of World War II veterans to natural causes, we are beginning to realize that

they don't have many years left and that opportunities to express gratitude are passing. The veterans of WWII were so involved in civic activities that they were once involved in almost every aspect of life and often were in charge of organizations. And there were a lot of them around. Now that the pace of funerals has picked up we are beginning to realize that we stand at the passing of a generation. Special programs such as honor flight have been developed as an expression of gratitude and support. In many cases, the opportunity came too late.

Korean War veterans belong to a group often characterized as the silent generation and usually get less attention. They have learned to take a back seat to the World War II Veterans. This is in part due to the high level of civic involvement of WW II Veterans combined with their tendency to serve long terms in leadership positions. Korean War Veterans found it difficult to assume positions of leadership and often did not feel welcomed into veterans' organizations that were filled with WWII veterans.

Vietnam Veterans returned to a nation that was trying hard to forget their war. For decades they found that attention was focused on other groups during events honoring and recognizing veterans. The construction of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC was a significant and cathartic event for our nation that raised the visibility of Vietnam Veterans and their service. But the problems of these veterans remain high and they continue to be an underserved population. It is a national shame that there are about the same number of veterans of the Vietnam War who are homeless as there were those who died in the war. In our town the rescue mission has had to build an entire facility to house homeless veterans. This is common across the nation.

In all three of these conflicts the nation has had a tendency to direct more attention to the healthy ones who returned than to those who returned with permanent injury. And of the wounded, those whose injuries are visible such as physical or mobility disabilities receive more attention than those who return with psychological illnesses.

I have learned that often those who are most eager to wave flags at parades are motivated in part out of their own desire to feel good and that they often are no where to be seen when veterans need significant care and attention.

Politicians love to make speeches at parades but often are less enthusiastic about finding adequate funding for medical services for veterans. And the general public supports them. Too often advocates for increased funding for veterans services are labeled as big spenders or as advocates of higher taxes. And there is no support for higher taxes – the general public does not see the connection between the magnets on their cars and the very real on-going expenses that must be paid.

Since the end of the Vietnam War our nation has continued to produce veterans at a regular pace. Some served between formal conflicts. Because of the extended length of wars and the need for multiple deployments, those currently serving may be exposed to far more violence and trauma than those who served in earlier wars. The entire span of WWII was less than four years from Pearl Harbor to Victory in Japan day. A typical deployment in the Vietnam War was for a single year and very few veterans served more than two tours of duty. We now have many troops who have served multiple deployments Iraq and Afghanistan. And every war has produced advances in field trauma care that mean that there is a increase in the survival rate of those who are severely wounded and disabled.

Veterans Day is a fine tribute. And I do not want to criticize those who organize the parades and wave the flags. But the truth is that our commitment to veterans needs to be far deeper than an occasional holiday. It is the day-to-day service of family members who are caring for severely wounded, the day-to-day anguish of those suffering from psychological trauma, the day-to-day needs of the left-behind families of those deployed, and the day-to-day struggle for adequate food and housing for forgotten veterans that demonstrate the true level of commitment to our veterans. There wasn't much talk about increased suicide and divorce rates among soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan in the observances yesterday, but we will need a lot of caring people to prevent these numbers from climbing.

Veteran's day needs to be every day and not just an occasional puff of emotion.

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November 13, 2009 – Immigration in the Heartland



Students of demographics know that while the population of the United States continues to grow, there are many places in the midwest where populations have been in decline for decades. The past 20 years has seen net emigration for most small towns in the midwest. This creates problems for the maintenance of community institutions. Schools and churches are disappearing as the populations of the communities decline. Some small towns are simply drying up with few businesses and little of the vitality that once marked those places. Entire rural counties are slowly dying, with shrinking and aging populations.

When we look at the United Church of Christ in South Daktoa, the only growing congregations we have are in communities that are growing. And growing communities in South Dakota are few and far between. Projecting the trends into the near future reveals that we will have a decline in the number of congregations over the next couple of decades at least.

There are a couple of communities in rural and isolated areas of the midwest that are going against those trends, largely due to immigration. And immigration is bringing surprising cultural changes to the heartland.

The plains have long been a place of immigration. Prior to the arrival of European settlers, indigenous tribes were primarily mobile, following the buffalo. The movement of the tribes sometimes resulted in one group displacing another, but often bands would move into a new region and co-exist with existing bands. As the continent was settled

by primarily European immigrants the culture and economy of the region shifted dramatically. Entire communities took on the culture and sometimes the language of other places. German and Norwegian churches wee formed and communities were filled with people of similar backgrounds and experiences. The end of the homestead movement meant the peak in population for many communities. Then, as farms and ranches grew in size, the population declined. Children grew up in rural communities, but moved to cities to pursue their livelihood. There was some return of retiring elders, but this has not been a significant source of population for many areas.

But there are a few communities in the heartland that have embraced new waves of population and are growing in surprising ways. In rural Iowa, you could find a Buddhist temple with monks dressed in saffron robes in the midst of the cornfields. Somali workers have arrived in the corner where South Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska and Minnesota meet. In Postville, Iowa ultra-orthodox Jews have formed a synagogue. In Storm Lake, Iowa, the halls in the high school echo with languages and dialects from every continent on earth.

Embracing immigration has not meant that the communities are integrated. Immigration is starting to have an impact in some places. At Storm Lake High School Hispanic students are now the majority. The percentage of native students is declining as more immigrants arrive. With family farms giving way to increasingly large scale agribusiness operations and fewer and fewer wages and benefits being offered int he meatpacking industry, the face of the population is shifting dramatically.

A couple of hundred miles to the east, Postville, Iowa is a community that has been brought to its knees. It never has been a big town, perhaps 2,000 residents in years past, growing to 3,000 by the turn of the century. In 1987 a Kosher mean processing plant opened in the community and brought ultra-orthodox rabbis and their families to the community. Soon immigrants, both legal and illegal, began to arrive to work at the plant. Many were from Central America, but there were workers from Ukraine, Israel and Somalia as well. Then in May of 2008 immigration officers raided the plant and found plenty of violations. Thousands of charges have been filed and owners of the meat plant have sought chapter 11 bankruptcy protection while trying to find a buyer for the plant. More than a year after the raid, Postville residents don't know whether or not the community's main employer will ever offer jobs again. More than a thousand people have left the community. The boom that came with the packing plant has gone bust and the community doesn't have enough social services to deal with the unemployment and displacement that has come with the closing of the plant. Some former workers at the plant have been ordered by the courts to remain in the community and are equipped with tracking bracelets as they are material witnesses in the case against plant owners. Without jobs and without the ability to leave town they are left in desperate circumstances. The community's churches do not have the resources to provide for all of the needs.

Other communities have had more positive results from their experiences with immigration, but it is clear that immigration is having an effect on the heartland.

This has not had much of an impact on Rapid City. For the most part the events of communities in Iowa have not made a visible difference in how we go about our lives and work. Although we have always had a trickle of new immigrants, it continues to be just a trickle. Somehow we have avoided the boom and bust cycles that other midwestern communities have experienced. But our statewide Conference is experiencing continuing decline and that is having an impact on our ability to maintain the ministries we once took for granted. With fewer congregations and fewer members the staff of our conference has declined and programs have been eliminated. The role of the conference has shifted and whatever programs occur are now primarily the responsibility of the largest congregations of the conference. We have once Sudanese congregation in Sioux Falls, but so far we have not formed ministries that are focussed on the needs of newer immigrants.

We cannot overcome the realities of sociology. Population shifts affect the church. Ignoring these realities will not change them. As the South Dakota Conference continues to explore and envision its future, it is likely that our identity will shift as the people in our communities change. Our images of who we are and of the place we are called to minister need to be updated in the light of present realities.

The future is, of course, in God's hands. May we be faithful to our covenant with God in the newness that is unfolding.

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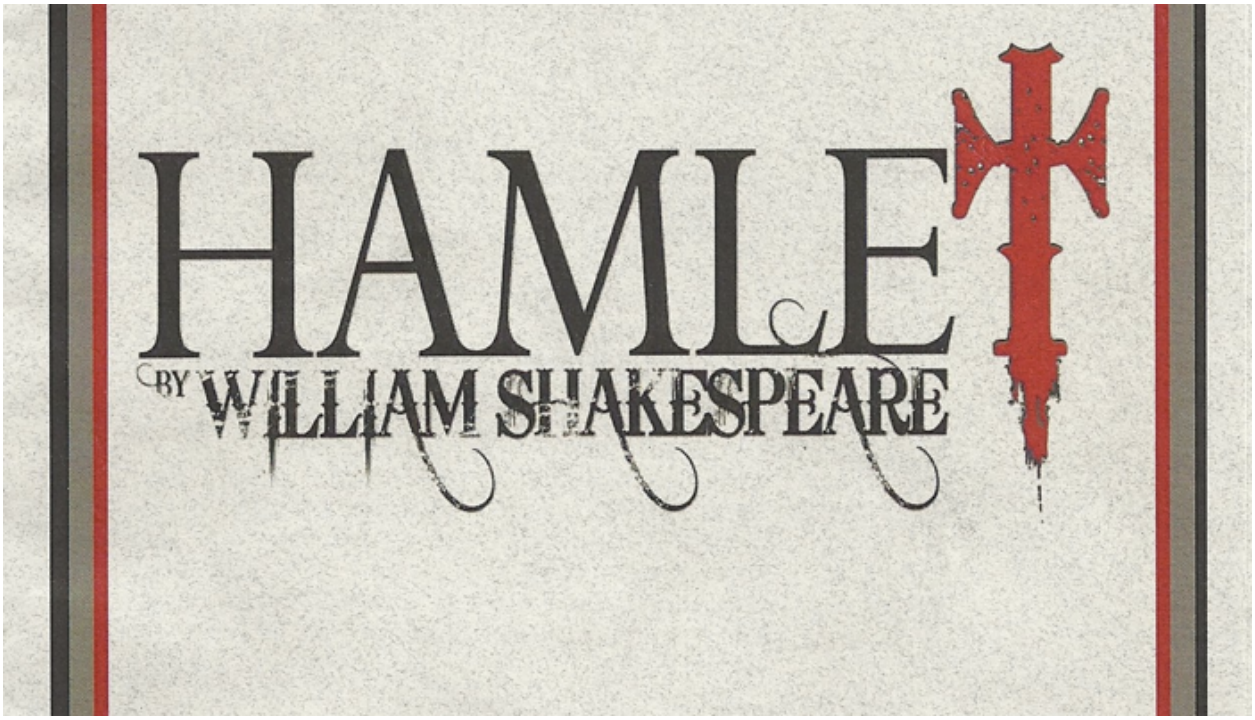
November 14, 2009 – The Play's the Thing



The pace of events in the ministry is never predictable. We know that we will be dealing with death and grief, but there are weeks when it is not the main focus of our attention. Then there are weeks, like last week, when grief is an ever-present companion as we go about our work and walking with others in their grief becomes the main path of ministry.

A week ago today we gathered for a funeral and celebration of life of one of our community's pioneers who had lived a full and faithful life. She had chosen the path of community service and had become one of the treasures of our area with her vast knowledge of history and of the people who had shaped our area. She had died with grace and dignity only at the end of a rich journey.

By Wednesday I was meeting with the sons of another woman who had died and Thursday morning was interrupted with the need to visit yet another grieving family. Funerals have been set for Monday and Tuesday of next week.

Yesterday afternoon I returned to the office after a visit to plan one of next week's funeral to find messages waiting and was soon on the road in the opposite direction to meet with yet another widow. The contrast between the day's two widows was striking. One, after sixty-six years of a wonderful marriage was not ready for the love story to reach this conclusion. She has lived for some time knowing that when the death occurred she would be left wanting another year, another month, another day. And she does. She can't quite imagine life without him. Another widow never expected to

receive that title before her thirtieth birthday. The death was sudden, shocking, unexpected and overwhelming. Just figuring out how to speak with her children about the details she was learning was a monumental task.

So, literally held two widows in one afternoon, it might seem strange that my evening would be devoted to a play that is filled with even more death. Shakespeare's classic tragedy is rife with death and filled with thoughts and words about the meaning of life and death. It is, to say the least, an incredible challenge for a high school drama department, but we have grown used to seeing incredible productions from this high school.

I was tired, the actors were nervous and it took a few minutes for us to adjust to the pace and sound of old English. But by the first appearance of the ghost ofHamlet's father, both the actors and the audience were transported back to Kronborg Castle and the intrigue of King Claudius and Queen Gertrude.

One of the startling aspects of High School drama is that despite costumes and makeup the audience is always aware, in the back of its mind, of the age of the actors. It is, perhaps not such a stretch to see youth playing the parts of Hamlet, Ophelia and Laertes, but Polonius, Claudius and Gertrude are characters whose life experiences and cynicism are beyond the experiences of the young actors. Yet they played their parts in a convincing manner.

Entertainment is an art and the stage has long been a place to practice art. But the theatre invites patrons to go far beyond art to wrestle deeply with the dilemmas of life. It is no accident that the historical roots of theatre and religion are inextricably intertwined. The layers of truth in a well-presented play transport the audience to a way of pondering life's great mysteries and listening to truth that would not be received were it presented in a less dramatic mode.

Repeatedly I am struck with the ways in which our children speak the truth to our community through the vehicle of high school drama.

They did not romanticize death. It was not pretty. And the cycle of pain, death, sorrow and grief once set in motion rolls over the audience. One lie leads to another. Violence begets violence. Revenge only tastes sweet in fantasy - in reality it is messy and ugly and ends nothing. I know that there are some who think that we should shield our youth from violence and certainly contemporary media exposes children and youth to violence in ways and at times that are wholly inappropriate. But what better place than live theatre to explore life's deeper truths with young people who will, all too soon, experience grief and sorrow and loss.

The stage allows death to be enacted and then to be finished. Hamlet's Father is dead at the beginning of the play. In the course of the drama Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude,

Claudius, Laertes and Hamlet all die. At the curtain call we see and applaud the actors who played those roles alive and healthy. To see the ghost of Hamlet's father run down the stairs and take a bow was one of the treats of the evening. In the theatre youth can speak and think of death and then get up and think about it again.

All too soon these young people will face situations in which death is all too real. Life doesn't always give second chances. And, for the most part, we fight our wars with soldiers that are within a decade of the ages of high school players. The experiences of my day preceding the play reminded me that grief and loss are not the territory of our elders only. These affect all ages and stages of life.

So I am grateful for the play. It is not real life, but like the brief drama enacted in the midst of Shakespeare's play within a play, drama informs life. A work of fiction can speak the truth. And sometimes it is a truth that we need to hear.

Bravo to the thespians of Central High School and to the adults who teach, direct and lead their activities! Indeed, as Prince Hamlet discovers in his attempt to discern the truth of the ghost's message, "the play's the thing."

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November 15, 2009 – Delivering Firewood



There is a long history of distrust in relationships between natives and newcomers in South Dakota. Treaties were made and broken. People were deprived of their land and livelihood. The reservation system is not working for most of the residents. Poverty is a major problem. There is a lack of adequate housing. Health Care is inconsistent and sometimes very difficult to obtain. Chronic diseases like diabetes and alcoholism have higher rates on the reservation than in the community at large. Unemployment is epidemic. Transportation is difficult to obtain with people living in rural and isolated locations.

We feel a responsibility for our neighbors and we want to open channels of dialogue. But the truth is that we do not know how to solve many of the most pressing problems on the reservations.

But we have an abundance of firewood. And we do know how to cut, split and deliver the wood. Yesterday a caravan of ten pickups with five trailers pulled into the yard of Rev. Norman Blue Coat northeast of Eagle Butte. That's about a 375-mile round-trip from our church in Rapid City. We delivered a little over 12 cords of firewood. The Blue Coat family will supervise the distribution of the wood. For four churches and at least three homes the firewood we deliver is the only source of heat in the winter. Other homes use firewood for supplemental heat.

Next week a similar-sized caravan will deliver firewood that is distributed through our partner congregation in Wanblee on the Pine Ridge reservation. By using private vehicles to deliver the wood we are able to involve more people in the process.

We've been doing this long enough that we have developed friendships. At each delivery, we have a pot-luck meal with an abundance of food and good fellowship with our reservation partners.

We are well aware that this project doesn't create any new jobs. We know that it doesn't build homes. We know that it doesn't meet educational needs. It is just one thing that we know how to do that helps a few people.

We call the project "The Woodchuck Society." Anyone who helps is considered to be a member. We don't have a budget. We don't do fund raising. We don't have officers. There is a bit of organization required to select dates, arrange splitting parties, secure volunteers who have pickup trucks and trailers, and arrange for food. The society has been the recipient of several generous gifts including a tandem axle trailer, a wood splitter, and a new motor for the splitter. And many people have graciously donated wood to the project.

There is no shortage of churches from outside our area who are eager to do mission work on the reservations. There are companies who organize youth mission trips as package deals and handle van shuttles from the airport, dormitory housing, work projects and cultural education. Work teams paint houses, make light repairs, help construct a few homes and do significant work on the infrastructure that supports the mission trips, such as building and repairing housing and dining facilities for those who come to visit the reservations.

Some of the outside groups develop lasting relationships, but each year there are thousands of youth who come to the reservations as if they were attending a summer camp. They have a single experience of poverty and indigenous culture and then go home. They report that they are transformed and that their lives have been changed by the experience. But very little is changed for the people who re the recipients of these work camps. The people who live on the reservations have some gratitude for the work that is done and enjoy meeting new people. But the truth is that there is a huge human cost in maintaining reservations for the personal transformation of privileged youth who live far away. And many mission projects seem to be more about making the mission groups feel good than about improving the lives of the people who live on the reservation.

So we try to avoid that type of "hit and run" evangelism. We seek to develop relationships that last.

That is what makes firewood a good match for our congregation. In Lakota and Dakota traditions, the gift of firewood is an honor gift. Youth are encouraged to honor elders with a gift of firewood. When a warrior died in the days before the reservations, the band would supply his widow with firewood as a sign of respect for the warrior. There is a long tradition of generosity that is ingrained into Sioux culture. In hard times and in good times, people share what they have with one another. Giving is far more important than having from the perspective of traditional Lakota values.

We know we can't fix the problems. What we are doing is trying to teach ourselves to be better neighbors while at the same time showing respect for a culture and a way of life that is not our own. In the process we are making a few good friendships and partnerships.

The Woodchuck Society wasn't my idea. It is a good idea and a good match for our congregation. And there is always more room for new Woodchucks. Anyone who can contribute any way from baking cookies to hauling a load of wood is a valued member of our team. And each trip extends our partnership and deepens our respect for our neighbors.

Firewood is good for warming homes. The Woodchuck Society is good at warming hearts.

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November 16, 2009 – A Clash of Cultures



November 16 isn't one of the days remembered as a holiday, but on November 16, 1532 a battle occurred that changed the course of history for all of Central and South America. It was probably the decisive battle that paved the way for Spanish domination of the region. Had things gone differently it is possible that Spanish wouldn't be the dominant language and Christianity wouldn't be the dominant faith in the region. The story of the battle is a story of deception, trickery, and the misapplication of the Christian Gospel. The carnage wrought in the name of Jesus is almost unbelievable.

Atahualpa was the 13th and final emperor of the Incan Empire. At the death of his father Capac died in 1527, the kingdom was devided between Atahualpa, who ruled the northern part of the empire and his half-brother Huascar, who ruled the southern part. A civil war followed, and Atahualpa, who was very popular with his soldiers, gained the victory. He was relaxing with his force of 80,000 battle-hardened troops when he received word of the arrival of the Spanish Conquistador Francisco Pizarro who had only 168 men.

The Spaniards had iron swords, guns, horses and armor. The Incas had none of those things. Pizarro sent his brother as an envoy who persuaded Atahualpa to attend a "feast in his honor" with 5,000 men. At the feast, he was met by the priest Valverde who urged Atahualpa to convert to Christianity and to accept Charles V as sovereign. Atahualpa refused. Valverde issued a signal and the carnage began. Trapped in tight

quarters the Incans had no defense. The 5,000 soldiers were all dead within an hour without injury to the Spanish. Pizarro was only barely able to save Atahualpa, whom he determined would be more valuable alive than dead.

With the Incan leader captive, the Spaniards continued to massacre, killing an estimated 2,000 additional Incans that same day. That is an average of over forty people killed by each of Pizarro's soldiers in a single day.

For most of the next year, Atahualpa was held captive by Pizarro. Atahualpa appealed to the greed of the Spaniards and offered a room filled with gold and silver for his release. The Spaniards agreed, but when the riches were delivered they refused to release Atahualpa. They prepared to burn him at the stake. Once again the priest was brought in. He promised Atahualpa that if he converted to Christianity he would be spared. Atahualpa agreed. He was spared the stake and was executed by strangulation instead.

Fighting between the Spanish and Incas continued after the death of Atahualpa, but the fighting was never balanced and the Spain's conquest of the Incan Empire was assured.

It is not a proud moment for Christianity. The result was that Christianity and specifically Roman Catholicism became the dominant religion in Central America. But the spread of the faith in the region was not, at first, a process of voluntary association. It was brutally forced and accompanied by no small amount of lying, deceit and trickery. The role of the priest in the massacre is not to be diminished. While he probably didn't take place in the actual killing, he certainly was party to the deception that allowed it to take place. And later he participated int he string of broken promises including the false promise that converting to Christianity would save the life of Atahualpa.

How such actions in the name of Jesus can be justified is beyond me. But these and other instances of Christian deception, cruelty, conquest, and massacre are often cited by critics of religion as reasons not to participate in religion. Their argument, "Christians have done evil things therefore don't be a Christian," could easily be applied to other aspects of the situation. For example science and technology led to the modern weapons that allowed 168 men to murder 5,000 in an hour. It would be irrational and wrong, however, to say that we should therefore reject all offerings of science and technology because of their association with evil.

While the argument against Christianity doesn't hold up from a strictly logical standpoint, the fact remains that great carnage and human suffering has been brought about in the name of religion. The promise of salvation was used as a lever of ill-gotten wealth and led to the destruction of human lives and entire cultures.

The theological challenge of how to respond “when bad things happen to good people,” is fairly simple when compared with the challenge of “when good people do bad things to others.”

The autumn is filled with holidays that celebrate the coming of European, language, culture and religion to the Americas. From Columbus Day to Thanksgiving we remember the courage and vision that pioneering people undertook to shape the history of the place where we live. But perhaps, in the midst of the days of celebration there ought to be a day of mourning as well. For not only were things gained in this clash of cultures - there were huge losses as well. November 16 seems to be an appropriate day for sad remembrances of the death and destruction that accompanied the conquest of the Americas by Europeans.

From a theological standpoint, reconciliation with God begins with confession. Being honest about our history might be an important part of drawing closer to God.

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November 17, 2009 – It Could be a Long Summer



AP photo of fires early this year in Victoria.

One of the benefits of the system of worldwide communication that is available to day is that we are able to keep track of events that take place in other parts of the world. As we are enjoying a rather gentle slide toward winter, folks on the other side of the globe are heading toward summer. Here at home it is still early. We are currently having some beautiful late fall weather, but we know that cold and snow are possible at this time of the year.

In southern Australia, people are bracing for what could turn out to be the second catastrophic fire season in a row. Last summer saw devastating fires, loss of life and entire communities as fires raged across the drought-parched forests. Victoria was especially hard hit with the combination of high temperatures and high winds that created firestorms that could not be fought - only fled.

In response to last year's fires, a new warning system was enacted that includes the category "catastrophic" when fire conditions are beyond "extreme" and "severe." When high temperatures, low humidity and very strong winds combine conditions make fires uncontrollable and residents are urged to evacuate even when no actual fire exists. Once a fire get started it may be too late to get out.

The first catastrophic warning was issued today in South Australia. Temperatures are forecast to be in the low forties for the next couple of days. The humidity is very low and high winds should blow through the area. Don't let the fact that Australia uses a different

temperature scale throw you. 40 degrees celsius is 104 degrees fahrenheit. Just as people who measure temperature on the fahrenheit scale think of anything above 100 degrees at hot, those who measure by celsius think of anything over 40 in the same way.

Catastrophic conditions mimic those of February 7, 2009, which has been dubbed "Black Saturday" when 173 people died and an additional 414 were injured in the worst fire disaster ever recorded in Australia. 113 of those who died, died in their own homes. As many 400 fires were raging across Victoria that day, resulting in the loss of 2,000 homes in 78 communities.

Regular readers of this blog will notice that I keep returning to the subject of fire from time to time. I'm not sure of all of the reasons why this is so. Perhaps it is that living in the forest means that one has to be aware of fire and fire danger. In the hills it is said that it is inaccurate to say, "If a fire occurs," only "When a fire occurs." Fire is a natural part of the life cycle of the forest and ignorance about the role of fire lead to excessive fire fighting that in turn led to catastrophic fires. The fires that raged through Yellowstone National Park in 1988 and 1989 were in part due to the success of previous fire-fighting efforts that allowed fuels to build up to the point where the firestorms raged in ways that only the onset of winter could control. Now twenty years later, fires forced some road closures in the park this fall, but the risk to buildings and people was greatly decreased because previous fires had eliminated some of the fuel build-up.

Perhaps I am aware of fires because I've been burned a couple of times. Our bodies don't give us accurate memories of pain, but I have some memory of pain and discomfort as I recovered from burns.

Maybe like so many other humans, I am just fascinated by fire because it seems to almost have a life of its own with behaviors that can be predicted in some ways and in other ways are impossible to predict. Watching a campfire is interesting as the tongues of flame heat and consume the fuel. Watching a wildfire is at once terrifying and fascinating. A smoke plume in the hills usually attracts a crowd of people who want to see what is going on.

We've had some cooler and more moist weather for a couple of years and we aren't feeling quite as vulnerable to fire as we did a few years ago. Still, we know that dry times will return and fuel loads will build and fires can return to our part of the world.

So the people of Australia will be in my prayers today, especially those in the Flinders and North West Pastoral Districts of South Australia. The rural area north of Adelaide has some heavily forested areas before the land starts to level out and the red desert at the heart of Australia begins to unfold. Many people in those areas will head to coastal communities in observance of the fire warning and will wait anxiously until the weather allows for their safe return. It is not the evacuees that cause worry, however, it is those

who stay. Australian law does not allow for forced evacuations, so people choose to ignore or deliberately disobey the warnings. It was a costly mistake for people in Victoria in February.

The fire season is just starting to heat up in Australia. Temperatures could be high for another four months.

It could be a long summer.

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November 18, 2009 – Over the Hump



Photo from Wikipedia

Although probably not as famous as the B-17, the Consolidated B-24 Liberator was an important aircraft used in a wide variety of roles throughout the second World War and for another twenty years after the war. It was a more modern design than the B-17, it had a nose gear instead of a tail wheel, had a higher service ceiling, and could be flown at higher speeds. The aircraft weren't as popular with their crews as the B-17 because of the very heavy control forces. It took a lot of strength to fly the aircraft. And the distribution of fuel tanks throughout the top of the aircraft meant that they were especially vulnerable to fire when shot at by fighters flying above the planes. A total of 18,482 B-24s were built in several variants between 1940 and 1945 at a cost of just under $300,000 each. They were expensive aircraft for their time.

One of the variants of the B-24 was the C-87, used to transport cargo and fuel over the Hump from India to China. The C-87 was not popular with the crews assigned to them. They were prone to electrical failure at critical moments, especially takeoff and landing. The superchargers were not up to the constant use required by the short field use and high altitudes, and the nose gear was too light for rough field cargo duty. The use of the C-87's was a temporary phase in the operation. It was an attempt to replace the C-46 Commando aircraft with a plane with larger capacity. As Douglas C-54 transports became available, the use of the C-87's was phased out.

During this relatively short window of time one of the C-87 pilots assigned to fly the hump was a kid from a small town in South Dakota. Somehow he had found his way

into the U S Army Air Corps. He had enjoyed flight training and for a while thought he might be selected to fly fighters, but there was a need for pilots who could handle the heavy physical demands of bombers and transport aircraft and growing up in the dirty dust-bowl days in rural and isolated north-central South Dakota had equipped him with the strength to do the job.

He maintained an outstanding safety record amidst some of the most difficult conditions in the world. The aircraft were over-loaded, the strips were too short, mechanical failures were regular and repairs were often cobbled. The weather and the high altitude presented their own problems. And navigation was done with crude and rudimentary instruments and often by the seat of the pants. A veteran pilot once explained the “CBI takeoff” to newcomers: “If you can see the end of the runway through the rain and mist, then a takeoff is expected.”

It was a different time. And for a young pilot half a world away from home it must have seemed that life was fragile. There were too many accidents, too many crews lost, for him to have escaped a sense of the frailty of human life. I am sure there were days when he wondered when his number would be up and he would be listed among the missing. A lot of those young pilots never expected to survive the war. A dramatic plane crash was an expected result.

So he wasn’t afraid of a mosquito bite. He wasn’t afraid of several. He didn’t think much of the headaches and muscle pain he felt. He didn’t notice the swollen glands. They were always tired from long days and short nights at the time, so fatigue was considered normal. But as the fever rose and the pain increased it became clear that he was in no shape to fly. In fact he couldn’t even walk. With a fever of 105 and extremely intense joint pain, he was impossible to sleep. He became delirious. The medics knew that he had Dengue Fever and they treated it as best as they could. But they knew that survival was not assured.

In those days the onset of the rash was seen as a positive development. It meant that the illness had moved to its final phase. Survival was possible.

Had he not survived, I would have never known the story.

Over the hump was the route of the flying missions. Getting over the hump of Dengue fever was the challenge to his survival of the war. He made it over the hump and came back to his home state. He earned a law license and he practiced his profession. He won elections and he served his community. He went on to do a lot of other things with his life.

He did not become immortal.

He remains human.

A few years ago a really bad hip fracture landed him in the hospital and resulted in a lot of complications that threatened his survival before he was finally able to return home. Once again he made it over the hump, but the effects of the crisis stayed with him. He never walked without a walker after that and his outings were, for the most part, confined to doctor visits.

Last Friday he suffered a stroke. His brilliant mind was severely injured. It was the mind that could remember the details of a very complex legal case, or recall the weight limits and operating speeds of a half dozen aircraft decades after he was no longer an active pilot. Now just opening his eyes is a struggle. Focusing may be beyond his current capabilities.

As I said, he did not become immortal. He will not live forever.

And getting over the hump of the transition from this life to what lies beyond may be one of the biggest of his struggles. This time he needs to fly without an airplane.

Gilespie Magee's famous poem, High Flight, is often thought of as a great description of the experiences of a pilot. "Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings."

My friend is somewhere on that journey today. I do not know what timing his trip will take. It is in God's hands and will occur in God's time. Where he is going, no poet has found the words to describe.

But once again, he's flying over the hump. And this time it is not with God as the co-pilot. This time God is the pilot-in-command. The landing will be easy even if the flight is rough. And I know his safety is assured.

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November 19, 2009 – The Trumpet



I've owned two trumpets in my life. The first was purchased by my parents when I began playing in the grade school band. The second, a silver Conn Constellation, was an upgrade when I was in the 10th grade. My parents paid part of the cost and I paid the rest. It is 50 years old this year. Age isn't a big factor with a brass instrument that receives a little bit of care. I also have a silver cornet that belonged to my mother that is probably thirty or forty years older than my trumpet. Both will be good for several more generations of players. Both have appreciated in value over the years.

Over the years there have been times when I have played the instruments regularly. I participated in band through my college years and occasionally played with a brass group when I was in seminary. When we lived in North Dakota, I played with a community band that performed in the summers. In Idaho we had a brass quintet that rehearsed weekly and performed regularly.

For the last fifteen years, however, I haven't been playing the instrument regularly. I have been busy with other commitments and when I have extra time other recreational interests have their attraction.

A couple of weeks ago our choir director mentioned that she needed a trumpet for a thanksgiving anthem the choir will be singing and I lightly said that it was not problem. And it isn't a problem, really, but brass instruments require an embouchure - a particular shape of the lips that requires practice and regular exercises. So I have had to do a little practicing and I have been carrying a mouthpiece with me and making buzzing sounds

whenever I think there is no one who can hear. I don't expect to be back to the condition I was in when I was playing regularly, but I think I will be able to play the part competently by Sunday. I rehearsed with the choir last night without embarrassing myself.

The process got me to thinking about all of the things that have captured my attention and then have somehow taken a back seat as new activities and concerns receive my focus. There are many things that I have done with my life that have a different emphasis than they once did. Music is a good example. During my high school and college years, I played in a band, I sang in a choir, I played the trumpet and guitar and practiced both instruments regularly. I devoted many hours to music each week. Gradually the role of music in my life shifted and other things began to receive my attention. I never lost my love of music. I still enjoy playing and singing and being a part of a music group. But I don't always find as much time for music as I once did. It isn't fair to say that I am more busy now. Graduate school was a very busy time in my life, but I still made time for music.

There are other things. I used to be passionate about flying airplanes. I spent a lot of time and a lot of money at the airport renting and later involved in a partnership that owned an airplane. Having grown up in an aviation family, I really enjoyed flying as a recreational activity as well as a way to travel. It was hard to justify the cost of flying, which has always been high and our family had other priorities so it made sense to sell our partnership in the airplane and flying is only safe when the pilot is very practiced and flying regularly, so I no longer fly as a pilot. No one took that activity away from me, I decided to invest my time and money in other directions.

I have been passionate about building canoes and kayaks, but I don't have a boatbuilding project going at the moment. I've been trying to get some home repair tasks finished before tackling a new project. And I can see that while I'll probably dabble with boats for all of my life, the role of building them may shift with time.

Of course there are some things that are constant. My commitment to the church has only deepened with time. Growing old together seems to make a marriage even more meaningful and I am more eager to spend time with Susan than ever. I have always enjoyed reading and I still spend a significant amount of time reading each day. Not everything in life comes and goes.

But it was fun to pick up the trumpet this week. It made me want to spend a bit more time with the instrument. It is good to have made a purchase that still is returning value half a century later. And at this point in my life the only cost to music is the investment of time.

I did remember one feature about the trumpet that I had forgotten: it is a rather loud instrument. An empty church is a good place to practice, but once the people arrive the

sound is rather invasive. It is hard to practice a trumpet at home without having all the other members of the family listening to every mistake - even if they don't want to be listening. Fortunately the other members of my family have years of experience with me playing various instruments and have developed a remarkable level of tolerance for my noisy hobbies.

And so far the neighbors haven't complained.

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November 20, 2009 – Nuremberg



Defendants in the dock at Nuremberg. Photo from Wikipedia.

Today is the anniversary of the beginning of the Nuremberg trials, held at the conclusion of World War II. It was the first time in history that formal trials were held to determine punishment of the leaders and decision-makers of a nation defeated in war. Out of Europe's experience in World War II, a permanent International tribunal has been organized to try those accused of war crimes. At Nuremberg, the concept of war crimes had not yet been fully established. The defendants were charged with crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

The passing of time results in the loss of eyewitnesses to history. The trials at Nuremberg are well-documented and will not be forgotten by historians, but there is still considerable debate about the proper way to treat the architects of mass violence against innocents.

There has been plenty of public attention lately about the decision by U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder to bring Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and four others to trial in New York. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is alleged to be one of the masterminds behind the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. It is easy to get a variety of different opinions on whether or not such a trial should be public. There is fear, among some, that a public trial simply gives the accused another platform from which to publicly air his radical ideas.

We just accept the Nuremberg Trials as a fact of history and don't often remember that they started amidst controversy as well. There had never before been such public trials. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was opposed to the public trials. He felt that quick private military tribunals and executions of the guilty would enable Europe to move more quickly to recovery. He rightly predicted that a public trial could take nearly a year. The sentences in the trials were finally handed down in October of the following year.

Of course we have no real way to assess which course of action, public or private trials, would have been the best. Once a decision is made, the results of a different decision remain unknown.

At Nuremberg there was a visible central character, who was referred to as a mastermind of the plan to exterminate jews by the millions. Hermann Goering, leader of the Gestapo and the Luftwaffe, was the most publicly known of the original 24 defendants placed on trial. He was convicted and sentenced to die by hanging. The conviction was handed down on October 1, 1946 and the execution scheduled for October 16. On the eve of the hanging, Goering committed suicide by poison. Trials of lesser criminals continued into the 1950's with the eventual conviction of 5,025 defendants and the execution of 806. Contrary to the popular notion that only members of the defeated German forces were ever put on trial, the Nuremberg court also tried and convicted members of Allied Forces who were charged and found guilty of war crimes.

Was it a good idea to hold public trials for key leaders of the Nazi war machine? Did such trials only bring more attention to the atrocities committed and the people who were behind those actions? Would the world be better off had the trials been kept secret and the sentences handed down quickly?

We will never know the answers to those questions.

And that simple fact provides fuel for the current debate over the public trials of those accused of crimes against humanity. There are plenty of people willing to argue for and against public trials. Attorney General Holder will be open for criticism no matter when or where trials are held. Part of the process of democracy is allowing those who disagree the ability to speak publicly of their opinion. Public debate and criticism are important to the process of making decisions.

Had I been there, I don't know if I would have been able to watch the Nuremberg trials. The evidence was so tragic, the photographs of victims so graphic that my instinct is to turn away even from the photographs in history books. How much more intense would be the feelings if some of those who were a part of this evil plan were present. I don't intend to watch television if it is a part of the trial of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. I believe in the process of open democracy and public trials, but I am not one to want to watch

the process very often. I don't know how I would feel were I a family member of one of the victims of the attacks, but I suspect that even then I would not choose to go tot he courthouse and witness the trials.

Nonetheless, I do believe that such trials should be witnessed. Such actions should be recorded. Just as we are able to read the records and accounts of the Nuremberg trials as we contemplate the critical decisions of our time, future generations deserve a public record of how our society deals with such massive crimes with so many innocent victims.

A generation has passed since Nuremberg. The cry of the victims of the Holocaust and of their families is that the world must never forget what happened. As the years pass and there are fewer and fewer eyewitnesses, it becomes even more important for people to study and learn about the events of the Holocaust and the world's attempts to bring justice after such an enormous crime.

May we never lose our zeal for justice.

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November 21, 2009 – Out of the Darkness



There are many times during the year when I think of the pain and loss and grief that comes from knowing someone who died by suicide, but there are two days each year when I try to focus my attention and energy. One of those days is the Saturday before Mother's Day each year when our local suicide prevention organization holds a walk to raise awareness and funds for the prevention of suicide. The second is today. On the Saturday before Thanksgiving each year, there is a nationally-broadcast teleconference on suicide, suicide grief and the prevention of suicide.

Today is the 11th Annual National Survivors of Suicide Day. Later this morning over 230 simultaneous conferences for survivors of suicide loss will take place throughout the U.S. and internationally. This network of healing conferences helps survivors connect with others who have survived the tragedy of suicide loss, and express and understand the powerful emotions they experience. The poster provides a powerful reminder of the reality of this tragedy in our country: "Every 16 minutes someone in the U.S. dies by suicide. Every 17 minutes someone is left to make sense of it."

Of course there is no way to make sense of suicide. It is irrational. It is the result of action by someone who is literally not in their right mind. Were they not the victim of an illness, they would not be able to justify such behavior. But in our country today depression is often untreated and it is often a fatal illness. Even with proper treatment, the risks for persons living with mental illness are real.

There is still an awful burden of stigma associated with death by suicide. For too many years it has been identified as sin or a moral failure by church officials and the ignorance that surrounds mental illness in general is significant. When it comes to suicide, there is more whispered behind the backs of surviving family members and friends that is spoken to their faces.

Because I am active in Suicide Survivor programs, I attend more funerals for those who die by suicide than the average person. And I have seen far too many awkward moments by uneducated and wrong-headed clergy who don't understand suicide and suicide grief and who can do even more harm in a situation where people are hurt and healing is so needed.

Some Christian preachers, who seem to love proof texting, seem to be unaware that Romans 8:1 says, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." They seem to have appointed themselves as judge of others and somehow believe that they have some special knowledge about the afterlife and who will and who will not be admitted to heaven. Such thinking is wrong-headed and not Christian. A little later our scriptures proclaim, " . . . neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us form the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I long for a day when Christians are able to show more compassion in the celebration of funeral rites.

So it is good for me, as a pastor and as a person, to stop and think about suicide and suicide grief a couple of times each year. There is much to learn. Each national teleconference has had fresh information and new insights into suicide and its prevention. Scientific research into the causes and treatments of brain diseases and mental illnesses is producing significant advances. Things that were once a great mystery are slowly becoming understood.

That is not to say that we understand the mind of a person who dies by suicide. We do not.

A while ago, I wrote in an essay: "Considering the possibility of suicide, what if at the very last moment, when one was at the very brink of life and death, when one was still alive but had gone so far that death was inevitable, what if the last thought that entered your mind was that it was a colossal mistake? What if your last thought was: 'oops!' I consider this to be a very real possibility simply because there have been a few times when I have injured myself, unintentionally. but nonetheless injured myself. Each time there has been a moment of realization of the absurdness of my mistake. When I was burned, in that brief instant between the flash and heat of the experience but before the

sensation of pain, I was distinctly aware of the absurdity of my behavior. How stupid I had been!"

Too many times I have been present when a family learns of a death by suicide. Too often I have been asked to be the one bringing notification. I have seen their reaction. Contrary to what many people think, it is not the most terrible thing that can happen. In fact I have witnessed great displays of human strength and resilience. I have watched the grace of community gathering to mourn and provide support. I have seen the capacity to celebrate the gift of life in the face of death. There are cases when the victim believes that suicide is the only way out of unbearable pain. What I know is that death by suicide does not end the pain. For the survivors, the pain is intense and worse than anything that can be imagined.

But humans are stronger than we imagine. We can bear more than we think possible.

And survival - even from the darkness of suicide loss - is possible.

Today is all about survival. It is a day for survivors. We will speak the names of those we have known who have died by suicide. We will remember the lives they lived. And we will support one another in grief, while at the same time we dedicate ourselves to doing everything we are able to prevent future suicides.

For those who are thinking of suicide, help is available. It is only a phone call away. The number is 1-800-273-TALK (8255). It is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by trained and compassionate people. You won't get a machine, you will get a real person. It is possible that a phone call could save your life. It is possible that a phone call could save an incredible amount of grief and pain for the people you love.

For those who are left behind: you are not alone. We are all in this together. For additional information on Suicide Prevention and the National Survivors of Suicide day, go to www.afsp.org. Find a local support group. If there is none in your area, start one.

Together we will walk out of the darkness into the light of a new day when suicide can be addressed openly and honestly and where suicide prevention is everybody's business.

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November 22, 2009 – Badlands



We drove through a corner of the badlands yesterday as we returned home from a firewood delivery to Wanblee. This is the second place where we have lived relatively close to a national park that is comprised of badlands. Badlands National Park gets its name from the Lakota “mako sica,” which means “land bad.” It is 244,000 acres of buttes, pinnacles and spires, most of which are bare dirt and rock. However it is also the largest protected mixed grass prairie in the United States. Its resident herd of buffalo (American Bison) allow one to see the land as it was before settlement. It is easy to find vistas in the park where you can see for miles and miles without any visible signs of civilization.

When we lived in North Dakota, we weren’t to far from Theodore Roosevelt National Park, where the Little Missouri River carves its way through the North Dakota badlands. President Roosevelt first visited the area in the fall of 1883 and fell in love with the landscape and the wildlife. He was a partner in two ranches in the area, the Maltese Cross and the Elkhorn. Experiences in the badlands influenced his life, his philosophy, and his politics. “I would never have been President if it had not been for my experiences in North Dakota,” he said.

The badlands are like that. They help to shape character.

I know that not every person is like this, but there is a part of me that periodically needs to get out to some place where things aren’t so crowded. I love people and I love working with people. And I can find my way around a city when I need to do so. Susan

and I lived in Chicago for four years and we got to know the city pretty well. But there are times when it seems like the people and the demands and needs of individuals press in on me and it restores my soul to spend a little time in empty space.

We didn't see to many animals yesterday. We did see antelope and there were lots of deer feeding alongside the road in the evening as we returned. And there is a small herd of domesticated buffalo grazing near the edge of the park. I know there are a lot more animals in the area and if there had been more time a short drive off of the paved highway and a bit of patience would have been rewarded with glimpses of a lot of different animals. The badlands are home to prairie dogs and ferrets and mule deer, antelope, buffalo, coyotes and bighorn sheep as well as a large number of birds and few types of snakes and other critters.

But it is mostly the land that captures my attention as I drive through. It is land that does not easily lend itself to human habitation and development. It is marginal at best as ranch land, requiring a lot of acres per animal to support beef production. So it has been mostly left in its natural state. Although the badlands receive too much rain each year to be technically defined as a desert, water is not easily available and those who spend any amount of time in the area have to carry water and be astute with their survival skills.

There are, of course, lots of stories of bandits and other outlaws using the badlands as a temporary hiding place.

I like looking at the strange shapes of the eroded buttes and the pinnacles and spires that stick up into the air. The landscape is different from anything else that I have experienced. The badlands have been used as a location for making science fiction movies, the stark backgrounds allowing the imaginations of movie goers to leave the planet and think of other worlds.

I think that I simply find myself, from time to time, in need for a little space - a slight separation between me and others, a few moments without conversation, and the feel of the wind on my face. I don't want to live there, just visit from time to time.

Today will be a fun, busy day with worship, a brunch featuring food from Costa Rica, and a visit with a family. My list of things that needs to be done before the start of worship is long - so I'll have a little while at the church by myself before others arrive. Early in the morning is another opportunity for me to get some alone time to do a bit of thinking, sort my ideas, and prepare for a day of intense relationships.

I am grateful that there were people who had the insight to preserve the badlands in their natural state for all to enjoy and I am grateful that my life affords me opportunities to visit some of the wild places in the world. But I am also grateful for the people who populate our community. I am even grateful for unmet needs that provide a challenge

for our church as we seek to be faithful in the midst of a world with many needs and hurts. We are in the people business and relationships are our main stock and trade. I wouldn't want it otherwise.

But in order to have perspective to work with and serve people, it is helpful from time to time, to visit the places where there are not many people. It is all a matter of maintaining balance in a busy world.

How fortunate we are to have the badlands so close to our home.

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November 23, 2009 – Flubber Kids



Samuel W. Taylor wrote a short story called “A Situation of Gravity,” that provided the storyline for the 1961 Disney movie, “The Absent-Minded Professor,” in which a professor invents a substance that gains energy when it strikes a hard surface. Fred MacMurray played the part of the professor. The movie gained considerable success at the box office and was reissued to theaters in 1967 and 1975. It was also released in video in 1981. The original black and white film was colorized and released as a color video in 1986 and 1992. Several follow-up features included the sequel “Son of Flubber,” released in 1963 and the television version starring Harry Anderson.

But it was the 1997 remake of the movie, starring Robin Williams, in which the substance flubber became a character. The substance assumed a variety of shapes that made it look as if it had arms, legs, a head and a pot belly as it danced, slid, bounced and few across the screen.

The story line is relatively simple. The invention, while showing incredible properties, doesn’t bring the success, wealth or fame that one might expect. The substance is a bit wild, unpredictable and difficult to control. And it seems to always result in trouble for the inventor and those closest to him.

This is portrayed comically in the movies.

In real life, energy that cannot be controlled is a problem that does not always leave those involved laughing.

Over the last couple of decades, educators have noted an increase in attention deficit and hyperactivity disorders that interfere with students' ability to learn. ADHD is a clinical diagnosis and is treated with a variety of different medicines, but there are many stories coming from contemporary classrooms of children who have not received a clinical diagnosis yet whose learning is challenged by an inability to focus on the subject at hand. These children can be disruptive not only to themselves, but to an entire classroom. One exasperated teacher, referring to the movie, said, it is like these kids are made of flubber - constantly in motion and always going in an unpredictable direction. She described classroom sessions where all of her energy and time was invested in simply preventing injury to other students and destruction to school property. One child can become a full time job for a teacher and having one such child in a classroom can disrupt the education of all of the children.

But every child is deserving of an eduction. And many behavior problems are not the result of controlled and willful action on the part of the child, but rather come from a child who literally cannot control his or her behavior.

Most educators are convinced that such behaviors are on the rise and that the percentage of children who suffer from such conditions is increasing.

The situation can be even more intense in a church education setting where all of the teachers are volunteers and where it is critical that the teaching and learning situation be accepting of all children. Accommodations in the learning environment need to be made to provide a welcome and appropriate learning experiences to all children regardless of whatever learning difficulties or challenges they present. At the same time, it can be difficult for a church school to provide the training and support for volunteers to be able to meet the needs of the children.

Parents are the obvious partners who need to be recruited into the learning environment. Their experience with the individual child can be very helpful in assisting the school in providing activities and experiences that are appropriate for the child. But parents themselves are often exhausted and need a break from the intensity of caring for the child. And the behaviors demonstrated in a group setting are not always shown at home where the child has more privacy and less pressure from peers. Sometimes the parents are as baffled and surprised by the behavior in a classroom setting as is the teacher.

Teachers have long known that there are too many variables in a classroom setting to have control of all of the influences on teaching and learning. Classroom learning and behaviors can be influenced by diet, exercise, conditions in the home, and many other factors over which the teacher has no control.

The church school is left with an imperfect situation. Ideally, we would become full partners in the overall education of a child and have open relationships with the parents, other schools and teachers. In reality the church school is not able to provide all that is needed. So we start with the environment. We strive to provide a welcoming environment and provide for the safety of all of the children. This means that some behaviors exhibited by students need to be redirected so that other students are not put at risk. Sometimes teachers are forced to simply react to the situations in the classroom and have to follow up with conversations with parents and re-thinking teaching and learning activities between class sessions. Too often we are uncertain of the impact that we have had in the lives of some of the students. The majority of learners in church schools do not attend every week, contact with the student is very limited and it is often difficult to know whether or not a particular teaching strategy has worked. And the dynamic changes every week with a unique combination of students for each class session.

Like the movie, there is a lot of potential in flubber, but it is rare that the potential is captured in a way that brings about positive results.

This does not mean that we should quit trying. Enormous challenges are part and parcel of the gospel enterprise. Were we left to our own devices, we would certainly be defeated by the size of our task. But we are not alone. The holy spirit works through our efforts and we belong to a community of Christians who share our love of and passion for children.

Perhaps every church school should purchase a copy of the video “Flubber.” It could be watched by tired teachers from time to time to remind them of the humor in their situation. A good laugh can go a long way to increase appreciation of a student who sometimes is perceived only as a problem to be solved.

Certainly we will continue to expand the amount of physical activities in Christian education. Opportunities to redirect energy into large muscles and energetic movement can provide a context for the teaching and learning of our faith. Jesus’ example, on the Road to Emmaus is fitting. He walked with the disciples as he taught them. The weren’t sitting in chairs in a classroom, but engaged in an outdoor activity involving physical movement and exercise. He taught them in the context of motion and activity.

We haven’t got our flubber kids figured out yet. But we are convinced that they are children of God, beloved and valuable and that we are called to provide for them activities and relationships that convey God’s love and explore God’s call for their lives.

And, if occasionally we are bouncing off of the walls, it may just be a reaction to a particularly challenging session of dealing with flubber kids.

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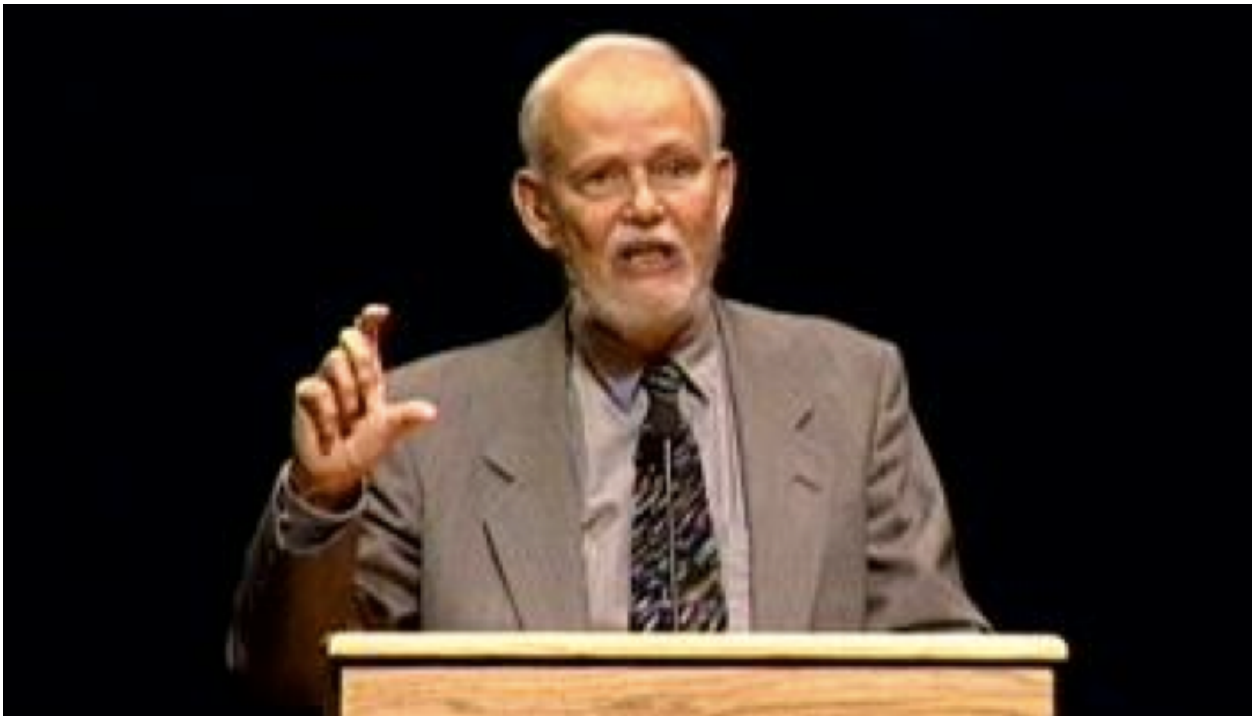
November 24, 2009 – Tales of Wonder



I've been keeping up the discipline of a daily blog for quite a while, now, but not every area of my life is so disciplined. One of the places where I am behind my intentions is the books area of my web site. I like to write a short review of each book that I read. I think that just the list of titles and authors might be interesting to someone trying to get to know who I am and what influences my thought. But I read books faster than I write reviews. Right now there is a stack of 20 or so books on the edge of my desk waiting for me to write the reviews.

So don't worry, this isn't going to be a book review. The book of interest is one that I haven't yet read - it has been on my "books to read" list since last April. The book is "Tales of Wonder," the autobiography of Huston Smith.

Huston Smith is known to most students of religion as the author of "The World's Religions." It is the definitive book of comparative religion that is used as a textbook in seminaries and colleges throughout the nation. The book, originally published in 1958, has been revised, and republished in many different versions over the years and still is considered to be one of the best introductions to religion available. Smith reports on Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity from the perspective of the believer. He has experienced the worship services and rites of these religions first hand and the book is not only academically accurate, it is appreciative of the beliefs and practices of diverse religions.

Smith's upbringing gave him a good start for the study of world religions. He was the son of Methodist missionaries in China and spent the first seventeen years of his life in that country, where Christianity was a distinct minority. For most of his adult life Smith has been a professor of religion, teaching at the University of Colorado, Washington University in St. Louis, MIT, Syracuse University and the University of California, Berkeley. Throughout his career he demonstrated an amazing ability to direct his own learning. In addition to being a practicing Christian, he also practiced Hinduism, Buddhism and Sufism for over ten years each. His personal experiences with religion made him one of the world's most noted experts.

Bill Moyers produced a five-part series of interviews with Huston Smith that covered six of the world's great religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The series addresses how they differ and what they share in common. Especially powerful in the series is Smith's interpretation of prayer in Western religions.

"Religion," Smith once wrote, is "the call to confront reality; to master the self." He answered that call with his life.

Huston Smith now lives in an assisted living center. He knows that his time in this life is limited. He has out lived his wife of 66 years, Kendra. He has witnessed the death of his oldest daughter. He has suffered a broken hip and received a replacement. He can no longer hear well.

But he whispers the same prayer to himself several times each day, "God, you are so good to me."

I am surprised that I have waited this long to read his biography. It is clear that he still has much to teach.

As I reach an age where some of my colleagues are thinking of retirement, it is inspiring to know of those who continue to contribute meaningfully well beyond the traditional age of retirement. And at 90, Smith is definitely an inspiration to me. But the truth is that the teachers and the writers of the textbooks that have shaped my life and my career are all older than I and many of them are no longer living. As each comes to the end of this life's journey there is a deep sense of loss, but also a deep sense of gratitude. The 20th century produced some great minds in the field of religion and religious studies. Great faith combined with great intellect to produce some very important works. Huston Smith's books will be in use long after his life on this earth is complete.

But there is also a sense of reality in thinking of these great people. Smith published "The World's Religions" at age 40. Now that I an my peers have reached our fifties, we know that our contributions will not match those of our predecessor generations. But we can match their quest for knowledge and their love of learning. We can strive to explore the same depths of faith and spirituality that they have known.

So I am eager to read “Tales of Wonder.” I suspect that it will reveal the personal side of a man I have primarily known as an academic scholar. And perhaps it will reveal to me some of the experiences that shaped a truly great man.

And I think I will adopt one of Smiths disciplines. This is one that I know I can keep. Several times each day, whenever I think of it, I will repeat the prayer. “God you are so good to me.”

“God is good. All the time.”
“All the time. God is Good.”

And there is one more prayer of gratitude that is in me - I am grateful that there are so many great ideas that I know that I will never run out of books that I want to read - even if I never catch up with writing the reviews.

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November 25, 2009 – Pilgrimage



AFP Photo

One of the pillars of Islam is the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. The annual event is now taking place in Mecca, Saudi Arabia and it is the largest religious pilgrimage in the world. Despite warnings about the potential for the spreading of swine flu, about 3,000,000 people are expected. Muslims have a moral obligation to make the trip at least once in a life time if they are physically able and can afford to go. Visiting the site and performing the rituals at another time of the year is considered to be of value, but it does not replace the obligation to participate in Hajj at some point in one's lifetime.

The Hajj is associated with the location and time of year of the last sermon of the prophet Muhammad in the 7th century, but the ritual pilgrimage is believed to stretch back thousands of years earlier to the time of Abraham. The rituals include walking seven times around the Kaabah in a counter-clockwise direction, kissing the black stone at the corner of the Kaaba, drinking from the Zamzam Well, standing in vigil on the plains of Mount Arafat and throwing stones. Some pilgrims shave heir heads and perform a ritual animal sacrifice. Many of the rituals have been stylized because of the very large crowds. For example it is acceptable to point to the black stone at each circuit of the Kaaba rather than actually kissing it and a proxy can be appointed to make the animal sacrifice for a pilgrim.

While the largest, the Hajj is not the only pilgrimage taking place int he world in this season. Hundreds of thousands of Hindus have converged on Barlyapur in southern Nepal for the Gadhimai festival which happens every five years. Gadhimai is a goddess

of power and sacrificing animals is seen as a way of thanking the deity for good luck and asking for prosperity. Over the next few days more than a quarter of a million animals are expected to be slaughtered as a part of the festival. One of the priests at the Gadhimai temple stated, “The goddess needs blood. If anyone has a problem, then I will cut the throat of an animal in the temple and that person’s problem will be solved.”

The rituals of the pilgrimages don’t make any sense to those of us with different beliefs, and we would probably ignore them except for the large numbers of people involved. Most difficult for those who do not practice these faiths to understand is the practice of animal sacrifice. For many around the world, the sacrifice of animals is seen as an ancient tradition, no longer relevant to contemporary belief.

Many traditions, including Judaism, in which Christianity has its roots, incorporated forms of animal sacrifice at various points in their history. Sacrifice of animals was part of the rituals of the Temple at Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’ life. But those practices have not continued into contemporary Judaism or Christianity.

Most Christians eat meat and are aware that the slaughter of animals is part of our lives, but such events are relegated to food producers and packing plants and are not parts of our religious rituals. Jews who observe the full Kosher laws are represented by rabbis who say prayers at the time of the slaughter of animals for food, but do not include the prayers for slaughter as a part of the regular practice of their religion. To be fair, the sacrifice of animals as a part of the Hajj has been played down a great deal in modern times and is a minor part of a much bigger series of ceremonies and rituals. Many pilgrims simply visit the official Hajj website and purchase certificates for the sacrifice. A certificate for a lamb is $115 and the purchase of the certificate guarantees that the meat from the sacrifice is utilized as food.

Christians do engage in pilgrimages, though not in the same numbers and often pilgrimages are seen as private travels rather than participation in large crowds. Visits to Bethlehem or to the sites visited by Paul in his travels can be informative and might be part of deepening an individual’s faith. Mission trips to work and share worship with believers in other parts of the world are forms of pilgrimage for Christians. Ancient Christian spiritual practices include pilgrimages that are undertaken in part as a practice of separation from and return to community for the purpose of prayer and spiritual growth.

But we do not have an insider’s appreciation for the mass pilgrimages that are part of the faith of others. For the most part we scratch our heads in wonder at why a person would want to be part of such a crowd, or what the attraction of being with so many people doing the same thing at the same time might be. Tolerance of other world religions and appreciation for their contributions does not require that we fully understand all of their practices. Christians can joy Muslims in honest prayer for the safety of the participants in the Hajj without compromising their beliefs or values. And

one doesn't have to fully understand the pilgrimage to join in the prayer posted at the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Hajj website that people will "be peaceful, orderly and kind and that there will be no crushing."

This year as we gather with families and friends for the celebration of Thanksgiving and as we offer our prayers of gratitude for the bounty of the earth and the blessings of life and health and the freedom to practice our religion, we will be aware that there are other people, with beliefs that are very different from our own who are exercising their freedom to practice their religion in a very different way. We can pray for their safety and for increased understanding between faiths as we continue to share this increasingly crowded planet. As Christians, we proclaim the peace of Christ to be "peace that passes all understanding." We do not need to understand to pursue peace with our neighbors.

And perhaps, for those of us who are just a little bit introverted and who appreciate a bit of personal space, we can be grateful that our faith does not ask us to be a part of such a large crowd.

May God bless all the people of this world with the peace that passes all understanding.

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November 26, 2009 – Thanksgiving, 2009



"The First Thanksgiving" Painting by Jennie Augusta Brownscombe, 1914.

Being a preacher, I like to think that I stand in a long line of preachers that goes back throughout the history of Christianity to Jesus' sermon on the mount. Of course, over all of those years, there have been many different variations of preachers and the Christianity's theology has been split into a lot of different perspectives. Preachers have advocated a lot of different positions over the years and some of those sermons have produced results that were less than Christian. But today is a day of thanksgiving and we are accustomed, in these United States, to recall on Thanksgiving the Pilgrims who left England in search of religious freedom on the North American continent. We like to think of the settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony as the philosophical, spiritual and moral ancestors of our nation. We think of ourselves as a Puritan nation. But our notions about the people who crossed the Atlantic on the Mayflower and the colonists who followed them are often more based in legend than in fact.

Retelling the history of those settlers at this time of the year has become a bit of a television tradition. From *Mr. Ed* to *The Simpsons*, a lot of television programs have done special episodes on the Pilgrims. Our notions of the life of seventeenth-century New England may be more shaped by *The Brady Bunch* and *Happy Days* than by historical facts.

So today, as we begin the celebration of yet another Thanksgiving, I begin by recalling just one of the actual sermons that has been preserved. In 1630, John Cotton was persuaded to preach a farewell sermon to a group of about 700 colonists of the

Massachusetts Bay Company who were led by Governor John Winthrop. This is not the departure of the first Pilgrims aboard the Mayflower, but a later group of mostly Puritan dissenters who are eager to leave England, and in fact eager to leave Europe and over a century of bloody religious wars. They are to set sail aboard the flagship *Arabella* and a fleet of ten other vessels for the already-established colony.

The Reverend John Cotton, then 46 years old, was at the time the most respected, famous and beloved Puritan minister in England. It was no small coup for Winthrop to convince him to deliver his sermon. Cotton was considered by many to be among the most intelligent people in England of his day. His congregation is a group of people who have been grumbling and complaining about life in England for a long time. But now they are about to set sail on fragile ships and they are aware that the journey is fraught with danger. If they survive the passage, they will probably never see the friends and family they are leaving behind.

Cotton's sermon title is "God's Promise to His Plantation." His focus text for the sermon is 2 Samuel 7:10: "And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more." He was not constrained by the time limits imposed on contemporary preachers. The sermon is a long document, with a lot of different illustrations from honey bees in a hive to a host of other Bible stories. But the point of the sermon rings through a couple of hours of rhetoric: "You are God's chosen people." The Israelites of the Old Testament are to be the inspiration of this new colony. He acknowledges that like Israel settling into the land of Caanan which was inhabited, the new Pilgrims will be settling into "a country not altogether void of inhabitants." His point is clear: God is ordaining this settlement. God is promising this land. God has chosen the Pilgrims. He even draws a parallel with the Israelites fleeing the slavery of Egypt.

Whether or not they were the first to celebrate Thanksgiving on this continent, the early pilgrims who found their way to this continent and who played such a large role in the establishment of what was to become the United States of America, arrived on the shores of New England with a huge sense of entitlement. God intended them to come to this place and whatever riches they found were theirs. They were chosen. They were entitled to whatever they could take.

As far as we know the people who first heard that sermon liked what they heard. They preserved the sermon so that it is available to read to this day. They named their new town, "Boston" after John Cotton's home town.

And that sense of entitlement which was instilled in them in part by that sermon has remained with the residents of this nation ever since.

We celebrate Thanksgiving to this day with a certain kind of smugness that seems to say, "Thank you God for the things we have - we deserve them." Or sometimes we

seem to be praying, “Thank you God that we are not like other people who don’t have it as good as we do.”

Last night I was asked to offer a prayer at our annual community Thanksgiving service. It isn’t really a service for the entire community, but rather the service of a group of about five congregations of different denominations whose pastors meet regularly for Bible study and fellowship. At any rate, it seemed that some sense of humility was appropriate in the light of this great sense of entitlement that is so ingrained in our culture. This is the prayer I offered. I seems like a good place to start this day of Thanksgiving:

Great God of infinite compassion and unending grace, we come before you with a spirit of thanksgiving in our hearts on this day of celebration.
But as we do so we cannot help but wonder if our prayers are a bit too easily and too lightly spoken. For we confess that we are a people of unique privilege having been separated from the processes of producing our food for far too long, having lived off of the cheap labor and unrewarded sacrifice of others, having known far too much luxury and far too little sharing. With heavy hearts we have recognized ourselves in the gospel to be much like the rich young ruler and very little like the widow who offered her two coins.
It is easy to say thank you when we have known more blessings than any previous generation of humanity.
So with humble hearts, transforming God, we pray that you might help us to taste hunger.
When our bellies are full may we never forget those who put their children to sleep without adequate nutrition.
When our appetites are satisfied may we find a genuine hunger for compassion.
When we have consumed our fill of beverages may we be granted a thirst for justice.
On this national day of feasting, grant to this world your blessings for all of your people and not just some of your people.
Give us grace to stand alongside those whose needs are greatest.

Bendice Señor, nuestro pan;
Y da pan a los que tienen hambre,
Y hambre de justicia a los que tienen pan
Bendice Señor, nuestro pan.
Bless, Lord, our bread;
And give bread to those who are hungry,
And hunger for justice for those who have bread
Bless, Lord, our bread.

Amen.

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November 27, 2009 – A Relaxing Holiday



Our families have learned that there are certain things about living in a clergy family that are a bit different from other families. Since pastors tend to work on weekends, we tend to take our day off on another day of the week. This meant that sometimes, when we had children in school, our family had different days off and our children's days off from school were often invested in church activities. Conversely, we often invested our days off from work in volunteer activities at our children's school - a luxury that was not afforded to families whose parents' work days coincided with the school schedule.

Holidays are sometimes very busy days in the church. Christmas Eve is filled with extra services and it is only when Christmas Day arrives that we begin to relax and celebrate the holiday. This schedule worked very well with school children because the time after Christmas was a good family time and we did not have the same kind of end-of-the-year pressures that accompany small businesses and many other workplaces.

It has been interesting for us to reflect on the many phases of our family life. There were the years when we went to our family of origin to celebrate Thanksgiving. When we were in graduate school, the distance was too great and the time too short to go back to Montana, so we improvised Thanksgiving celebrations with friends in the seminary community. Students who lived closer to the school would be able to go home for the holidays so those of us who were left tended to be those whose homes were farther away. As a result we often had meals that included international students and our Thanksgiving dinners were those students' first introductions to an American Thanksgiving.

Later, when our family included small children, we would sometimes travel to be with our extended family and sometimes have smaller celebrations closer to home. The events and activities of holidays lend themselves to the inclusion of children, but there are things that children need to learn about celebrations and there are activities reserved for adults that we tended to avoid when our children were small.

As our children became teenagers and adults, our activities changed. The changes don't occur all at once and so they seem natural. But there are some events that we remember. We'll add yesterday's celebration of Thanksgiving to the list. It was the first time since the birth of our son that we didn't have one of our children with us for our Thanksgiving celebration. Our children now live in far-away places and travel to our home for Thanksgiving wasn't practical. The change got us to thinking about other changes that have happened over the years.

The homes to which we used to return as young adults have been sold and are no longer occupied by members of our families. Some family members have come to the end of their lives and others have been born. A holiday is a good time to recall pleasant memories and to think of those who are no longer with us.

We are fortunate to continue to live in a multiple-generation family. Now that our children have moved farther away, our parents have moved closer so that we still have a group to load into the car to head for events and celebrations. The equipment we haul along has changed. We no longer have strollers and car seats and bags of toys. Now we have a check list that includes a walker, hearing aids, and other supplies. But the feel is very familiar to us. Being with our family is so much a part of our holiday that we can't imagine it any other way. And we have developed friendships where our families are included and warmly welcomed.

A holiday for our family is mostly about people and a relaxed atmosphere that allows for visiting and storytelling and laughter and jokes. The food is wonderful, and we do seem to assemble a significant feast when we get together with our friends, but the focus is always on the people. There is something to sitting around the table together that creates and builds relationships of lasting meaning.

It is not a mistake that the core sacraments of our faith involve welcoming newcomers and sharing a meal. At baptism we say to the youngest children and to those who are just becoming a part of our community, "You are welcome! You belong! You are a part of us!" And, around the table, we recall Jesus instruction to "Do this in remembrance." So the family stories are repeated and our memories stirred each time we gather at the table, offer thanks to God, and share the bread and beverage that sustain more than our physical bodies.

How grateful I am for the change of pace that allows us to slow down and celebrate. A holiday gives us the gift of time to focus our attention on the things that are most important. And it gives us energy for the everyday living that we too often take for granted.

Because of the way our work is concentrated on weekends, weekend holidays are often different for a clergy family than for other families. Thanksgiving is a unique holiday for us. While many people have just one day off, Thanksgiving is often a three day weekend for a clergy family. Thursday, Friday and Saturday are days with a slower pace and less focus on work. And, since we don't get other three-day weekends throughout the year, we are very grateful for the way this holiday works for us.

So at our house it is not just the refrigerator full of leftovers that remind us of yesterday's holiday, it is a few more days filled with holiday spirit. Thanksgiving continues.

And we have another holiday tradition that we have grown to enjoy. On the Friday after Thanksgiving, sometimes called "black Friday," we have a tradition of not going Christmas shopping. Despite the sales and possible deals, we enjoy staying away from the crowds and the rush. We have a house full of food and no need to go to the stores today. We'll let others enjoy their traditions while we enjoy time together.

May the spirit of Thanksgiving linger with you and your family.

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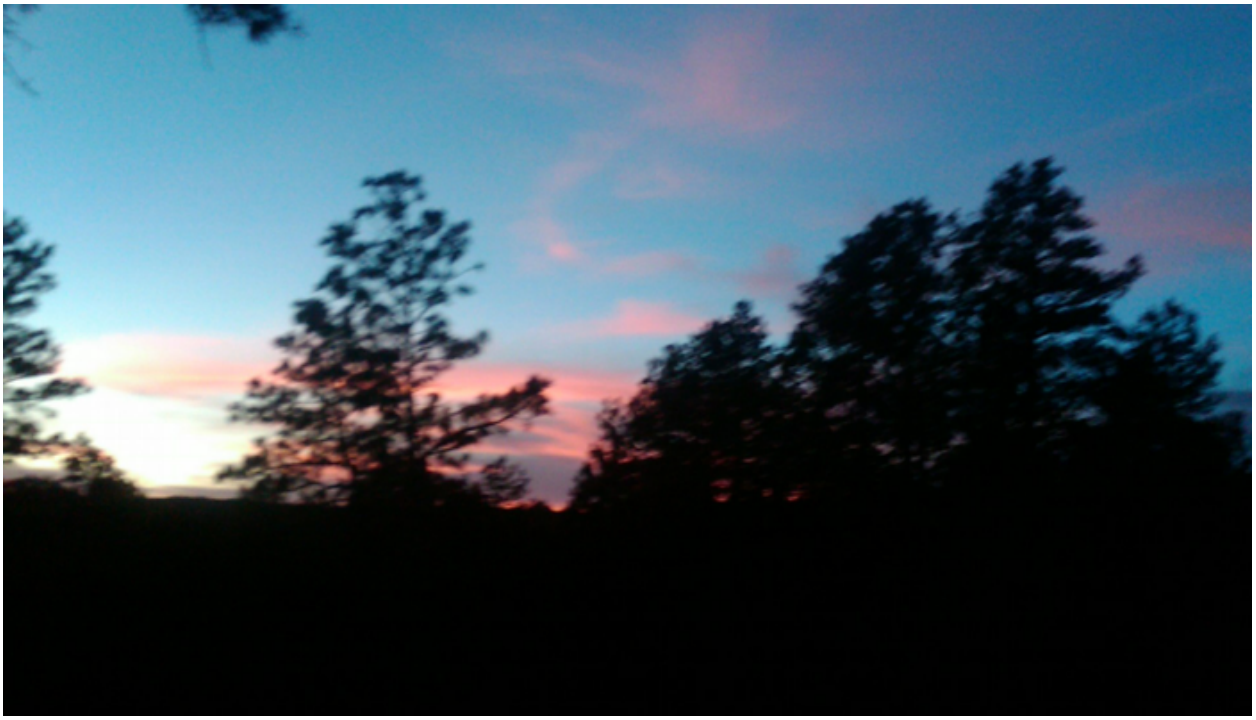
November 28, 2009 – Waiting



We seem to get the most pink in our sky in the evening and morning. Sunrise and sunset are times of beautiful skies around here. And they are good times to reflect on the day that has just passed and think of the day that is to come. Today will be a flurry of activity as we get our church ready for the First Sunday of Advent. Some years the Sunday after Thanksgiving is Reign of Christ and we get a short break before beginning Advent, but most years we go straight into Advent and have only four weeks to prepare for Christmas. There is a sort of frantic pace to Advent many years.

It is hard to separate ourselves and the activities at the church from the frenetic pace of Holiday shopping, parties, concerts and special events. It seems as if there is some kind of special activity every evening. The stores put up their Christmas decorations right after Halloween and intense shopping and special deals are a part of the culture for the weekend after Thanksgiving. Many Rapid City stores stayed open all night on Thursday or opened their doors in the very early hours of the morning to accommodate bargain hunters. There was lots of traffic and many crowds at area stores and at least a couple of articles in the newspaper about black Friday shoppers in our city.

Advent is a different kind of preparation than all of the shopping and decorating. It requires quiet for contemplation, time for reflection, and patience for longing. It stands in contrast with a culture that often focuses its attention on instant gratification. Shoppers head out in search of the lowest price. God's gift of Christ to this world is the most costly gift imaginable. We want to get to the Christmas Carols and warm feelings as quickly as possible. Christ came into this world only after generations of waiting and then entered

through the process of a normal human birth. We live in a society with a credit-driven economy. Buy now and pay later is built into the functioning of our commercial enterprises. Credit cards are a preferred method of payment. In Jesus, God has pre-paid the cost and is willing to wait for the redemption of the whole world.

Real living is a process of waiting.

It may be a part of aging, but I do find that my attitude toward waiting is changing. I used to be impatient with delays, wanting everything to run on a schedule and had little understanding for those who couldn't make it to an appointment on time. It took me a long time to realize that my biggest problem with having to wait wasn't caused by others, but rather my attitude. Living in community means that we are not always going at the same pace. Children and elders have different perspectives on time and require different amounts of time for similar tasks.

These days, I have times of waiting in Doctor's offices, as we get ready to head out as a family, while others assemble for meetings and appointments. I have several opportunities to practice waiting each day. I used to think of these as wasted moments - time that could be invested in doing something else. More and more I am learning that times of waiting are a gift. In a hectic world, a few minutes to sit and gather one's thoughts can be a marvelous opportunity. There are far too few vacations when we can wander without agenda - why would we pass up a five-minute vacation when we can allow our minds to wander without agenda? Waiting gives an opportunity to relax and enjoy the moment. Waiting allows for a glimpse at the world around without always being in motion. Waiting allows us to take a deep breath and be ready for whatever is to come.

The readings for Advent draw a parallel between the preparation for the coming of Christ and the preparation for the realm of God into which we are invited at the end of time. It is clear that the process of waiting, watching, and preparing is a function of time. In God's realm, time is not the dominant way of measuring things. There are glimpses of heavenly reward, promises of an end to pain and sorrow and suffering, but the details of what is yet to come are, for the most part, unknown in this life. This is a time for anticipation and preparation. In a sense our whole lives are Advent.

This year I pray for the patience to take Advent one moment at at time, without becoming consumed by a rush toward Christmas. I hope to achieve a balance between doing and being. I plan to take time to slow down and examine what it means to wait. I know that I will not avoid the crowds. I know that I will not avoid the sense of rushing toward deadlines. I know that I have plenty of work to accomplish. And I know that I will accomplish my change in attitude only incrementally.

Like all spiritual disciplines, Advent is a practice of faith. As such it deepens with repetition. May be it takes a half century or more of Advents in order to develop the

perspective of quiet anticipation. If our whole lives are a process of preparing for something that is greater, it makes sense that it would take us a great deal of practice to shape our attitudes and expectations.

Tomorrow is the First Sunday of Advent. Now the waiting begins. May this Advent find us growing in our ability to watch, wait, and be patient. May we open ourselves to the real blessings of this season.

And even today, we need to wait until tomorrow for Advent to begin.

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November 29, 2009 – The Tree



Every Advent, my colleagues and I have conversations about how to slow down the process in our congregations. Because the wider society is rushing toward Christmas, there is a pressure to have the church rush as well. People are ready to sing Christmas Carols and put up Christmas decorations. Christmas decorations can also cause tensions in some congregations. One of my colleagues was describing how the members of her congregation cannot believe that she wants to wait until Christmas Eve to put up the Christmas Tree in the sanctuary.

I can see both sides of the situation. While I understand the need to allow Advent to be its own season, and the spiritual discipline of preparing, I also understand that decorating can be a part of preparation. Congregations are simply more familiar with Christmas carols than they are with the songs of Advent and it takes time for new songs to become beloved.

So we live in a tension. Parts of Christmas enter into the season of Advent. It is, I think a reflection of the theological concept of realized eschatology. The coming realm of God enters into the present reality. We experience it incompletely and imperfectly, but nonetheless, God's promise is not about the future only. One professor put it this way: "The not yet already is."

So this year, in our sanctuary, we put up our Christmas Tree for the First Sunday of Advent. The tree will remain in the sanctuary all the way through Advent and the season of Christmas until Epiphany. We have a new Christmas Tree - and that itself is a story.

For many years, it was our tradition to have a tree from the hills in our sanctuary. Members of the congregation would take drives through the forest and scout out trees that they thought would be appropriate. Each year a tree would be selected, cut, and brought into the sanctuary. The decorations were usually simple - just a few strings of white lights. The tree was watered regularly and remained fresh throughout the season. The aroma of a freshly-cut spruce tree added to the mood of the season.

Then, a few years ago, the city fire department inspected our church the week before Christmas. At the end of the inspection, one of the officers said to me, “For the record, I didn’t notice the Christmas tree in the sanctuary. I’m not going to make you take it down the week before Christmas. But next year, I will notice it.” He provided information on the fire code and the rules are clear. Only artificial trees are allowed in public buildings that are not equipped with fire sprinkler systems.

We discussed the situation at our church board meeting and arranged to purchase two artificial trees at the end of the season sales. The artificial trees were nice, but they didn’t generate the same enthusiasm as going to the hills to cut a tree. The families who loved the trek to the hills continued to make the trip to gather trees for their homes and they weren’t particularly interested in erecting the artificial trees for the church. Because the process had been informal in the past, no committee had care of the Christmas trees in their job description. We managed to get the trees up for Christmas each year, but what had been a joyful process turned into just another job to accomplish. Last year we were late in getting the tree for the sanctuary erected and it was unlit and undecorated for several weeks. After Christmas, the Department of Worship finally took the tree down and put it away. They discussed the situation and decided that next year they would adopt all of the sanctuary decorations, including the tree.

Meanwhile, one of the members of our congregation noticed the situation with the tree and decided that next year things would be different. During the summer, a freight truck delivered four large cartons containing a new artificial tree. Later three boxes of angels to decorate the tree arrived.

Yesterday was set as the day to decorate the sanctuary. The quilting group had their Advent banners and altar cloth ready. There was a new tree skirt for the new tree. Six or seven volunteers arrived at the church to set up the new tree. As soon as we began to unpack boxes, we realized how truly large the tree is. Fluffing and straightening branches began and the various electrical connections were made as section after section of the tree were added to the base. Soon we were using a ladder, then two ladders, then we realized that our 12’ step ladder simply wasn’t tall enough to complete the job. The tree was mounted on casters, so it was carefully wheeled down the center aisle of the church until it could be reached from the balcony, where the final sections were added and all of the connections made. Carefully the tree was returned to its

position in the front of the sanctuary and the thirty-six angels were arranged on the tree.

When we plugged it in, it was magnificent! The angels are reminders of Luke's description: "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and singing." The tree will be the dominant visual feature in the front of our sanctuary for the season.

It had taken a crew of seven two and a half hours to erect the tree. And we know that a similar-sized crew will take a similar amount of time to take the tree down.

The amount of time invested is not more that it takes to go out into the hills to get a tree - it is just a different type of task.

So, while other congregations are waiting until Christmas Eve, or at least later in the season, we are beginning Advent with a large and beautiful tree. It is a sign of things that are yet to come. In the daytime, it can only make us think of how it will shimmer in the darkness of the late Christmas Eve service.

We have large creche figures that are a part of our Christmas celebrations. For the first week in Advent, only Mary has been taken out of storage for display. Other figures will appear as the season progresses. The Christ Child will only appear on Christmas Eve. Some things require waiting.

In the meantime, we will enjoy the new tree and anticipate the glory that still lies ahead.

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November 30, 2009 – Remembering



It is funny what events bring up memories. One of the things about memories is that they are often quite unpredictable. Our family had a wonderful Thanksgiving this year but it was a unique year for us, as neither of our children were at home for the holiday - a first since we became parents. However, with phone and Skype, we had good conversations with both children and our holiday was cheerful. But it sparked a lot of memories.

During the years we lived in Idaho, Thanksgiving was usually an event for our immediate family. With both parents working in the church, it was a long weekend that we could enjoy as a family. For several years, we celebrated at a cabin in the mountains owned by members of our congregation. It was a quiet get-away and a few days off before heading into the rush of the holiday season. There was usually snow and we could ski and sled from the cabin. Often we combined the search for our family's Christmas tree with the same trip into the mountains. But things have changed. The wife of the family who owned the cabin passed away a couple of years ago. Remembering our family Thanksgivings was also a time to remember Marilyn with her gracious and generous ways. She was always so kind to our children. Our family was often included in their family events. Over the years we shared in the weddings of their children and the birth and growth of their grandchildren. Although there is a bit of sadness in realizing that times have changed and a truly wonderful woman has died, there are so many good memories that thinking of her is a delightful sensation.

On the day after Thanksgiving the time came for a friend from another phase of our lives to die. He had been struggling for more than a year with lung cancer. Doctors had predicted that his death would come sooner. There was a sense of relief and release when the end finally came. We have not lived in the same town as this friend for 25 years, but we have stayed in touch over the years. The news of his death set of another flood of memories. The friends who were a part of our lives at the time our children were born got to know us in a unique way. In the intervening years, they have become grandparents. Our memories are mostly of the days when their children were the age that their grandchildren now are. A generation has passed, but the memories are precious.

Thanksgiving day was the birthday of Charlotte, Susan's mother. In recent years, we have tried to remember Charlotte by arranging for the flowers for the communion table at church. This year the day for the flowers was the First Sunday of Advent, a time when we also remember Charlotte's sister Sybil and her husband Bill with the Advent Wreath. So as we arranged the flowers and set out the Advent Wreath, there were a lot of wonderful memories of these truly remarkable people. Church had been at the center of Charlotte's life as well as the lives of Sybil and Bill. Charlotte was always so glad that we had been called to serve the church and she was excited when we were called to this congregation, where Sybil and Bill had been members since they moved to Rapid City to become managers at Placerville Camp. Both died in Rapid City and are buried at Mountain View Cemetery here in town.

Memories, of course, come to us in their own patterns, not always in the order that the events occurred in our lives. Thanksgiving weekend this year was a time of treasuring memories and enjoying the recall of great people whose lives shaped ours and whose friendship has been precious. It was not a morbid time when our attention was focused on death, but rather a time of recalling life that was shared.

The beginning of the 12th Chapter of Hebrews uses the image of "A great cloud of witnesses." Indeed we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. So many people have witnessed parts of our lives and shared part of our journey and story. Each has contributed to this world in unique ways. Each has served others. Each has made a difference in our lives.

Each individual has a unique set of memories. Even though we share many memories and hold many things in common, the particular combination of memories that we carry is unique to each person. I am who I am because of the other people who have participated in my life. Ross Snyder used to call this reality an "ecology of Spirit." Each human being is a distinctive web of relationships. Each mind is a particular combination of memories.

One of the tasks of life after having collected a few decades of memories is sifting and sorting. We put our memories together in patterns that hold meaning to us. We

associate certain people with each other, certain events with other events. One memory triggers another in patterns that can be repeated. We can use certain memories as gateways to additional memories.

But life is not just about organizing our memories. Sometimes it is meaningful to just let them wash over us and to enjoy the sensation of our memories. Sometimes memories remind us of the things that we have lost. More often they remind us of the blessings we have received.

Flowers on the communion table, a few candles in a wreath, a holiday weekend and time to relax - all of these have triggered memories for us. And we take great delight in remembering.

May your memories warm you in this holiday season.

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December 1, 2009 – Underground



I'm not by nature an engineer, but I do have a great deal of appreciation for the work that engineers do. Here in Rapid City, South Dakota School of Mines and Technology is a first-rate engineering school and the students at the school are an intense group. As a member of the board of United Campus Ministries, I have spent considerable time thinking about how best to serve students who are so focused on their studies. It is a challenge for campus ministry and a challenge for the entire campus as students become so focused that they do not spend much time or energy working on relationships. One of the ways that the university challenges the students is by engaging in a number of interdepartmental challenges that require students to participate in interdisciplinary teams and work with each other in ways that are similar to the kind of projects they will face after graduation.

It has been fascinating to observe as the former Homestake Gold Mine in Lead is being transformed into the Sanford Underground Laboratory. After the transfer of the mine to the state, work began in ernest to pump out the water that had been accumulating in the mine. The water level is nearing a mile beneath the surface and significant construction on the laboratory is underway. Currently at 5,044 feet, the water will be maintained at that level as new pumps are installed at the 5,000 foot level, a process that will take about another month.

The project employes geologists and engineers and stories of their work amaze those of us who are not in the business with the size of the task and the amount that is being accomplished.

Today is the anniversary of the first handshake through the Chunnel, a pair of tunnels under the English Channel that moves trains between England and France. It was December 1, 1990 when British and English flags were exchanged. There had been a small bore hole completed earlier that year, but the ceremonial event was reserved for the 1st of December. The Chunnel, although not the longest tunnel in the world, has the longest under water portion of any tunnel. We were treated to regular news of the project because we were living in Boise, Idaho at the time. Boise is home to Morrison Knudsen Engineering which was involved in the project. A spin-off corporation, Lemley International, founded by Chunnel builder Jack Lemley, also calls Boise its home.

The thought of these massive construction projects boggles my mind. People had figured out how to build tunnels many years earlier, and as equipment was refined and techniques developed, the size of projects grew. Much of what was learned about tunneling and underground construction came through mining engineering. The search for precious metals and minerals that are used in many products has led to more and more complex methods to dig in the earth and extract the minerals. As miners learned from mistakes and tragedies as well as significant successes, knowledge of how to dig deeply underground and how to maintain safety and adequate levels of oxygen in such places improved.

The scale of underground operations is amazing. Many projects are measured in miles. The Chunnel is over 31 miles in length. The Seikan Tunnel in Japan is even longer at nearly 34 miles, but the underwater portion of that tunnel is shorter than the Chunnel. The Gotthard Base Tunnel, under construction in Switzerland, will be over 35 miles long. Humans seem to have incredible abilities to dig holes int he ground and then to enlarge them enough to run railroads through them.

The Sanford Lab is about more than the science of engineering and mining, however. It's major accomplishments will not be in the area of digging and creating spaces deep underground. The records associated with the mine were mostly accomplished during its life as an active gold mine. The research of the laboratory will focus on better understanding this world. Many of the experiments will involve the study of physics. Actually, research into physics was going on in the mine while it was still a working gold mine. Dr. Ray Davis installed the first neutrino detector in the mine in 1965. Understanding some of the properties of neutrinos led to a change in the commonly accepted models of how the universe works.

The proposal for the National Science Foundation's Deep Underground Science and Engineering Laboratory at Homestake proposes multiple campuses and experiment sites from the surface down as deep s 8,000 feet below ground. There is a vision for expanding the Sanford Lab to incredible proportions.

We humans have an insatiable desire to learn and build. Any construction project leads to another of even more incredible proportions. Knowledge and understanding build upon previously-acquired knowledge and understanding.

Regular readers of the blog won't be surprised that a pastor and theologian is allowing his mind to wander so far from his usual topics. I find many things in this world fascinating. But my understanding of the nature of God is such that there is really no field of human endeavor that does not lead to an increased understanding of God. Because God is the creator of the entire universe, understanding the universe leads to a deeper and larger understanding of the nature of God. Although few of the physicists designing experiments for the Sanford Lab would use theological language, the results of their experiments is the discovery of the incredible complexity of this universe.

And theoretical physics uses patterns of study and develops theories that are remarkably similar to the study of theology. Both stretch the human mind to its limits as we seek to understand that which will always be beyond our capacity to understand. It takes generations to develop the basic concepts.

So I pay attention to the miners and their work underground, though it is not a profession in which I will ever engage. Their work fascinates me. Their accomplishments impress me.

May we never lose our fascination with learning and discovering new things about this universe. May we continue to find the love of learning - a love that eventually leads to the love of God.

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December 2, 2009 – Windshield Time



I really enjoy driving through the open country. Highway 79 from Sturgis to Newell and on up through Hoover and Reva to Reeder, North Dakota is a good place to get away from the hustle and bustle and rush of life. And a little windshield time is a good way to gather one's thoughts and reflect. A drive alone through empty country gives the freedom to sort out one's thoughts. And I've been needing to sort out my thoughts. This is the third week that has been dominated by funerals for me. Too many funerals in too little time. It is the way that life is sometimes. Life and death are really very close together - we just pretend, sometimes, that death is somehow distant and far away.

So it was good to have the time to drive yesterday.

It was good to get the time to think.

The weather was a bit chilly and there was a bit of wind, but the roads were dry and the drive was good.

The Slim Buttes don't pose much of a barrier to travelers on modern highways. A narrow band of bluffs and buttes with a reasonable stand of ponderosa pine, they stand out from the surrounding rolling hills. In the fall of 1876, the buttes were part of the Great Sioux Nation, where U.S. Calvary were pursuing encampments of warriors and civilians following the summer's Battle of the Little Big Horn. The weather that fall was a lot wetter than this year, and the gumbo in the buttes can be brutal. General Sheridan had ordered the troops to round up and convince the remaining Indians to go to specific

reservation location. A contingent, led by Captain Mills was dispatched to head to Deadwood for reinforcements and supplies. The troops left behind their wagons, but the going was still tough. Soon they were down to half rations, supplementing their food with mules and horseflesh and waiting for reinforcements.

On the evening of September 8, Captain Mill's contingent of 150 troops surrounded an encampment of 37 lodges just to the north of the Slim Buttes. In the morning they attacked. Those who could fled the lodges. The elder American Horse, mortally wounded, hid in a cave with 15 women and children. He, two of the women and one child died. The people who did manage to escape took news of the battle to Brule and Cheyenne villages. Crazy Horse was only about 10 miles away with 600 to 800 warriors and they quickly headed to American Horse's village. What they did not know as they assumed positions above the village was that in the meantime Crook's main column of infantry, artillery and other calvary had since arrived.

As Crazy Horse's troops attacked, General Crook ordered the village to be set ablaze. Despite an intense firefight, the soldiers were able to drive the Sioux from their positions in the hills. Seized in the battle were all 110 of American Horse's ponies and a supply of dried meat. The soldiers also found a number of artifacts from the Battle of Little Bighorn, including government-issued guns and ammunition.

By September 10, Crook and his troops headed out for the Black Hills with the Sioux keeping up a running fight for the next few days. It took them 5 days to reach the hills where they met up with a supply column. It was a distance that I covered in about an hour and a half yesterday.

The death toll of the battle of the Slim Buttes was two cavalrymen and one of Crook's civilian scouts on one side and at least 10 on the Sioux side. It was the beginning of the end for the remaining free Indians. On November 25 Dull Knife and Wild Hog were captured over on the Powder River and the following May Crazy Horse surrendered at Fort Robinson and Sitting Bull led his remaining followers to Canada.

Over the next couple of years the Buttes and the surrounding grasslands were the location of the final Buffalo Hunts of the prairie. Within 30 years the area was filling up with settlers. Change had come.

The sounds of battle have long been stilled. The buttes are quiet these days. There isn't even much traffic. I stopped at the top and looked down at Reva in the distance, near the location of American Horse's encampment. More has stayed the same than has changed in the century and a quarter that has passed. The buttes are not heavily settled. The land doesn't support too many families. Domestic cattle have replaced the buffalo and a few manage to raise a respectable crop of wheat most years. Spring Durham is the preferred variety, headed to make the main ingredient for a million boxes of macaroni and cheese.

It's a good place to clear one's head. It's a good place to think. A little bit of history has unfolded in this corner of the world, not as much as in some other places. It has never been a place that has been filled with people and always has been one of the lonely corners of the world. Perhaps someone knows the location of the cave where American Horse hid at the end of his life. I don't, but there are a lot of caves in the buttes.

What I do know is that yesterday with the wind whistling and an eagle soaring high above me, I stood for a few minutes. No cars were traveling on the highway. I passed one on my way up the hill and didn't pass another until I was nearly to the Grand river. It is a good place to be alone with one's thoughts. To the north lies the community where we lived for the first 7 years of our career. The population is dwindling. The church is dying. The reason for my visit is a funeral. To the south is our current home and the church where we now serve. Another ten or fifteen years and we'll be choosing the place of our retirement. Time passes. The years go by. But a thousand years from now there will be an eagle circling the skies above the buttes. There is much in this world that lasts longer than we do. And the things that seem most important to us at the present often are not very important in the big picture.

It was good to get some windshield time and some perspective. Today I'll participate in a funeral, we'll have a little lunch and I'll be home by late afternoon. Another trip with my memories through the buttes. Life goes on. I'm a little bit older. And perhaps, one day, I'll be a bit wiser as well.

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December 3, 2009 – Squall



I don't think the term is used around here as much as it is in coastal areas, but all sailors know the meaning of a squall. It is a sudden and dramatic increase in the wind speed. It is usually associated with active weather such as rain showers, thunderstorms, or heavy snow. The sustained increase in winds over a short time period may be accompanied by a variety of gusts, microbursts, and other wind phenomena. All squalls have the potential to produce substantial wind. It is critical for sailors to know what to do when they see an approaching squall. It may be time to take in a reef on the sail or to alter course to best manage the coming wind.

Fortunately, clouds are usually a good indicator of squall activity. On the open ocean in the daytime, there is often ample warning of approaching squalls. However, the most fearful weather for a sailor is a squall that comes out of mist or fog, hidden by the conditions that precede it. It can be the storm that comes from nowhere and in an instant quiet seas can become rampaging white caps.

There are a lot of stories about squalls at sea. The USS Squall is a Coast Guard Coastal Patrol boat launched in 1993 and named out of respect of the weather.

We live a long way from the ocean, but if I wanted pictures to illustrate a weather text book, I could hardly have done better than the cloud patterns in yesterday's sky over northwestern South Dakota.

There were plenty of squalls.

At one moment I would be driving in bright sunlight. A few miles later I'd be unable to see the edges of the road in a driving snowstorm. The squalls were quiet small, usually less than ten miles across, but there were several of them blowing across the Dakota prairie. It wasn't much of a challenge for driving, and it was a lot of fun to watch the quickly moving and rapidly changing clouds.

I was traveling in luxury in a warm car with lots of warm coats and coveralls and blankets in the trunk. Whenever I travel in this country in the winter, I carry enough provisions to last for several days were I to get stuck in a ditch in the midst of a blizzard. But this kind of weather could rapidly become life-threatening to travelers in this region just a few decades ago. Walking or riding a horse in the midst of a squall could cause disorientation and a casual traveler might end up going in the wrong direction. And without the speed with which a car travels, it might take hours instead of minutes to travel through a prairie snow squall. This country wasn't for the faint of heart in pioneer days.

But when you have a safe place and plenty of food, a winter squall in open country is a sight to behold and a lot of fun to watch.

The timing of my trip yesterday was perfect for weather watching. I left Hettinger around noon for a three hour drive. Knowing how far I had to drive, knowing how rapidly the weather can be in this country, knowing a bit of sailor's lore, and having a mind for jingles and tunes, I have to confess that I left Hettinger singing the theme song from Gilligan's Island:

"Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip that started from this tropic port aboard this tiny ship. The mate was a mighty sailing man, the skipper brave and sure. Five passengers set sail that day for a three hour tour, a three hour tour."

I wasn't aboard the SS Minnow, but I knew the general gist of the sitcom's story:

"The weather started getting rough, the tiny ship was tossed, if not for the courage of the fearless crew the minnow would be lost, the minnow would be lost."

The weather wasn't all that rough for my trip and fearlessness was not required for a simple drive home on a blustery winter day. But we are beginning to get some cold weather these days and it is time to be prepared each time we go outside.

Funerals are exhausting for me, though I have learned that my role is nowhere near as tiring as that of the surviving family members. Grief takes a lot of energy. Meeting people and listening to them takes a lot of energy. Combine the two and add the stress of a special church service and a bit of entertaining and exhaustion isn't far away. So after officiating at a funeral, I knew that I needed to be very careful not to get sleepy as I

was driving. I knew that in that cold and windy weather were I to get tired a few moments outside would cure that problem. I only stopped the car to take pictures. I didn't need to get out into the weather in order to stay alert.

And it was just a three hour tour - a three hour tour. The drive went by quickly and soon I was back in my office and preparing for a meeting.

Looking at the pictures I took from the highway yesterday, I was once again reminded of the force of a winter squall. And I was once again reminded of the beauty of this land where we live.

So be careful out there. The weather can bring unpleasant surprises to those who are unprepared. But don't stay home to avoid the weather. Although a healthy dose of caution is valuable - the cost of staying home is that you might miss some of the best scenery the Dakotas have to offer. Moreover, staying at home cuts you off from the wonderful people who inhabit this land - most of whom are not held in by the approach of a squall.

Life is filed with squalls. Wether we react with fear or with calm resignation makes a big difference in our memory of the events of our lives. May we always take the weather seriously, but not too seriously. May we be willing to head outside and feel the full force of the wind, even in the midst of a squall. Perhaps it is only by facing into the wind that we are able to see the deep beauty of this land.

May you find time for outdoor events this winter. Don't be afraid of the squalls - it is far better to be over prepared than to live in fear.

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December 4, 2009 – Entertaining Angels



In the 18th chapter of Genesis there is the story of three visitors who visited Abraham and Sarah. The story reports in some detail the efforts extended to provide hospitality for the strangers, including preparing a tender calf, curds and milk and other food. After they have been entertained, the guests declare that even thought Abraham and Sarah are old and bast the usual age of becoming parents, they would conceive and have a son. The story reports that Sarah laughed to herself, but the visitors knew that she laughed. There is a brief denial on Sara's part, but he visitor persists and declares, "Yes, you did laugh." Sarah does have a son and his name is Isaac, which means "he laughs."

The traditions and stories that have grown up around this story declares that the three visitors were angels.

Had Sarah and Abraham been looking for creatures that looked like we imagine angels, they might not have ever received the message that God intended for them.

There are many places in the Bible where visitors are called angels. Visits from angels happen in several places in the Gospel of Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus. Elizabeth is visited by an angel. So is Mary. The shepherds receive an angel visit. In Matthew's Gospel, Joseph has a conversation with an angel. In these stories, fear seems to be a common reaction. The characters are not used to angel visits and are surprised when such events occur.

A direct message from God, delivered by an intermediary seems to be a relatively rare occurrence. And when it does happen, it is not quite the way that the recipients of the visit imagine it to be.

Over the centuries, people of faith have speculated about angels in a lot of different places. It is common to dismiss medieval scholasticism with the declaration that figures such as Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas were sitting around discussing how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. There is not evidence that such was ever the topic of their conversation. No written records remain. More likely, relatively modern thinkers invented the image as a way of discrediting scholastic philosophy and its role in university education. Regardless of the origins of the idea of angels and tips of pins or needles, there have been some rather obscure and arcane conversations as humans envision what an angel might be like and it seems quite clear that talking about angels is far different from an actual encounter.

For nearly a decade beginning in 1994, CBS aired a fantasy drama series called "Touched by an Angel." In the series a group of angels are sent by God to intervene and solve various earthly problems encountered by individuals. The angels were distinctly human in appearance, but had supernatural powers. The television series departed from the original concept by John Masius, who produced a pilot that was never aired and focused on human suffering. Masius was fired early in the first season because CBS wanted more "life-affirming" stories. Martha Williamson was hired as executive producer and the general plot of the shows was that angels intervened to change non-believers into believers and improve the lives of those who had been visited. The angels in the series have a distinctly human hierarchy with supervisors and levels of authority. Only the supervisors get to drive the Cadillac in the show. The series is still being broadcast on the Hallmark Channel.

Biblical Angels don't appear to change non believers into believers. In most biblical accounts of angels, the ones who experience angel visits are already believers and in most cases are lifted up as examples of faithfulness.

The truth is that whether we are talking about esoteric philosophy or contemporary entertainment or the decorations we hang on our Christmas tree, we don't really know much about angels at all. Our imaginations are engaged when we think of the ways in which God's message might be conveyed to humans. Of course there are biblical stories of times when God speaks directly, as is the case with Moses and Elijah and Jesus. With others, the message is less direct as with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

So, as is true with many other aspects of God and the realm of God, our imaginations give us analogies and images, but what we imagine falls far short of the reality of what lies beyond our human experience. And when encounters do occur, our language fails us and the descriptions while making interesting stories are not the same as the actual encounters.

Only the actual shepherds who were out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night know the fullness of the presence of the angel. Their story does not report what the angel looked like, how it was dressed, how big it was, what it smelled like, or a thousand other details. Perhaps their experience wasn't primarily visual. The description of the heavenly host focuses on a description of the sound.

I suspect that the visit of an angel would surprise us as much as it did the characters in the Biblical narrative. An actual angel might not be quite what we had imagined. It is not so much a failure of our imaginations as it is a reality that is far wider than our experience. There is so much to God's realm that lies beyond this human life. It boggles our minds and defies our imaginations. Art forms such as painting, sculpture and even movies and television are ways of expressing our imagination and occasionally of inspiring our belief, but they are not definitive descriptions of God's realm.

Like reports of discussions of the number of angels dancing on the head of a pin, it is as easy to ridicule philosophical and theological discussions as it is to make fun of artistic expressions. Our vision is imperfect and it is not difficult to see its flaws. But, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "our knowledge is imperfect and our predictions are imperfect, but when the perfect comes the imperfect will pass away. . . Now we see as in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now we know in part, but then we shall know fully, even as we have been fully known."

Advent is a good season to allow our imaginations to soar. It is a good time to picture what a visit from an angel might be like. Wonder is appropriate for people of faith. It is just when we think we understand it all and know all the answers when we discover how little we really know.

May we all be prepared to be surprised by the visit of an angel - and if the visit makes us giggle like Sarah, then so be it.

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December 5, 2009 – Room to Roam



European settlers first arrived on the east coast of this continent. As a result the settlements they established in Atlantic states are much older than the communities in the west. But it is not accurate to say that the continent was settled from east to west in an orderly sweep. Traveling through Mexico, Spanish settlers reached the West Coast long before the center of the nation had been explored. Others traveled around the tip of South America to reach the Pacific coast of the continent by sea.

As a result of the various patterns of travel, parts of the center of the nation were not seen as places to settle. Once overland routes were established, the plains states were seen as places to go through, not places to stop and settle. The Oregon trail was probably the biggest and most famous overland routes, leading from Missouri across Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho and Oregon. The eastern part of the journey across Kansas and Nebraska to Wyoming, was also traveled by those seeking different trails in later years. The California trail headed south from Green River Wyoming alongside the Great Salt Lake and Nevada. The Bozeman Trail headed north from Casper to Montana. The Mormon Trail followed the rough path of the California Trail, stopping in the Salt Lake area. Wagons and carts, horses and oxen and people walking on foot traveled these trails for decades before there was any significant settlement in the area.

California and Oregon were states before the outbreak of the Civil War. Kansas was admitted right at the beginning of the war and Nevada right at the end. Nebraska and Colorado followed in 1867 and 1876. Then there were 13 years before the flood of

states in that included North and South Dakota, Montana, Washington in 1889 and Idaho and Wyoming in 1890. Due to complex political considerations and more than a little bit of religious disagreement, Utah was not admitted to the nation until 1896. That left three states that were considered to be Indian country, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Arizona for the first couple of decades of the 20th century and finally Alaska and Hawaii in 1959.

Another way to think about population in the west is to follow the gold rushes. Today is considered by some to be the beginning of the California Gold Rush because on this day in 1948 President Polk made an official announcement that Gold had been discovered in California. Others think that January 24 of 1848 is the real start because that is the day that James Marshall made the actual discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill.

A lot of people followed the California trail, passing south of the Black Hills near the mid-point of their journey without knowing that the nation's richest Gold Mine was yet to be discovered. A quarter of a century after the California gold rush, the 1874 Custer expedition discovered placer gold near the present day location of Custer. Further explorations turned up traces of surface gold at Hill City, Sheridan, and Pactola. The richest finds, near Deadwood were made in the late fall of 1875 and by 1876 there was a full-blown gold rush in the area. Two years later, the congregationalists had established five congregations in the northern hills as people streamed into the land that had previously been a part of the Great Sioux Nation. Whites had been forbidden by law from entering the area, but the discovery of gold made the law unenforceable.

The area to the north of the hills remained largely unsettled for the rest of the 19th century, with a few herds of cattle grazing across the grasslands. Permanent settlements and communities weren't established until the Milwaukee Railroad was built near the route of US Highway 12 in the first decade of the 20th century. Some of that area was opened for homesteading first with 160 acre plots and later with 320 acre plots. Settlers, primarily from Northern Europe, arrived and the population in the grasslands on the western North and South Dakota line peaked in the late 1910's and 1920's with a steady decline ever since. Dramatic decreases in population were observed int he 1930's and 1980's, but for the most part the decline has been relatively slow.

It never was a place for too many people and it still remains a place were there is room for folks to spread out.

For a long time I have found that visiting this empty country restores my soul. We lived there for seven years, but I have never really figured out how to earn my living from that land. My work is with churches and it takes a certain number of members to pay a living wage to a pastor. The increases in educational debt and health insurance costs have made full-time, seminary-educated pastors a commodity that is too expensive for the small congregations of the open prairies. Still, living where we do, it isn't like living in

eastern states where towns and cities are located at regular intervals. Many of my friends in New England like to think of themselves as living in small towns far away from the cities, but they can't really conceive of a "city" of 66,000 being a regional center with a shopping impact with a radius of about 250 miles, where one has to travel more than 300 miles in any direction to find a city with a larger population.

We like living in this place and we like being surrounded by country that many would consider to be empty. It takes all kinds of people.

Being at the center of all of this empty country does, however, carry responsibilities. This week I have been thinking a lot about how we might provide pastoral services and care to rural and isolated congregations that lie within a half day's drive of our city. While they may not be able to afford a full-time pastor any more, they still have need of leadership and care. Perhaps a "hub and spoke" system of serving congregations would provide some of the things that they need. While they wouldn't have a pastor living in their town, one could be made available. At this point it is just the beginning of an idea and I don't know any details of how it might work, but it is an idea that I can't get out of my head and perhaps the reason it lingers is that it needs development.

In the meantime, I am grateful that I live in a place with room to roam. The empty spaces give my mind an opportunity to think of new ideas and my spirit space to focus on the new directions that God is calling me.

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December 6, 2009 – The Valley of the Shadow



The phone call came a bit after 8 p.m. last night. Another death in our congregation. Another funeral to plan. This will be the fifth week in a row that I have officiated at a funeral. One of those weeks there were two funerals. I don't know if I have ever before had a steady stream of funerals this long. It seems to be a season of funerals. Taken individually, none of the funerals was a shock. All of the deaths occurred after meaningful lives. The youngest was 70. All had made significant contributions to their communities. There has been much to celebrate in lives of faithfulness, service and love.

People often say to me "funerals must be the hardest part of your job." It really isn't the hardest part of my job. Helping a family work through the stages of grieving, planning a service that is unique and fitting for each individual, handing the dynamics of a community where not every member is at the same place in their grief - these are all meaningful challenges and I do not mind the work that is involved. There are other parts of my job that are harder for me.

But grief takes energy. Funeral services are once-in-a-lifetime events for families and they need to be planned with care and compassion. It is the wrong time for mistakes. Each word must be carefully chosen, each detail worked out. Details of music and arrangements must be attended to in a relatively short amount of time. After officiating at a funeral, I find it hard to accomplish much else that day. I am usually exhausted after a service.

For the family members of this woman it doesn't matter how many funerals in which I have been involved in recent weeks. Their grief is unique. Their loss is real and it isn't diminished or changed in any way by the fact that I've been spending hours each week working with other families.

And yet there is a value in reminding ourselves that we belong to a community - ours is not the first generation to have known grief and loss. Some of the feelings and experiences we are having have been known to others. Sometimes grief can make family members feel cut off from community, isolated and alone. Just knowing that there are others who have, in some way shared their experiences can be reassuring. There are points in the process of grieving where family members begin to wonder if their disorientation is permanent. A conversation with someone who has been through the experience can be very reassuring.

We often speak of practices of faith such as keeping sabbath, extending hospitality, practicing stewardship, prayer, bible study, engaging in mission, and giving testimony. We know that the practices of our faith need to be exercised. We learn to pray by engaging in prayer regularly. The scriptures deepen in meaning through repetition. Regular worship strengthens a life of faith.

Learning to grieve and celebrating God's gift of life in the midst of sorrow are also spiritual disciplines. We grow in faith by practicing our faith. None of us is exempt from loss. We all will know the sadness of the death of someone we love deeply. And none of us will escape the final human limitation. We all will one day die. The conduct of funerals and the participation in the process of grief are ways of practicing our faith as surely as engaging in the sacraments.

As people of the resurrection, we affirm that death is not the end of the worth, the beauty, and the meaning of human life. As followers of Jesus, we know that we are called not only to share in this life but also in the process of death and resurrection. Many of the world's religions have teachings about what happens after someone dies. Ours is unique in its understanding of God's continual presence throughout the process. Because Jesus experienced the death of those he loved, because he suffered human pain and died a human death, we are assured that we are not alone in grief.

It is important for us to express that faith and to speak publicly of our beliefs. Funerals are unique opportunities to practice our faith.

Funerals bring together unique communities. People who rarely come to church will attend a funeral. Folks who have deep commitments to a particular congregation or denomination will attend the service of another congregation. Family members who have been primary caregivers and have, in some cases been homebound with a family member who is ill often find the funeral service as a point of re-entry into the experience

of regular worship. Each funeral service presents the opportunity to speak of faith in ways that touch people without the barriers that we often erect in our lives.

And so each funeral is an opportunity. It is a blessing that should be received as such.

But it is clear that I need to give myself this pep talk this week. I'm ready for a break. I know that such a break will come. LIke many other seasons of our lives, this season will pass and we will have weeks without funerals. My job, however, is not to rush to that time, but to live fully in this time.

So I will meet with the family. I will encourage them to share their stories and tell of the life they have known and loved. I will counsel them in their grief and I will assist them in planning a service that is meaningful, personal and helpful. I will call the organist and the ushers and the folks who prepare refreshments. I will sit at my computer with sheets of notes and write the story of this unique journey of faith.

Shortly after the second Vatican council congregations began to consider a change of color during the season of Advent. The traditional deep purple was replaced in some communions with the blue that is associated with Mary. New vestments were created, new paraments were placed in sanctuaries. Our church never fully embraced that particular change. We use a little blue during Advent, but purple remains the dominant color - it is the same color we use during lent. This year the purple seems very appropriate.

Tears of sadness and tears of joy mix on our cheeks - life and death come face to face. As we prepare for a birth, we celebrate a funeral. Life is like that.

Jesus said, "so you are sad now, but I will see you again. And your heart will rejoice. And no one will take your joy from you." (John 16:22) May we embrace this season of sadness fully knowing fully the joy that is being prepared for us.

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December 7, 2009 – Day of Infamy



USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor. Photo from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

In 1941, President Roosevelt referred to December 7 as “A date which will live in infamy.” December 7, 1914 is the date of the U.S. declaration of war against the Austro-Hungarian Empire about 8 months after the U.S. entry into World War I, but that, of course, wasn’t the event to which President Roosevelt was referring. He was referring to the previous day’s attack by Japanese aircraft and ships on Pearl Harbor. Five battleships, three destroyers, and seven other ships sunk or damaged beyond repair, more than 200 aircraft destroyed, 2,400 American lives lost and another 1,200 wounded. Japanese losses that day were 30 planes, 5 midget submarines and fewer than 100 lives. The attack came as a devastating surprise to the U.S. Naval base despite strong evidence that Japan was panning an imminent attack and two radio operators detection of large amounts of aircraft approaching the island.

It was difficult for people to believe what was going on. It was hard to accept after it had happened. The mindset of most Americans was that war was something that happened on someone else’s soil. It wasn’t that there hadn’t been wars on U.S. soil. Most famous was the Civil War, not yet a century prior. But the experience of World War I was the the gruesomeness of modern warfare happened somewhere else. U.S. Soldiers traveled to war. And the devastating impact of air forces was only known intellectually. People were still thinking of war as something like the action in the trenches of World War I. This new war into which the U.S. Was now entering was an entirely different entity. Even the numbers were shocking. The death toll of the attack on Pearl Harbor would soon fade in the face of the overall cost of the war. By the end of World War II

nearly 40,000 U.S. troops had lost their lives. And Japan's losses were much higher. 140,000 died from a single bomb dropped on Heroshima and an additional 80,000 were killed by the bomb dropped in Nagasaki. By the end of the war, the costs in terms of human loss were staggering.

So today is one of those days that is firmly etched in our national consciousness. It isn't the right kind of day for a holiday. President Roosevelt's choice of words was appropriate. The memory is of infamy: "evil fame or reputation - a state of extreme dishonor." The reasons we remember are because of the evil that was done on that day.

Some have drawn comparisons between the attack on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 and Pearl Harbor Day. The two events do have a way of being seared into memory. People remember where they were and what they were doing when they received the news. There are, of course, significant differences in the events. The attack on Pearl Harbor was from a known and clearly-identified enemy. A single nation could be held responsible. That nation and its allies were identified as an enemy. A war was declared, sacrifices were made and victory was declared within 4 years. The attacks of September 11, 2001 were acts of terrorism with the terrorists killed in the initial attacks. The people who supported, sponsored and planned the attacks were not identified with a single nation and not even easy to identify. Two wars against nations were started, but now, more than 8 years later, it is unclear whether or not the wars had any impact on the level of threat from the terrorists. And while our military has proven to be extremely competent and successful in executing combat operations, securing the peace in the nations of Iraq and Afghanistan are proving to be far beyond military operations.

It is clear that September 11 is not the same as December 7.

This year, as has been true for several years now, December 7 is a reminder of the passing of a generation in our country. The attacks of 68 years ago are fading from first-generation memory. A person has to be at least 70 to have a conscious memory of the day. The soldiers who fought in the war are all over 80 years old. Funerals of World War II veterans are daily occurrences at our national cemeteries and it will not be long before we have no more actual eye-witnesses to those events. And memories shift when they are transferred from one generation to another. It isn't that we will forget. We will not. It isn't that the day will lose its infamy. It will not. But it is already beginning to fade in terms of the sharpness and impact of the events. The sharp emotional reaction to Pearl Harbor experienced by this generation has to do with memories of our parents and of visits to the memorial at Pearl Harbor or other places where memorials have been erected.

It is not that the events that people vowed to never forget have been forgotten, it is just that the passion surrounding the memory has softened. We think of those events on

anniversaries and as a part of the study of history rather than as the deep ache of a survivor or an immediate family member of one who was lost.

Humans were not created for remembering pain. The memory of pain is not the same thing as its experience.

So today is not a national holiday. It is not a day for much ceremony or special events. It is a day to go on with our living and work for a world where such attacks do not occur. But it is also a day to pause and remember.

I do not have personal memories of Pearl Harbor day. But I did serve as a chaperone to a group of high school students who were visiting Hawaii. i drove one of the vans to the Pearl Harbor parking area and rode with them the short boat trip to the memorial. And I remember the silence that overtook the group as they began to read the names and dates of birth of those who died in the attack. The realization that so many of the victims where within a couple of years of the ages of the teens with whom I was traveling swept my group in whispers and then silence. They did not need to be lectured about the sacredness of the place of the depth of the loss that had been experienced. The young people with whom I was traveling were mostly of the generation of the grandchildren of those who served in the second world war. Their memories were mostly of stories told. They were silenced by the realization of what had happened when their grandparents were teens. They will not forget our visit. Nor will I.

Memory can be a powerful source of motivation. May the memories of the tragedies of this day inspire us to work toward peace for all. May a day of infamy give rise to a time of honor, justice and peace.

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December 8, 2009 – Out of this World



Photo courtesy of Virgin Galactic.

When I was growing up the United States was in the midst of the race to the moon. There was so much attention to space flight and so much national energy invested in the space program that it was impossible for me to imagine that once landing humans on the moon our country would quickly abandon such flights and that for essentially all of my adult life there would be no further trips to the moon.

There were other things that I assumed that have not come to pass. I assumed that private aviation would expand exponentially and that most families would have a private airplane just like most families have private cars. I thought that the cost of aviation would come down and safety go up. The safety has gone up. Private aircraft have many advanced navigational features and other improvements that have added to safety. But private aviation design hasn't advanced all that much in my lifetime.

One company that I have been watching for a long time is Scaled Composites in Mojave, California. The company was formed to bring some of Burt Rutan's designs into production. Experimental planes such as the VariEze and LongEze were designed for the homebuilt market. They had a futuristic appearance with the engines on the back, large delta wings to the rear and a short canard at the front. Larger and more complex designs followed. The twin-engine defiant was constructed by some home builders with more financial means.

Burt's brother Dick was often the demonstration pilot showing up at air shows with the latest of his brother's designs. Together they and other investors formed Scaled Composites to build and test the designs. According to the stories I've heard it was Dick's idea to design an airplane that could fly around the world unrefueled. The Voyager was the design that Burt drew and it was built by Scaled Composites and in December 1986, Dick and Jeana Yeager made the flight heading westward from Edwards Air Force Base the site of the takeoff and landing. The Voyager is now on display at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. where it joins the Wright Flyer, the Spirit of St. Louis and hundreds of other famous record-setting airplanes.

In 2004, the Rutan-designed SpaceShip One became the first privately built and funded craft to reach space. A few months later the same craft earned the Ansari X Prize, which required completing two flights into space within two weeks. The design team also won the 2004 Collier Trophy awarded by NASA for "the greatest achievement in aeronautics or astronautics in America.

Sir Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin airlines group, entered the project announcing the intention of having commercial space tourism flights by 2008. The project did not meet that goal, but yesterday unveiled SpaceShip Two, a 60-foot long space craft designed to carry two pilots and six tourists into space. Flight trials are set to begin shortly and it is expected that within about 18 months, sometime in 2011, the first flight with space tourists will launch. Sir Richard plans to be on that flight with his children and his parents. Approximately 300 people have put down deposits on the flights, set to cost $200,000 for a two and one-half hour flight that includes 5 minutes of weightlessness in space and spectacular views of the earth. Every seat is a window seat. A space port is under construction in New Mexico to accommodate additional space tourism flights.

The company expects that within a couple of years of the commencement of flights they will have doubled the number of people from the earth who have traveled into space. Their plan is to build a fleet of spaceships that will launch from a variety of locations around the world to carry tourists into space.

The twin fuselage, four engine mother ship, White Knight Two, will take off with the spaceship suspended under its wings. The unit will fly to 50,000 feet of altitude, where the spaceship will be dropped. It will then fire its hybrid rocket engine and climb at nearly 2,500 miles per hour to an altitude of 360,000 feet generally recognized as the beginning of space. After approximately 5 minutes in space the craft will descend with folded wing and re-enter the earth's atmosphere and land as an unpowered glider in a manner similar to the space shuttle.

One craft is said to be able to carry as many as 1,000 space tourists a year once flights become regular. Branson envisions a fleet of the craft carrying tens of thousands of space tourists each year.

The trips are still beyond my budget and that budgets of many people. But there are a lot of people who are willing to make the investment. Anticipating a pay back in revenue from space tourists, the State of New Mexico is investing almost $200 million in a futuristic-looking space port in Upham. The space-age terminal and hanger will sit next to a 10,000 foot runway.

Other designers are at work to produce craft for space tourism but it appears that Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic will be the first to fly with groups of space tourists. They plan to fly from Mojave initially, moving to New Mexico when facilities there are completed.

It isn't happening the way I expected, but I did expect that we would see some form of recreational space travel in our lifetimes.

Big dreamers, talented designers, wealthy investors have come together to capture the public's imagination. It would have been fun to have been in Mojave for the unveiling yesterday. It was fun enough checking out the pictures on the computer. And I'll be paying attention when the first flights are made. I suspect that before long such flights will be so routine that we won't even take notice.

The future may not have arrived, but the present is pretty interesting.

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December 9, 2009 – Waiting for Rachel



She wouldn't like this picture. She had been awake for 24 hours and traveling for most of that time. But it sure was good to see her.

CAUTION: I am well aware that I have become a sentimental old fool. I couldn't forget it if I tried, my family reminds me from time to time. So in the place of the usual this morning, here are the ramblings of a blubbering old coot who no longer tries to keep his feelings to himself.

In October, 1983, we received a phone call. It was one of those phone calls that you wait for. We had gone through the whole process with the agency - applications, classes, home study. We had been interviewed by social workers and visited about the types of children who might be available and the approximate timing. We had spoken of infant lists and special needs lists and we had a general sense of the process. We had taken the Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis and sent our tests off to be scored by a trained professional.

We thought we were ready.

But when the time came, it was a whirlwind. The call came one morning. "Would you consider an infant instead of an older child?" We supposed that we would. "Could you pick her up tomorrow?" We supposed we could. "Oh, can you come to Grand Forks (435 miles away)?" We did.

Somehow the three of us, Susan our son Isaac and I were in the small office the next morning, trembling with excitement and a little bit short of sleep. We didn't know then

that short of sleep would become a permanent lifestyle. The social worker said to Isaac, who was 2 1/2 at he time, “Would you like to go get your new sister?” And down the hall they went, leaving us waiting for Rachel.

We had only known for about 24 hours that we would be naming this child - the process of selecting a name was rushed a bit, but we knew we had a name that was deeply meaningful to us. We talked and didn’t talk nervously for just a few minutes that seemed much longer. Isaac and the social worker returned with a pink blanket that held the tiniest little bald-headed baby. She was so short I could put her head in the palm of my hand and tuck her feet into my elbow. I had to make myself stop shaking.

I have waited for her several times since. Sometimes I have waited with her.

I remember waiting in the hallway to go into the courtroom for our formal adoption hearing. The judge only had one question for me. “Is she named in your will for an equal share with your son?” The process was over almost before it had begun. My nervousness had been wasted energy. That time of waiting was over and the time of celebration had come.

It didn’t stop me from waiting in the future.

I used to wait for her at ballet. She loves to dance. And the studio was cramped and crowded and short of dressing space. Ballet moms could go into the back of the studio and peer through the doors at their tiny dancers. Dads waited in their cars in the parking lot, more than a little bit awkward and uncomfortable in the studio. I could see her coming before I could glimpse her face. She always bounced out of the studio, leaping and dancing.

I waited for her in other places.

It seems like I spent quite a bit of my time in the orthodontist’s waiting room. After she was completed with years of braces and other treatments, the orthodontist built a new office. I have always felt like I should go and sit in the waiting room at the new office. It felt, at the time, like I was paying for it. The investment paid off. Her smile could be used as an advertisement for the doctor’s work.

I don’t think I’ve ever had to wait for her at church. She has been involved in church all of her life - that’s not an option for a preacher’s kid. But church was a place where she waited for me and for her mom. We always had one more task to finish, one more person to visit. Some kids long for their driver’s licenses for the freedom of the road or the ability to impress their friends. Our kids longed for their driver’s licenses so that they could go home after church.

She’s waited for me other times as well.

Not long after she graduated from high school she was working as a nanny in New York City. We hadn't been apart that long for her whole life. She made arrangements to join a mission group in Costa Rica. I was nervous about her traveling alone, so I arranged it so I would arrive ahead of her and we could go through customs together. Costa Rica being Costa Rica our flight was delayed and she arrived a couple of hours ahead of us. By the time I got there, she had cleared customs and was waiting with our Costa Rican hosts.

Last night it was her flight that was delayed. She had gotten up in the wee hours of the morning in England to catch a bus to the airport, where she had to arrive a full two hours early for a 7 a.m. flight. From London they flew to Washington D.C., where she cleared customs and got back on the same plane to fly to Denver. By flying to the west, the time zones stretched out her day. It was snowy and cold in Denver and the line of planes waiting to be de-iced was slowing departures by about an hour.

When we arrived at the airport to meet her plane, we discovered that we had an hour and a half wait. We decided to run Susan back home so she could have supper with my mother. I returned to the airport to wait for Rachel.

It seemed like forever after the plane landed until the first passengers appeared down the long hallway that stretches past the security checkpoint. The airport that had been designed for families to meet travelers at the gate has had the main concourse transformed into a security check point.

But I didn't have any trouble recognizing our daughter in the midst of the other travelers way at the end of the hallway. And she wasn't wasting any time getting to the area where we were waiting.

She really looked good.

She was, of course, exhausted and excited and full of stories of her trip and of the past nine months living in England. We had decided in advance that a stop for some American fast food on our way home was the way to handle supper. We got our food "to go" and headed home. She was too tired to eat. After a little while of visiting and checking in it was time for her to head to bed.

I resisted the temptation to open the door to her room just to watch her sleeping. I remembered that first night, in a motel, half way home from Grand Forks. I was tired, but too excited to sleep. I kept getting up to look at the little bundle in the crib. She didn't, of course, sleep through the night. I was right there when she stirred. Later she'd have to get a good breath of air and let out a fairly loud cry to raise me.

There are many wonders and delights in this life. I have been privileged to learn from some of the most incredible teachers. I have been inspired by some of the greatest preachers. I have climbed to the top of mountains and paddled in clear waters. I have traveled to distant deserts and watched sunsets on the shores of a half dozen oceans. I have prayed in monasteries and been lulled to sleep by coyote song. I have received awards and walked into the spotlight on the stage of packed concert halls.

But there is nothing in this life that is any finer than seeing that face after you've been waiting for Rachel.

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December 12, 2009 – Learning to Text



There is a long history of the church and its struggles with technology. There is certainly a relationship between the development of the printing press and the 16th Century Protestant Reformation. Printing gave common people access to the Bible in ways never before possible. It gave rise to a rapid increase in literacy. Although the process of translating the Bible into common languages started before the invention of the printing press, the invention gave people access to bibles in ways never before possible. The book that previously had been controlled by the church became available to the public. And individuals were able to read it for themselves and make their own judgments about its meaning.

There are some people who claim that the current communications revolution is equivalent in scope and impact to the invention of the printing press. It is difficult to point to a single invention as the center of this current wave of changes but computers have to be one of the major players in a transformation that began with wireless radio, was transformed by the advent of television broadcasting and now is swept up in multi-media computer-based communication. These technologies are being blended as people use their telephones for cameras and send and receive e-mail through a wide variety of devices. Access to reliable high-speed Internet service is becoming common.

Last night, before the supper dishes were cleared from the table, our daughter was giving Susan a lesson in sending and receiving text messages from her cell phone. While this is not considered to be new technology to teens, it is now considered by some to be essential technology. Effective youth ministry uses the tools that teens use

and part of Susan's job is using the available tools to communicate effectively with teens. So she is honing her skills at sending and receiving text messages as a way of extending her contact with the teens of the church.

We are very aware of the pitfalls of this technology. Teens have become distracted by sending and receiving text messages. The attempt to do so while driving is very dangerous. The use of cell phones is banned in many high school classrooms, but teens have developed techniques to send occasional texts without being detected by teachers. I have been driving a car of teens who are texting each other as we travel as a way of having a private conversation that does not include all of the people in the car.

I don't know how deeply the new technologies will shape the life of the church. I am not sure that I will live long enough to be fully aware of the impact. What I do know is that new technologies are producing changes that seem to be dramatic.

Pilgrim Press is the oldest continually-running publishing house in the United States. There was a small printing press aboard the Mayflower and the first book published on this continent, The Bay Psalm Book was a product of those early congregationalist settlers. Our church has been printing books ever since. But in recent years it has been difficult, if not impossible, for the press to break even on its operations. Despite significant cutbacks in staff and operating expenses, the press is facing unprecedented financial challenges. The problems are not unique to our press. Publishers and booksellers around the world are wondering how much longer it will be possible to cover expenses of the process of printing conventional books. Our distribution warehouse is closed this week as they move to new and smaller space and after the move the press will begin to offer more and more titles for on-demand printing. Instead of comparatively large press runs, the new concept is to be set up to print small numbers of books quickly. When orders are received the printing will be tailored to meet the orders, instead of filling orders from warehouses full of already-printed books.

Digital readers and Internet-distributed books are also on the horizon for contemporary publishers.

I don't know what this means for us. We have long considered ourselves to be "The People of the Book." The Bible is central to the practice of our faith. We have Bibles in the pews of our church for the use of worshipers. We award Bibles at several points in the education of our children. We have book groups and discussion groups and encourage our members to be constantly reading. And many of our pastors, like me, are constantly surrounded by books.

But times are changing and the church is not exempt from change. We serve in the midst of this world and its ever-changing cultures.

I have made a fair use of some of the modern technologies. I write a blog each day. And our church has a web site, though it is a struggle to keep it up to date. I do have the ability to read the Bible on my cell phone, complete with significant search tools right at my finger tips.

But I still carry an actual book to Bible Study each week. And I prefer to read the Bible from printed pages. The digital book in my cell phone is used mostly for quick reference or to look up an elusive passage. The computer Bible on the church's system is mostly used to provide large print versions of the week's reading for the lay reader. For most other uses, so far, we tend to use printed Bibles.

But we are citizens of the existing church and the church that is emerging to serve the needs of future generations is not the same institution. It may be much less of an institution than our current building-centered congregations.

For now, we are trying to find appropriate ways to use technology in the life of our church. We are moving at a slower pace than some other congregations. But we are affected by the changes in technology.

Sometimes no matter how much things change, the more they stay the same. When the Bay Psalm Book was printed in 1640, it contained the work of "thirty pious and learned Ministers." They had prepared fresh translations of the Psalms from the original Hebrew. They were proud of their work, but it received considerable criticism from within the church as people had difficulty adjusting to the changes in the words in their songbook. Many people said they preferred the familiar words of their existing psalters. We still hear similar reactions when we match new words to familiar tunes.

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December 11, 2009 – Blue Christmas



The third Sunday of Advent is called Gaudete Sunday. The name comes from Philippians 4: “Rejoice in the Lord Always.” The name means “rejoice.” It is a tradition in liturgical churches for the advent candle to be rose, the color of joy and for the service to be festive and upbeat. Not all waiting is drudgery and grim preparation. Part of anticipation is joy.

The joy of Christmas is genuine. There are many reasons for people to feel joyful throughout the season.

But holidays are not happy for everyone. There are many painful memories that are associated with holidays and sometimes those who are grieving or who have experienced trauma in relationship to holidays find the celebration to be oppressive. The expectation that everyone be joyful and happy on any one day is not realistic. In the real world there are those who are sad, those who are grieving, those who are hurting, on every day of celebration.

The local chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving held its annual vigil and candlelight kick off for the red ribbon campaign at the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center yesterday. Part of the observance was the reading of the names of the 48 persons who died in South Dakota last year in accidents caused by drunken driving. The timing of the observance is not a mistake. Holiday celebrations can lead to over-indulgence and irresponsible behavior that results in tragedy. The holiday season is one of the most dangerous times to venture out on to the roads because of the increased number of drunk drivers. Each

year the solemn ceremony serves as a reminder to the community of the tragedy that occurs and an invitation to all to find ways of celebration that are safe.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving sounds at first like an organization that is defined by what they oppose. And their opposition to drunk driving is clear. The organization has more than a little bit of anger in its founding. The anger is clearly understandable and a normal part of the grief process. But the organization has channeled that anger into a process of change. The organization is primarily devoted to education. Public education is seen as the most important tool for promoting change in our culture.

The group also supports tougher laws and increased enforcement of existing laws. Each year as a part of their annual observance, the group makes an award to a law enforcement officer in recognition of efforts to make roads safer. I know from my experience with officers that more than the successful stops and preventive arrests, more than the traumatic accident scenes, more than any awards presented, what really stays in the hearts and minds of the officers are the moments when they are given the task of notifying loved ones. Nothing is more difficult. Nothing leaves a more lasting impression on the officer. They are trained and provided support to deal with the stress of what they see at accident scenes. They are trained and equipped to make arrests and enforce the laws. But no amount of preparation is adequate for the task of telling someone that their loved one has died. A desire to avoid that particular duty turns all law enforcement officers into advocates of prevention.

The traditional visual symbol of M.A.D.D. is the red ribbon. The symbol has been adopted by a variety of anti-drug campaigns where it is also a fitting symbol. Originally M.A.D.D. members and supporters tied red ribbons to automobiles as a visual reminder not to drink and drive. One year we had a little program in our youth group where members of M.A.D.D. tied ribbons to all of the cars in the parking lot. Then one by one I removed the ribbons and tied them loosely around the fingers and wrists of the youth in our group, saying it isn't the car that is responsible for ending drunk driving - it is you. You and your brain are the keys to ending the tragedy and violence of drivers impaired by alcohol. I hope it made an impression.

Surviving members of families affected by drunk driving are only part of those who experience sadness at holidays. There are many other kinds of loss. Each congregation gathered to celebrate the birth of Christ has in its midst those who have lost a loved one to suicide and those whose family members have been victims of life-robbing diseases. In each congregation are grieving widows and widowers and children who are facing their first Christmas without a parent. There are those who have known the pain of losing a child and those who are facing economic crisis. There are ones who have been laid off of their jobs and others who have been victims of domestic violence.

The true joy of Christmas does not ignore the real pain and grief and sorrow and sadness that are a part of our community. Real joy is not a veneer of happiness applied

to cover up tragedy. The baby in the manger is also the man on the cross. The joy we celebrate at Christmas is a joy that knows the reality of pain and death and yet affirms that these are not the final words on the condition of the human spirit.

It is meaningful each year to remember those who are the victims and those who suffer at this time of the year. Their presence in our community adds depth and meaning to the holiday we celebrate.

“So you have sorrow now,” said Jesus. “But I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice. And that joy no one will be able to take from you.”

Perhaps the joy of Christmas comes from facing the sorrow directly and knowing that there is a greater joy that lies ahead.

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December 12, 2009 – An Evening at the Opera House



George Hearst was a wealthy American businessman who became a U.S. Senator. He was the father of William Randolph Hearst, the famous American newspaperman. George Hearst made his fortune in the mining industry. He was a partner in Hearst, Haggin, Tevis and Co., and had interests in the Comstock Lode and the Ophir mine in Nevada. Other successful mining enterprises in which he was heavily invested included the Ontario silver mine in Utah, and the Anaconda Copper Mine in Montana.

In the spring of 1877, Hearst sent L.D. Kellogg to investigate claims of new gold discoveries in the Black Hills of South Dakota. He optioned the Homestake and Golden Star Claims for $70,000. Hearst and his partners incorporated their holdings as The Homestake Mining Company. Until its closing in 2002, the Homestake mine was the largest and deepest gold mine in the world. It produced more than a billion dollars in gold.

George Hearst passed away in 1891. His widow, Pheobe Apperson Hearst turned her attention and the considerable wealth of the Hearst family to humanitarian and philanthropic ventures. In Lead, the home of the Homestake mine, she presented the community with a library and established one of the earliest kindergartens west of the Mississippi. In 1911, with the help of Thomas Grier, superintendent of the Homestake Mine, conceived the idea of opening an opera house and recreation building to be presented to the citizens of Lead as a gift. No expense was spared in the quarter-million dollar complex. On the last day of August, 1914, the grand opening of the opera house occurred with the Sheehan English Opera Company playing to a packed house.

The opera house also featured a movie screen and silent movies were a regular feature. Vaudeville and stock companies also performed in the opera house. Boxing and wrestling matches were also popular entertainments. In 1920 the services of the Episcopal Church were held int he opera house as the building was moved brick by brick by the Homestake mining company to a new location and reassembled complete with a new bell tower.

The center also featured a swimming pool, a bowling alley, billiard rooms and a new home for the community library.

The building suffered two devastating fires, while remaining structurally sound. The 1984 fire burned the roof off of the building and extensively damaged the interior. Although the flames were extinguished before all of the ornaments and decorations were fully destroyed, it seemed that the building might be a complete loss.

But the community has rallied around the opera house that is part of its legacy. Funds were raised and repairs begun. Decades of work have resulted in a new rood and structural repairs to the building. The lobby area has been restored and much work has been done in the entryway. The theatre itself has received a new heating system and new floor. The stage has been rebuilt and work has begun on balcony railings and other improvements.

And the Opera House is back in service as a venue for entertainment for the community.

Last night The Bells of the Hills, Rapid City's community handbell choir, presented its annual Christmas program "The Magic of Christmas" at the historic Homestake Opera House in Lead. It was a chilly 51 degrees when I stepped out onto the stage. The main floor was filled and there were additional folk in the balcony. The lighting was not perfect, and there was a cold draft from a couple of high windows that could not be closed, but the sound system worked well and the concert began with energy and enthusiasm. It was a delightful evening and the audience was delighted with the performance.

As narrator for the ensemble, I had some time to explore the old opera house while they were rehearsing. Two things are evident. One is the incredible beauty that was designed into the opera house. It is clear that at one time this was as beautiful as any other performing arts space in the world. Sculptures of cherubs adorned the stage. Dramatic chandeliers graced the lobby, fancy facades graced the columns and pillars, gorgeous windows overlooked the city. The stage had at one time been a theatrical masterpiece with a huge fly tower over the stage with room for many different screens, curtains and sets. There was a small orchestra pit beneath the stage. A huge light board

must have required the hands of many in order to make the complex connections in an era before computers and modern controls.

There is a lot of work that remains before the theatre and recreation building can be restored to their former grandeur. Raising the money to accomplish those tasks is a significant barrier which must be overcome. It is estimated that it will take an additional $4 million to restore the Opera House including state of the art sound, lighting and stage equipment, new theatre seating, dressing rooms, curtains for the stage and the proscenium arch, and other decorations, including making a replica of the grand chandellier. The community is taking the process one step at a time.

In the meantime, the show must go on. The volunteers who are giving of their time for the restoration of the Opera House are working to book entertainment into the yet unfinished theatre. Last night was just one of many shows that will weather the challenges and hardships of an unfinished theatre as entertainment is offered to the community while restoration work continues.

And for a while, as the music drifted into the hall and the audience applauded and cheered enthusiastically, the unfinished work was less important than the heritage of entertainment and community service that started with the vision of Phoebe Apperson Hearst nearly a century ago. Perhaps there is yet another century of service to the community in the old building.

It was good to spend an evening at the opera house. There are many wonderful evenings yet to come.

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December 13, 2009 – Ram Tough



Although technically a part of the Rocky Mountains, the Black Hills of South Dakota stand as an island in the midst of the prairie, nearly 200 miles from the slopes of Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. Populations of wild animals live in relative isolation in the Black Hills. Although it is not uncommon for wild animals to travel long distances and make contact with animals in other parts of the Rocky Mountains, animal populations in the hills are a bit more vulnerable than in other parts of the mountains because they live at a distance from other bands and herds of their species.

Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep are native to the hills. Within the first few decades after the hills were opened to settlement, they were prized by trophy hunters. To this day the animals are among the most sought-after trophies of hunters. The full-curl horns on the rams can weigh up to 30 pounds on a fully-grown 300 pound animal. In 2006, there were 1,200 applications for the three hunting permits issued in the hills. The animals are curious and relatively easily hunted.

By 1916, Bighorn Sheep were extinct in the Black Hills, due primarily to over hunting. For decades there simply were no bighorns in the hills. Then, in the 1960's bighorn sheep were brought to the hills from Colorado and Wyoming in an attempt to re-establish a herd at Custer State Park. There were some ups and downs in the population due to disease, but several bands began to spread out throughout the hills. Additional transplanted sheep were brought to Custer State Park int he 1990's. By the time we moved to the hills in the mid-1990's bighorn sheep were a common sight in the hills, with established bands within Custer State Park and to the

north of the park in the Hill City area. They are a common sight along highway 44 heading into the hills at the western edge of Rapid City. The crash of horns as the males head butt during the fall rut is common at Cleghorn Springs Fish Hatchery. The local joke is that bighorn sheep must be catholic because there is a band that is regularly seen grazing on the manicured lawn of Blessed Sacrament Church across the highway from Canyon Lake.

The three rams in the picture with today's blog were standing in the middle of Highway 385 near the intersection with highway 16 just outside of Hill City on Friday. They were part of a band that included about a dozen other animals. They didn't seem too concerned with the traffic on the highway and reluctantly walked to the edge of the road so we could pass by, giving us a good close-up look at the beautiful animals. I'm not sure what was so attractive about the highway. There was a little snow, but not enough to make it difficult for the sheep to walk across the open fields. Perhaps it was the residue from the salt that is used to clear ice from winter roads. They did appear to be licking the road surface and salt is the only explanation for that behavior that I know.

One of he pleasures of living in the Black Hills is the relative ease of showing wild game to visitors. We have both mule and whitetail deer in our yard and the wild turkeys make a visit to our deck most days. Mountain goats are frequently seen around Mount Rushmore and the Crazy Horse memorial site. Elk are a bit more elusive, but often can be seen from Highway 385 traveling through the middle of the hills. The buffalo herd in Custer State Park and Wind Cave National Park are easy to spot and often are standing right on the roadways. Antelope are common on the prairies in the northern and southern hills. There is even a band of wild burros in Custer State Park.

The bighorns are a special attraction to visitors. Their dramatic horns are worth a second look and they seem to be, for the most part, unconcerned and unafraid around humans. They don't mind if we stop and gawk and take pictures.

The animals do seem especially susceptible to outbreaks of disease. In the early 1900's populations of Bighorn sheep across the rocky mountains plummeted, making them difficult to hunt and a rare sight for visitors. In January and February of 2005, there was an outbreak of pneumonia among the bighorn sheep in the Black Hills resulting in a loss of nearly 75% of the animals in the hills. Populations have been recovering since that time and we now know the general range of several different bands and are once again able to show them to our visitors.

Bighorn sheep were among the most revered animals of the Absarokee (also known as Apsaalooka or Crow) people. Prior to settlement by Europeans, the bighorn mountains were central to their territory. Crow storyteller Old Coyote told the legend of a man who was possessed by evil spirits and who tried to kill his own son by pushing the young man over a cliff. The young man was caught in some trees and survives the fall. He is rescued by a band of bighorn sheep and takes on the name of the leader of the sheep,

Big Metal. By living with the sheep he gains their powers: wisdom, keen eyesight, sure footedness, strength, good hearing and a strong heart. After living among the sheep, Big Metal returns to his people to become a great leader. Bighorn sheep horns are used in some of the ceremonies of the Crow people. The Bighorn River crosses the Crow reservation as it flows out of the Bighorn Mountains and into the Yellowstone River.

Bighorn sheep are one of the joys of life in our neighborhood. We continually feel privileged to have such a diverse population of animal neighbors. And if you are around in the fall and get to witness the head banging action of the males, you won't forget the sight or the sound. Maybe that is why Dodge chose the ram as a symbol for their trucks. The animals really are tough.

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December 14, 2009 – Bells in the Church



Bells of various kinds and sizes have been long associated with churches. It is not clear exactly how or when bells first became a part of Christian theory about how bells came to be used in churches is that until the end of the 17th century bells were very expensive items. They were cast in moulds made from patterns set in clay. Due to the high price, it made sense for communal organizations to purchase what individuals could not afford. There are a lot of traditions associated with bells and by medieval times, bells were steeped in superstition as well.

Bells were believed to have the power to ward off evil spirits. They were baptized by priests in a fashion similar to the baptism of people. Once baptized, the bells were believed to have many different powers. Bells were hung in doorways in the belief that there were always evil spirits lurking around doorways waiting to get inside. Ringing the bell as one entered was thought to keep the spirits at bay long enough to make the entry. It also had the added benefit of allowing those who were already inside to know of the presence of the visitor.

Another custom was the ringing of a bell to mark the death of a person. It was thought that evil sprits stood at the food of a dying person's bed waiting to seize the spirit of the person as death occurred. Ringing a bell was thought to prevent the evil spirits from being able to make the grab. Because larger (and lower-toned) bells resonate longer, it was felt that the deeper the bell the more time was allowed for the departing spirit to get away from evil. This custom led to the tradition of tolling the largest bells in a church tower at the occasion of a funeral.

Bells were believed to have powers to calm storms and decrease thunder and lightning. In some places in medieval England, all the bells in town would be rung in an effort to clear an especially violent storm.

As bells became more common, they found many uses outside of the church. Bells were used to adorn horses and carts as symbols of wealth and power. Later bells were found to be safety devices that warned of the approach of a cart or sleigh. In parts of Canada there are still laws on the books requiring the use of bells on all sleighs.

Churches began collecting bells, especially large bells, in their towers. As founders gained more ability to produce specific tones through the use of different sizes, materials and clapper designs, sequences and tunes could be rung by experienced ringers. Carillons of tuned bels were installed in towers and rung by practiced teams.

Handbells as musical instruments in the church evolved from the creation of small practice versions to prepare teams for change and tune ringing in tower carillons. The smaller bells allowed ringers to stay inside around a warm fire instead of standing for hours in the cold towers and belfries of churches. The first known use of handbells in churches centered around the celebration of Christmas, which occurs at the coldest time of the year in the northern hemisphere.

Today there is a wide variety of music arranged for handbell choirs to use in all seasons of the year, but the association of bells with Christmas continues.

Yesterday our handbell choir, which usually rings from the balcony, moved all of its tables down to the chancel of the church as a part of an Advent service of lessons and song. They rang three anthems. Our congregation enjoys having the bells in front where the ringers can be seen. Our choir rings five octaves of bells and three octaves of chimes in their primary arrangements and has an additional three octaves of bells that have been tuned for use with the other bells to add additional depth to their music.

Handbell ringing, like vocal music, is a great match for a congregation like ours because it requires the coordinated efforts of a large group of people. Our handbell choir usually rings with eleven or twelve persons and can use up to fifteen to assist with more complex pieces. Like many other musical ensembles, handbell choirs can be composed of persons of many different ages assisting with interaction between generations. Our handbell choir includes ringers from their teens to their late seventies.

Because I narrate for our community handbell choir, which had its Christmas concerts over the past weekend, I've been spending a lot of time close to the ringers listening to their art. It is a joy to hear and to watch the ringers as they produce an amazing variety of sounds from the bells.

Gratefully we have lost many of the superstitions that surround bells and their use. We no longer feel a need to baptize bells, though we do say prayers of blessing when new instruments are added to our church. And we have a single large bell in our tower that is rung to announce worship and tolled for special occasions. But we do not hold beliefs that our ringing of bells has anything to do with the manipulation of evil or good spirits. We ring our bells because we enjoy the sound and appreciate the art.

So today's blog is more of a lesson than a personal reflection, but it comes out of the events of my life in the past weekend. And it reading the blog has made you into a campanologist - a person who studies bells.

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December 15, 2009 – Gone is not Forgotten



Today is the 70th anniversary of the opening of the movie, Gone with the Wind. The David O. Selznick-produced movie starred Clark Gable and Vivian Leigh. There was plenty of pomp surrounding the opening on December 15, 1939. Mayor William B. Hartsfield hosted three days of festivities including a parade of limousines, receptions, false antebellum fronts on stores and houses and a costume ball. Eurith D. Rivers, the governor of Georgia, declared December 15 a state holiday. Thousands lined the streets. President Jimmy Carter later recalled the day as “the biggest event to happen in the South in my lifetime.” It was a different time, however. Hattie McDaniel, as well as the other black actors in the film, were prevented from attending the premiere due to Georgia’s Jim Crow laws, which would have kept them from sitting with the white members of he cast. Clark Gable threatened to boycott the event, but McDaniel convinced him to attend.

The movie, based on Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 novel, has come to be considered one of the greatest movies of all time. When adjusted for inflation, Gone with the Wind remains the highest grossing film of all time in North America and the United Kingdom. It has sold more tickets in the U.S. than any other film in history.

In the opening months, the film only played to advance-ticket road show engagements at a limited number of theaters. Its general release occurred in 1941. The movie opened in London in April of 1940 and was a sensational hit throughout the blitz.

Part of the impact of the film was its ability to distract a world from the horrors of the second world war, but its popularity continued after the war was ended.

Even people who have never seen to movie know some of its famous scenes and can quote Scarlett's question: "Rhett, if you go, where shall I go? What shall I do?" and Rhett's famous reply: "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

The movie is consistent with other portrayals of the south during the period of segregation, showing white Southerners as defending traditional values while the issue of slavery was largely ignored. Hattie McDaniel was the first African-American to win an Oscar for her performance in the film, but her portrayal of Mammy has since been criticized as perpetuating an unrealistic stereotype of the lives of African slaves in the American South.

Works of fiction have helped us understand our history and our present situation for many generations. Great novels give a society a way of looking at itself and finding itself in the story. Shakespeare's plays, Tolstoy's War and Peace, Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment and J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings are all said to have had a impact on history. Orwell's 1984 and Huxley's Brave New World are also literary classics that have had an impact on how we understand the world. And many would add Jane Austin's Pride and Prejudice to that list.

It is a little less clear, in my mind, how movies and films shape our culture, but their impact is clear. Famous lines from movies become ingrained in our culture and shape our perception of history as well as the present.

Somehow I have never become a fan of movies. I probably only watch one or two a year. I enjoy movies when I make time to watch them, but often am behind the curve when discussing movies and popular culture with my friends and colleagues. But I live in a culture that is shaped by the movies. Poplar understandings of culture and religion are often presented with references to Star Wars and other such films. From Casablanca to The Godfather, from Citizen Kane to Shindler's List, From It's a Wonderful Life to Raiders of the Lost Ark, our culture is infused with images and ideas from the movies.

Artists often claim that they do not shape culture, but rather reflect the values that are already present in the culture. Perhaps that is true. Certainly the attitudes toward race relations were deeply ingrained in American culture before the release of Gone with the Wind. People had deeply-ingrained ideas about good and evil forces before they had seen Star Wars.

The majority of fictional movies continue to be based on literature. Good movies are dependent upon good fiction writing. The fact that the movies are the way in which

many people access the storyline in no way diminishes the impact and contribution of the talent of writers.

Margaret Mitchell never wrote a sequel to Gone with the Wind. In 1991, her estate authorized Alexandra Ripley to write the novel Scarlett. Alice Randall wrote The Wind Done Gone as a parody of the original book. It became a New York Times bestseller after a lengthy court battle over its publication. The book tells the story from the perspective of the slaves. Donald McCaig's novel Rhett Butler's People came out a couple of years ago as an attempt to retell the story from Rhett Butler's perspective, but it has not been widely read.

The images from the film are the images that the public wants to keep in regards to the story. Now, 70 years later, we prefer to have the story told with Vivian Leigh and Clark Gable still young and energetic and at the top of their game.

Seventy years is a long time for a movie to remain popular. It is a short amount of time for a great work of literature. It remains to be seen which films will become classics and kept as icons of culture, but I suspect that Gone with the Wind is one of those that will still be watched a long time from now.

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December 16, 2009 – Past, Present, Future



Jerusalem, from the Mount of Olives.

I admit that the process of writing an essay every day is a challenge. Lately I have been struggling with selecting the topics for my daily blogs. Some days the subject comes easier than others. I usually have a short list of possible topics by the end of each day and, after checking a few web sites in the morning, select the topic to pursue. More often than not, I have lots of extra topics, but that doesn't eliminate the struggle to write an essay on the topic selected. When I read through the different topics that I have selected, I realize how diverse they are and how far I often stray from topics that might be considered to be closely linked to my work as a pastor.

I make no apologies for the variety of topics, however. I do not believe in a distinction between sacred and secular. Because I believe that God created everything that exists and because I believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in the everyday events that form our story, I submit that there is no topic that does not bear some connection to the divine presence. We all belong to God and every part of our story is in some sense sacred.

Three different topics were on the short list this morning. The first is airplanes. I'm quite interested in airplanes. Boeing achieved first flight of the 787 yesterday. This is the first flight this century of an airplane that incorporates totally new technology. I think that we will look back on the event as the opening of a new era in a similar manner to the historic first flight of the 707 on December 20, 1957,that opened modern jet transportation or the first flight of the 747 in February of 1969, that opened up the era of jumbo airlines serving major hub cities.

My second possible topic was the death of Oral Roberts. I often write a blog on the occasion of the death of a famous person. But, quite frankly, it would be difficult for me to write such a blog with a proper amount of respect for a man who was deeply faithful and who contributed heavily to the advancement of Pentecostal Christianity. He was one of the early proponents of the "prosperity gospel," that dominates television evangelism. The connection between faith and financial success simply doesn't connect with my own theology. Far too often the prosperity gospel has been corrupted into a technique for charismatic evangelists to enrich themselves at the expense of their viewers. I could not understand his claim that God would "call him home" if he failed to raise $50 million for his failed medical school attempt. It made no sense to me that he set up his son to be the president of his university - a move that resulted in his son achieving significant personal wealth and the university facing critical financial crisis. The temptation in writing about Oral Roberts would be to parallel the decline in his health with the decline in the fund-raising efforts at the university that bears his name in Tulsa, Oklahoma - a comparison that is unfair and not faithful.

The third topic on my list for this morning is the discovery, in Jerusalem, of a burial shroud that dates to the time of Jesus. This is a unique and meaningful archeological discovery and it raises additional questions about the famed Shroud of Turin that some claim to be the actual burial shroud of Jesus. Many scientists and people have faith have claimed for some time that the Turin Shroud is made of a modern cloth with a more complex weave than the type of cloth that would have been used in Jesus' time. The discovery of the Jerusalem shroud confirms this theory and continues to point to the Turin shroud as a product of the Middle Ages and that the impression of a man's face on that cloth is not an authentic image of Jesus of Nazareth.

Probably any one of the tree topics might have been expanded into the blog instead of my writing a blog about the topic of how I choose the topic of the blog.

Here is what is intriguing me today. I remain fascinated by the events of the past, present, and future. A team of archaeologists and scientists from Hebrew University and institutions in Canada and the US has discovered the body of a man wrapped in fragments of a shroud in a tomb dating from the time of Jesus near the Old City of Jerusalem. The site of the discovery is in the old "Field of Blood" cemetery, where Judas Iscariot is said to have committed suicide. This dedicated scientific study of the past is deepening and strengthening our ability to understand the historical Jesus. Because so much tradition, superstition and mystery surround the church, we often are prevented from understanding the origins of our faith by the events that have happened in succeeding years. This new discovery is not the shroud of Jesus. It probably is the body of a Jewish high priest. It is the earliest proven case of leprosy known. It tells us about the time of Jesus and helps us separate myth from fact in the present.

In the present, a grieving family is preparing for the funeral of a man who was, undeniably a part of the religious fabric of 20th century America. Oral Roberts may have had a different theology than mine. He may have expressed his faith in ways that I do not understand. But he had a big impact on the way that Christianity is perceived in our time. His funeral will be noticed by believers and non-believers alike. The church and university that he founded continue to have an impact on the shape of Christianity in our time.

In the future, fuel efficiency and environmental responsibility will shape the way that we travel. The ways we currently travel cannot be sustained indefinitely. We will either find better ways to travel, or we will be forced to travel less. And, I suspect, that we will look back on the health risks that we have taken for airline travel in the current time frame as unnecessarily risky once airlines with clean air and proper humidity levels are the standard.

The truth is that we celebrate and worship a God who is God in all times. Past, present and future are human distinctions that are not a part of God's realm. God's realm invites a non-linear approach to time. The past is the present is the future to God.

Who knows, perhaps I will one day take some of the prosperity that has come from my life as a preacher and invest it in tickets to travel by a 787 dreamliner to visit Old Jerusalem and view the remnants of the cloth of the ancient burial shroud. Until then I will continue to puzzle at how my mind works and why such divergent topics capture my imagination.

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December 17, 2009 – Christmas Cookies



There is no shortage of Christmas goodies around. There have been plates of cookies, fruit, cheese, crackers and other things to eat at the office for the past couple of days. People bring in their baked goods as gifts to the church staff. We enjoy the extra attention and the food tastes good even though we know we're eating too much and a bit more restraint would be in the best interests of our health. The gifts are offered with the best of intentions and eating is one of the ways we celebrate the holidays.

I've eaten plenty of cookies at other occasions this year as well. The Women's Fellowship serves cookies and beverages after funerals. People gather in the fellowship hall to remember, tell stories and greet the grieving family. It is an important part of the grieving process and one of the ways that the wider community can demonstrate its support for those who have lost a loved one. And I've been to too many funerals this year, not that there is any choice about the number of funerals one attends.

We have a large container of cookies at our home that contains more than goodies to eat. Of course there are cookies and they taste good. And, like other gifts of the kind, it is an obvious symbol of the love and care that has been invested in preparing the treats. It is a gracious gift, freely offered. But, as is often the case, there is more to the story.

There is a family that has seen more than its share of tragedy, trauma, and disruption this year. Raising a child is always a challenge for a family. An adopted child who suffers from mental health concerns and educational disabilities is an additional challenge. Love has a wonderfully powerful effect on persons, but love alone cannot

cure every disease. Careful diagnosis and treatment is important. It can be a struggle, advocating for and educating schools about the needs of your child. It can be a struggle, balancing doctor's appointments and visits to a counselor with the normal demands of life and career and being a parent. Seeing the child reach a milestone birthday such as 18 is a bit of a victory. Then, after all of that effort and investment, after all of the sleepless nights and worrisome days, there came a visit from a deputy sheriff in the middle of the night. There had been a car accident. The son had died. The world turns upside down.

Somehow they got through the funeral and the first days and weeks that followed. But it takes its toll. And life never gives you a day off to just process the grief without having other concerns. In that same family this year there have been grave concerns and emergency trips to another state as an aging parent faced medical problems and the need to enter a care facility. The mother received a cancer diagnosis and the chemotherapy and radiation treatment that has been prescribed has been very difficult with days of nausea and depleted energy and stays in the hospital with infections and other problems. A beloved pet died and needed to be buried. Disagreements about priorities at work that normally would be taken in stride have become real producers of tension and worry. And the list of troubles goes on and on.

Some years seem to be filled with troubles. 2009 was one of those years that was beyond anything that could be expected or imagined. You wake up in the morning wondering, "what else could happen?"

In the midst of the troubles you strive for some sense of normalcy. Baking Christmas goodies to take as gifts to colleagues and friends is a tradition. You've been doing that for years. You know this Christmas is going to be tough. There are too many reminders of the losses of this year. It is hard to feel like celebrating.

But you could bake a few cookies.

Opening the container of cookies brings tears to my eyes.

No one would have faulted this family had they taken a year off from the tradition. There was no expectation that they would be giving gifts. We ought to be baking cookies and delivering them to their home. But here are the cookies, baked with care and love and freely offered as a sign of friendship.

When the whole world is falling apart, sometimes you can't fix the big things. You can't take back a car accident. You can't undo an illness that has stricken. You can't reverse the aging of your parents. You can't make pets live forever. You can't avoid pain and sorrow and sadness and grief and loss. You can't fix the big things.

But you could bake a few cookies.

You could do one Christmas tradition. You could make one thing seem normal. And you do what you can.

The resilience of the human spirit is truly amazing. My friend has baked the entire book of Psalms into a few batches of cookies. Lamentations and sadness, praise and thanksgiving, offering every part of his life to God in the act of preparing gifts for others.

I picked up a cookie. Psalm 34:8: “Taste and see that the Lord is good.”

Just surviving would be miracle enough. To survive with your generosity in tact is truly impressive. Offering love as a gift is evidence enough for me that Christ is being born into our world this Christmas.

I know that it is too soon for me to be telling someone else’s story. I know that many readers of the blog will instantly identify the baker of the cookies. It is no secret. But it is not my practice to tell others’ stories for them. Somehow, however, I feel it is important for us to recognize the birth of Christ - God’s gift of love incarnate - when it occurs in the midst of our everyday lives. And it is a miracle worth celebrating.

If I am feeling a bit overwhelmed, or if I feel like I’v been given too many stresses and struggles, I only have to open a container of cookies to know that people have faced worse and survived. More than survived, they have remained human and capable of offering gifts of love in a world that has all too few of those gifts

There is no doubt that Christmas will arrive this year. And we will be surprised and amazed and filled with wonder and awe. I’m already shaking like the shepherds at the sight of the angel.

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December 18, 2009 – One Week Away



Christmas is one week from today. Advent seems like an adequate amount of time for preparations, but we find ourselves cramped for time. It may be that we really haven't been using our time wisely. It may be that the sense of time moving at a more rapid pace as we age is catching up with us. Whatever the reasons, the sensation is that Christmas is coming very quickly. And there are a lot of things to do before the day arrives.

Yesterday, at a meeting, a friend proclaimed that he would be doing all of his Christmas shopping on Saturday. Other participants in the meeting were commiserating with him, acknowledging that the stores will be very crowded and things will be hard to find on Saturday. The Lakota Nation Invitational, a large basketball tournament, is in town this weekend. There is an indoor soccer tournament. There will be lots of other last-minute shoppers. The friend didn't seem particularly distressed. In fact, there seemed to be a bit of joyful anticipation in his telling the story that he usually leaves his Christmas shopping to the last few days before Christmas.

Shopping is part of the process for us. We like to prepare special foods and there are a few specialty grocery items that are not a part of our normal pantry stock. We exchange gifts and there are some things that I want to have in the house on Christmas morning that I have not yet purchased.

The emphasis of our celebrations is not really shopping, and this is especially true of our family this year as our children will not be at home for the holiday. Their celebrations

will be in their own homes and our observance with the two of us, Susan's father and my mother will be a bit more subdued and a bit less focused on gifts than the years when we had small children at home. It feels good and appropriate to enjoy a slower pace, knowing that there are many moods to Christmas and that there will be other celebrations in the future with other pacing.

Today is the generally accepted date for the disembarking of the passengers of the Mayflower at Plymouth Rock. It is a bit difficult to get specific dates and numbers as the records are not always consistent, but the generally accepted dates are that the ship left England on September 6, 1620 and arrived at Provinceton Harbor on Cape Cod on November 11. From there it proceeded north to Plymouth Rock arriving about a month later, around December 11. After a few days of living on board and organizing for the occupation of the settlement, December 18, one week before Christmas, is the generally accepted date for the departure from the ship of the Pilgrims and the beginning of their lives a settlers. Sometime before hey disembarked, 41 male members of the new colony signed the Mayflower Compact, an agreement to abide by the government of the new colony.

Despite the fact that there are many books that declare with great certainty that there were exactly 102 passenger who left the ship, the official records are not as clear. In one point, the newly elected governor, William Bradford, writes the ship carried "about nine score." At another point he wrote, "these being a hundred souls, came over on the first ship." There is record that at least two of the company who stayed behind when the ship departed were hired from the crew of the ship to assist the settlers and that they returned to England on the next ship. There are records of 51 persons dying in the first year. Bradford's records state "the greater half died in the general mortality." This statement would be factually true if there were one hundred pilgrims and two hired crewmen. A certain amount of fuzziness in the facts seems inevitable given the state of record-keeping and the time that has passed.

What we do know is that about 100 pilgrims landed sometime in December. And we know that they were Puritans, with strong ties to Calvinists. It is likely that they played down the celebration of Christmas and other holidays associated with the Roman Catholic church and its calendar. It is likely that their first thoughts upon watching the Mayflower depart was anything like "Goodness, we've only a week to get ready for Christmas!" Christmas was likely not a day of particular significance to the settlers.

More significant was the season. It was winter. Had they known what the next 12 months would bring, had they realized how ill-equipped they were for settling, they might not have departed from England in the first place.

All of this is to say that I stand in the spiritual lineage of people for whom Christmas wasn't an occasion for shopping or special feasts or significant preparations. It was, like other days, a day for prayer and compassion.

After that first harsh winter, other colonists arrived on other ships and within a decade the Massachusetts Bay Colony was organized with an official charter from the King of England and an elected government. The first governor, John Winthrop, was a controversial figure who had many conflicts with other leaders and was voted out of the governorship and then re-elected a dozen times over his career. His most famous speech, “A Model of Christian Charity,” said to be delivered to fellow passengers on his trip over to the colony, was not published until two hundred years after his death. Assuming that the words we have today bear some resemblance to those originally uttered, the sermon contains one of the most beautiful sentences about Christian community: “We must delight in each other, make other’s conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body.”

As meaningful as is the celebration of Christmas, it might do us all well each year to remember the vision of a community of people who valued others. The rampant individualism that is characteristic of contemporary American culture might be tempered with an annual reminder that we belong to each other and that the common good is worthy of the work and sacrifice of individuals.

Christmas is just one week away. In celebrating the birth of the child may we also be reminded of the community that arose around him and of the values of caring for one another that are ingrained into that community.

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December 19, 2009 – Emerging Church



In every generation, a new church emerges. As one generation passes and another arises, the common memory shifts. Each generation has the ability and the responsibility to sift and sort through the heritage and determine what is most important. Churches, like all other human institutions, are constantly changing. Those who seek to keep everything the same are continually frustrated because change cannot be halted.

The current popular name for this phenomenon is “emerging church.” The term is too broad to define any specific group of Christians, but the term is used both by insiders who consider themselves to be active participants in a movement within the church and by outsiders who are observing a phenomenon without participating in it. I don’t think that this phenomenon is particularly new. The church is a living institution and new ideas are continually emerging. We know that the church of the future will be different than the church of today. We know that the ideas and passions of some of our newer members will provide shape and meaning for that which is yet to come. Change is a natural process, and institutions that fail to change lose their relevancy and die.

At the same time, there are many thinkers who claim that the pace of change is accelerating in our time and that we are more aware of and our society is more disrupted by change than previous generations because more change is happening at a more rapid pace.

So the church is changing. And the church of tomorrow is different from the church of yesterday. There is nothing particularly worrisome in that fact. Of more interest to me

than the fact of change, is the difficulty with which Christians have in describing that change - or even articulating a vision of the new church that is emerging. We use lots of words. I have heard the emerging church described as evangelical, post-evangelical, liberal, post-liberal, charismatic, neo-charismatic, and post-charismatic. I have heard it described as post-millennial, post denominational and on a couple of occasions even post-Christian. The terms and words are also undergoing changes, so they don't have the same meaning to all of their users.

I think that we are suffering from a lack of vision about our future. People are able to identify characteristics in the existing church with which they are uncomfortable or with which they disagree, but there is, as yet, no comprehensive vision of the future toward which they are willing to invest their time and passion and energy.

So we know that the emerging church is critical of institutions and more focused on mission, but because most of the mission of the church has been funded by institutional structures and identity, much of the mission of the emerging church is still being funded by the very institutional structures that are being criticized. We know that the emerging church is critical of denominations and the artificial distinctions between Christians that are the product of our unique history, including many mistakes of the past. But, so far, most of the emerging communities imitate denominational structures in their organization and rely on denominations for their leadership. We know that the emerging church is not concerned with membership numbers and statistics and focuses instead on who is participating in a particular event at a particular moment, but so far many parts of the emerging church are so diffuse in participation that they are unable to sustain regular gatherings.

Nonetheless the emerging church is transforming the existing church. At this time of the year, every Christian educator knows the bind of being expected to produce a pageant and having a role for each child that shows up, but knowing that there is no way to have a rehearsal with the complete cast, or even to know which children will participate in the pageant before it begins. People want church to exist at their convenience, to be there for them when they want it, but they don't want to be pressured into commitment or made to feel guilty when the church is just one among many different aspects of their lives. As a result we have learned to create pageants without memorized lines, rehearsed musical numbers, and other features. And we prepare ourselves to be surprised by which children participate.

At the moment, the spontaneous nature of the emerging church seems to defy any attempts at planning. "Will you be going on the mission trip in June?" we ask. "I don't know, I can let you know in May," comes the response. It is not at all common for youth on Wednesday to not know what activities they will be doing on Saturday. Increasingly we find youth who agree to participate in more activities than are possible and leave the dilemma of multiple and conflicting commitments to their parents to sort out.

As we who are older observe the emerging church, we sometimes wonder if there will be any church left for them. Our fears are, of course, exaggerated. God will provide for the church in every generation. And the Gospel is filled with practical advice not to worry about those things that are beyond our control. But we have lived our lives inside of the existing church.

There may be a new post-denominational church emerging, but I have invested my life in the denominational church. There are elements of the story of our denomination that are deeply meaningful to me. There are pieces of our history that I do not want to be lost.

So why the picture of the wood pile with today's blog. I'm getting to that. The Woodchuck Society is definitely a mission project that grew out of the existing church. It's founders and leaders are people who grew up in he church and have a deep loyalty to the traditional church and its work. But the society has always been a place where everyone is welcome. Newcomers enjoy the opportunity to do a bit of physical labor with visible results. They like investing a day without having to make a commitment to regular meetings.

But the woodpile is a good place to tell one of the beloved stories from deep in our traditional past. Cotton Mather's 1702 book, "Ecclesiastical History of New England" contains a story about John Winthrop that I enjoy telling as we are preparing firewood for delivery. In the middle of the winter, Boston was low on fuel and a man came to governor Winthrop complaining that a "needy person" was stealing from his woodpile. Winthrop mustered the appropriate outrage and requested that the thief come to see him, apparently to receive his punishment. According to Mather's book, Winthrop tells the man:

"'Friend, it is a severe winter, and I doubt you are but meanly provided for wood; wherefore I would have you supply yourself at my woodpile till this cold season be over.' And [Winthrop] then merrily asked his friends whether he had not effectually cured this man of stealing his wood."

The leaders of the church in the future will not forget the past. But as this new church emerges, it is the job of some of use who are citizens in the existing church to tell the stories and teach the history that will be incorporated into the new church that God is calling forth.

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December 20, 2009 – Waiting for Christmas



A church is a really big place. And even though it is a place where your family goes and it seems sort of familiar, it is a place where surprises seem to keep happening. It is good to stick close to mom or dad when you're at the church. It's more fun in the nursery. That room isn't too big, but sometimes it is too crowded. There can be too many people in that room. And there is the big room where all the kids go to sing songs. There is a pool table and a ping pong table in that room, but they are too tall and the big kids say that I am too little. And there is the cookie room. When they have cookies it is always full of people and lots of them. It is a good idea to get your cookies and sit at the table to eat them. There are so many grandmas that you can't figure out who is who and none of them are my grandma unless it is a special day and grandma is visiting us.

You can tell that there is something important happening. Christmas is coming. We've got a tree and there are three trees at the church. One of them is really big and has a million lights on it and angels, too. If you star at that big tree, the lights twinkle sometimes.

The big girls have parts in the Christmas play. I might stand with them when they sing one of the songs, but it is pretty scary to be up front and I think I would rather stay with mom and dad than go up front.

Yesterday, when everyone was practicing, my dad took me up into the upstairs at the back of the church room. There are a million organ pipes up there. They are gold and

silver and you can look down on everyone when you are up there. I was glad my dad was with me. It is very high. People look small from way up there.

Christmas is coming soon. That means that we have to be good. And it means that we are going to get presents. There is a lot more stuff and people keep saying “don’t you remember?” but I don’t remember too much. I used to be a baby before I got to be bigger. Babies don’t remember very well I think. I can’t remember much about being a baby.

Of course I am just guessing what it might be like to be one of the younger members of our church. I think that the confusion of the Christmas pageant and all of the hustle and bustle of Christmas Eve might be a bit intimidating. I often hear people say that “Christmas is for children,” and then behave as if children were for the purpose of entertaining adults. Adults like the Christmas pageants and many of them wish that they would be a repeat of the pageants they were in when they were children.

For several years our church had a family who raised sheep and they arranged for baby lambs for the Christmas pageant. Then their circumstances changed and the church lost its source of lambs. Lambing is generally a February event around here and it takes a bit of extra effort to find lambs in December. So we don’t have live lambs for our Christmas pageant any more. But people remember the lambs. And each year they are disappointed that he pageant doesn’t include live lambs. The other day I ran into a man who grew up in the church, but who hasn’t attended in the last fifteen years except for his grandmother’s funeral and the wedding of a friend. He said he was thinking of coming to church for Christmas Eve and he was wondering if we were going to have live lambs. I thought of several clever answers after our conversation ended, but I never think of these things at the right time. It is a good thing, too. It would be really rude if I were to say the things I think of later. Responses like:

“Those lambs they had when you last came to church have all died of old age now. With good feed, I’ve heard of sheep living to 10 years, but I’ve never heard of one living to 30 years.”

“It’s a good thing you warned me. I’ll go get some lambs. Since we only have them when you attend church, we haven’t needed them since I’ve been pastor. I’ve only been here for 15 years.”

“No, we’ve switched the sheep to Easter. Santa owns all of the Christmas copyrights these days.”

One of the ranchers in our church asked me once if I ever baptize hay bales. “No,” I responded, “why would I baptize a hay bale?” “It’s just that those bales you use for the Christmas pageant have been to church more often than some of our members.”

I guess all pastors have mixed feelings about Christmas. The expectations are very high and the pressure is on to have everything just so. And one is supposed to uphold traditions that may or may not be familiar. There is a vision of the simple joy of waiting and then celebrating the quiet birth of the infant Jesus and the joy of Emmanuel - God With Us. But the reality is the the number of people with expectations and demands goes up with the attendance at Christmas. And the pastor is expected to produce - good looking costumes, simple, but beautiful sets, and a story that evokes memories not so much of the first Christmas so long ago, but rather the Christmases that members and friends remember from their childhood. And the star is supposed to be perfect. It should take your breath away.

I always feel like our Christmas Eve services are a bit of a disappointment for those who attend. We never quite live up to their memories. Last year an adult who lives in another community said to me after the service, “It’s too bad we didn’t sing ‘Joy to the World.’ That’s my favorite Christmas Carol. We used to always sing ‘Joy to the World.’” I had no idea how to respond since we had sung “Joy to the World” in the service just ended. I mumbled something about my liking that carol too, which is true.

I spend Christmas eve worrying about candles and passing flames and people getting hurt and whether or not the sound system is working properly. I have to memorize parts of the service so that they can be read when the lights are out and I need to make sure that the various characters know their entrances.

I think we put on a beautiful service, but I never really pause to enjoy it. The midnight service has a little less pressure for me, but as that tradition is becoming more ingrained the pressures are increasing. It used to be just me and a piano player. Now we need extra musicians and they all have their ideas about what should and should not happen.

I’m not complaining. At least I don’t mean to complain. But I am a bit nostalgic for the wonder and awe of the child who can’t quite remember last Christmas. Everything is a joy and a surprise and a delight. She understands Christmas better than I. And my best shot of really getting Christmas might come from paying attention to the littlest ones.

After all, God chose to come as an infant. It wasn’t a mistake.

May we find the openness of infants for our celebrations this year.

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December 21, 2009 – Youth



One of the last pieces of youth to depart is that feeling that you will never grow old. At least that is the way it has been for me. It has been a long time since I was a teenager. And there were all kinds of things about being an adolescent and a high school student that I did not like. I wasn't reluctant to go off to college and embrace my adult life. But I have really enjoyed working with youth groups. I have led and participated in youth events for all of my professional career. I was bringing youth to the Black Hills for events when the parents of the current generation were themselves youth.

A lot has changed over the years.

Today's teens are much more heavily scheduled than their parents were. They have a wider range of choices in many aspects of their lives. There are more options for sports. In our part of the world, soccer, hockey, gymnastics, cross-country, tennis, volleyball, dance team, swimming and golf have joined football, basketball, wrestling, track and baseball. In addition to orchestra, chorus and band, there is jazz band and swing choir and a dozen ensemble groups. With debate and drama are a dozen special speech and oral interpretation activities. The schedules of senior high youth are constantly filled with activities with very little down time. And many teens don't know their own schedules. They will think that they are available on a particular day and when the day comes there will be several competing activities.

Today's teens are in more constant contact than previous generations. Cell phones are taken for granted. Calling plans with unlimited text messaging are seen as essential. At most functions the cell phones come out, are compared, and the fingers are busy making contact with youth in other locations. The youth will occasionally send a text message to an adult, but the majority of their cell phone communications are with other teens.

A lot has stayed the same.

Youth enjoy being together and they do not need structure in order to be entertained. A simple meal and a bit of space are all that are needed. They have plenty to talk about. They will get out their instruments and music flows naturally. They can be very supportive of one another. The range of their interests is expansive. They love to talk and think about God. They love to talk and think about their futures. They are far less intimidated by challenges that those of us who are older. They are idealistic and have a vision for the future that is inspiring.

In this congregation, we have struggled with programming for youth. Part of the struggle is the way that staff responsibilities are divided in the church. My role as senior pastor is not the one traditionally associated with youth ministry. And it is more than just the job descriptions or personalities. There is a long-standing tradition in this congregation of youth ministry being an "on the side" activity as opposed to integrated into the life of the congregation. The youth room is at the end of a long hallway - as far from the sanctuary as you can get in our building. Leadership for youth groups has been hired for decades. We can find volunteers who are willing to do events with the youth, but have not been successful in recruiting volunteers who will make a regular commitment to planning and leading youth ministries. It is the expectation that regular youth events and activities will be staff-driven. Our most successful volunteer recruiting has been in the area of confirmation mentors - we've got some outstanding adults who are generous with their time and talents. But we have not been able to build a consistent leadership team for regular youth ministries.

So we have tried a lot of different configurations for youth ministries. Some years the personalities of the youth have lent themselves to combined activities with middle school and senior high youth. Most years the gap in interests, abilities, and maturity invites separate groups.

This year our senior high activities have centered around a series of after-church brunches, hosted in homes in the church. Not all of our hosts are families with youth. Yesterday, ten youth gathered in the home of a couple who do not have children. After a wonderful meal, the youth took their conversation to the easy chairs. Soon a couple of guitars cam out and were passed around. A few Christmas Carols were sung, but most of the music was performed for the group rather than sing-along. People were not eager to leave. There was a relaxed atmosphere that we don't often achieve with the

youth. It could have been a youth group meeting from my teen years - or from the generations of youth who have gathered in other congregations over the years. Of course times are changing and today's youth are unique. But there are moments when they are allowed to just be teens - to sit back and relax and enjoy a little unstructured time. And those moments are precious indeed.

I'll never grow out of the joy of being with such talented, creative, idealistic and joyful people. I'll never stop being impressed with their talents and abilities.

Adults often speak of youth as "the future of the church." They feel that youth ministry is important because it produces adults who will someday assume leadership in the church. And there is an aspect to youth ministry that includes at least an awareness that the experiences of youth shape life-long commitments. Ministers often cite experiences at Church Camp as formative for their faith and vocation.

But youth are the church of today as well. They really worship. They really provide leadership. They really live out their discipleship.

The way of thinking about youth ministry that works best for me is to think of it as mission work. Youth ministry is about outreach. Most of the youth in our church will live their adult lives in other locations. They will not be members of our particular congregation in the future. The youth in yesterday's meeting were talking about college choices - most are thinking of colleges in other states. And our experience with the youth of our church is that they pursue careers in other locations after graduation from college. The ones who remain in our community are the exceptions.

Youth ministry is not about maintaining the institution. It is not a venture in producing people to serve on the committees in years to come. It is about spreading the good news of Jesus Christ in an ever-changing world. And that news is best spread today in the ways that have always marked the gospel - in relationships of genuine care and concern. Our youth are not looking to the church for programs - they have enough programs in their lives. They are looking to the church for relationships. They want to get to know us and they want to be known by us.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. And in some ways, I hope I never grow up.

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December 22, 2009 – Sheep and Cattle



There are a lot of versions of the sheep wars of the American west. Throughout much of the west, sheep came first. Spanish settlers introduced sheep in the early 17th century, but those bands of sheep were located in the southwest for the most part. In the state where I grew up, Montana, there wasn't much agribusiness until after the dramatic declines in the buffalo in the 19th century. By the time the big bands of sheep and herds of cattle began to arrive in Sweetgrass County, Montana, the animosity between sheepherders and cattlemen was well established. Clashes along the U.S. Mexico border had already resulted in fatalities. Since many of the cattle that came to Montana were driven up from Texas, the animosity came with the cowboys who brought the herds.

In the high country of the Absaroka mountains, however, sheep were a profitable proposition. They tended to handle the cold weather quite well and the sure-footed creatures had less problems finding food in the forest meadows of the high country. Their wool was a renewable resource. The same animal could be shorn for wool each spring for several years. Although the market for lamb was smaller than that for beef, there was a secondary market in the sheep business. This meant that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a living to be earned raising sheep in the country around Big Timber, Montana.

In some parts of the west, sheep wars focused on access to water, but water was not a big problem in the country where I grew up. The issue was who controlled the pastures that were on public land. Sheep graze grass to a shorter length than cattle. Once

sheep have been in a pasture for any amount of time, there is not enough feed available for cows. Cattle ranchers claim that sheep ruin a pasture. As the number of producers increased so did the size of the herds. There was competition for the permission to graze on public lands. At first there was no regulation. Whoever got there first was allowed to use the land. In Wyoming and Colorado several counties attempted to tax sheep in the early years of the 20th century. Other forms of control were also attempted. A system of grazing permits was finally established that continues to be the common rule today.

Growing up in Sweetgrass County, I learned the difference between sheepmen and cattle ranchers. Today there are a lot of mixed operations with both animals, but when I was younger, ranchers and sheepherders were identified as two different sorts of people. They had separate bars downtown and were not known to associate with one another.

The naming of the high school sports teams was a nod to the dominance of sheepherding in the early days of our community. There was a huge wool warehouse and at one time our town claimed to be the largest wool shipping point on the Northern Pacific Railroad.

It was a little different in the open prairies along the North Dakota-South Dakota line. Those areas were settled even later. Buffalo were the dominant grazers until around the turn of the century. As livestock moved into the region, there were a lot of producers who ran both sheep and cattle. The public lands were predominantly grasslands that in good years produced forage sufficient for both animals.

Around here you can still find people who are identified as cowboys but who have spent a few winters in a sheep wagon up in the grasslands. There were some really large bands of sheep in northwestern South Dakota in the first four decades of the 20th century. And there are a few folks around who came into their adulthood in those years and who found employment on the open prairie tending the large bands of sheep. Operations that ran both sheep and cattle were the norm across this country in the first half of the 20th century, and there are still a number of ranches that graze both sheep and cattle.

Today I am working on a funeral service for one of those cowboy/sheepherders. He was born on the family ranch. His parents had lived in a soddy during their early years of marriage. A little hardship was expected. So when Eldon fell in love with the daughter of one of the shearers who came through the region each spring it made sense that they would spend a few years in a shearer's wagon. It was the pioneer days of recreational vehicles, and there wasn't much recreation associated with life in a sheep wagon. But they did devise an effective system of making a house that could be moved from one place to another. Home was wherever the wagon happened to be sitting at the moment.

It didn't take too many years before the young couple settled into a more permanent home on the ranch.

I suspect that having grown up where I did, having seen bands of sheep trailed up the river each spring and back down in the early fall, having been around for sheering, having been lifted into the wool bags to tramp down the wool so more can be loaded, gives me a sense of understanding and identification with the man whose funeral I now am writing. His life was vastly different from mine. The closest I ever came to being a cowboy is the clothing I wear. I've never lived on a ranch and my family's livestock was limited to a few Spanish burros and chickens. But I grew up immersed in the culture of my community. People like the cowboy we'll bury tomorrow are simply more familiar to me than folks whose lives were lived in cities. I know what the family expects for the funeral and I feel a sense of connection with the man who died.

We do a lot of joking about the old guy with the scraggly beard, droopy mustache, small-brimmed hat and smoky pipe who is still the mascot of my high school. But the truth is that I may have learned as much about how to be a minister from the people in my home town as I did from the books and teachers of graduate school. Both experiences were important to my understanding of the ministry and the role of a funeral in the life of a community.

The vocabulary for tomorrow's service, however, comes more from growing up among ranch folk than from the depths of the great libraries of Chicago.

And, come to think of it, I look a lot more like the mascot of my high school these days than I did when I was a student there. Don't expect me to pick up a pipe anytime soon, however.

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December 23, 2009 – Frost



Christina Rossetti's hymn, set to music by Gustav Holst, begins: "In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan, earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone; snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow, in the bleak midwinter, long ago."

It's actually a lovely hymn with a verse about heaven's inability to hold Christ, another about the blessing of his mother's kiss, and a final verse about offering one's heart. But I suspect that the harshness of the winter is based more on a romantic image than it is on the realities of actual Mid-Eastern weather. It stands in a tradition of poetry and other literature, used also by Milton, that at Christ's birth, the earth was covered with pure white snow. Maybe the vivid descriptions of the cold winter come more from the experience of the daughter of an Italian immigrant in England. But we don't expect historical accuracy from our poetry - we expect images that evoke a connection with the transcendent. And this hymn does make the connection. It probably isn't one of the most beloved Christmas carols of our congregation, but I like it and have used it on many occasions.

I was thinking of the frosty wind yesterday as a slight breeze combined with heavy fog to create fantastic and beautiful crystals to coat the trees. I made several attempts to photograph the crystals throughout the day, but the breeze kept the branches dancing and it was difficult to capture the image. The low contrast of white on white also provided a challenge. I did get a couple of reasonable photographs, but they lack the sparkle that was part of the experience. It helped to set the mood for our Christmas celebrations.

The forecasters tell us we'll be having a white Christmas this year. We already have a bit of snow on the ground and a major winter storm is boiling up from the southwest. State troopers and workers of the Department of Transportation will be putting in overtime during the holiday weekend if conditions work out as forecast. The Governor declared a state of emergency yesterday afternoon that allows the use of equipment and employees as necessary during the storm. The state Emergency Operations Center will open at noon today and remain open throughout the storm. People who were planning travel were urged to complete their travels before noon today.

Forecasts are fairly accurate, but not exact and it is hard to say how much snow we'll get in the hills. It appears that the brunt of the storm will impact the open prairies more than our immediate area, but we've got plenty of groceries and won't have to go anywhere except back and forth to the church and we've got good four-wheel-drive vehicles.

Of course there are plenty of Christmas songs that express delight with cold weather: "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping on your nose, Yuletide carols being sung by a choir, and folks dressed up like Eskimos;" "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas just like the ones I used to know where the treetops glisten and children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow."

Of course snow at Christmas is a northern hemisphere phenomenon. It's summer in half the world and there are plenty of Christians who will celebrate the holiday without the winter weather. In Port Lincoln on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula the temperature will be over 100 degrees fahrenheit today. At least five homes and a state emergency services headquarters have already been lost to the ranging bush fires and more homes are threatened. The winds from Cyclone Lawrence triggered a raging firestorm. Eight fire districts have been declared to be at catastrophic risk as temperatures reach their highest of the summer.

I think I put some the Australian words of Jingle Bells in this blog a year or two ago, but here they are again: "Dashing through the bush in a rusty Holden ute, Kicking up the dust, Esky in the boot, Kelpie by my side, singing Christmas songs, It's summer time and I am in my singlet, shorts and thongs! Oh! jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way, Christmas in Austrailia on a scorching summer's day, Oh! jingle bells, jingle bells, Christmas time is a beaut, Oh what fun it is to ride in a dusty Holden ute."

We probably won't be thinking of "a scorching summer's day" much in the next week.

Of course weather in Bethlehem won't be at either extreme. Highs should be in the fifties and sixties with lows in the forties all week.

Not that Jesus was born on December 25th anyway. The date of his birth has been lost to time. The exact reasons for the choice of the date are unknown as well, but most contemporary scholars believe that it has something to do with celebrations of the winter solstice in the northern hemisphere. The shift of a few days can be easily explained by changes in calendars. There were probably practical reasons for setting the date a a time when festivals were observed thus allowing the continuation of the festival with a new interpretation as the Christian faith spread throughout the Roman empire. Subsequent generations of faithful people have likened the presence of Christ to the warmth of the sun. Just as the sun is "reborn" a the solstice and days become longer, Christ is also reborn into the hearts of believers. A bit of reverse math places the traditional date of the Annunciation (March 25) at nine months before the celebration of Christmas.

So we celebrate once a year regardless of the weather. There have been open Christmases and white Christmases and stormy Christmases and clear Christmases. The weather doesn't deter the warmth of enthusiasm or the joy of the holiday.

But this year, we are hoping that folks will keep safe out there. Whether battling the flames in South Australia or the icy roads in South Dakota, there are real risks to health and safety. Be careful out there, and include an eye for safety in your plans.

Merry Christmas! The fun is just beginning.

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December 24, 2009 – Eve



Today is the day for which we have been preparing. Christmas Eve is a day of wonder and celebration. We have two very special services at our church this evening, each unique, each special. The weeks of Advent reach their fulfillment in the celebration of the birth of the Christ child.

Christmas Eve has a delicious double meaning for Christians. Most people believe that the word “eve” is short for “evening,” but it is probably the other way around. In Old English, prior to 1200 a.d., the word “eve” was used to mean the day before an event. Only later did the extended word, “evening” come into popular use and take on the sense of a particular time of day, that is the time between darkness and bedtime. For many of us, when applied to Christmas Eve, it retains its more ancient meaning of the entire day before Christmas.

The double meaning comes from the same day, December 24, being observed since the middle ages as the name day for the first woman mentioned in the Bible, Eve. Although not a saint in the formal sense of the word, she has been given a name day in the Christian calendar. The reasons for choosing December 24 as the name day have been lost to history, but I like to believe that there is some link between the date and the celebration of Christmas. Eve and Mary are both extraordinary mothers in our traditions. Thinking of both of them on the same day seems so very appropriate.

The name “Eve” appears only five times in the Bible. In the Genesis narrative, the name is given her by Adam. Adam, the name for the first man, comes from the material used

by God for creation. He was scooped and moulded from the “adamah,” the soil. And his name reflects his origin. The english words “human” and “humus” bear similar meaning. “Eve” is a noun form of the verb “to live,” so the name means “living one” or “source of life.” The name is also used to mean “giver of life.” The modern English pronunciation with the long “e,” varies from the ancient Hebrew, which might be pronounced a bit more like “hawwa,” or “heua.” Vowels are always tricky in an ancient language that was written only in consonants. The three letters in the Hebrew that make up the name might lead one to spell it “Hvh,” thought the two h’s are different in Hebrew. At any rate the result is unpronounceable in English. In common contemporary usage, two spellings are accepted in English, Eve and Eva, the latter resulting in a pronunciation that is a bit closer to the Hebrew.

However you say the name, today is the day that we celebrate the name “Eve” and with it the women who have that name. My maternal grandmother was named Eva and her name was combined with that of her husband, Vernon to form the name “Verneva” which was given to their first daughter, my aunt. We gave the name to our daughter, Rachel Eve, using the more common spelling “Eve.”

Our Eve had and “eve” in her life, if we use the meaning of “the day before.” Actually it was nearly a month. Born on September 14, it was not until October 11 that our family was chosen as her adoptive family. She came home to live with us on October 12, so there is that period between her birth and our introduction to her about which we know very little. Her foster mother did have one picture taken, on September 28, when she was 2 weeks old. That is the picture that accompanies today’s blog. I look at that picture and try to imagine the life she had in those weeks before she joined our family. She, of course, has no conscious memory of that time at all. Her earliest conscious memories all come from being a member of our family. We do know that her care and treatment during that time was loving and that she came into our family as a healthy baby.

I celebrate December 24 both as the eve - or day before and as the name day. It seems that when we recognize both the anticipation of that which is to come and the gift of that which is already present we are nearing the essence of our faith. We live in anticipation and expectation of a fulfillment that is not yet fully realized. And, at the same time, we live with the abiding presence of the gift that has already been received. Theologians, who love to use jargon, refer to this as “realized eschatology.” The not yet already is!

The activities of this day are almost all focused on preparing for this evening’s services. It has become my tradition to put out the candles for the candlelight service and, in so doing, to walk through each row of pews in the sanctuary thinking of those who will later occupy them and of those who used to be a part of our community who have since died. The room is decorated for Christmas. Poinsettias grace the chancel. The creche figures are in place. The Christmas tree is filled with lights. I’ll bring up hay bales from the basement and arrange the place where the live actors will portray the holy family in

the early service. As is our custom, there will be a very young baby to play the part of Jesus. This year the child's parents will play the roles of Mary and Joseph as well.

At the late service I will recite the story from the Gospel of Luke, so I often practice the words as I put out the candles to make sure that I'm not forgetting part of the story. The moments of preparation in the sanctuary are wonderful and peaceful. It is a good day for the other celebration of the day - the observance of one of the name days of our daughter and of my grandmother.

And since the name means "life," it is the case that every human being has a bit of "Eva" or "Eve" as a part of their essential nature.

Happy Christmas Eve to you. May you enjoy the life that is within you this day and every day.

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December 25, 2009 – Christmas 2009



Once again Christmas has come.

And one is tempted with the question that comes each year with our celebration. "Does it make any difference?" Another way to think of the question is, "What is different now that Christmas has come?"

One could easily be tempted into another one of the endless lists of events of the past year from the best song to the most important events to the top news stories and the most exclusive restaurants. I am not interested in such a list. Perhaps I'm just getting old.

And regular readers of my blog may be a bit tired of my repetitive reflections about our now adult children. Never mind. Here is one more "father" story. It helps me think about the significance of Christmas in my own way.

Our son was born just past noon on a Sunday. Because being present for the birth was my highest priority I had missed the 9:00 service at our Reeder Church and our 11:00 service at our Hettinger Church. At both places the congregations were waiting for news of the birth. We had been awake all of the night before. My mother had started driving from nearly 400 miles away at first light. I called the nursing home and told them I wouldn't be leading the 3:00 service that day. One of the challenges of being the child of a clergyperson is getting your parent to stop working and pay attention. Isaac succeeded quite well on his first day.

The doctor was very familiar to us. The nurse who was the head of the unit was a close friend. Isaac was received into warm towels and after a brief moment to gently suction his tiny, somewhat crooked nose, he was laid on his mother. I had been holding her hand and I reached out to touch the tiny hand of our newborn child.

We weren't especially young. Many of our peers had had children for some time before we became parents. And we were probably a bit over educated. We had studied books and books on children and infants and various methods of birth, childcare, child development, and a dozen other related topics. We were not short of head knowledge.

We were exhausted. Susan was more tired than I. I had heard about the pain of childbirth. I have little memory of pain. What I remember is that it was work: pure and simple plain hard work. A dozen hours of sweat-breaking, intense physical work. There is an obvious reason they call the process labor.

Isaac was born five months after my father died. My dad had lived long enough to know that there was a baby on the way. The sense of loss was palpable. I really wished he could be there to hold the baby. Grief is a sneaky emotion and I'm no good at seeing it coming.

So a child comes into this world with the parents in a rather fragile emotional state.

I remember this overwhelming feeling that I belong to something bigger than myself. This moment was more than just the moment of passing down a bit of DNA – the genetic code that has been rummaging around our family ever since there was anything that could be identified as our family. It was more than moving into a role that had been the role occupied by another generation. It was a deep sense of responsibility. This world is not just about what I want and who I am.

College and graduate school had been filled with events about me. I had received my awards, participated in my wedding, and attended my graduations and my ordination. OK the wedding was our wedding and Susan had graduated and been ordained in the same ceremonies as I. But I was really full of myself in those days. I was proud of my accomplishments and more than little bit seduced by the praise of others.

But here was a new person. Here was a person who would probably outlive me. Here was a person who would go places and do things that I would never do. Here was a person who would look back at my time and think of it as a primitive past.

And I was aware that I had specific responsibilities for this person. His food, shelter, clothing, and nurture were as important to me as my own.

People who have any common sense at all realize this truth when they make their wedding vows, but there is something about the birth of a child that makes is absolutely undeniable.

And God comes to us as a baby. Just as vulnerable and needy and fragile as that little one I held when I was the age that he is today.

Does it make any difference?

It makes all the difference in the world.

Christmas is the renewal of the recognition that there is more to our life than what happens to us. There is more for which we are responsible than just the events of our own lives. God comes to us as a child of blessing and promise. Like any child it is something we never possess, only witness, celebrate, nurture and support. Like any child it exists to go out into the world to share its unique gifts and talents with people who are beyond our own circle of friends and acquaintances.

Sadly, there are a few too many Christians in this world who think that this wondrous gift is about them. The theology of personal salvation is rampant in our time. Like a parent who tries to live vicariously through their child while at the same time manipulating the child to their own will, these Christians never fully recognize the beauty and worth that is right before their eyes.

So we celebrate Christmas every year. Like a troop of actors practicing the scene, knowing that it is not quite right, we practice our faith by marveling at the miracle of birth and taking up the responsibilities of those who witness that miracle. And practice helps us to grow in understanding and in maturity.

Christ has been born. It is not the same as last year. Another year's practice has been accomplished. Another group of people have come to the end of this life's journey. Another group of new births has joined our human family.

Merry Christmas! It is a joyous and yet serious moment as we realize another layer of the meaning of this day.

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December 26, 2009 – Boxing Day



Throughout the United Kingdom, Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, is one of the biggest shopping days of the year. The stores offer after-Christmas bargains and shoppers often spend much of the day seeking out the best bargains. Americans are more likely to observe black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving as their big shopping day, but across the United Kingdom, where thanksgiving is observed on several different days, the big shopping day seems to be boxing day. Boxing day is a British bank holiday observed since 1871. All banks, government offices and the post office are closed on both Christmas and Boxing Day. The origins of boxing day are a bit unclear. It has been observed since the middle ages. I know a couple of stories, neither of which have to do with the sport of boxing.

One story is based in the practice of churches keeping alms boxes. From pre-Christian times, religious institutions have had special donation boxes where gifts to support impoverished persons were given. As the Christian church began to grow, it adopted this practice from Jewish synagogues and temples. After the calendar of the church began to be formed, the day after Christmas, celebrated as Saint Stephen's day. Stephen is recognized as the first Christian saint and his day is December 26 in the Western Church and December 27 in the Eastern Church. The feast of St. Stephen was a day of opening the alms boxes and distributing the proceeds in acts of charity to support the poor. The theory is that the name "boxing day" came from the opening of the alms boxes.

Another theory about the origins of the day lies in traditions surround domestic servants. In homes that have a large number of servants, the tradition was for the servants to all work on Christmas Day, preparing and serving a feast for their employers. The day after Christmas was a day off for the servants to celebrate the holiday. As the servants left the house at the end of Christmas day, they were giving a box of gifts for the next day. The term boxing day comes from the gifts that were received on that day.

Around here, we don't make much of a tradition of boxing day. Depending on which day of the week the date falls, our activities might be more or less related to work. Saturday is a day of preparation for Sunday services, and so today will be similar to other Saturdays. Our day will probably be more shaped by the weather than by its proximity to Christmas. The wind blew hard all day yesterday and although we didn't get much new snow, a little fell and the wind created big drifts. In the early evening yesterday, as I was taking Keith back to his home, the drifts were starting to make driving a bit tricky. A night with no traffic might result in some places where it would be best to wait for the snowplows. I haven't ventured out this morning, yet, but there will be some shoveling required to clear the dirveway.

One memory that I do associate with the day is that of the December 26, 2004 tsunami that killed more than 220,000 people across Asia. A deep undersea earthquake unleashed a devastating wave. Losses were most severe in the Aceh province of Indonesia where almost 170,000 people lost their lives. There are several mass graves in that area, where victims were buried without identification. Some survivors lost every other member of their families and do not know the exact burial place of their loved ones. Others were washed out to sea and no formal burial was possible. In those places this is a day of grieving and mourning for the devastating losses that are still fresh only five years later.

So, unlike our friends who live in the U.K., we probably won't be making too big a deal of Boxing Day. It will probably be a day of contemplation, preparation, and a bit of digging out as the winds die down later in the day. But it is also a good day for prayers for those who are grieving. Holidays can be hard for those who have experienced losses. Holiday traditions are disrupted by grief. As the new day dawned across Asia, many people have observed moments of silence and remembrance for those who were lost in the tsunami. I have included those families in my prayers as I start this day as well.

Today will be a travel day for many, if the weather clears. Many travel plans were disrupted by a day of closed airports and closed highways across the upper midwest. It looks as if the storm hasn't quite played out and there is still a bit of snow falling this morning. The forecast calls for snow throughout the day, letting off in the late afternoon, but winds are expected to continue at rates above 25 mph all day. Not a bad day to stay home.

Our Christmas was filled with family and friends, with lots of good food, fun phone calls with family, and an abundance of presents exchanged. I hope yours was merry as well. In our traditions it was the first of a dozen days of Christmas celebration. For Christians, Christmas isn't over - we observe a season rather than just a day. There will be plenty of Christmas carols in worship tomorrow.

So if you want to celebrate boxing day, go right ahead. An act of charity for the poor or a gift to those who work hard to clean and serve might be more meaningful an lasting than a day of shopping. However you observe the day, stay warm and stay safe. Enjoy the on-going season.

See you in church tomorrow!

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December 27, 2009 – The First Sunday After Christmas



The First Sunday after Christmas is a kind of laid-back day for our congregation. Worship attendance drops slightly because of many family activities. And we give our choir the day off from singing in part because of the extra music they have had to prepare for Christmas Eve. It is an opportunity to sing more of the beloved carols. There never seems to be enough time to fit in all of the carols in the season and there are some wonderful Christmas songs that are easy and fun to sing.

Attendance at today's service may also be affected by the weather. Although the wind has let up and there is less snow, there are still a few drifts and the temperatures are cold, just a few degrees above zero fahrenheit. I received a couple of calls from folks yesterday wondering about the condition of the roads. A couple of members who traveled for the holidays have delayed their return due to road conditions. But it seems easy to get around town and I don't think those who venture out will have any problems as long as they are careful.

There is a shift in the mood of worship with Christmas. For weeks, the focus has been anticipation. We have been lighting Advent candles, and focusing on how all of this life is preparation for that which lies beyond. We have spoken of the need for patience and quiet and waiting. And now Christmas has arrived.

It has been our custom to have a variety of children's Christmas books and several sets of creche figures available for the younger children. Sometimes the children play quietly at the front of the sanctuary, sometimes they take the objects back into the pews and sit

with their families. The presence of the children in our worship helps us lighten up with the rest of the service as well, with less emphasis on talking and more opportunities to sing and listen to brief passages of scripture. The mood is informal and warm and sometimes the gentle sounds of children playing are as important to our worship as are the words that are spoken.

But words are important. And what I say is important. Sometimes it is harder for me to develop a short sermon than a long one. Many theological ideas are complex and it takes carefully chosen words to communicate complex ideas.

One of the tensions of this season is that there are a lot of mental images of the nativity. People picture the birth of Jesus in many different ways and their images are affected by a lot of elements from sources other than the Bible. Artists often depict the parents of Jesus dressed in rich and flowing robes. The baby is shown as calm and peaceful, lying in fresh straw. In reality, the parents probably were dressed in the most common of outfits and straw is scratchy and harsh on tender baby skin. It would have to have been covered with something or the baby would have been crying. The “inn” where there was no room was simply the guest room of the house of a relative. The baby was probably born in the common room, often built at a lower level in a two-room hillside house. A poor Bethlehem family would not have been able to afford a cow, the sheep would have been out in the fields with the shepherds. If there was an animal present, it was probably a donkey.

The visits of shepherds and wise men are reported in two different gospels. It appears that they were separate events. The entire party, all together as depicted in many creche sets and scenes is probably quite different from the reality.

But the images we hold of the event are deeply ingrained into our psyche. We have generations of artists who have created pictures and sculptures and sets of figures for our churches and homes. We have generations of pageants that depicted the story. And we have told a hybrid story with elements taken from Luke and Matthew so often that it seems to us to be a single seamless story.

Christmas worship, while seeking the truth, is not primarily about dispelling the images that people bring with them to worship. Some of those images carry deep meaning. And complete historical accuracy is not possible. We don’t have all of the information. Furthermore truth is carried in a lot of different forms and the true meaning of Christmas transcends the images of our celebrations.

The great teacher of World Religions, Huston Smith, comments in his memoirs that after decades of studying, practicing and teaching many different religions of the world, he remained steadfastly Christian throughout his entire life. The deep and abiding love that he found at the core of Christianity seemed to him to have a secondary role or even be absent from other world religions. It is not my place to judge other religions. I am not

well-versed in them enough to know and I will live my life as a Christian. But I do believe that love is at the core of our faith.

Christina Rossetti's poem that was set to music by Robert Morris expresses the mood of this day for me:

Love came down at Christmas
love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas
star and angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
love incarnate, love divine;
worship we our Jesus:
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.

May you discover love this Christmas.

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December 28, 2009 – Why I Remember This Day



President Wilson throwing out the first pitch. He was the first President to do so and started a standing tradition. Historic photograph from Wordpress.com.

Here's a bit of historical trivia: Our nation's 28th president was born on December 28. Woodrow Wilson was a Democrat who got elected President in part due to a split in the Republican Party with factions led by Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. He served two terms as President. The first term focused on domestic issues with the creation of the Federal Trade Commission, the passing of the Federal Reserve Act, the Federal Farm Loan Act and the Clayton Antitrust Act. The federal government also adopted its first progressive income tax during his first term in the Revenue Act of 1913. His second term focused on International Issues. Although his campaign slogan for the 1916 election was "he kept us out of the war," in April, 1917, he asked Congress to declare war after Germany proposed an alliance with Mexico to wage war against the U.S. Thus his second term focused on funding and supporting the war effort with the sale of Liberty Bonds, the creation of the War Industries Board, the Lever Act which temporarily gave control of the railroads to the federal government, and institution of the nation's first draft since the Civil War.

There were other significant changes during Wilson's presidency. Although he invited many southerners into his administration and allowed segregation to continue in the federal government, women achieved the right to vote under Wilson's presidency. He also oversaw the first federal laws prohibiting dangerous drugs from being sold.

He became a diplomat, taking personal control of negotiations with Germany leading to the armistice. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1919 for his efforts to

establish the League of Nations. It was during the bitter fight with the Senate over the U.S. joining the League of Nations that Wilson suffered a debilitating stroke. His uncompromising nature resulted in the establishment of the League of Nations, but the United States never joined.

Wilson's father was a Presbyterian minister and his grandfather was a newspaper publisher. Both were staunch defenders of slavery and favored the south in the Civil War. His father was one of the founders of the Southern Presbyterian Church which split from northern Presbyterians in 1861 largely over the issue of slavery. Wilson claimed that his earliest memory, from when he was three years old, of the election of Abraham Lincoln as president and that war was coming.

Of course a lot more can be said about Wilson. He was a Princeton graduate who had not learned to read at age 10. He earned a PhD in history, but dropped out of law school. Today he might have been diagnosed as dyslexic, but he learned shorthand and used it to take notes through college and into his career in politics.

The reason I can remember Wilson's birthday, however, is not that I am very versed in history. It is that my father's birthday was the same day. There might be other famous persons who share my father's birthday, but the only other one I know of is our South Dakota Senator Tim Johnson, who was born 25 years after my father.

Today would have been my father's 89th birthday, a number that means very little except that he was 59 when he died, so this fall will be the 30th anniversary of his death. We're not much on observing such occasions in our family, but there are certain memories that are sparked by days on the calendar and today is a day of those memories.

My father wasn't much like Woodrow Wilson, but they both were people who found themselves swept up in war, but who turned that experience into working for peace. My father's war was World War II. He served as a service pilot, mostly as a flight instructor in California during the war and was awarded the Purple Heart after being injured when a mechanical failure forced him to bail out of an airplane. He was posthumously awarded the Jeannette Rankin Peace Prize in part for his efforts to establish the Center for Peace Studies at Rocky Mountain College. Like many who have worked for peace over the centuries, his stands often required far more courage than simply going with the flow. His views could be unpopular with some of his peers. Opposing the War in Vietnam wasn't a popular position for a small town businessman in the 1960's. But he was a man of deeply held convictions and values and wasn't afraid to express his opinions and work for the causes in which he believed. Even those who opposed his views respected his integrity.

On his birthday it is good for me to remember him. So much of who I am today has a direct relationship to my father. And the memories aren't limited to the events of

birthdays. My father taught me to ride a bike, to drive a car and to fly an airplane. He taught me to stand up for my beliefs even when they aren't popular. He showed me the value of making life-long commitments and he taught me to be an integrity that can be encountered.

The lives we lead are shaped by those who have gone before. And gratitude is an appropriate response to the legacy that I have inherited. Today is a good day to give thanks to God for my father and for the family he formed with my mother. Even though nearly three decades have passed since his death it is still an important day for me.

Happy birthday, Dad!

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December 29, 2009 – Five Gold Rings



Photo courtesy of the South Dakota Department of Tourism.

Today is the fifth day of Christmas. It is the verse of the song that breaks rhythm with those that precede and those that follow. After cascading eighth notes, we pause for a half note, two quarter notes and the only whole note in the entire song. And, depending on how one interprets the words, it is the only verse that refers to jewelry. Days one through four as well as six and seven refer to birds and days eight through twelve refer to groups of people. Some interpreters of the song say that the entire song is an elaborate expression of love and that the five golden rings refer to a marriage proposal, but they don't give any particular reason for the number five. Most marriages come off with two rings and the proposal is usually accomplished with a single ring. Of course the number five is the number of fingers on one hand, so, in theory there could be a ring for each finger, I suppose.

I prefer to think that the five golden rings in the song refer to another type of bird: the ringneck pheasant. Pheasants fit into the song much better than jewelry. Of course had the writer of the song been a true lover of birds, there would have been no problem coming up with twelve kinds of birds instead of switching after seven verses to maids a milking, ladies dancing, lords a-leaping, pipers piping and drummers drumming. Although with the proper amount of imagination, I suppose every verse could be made to refer to some kind of a bird. Both woodpeckers and grouse use drumming to delineate territory and attract mates. Piping plovers are sparrow-sized shore birds. Leaping and dancing birds could be many different varieties. But I have no idea what kind of bird might be eight maids a milking.

Although originating in Asia, pheasants have been imported into many other parts of the world. They were well-established in Europe by the time the counting song gained popularity. In medieval times the hunting of pheasants was reserved to nobility, while starving pheasants were forbidden to hunt for food. Once established in North America, pheasants made their home here. Here in South Dakota we've made them our state bird. It is the only state in which I have lived where the state bird is an immigrant and not a native. It is also the only state in which I have lived where the state bird spends the winter in the state. And it is the only state in which I have lived where there is a regular hunting season on the state bird. Here in South Dakota we have no problem serving the state bird for dinner. Try making a meal out of a meadowlark if you live in North Dakota.

Five golden rings make a delicious feast. A feast seems to be what the French have in mind in their version of the song, "La foi de la loi" sung "avec solennite:" a good stuffing without bones, two breasts of veal, three joints of beef, four pigs' trotters, five legs of mutton, six partridges with cabbage, seven spitted rabbits, eight plates of salad, nine dishes for a chapter of canons, ten full casks, eleven beautiful full-breasted maidens, and twelve musketeers with their swords. OK so once the french get full their minds turn to beautiful women and fighting, but until then there is a LOT of food.

The Australian version substitutes Australian animals: Twelve goanna going, Eleven snakes a-sliding, Ten dingoes dashing, Nine wombats waddling, Eight koalas clinging, Seven emus running, Six 'roos a-jumping, Five opals black, Four great galah, Three parakeets, Two cockatoos, and a kookaburra up a gum tree. Note the Australians pause at five for a gemstone that makes nice jewelry.

There may be no truly deep meaning in a song that started out as a nursery rhyme. Probably the origins of the song are in folk tradition. Many consider the version that appears in the Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes to be the authoritative, traditional version. I learned it that way with the exception that we used to sing "calling birds" instead of "collie birds." Collie means "black as coal," and we would have been more familiar with blackbirds than we might have been with calling birds whatever they are.

There probably was a teaching function in the song as children learned their numbers as they repeated the rhyme. There are several variations of "memories-and-forfeits" games where the leader recites a verse and each player repeats the verse with a new verse being added in each round until one of the players makes a mistake. Some people have linked the number twelve to the number of months of the year, saying that the song represents a special food for each month of the year. However, the reference to the twelve days of Christmas is so obvious that it seems most likely.

In the Christian Church, Christmas is a season that spans from Christmas day through January 6, the celebration of Epiphany. You can find Christians who count the twelve days in different ways. Some call December 25 the first day of Christmas with the 12th day being January 5 or the eve of Epiphany. This makes Epiphany its own feast day. And it is by that method of counting that today is the fifth day of Christmas. Others begin with the Feast of Stephen, or the day after Christmas and call Epiphany the 12th night. That would make today only the fourth day of Christmas. Which would be fine, but I had this great picture of a pheasant from the SD Dept. of Tourism.

What the song is mostly about is fun and joy and that is the mood of the season however you count the days. I hope that there is abundant fun and joy in your life as you celebrate the season.

May the joy of Christmas continue.

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December 30, 2009 – Avatar



Promotional picture from the 20th Century Fox/Lightstorm movie, James Cameron's Avatar.

Note to self: Stop referring to the James Cameron Movie, Avatar as Smurfs on steroids at the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

The people who like this movie really like this move. They get indignant when I make fun of it. The special effects are groundbreaking and the 3-D results are stunning to audiences. Furthermore, I haven't seen the movie, so I am in no position to criticize it. I do know the rough outline of the story: There is a precious substance needed by people from the planet earth. It is available on the planet Pandora, but in order to get it , the Nu'vi creatures who live there must be forced to relocate. They resist. Through technological wonders, a marine who is paralyzed is given the opportunity to assume the form of a Nu'vi in order to infiltrate their ranks. His new body and new role is gloriously athletic, capable of things he has never before been able to do. (Maybe it helps to have a tail.) With his new body come new experiences and a new perspective. His loyalties are mixed. In the end the Nu'vi win the battle and repel those who would take their land.

May young people, raised in the computer culture of the 21st century think that an avatar is a computer user's representation of himself or herself or alter ego in a computer game. Avatars can range from a one-dimensional user name to a two-dimensional icon or a three-dimensional gaming character. The contemporary use of the term probably dates back to 1985 in the online role-playing game Habitat designed by Chip Morningstar and Randy Farmer for Lucasfilm.

The term is much older. Avatar is a Hindu term in the Sanscrit language, deriving from the combination of ava (down) and tr (to cross). It refers to the appearance in a physical form of a deity, having descended from heaven to earth. It is less known in English because it is often translated into the English word, “incarnation,” which isn’t quite accurate, because the appearance in a physical form may or may not involve a human body. It would require a complete blog and more to draw the distinction between the Christian notion of Jesus being born as a child and the Hindu avatar concept. But they are quite different. Hindu gods don’t become human, they are not subject to death, they continue to be gods as they assume a human form. The word avatar might more accurately be translated “appearance” or “manifestation.” The Hindu God, Vishnu, is said to have had at least 10 avatars including a fish, a tortoise, a boar, a half man-half lion, a dwarf, a sage who killed an entire army with an axe, a couple of kings and the Buddha.

Depending on your perspective, it is either incredibly vain or a reversal to describe the character in the movie as an avatar. It is vain if the assumption is that the creatures on earth are gods who “descend” to Pandora to assume the form of lesser beings. It is a reversal if the character ascends from a body that requires a wheelchair for mobility to a body that can run, leap, drift through the air and achieve incredible physical feats.

In the less religious sense of a fictional character assumed by someone for the purpose of playing a game, the movie avatar makes a bit of sense. But the game gets pretty serious. The effects in the movie make it seem pretty real. The political overtones of the movie are clear. It is not difficult for me to think of the movie as offering some commentary on the occupation of Native American lands by others, mostly of European descent. After all, I live in the Black Hills, land sacred to the Lakota, that was seized because of the dominant culture’s desire for more gold - and also our desire for ski resorts and reservoirs and snowmobile trails and bike trails and lumber and vacation homes and grazing land and a host of other uses to which we put the land.

This week, however, it is easy to remember that military victory did not solve the problem. The victory at the Little Big Horn by the alliance of Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse and Chief Gaul over the 7th Calvary under the command of George Custer, Marcus Reno, Frederick Benteen and James Calhoun was fairly stunning. On June 25 and 26 in 1876 the Lakota, Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors thoroughly defeated an entire Calvary Regiment.

The reason this week figures into the story is that it was on this day, December 30, in 1890 that the ragged survivors of the previous day’s massacre at Wounded Knee started their 150+ mile walk in the dead of winter from the site of the massacre to the Cheyenne River area, to Takini, which means “barely surviving” in Lakota. They were hungry. Some were injured. They were cold. And they were totally grief-stricken. Regardless of who fired the first shot, the undeniable fact was that 84 Lakota

men, 44 Lakota women and 18 Lakota children were dead. Just 4 and a half years after the victory at Greasy Grass Creek (also known as the Little Bighorn and also Custer's Last Stand), there was no victory left for the Lakota people. The hills were lost. Regardless of the words of the treaties, regardless of the bravery of the warriors, regardless of the justice of the cause, a sad and tattered remnant walked to the area where the community Bridger now stands. They were barely alive when the arrived.

Forget the myth of the noble savage. Picture grief-stricken people in poor health without adequate clothing or sufficient food walking across the windy prairie, heading north, not knowing where to go, just knowing that their encampment was destroyed. Their leader, Spotted Elk, also known as Big Foot, was dead. The trip south to Pine Ridge had failed and they had to go back north because they had no home.

They lost their land. But they survive. Their grandchildren and great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren are still here. It is not a story of Avatars - of gods descending. It is a story of the triumph of the human spirit in the face of the worst this world can throw at it.

You might actually like the movie. Nearly $300 million in production and an additional $150 million in marketing has been invested in the hopes that a lot of people will pay to watch it. It is a high price to pay for the telling of a story that doesn't seem entirely new. On the other hand, it had the ninth-largest opening-weekend gross of all time, and the largest for a non-franchise, non-sequel original film. It sold over $230 million in tickets the first weekend. Those who spent all of that money stand to make a whole lot more.

The plot of a movie, however, is simple compared to the ongoing story of people on this planet. And it takes more than an avatar to make sense of it.

A hundred and nineteen years isn't enough time for us to make sense of what happened in the place where we live. And that story is far from over.

At the risk of making this blog last forever, a brief comment on the name of the planet in the movie. Pandora comes from Greek mythology. It is the name of the first mortal woman. Her name means "all gifted" from pan (all) and doron (gift). There are two versions of the box which she received as a gift from Zeus which was foolishly opened by Epimethus, her husband. In the most common version, the box contained a host of human ills when then escaped into the world. The later version is that the box contained all of the blessings of the world, which were lost save one: hope, which remained.

Hope doesn't come from myths or as a gift from gods.

Hope comes from God. Even the foolishness and greed of people cannot erase hope.

I remain convinced that the real story of Wounded Knee is not the death of the victims, but the resilience of the survivors.

Hope is not lost. And that is a reality, not a fantasy regardless of who ends up with all of the money.

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December 31, 2009 – Once in a Blue Moon



Photo from astroproofspage.com.

The phenomenon of a blue moon is relatively rare, occurring on average every 2 and 1/2 years. A blue moon is when there are two full moons in the same month. The last one we had was in May, 2007. The infrequency of the event gives us the phrase, "once in a blue moon," that refers to things that are rare or infrequent. Tonight's blue moon is even more rare. The last blue moon on New Year's Eve occurred in 1990. There won't be another until 2028. And this New Years Eve full moon does not technically occur in all parts of the world. While the Americas, Europe and Africa will have a New Year's Eve blue moon, the full moon occurs on January 1 for Australia, New Zealand and Asia, so they have to wait until the end of January for their blue moon. Parts of Europe, Africa and Asia will also have a partial lunar eclipse this evening to add to the dramatic skies.

And with the full moon, we get the full dawn-to-dusk opportunity to observe its beauty. The last couple of nights have been bright with moonlight reflecting off of the snow, making for a beautiful view of the hills.

So the timing of the full moon is a relatively rare phenomenon.

But not as rare as some of the special people with whom we correspond with at this time of the year.

Katherine Musgrave's annual letter is dated December 25, and I have no doubt that she actually wrote the letter on that day. She keeps an incredibly busy schedule - one that

would wear out many people half her age. More than twenty years after her retirement, she is still teaching as an online professor for the University of Maine. Her Fundamentals of Nutrition course includes weekly recorded lectures and web-based learning for 210 to 300 students per semester. She has students all over the world. In addition to her teaching, she continues to maintain an active practice, counseling patients on nutrition in a practice with three physicians. Then there is her weekly radio segment on nutrition and her frequent talks to a variety of groups on nutrition. She's been teaching nutrition since she first stepped into a classroom at Vanderbuilt University in the 1940's.

She hasn't lost any of her passion for teaching people how to live a healthy life. "the basic principles that I learned in my first nutrition class in 1937 are the same guidelines that we see in our textbooks today," she says. "Eat a variety of foods. don't eat the same thing every day. Eat moderate amounts. Watch our servings. I think it's a shame that people get bogged down with food rules. There are no rules. Just be sure you get the nutrients and make sure you're expending enough energy to burn them up."

Katherine certainly expends the energy! She remains incredibly busy, filling every day with meaningful activities. "I believe that as long as I can breathe, its my duty to impart whatever little information I've gathered and share it."

I met Katherine because her daughter is a member of our congregation. Then, in 2007, the opportunity came for us to visit her and her husband in their home in Maine. We were graciously welcomed and ended up staying a day longer than we had planned because we were having such a good time visiting with them. They are amazing, remarkable, memorable persons.

Life hasn't been all career for Katherine. Along the way she has raised two intelligent and delightful children and their children are fascinating and wonderful people as well. She remains active in her church and involved in politics and has a social life that is impressive.

I am more than three decades younger than Katherine, but I already know that I won't be like her. I don't have the energy or the desire to work full time for the full span of my life. There are days when I think that the idea of retirement is quite appealing, and that is not going to be happening for a long time in my life. She is truly a one-of-a-kind person. And she is an inspiration for me. There are all kinds of reasons to continue to remain active and engaged and contributing to this world. And there are a lot of different ways to do so. Some of the retired persons in our congregation are as rare and unique as Katherine. They may not be pursuing the careers they followed in their working years, but they get up every day and participate in life fully. They find ways to share their leadership and to make lots of positive contributions to our world. In their own right each is as unique as is Katherine.

Another of those people that you meet only once in a blue moon is a friend who has been a resident of a local healthcare facility for more than two years. She uses a wheelchair to get around and needs supplemental oxygen in order to get through her days. But her bright and chipper spirit makes everyone feel good. The other residents and the staff of the care center all have their days brightened by this woman and her faith. I never fail to feel better after I have visited her. You don't have to be capable of teaching classes or going to work every day in order to be a contributing member of our community.

I am so fortunate to have a life that is filled with people who are truly unique and wonderful. And they are rare gems. Even more rare than a New Year's Blue Moon.

Happy New Years to you all. Stay safe out there tonight and remember how valuable you are. People like you come around only once in a blue moon.

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