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## February 1, 2017 – Resources in a Time of Crisis

Sometimes we don't notice the changes in our world, but we live in a world that is vastly different from that of our forebears. In just a few generations, many things have shifted substantially. We, of course, are aware of the rapid changes in technology. We know how different our lives are than the lives we had just a decade ago when it comes to technological devices and communications. However, there are other things that have changed dramatically, and change continues to have a big impact on our lives.

One of the changes is a substantial shift in mortality rates. As recently as the 19th century, death was so common that it was virtually unavoidable. With infant mortality rates running at or above 25%, one in four children died before reaching the age of 5. With the average conception rate of four children per woman, that meant that virtually every woman experienced death of one of her children. There were some places in the world where it was common not to name a child until it reached the age of four or five simply because the likelihood of the child surviving was low enough that names were saved for the children who would live longer.

This isn't just a story of long ago, either. As recently as 1960, child mortality rate was as high as 18.5%. Almost every 5th child born in that year died in childhood.

Global child mortality has been in steady decline in recent centuries. It is estimated that 43% of the world's newborns died in 1800. Today the infant mortality rate is just slightly over 4%.

Life expectancies are increasing as well. The result is that people simply have fewer experiences with the death of someone who is close to them. In just a couple of generations we have become a society in which people frequently live into their 30's or 40's without experiencing the death of a close friend or relative.

That lack of experience is to be celebrated. No one wishes the pain of grief to enter the lives of others. On the other hand, as our society becomes less familiar with death, it becomes less familiar with resources to cope with loss and grief.

In the wee hours of this morning, I was called to an apartment shared by three young adults in their twenties. One of the persons living in the apartment had died by suicide shortly after midnight. The remaining residents of the apartment, together with a couple of friends were left trying to figure out what had happened and what to do next. The grief was so intense that it was impossible for those who had made the initial discovery of the death to even plan what to do next. They were immobilized by their grief, shock, and horror.

Over the course of the next hour, our response team slowly and carefully worked with them on a plan of making necessary notifications, summoning family members and

friends for support, repeatedly I heard a phrase that has become familiar to me in working with similar situations: "I've never had something like this happen to me. I don't know what to do."

Of course, there is no way to prepare for a sudden and traumatic loss. The trauma experienced in such a situation is inevitable and unavoidable. What troubles me is that there are so many people in our community who are living without resources of family, friends, and religion to help them as they walk their journey of grief. When I ask if there is a minister or spiritual leader I could call, too many of our young people have no one to name.

Of course, I have no way of knowing whether or not this is more true of this generation than it was of their predecessors. Researchers report that the number of people with no religious affiliation is on the rise and that it is especially common among those in their twenties and thirties.

There is no way to impose religion on others that is responsible or meaningful and I certainly have no desire to do so. Still, I am saddened by what seems to me to be a tragedy of people facing life-altering circumstances with insufficient resources to deal with what has happened.

In my role as a member of our LOSS team and in my role as a Sheriff's Chaplain it is not my position to become pastor to those I meet. Rather, my role is to connect them with the spiritual resources that already exist. It is inappropriate to use a time of trauma and loss as a time to make religious conversions. Our job is not to change a person - the circumstances of their lives are already changing them. It is to connect them with the natural resources that already exist. Increasingly I find myself working with people who aren't aware of the spiritual resources that are available to them.

I've learned to ask, "Did you grow up with a religious tradition?" "Did you used to have a church that you attended?" "Is there a particular congregation that would be more comfortable to you?" Sometimes I have to wait until funeral plans are being made to make a religious contact: "Is there someone you would like me to call to officiate at a service?"

I'm sure that funeral directors encounter these situations on a regular basis. I know that some of them have "go to" officiants that they can call when the family has no religious connection. What I know from experience is that the spiritual needs of grieving persons extend well beyond the time of the funeral and that an on-going relationship can be extremely helpful over the next years of their life.

Regardless of the statistics, regardless of the changes in our world, one of the things that we share with all humans is that we will all one day experience loss and grief. It is part of our lives. Developing relationships and resource for those moments is critical.

Teaching our children about those resources must continue to be a priority for the health of our society.

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## **February 2, 2017 – Not a Ladder Climber**

My vocation isn't one that is marked by much of a career ladder. There aren't many differences in pay or status when it comes to the ministry. Our vocation is to serve and there are many different settings for our service, but the differences between those settings are mostly external to the role of the pastor. There are denominations with a hierarchical structure, but ours isn't one of them. Still, when I was a young pastor, I thought that I might follow a kind of progression through my career: start out serving small congregations, move on to a mid-sized congregation, from there to a large congregation, then on to the Conference level and finally to the national setting of the church's ministries. I sort of followed that plan. We served two small congregations for seven years and from there went to a congregation with membership that was a bit larger than the combined memberships of our first congregations. After a decade, we moved to our current call, which is not a huge congregation, but large enough to be very stable and effective in its ministries. Then we stopped moving, at least for a while.

In the meantime, there has been a general shrinking of the ministries of conferences over the span of my career. The so-called midlevel judicatories - Association and Conference Ministries - are much smaller than was the case 30 years ago. The number of people serving in those ministries is less than half of what was the case when I graduated from seminary. I have served in that level of the church as a volunteer and have enjoyed the work that I did there, but never was called to have my primary job be work in that setting.

In terms of people, the national setting of our church has shrunk at an even more rapid pace. We own a nine-story office building in Cleveland that once was crowded with staff and now is down to just a handful of dedicated and faithful workers. Our publications warehouse used to be a large space near the airport with shelves crammed with books and supplies. It now occupies a bit of space in the office building with a skeleton staff. I have served in the national setting as a volunteer, as a board member, as a free-lance writer, and for a dozen years as a part-time educational consultant.

The changes are the result of major changes in denominational life that are reflected in churches across the world. Resources for ministry are far less likely to flow through denominational stores and warehouses. The Internet is the primary source of curricula for Christian Education, not a bricks-and-mortar bookstore. Local congregations are far more engaged in mission and ministry both in their own setting and in places around the globe and less likely to support mission by sending missionaries through a national agency.

But there are other reasons why my career hasn't been a steady climb up some imaginary ladder. Chief among those reasons is that ministry is about building relationships. Relationships take time. The quality of my ministry has been, in part, the result of staying in one place long enough to really get to know people and to really understand the setting in which I minister. I am a better minister for the congregation I serve today than was the case ten or twenty years ago. I know the stories of the families. When I walk into a hospital room to pray with a family in crisis, I do not enter as a stranger. When I officiate at a funeral, I know the deceased. This makes for an interesting emotional journey for me. For the most part, the people whose funerals I lead are my friends. I have to consider my own grief as I minister to others who are grieving.

Another benefit of not moving as often as some have is its positive effect on family life. Our children grew up knowing that their lives and interests are not somehow less important than their father's career. They did experience two moves as a family - one when they were 2 and 4 years old and another when they were 12 and 14. Those moves provided them with resources that serve them well in their adult lives as they find themselves in circumstances where they move. The balance seems to have worked well for them.

We were able to provide in-home care for our parents as they aged because our lives and place of residence were stable. The experience is one of life's greatest joys and one that I treasure deeply.

Of course, none of us know what the future holds. We do know that things will not always be as they are today. There will be changes in my vocation and in the setting of my ministry at some point. Like everyone else, I get older each year. Although I have been blessed with strength and stamina, I know these will not last forever.

For now, I have work that I love. I wake up eager to get at my day. The challenges and opportunities present in the ministries of this congregation stretch out with awe and wonder. Each day has an element of surprise and enough familiar tasks that I don't feel constantly lost.

I know it might have been otherwise. I have enjoyed incredible privilege in my career. There are others who have had to struggle much harder than I. I have never served a congregation that abused its pastor. I have always found the people I serve to be gracious and forgiving. I have been allowed to make mistakes, admit failure, and change my ways. I have been encouraged to learn from my experiences.

Today and for many more tomorrows I head off to my work to make my small contribution to the world grateful that I am not balanced on some ladder. My place in the

world is secure for the present and the future is in God's hands. Looking back, my path has been delightful. Looking ahead, I trust the directions I have found.

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## **February 3, 2017 – What I Can Do**

I read that a woman once asked Archbishop Desmond Tutu this question: "The world is in such turmoil - war, starvation, terrorism, pollution, genocide. My heart hurts for these issues. How do I find joy amid such large world problems?"

"You show your humanity," the archbishop began, "by how you see yourself not as apart from others but from your connection to others. I have frequently wept about the things such as the ones you have mentioned."

Tutu's theology like my own, is rooted in the deep conviction that God holds such deep severance for human freedom that God is willing to allow us to suffer the consequences of our judgments and mistakes rather than compel us to do what is right. Much of the pain, sorrow, trauma, and tragedy of this world are directly the results of humans who abuse the freedom which we have been given.

The question for me is not, "Why did God allow this mess?" but rather "Where is God in all of this mess?" And I know the answer.

God weeps with the victims.

And we are called to go and do the same. That means that we will feel the pain of our confused and turmoil-ridden world. That means that we will see tragedy and grief and injustice. Being a person of faith is no promise that we are except from the suffering of this world. It is quite the contrary: we are called to stand with those who suffer, to bind up their wounds, to remind them that they are not alone.

I remember sitting with a woman who was gently weeping on the anniversary of the death of her brother. She had had an awful day at work and was fearing that her job might be in jeopardy. She had thought that she had gotten through the grief and had come face to face with a wall of pain that was as fresh as it had been on the day that he had died. She was overcome and overwhelmed. I listened. I offered her a tissue. I got her a glass of water. I acknowledged her pain. "There is one thing I just don't get," she said. "Why do you bother hanging around? You could leave me alone here."

"I didn't think you wanted to be alone," I said.

"I don't. But I'm no fun to be with."

“I’m not here to have fun. I’m here to share your pain.”

I don’t think she understood. Maybe she wasn’t even convinced of my motives. I hope I was a little bit helpful. It is what I do.

You see, I can’t fix the big problems of this world. I don’t know how to create world peace. I don’t have a clue how to restore integrity to government. I can’t stop pollution or end crime or recover the rights of the victims of injustice. I can sit with those who are grieving. I can listen to their stories. I can share their pain.

One of the things that inspires me when I read the words of Desmond Tutu, is his unconditional hope. He has a deep conviction that a different world is emerging. He truly believes that things are slowly getting better: “Yes, we do have setbacks, but you must keep everything in perspective. The world is getting better. Think about the rights of women or how slavery was considered morally justified a few hundred years ago. It takes time. We are growing and learning how to be compassionate, how to be caring, how to be human.”

I really, really want to believe him. I am not as confident, however. Some days it seems like it is getting worse. We’ve had four suicides in the last two weeks in our community. We’ve had three murders in 30 days. The depth of tragedy and pain can be overwhelming.

I can’t even figure out how to write about the disorder and chaos that have accompanied the new administration. I don’t know how to answer the inquiries of my friends around the world who ask, “What are you Americans doing, anyway?”

Some days it doesn’t seem to me like the world is getting better.

The archbishop likes to quote one of his heroes, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who in turn was quoting one of his heroes, the abolitionist minister Theodore Parker, who said: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Recently, however, I read that in private Tutu often comes face to face with his despair and frustration. He has a private chapel where he goes to express his upsets to God. In an interview with Douglas Abrams, he once talked about the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah would say to God, “You misled me. You called me to be a prophet, and I said I don’t want to be a prophet. And you said, no, I will be with you. All you have made me say to these people - people I love very much - is to condemn them.” Like Jeremiah, Tutu told God he did not want to be a prophet: “I weep when something has happened where I may not be able to assist. I acknowledge that is something I can do very little about.”

I remember, however, one of my favorite Desmond Tutu quotes: “Do your little bit of good where you are; it’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”

Perhaps all I can do is a little bit.

I can listen.

I can visit.

I can weep with those who weep.

It isn’t much. It is my little bit.

And that reminds me of yet one more thing Tutu has said, “My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.” It reminds me of 1st Corinthians 12: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you.’” We can only be human when we understand that it takes all of us to be so.

In this world of chaos, confusion and so much pain, what I can do is continue to reach out to you and share a bit of my humanity. If you share yours with me, perhaps we can be a bit more human together.

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## **February 4, 2017 – Hearing Others’ Stories**

One of the joys of working as a Pennington County Sheriff’s Chaplain is that I get to know some people that I might not otherwise meet. Because I am present a shift changes to get to know the people that I serve, I am free to chat with folks that sometimes are forgotten when we think of law enforcement. I meet the janitors and other cleaning staff, the jail laundry crew, the secretaries and receptionists, and other office staff, the maintenance crew and a whole lot of other folks who faithfully come to work every day and contribute to public safety and well-being without getting the recognition that is afforded to patrol officers and command staff.

Three stories from the past week are sticking with me. Without identifying the individuals involved, here are some real-world stories of real people trying to make their way in the world and trying to contribute to our community.

Friday was donut day at Western South Dakota Juvenile Services Center. I brought donuts from the Chaplains for the people who work at JSC. One person had forgotten that it was donut day and had brought a muffin from home. She “traded” her muffin for a donut and sat down for a moment with her donut and a cup of coffee. Soon we were talking. I heard of how a year ago she had been called to her hometown because her

father was dying. He passed away before she arrived. After the funeral her mother took ill and was admitted to the hospital. Within three or four days she also died. Her funeral was also arranged. All the arrangements required plenty of energy and the woman who had lost both of her parents in short order felt like she was handling the stress and grief very well. By the time she returned to work, she had used all her vacation leave for the year to come plus a few personal leave days. She wasn't worried. She wouldn't be needing vacation now that her parents were no longer there to visit.

A few months later she found herself immersed in deep sadness. She would cry at work at the slightest provocation. She seemed to be losing her self-confidence. She began to wonder if she was going crazy.

Fortunately, she was able to connect with a counselor who helped her to understand that she was experiencing normal grief and that part of what was going on for her was that her grief had been put "on hold" with all the decisions that were required. She learned an important life lesson: "You don't get over grief. You get through it." Things never go back to normal after a significant loss.

Another person told me the story of recently taking care of her sister's three children. The kids were playing peacefully, and she was listening as they put together their game at their aunt's house. She had set out some toy dishes at a coffee table and given the kids some snacks. There were two boys and a girl. The girl announced to the others. "Let's play house. I'll be the mother. You can be the father." She indicated the older of the two brothers. "I don't want to be the baby." said the younger brother. "You don't have to," his sister replied. "You can be the stepfather."

At first, she thought the conversation was cute and she was amused. Later, as she thought about it, she was overcome with sadness that such young children had a worldview that included such complex family relationships.

In all the facilities run by the Pennington County Sheriff's Office there are specific and careful procedures for cleaning up. Sometimes people become sick or are injured and there may be blood or other body fluids that need to be properly dealt with after the person involved has received necessary medical care. One of our staff members is very experienced in the procedures and has seen a lot over the years. However, not long ago she was cleaning up some blood from a self-inflicted wound when all of a sudden, she began to just fall apart emotionally. The crisis deepened beyond tears to the point where she couldn't continue with her work and another employee was required to finish the job that she had started. It was a very strange experience for the worker. Nothing like that had ever happened before. She loves her job. She is good at her job. She had no previous experience that would indicate that such an event would trigger her emotions so dramatically. As we talked about it later, she remembered some of the emotions she had felt when a family member had died by suicide several years earlier. Slowly, she began to understand that the cleaning job had triggered memories that had

been long suppressed in a family that found it very difficult to talk about the suicide. There was little in the experience of cleaning up the blood that was like the situation in her home. The person whose blood she was cleaning had not died. The age wasn't similar. The circumstances were very different. But somehow the job of cleaning up this mess triggered a deep emotional response from her.

The people who serve us by working within our law enforcement agencies are wonderful, complex, varied, troubled, exciting, well-educated, faithful and sometimes exasperating - just like the rest of us. Getting to know them and listening to their stories reveals the wonder and busy of human life as well as the struggles and challenges that real people face every day. More than that, it reveals how much we all have in common. We're all in this together. We need one another.

Sometimes we forget this.

Sometimes remembering is as simple as sitting down for a cup of coffee and taking time listen.

Thanks to God for the opportunity to hear the stories of real people.

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## **February 5, 2017 – The Pursuit of Happiness**

I've been reading "The Book of Joy" by The Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Abrams. The reading is part of a book group to which I belong, so I have been reading it section by section, coordinated with others. The pace is a bit slower than my usual pace, so I sometimes look ahead in the book. Moreover, the structure of the book is very straightforward, so it is easy to see where its discussion is going.

Early in the book, there is a bit of discussion of terms. Tutu prefers the term joy to happiness sensing that true joy is a deeper, more internal reality and happiness is a more outward expression. The Dali Lama defends the use of the word happiness and views it as a fundamental reality that is sought by every human being and necessary to a high quality of life. It may well be that the difference in terms is a matter of languages and translation, as it becomes apparent early in the book that the two men agree on a great many things and their conversations around the topic. Perhaps the final choice of the word joy for the title of the book reflects Abrams editing and the fact that the book is written in English and marketed to an English-speaking audience.

Roughly a third of the book is devoted to the discussion of "Eight Pillars of Joy." Those pillars are: perspective, humility, humor, acceptance, forgiveness, gratitude, compassion and generosity. I recommend reading the book, so I won't go into depth

with my reflections on those pillars today except to say that they represent concepts that reflect Gospel values. Reading the Bible might bring one to similar conclusions.

The Ten Commandments, seen as key to God's commitment to human freedom and a basic guide to living lives of freedom begin with perspective: "I am the Lord thy God. Thou shall have no other gods before me." They mention gratitude: "Honor thy father and thy mother." Compassion is a major biblical theme. Forgiveness is the heart of the New Testament Epistles. Generosity and humility come through again and again in the parables of Jesus.

Humor might not be expressly addressed in the Biblical narrative, though some of the puns, tongue-in-cheek comments and other parts that might be constituted as humorous have lost much of their edge in the multiple generations of translation that bring us a contemporary Bible in English.

So, while the eight pillars of Joy discussed in the book aren't directly extracted from the Bible, many of them reflect Biblical themes and perspectives. Moreover, Archbishop Desmond Tutu's deep-seated Christian faith shines throughout the book and gives a reader no doubt as to the source of his thinking and acting in this world.

I was thinking of the eight pillars in an entirely different context recently, however. I was reflecting on the Declaration of Independence's assertion that among the unalienable rights of people is the pursuit of happiness. Specifically, I was wondering about the role of the pursuit of happiness in our contemporary political dialogue. It seems that much of our rhetoric is not very happy these days.

Of course, there is no shortage of attempts at political humor. The problem with most of these is that while the jokes and impersonations are laughed at by some, they generate intense anger in others.

And humility is not seen as a quality of leadership in the eyes of many voters.

Even compassion seems to have taken a back seat in contemporary political discussion. Back in 1979 historian Doug Wead used "Compassionate conservatism" as the title of a speech. The concept was picked up and even used as political slogan in the 1980's and 1990's. References to compassion in political speech seem to be very rare these days.

It makes me wonder what role "the pursuit of happiness" is playing in contemporary American politics. One might conclude that either we are no longer pursuing happiness or that we are pursuing it in entirely the wrong way. The latter seems most likely.

The Washington Post recently carried an interview with James Hagedorn, chief of Scotts Miracle-Grow. He had expected that the Republican-dominated administration

and congress would increase his company's profits by cutting his firm's tax rate from about 36 percent to 20 percent or less. Less taxes mean increased profit. Increased profit means more happiness, right? Well, not so quickly as it now appears that the Republican plan also includes stiff new taxes on imports. Since the materials sold by Scotts consists largely of raw materials imported from abroad, the effective tax rate on the company under the corporate tax plan making its way through the Republican-controlled House of Representatives rises to about 37%. Hagedorn, a Republican, may still have the right to pursue happiness, but he isn't very happy with the results of his recent political actions.

I don't watch much television, but I do see a number of clips from television on the Internet. What I have noticed is that there aren't too many smiling faces in stories about politics these days. It certainly appears from my following of the news that our politics aren't making us very happy as a nation.

Of course, the declaration doesn't guarantee happiness. It only asserts that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right. I guess we are free to pursue happiness even when we aren't happy with the results of our political actions.

All of which brings me back to those eight pillars of happiness discussed by the two world religious leaders: perspective, humility, humor, acceptance, forgiveness, gratitude compassion and generosity. Those seem like things that I can pursue in the days, weeks and years to come. Working on my compassion and generosity, learning to express my gratitude, accepting the things I cannot change, forgiving others, gaining perspective, and practicing humility are all good goals for me to pursue. And, to top it all off, a dose of humor isn't a bad idea for these times, either.

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## **February 6, 2017 – The Importance of Words**

I spend a fair amount of time in front of a computer screen. I began each day by writing my blog. I use my computer at work to check email and communicate with people around the world. I visit multiple sites weekly as a part of preparing my sermons. We do the layout for our worship bulletins and church newsletter on the computer. I manage the church's web site. In my time away from work, I often use my computer for entertainment. I occasionally watch PBS programs on my computer, and I've downloaded and watched a couple of movies on the screen. I am very grateful to live in a time when I can use a computer to video chat with my daughter in Japan, my grandchildren in Washington State and my friends in Australia.

The computer, however, is not my preferred form of social interaction. I was slow to establish a Facebook account and did so primarily to keep up with a nephew who was, at the time, traveling in Central and South America. I also helped establish a page for

our church on Facebook and have encouraged church staff to use it as a way to communicate with our members, but I don't look at that page daily and sometimes I don't even look once a week. I have never sought to expand my friendships through Facebook. I will respond affirmatively if asked to be Facebook friends with someone I know and already consider to be my friend. I don't, however, make Facebook friend requests. I have no concern as to the number of friends I have on social media.

I am even less active on Twitter. I established a Twitter account and use it to promote the church newsletter, but that is about all that I post. I have no idea how many people "follow" me on Twitter. I don't check the Twitter application on my phone unless I've run out of other things to do while waiting, and that isn't very often.

I certainly don't use social media as a source of news or truth. I do use my computer for research but prefer Google Scholar to the regular Google search engine. I also use ERIC - the Educational Resources Information Center - as well as the Library of Congress online Catalogue and BASE - Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, operated by Bielefeld University in Germany.

One of the things that I learned in my college and graduate school days is to seek multiple sources of information. In addition to our local newspaper's web site, I've bookmarked several national newspapers. I find it helpful to know that the Wall Street Journal often offers a different perspective from the Washington Post, for example. I also like to scan the headlines and read a few articles from international sources. Sometimes the perspectives of those outside of our country give insight that is difficult to obtain from domestic sources.

For that great diversity, I am grateful for computers and the Internet. Prior to being able to access the Internet, my primary place of research was libraries. For four glorious years I had full access to Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago. Since those days I've lived in places that are somewhat more isolated. However, for the last three decades I have lived in places with excellent city libraries. In my early days of living here our home was outside of the city limits. Prior to being annexed, we had trouble convincing our County Commissioners to put in place a system allowing all County residents access to the city library, but even before we had that as a part of our residency, library cards for our whole family were a very inexpensive investment.

My background and my style of obtaining information has given me deep respect for fact and evidence. It also makes me eager to call out lies. Honesty was a huge value for those who raised me. As such, I have no understanding of alternative facts or fake news. I don't think that there are alternatives to facts, and I don't think that fiction is news. I'm no fan of lies, fibs, stereotypes, or false narratives. I believe that there are indisputable, true, real facts that will prevail in the long run, despite attempts to delude, disinform, misguide and mislead.

The truth remains despite the presence of falsehood.

I also have deep respect for the accurate use of words for clear communication. I am judgmental when others use crude or sloppy language. The careless use of words is not just an obstacle to conversation, it can be an obstacle to good policy and fair government. I'm saddened by an administration that thinks its dress code is more important than the careful choice of words to communicate.

Pretending that there is something populist about the imprecise use of language is a denial of the history of this country. Worse, it is one of the worst forms of elitism because it demeans ordinary citizens who have always appreciated eloquence. The words of Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln have been memorized by millions and are treasured by people in all walks of life.

My father was a successful salesman. He sold airplanes, farm machinery and even used cars. He was aware of the reputation of salesmen to use words to bamboozle, befuddle, deceive, delude, hoodwink, con, hornswoggle, trick and flimflam customers. (Yes, I do visit [thesaurus.com](http://thesaurus.com) regularly.) My father, however, made a point of being honest in all his dealings. He believed that customers had a right to know the reasons things cost what they do. He was unafraid of telling customers what he paid for an item he was selling and explaining how overhead must be paid before profit is taken. He was willing to negotiate, but he didn't try to confuse customers with inflated figures or false claims. His practices earned him repeat customers. "Honesty is the most important key to business," he taught me.

I'll take it one step further. "Honesty undergirds all of our relationships."

Don't look for that as a tweet from my account, however. I don't expect to increase my time on social media. I may, however, increase the amount of time invested in research.

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## February 7, 2017 – Enjoying Beauty



I don't do this too often, but yesterday I treated a day off like a day off. After writing my blog, I went back to bed and slept in. (OK I was up and dressed by 7, but for me that's sleeping in.) After breakfast and a few household chores we went for a drive up to the northern hills. There are so many beautiful places in the hills and the temperatures rose with the altitude. It was a good ten degrees warmer in Spearfish canyon than it had been at home.

Spearfish falls is a short walk down to the creek from Latchstring Inn and enough hikers had made the trip since the last snowfall that there was a well-packed path to walk on. You did have to stay on the path. Otherwise, you'd sink into the less compacted snow. The thawing and refreezing on the surface of the snow made for some ice and we joked about my leading Susan down a slippery slope.

It wasn't the first time.

The events of the day were a bit of an early celebration of her birthday, as we'll be engaged in work as usual tomorrow, which is the actual birthday. While we enjoy birthdays, we don't get too carried away with parties and other celebrations in our family. We prefer some quiet time together to reminisce and enjoy each other's presence.

Susan's birthday this year is another palindrome birthday: when her age reads the same backwards as forwards. It isn't a complex concept: 11, 22, 33, etc. However, it is worth noting as it is a little quirk of mathematics that makes it a bit different than other years. Since palindrome birthdays only come every 11 years, they are worthy of a bit of notice.

Since we were married in a palindrome year for Susan - she was 22 - that means that this is a palindrome anniversary year for us as well. I remember well attending a 50th wedding anniversary the year we got married and thinking that it would be such a long time before we would be in that situation. Now, at 44 years, it doesn't seem so far off.

Susan's palindrome years have been good years for us. I wasn't around at the time, but the year she turned 11, her family moved into a new home - the home where her parents lived for the rest of her mother's life. She got her own bedroom.

When she was 22, we were married.

The year she turned 33 was a bit less dramatic. We were established in our careers and our family was complete with two children.

She was 44 the year we moved to Rapid City and purchased the home where both of us have lived more years than any other home in our lives.

The year she turned 55, we had a wonderfully exciting sabbatical, fund in part by a grant from the Lily Endowment, that enabled us to travel to Australia with our whole family.

66 is looking like it will be a great year.

A short winter hike was just the right thing for yesterday. The winds were not bad, with occasional gusts. The weather was warm. And the scenery was magnificent.

I guess the official name of the falls is Little Spearfish Falls. Little Spearfish Creek plunges about 100 feet to join Spearfish Creek in the bottom of the canyon. Waterfalls are glorious in the winter as the spray freezes and builds up fantastic ice sculptures on either side of the waterfall. Some areas look like a frozen waterfall. Other areas are built up with intricate crystalline structures caused by the freezing mist. The snow sticks to the surround areas and builds up cornices with water flowing underneath.

The falls retain the musical sound of rushing water, but sound carries in a different way in the winter. Other than meeting a small group descending the trail as we were hiking back up, we had the area all to ourselves.

Whenever I am hiking in the hills, I wonder why I don't do it more often. We are so fortunate to have so many truly beautiful places that are so easily accessible. There are hundreds of short hikes that take one to incredible vistas. We are so fortunate to live in such a beautiful place.

This winter there has been plenty of talk about Spearfish Canyon all around the state. The Governor has proposed a series of land purchases and swaps that would result in forming a new State Park around the Canyon. There has been considerable resistance to the idea. Some people fear that despite promises, something that is now accessible without a fee might become a place where fees are charged. Some fear that increased publicity will result in crowds and a decrease in privacy. Private campground owners oppose the state competing with their operations. Some people wonder whether or not the state is a better steward of the lands than the current arrangement. This evening there is a meeting at the Journey Museum hosted by a group that opposes the proposal. Although I have some interest in the conversations, I won't be attending the meeting.

I'm no expert in the management of public lands. I do appreciate the other State Parks that we have in South Dakota, find the fees to be very reasonable, and enjoy visiting them frequently. Clearly the State has done a good job with balancing preservation and access in Custer State Park.

Yesterday, however, wasn't a day for politics. It was a day to enjoy the beauty of God's creation in the company of my partner and wife. It was a day to celebrate that despite the strangeness of human interactions and uses and abuses of power, the beauty and glory of the natural world is worth experiencing firsthand. Even though we sometimes spend too much time indoors in the winter, it is good for our spirits to get out and experience beauty firsthand.

Indeed, the land upon which we stand is holy ground.

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## **February 8, 2017 – A Place of Clean Water**

Mni Wiconi is a Lakota phrase that means simply, "Water is life." It has become a familiar phrase in the Dakotas since members of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe invited people from around the world to come together to raise awareness and action in response to the building of the \$3.78 billion Dakota Access pipeline to transport up to 570,000 barrels of crude oil from North Dakota across four states to a market hub in Illinois. The pipeline is being built despite opposition from farmers, ranchers, and environmental groups, but most visible in their opposition have been the indigenous people. Representatives from tribes around the United States and indigenous people

from several other nations have gathered, camped, prayed and peacefully faced off against heavily armed private guards and public law enforcement officers.

While some slim avenues of legal action remain, it now appears that the pipeline will be built under the Missouri River on former Hunkpapa Territory condemned for the building of Oahe Dam.

The political and media frenzy around the building of the pipeline seems to have overcome the prayers of the elders and overshadowed the simple concern for the water that is the source of life not just for indigenous people, but for all living things.

Putting aside the politics and the frenzy, water remains one of the great miracles of the universe. We are all made of water. We are all dependent upon water. The human manipulation and pollution of water has left this planet stretched to its limits when it comes to supporting the population of humans which now has exceeded 7.5 billion people and continues to grow.

Already water has become a commodity which is bought and sold, and over which people fight. Access to clean water is literally a life and death struggle in many parts of the world. The increasing commodification of water was evident in the advertising for the Super Bowl this year. Averaging \$5 million for each 30 second ad, one proclaimed, "Fiji water is a gift from nature to us to repay our gift of leaving it completely alone. Bottled at the source, untouched by man, it's earth's finest water."

It's an intriguing concept. Pure water, with no additives, is placed into non-reusable plastic containers and sold at a sufficient profit to afford its sellers multi-million-dollar advertising campaigns.

It is also water that the planet's poorest people cannot afford to drink.

I am a lover of water. I paddle on its surface whenever I am able. I drink water every day. But I acknowledge that my presence and my consumption takes a toll on the planet. The lake where I paddle is an artificial reservoir. The water I drink is filtered and treated. My consumption is a luxury of a certain affluence.

Mni Wiconi - Water is Life.

There is a lake that is so pure that you can lower a cup into it and safely drink it. It is the last of the 10 largest lakes in the world to remain in its natural, unaltered state. It is bigger than Belgium. It is deeper than Lake Superior. It is the eighth biggest lake in the world. It is so beautiful that people have composed love songs to it. It is so mysterious that there are those who believe it is alive. Straddling the Arctic Circle, it remains hidden under a layer of snow and ice most of the year. It is surrounded by wilderness - boreal forest and tundra, rivers and mountains with virtually no human inhabitants except a tiny

town on its shore with a population of 503 people, who are as connected to the lake as their ancestral name implies. They are Sahtuto'ine - Bear Lake People.

I have never been to Great Bear Lake. I may never be blessed to see the northern lights dance above it. But I am deeply grateful for its presence - and for two aspects that make it a treasure for the entire world. The first aspect is that last March, Great Bear Lake was declared a Unesco Biosphere Reserve, called Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve. It is the largest in North America. The world has made a commitment to preserving this body of water for future generations.

There is something equally important that bodes well for the future of Great Bear Lake. It is the first Biosphere Reserve to be led by an indigenous community. Furthermore, a few months after the Reserve was created, the Canadian government granted Deline, the community on the shores of the lake, self-government. The people who live there have full control of language and education. That makes it the first time that an aboriginal government in Canada has been given the responsibility for governing everyone in the community, aboriginal and non-aboriginal. Together with the Unesco designation, self-government means that Deline can control what happens to Great Bear Lake.

What needs to happen to the lake, of course, is nothing.

The lake is a world treasure that can be harmed by too many visitors. Fortunately, its remote location and harsh climate protect it from casual tourists. It is a very difficult journey to make it to its shores. It is a journey that I may never undertake. All the same, I benefit from the presence of the huge body of clean water. The whole world benefits from it.

The tragedy is that thousands of years ago every lake used to be that clean.

The tragedy is deepened by the fact that some of the world's sources of clean water are being exploited for profit and kept out of the hands of those who have no money.

In a world that seems literally "hell bent" on polluting and threatening every source of water there is a glimmer of hope in one body of water that is out of the reach of the seekers of short-term profits.

I'm almost ashamed to have written about Great Bear Lake in my blog this morning. It probably should be kept a secret.

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## February 9, 2017 – A Health Care Crisis

Severe mental illness is amazingly common in our society. It is very rare for me to go an entire week without direct contact with a family who has experienced a major trauma as the result of mental illness. I realize that I am in a place where I am exposed to more of the effects of mental illness than some others. I am on our community's suicide response team. But suicide is only one of the manifestations of severe mental illness. There are illnesses that produce distortions of perception, delusions, hallucinations, and unusual behaviors that do not result in death. They do, however, result in disability and can persist for years disrupting jobs and family life.

There is, however, a huge stigma associated with psychological illness in our society. Mental illnesses have been viewed as character flaws or a lack of personal discipline by those who have no experience or understanding of the disorders. The stigma results in isolation not only for those who suffer from these diseases, but for their families as well.

Schizophrenia is one of the most common thought disorders. It is very difficult to accurately diagnose because it has so many variations in its symptoms. It is not, as some have characterized it, a "split personality" or a "multiple personality." It can manifest with psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations, false perceptions and beliefs, bizarre behavior, disordered speech, and delusions. It can also affect a person's mood and emotions, showing up as depression, anxiety, anger, and rapid shifts in mood. For the victim of the disease there are problems with attention and information processing. Once a diagnosis is made, treating the illness is a long and difficult process. Chemicals that are effective in some cases, do not work in others. The process of finding effective medications and dosages is one of trial and error. Sometimes a treatment will be effective for a while and then suddenly fail to work.

Surrounding the diagnosis of Schizophrenia is a cluster of schizoaffective disorders that often manifest in depression, mania, or both types of symptoms. Schizoaffective disorders can appear quite like bipolar disorder which is a different category of illness marked by extreme mood swings. Persons suffering from bipolar disorder can have periods with few or no symptoms in between cycles of mood and behavior swings.

Depression is another mental illness that can completely disable its victims.

When you live with a person who suffers from one of these or other mental illnesses, your life can easily be disrupted by behaviors that threaten the stability of your home, and in some cases threaten the safety and well-being of yourself and those you love. Families who have a member suffering from one of these illnesses develop coping skills, but are often overwhelmed and frustrated with a lack of services. They find themselves with few options when it comes to seeking help.

Our community hospital has a small behavioral health unit in a building that housed a former hospital. The facility is too small for the needs of our community and almost constantly full of patients who need constant care. This means that when a crisis occurs in the life of someone who is not in the hospital, there is no space available for treatment. Until last week, patients in acute crises who could not be admitted to behavior health because of a lack of space were treated at the main hospital. As of February 1, our hospital began to refuse admission to patients suffering from mental illnesses. In its statement, the hospital seems to deny prevailing medical practice, saying, "Effective Feb. 1, 2017, we will no longer admit behavioral health patients who do not have acute medical needs to the main hospital when the Behavioral Health facility is at capacity."

Saying that a person suffering from a mental illness does not have acute medical needs flies in the face of the medical facts. It is not just a case of hospital priorities. It is a case of a major medical facility operating with false assumptions about basic medical facts. Mental illnesses are real. Acute mental illnesses require prompt treatment. Refusing such treatment is a denial of the core mission of a community hospital.

Imagine having a family member who is in such acute mental distress that they are causing self-injury or injury to others. When you arrive at the hospital you are told that they will not admit the patient. When you ask where you can find a place of temporary safety while you seek other treatment options you are told to take the patient to the jail. In South Dakota a person can temporarily be held in jail for up to 24 hours without being charged with a crime.

Obviously, jail will hinder, not help the person suffering from the illness. Obviously, the jail was created and is staffed for other purposes.

Our hospital has an entire floor of single luxury suites. But we cannot afford to expand our behavioral health facility to meet the needs of our community. Our hospital has announced the construction of a major orthopedic and sports medicine institute that will "provide care for elite athletes, with facilities and staff to train to enhance their athletic performance," but cannot afford to provide space for those suffering from acute and life-threatening symptoms of major mental illness. Our hospital found money to construct new parking structures, include covered parking for the convenience of physicians and caregivers, but cannot find room for people suffering from mental illnesses.

One of the reasons the hospital doesn't have space is that it is in the process of making all current patient rooms private.

I won't go into additional amenities such as a new main entrance to the building, a new office building, and other expensive hospital projects.

Mental illness cuts across all social barriers. It occurs in families of different educational and socio-economic levels. It may not pay in terms of reimbursement to the hospital in ways that elite sports medicine does, but care for those who suffer is as critical as emergency services to those who are injured in accidents.

As you can tell, I'm pretty worked up about this. Fortunately for you, I've used up my words for today's blog, so you don't have to endure my rant about sending children suffering from autism spectrum disorders more than 300 miles out of town in search of treatment.

The health care crisis is not somewhere else or sometime in the future. It is right here, right now in our community. The crisis is real.

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## **February 10, 2017 – Faithful Humility**

Jesus told a parable of two men who went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee. the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee's prayer was something like this: "Thank you, God, that I am not like others: executioners, cheaters, adulterers. Thank you that I'm not like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get." Not far from the Pharisee stood the tax collector. His prayer was this: "God be merciful to me. I am a sinner!" After he told the story, Jesus commented to his listeners, "The one who prayed for mercy went to his house justified. Not so for the Pharisee. If you pump yourself up, you will be humbled. Those who are humble will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14)

Add to that a story that is told in theological seminaries: There once was a great scholar of the New Testament who was beloved by his students. They marveled at his insight and understanding. One day one of his students asked him about the parable of the pharisee and the publican. He responded, "Go to the library and check out the book that I wrote on that parable. It's absolutely the best book ever written on that subject."

I'll pause to let that one sink in.

Joke number two for the day: After a conference held to study the parable, three great leaders of the church were in the great chapel. They prostrated themselves before the altar, beating their breasts and praying, "Lord have mercy, for I am nothing!" After a few minutes the janitor, who happened to be watching, put down his cleaning supplies and went up and knelt beside them, repeating their prayer. As the church leaders left the chapel, one poked another in the ribs and said, "Look who thinks he's nothing!"

It isn't easy to be truly humble.

I've been a pastor for nearly 40 years. I try to live a faithful life. I try to present myself, as I really am, to God in my prayers. Yet, I still have within me a part that keeps comparing myself to others. Not long ago, I failed to understand what one of the mid-level judicatories in our church was doing. I thought to myself, "Who does he think he is? He wouldn't last a month in my job!" Fortunately, I didn't say it out loud. It wasn't exactly a humble thought. There have been times when I've blurted out similar thoughts.

If one would be truly humble, the only comparison that should be made between yourself and others is to look deeply for similarities. It is critical for preachers to connect with those who listen to our sermons. That is one of the reasons I step out of the pulpit. Standing in a high pulpit with your feet above the heads of the people you address raining words down upon them, it is difficult not to think you are somehow better than those who are listening. Stepping out of the pulpit to preach reminds me, every week, that I speak as one member of the congregation. We are equals. My role is to clarify the scriptures in the context of this congregation and what it says to all of us, not just to some of us. After all these years of practice, I still don't get it right every time.

After I graduated from seminary, I was an educational elitist. I had invested eight grueling years of my life in higher education. I had a diploma with the word "doctor" on it. I had published articles in professional journals. I was proud of my grades and my academic achievements. Beginning my work in a rural parish that was more than 100 miles from any population center, I quickly found out that I still had a lot to learn. Two places served to further my education in the ministry. One was the local cafe, where people gathered for mid-morning coffee. I'd go in and most of the customers were simply drinking coffee. It was rare for one of them to order any food between mealtimes. It was the place where the politics of the town and of the nation were discussed. It was the place where the triumphs and tragedies of its people were shared. The first time I went to the cafe, the place went silent as I walked into the room. I got a cup of coffee and slid into a back booth and tried to hide. It took several minutes before people began to talk again. It took several weeks before they invited me to sit at their tables. Even then, they were careful with their words when I was around. Five years later, the roughest cowboys didn't stop cursing when I came into the room. I learned a lot from just listening to the talk of the town.

The second place I learned about rural ministry was when I made ranch visits. I quickly learned to wear my boots and jeans and to head for the barn after I parked my car in the yard. I'd observe what work was being done and join in, whether it was stacking bales or shoveling manure. It wasn't four years of undergraduate school and four more years of graduate study that was connecting me with the people I served, but rather the high school summers I worked on a ranch to earn spending money. Once the ranchers learned I could drive a grain truck and unload a combine without it having to stop cutting, I gained a certain level of credibility among them.

I still haven't mastered my pride. I still struggle with humility. I still catch myself comparing myself to others. I still have to resist the temptation to tell others how to act.

Recently I've begun to pay attention to how many times I use the words "we" and "I" in my sermons. "I" is a word that separates me from those who listen. "We" is a word that binds us together.

I have a lot yet to learn. However, I sense that we are making some progress.

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## **February 11, 2017 – Serving Those in Need**

Because of the work I do with The Front Porch Coalition, I attend a lot of funerals for those who have died by suicide. Attending funerals that are officiated by someone else is a good practice for a pastor. Direct observation is a good way of learning. Often what I learn is what not to do. Promising grieving family and friends that they will get over this is not a good idea. Not only is it untrue, but those who are grieving don't want to get over a person they have loved. Pretending that no one knows that the death was by suicide is not helpful. Describing the horrors of hell or the rewards of heaven can be overplayed in ways that are harmful. Being impersonal and offering generic platitudes and prayers that would work at any other funeral doesn't serve those who are grieving. I've got a long list of what not to do.

Knowing exactly what to do is a bigger challenge.

Actually, I don't officiate at many funerals of those who have died by suicide. The role of a chaplain is to steer individuals and families toward their own spiritual resources, not to impose my own church or theology on those I serve. I regularly call my colleagues and get them involved in serving those who are suffering the trauma of sudden loss.

Today, however, I will be officiating. The obituary lists three family members who preceded the victim in death. I officiated at all those funerals. Now, my job is to walk yet another journey of grief with a family that has known more than its fair share of grief in recent years. I've been working on the funeral service most of the week and yesterday I invested a block of time to write the funeral meditation. I woke this morning with that meditation on my mind, thinking of how I might make a change here and there.

I've been around enough to know that it is how you say things as much as what you say. Just having the right words is insufficient. Furthermore, there are no right words for such a situation.

The family is wondering why this happened. They don't understand the choices their brother made. They are struggling with themselves wondering what might have been

done to prevent the death. They are filled with thoughts of what might have been. I don't have answers to any of their questions. The best I can do is to reassure them that such questions are normal and remind them that when a person dies by he is not in his right mind. Unfortunately, the evidence about what he was thinking is not available. It was lost with his death.

There is no small amount of anger: "How could he do this to us?" This too is completely normal. But the family members don't want to feel angry. They actively work to suppress their anger because they don't want to be mad at someone they loved so deeply. As an officiant I have to acknowledge the reality of the anger, but I don't need to overemphasize it. It simply isn't the only feeling that is present in the room.

Every worship service that I lead is, in part, about building community. One of my goals is to craft experiences for people where the sharing of the experience connects them with the others in the room and enables them to access the support of others. I cannot take away the pain of grief. My goal is that no one should have to bear that grief alone.

It is so easy for me to over think the dynamics of any funeral. I go through the family members who were present when we planned the service one by one in my head. I think about their different experiences and different relationships with the one who has died. I think about the impact of this death on their place in life's journey. Losing an uncle is different from losing your baby brother. It is different for those who have married into the family. The perspective of friends is not the same as that of family members. The community that will gather today is complex and there are many factors that influence who will come and who will be absent.

Like every service of worship my effectiveness in my role is dependent upon how open I can be to allowing the spirit to flow through me.

A few weeks ago, I embraced a colleague just before he began to officiate at a service for a young man who died by suicide. He asked me, "Have you ever felt inadequate to the job that you have to do?" "All the time," I responded. And then I noted, "Fortunately you aren't alone."

It is true. A pastor never stands alone in the pulpit. God will be present, and my job is to allow God's presence to be perceived by those who are grieving.

Still, it is possible that my nervousness and feelings of inadequacy are important elements of the process. Being asked to serve a family in a moment of crisis is an awesome responsibility and realizing the awe that is inherent in the task is not a bad thing. Shaking in my boots as I stand before God is probably the appropriate posture for the occasion. Knowing that this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for the family is a good reminder to me of the importance of today for them.

Today is not about me. This rather selfish blog post is just part of my mental preparation. Perhaps it shares with my readers a small view of the inside of a pastor's preparation for the work that we do. Perhaps it is simply clearing my mind of the extraneous self-indulgent thoughts that need to be laid aside to serve a family deep in grief. I have a few more hours to read through the service, make a few changes and prepare for the important part of the day: being face-to-face with people who need on this day to know they are not alone.

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## February 12, 2017 – Horses and the Spirit



My father grew up on a farm that was worked by horses. My grandfather operated the homestead of his father where grandpa was born in a sod shanty until his children were teenagers. There were ranches where there were sleek cutting horses and other animals bred for speed and agility, but the horses on their farm were selected for strength and teamwork.

Around the time my father graduated from high school, land prices in North Dakota were beginning to emerge from the bottom of the Great Depression and grandpa was able to sell the farm and put together enough money to purchase a gas station one state to the

west, demonstrating his belief that automobiles were the future and a more stable economy from which to support his family. Having endured the Great Depression on a dry-land wheat farm in North Dakota, he wanted to build something different for the next generation.

My father retained a bit of that farm upbringing inside of him. Although he earned his living as a pilot and farm machinery dealer, he always wanted to have a few animals around. We had donkeys and for a short time bred mules for the Forest Service in partnership with another man who had a small average and a few horses. We raised chickens for our freezer. We had various pets over the years from cats and dogs, hamsters and guinea pigs to a turtle, rabbits and other creatures.

When I was in late elementary school, he set up horse riding lessons for us. We'd go a couple of times a week to a place on the edge of town where we learned to catch and bridle the horses, saddle them up and put a bit into their mouths and then ride them. The horses on the place were tame and we didn't learn very much but developed a bit of confidence about being on the back of a horse. Later I developed a friendship with a classmate whose parents operated a dude ranch, and we often rode their very tame animals as a part of our entertainment.

Although I wear cowboy boots, I never really became a horseman.

Years later, when I had graduated from seminary, I signed up for a fund raiser for Church World Service/CROP that was a half day horseback ride. I borrowed a horse and rode just enough to make myself pretty stiff the next day, which was a Sunday, much to the delight of my parishioners who teased me about it for quite a while after the event. We did raise some money for the cause, however.

My friend Byron, however, has an entirely different relationship with horses. He is the pastor of Upper Cheyenne United Church of Christ in Bridger, South Dakota. Over the years of his service to the congregation at Bridger, he has tried a lot of different projects to serve the people and create sustainable projects that build community. They have planted fruit trees and raise chickens. They have developed a quilting and handicraft project and purchased a quilting machine. They have built and then expanded the church fellowship hall to serve community meals and provide shelter when storms batter the region.

Bridger is a location with a lot of historical significance, but the heart of the contemporary community is a housing project. There are no services in the town - no stores, no gas stations, no school. That means that the people must drive for everything that they need. It also means that there are no jobs in town. It is the area where Byron grew up and he knows first-hand how deep-seated unemployment can combine with other factors such as alcohol and drug abuse to create real problems for the people.

Several years ago, Byron participated in a horseback ride that really touched his spirit. Something about the multiple day journey on horseback reconnected him with a bit of the history of the Lakota people. There was a time when horses were at the heart of Lakota culture. The ride was a kind of turning point in the way Byron thought about his ministry. He began to dream and work on a horse program for the youth and adults of Bridger. At first there were just a couple of horses in a small, fenced area around the church. They built a round corral and began to work with the horses. Byron emphasized the role of the horse as the teacher in the relationship. He got young boys and elder men to go into the corral with a horse and by trial and error they learned how to work and train the horses. They began to organize rides for the people of the area.

The program is growing. The church now has 11 acres of land to run the horses. That means that they must haul hay to feed them, but it gives space for quite a few head of horses. There have been donations of additional horses and a horse trailer. Byron figured out how to get a full-sized pickup truck. The operation is still run on a shoestring and donations are still needed, but there have been some amazing successes.

A couple of years ago some of the members of our congregation were able to hear the story of a man whose relationship with the horses and the program has helped him turn away from alcoholism. We've seen dramatic changes in teens who once seemed to lack confidence and now are articulate about their work with the horses.

As we were talking about the program last week, our choir director remembered a quote, sometimes attributed to Winston Churchill: "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man." Byron would agree with that. He has discovered that there is something about a horse that connects with the spirit of Lakota people.

After decades of oppression and attempts at genocide the renewal of the spirit of the Lakota people is a powerful transformation. The ability of the people to thrive amid such hardship is inspiring. Using horses to teach their souls to soar is planting seeds for the future of all people.

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## **February 13, 2017 – Anticipating Spring**

I am quite certain that no matter how long I live, I will never cease to be amazed at the ability of the world to surprise me. I'm not particularly talking about the surprising twists and turns of politics and governments now. The natural world is full of surprises.

In our corner of the world, things began a rapid thaw last week. The piles of snow are quickly shrinking. The patches of ice are disappearing. Even overnight the temperatures barely dip into the freezing zone. By the end of the week some of the places that are

squishy with melted runoff will be dry once again. The warm temperatures may even trick the grass into turning green.

It is only February in the hills. We've seen snow in May. Still the change is welcome. It feels as if winter has loosened its grip on the land and our lives. We know the difference between the winter blizzards when the snow falls powdery and blows for days and remains on the ground and a spring blizzard with the huge snowflakes, moist mounds of snow that thaw in a few days. Perhaps we have turned that corner between winter and spring. Perhaps we're just developing spring fever a bit early this year. It is still a bit too early to tell for sure.

I don't need to know what lies ahead. I do pay attention to the forecasts, but I know that the longer out I'm looking, the less accurate the forecast. And I like being surprised by the weather, especially when I'm not dependent upon it to complete travel or other activities.

The think about warm weather for a canoeist is that I start thinking about paddling. I'm wondering if there is any open water at the lake yet. I may even take a short drive just to find out. I've done sillier things on my day off before.

I like winter, but in the depths of winter, we often fail to see much of what is really going on in the world. When the snow is deep, we look only at the surface. The buffalo know that there is food for them beneath the snow and put their heads down and push the snow aside. The coyote can hear or smell the mouse running on darkened trails beneath the snow and occasionally with just the right pounce and dig, the coyote can get his lunch by sensing what cannot be seen. There is a lot more going on than what can be seen.

Springtime's awakening can be very visual. If you look closely at the ground, you can see new shoots beginning to emerge from the dark soil. The buds on the tree leaves aren't quite so tightly wrapped up when the sun is bearing down as they have been during the winter's coldest days. The land is rich with hints of things that are yet to occur.

The smells change as well. Winter just smells cold. Sometimes it gets so cold that it hurts your nose to breathe in the air. Springtime brings the aroma of mud and the beginnings of new growth. Somehow spring invites a second look - a closer look that winter. Instead of rushing from place to place to get in out of the weather, we slow down a bit in our walking and look a bit closer at our surroundings.

On days like today I must remind myself that winter is not over. I should get about the outdoor chores that need my attention because there will be days to come when I won't be so eager to get outside. I suspect that the unfinished yard work that is emerging from

under the snow will be covered up a few more times before it is really time to till the garden and plant seeds.

I've always been susceptible to spring fever.

Yesterday, I re-watched Valerie Kaur's address at the National Moral Revival Watch Night Service. Her talk is powerful, and I can't adequately paraphrase it in this blog. She recalled how over a century ago her grandfather was arrested when he arrived in the United States seeking freedom and how he spent months in the darkness of a jail cell until a lawyer filed a writ of habeas corpus that secured his freedom. Her grandfather went on to become a farmer who later tended and cared for the farms of his Japanese neighbors who were interred during World War II. The stories of her grandfather and the attorney who helped him secure his freedom inspired Valerie, who became an attorney herself and who has invested her professional career in defending the rights of those who have been marginalized by society.

In a poetic turn of language, Kaur reminds us of the light that can emerge from dark places and of the power of hopeful expectation. And even when the future is dark, as it was for her grandfather as he waited in the prison cell, she invites us to feel the power of hope rising within us, and asks, "What if this darkness that is around us is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?"

Because if it is, then the midwives teach us to breathe and to push. And hope and new life will emerge.

The amazing dance of winter and spring to which we are greeted each year is our invitation to experience the power of light once again in our lives. Just as the return of longer days provides greater warmth, so too we remember that hope springs eternal from life's darkest moments.

I've been around long enough to know that between those melting snowdrifts on my garden and the lush taste of a tomato eaten directly from the vine are separated by a lot of hard work. I can remember the weeds that need to be pulled and the days that the hose needs to be drug out to the garden. But the promise of that tomato makes it all seem worthwhile.

Step outside and breathe deeply. Hope is in the air.

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## **February 14, 2017 – Live in Commitment**

A man died. It was sudden and unexpected. His family status at the time of his death was this. He had been divorced. His parents were no longer living. His children were

adults and living in several different states. His closest relationship at the time of his death was with a woman he had met. He had been living with her and her teenage son for several months, but they were not married. When he died, the rule of law kicked in.

The family with whom he was living had no immediate legal authority. Because they were not married, she was not considered his next of kin. Notification of next of kin was a bit complex, as he didn't have written information about his out of state children. One of the numbers stored in his cell phone was no longer in service. Another produced no answer. Law enforcement officials are working on getting the notification made, a process that is done face-to-face whenever possible. They are now working with law enforcement in another state to get the notification made.

In the meantime, time is passing. His body is being stored, under refrigeration, in the morgue at the hospital, awaiting instruction on final disposition of his remains. Sometimes, contact with the legal next of kin cannot be made. In those cases, the county assumes responsibility for the burial of the body.

In the meantime, there is a grieving family, who would be willing to care for the remains of their loved one. They are feeling lost and left wondering what they should do.

It is not some kind of bizarre and unusual situation. That kind of situation occurs more often than one might think. If the death occurs under the care of a physician, the physician can issue a death certificate, but the body can be released to a funeral home only with the consent of a legal next of kin. If the death occurs unattended, the County Coroner issues the death certificate, and cannot release the body without consent of the next of kin. Once the body is released there are additional legal restrictions. Cremation, for example, requires consent of specific individuals. Since children are equal, if there are no prior arrangements and the children are the legal next of kin, all living children must agree to the cremation. At least that is the law in South Dakota.

This blog, however, isn't about the specifics of the law. It is about relationships that can be strong and loving but lack legal status. In the case reported above, had the victim ended up in the hospital and unable to give informed consent, the woman with whom he lived would not have had access to his medical information had he not signed a privacy form indicating her as one with whom information could be shared. I've witnessed loving family members who are unable to find out what is going on because of their lack of legal status.

Our society is shifting in many ways. There are a lot of people who are engaged in significant and meaningful relationships that lack legal status. Things work out well for many of them. But there are times when a crisis occurs that leaves them without the status and access that they want. The laws have been designed around traditional families, where couples are married in a legal fashion and have the documents to prove it. There are, however, many different shapes of families on our world today. In addition

to couples living with a certain amount of legal uncertainty. There are families that have been reconfigured without legally changing the status of the children. An unexpected death or disability can result in children being removed from the home where they have lived and the people they have known as family.

I can rant and rave all I want about preplanning and making out wills and custody arrangements and it won't change the situation for very many people. Often those who have unconventional relationships fear judgment by the church. Official church leaders have not always been accepting of divorce and family reconfigurations. People sometimes simply don't feel welcome in the church.

In some situations, people intend to marry, but are delaying for a wide variety of different reasons. In others, people have been wounded and hurt by divorce and are reluctant to become entangled in another marriage. There are probably as many different reasons for arranging their lives as there are different types of relationships.

The bottom line is that none of us will live forever. We are all mortal. And even though we have some aversion to thinking about our death, making a few plans is in order. It is a responsibility of adult living as surely as is earning a living and paying one's bills. But you won't find the topic being discussed in the life skills classes in area schools. Young people are rarely encouraged to consider their own death. It makes us nervous to talk about death and so we avoid the topic.

I have often been called to minister with a grieving widow or widower who has no legal status. I have watched as distant family members have swept in and dealt with funeral arrangements as if the immediate family did not exist. I have come to understand the grief of unofficial widows as a unique form of grief with its own trials and challenges. My heart breaks for those who are left without the traditional supports that are afforded to those with legal status.

So, I speak of these things when I have the opportunity. I am careful not to be telling others how they should live their lives, but rather to help them to think of things that they might not otherwise consider.

And I remain a big fan of marriage. Formalizing relationships and obtaining proper legal status for the relationship can ease the burden for loved ones. Beyond that, life within a commitment is a joyful existence. Only when one has discovered to whom and with whom that person can be committed, does that person discover true freedom.

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## February 15, 2017 – Nurturing Endurance

Yesterday a book study group in which I participate every week began our conversations, after a brief check in to see how everyone was doing. We discussed the book we are reading together for quite a while before the topic of politics entered our conversation. It was the longest that group has gone without mentioning the disruption, dysfunction, and disorder of the current state of US politics since the election in November. I commented to my colleagues about what seems to me to have been a season on inability to focus on our reading and concentrate on the topic at hand. I don't think yesterday signaled any substantive change. It was just one of those things that occurs in established relationships. We all have spoken our minds. We know where each other stands for the most part. There was nothing particularly new to add to the conversation. The moment was slightly liberating - freeing us to focus our attention on a particularly well-written book with a lot of useful information for life and for the ministry.

Last evening, we spoke with friends in Australia. The mother of one of our friends passed away yesterday after a long and beautiful life and it was good to talk to our friends. We had met the woman who died only once - on a visit we made to Australia in 2006 - but she has been a part of our lives through our relationship with her daughter since 1974. These are particularly close friends with whom we always talk about the things that are most important to us, and with whom we've been discussing world politics for decades. And we did invest a few moments of our telephone conversation mentioning the state of American politics and the disruption caused in US-Australia relationships by what appears to be a combination of insensitivity and ignorance on the part of our president. But that topic wasn't the focus of our conversation. Recalling a life well-lived and sharing the grief of loss was what was most important then.

A third experience and a third scene is playing in my memory this morning. This one is from last week. I walked through the lobby of a local motel where there was a large television mounted on the wall. Two people were sitting at a desk on the screen. They were, I guess, talking about the news. The sound from the television was low and there were a lot of people in the lobby of the motel. I had no interest in the television and was thinking about the people I was planning to meet, but I noticed as I walked through the area that no one else was paying attention to the screen, either. Here were two people, national celebrities, I presume. They are probably paid millions of dollars a year. They probably think that they play a large part in the life of our nation. But that evening, in that hotel, they were being ignored by everyone in the room. The sound of their voices was nothing more than background for other things that were going on, like the wind in the trees or the roar of the freeway outside of the motel. For that evening, the national news and the people who were reporting it were simply part of the decor of the hotel lobby, as useless as the artificial plants that stood next the draperies. Their individual identities, opinions and perspectives were meaningless in the setting.

These three experiences may be indicators of what is becoming a kind of new normal for me. For the few months since the election, I have been living with a heightened sensitivity to the racism, misogyny, and xenophobia that have marked this transition in leadership. It has seemed as if so many things that are important to me have been suffering dramatic attacks from leaders in our government: women's rights, science, the environment, education, stable relations with other countries, voter rights, fiscal responsibility, and so much more. It has felt like a direct attack on so many things that are important to me. This national fervor has been matched with equal intensity and distraction in our state's politics as well, with legislators mocking the initiative of a majority of voters calling for ethics in government and choosing the money of lobbyists over the will of the people.

I don't think, however, that moving some of this negativity to the background for certain moments of our lives is giving in to the disrespect and negativity of misguided leaders. It is, rather something deeper and more important. It is a reminder that the road to justice, equality and peace is long and difficult. When we simply drink from the fountain of negativity and rise in loud protest, we can lack the endurance and strength that is required for a lifetime of struggle. The true quest for freedom in the face of expanding empire is not the work of a single individual or even a single generation. Our people have been engaged in the struggle since Moses first stood up to Pharaoh. The virtues addressed by the prophets were echoed in the sermons of Jesus. We have known for many generations that the journey of God's people is a long one that demands the best of our spiritual strength.

Focusing on the relationships I have with other people, studying hard and questing for the truth, caring for those who are grieving, remembering the widows, orphans, and immigrants - these virtues require a life-long investment. We are more than leaves in the wind, reacting to each outrage of the unpredictable whims of disordered government. We are the people of God, sharing a journey toward freedom that did not begin with our generation and will not end when our time on this earth is over.

So, these days, I'm paying more attention to the things that increase my energy and endurance rather than draining them. I'm avoiding the temptation to stick my nose in the trough of despair. I'm paying attention to relationships that endure. I'm avoiding tweets and writing essays. I'm reading books and strengthening my mind. I'm turning off the television and paying attention to the needs of my neighbors.

Nothing matters more than learning to love the world and the people we find in it.

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## February 16, 2017 – Learning to Pray

I have enjoyed incredible privilege in this life. I was expected to have a job and work for my living from an early age, but I have always had a job. When I was a child, there was work available in my father's business. I had a relatively easy time finding work when I was a student. Since completing my degrees, I have never been unemployed. There were some less-than glamorous jobs along the way. I spent a summer dumping garbage cans into the back of a compactor truck. I cleaned a lot of toilets in the early years of our marriage.

I have been equally privileged when it came to education. I never doubted that I would attend college. I began my college career on academic probation, but that was the result of decisions that I had made. When I graduated from college, I had already been accepted into graduate school and there was no doubt that I would find a way to keep on with my education. My father was a trustee of a college and my grandfather had been a trustee before him. College education was simply assumed in my family.

So, when it comes to delivering an honest sermon on the end of Matthew 5, I am a bit challenged. Matthew 5:44 says, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." That is all well and good, but the truth is that I have never been the victim of persecution. And though there are people with whom I have ideological differences, I don't really have any enemies. It is easy to pray from someone with whom I disagree. There is, however, a big difference between praying for someone to change their mind and honestly praying for the well-being, health, and happiness of that person.

The challenge of praying for one with whom I disagree is worthy of a bit of contemplation. Because we disagree, we don't see the world from the same perspective. Gaining sufficient perspective to even attempt to see things from the point of view of the other is challenging. If I saw things that way there would be no disagreement, but the truth is I do not. Praying for someone requires a degree of compassion and understanding that pushes me beyond my usual comfort zone.

For a person of privilege, such as myself, one of the keys to a meaningful life of prayer is to learn how to make deep emotional and spiritual connections with those who are suffering. I must push myself to do this. It is not natural, nor is it my first inclination, to get up in the middle of the night and rush to the aid of someone who has just experienced a sudden and traumatic loss. Then, after we have made our initial contact, I must push myself to pick up the phone and make follow up calls. My instinct is to keep to myself. I'm not big on making phone calls in the first place. I've been known to get in the car and go make a face-to-face visit to avoid having to make a phone call.

Those simple disciplines, however, are critical to a life of faith. I need to stand with those who are suffering. I need to breathe in a bit of their suffering and, to the extent that it is possible, take some of the burden of suffering upon myself.

When I am tempted to complain, it is easy to see that the modest discomfort of losing a bit of sleep, of having a family meal interrupted, of having to go out on a night when I thought I could stay at home - these are minor inconveniences compared to the genuine suffering that I witness. The sudden and traumatic loss of a loved one doesn't give the survivor the option of whether to respond. They are thrust into the middle of suffering with no power to avoid it.

Standing with those who suffer is an important component in developing compassion.

Still, I have little direct experience with real persecution. I have, on several occasions, been involved in hosting refugees who were being resettled in our country. That has brought me face-to-face with people who were forced to flee their homes and families under the fear of persecution. Listening to their stories has helped me to understand that persecution is real and that there are those to whom praying for "those who persecute you" presents a real challenge. In those cases, however, the source of their persecution has been the large sweep of history, failed or corrupt governments, and distant wars. Identifying with the source of their persecution is challenging because I don't fully understand who is doing the persecuting.

I invest some of my time working with victims of the cycles of poverty, abuse, alcoholism, and drug abuse that are rampant on the Reservations closest to my home. I can speak about the history of persecution and the near genocide of indigenous Americans, but it is hard to distinguish individuals from the flood of history that has led us to this place in our story. I can understand the role that my privilege has played in the suffering of others but putting a name on that persecution so that I can focus my prayers doesn't seem to be accurate.

The truth is that Jesus' teachings were not directed at the elite and comfortable in his day and they are a challenge for those who know privilege in our day. As a disciple, however, it is important for me to take his words seriously. As a student of the Bible, I know that one way to deepen my faith is to keep reading. The next verses go like this:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"

Then he hits his listeners with a zinger:

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Trust me, I don't have a clue how to be perfect. In that regard, we're all in the same boat.

There is still much I need to learn about living a life of prayer.

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## **February 17, 2017 – Taking Their Oath**

I spent a little time with some new hires at the Pennington County Sheriff's office this week and attended their swearing in ceremony yesterday afternoon. I have attended a couple of swearing in ceremonies each year and much of what occurs at the ceremony is not a surprise to me. Still, each ceremony is unique because the individuals taking their oaths are each different.

The promise of a law enforcement officer is simple: To protect and defend the constitution of the United States and to protect and defend the constitution of the State of South Dakota and, to the best of one's ability and knowledge to execute the tasks of the job.

The oath may be simple and direct, but the moment is sacred. A person stands in front of the job and promises to be governed by a commitment to the core written documents that govern our nation of free people. Law enforcement officers don't promise loyalty to a particular political leader. They don't promise loyalty to a party or an ideology. They promise to protect and defend the principles upon which our democracy have been founded.

We had all just pledged our allegiance to the flag and to the country for which it stands, one nation under God, with liberty and justice for all. Not justice for some, but rather justice for all.

I find the ceremony to be moving on several fronts.

First, as a man in his sixties, it is impressive to see such young people make such deep commitments. Many of those sworn yesterday are in their twenties. Some of them look like teenagers to me.

Beyond that, however, I am moved by their dedication to our community. They are taking on a deep commitment to make our community work for all its people, to protect and defend all of the people, to provide safety for all. Their idealism is inspiring.

I watched as family members pinned the badges on the uniforms. I wonder if their loved ones understand that law enforcement is not a 9 to 5 job. Once you wear the badge, you remain a law enforcement officer whether you are on duty. And, as chaplain, I am

deeply aware that it isn't just the officer who is transformed by these commitments and this way of life. The entire family becomes part of the process.

Part of the sacrifice of service falls on the shoulders of spouses who have to assume extra responsibility for childcare when their loved one is working overtime. Part of the sacrifice of service falls to families who have their plans disrupted by unforeseen circumstances. Part of the sacrifice of service comes in the form of extra worry and concern.

I don't want to overstate this. Law enforcement does involve danger and facing risk. But as jobs go, being a corrections officer or a patrol officer is not one of the most dangerous. The only year in the history of our nation that law enforcement made the list of the most dangerous jobs was 2001, when so many officers died in the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Towers in New York City. Even that year, it was nowhere near as dangerous a job as, farming or roofing or power line construction. Truck driving, garbage collecting, and fishing are far more dangerous. And all those professions are not as dangerous as logging. By comparison, law enforcement is a safe job. It is important that families are aware of that reality, because like it or not, they will worry.

It is easy to be a bit cynical about promises in our country. It seems that there are those in government who have forgotten their promises. Congresspersons and Senators promise to protect and uphold the constitution. The courts occasionally must remind them that they have not done so.

Yesterday, however, was not a day for cynicism. Those sworn in were genuine in their intention to keep their promises. They were intentional in choosing the role of a public servant. They are serious about their choice of career. Of course, not all of them will make this their life's only career. Some will move on to other jobs and other ways of earning their living. But some of them will provide years and decades of service to our community.

I am inspired by dedication to service. I know that our public servants are, like the rest of us, imperfect. I know that they make mistakes. These new hires will make mistakes. They have a steep learning curve ahead of them. But if they remember the promises that they have made and if they are responsible with the training that they will continue to receive, they hold the promise of making our community a safer place for all. They hold the promise of making the dream of justice for all a reality.

There is much that is yet to be revealed. We still must get to know these new hires and discover a bit more about who they are and how they react to the stress of their job.

So, I have two things to say these new officers. I delivered them face-to-face with most of them yesterday. The first thing is "Congratulations." The selection process is rigorous. The training is exhausting. The commitment has been tested. Congratulations on the

strength of character that you have demonstrated and the accomplishments that you have achieved. The second thing is “Thank you.” Thank you for choosing a career in service to others. Thank you for giving up some of the luxuries and days off that others enjoy. Thank you for working on weekends and holidays. Thank you for being there for our community whether or not you are on duty.

As a chaplain, I pray for those who serve every day. Occasionally, I have the opportunity to pray with them. When I do, it is an honor indeed.

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## **February 18, 2017 – Seeking Peace**

Occasionally I glimpse a great and amazing skill of one who is at home in this world. Our world is rapidly changing. We can get caught up in the frenzy of everyday life and succumb to the stress and tension of the world around us. We craft lives of constant motion, climbing career ladders, struggling for success, trying to keep up with the neighbors, and forging plan after plan in an ever-changing world. Then, occasionally, I discover the presence of someone who is able to discover peace in the midst of the craziness, who has crafted a life that stands in contrast to the frenzy of the world. Often those people are ones I meet through their writing rather than face to face. Their lives touch me through the graceful and elegant use of words.

One of those unseen mentors in my life is Parker Palmer, an author and educator who founded the Center for Courage and Renewal. He has an amazing capacity to balance education, community leadership, social change, and spirituality. He also has honestly revealed how difficult that balance is by sharing the stories of his own struggles with depression. His blog, which I read regularly, often features the poetry of others. I am often touched by his ability to say so much with so few words. He does not deny that life is a struggle, but rather demonstrates with his life that the struggle is worth the effort.

Another of those persons whom I've never met, but for whose influence on my life I am deeply grateful is Wendell Berry. It is not easy to sum up this man's incredible life. I would describe him as an academic, although he doesn't have a string of degrees. He completed his masters in English in 1957 and isn't an academic insider. Still, he is an amazing critical thinker who is in high demand as a speaker on college and university campuses. More than the lectures he delivers, however, he has communicated with the world through his books, of which there must be 40 or more, fiction, nonfiction and poetry. But I suspect that Berry might prefer to describe himself as a farmer. He comes from a long line of farmers on both sides of his family and although his father also practiced law, he also farmed throughout his life and Wendell grew up on the farm. After completing his master's degree, Berry was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship that took his family to France. He then taught college English for a few years before purchasing a farm in Kentucky where he has lived since, farming, and writing at a

prolific pace. Importantly, Berry describes himself as “a person who takes the Gospel seriously.” Like others who are serious about the Gospel, he can be a critic of the institutional church and quick to point out the gaps between our faith and our practice.

One of the things I deeply appreciate about Berry is his sense of humor and ability to poke fun at himself. In a poem he titled, “How to be a Poet (to remind myself)” he quips, “Any readers who like your poems, doubt their judgment.”

Berry invites his readers to put aside the disruptions of technology and discover depth and meaning present in an unplugged world: “Shun electric wire . . . stay away from screens . . . There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places.” He challenges us to dwell with silence: “Accept what comes from silence. . . . make a poem that does not disturb the silence from which it came.”

This new year, still young, has been a season of unsettled nature for me. I have found myself awake in the middle of the night contemplating the disruption of unconventional politics and what seems to be an assault on the foundations of American Democracy. Amid the claims that question the nature of truth and challenge the limits of the bill of rights and the seeming chaos of an unfocused administration, I wonder about the resiliency of our nation in a way that I have never before experienced.

It isn't just politics. I have lost confidence in my ability to do my work well. I have, for decades, prided myself on my capacity to preach meaningful sermons. I work hard at it, but I have felt that it was a skill at which I excelled. These days I am very critical of my preaching, feeling as if I've lost my rhythm and have become repetitive. I struggle for words and focus. I'm spending more time preparing and am less satisfied with the results. I wonder if I am becoming what I used to criticize in some of my elder colleagues - trapped in a former way of communicating and unable to speak to the present.

In these unsettling times and in this season of searching and questing, I am grateful to Wendell Berry, who invites me to simply go outside and reconnect with wild things:

“When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

—From “The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry”

I awoke this morning aware that I need to invest a block of time today working on my sermon. I feel unprepared for tomorrow’s worship service. First, perhaps, however, I will go for a hike, and take a break, and find a place to sit and contemplate and “come into the peace of wild things.”

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## **February 19, 2017 – Solitude**

When we moved to Chicago in 1974, I was really a small-town kid. I had grown up in a small town and my only semi-urban experience came from the four years I lived in our state’s largest city while attending college. Our state was Montana, so that “largest city” was only about 100,000 people. Chicago was, by comparison, huge. Living in the University of Chicago we were surrounded by the reality of urban living. The only ground that wasn’t covered with pavement or a building were small lawns around houses and a few parks. The University of Chicago quadrangle had a bit of grass in the center, but it was usually covered with students. The Midway was a long boulevard with a park area in the center, but it was surrounded by the rush of traffic. Even the city parks were full of people. From time to time, we would walk over to the shores of Lake Michigan just to have a place where we could look out at something other than the density of urban living. The walk to the lake wasn’t far, but it wasn’t the kind of walk that one would take alone. We went in groups for safety.

I found myself longing for times when I got away from the city just to have some time by myself. We spent the first two summers of our Chicago years managing a Church Camp in Montana. In the time before and after and between campers, we would turn off all the lights and revel in the solitude of our mountain retreat. I would go for walks several times a day that led me to places where there were no people.

I treasure the times when I can be alone.

As I promised myself, I took a hike alone yesterday morning. I just drove up the road a way, parked the car and took a hike on a well-traveled trail. There is still a bit of snow and ice in the hills, but the day was warm and I had no need for gloves. The steep uphill and downhill sections of the trail required a bit of attention and care as the places where other hikers had previously walked had turned to ice. The crunchy, melting snow on the edges of the trail provided better traction and there were plenty of places where the bare ground was showing and some of those places were quite muddy. I was in no rush and the conditions were not problem. I had planned to hike out and back, so there was not required distance to my walk. For part of the walk, I was overlooking a lake and could hear the faint sounds of the ice fishermen below. At another point, I heard the

echoes of a siren as a sheriff's deputy rushed along the road responding to a call. Most of the time, the sounds surrounding me were much softer: the drip of water from melting snow and ice, the wind in the trees, and the crunch of my own footsteps. There were plenty of deer tracks in the snow, but I was making enough noise with my walking that I didn't see any deer as I hiked.

Walking alone is one of the ways that I seek balance in my life. I love working with people. I love being with people. I have a wonderful family and a job that grants me meaningful relationships with a wonderful community. I believe in serving my community by investing my energy and enthusiasm. But sometimes I just need a little alone time. Sometimes I just need to reflect and think.

On Friday I was reminiscing with a colleague about how, just a few years ago, we used to go up into the hills and our cell phones stopped working. We didn't have to worry about being interrupted with a call because we headed to places where there wasn't any service. That has changed. The hills are covered with cell phone towers. Within sight of our house is a tower that is decorated to look like a pine tree. Other than the fact that it is twice as tall as any of the surrounding trees, it doesn't disrupt the view much. And there are lots of other ones. There are towers that are disguised as flag poles and towers that are installed in existing structures. There aren't many "dead zones" left. And I carry my cell phone with me when hiking. It would provide emergency contact if an accident occurred. It would provide emergency navigation if I became disoriented. Fortunately, no one called while I was on my hike yesterday. Still, it interrupted my solitude at one point by issuing a tone that indicated the receipt of an email message.

When I lead worship, I leave my cell phone in my office. Most of the rest of the day I carry it with me wherever I go. I even have a waterproof case for taking it when I am out on the lake paddling. Constant contact is now a part of our world.

Even though I complain about the phone, the truth is that I have it pretty good. I visit regularly at the jail and at Western South Dakota Juvenile Services Center, where inmates live their lives without any true solitude. Their actions are continually witnessed. They don't go anywhere outside of their cells as individuals. They are always accompanied. When they do get to go outdoors, it is to a small patch of concrete where there are other inmates and plenty of supervision. The concept of a penitentiary - a place where people are kept in solitude so they can repent from their sins and become penitent - is not the prevailing philosophy in corrections these days. Extreme isolation doesn't help people reform their ways. But being confined in jail is a tough routine. I would not enjoy the constant noise and the constant closeness to others.

I am fortunate to live in a place where a walk alone is readily available. These hills are a wondrous resource for my spiritual health. Today I am ready to worship with God's people.

## February 20, 2017 – The Power of Love

My maternal grandfather died when I was young. I don't have much of an active memory of him, although I have an image of him sitting in an overstuffed chair in our home that I think is an actual memory - at least I've never seen a family photo that is exactly like the image that is in my mind. I have two possessions of his that were handed down to my mother and then on to me. I have his bible. It is a small leather-bound book with small type. On the front cover, embossed in gold are the words "Holy Bible" and his name, "Vernon E. Lewis." The gold leaf on the edges of the pages has worn off in several spots and the spine shows signs of having been held a lot. It falls open to the Gospel of Matthew and the spine is bent in a way that reveals that more time was spent reading the New Testament than the old.

My grandfather was a Methodist. His parents and his in-laws were active in their local Methodist Church and in the Conference. He, in turn went to serve in several offices in the church, including attending national conferences and gatherings. His faith was important to him, and he passed that faith on to his daughters, one of whom was my mother. She spoke of experiences that she had growing up that shaped a lifelong faith and commitment to the church.

The second item that I have is a 3x5 post card that was used in a campaign for district judge. Grandpa was a republican. He was politically active all his life, serving both in the Montana House of Representatives and Senate. This post card has a black-and-white photograph of him as a young man. Some of the type on the card is smaller than the print in the bible, but it can easily be read: "Vernon E. Lewis for District Judge, Republican ticket, Interpret the law with equal justice to all alike, seventeen years of active practice in Chouteau County, paid for and circulated by Vernon E. Lewis, Fort Benton, Montana." If I have done my math correctly, he would have been roughly the same age that I was when I moved to South Dakota at the time that card was printed. In those days, with somewhat shorter life expectancies, he would have been mid-career. He was young and energetic, but he had gathered a significant amount of experience.

It is no mystery why the post card and the bible have lived together in the same cedar box for all the years since he passed away. Not only are they valuable reminders of the man and the things that were most important to him, but they also demonstrate the connection that he lived between a life of faith and a life engaged in community service. For my grandfather, faith and politics were not two separate subjects, but rather expressions of the same convictions. His passion for equal justice for all came directly from his biblical faith. His belief in the power of carefully crafted legislation to improve the lives of all the citizens of his state came from his extensive study of biblical laws.

The two items are important treasures to me. They are symbols of the heritage into which I was born and the faith that has been handed down for generations in my family. I belong to a people who believe, and who have long believed, in the power of love.

Love is not the only way to interpret history. You can read the stories of the great empires of the world and their leaders as stories of power, force, military might and conquest. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, Napoleon . . . the list goes on and on. They forged empires and won victories in battle. And the world they shaped was a world of oppressors and the oppressed, of victors and victims. If you follow their way the task of the victim is to rise and conquer the victor. The journey is always one of violence and in the end, someone is the loser. And there are plenty of people in the world who see things that way. Their way of winning is to conquer someone else. When their side rises up another must fall.

This, however, is not the way of Jesus. Nor is it the way of the disciples of Jesus. It is not the way of my people. We believe in the power of love. We believe that the world is transformed not through the application of violence, but through the power of sacrifice. We believe in Christ crucified. The might of the Roman empire had the power to execute Jesus in a cruel manner. It did not have the power to suppress the love that continues to transform the world centuries after the fall of the empire.

Now, in my own life, once again the decision comes. Do I really believe in the power of love to transform the world? Am I fully committed to love's way as I engage in serving my community? Do I trust the power of love to transform the politics of the day?

These are not esoteric questions - they are the real substance of life and death in this world. There are plenty of people who believe in winner-take-all approaches. There are those who are unconcerned with the victims as long as their side is winning. There are those who believe that human lives and families must be sacrificed in pursuit of wealth and power. Some days I feel like rising up and resisting them with all of the power I can muster.

I know there is a better way. I know that the real power to transform the world is the power of love - love applied to all - love for enemies as well as for family and friends.

I take out the cedar box and open it up to reveal the treasures of my grandfather and once again am reminded that the true legacy isn't an object at all. It is the absolute conviction that God is love and that love conquers all.

To this I will be true.

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## **February 21, 2017 – A Small Thing in a Big World**

With our annual meeting at the end of January, February is always a month of getting our church structure fired up with new people coming on board, checking-in and negotiating meeting times for departments and committees and planning for the year ahead. In our church's system, about one third of each group is new every year, leaving plenty of experience, but also bringing freshness to the process. For several years now, I have signed up to lead devotions at the February meeting of our Church Board to demonstrate my support for the board and to give the Board the opportunity to organize its own devotions for the balance of the year. Leading a brief devotion is not that big of an assignment, and I generally must be prepared to lead such an exercise at a moment's notice as I meet with other committees and groups within the church.

There is a temptation in such moments to deliver a sort of "religion light," a watered-down bit of faith that makes the listeners feel good but fails to seriously challenge their preconceived notions or invite them to make bold new decisions in their journeys of faith. I know a lot of stories that are a bit heartwarming and leave a good feeling with those who hear them.

The Gospel, however, is filled with so much more. It contains challenges to endure suffering for the sake of justice, to sacrifice for righteousness and to endure in a way of life that often brings criticism and even worse from the wider community. Standing up to empire has long been one of the hallmarks of our traditions.

Prophets - those who articulately call their peers back into relationship with God - are, however, few and far between. It may not be my calling to speak such words in every setting. Discovering the balance of vision and humility is not an easy process.

I would like to offer a devotion that will stick with the leaders of our church. I would like to inspire courage for the tasks that lie ahead and support of the costs of discipleship. Our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith promises "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 has no end." Those promises have been incredibly motivating and inspirational throughout the years of my ministry, and they may be just what is needed for our Church Board as it begins its year of forming policy and setting direction for our congregation.

What I do know is that after this evening's meetings are completed, there will be more work to do and another month will pass and another round of meetings will be in place. Even though we try to organize ourselves for fewer meetings and more direct ministry, meetings seem to be a necessary part of the life of the church.

One of the things that advancing age and increasing years of experience behind me is teaching me is that ministry is short of tasks that are finished and set aside and long on

tasks that are ongoing. So much of the work I do doesn't lead to a list of accomplishments, but rather to another call and another need. When I finish one week, I am already working on the next one. When one year has passed, there isn't a big list of accomplishments, but rather a long list of ongoing commitments.

For a long time, I have looked to the print publications of the church - worship bulletins, newsletter, and annual reports - as documents that can be completed. Each week there is a sense of accomplishment when a stack of neatly folded bulletins is in the box writing to serve the congregation in worship. Each month, when we finally get the newsletter completed there is a sense that we've come to the end of a big job. Each annual report is a massive undertaking that must be "put to bed" when we order the prints from the copier and use the binder to pull the pages together. But if you look at the archives of worship bulletins, newsletters, and annual reports, you understand that in the big scheme they are little more than long lists of documents stored on a hard drive and backed up on a digital cloud. It is unlikely that even the most ardent church historian is ever going to want to go back and consult the liturgy for communion we used just a few weeks ago, let alone one used a few decades ago.

I can feel good about a particular funeral service when I am visiting with a family following the service, but I know that the next one is not far away and when that one is finished there will be more. So much of the work that I do doesn't produce tangible results. Our community is constantly changing, and we don't even have a very long institutional memory. Early this year as we were cleaning out a storage room, I once again was reminded of how much we try to save soon turns into meaningless clutter. Time goes on and the future beckons. We live our lives during the struggle not at the moment of completion.

Knowing all of this, however, doesn't change that this evening presents me with an opportunity for a single, unique moment in the ever-flowing history of our congregation. I've been given the challenge of trying to come up with the right words for a particular time in our life together. The words will be fleeting. People won't remember them after a month or a year has passed, but perhaps the words can inspire leadership or provide strength for genuine ministry and service.

I know it is not about me or even about the words I will share. One of the daily devotionals I read offered this verse yesterday: "(And God says) the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended." - Isaiah 51:6b My words and even my life may be just a gnat on the fabric of the earth. Perhaps, however, they can contribute to something that is much bigger than myself and my time on this earth.

## February 22, 2017 – My Theory of Canoe Distribution

It isn't difficult for me to wax rhapsodic about canoes. Virtually every culture that has lived near some source of water has come up with a variation on the long, slender boats with which to travel across the surface of the water. On every continent except Antarctica there is evidence of a form of dugout canoe. People have been paddling canoes for almost as long as they have formed communities. Although canoes themselves, being made from natural ingredients, deteriorate over time, there have been discoveries of ancient canoe-making tools that are even more ancient than actual evidence of the boats and paddles themselves.

The North American innovation and design that captured the attention of the world once European travelers visited this continent was the skin-on-frame boat. A framework of wood, often driftwood or other available materials, was covered with animal skins and sealed with various combinations of tree sap and fat to create a waterproof craft. Also of note were the bark canoes of North American tribes. These boats which were technologically superior to any European designs of their time have contributed the basic shapes that have persisted. Most modern canoes, even those constructed of space age materials, conform to traditional shapes.

As I said, I can go on and on about the elegance and beauty of canoes.

My personal story of canoes has its origins in church camp. In the early days of my career as a pastor, we would go to our Conference church camp located on the shores of Lake Metigoshe in the Turtle Mountains of North Dakota. The camp had several different boats of different sizes. An old aluminum canoe was the one that was accessible to me. I could get up early in the morning and paddle on the lake without requiring the assistance of others. Later, when we had moved to Idaho and our church camp was at Payette Lake in Idaho, I began the process of adding to the camp's fleet of canoes. As well as helping the camp to purchase additional boats, I participated in developing a program of instructional classes and a curriculum to improve canoe safety for campers. It was during that time that I decided that I would like to have my own canoe. Not having funds to purchase a new canoe, making one seemed like a good plan. I still own that 17' tandem canoe. I made a few mistakes in its construction, but it continues to be a safe and reliable boat. After owning it for several years, I replaced the gunwales with ones of a better design, made new thwarts and crafted a sailing rig for the boat. I'm not an accomplished sailor, but the boat is a good way of getting wet on a hot summer day.

Over the years there have been more canoe projects. On summer I took my brother for a ride in a very small canoe that I had built on the Puget Sound off Whidbey Island. There was a bit of light chop on the surface of the water, and we returned with the canoe nearly half full of water. I decided to make a kayak. The result was a boat that I have paddled all around including the Pacific and Atlantic Coasts of Canada and the

United States from the Bay of Fundy to the beaches of Oregon. It has been in three of the Great Lakes, in the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers and in countless lakes scattered across the country.

And there have been other kayaks, including the one taking shape in our garage right now.

For variety, I have restored a couple of wood and canvas canoes and built a rowboat as well.

The process has been fun, relatively inexpensive as hobbies go, and provided a lot of hours of paddling and rowing.

However, like many other ventures in life, I have realized that I am now at a point in my life where accumulating more things - including more boats - isn't the wisest of choices. The time is coming when I need to devise a strategy to decrease the inventory of boats in the storage shed.

The task is proving to be at least as challenging as was the job of acquiring the boats. That first canoe is rarely paddled these days. I never was much of a sailor, and I now have boats that are lighter and easier to use. It wasn't in the water at all in the last year. The time has come when I could get along without it. But there is a certain emotional attachment. Furthermore, that boat has very little cash value. The trick is finding someone who wants to have it and who will care for it and enjoy paddling it.

The right match for each boat that I need to move one presents a significant challenge. Canoeing isn't a very big sport in our part of the country. It probably makes sense to think in terms of searching for new owners in places that are closer to larger bodies of water. Selling a canoe long distance, however, is a challenge even in the days of the Internet. I watch the classified ads in the canoeing magazines to which I subscribe, and I know that similar boats often take a long time to sell through such forums.

In traditional educational theory, humans go through various phases in their lives. According to Erik Erickson's system of psychosocial stages of development, the task of older folk is integration. As we age the task of pulling together the various experiences of life into a meaningful whole becomes an important task leading to the development of wisdom and satisfaction. All of that is well and good, but I'm beginning to think that there is yet another stage of development. That additional stage is distribution. After accumulating experiences and possessions over the span of a lifetime, there comes the need to distribute that which has been drawn together. This is true not only of possessions, but also of knowledge and experience. As we age, the urge to teach becomes stronger.

So, if you know anyone who wants to have a canoe who also would be able to tolerate the stories of an aging man, have them get in touch with me.

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## **February 23, 2017 – My Terms of Service**

All right, all you engineers and software writers and brilliant minds who have given us the Internet. I'm asking you to put your minds together and start writing your algorithms. The time has come for a new Internet. I know how quickly the existing Internet came to dominate our lives, and I know that the pace of change is accelerating, so I know that this can be done in a short amount of time. And I'm willing to be reasonably patient.

Before I describe what we need, however, I want to go on a short rant. So, regular blog readers, fasten your seatbelt and get ready. You've heard me rant before.

Here's the issue. With every piece of software, I purchase and with every application I download from the Internet and with each new piece of computer hardware I buy, there are multiple "terms of service." These are legally binding contracts with a whole host of tiny print. They set out the rules and the guidelines by which users must abide to use the product. They often specify that users must register and give accurate information about name, address, and other information and that the information must be updated when it changes. Many terms of service also specify that the company can change a username if they deem it to be inappropriate. Some even state that they can change the username without explaining why or even giving notice. They often specify that the company ends up owning all user content. They can specify user behavior, ownership of intellectual property and a host of other details. It is not at all uncommon for terms of service to be many pages long.

Most software demand that the user agree to the terms of service specified by the company without any changes. Failure to do so means that the user has no access to the product. For example, if you purchase Microsoft Word, a common and very useful tool, you must agree to Microsoft's complete terms of service without any exceptions, or the software cannot be used. You must pay but having paid does not grant you access to the product for which you paid. You can only gain access to that product when you agree completely and without exception to the complete list of Microsoft's demands.

Generally, a contract is a two-way street that protects both parties and provides clarity about an agreement. But when it comes to software, the agreement is a forced acceptance of all the company's terms without any rights for the user at all.

So here is the deal, software developers. I want a new Internet, where both parties can make offers when it comes to terms of service. We users have rights, and we deserve

the ability to make the company respect our rights. And we need contracts to protect our rights.

Here are my terms of service. Software developers please make note.

I as a user have the right to privacy. The 4th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States guarantees my right to be secure in my person, house, papers, and effects. Any use of my private and personal information by the company including my address, phone number, email address or any other identifying information other than direct communication with me shall constitute a violation of this agreement.

I as a user have a right to freedom of religion. Any use of my religious affiliations or preferences by the company for the purpose of creating lists of members of my religion, directing advertising based on my religion, or compiling data about religion, is strictly prohibited.

I as a user reserve the right to my intellectual property. My words belong to me. My photographs belong to me. The company has no right to use any of my creative work or intellectual property, whether for profit or any other reason.

I as a user have the right to remove the company's software at any time. The company agrees to provide a single, simple to use, tool that will completely and absolutely remove all the software and any residual code generated by the company. The company guarantees that the use of that button will not negatively affect the performance of my computer or any other software I have installed on the computer.

I as a user remain the owner of all data collected about the user including location, shopping preferences, schedule, contacts, and any meta data attached to photographs, compositions, or any other intellectual property. The use of any of that information for any purpose other than a direct request of the user is prohibited.

The company must provide the user with a username that contains a minimum of eight characters and is unique to the company. The company must further provide a unique password that contains both upper- and lower-case letters, at least one numeral and one special character. This password must be changed every quarter, and whenever requested by the user, and notice of the username and password must be given to the user. The company must provide answers to seven security questions provided by the user. The user agrees to provide security questions for which the company would have no natural ability to discern a consistent answer.

OK, the last one has no purpose or function whatsoever. It is just an expression of my frustration of the ridiculous and meaningless security measures that do nothing to protect the security of users.

I'd love it if the contract also specified penalties for failure to observe my terms of service. Something like a fine of \$10,000 per occurrence seems about fair. After all, if they compromise my privacy or impinge on my freedom of religion those things are permanent and cannot be reversed.

I think that it should be possible to create algorithms that require companies to comply with users' custom terms of service. If it can be done it certainly would go a long way toward making the Internet a more just and equitable place for all users and companies. When it does, I'm going to be ready with my terms of service.

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## **February 24, 2017 – Travel Day**

When I travel, I often transform the blog into a bit of a travelogue. So, since I am away from Rapid City, I might as well fill you in on yesterday's adventures. This is also notice that for the next few days I may be a bit irregular in posting my blog, depending on access to the Internet and what is going on. At any rate, I don't expect to be in my regular routine while I'm away.

The day when the National Weather Service is calling for a spring blizzard with snow accumulations of 5 - 8" is probably not the best day for delay-free travel. On the other hand, I didn't know what the weather would be like when I booked my flight and the weather reports aren't always exactly right, either. From what I can tell from this distance, the snow depths at home were considerably less than predicted. It got warm enough for much of the precipitation to fall as rain.

I did end up spending most of the day in Denver yesterday. After a delay in my departure from Rapid City that made it impossible to make my connections in Denver. I rebooked my connection to a later flight into Seattle and sat back to wait. I was supposed to get into Denver a little after 10 am and arrived at noon. That left me more than six hours to wait for my connection. I made laps in the B concourse, read my book, watched people, and generally had an interesting time. Denver is an interesting city, and it has an interesting airport. Where else can you sit down for a meal of Chinese food that was prepared and served by people who are speaking Spanish to each other? I'm sure there are plenty of places where this is common, but it is a bit unusual to a boy from Rapid City.

I found a place to sit right next to a window where I had a plug in to charge my phone and computer and free airport wi-fi. The place I picked was right above United Airlines' PetSafe shelter for animals that are being flown around. There is a fleet of vans - at least 5 - that transport the pets from one flight to the next. They must have an indoor area where they can keep the pets warm, because sometimes they unloaded the pets from the vans and then loaded up others and headed out. I guess I never thought about

how many pets might be transferring from one flight to another at an airport this big. It seems that there are quite a few.

The weather wasn't that bad in Denver, a little snow, and a few times when visibility was reduced, but the snow wasn't sticking to the ground and there were also plenty of times when the clouds would lift and the visibility was pretty good. Most of the flights in and out of Denver were delayed a bit, however. Much of the time that I sat in Denver, I was surrounded by people who seemed a bit upset by the delays. I always wonder why people get so upset. I know that it can be frustrating when things don't work out the way you'd planned, but there is nothing to be gained by getting upset. The employees of the airline can't change the weather. They can't make planes any bigger than they are. They can only process rebooking one at a time.

Furthermore, with all the different ways to manage airline travel these days, there are shortcuts that a savvy traveler can take to help smooth the process. As soon as I found out that I would need to change my ticket, I got on the phone and got the change made before I got up to the attendant. All I needed that person to do was print me new boarding passes. That meant that those behind me in line had their wait shortened because I was able to use the phone to talk to an agent in some other town.

The thing I missed by being late was the half day that I thought I would have with my son and his family. I'm out here to help them move and there will be plenty to do today and in the next few days. But we will get the work done and still have time for grandpa to read stories to the grandkids and do a little playing as well.

It has been a long time since we have moved from one home to another. But we did make two moves when our children were living at home. Both times, my in laws were very helpful. On the move when our children were preschoolers, my father-in-law drove our suburban and pulled a trailer with the family while I drove a U-Haul with our household goods. I also remember some of the silly stories from our moves, like not finding things after making the move for a while because they were packed by someone who thinks about appropriate places to put things in an entirely different way than I. I'll try my best to avoid pulling that one on our son and his family.

According to the airport's web site, Denver International Airport is the sixth-busiest airport in the United States. In 2015, the airport served a total of 54 million passengers. That's a little less than 150,000 people each day. Of course, some days are busier than others and yesterday probably was nowhere near as busy as a holiday. Still, there were a lot of people in the airport yesterday, all of them seeming to be in a hurry to get wherever they were going. Their pace contrasted with my own. I didn't have any reason to rush. I had time to walk at my own pace, to sit for a while and to watch people whose lives were a lot more rushed than my own.

So, for now, I'm safe in our son's home, having invested a day in travel, which, if you think about it, is still pretty amazing. I woke up in Rapid City and went to bed in Olympia, WA. Not a bad number of miles for a leisurely day!

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## **February 25, 2017 – Lovin' Being a Dad**

Some parents that I know remember ages of their children as being more enjoyable than other ages. Some think that infants are the most fun. Others prefer preschoolers. Some think that teens are fun, others find teenage years to be more challenging. I don't think that there is any agreement on one age being better than another.

Our oldest child will turn 36 in less than a month, and I have to say that I don't think that there is one age that is better than another. I loved being a father when he was a tiny baby. I love being a father now that he is this age, and his sister is 33. Every stage of parenting has had its challenges and every stage has had its rewards. From my point of view, the rewards have outweighed the challenges every time.

Visiting our son and his family reminds me of the days when we had two young children. Each day is very busy. There is a schedule that must be maintained because children need to get to school on time with a good breakfast inside of them and having had sufficient sleep to be able to concentrate and study. There are activities that require an investment of time and the ever-present chore of driving children from one activity or event to the next.

By the time the children are fed, played with, bathed, had their stories read and been put in their beds, the parents are nearly out of energy. There are still a few chores that need to be completed but knowing that the next day will be as busy and filled with activities means that parents are heading to bed as soon as possible after the children are asleep.

I remember those days. I remember being tired. I'm grateful that the pace of our lives is a bit different these days. But I wouldn't have traded those days for anything. And I know that our son is enjoying his children in similar ways to the joys that I knew as a father. That makes me joyous.

I watch as our son gets down on his hands and knees and swings both of his children onto his back and crawls around the room. The delighted giggles of the children are contagious, and I know they are warming his heart as much as they are warming mine. It isn't just that it is great fun to watch our grandchildren having such a good time. It isn't just that he is able to share in their joy. It really makes me happy to see him be so

happy doing things that used to make me happy. He is a really good father and that make me think that we have shared a very special father-son relationship for all of these years and he continues to amaze and impress me.

While he as saying goodnight to his daughter last night, I overheard a bit of their conversation.

“Do you like having Grandpa Ted visiting us?”

“Uh huh?”

“You know Grandpa Ted is my daddy.”

“Humpf!”

“What are you thinking?”

“You are my daddy. He is my grandpa.”

“Yes, that’s right, he is your grandpa, and he is also my daddy.”

“Humpf!”

She wasn’t quite what she thought about someone having multiple roles. Trying to figure out how her grandpa could also be a daddy and how her daddy could have a daddy of his own was all a bit of news to her.

I remember a similar conversation with her brother when he was about her age.

The wonderful thing about being the father of a father is that you get to see the layers of relationship. Some things, like getting down on the floor to roughhouse with the kids seem so natural and so much the way that I used to play with our children that it triggers a lot of pleasant memories when I see him do it.

We were productive yesterday. We got several of the tasks on the “to do” list accomplished. We work well together and enjoy each other’s company so much that we have a constant stream of conversation going.

Moving is always a time of mixed emotions. There is genuine excitement about the new place and the challenges of the new job. There is genuine grief over leaving a place that has been a good home and a community that is a wonderful place to live. There are a lot of goodbyes that need to be said and a lot of new relationships to form and nurture.

I can remember many of those emotions, but it is a bit different witnessing our son going through them. In a way, I think that we helped to prepare him for what he is going through by the way we handled the moves we understood when he was younger. We moved when he was four years old and again when he was fourteen. Those experiences helped prepare him for his life and choices that he has made.

I have enjoyed every life phase with our children. This one is very special. Watching him manage the complexities of life, work, and parenting makes me swell with pride and fills me with admiration for him. He is a wonderful person and have been around for all his life helps me realize that the time I do have with him is precious indeed.

In so many ways yesterday was just an ordinary day, but it was made extraordinary by the fact that we are privileged to be together, and I am privileged to be here where I can witness his life and see how he cares for his family. My respect and admiration for him grow continually.

It is good to be a dad of a dad. It is good to be grandpa to his children. Reading bedtime stories is one of the traditional roles for grandpa when he is visiting, and it was a perfect way to cap a meaningful day.

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## **February 26, 2017 – Transfiguration, 2017**

Our perception of time changes as we age. A year seems like a different amount of time to a six-year-old than it does to a sixty-year-old. So, It shouldn't surprise me that the seasons seem to be going by so quickly. It is just part of life. Because the season of Epiphany focuses on the teachings and sayings of Jesus, we usually go through quite a bit of his life in the weeks following Christmas. There is a lot of territory to cover, and it usually leaves us with our heads spinning with so much content. By comparison, Lent assumes a somewhat slower pace, allowing us to reflect and meditate and even feel the discomfort of the stories and teachings of the season.

Part of our perception of time comes from our memories of the past. To that six-year-old mentioned above, a year is one sixty of his life. A year represents a significant portion of his experiences. The sixty-year-old has collected so many experiences that it takes more than a year to remember them all. And as the sixty-year-old remembers, it is difficult to distinguish which events and experiences occurred in which year.

All of this reminds us that our perspective on time is only part of the story. As we learned from Einstein's theory of relativity, since everything in the universe is in motion, all time is a matter of perspective. It depends on where you are and how you are looking out at the universe when it comes to measuring the passage of time. Time doesn't always flow at a consistent rate.

Thinking about time and its rate of passage is a key to understanding the stories of Jesus' transfiguration. He took with him a select few of his disciples and together they went up on the mountain to pray. As they were praying, it seemed to the witnesses that the entire universe was shifting. The light seemed brighter. The colors seemed sharper. Jesus' robe seemed whiter. And then, right before them, the seemingly impossible happened. They witnessed Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah had been dead for generations. The people had been telling their stories as stories of the past for so long that Jesus' disciples didn't know the exact timing of their lives. Elijah had been gone for as many as 850 years. It had been over 1200 years since Moses breathed his last. Even though both characters came alive in the stories that were told about them, they were always stories about the past - the history and the heritage of the people of God was recounted season after season, year after year.

Having Moses, Elijah, and Jesus share the same conversation on the same mountain defied the understanding of time that the disciples possessed.

It challenges our thinking as well.

It is often the case that the stories that we tell over and over, year after year, are those that we have the most difficulty understanding. The last Sunday before the beginning of Lent is always reserved for the stories of the transfiguration of Jesus. Like the first generation of Jesus' disciples, we who follow from centuries and even millennia have trouble figuring out the meaning of the disciples' reports. If Jesus can talk with Moses and Elijah, if time is flexible for events that are separated by hundreds of years to be somehow contemporary, then it follows that Jesus might also be as present in our lives today as was the case when he walked among us as a human prior to his crucifixion by the Roman authorities.

That, of course, is the truth that we celebrate on Transfiguration Sunday.

Our conviction that time must be linear with one event following the previous one in a precise, exact, and pre-determined order is only one way of perceiving time. It makes sense from our perspective to have things in a particular order. That perspective, however, makes it difficult to understand other realities of our existence, such as life and death. As much as we try to think of life only in terms of the span between birth and death, our experiences give us a distinct perspective. We experience the presence of one who has previously died. We live in expectation of the birth of new ones. We see characteristics of our grandparents in our grandchildren. We recognize bits of ourselves in others we have known and loved. The distance boundaries between individuals and the precise measurement of time that characterize our perception of reality are only part of the picture. Repeatedly life presents us with challenges to that perspective and invites us to consider the possibility that there is more to this universe than we had previously recognized.

Transfiguration Sunday is our annual reminder that reality isn't always what it seems. Our point of view is only one possible way of understanding what is going on in the world. Our sense of the flow of time is not the whole story of the nature of time in our universe.

Perhaps the invitation of Transfiguration Sunday is the call to change pace, to slow down, to spend more time thinking and reflecting and less time just getting through each day. When we allow ourselves to contemplate the nature of time, we also allow ourselves to become freed from the slavery of appointments and schedules and calendars and the other aspects of time management that confine and constrain us. In fact, the very concept that time can be managed is probably another of life's illusions. Each moment is an opportunity to live fully in the now and each new moment is another gift of immeasurable value.

This year, during the season of Lent, I hope that I can relax more about time. When I learn to breathe deeply and open myself to the moments that are given, I can be more aware of the power of the present and enjoy the gifts that come.

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## **February 27, 2017 – Packing Day**

Everyone was tired when we went to bed last night. The movers will be here at 8 this morning and when they have things loaded up, we will all head up to the new house. The family has done a good job of packing things and they are pretty much ready for the movers. There were a few moments of stress.

Our almost three-year-old granddaughter was upset for a little while when she discovered how many of her dolls were packed away. She wanted to have five babies to sleep with in her bed and couldn't find the ones she wanted. Fortunately, neighbors stopped by a little later and they brought presents for the kids, including a new doll for our granddaughter.

I remember how disorienting it is for children to have all their things packed up. We moved when our children were two and four and although we kept speaking of the move as an adventure, their things had to be packed up for several days because it took us three days to drive the U-Haul from North Dakota to Idaho. Neither of our kids remember that move with any kind of regret now that they are adults, but I know it was hard to explain to them what we were doing and why things were so disrupted.

Despite a few moments of tension, the kids have been handling this move very well. For the most part they have played peacefully with each other and helped with packing boxes of their toys and clothes. They chose a few of the things that are in their luggage

for traveling and yesterday and today will be the only days that they will have to do without most of their things. If all goes as planned, we will be unpacking boxes and setting up their bedrooms and getting the kitchen ready to go by this evening.

I packed up the kitchen yesterday afternoon, including the silverware. Our daughter-in-law helped the kids make a cheese pizza for supper which could be eaten off of napkins with no silverware and we adults enjoyed Thai take out with disposable chopsticks. Today we'll eat our meals of carry-out food from restaurants and should have time to unpack enough kitchen items and get a few groceries for normal meals at home tomorrow.

The great task that grandpa gets is playing with the children so that the parents can get their packing done. We've found ways to make games out of packing boxes. At one point we arranged packed boxes in the garage into a sort of maze with passageways that were wide enough for children, but too narrow for adults. In the afternoon we made up card games and grandpa gave a few horseback rides to giggling children.

Of course, there are stories to read. There is a bag of books that need to be returned to the local library, so we had them to read while the others were packed away. I'm not to the point of memorizing them like I was with some of the stories I read to our children, but I've read them enough times for a sense of familiarity.

At one point yesterday, our granddaughter and I were sitting on a love seat and visiting while her brother was in his bedroom getting a bit of alone time. She checked with me a couple of times: "You're MY Papa Ted." "Yes," I replied, "I'm YOUR Papa Ted." "You love me?" "Yes, I love you!" "You going to my new house?" "Yes, I'm going to your new house tomorrow!" "You're MY Papa Ted!"

I think the concept of packing things away is quite a bit easier for her six-year-old brother to understand. Even though he has never moved in his life, he knows that the things that have been put into boxes will be unpacked when they arrive at the new house. It is a bit more disorienting for his little sister. She just knows that things keep being put away where she can't get at them, and she isn't sure what has happened to them.

The house is looking pretty bare this morning. The cupboards and shelves and closets are empty. The garage is stacked high with boxes. The furniture is ready for the movers to pick it up. In a little while the beds will be stripped, and the towels will be gone from the bathrooms.

Our son and daughter-in-law have made the wise decision to wait to put their house on the market until they have moved out. They have selected a realtor and have arranged for a six-month lease of a house in their new town. Their move is around 120 miles, a distance that probably only takes about two hours to drive. However, the city of Seattle

is between the two towns, so in most traffic conditions, the time on the road is probably nearer to three hours. That means that it isn't impossible for them to make a few trips back down to their old home to handle the final details of cleaning and selling the home.

The six-month lease will give them time to look around their new home and make decisions about housing. In the meantime, there is the matter of getting their son started in his new school and our son begins his new job in just two days. It is indeed a busy time for their family.

The pace is intense. I don't remember exactly how many days we took to move and to get settled in our new home. It has been a while since we made a move. I am, however, impressed with their organization and ability to accomplish a lot in a short amount of time. They seem to have energy for the hard work that is required of such a transition.

Today will be a busy day. Tomorrow, I will be heading back home in the afternoon. The trip has been short, but I feel like I've contributed to the move and investing in the next generation is one of the greatest things a father can do.

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## **February 28, 2017 – Moving Day**

The move has been accomplished. It took less than two hours for the movers to load their truck yesterday morning. They complimented our son and daughter-in-law for being organized and ready for them to come. We were on the road by about 10:30. Our son stayed behind to do a few last-minute chores and cleaning and I headed out with the rest of the family to be there when the movers arrived. We made a quick stop for lunch and got in about a half hour ahead of the movers. The movers showed up and had the truck unloaded and everything in place by a little after 3 pm. I was amazed at how quickly they got it all done.

Our son had devised a system of marking boxes with colored duct tape as we sealed them to indicate which room of the house they belonged to. He had gone through the new home and put up signs at the doorways with corresponding colors. As a result, it was very easy for the movers to put each item in the correct room. They really appreciated that system.

The new home has a mini garage. It is about 12' by 12' with a regular overhead garage door. It has a concrete floor and a window. It was designed for storage, and it works perfectly. I'm a bit amazed that they had both of their cars in the garage the same day that they moved. It was impressive.

We worked at organizing for a while and then took a break for a drive around town and to get supper. We looked at the outside of the school where our grandson will be a

student and the library where our son will work. We walked a bit alongside the Skagit River and drove through downtown. We ate supper at the deli of a co-op grocery store. It was a delightful gathering place with plenty of people and very good food. After that we made a quick stop at a hardware store followed by a look at a campground where we may stay when we come to visit with our camper.

We crawled into bed tired, but with a real sense of accomplishment having pulled off the move.

The amazing thing for me was how well the children handled everything. They were calm and well-behaved as the movers loaded the truck. They were interested in watching the process but understood how to stay out of the way of the workers. Then they were cooperative and good travelers as we drove up to their new home. Once we arrived, they took great pleasure in showing me around the new house, pointing out which room each would occupy and entertained themselves quietly as the movers brought in the furniture and boxes.

Once the boxes were unloaded from the truck, the children were really excited to start unpacking and discovering some of their toys.

I think the big thing that made the experience so pleasant was that the parents had really prepared the children well for the move. They had talked it through with them so the children knew what to expect and understood that the things that were packed up would soon be unpacked in their new home. Our granddaughter was especially pleased at the discovery of each item as it was unpacked. Best of all was her bed. She crawled right in and went to sleep as soon as it was set up.

Part of the process of growing up is learning to be a home in your world. In the language of traditional developmental psychology, developing trust is the first stage of development. When a child learns basic trust, they have the capacity to live comfortably in their world. The failure to learn trust can inhibit each successive developmental task. As a grandfather, it is very gratifying to witness our grandchildren exhibiting such ease with a major change in their lives. They do so because they know that their parents are there for them and will continue to be there for them. They understand that whatever else happens, they are loved and protected and will have a place in which to make their home.

As our granddaughter was showing me around the new house she kept saying, "My new house!" She was excited with the newness, and she had a distinct sense of ownership of the space. The process of moving wasn't too overwhelming for her because she knew she could count on her parents and brother to be there for her.

It is a luxury that too many children of the world don't know and may never know. According to UNICEF, nearly 50 million children are refugees. Through no fault of their

own, they have been forced to flee their home countries under the thread of violence. The temporary homes they know are often refugee camps. Too many children are forced to sleep outdoors and on the run as they try to escape war and violence. Among those tens of millions of refugee children are a lot who don't know who their mothers or fathers are. Orphaned and homeless and without a country their identities are severely tested by the circumstances to which they have been forced to flee. It is a less than ideal way to be working on learning basic trust.

Among my prayers of gratitude is one for the security and support that our grandchildren know. Like all children their lives hold such promise for the future. Those promises are enhanced by their ability to be at home in their world. That confidence frees them to engage in creative activities.

Today will be another long day for me. We will be able to learn a bit more about their new home and to help them become a bit more settled. Then it's off to the airport for me to fly home and back into the swing of things tomorrow morning. It's been a good trip and I'm grateful for the support that has enabled me to make it.

Onward we go!

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