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September 1, 2017 – Professionals in the Spotlight

I was listening to a podcast of “Freakonomics Radio” as I was running some errands yesterday. The program was about some of the problems in our current health care situation and one of a series. There were some very good points made in the program. At one point the program commented that “Doctors are already in a tough place, under attack from nearly every quarter. . . And the fear of making a mistake - or what may be construed as a mistake - is already so high that doctors practice way too much ‘defensive’ medicine.” The program went on to discuss other pressures that are laid upon health care professionals.

I have been aware of the fear of being perceived to have made a mistake in my interactions with our health care system. Once, when I was handling my mother’s health care management, a payment was mistakenly posted to the wrong account. Instead of paying the hospital bill, which was included with the payment and the proper account on the check, the check was somehow posted to a lifeline account managed by the same hospital. We ended up with a debt in one account and a huge prepayment in the other. It took multiple trips to the hospital billing office to get the mistake straightened out. After working with multiple clerks, the mistake was discovered and corrected by the hospital. At no point in the process did anyone who worked for the hospital say, “I’m sorry,” or “I see we have made a mistake.” I was told by clerks that I could have resolved the problem over the phone and needed not come in to speak with them in person. I was told by clerks that I must have made a mistake in the account number written on the check. I had not made the mistake. But it was abundantly clear that all of the clerks had been carefully trained to never admit a mistake or apologize. So I know that our health care system is feeling under pressure and that they hospitals, doctors and clinics are doing whatever they can to avoid any appearance of mistakes.

The program cited patient satisfaction surveys as one of the pressures that physicians feel when they practice medicine. Failure to give a patient what the patient requests can result in poor ratings on surveys. The system results in an inaccurate assessment of the judgment, decision-making skills and ability to practice medicine.

But doctors do make mistakes. Health care systems are made up of real, live, human beings and human beings make mistakes. One statistic that was cited in the report is that “the third-leading cause of death in the U.S., accounting for 10 percent of deaths annually, is medical error.”

The mistakes are real.

Still, the program repeated over and over that physicians are “under attack.”

“Under attack” was a phrase that I heard a lot a couple of months ago when I attended a conference of law enforcement chaplains. It was popular, at that event, for speakers to

refer to law enforcement officers as being “under attack.” The ways in which video tapes of police shootings have made the rounds on social media and the fact that split-second judgments are being evaluated by the general public with insufficient information was cited as one of the sources of the attacks. Some interpreted the “Black Lives Matter” movement as being anti-police.

Police officers, like physicians, are human. They make mistakes. That doesn’t mean that their intentions are evil. It doesn’t mean that their training is misplaced. It means that we rely on humans for some very important jobs in our society. And humans are fallible. We make mistakes.

I suppose that you could use the phrase “under attack” to describe a lot of professions - even my own. You could say that ministers of mainline churches are “under attack.” Our congregations are shrinking and we are frequently blamed for a lack of church growth as if the minister were the sole reason for church growth and decline. The proliferation of non-denominational congregations and the expansion of “boom and bust” churches that expand and contract dramatically in short cycles often causes criticism of clergy. And clergy also are human. We make mistakes.

I am, however, becoming reluctant to interpret the simple fact that we are human as evidence that we are “under attack.” The quest for a better health care system is not an attack. The push for better training and support for law enforcement officers is not an attack. The call for better initial and on-going education for clergy is not an attack. The language of war and battle is, for the most part, inappropriate to describe the role of professionals in our society.

It is true that many of our social institutions are undergoing close scrutiny. The world is in the midst of a great deal of upheaval. Priorities are shifting. The concepts of vocation and career are being examined. The world is changing. That doesn’t mean that we should assume a battle mentality and assume a defensive posture.

In religious terms, a more appropriate posture would be that of confession. We are finite. We are fallible. We make mistakes. That doesn’t mean that we don’t care. It doesn’t mean that we are incapable. Rather, it means that we can benefit from admitting our mistakes, examining them, and making deep and meaningful changes. When we confess the things in our lives that are wrong we gain the ability to make changes for the better.

If medical mistakes are a real problem, pretending that they don’t exist won’t solve the problem. If police officers occasionally make an error in judgment in a situation of extreme stress, choosing sides won’t improve the odds of better judgment. If congregations and pastors are facing the ups and downs of a consumerist approach to religion, pretending that “we are right and everyone else is wrong,” won’t change the realities of church growth and decline.

We are not under attack. We are human. We make mistakes. We can do better.

Repeat that three times and go back to work.

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September 2, 2017 – USA vs Costa Rica

I checked the headlines of the Rapid City Journal, the Washington Post and the New York Times before writing my blog this morning. There was no mention of the story. I might have missed it if I hadn't scanned through the Tico Times from Costa Rica. There it was, as plain as day: "Costa Rica 2, United States 0." The rest of the world calls the game "football." We call it soccer. You know, the round ball with the pentagon shapes. No pads. Lots of running. Low scores. Games end with a tie. Yea that game.

The players may move quickly, but the process of qualifying for world cup competition takes a long time. The process of qualifying for the next World Cup competition, which will take place in Russia in 2018 began back in March of 2015. The CONCACAF FIFA World Cup qualification process is known as "The Hex." a six-team group sees each team play each other twice for a total of 10 matches. The top three teams qualify for the World Cup. The fourth-place team qualifies for a two-game playoff.

This is a big deal because team USA is in third place. Standings are based on total wins, losses, draws and the total number of goals scored. Back in June, the USA men were looking good when, coming off of a victory over Trinidad and Tobago, they played Mexico to a 1 to 1 tie. The tie felt like a victory for team USA. Mexico is in first place in the hex.

Yesterday, Costa Rica, number 2 in the standings, pulled off a victory over the USA, 2 - 0. USA is holding onto its 3rd place position by a hair with Honduras sharing their 2-2-3 record, but having a higher deficit of goals. Honduras plays the USA on Tuesday while Costa Rica matches up against Mexico. After that, the final round of matches takes place in October, with the playoff between the fourth and fifth place team taking place in November. The World Cup begins in June, 2018.

Like I said, the game didn't make the lead stories in the Washington Post or the New York Times.

We often speak of sports as ways of teaching physical education skills, building teamwork, and teaching values. We encourage children and youth to participate in team sports. With the exception of the Olympic Games, few sports competitions involve the whole world. Football with its brain-jarring risk of concussions is predominantly a USA game. Yes, I know they play the sport in Canada, too, but it doesn't garner the huge

advertising revenue and stadium naming rights up there. Baseball and Basketball are played in a few more countries, but the only game with true international standing is Soccer.

If you think you've experienced sports excitement by attending a super bowl party or getting caught up in the World Series, you really ought to have the experience, at least once in your life, of being in downtown San Jose, Costa Rica when their team is playing in the World Cup. Giant televisions that normally display advertising are all tuned to the game. People stand in the streets and block the intersections to watch together. Faces hang out of windows in the surrounding buildings to participate in the street-level excitement.

I have some friends who are really ardent sports fanatics. My own daughter has more money invested in New York Giants jerseys than I have all of the sports-themed clothing I have ever owned. But sports fans here don't hold a candle to the fans in Costa Rica. If you are a big fan of any sport, I bet you have never driven down the street honking the horn of your car in rhythm to your team's fight song. They really do that in Costa Rica.

Down in Costa Rica they can tell you that their forward Marco Urena scored both of the goals against the USA team, one in the 29th minute and the other in the 81st. That's how they talk about the highlights of the game - by keeping track of how many minutes have passed on the clock. A soccer game works on a 90 minute clock, which doesn't stop as often as in other sports, but can be stopped by officials.

I'm not what you would call a sports fan. I am loyal to my team, but they've been known to go more than a century between World Series appearances and since they won last year, I'm not going to hold my breath even though they are first place in their division right now. The games I enjoy the most are high school games when I know the kids who are playing. I'm unlikely to rearrange my schedule to make a game.

I get a kick out of soccer because we have a sister church in Costa Rica. I've got some friends there and I enjoy keeping track of the headlines in their country. It is amazing how much we have in common. In both countries, knowing a bit about sports headlines can ease conversation with people you've just met. Meeting and welcoming strangers is part of the life of the church and having a topic for conversation is always helpful. Were I in Costa Rica today, last night's game would be the main topic of conversation wherever I was meeting people.

Church life in the two countries is very similar and though the circumstances of our congregations are very different, some of the same challenges of cultural change, decreasing attendance, culture-transforming technologies and concern for youth are very familiar. When we talk pastor-to-pastor we discover that our lives are more similar than different. Understanding that we share the same ministry in two different locations helps us understand the true world-wide nature of the church and its ministries. Faith

knows no boundaries and though we speak different languages, we worship the same God. The connection has been deeply meaningful in my ministry.

And, just as is the case in sport, my Costa Rica colleagues have a thing or two to teach me.

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September 3, 2017 – Sue is Moving

When our children were teens we took them to Chicago, the place where we had lived as newly weds while we attended graduate school. We showed them the seminary campus and the apartment building where we lived, the University of Chicago campus where we studied, Regenstein Library, Rockefeller Chapel and other features of Hyde Park. We also toured the Museum of Science and Industry, not far from the campus and made it to a few other cultural locations in Chicago, including the Art Institute and the Field Museum of Natural History. Visiting the Field Museum we came face to face with Sue in the main gallery. Sue is a very famous former resident of South Dakota.

Known officially as FMNH PR 2018, her catalogue number, Sue is a Tyrannosaurus rex somewhere between 67 and 65.5 million years old. Initially discovered by Susan Hendrickson on the Cheyenne River Reservation near Faith, South Dakota, the skeleton had been the subject of a court case around the time we moved to the state. The legal ownership of the fossils were in dispute. Hendrickson was a part of the Black Hills Institute of Geological Research in Hill City and the fossils were originally moved to that location to be prepared for display. They claimed ownership of the fossils and paid the land owner for the remains. The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe claimed the remains belonged to them. The Land on which they were found was held in trust by the United States Department of Interior so the federal government weighed in as well. The FBI and the National Guard had seized the fossils and they were placed in temporary storage at South Dakota School of Mines and Technology where they remained until the case was resolved.

After a lot of additional legal wrangling, the fossils were put up for sale at Southerby's Auction. The Field Museum obtained financial backing from the California State University system, Walt Disney Parks, McDonald's and individual donors and won the auction with a bid of 7.6 million. With the commission the final sales price was \$8.36 million. The Field Museum also raised funds for a new lab in which to prepare the fossils for display. The new lab has glass windows that allowed visitors to view the work as it progressed. The skeleton was nearly complete, but some bones were missing. Crews made plastic replacements for the missing bones, casting them in a purple color so that they could be easily distinguished from the actual fossils. Replicas of the skull were made for display. One replica went on a tour of the nation. Another is on display at Disney's Animal Kingdom in Florida.

The main attraction, however, is the mounted skeleton of Sue in the main hall at the Field Museum in Chicago. That's what we saw when we took our children to visit the museum.

Now, Sue is on the move once again. The 40 1/2 foot skeleton will be taken down, moved to a new display space and remounted. A cast of the skeleton of the largest-known dinosaur, Patagotitan mayorum, will take the place of Sue in Stanley Field Hall. The patagonian is 122 feet long and is estimated to be more than 30 million years older than Sue.

Meanwhile, scientists have discovered more about Tyrannosaurus rex and will make some adjustments in the display of Sue. The changes are based on the latest research into the dinosaurs. The new display will feature gastrula, a new set of bones resembling an additional set of ribs spanning the belly. These are believed to have provided structural support to help the giant animals to breathe. They will show the bulging belly that was a feature of the meat-eating dinosaurs. Scientists will also replace Sue's wishbone. They believe that the wishbone was originally misidentified when it was mounted in 2000 and believe that they have the actual bone to add to the new mount. Ribs will be adjusted to produce a less barrel-shaped chest and the right leg will be adjusted so the dinosaur isn't crouching so much.

We pay a bit of extra attention to Sue simply because the story of the dinosaur began in South Dakota. We've hiked some of the hills in the area near where Sue was discovered and our friends ride their horses not far from that place. We know the look of the land, at least the way it looks now, which is likely very different from the way it looked in the age of the dinosaurs. Discovering and displaying dinosaurs required a unique combination of hard, careful scientific process and a large dose of imagination about how things might have been. New discoveries alter original theories and sometimes fill in information that was previously a matter of speculation and imagination. Dinosaurs are so large that displays are not often changed once they are erected.

Within sight of my office are the life-size concrete sculptures of seven dinosaurs that make up Dinosaur Park on Skyline Drive. The park was originally opened in 1936 and the creatures were made to look the way people imagined them at the time. They are painted green on the top with white bellies. The tyrannosaurus rex stands much more upright than the display of Sue in the Field Museum. Its large head seems to be mounted on an impossibly thin neck. It reflects the way dinosaurs were imagined to be back in the 1930's.

Sue, however, after a bit less than 20 years of display is now going to get a makeover that reflects the latest in research.

Scientists don't know the full story of Sue. There have been speculations about the cause of her death that include injury, disease and starvation. The fossils show marks of a rough life that include bite marks, parasites and arthritis.

I continue to be interested in the fossil. The new display will definitely be on my list of things to see the next time I have an opportunity to visit Chicago.

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September 4, 2017 – Earthquake, Wind, and Fire

We've heard from a number of our friends about relatively mild, but definitely real earthquakes. About 55 earthquakes occurred overnight from Saturday to Sunday in Southeast Idaho. Some could be felt in neighboring Utah. One of those quakes was the strongest earthquake to hit the region, near Soda Springs. The earthquakes began about 6 in the evening on Saturday. The second, striking at 5:56 pm was the most powerful so far, registering 5.3 on the Richter scale.

The InciWeb Fire incident information system of the Interagency Fire Center is showing 44 active fires in Montana alone, with other fires in Wyoming, Idaho, Washington, Oregon and other states. We've been seeing smoke-filled skies long enough that most of us are sneezing and feeling our eyes irritated. What little discomfort we are experiencing is nothing compared to those who are living in the midst of the fires. A friend of ours who recently got back from fighting fires in Montana, left yesterday morning, heading with his team to another fire in Montana. He was hoping to get a little more time off, knowing he'd be dispatched again, but thinking it would come on Wednesday or so. The need for experienced crews, however, changed that schedule.

As we read about the severe flooding in Texas in the wake of hurricane Harvey, we are also noticing that Hurricane Irma, out in the mid-Atlantic, is a well-formed storm, already listed as a Category 3 storm, and is a potential threat to the eastern seaboard of the U.S. It is still a bit early to forecast the exact track of the storm. It may head for the east coast. It may turn away. It is, however, a storm worthy of our attention.

The natural phenomena of just the last week are enough to bring to mind the fifth verse of John Greenleaf Whittier's poem, turned hymn, "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind." That hymn recalls the prophet Elijah hiding in a cave in Horeb:

Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.

There have been plenty of earthquakes, winds and fires - enough to make us wonder what is going on in our world.

Yesterday I was talking with a group of friends about how we interpret the events of our world. Natural phenomena have, over the centuries, been interpreted as signs of God's favor or disfavor. The ancients interpreted phenomena such as a solar or lunar eclipse as a portent of God's actions or feelings about humans. Modern science tends to lead us to dismiss such conclusions about nature. We don't look at the smoky skies that have been prevalent in our region for days and think that we are somehow being punished. This was not always the case. Generations of people saw signs of God's existence and action in the world in the weather,

Earthquake, wind and fire bring the question, "Where is God in all of this?"

It can be helpful to turn, once again, to the stories of our people.

Elijah had slain all of the prophets of a competing religion and in the process raised the ire of Jezebel. She threatened to have him killed by the next day, so Elijah went on the run. He believed himself to be doing God's work, but the result was a run for his life. After going a day's distance into the wilderness he was exhausted and ready to give up. He found food and water and slept a bit. That gave him energy to keep going. 40 days later he found himself in a cave where he decided to live. It was from the mouth of the cave that he witnessed a great wind and an earthquake and a fire. But the voice of the Lord was not in the wind. It was not in the earthquake. It was not in the fire. Elijah only understood God's call for his life when he persisted to listen to "a still small voice."

God doesn't always come to us in the ways that we expect.

The voice of God may not be in the earthquake, wind and fire, but rather in the compassionate response to those events. People have remarked at the heightened sense of service and community that has been evident in the aftermath of the hurricane and flooding in Texas. Folks from around the area and across the nation have gone to offer assistance and support to those who have lost so much in the events. Volunteers have rendered help when it was most needed. As water and sewer systems have been rendered unworkable in the aftermath, people have been delivering clean drinking water. Of course the recovery is massive and will take a long time. It has been a dozen years since Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans and folks there still feel its effects and still are recovering. Buildings are rebuilt more quickly than the trust of people.

Despite our advanced scientific understanding of natural phenomena, despite our skepticism about the ways that God works in the world, it would do us good to think about how God works in our world. It is not a matter of having to choose to either see God's work or embrace scientific method. The two worldviews are not mutually exclusive.

Many contemporary thinkers see God at work in the natural phenomena that are observed by scientists. Rather than seeing scientific method as a threat to religion, they see the advancement of knowledge and understanding as expanding their understanding of God's actions in the world.

We live in interesting times. There is much that seems to us to be crisis. We are right to be alarmed at the threats to order and safety that we observe. But when we carefully listen and look for God's call in the midst of these events, we may discover that God is not being silent. Rather God calls to each of us with new possibilities for deepening our relationship with what is truly most important.

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September 5, 2017 – Anticipating a Season of Grief

As a pastor I come face to face with grief on a regular basis. Perhaps my work with our area LOSS (Local Outreach to Suicide Survivors) Team and as a Sheriff's Chaplain bring me in contact with more sudden and traumatic loss than some, but every pastor faces instances when grief enters the community without warning. Alongside those moments are the types of grief that are nearly constant in the life of any community. Right now I am thinking of two families that have been told that in all likelihood they will face the death of a loved one within the next year. The medical diagnoses have been made, the treatment options have been discussed and the reality of the limits of modern medicine are evident in both cases. These are people who have access to high-priced medical care, but life is more complex than simply being able to hire the best doctors. Death is a reality for the best doctors, though most hospitals and clinics try to keep that from the minds of their patients.

Sometimes, in casual conversation, I've heard people remark that one type of death is somehow preferable to another way of dying. Most of the time people express fears of a slow process where one lingers between life and death for an extended period of time. We put significant energy into creating advance directives to assist family members with difficult decisions should we end up in a position where we are unable to make decisions about our care.

At the same time, we use euphemisms that aren't always helpful when faced with the really difficult decisions of life. We refer to withdrawing life support as "pulling the plug." Of course some of the machines used to assist with breathing and regulate heart rate are powered by electricity, but there is nothing remotely related to "pulling the plug" in modern medical practice. I have been present on numerous occasions when a ventilator is withdrawn. The process is nowhere as simple as unplugging a device and the patient's reaction is often one of relief, not distress. The breathing tube causes irritation in the throat and its withdrawal allows for a more natural feeling.

We go through seasons of grief. It seems as if we often experience grief upon grief, instead of having a single loss command our entire attention. The losses in life are not distributed evenly over its span. It is very common for me to work with families who have experienced multiple deaths in the same year. And grief is cumulative. Additional grief is added to existing grief. Having the losses occur in close proximity does nothing to ease the pain experienced. It is, rather compounded by the rawness of emotions that accompanies the initial grief.

The Christian calendar is organized to create its own season of grief. Because we believe that faith is a part of every aspect of life, our calendar is organized to help us experience all that faith has to offer. Part of this arrangement is expressly to allow us to practice the really big events of faith in preparation for the inevitable. The season of Lent, culminating in Holy Week, is a season of coming face to face with loss and grief. The tools and language of faith for dealing with real death are on display in the texts we read, the liturgies we perform, and throughout the life of the church.

The seasons of real life, however, rarely line up with the neatness of a pre-planned calendar. Whether death comes suddenly, or is long anticipated, the actual moment of death always comes as a bit of a surprise. We simply do not know when it will occur and we can't predict our reaction. As I frequently hear from grieving people, "You know it is coming, but you can't be fully prepared." Grief is frequently an experience of the unknown. "When will I stop crying?" "When will life return to normal?" "When will this pain I'm experiencing ease?" Those are questions to which we do not have answers and, in some cases, the answer is that life never goes back to the way it was before. Loss is not something you get over. It is something you get through with the love and support of a caring community.

In my experience, however, grief is awful only in the sense that it does inspire awe. It is not something that should be avoided at all costs. For the most part, you can trust people with their grief. When they collapse in tears on the floor, that collapse may be exactly what they need at that particular moment. When they want to see the body of their loved one, their instincts are usually right. We need to stand with those who are grieving and we need to do what we are able to support them, but we do not need to tell them how to feel or react to their experience. We can trust them with the process of grief.

Grief, is, after all, a natural process and a process of healing. Like other types of healing, there is pain involved. But that pain is part of a process of transformation. Something new is emerging in the midst of the grief. Pain is difficult. Sometimes we feel that we are unable to bear any more. But pain is also an effective teacher. We learn from the process of pain. As we go through pain we are being reformed into a new way of living and seeing the world.

I can see that our congregation is living in anticipation of a new season of grief. Some of our prominent elders have been hospitalized recently. Some of our members have received devastating diagnoses. Some are in the process of accepting the news that their lives will be shorter and end differently than they anticipated. Some are adjusting to the impending loss of a loved one. As pastor, I know that I will be called upon to officiate at some significant funerals in the year to come.

We can anticipate, but we can never be fully prepared. We have to trust the process of grief as it comes. That's why we practice with the season of Lent each year - so we can be reminded that God is present in the midst of loss and grief. We are never left alone.

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September 6, 2017 – The Protection of the Ancestors

One of the blessings that comes to a pastor who has served the same congregation for many years sometimes doesn't feel like a blessing. As I go through my days I am deeply aware of those who have gone before. When I stand in the sanctuary of the church I serve, I can remember a lot of funerals. I can remember the days when some of our widows became widows. I can recall the ceremonies of saying good bye to beloved grandmothers of our congregation. The shock of the loss of young ones comes to mind. The room is made sacred by so many memories. There are also memories of weddings and baptisms and days of great joy.

But it isn't just my memories that makes the place sacred.

When we worship, the room is filled with even more memories. Those with whom I worship bring into that place their own memories. Some of those had belonged to the church for decades before I arrived and know the stories that precede the ones I know. Some of the memories come from different places - places where I have never been.

The ancients often speak of an awareness of the presence of the ancestors. They sensed that they were with them in moments of crisis and transition. They spoke of them at times of promise. When Moses met God at the burning bush, he first asked who he (Moses) was that God should send him to Pharaoh. Then he inquires of God, "When they ask, who should I say sent me?" God at first responds simply by asserting that God exists: "I am who I am." A moment later, God reminds Moses that God has been a part of the story of our people for generations: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob."

We often recall our ancestors when speaking about God. It is one of the ways we acknowledge that ours is not the first generation to have lived in deep relationship with God.

There are many other places where our faith invokes the ancestors. In Celtic Christianity a common blessing is to invoke the protection of ancestors.

I often am aware of those who have gone before. I think of my grandparents and of my parents and of the values and perspectives they left with me. I consider my father's passion for family when I make decisions. I hear my mother's passion for peace when I work with others. But my ancestors in faith are more than just those in whose direct lineage I stand. I am influenced and guided by those with whom a genetic connection would be hard to trace. I have been adopted into a specific corner of the family which is the church of Jesus Christ. In this particular congregation have been many ancestors whom I never met face to face, yet who shape the people we are and guide us.

I did not know, face-to-face, the people who designed and constructed the building we use. But their contributions to our congregation benefit me every day. I have been told that the plumber Pete Melgren was among those who insisted that the building be accessible to those who use wheelchairs. I also know from having responsibilities for the maintenance of that building that he insisted up on the use of the finest quality materials in its construction. Those doing repairs or making minor modifications to the building routinely comment on the quality of construction and the materials that were used. Those who were making decisions about the building at least had the foresight to look a half century down the road. Now, as the building approaches 60 years of continuous service, the fact that they didn't scrimp or cut corners is evident and deeply appreciated.

I am deeply aware of the legacy of service that is embedded in this congregation as well. The church was formed to provide Christian services for those who were living on the frontier in a location far from the homes of their birth. It began by reaching out to Christians of many different denominations and was nurtured by pastors who were open to differences of opinion and interpretation. It has never forgotten its call to service. The founders might never have imagined delivering firewood to those who need it to heat their homes or maintaining a relationship with a sister church in Costa Rica as specific callings of the congregation, but they would have understood the call to serve others.

This awareness of the blessings of the ancestors gives those of us who serve in this generation a specific calling. We, too, are called to invest in the future. We are called to pass on the blessings of this time to those who will come after us.

Perhaps it is the product of my age, but I am increasingly aware that the decisions I make affect the choices that will be available to future pastors of this congregation. I have no idea who will be called to serve the congregation in the future, but I suspect that one day another person will stand in the same room where I have stood and be embraced by the spirit of the place. I ask myself, "What gifts can I make to those who will come in the future?"

John O'Donohue was a poet, theologian, philosopher, and author who died nearly a decade ago. His words continue to inspire me. In one of his poems that speaks of the need of special inspiration in times of darkness and grief, he includes four specific blessings:

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,
May the clarity of light be yours,
May the fluency of the ocean be yours,
May the protection of the ancestors be yours.

It is a blessing like that one that I would aspire to leave to future generations of this congregation. I am confident that the last blessing will be granted, for those who have gone before have offered protection that I have known and learned to trust. It will be there for those who are yet to come.

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September 7, 2017 – Disciplines for the Long Haul

I'm not sure how the conversation started, but it drifted to a few questions about how I have ended up serving the same congregation for more than two decades. Different pastors and different congregations are matched for different amounts of time. While the trend during my career has been toward longer and longer pastorates, our experiences of serving congregations for seven, ten and now twenty-two years and counting has been that long-term relationships with congregations is a fruitful experience.

I'm sure that the length of our pastorates is the result of a lot of different factors. One possibility is that options for making a change have been limited. One possibility is that family circumstances have created an incentive to stay even when things are tough. One possibility is that the congregation we serve is incredibly tolerant. The conversation to which I refer, however, had a question that I've been pondering ever since: "What spiritual disciplines sustain you for long-term ministry?"

After all I've been a full-time ordained minister for 39 years. I'm married to a minister who was ordained on the same day and has served the same length of time. I guess that qualifies as long-term ministry.

In no particular order, here are some of the things that have sustained me.

I'm not sure it is accurate to name marriage as a spiritual discipline, but the value of a partner who understands and is fully committed to the ministry is a huge factor in my staying in the ministry. Without that support, I suspect I might have drifted into another career. My whole family has been supportive of the work I do. My partner understands

the pressures I experience and shares the burdens I encounter. Care of marriage and family life has been critical to sustaining ministry.

My preaching is dependent upon small group bible study. I meet weekly with a small group of colleagues, sometimes as few as just one other colleague. We discuss the texts that form the basis of our preaching. We use the Revised Common Lectionary as the foundation of our discussions. Hearing the perspectives of others is important to keeping preaching fresh. Being able to float ideas before they are committed to paper or ensconced in a sermon allows them to be modified. Sharing ideas helps all of us.

Some authorities on prayer walking claim that it is always intercessory - that praying while walking outside of the church building is about focusing one's attention on the concerns of the community and lifting them up to God. I think, however, that my prayer walking is quite devotional. I try to take a walk of at least a mile through the streets of our city each week. Most weeks I easily double that amount of distance. Sometimes I am very conscious of praying as I walk. Other times I just focus my attention on what is going on around me: people going to work, parents dropping off children at day care, clusters heading for the coffee shop, homeless folk heading to and from places of support, parking officials chalking tires, business people arranging store displays. Just paying attention to the activities in our community seems to provide a sense of connection. I understand that these people and I belong together. Our lives are intertwined. As far as prayer is concerned, simply being aware that God is present and involved in our lives is sufficient. God doesn't require that I ask for anything, nor even that I pay attention. However God provides a sense of connection with our town that is important to the task of preaching each week.

Silence. I get at least a half hour of simply sitting quietly in the church every week. Most weeks I get an hour or more. One of my times of silence is early in the morning on Sunday. I arrive at the church before anyone else. I sit in the sanctuary in the pews where the people sit. Sometimes I move around as I think of different people. Many of the folks in our church sit in the same place week after week. Most weeks I get another half hour or more on Sunday afternoon. This is the start of my week. After focusing on worship for a whole week, I release the service completed and start to think of what is to come. I often have pastoral concerns on my mind. People who are in hospital or hurting, those who are grieving, those who are traveling, those who are between jobs, those whose marriages or families are threatened all come to my mind as I sit quietly. Part of the time, I practice centering prayer, clearing my mind of distractions and releasing concerns to just listen to God.

Some wouldn't call it a spiritual discipline, but I definitely do. I am intentional about spending time with children each week. Some weeks I just walk through the halls of the building as children are being dropped off and picked up from the preschool. The rush of parents and children and teachers is conducted with great care for the safety of the children and their enthusiasm for what is happening is contagious. Sometimes a parent

will trust me to hold a baby during the coffee hour after church. Some days I sit with children at a table in the fellowship hall as we eat cookies together. The prophet Isaiah beautifully described a vision of peace in which “a little child will lead them.” Jesus commented that “anyone who doesn’t receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.” I find the perspectives of children to be essential to my spiritual well being.

Oh, and I also seem to keep writing my journal. Regular readers will notice that my mind ranges across a very wide spectrum of topics. Starting each day with the writing of an essay seems to be an important part of sorting out my ideas, feelings, and understandings. I’m not sure of the spiritual value of publishing the journal as opposed to writing it and keeping it to myself, but it seems possible that those who read this journal are essential parts of my spiritual discipline and you are the reason I’ve sustained ministry over all of these years.

Thank you.

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September 8, 2017 – Not Like the Movies

I’m not much for movies, but a decade or so ago, I watched a movie that was at the time pretty popular among people with whom I talked. The Bucket List was the story of two strangers, with very different lives, who met in a hospital room having both received devastating diagnoses that meant their life spans were short. Together they hatch a plan that involves a series of adventures including driving a Shelby Mustang, flying over the North Pole, visiting the Taj Mahal, Great Wall and Egyptian Pyramids, going on safari and visiting Everest base camp. The movie also has some scenes of reconciliation with estranged family members and some pretty emotional scenes.

At the time I was struck by the difference between the characters in the movie and how I think I would react. Given a short timeline, I would prefer to spend as much time as possible with my family and travel less.

The movie came to my mind this week because I have visited with two very different men who have received news from medical professionals that the amount of life remaining for them will be measured in months, not in years. Both have likely already taken their last trip from our town and will remain in Rapid City for the rest of their lives. Neither is distressed with that part of their diagnosis. “This is a good place to be” one commented to me. Neither has a bucket list of things they want to do before the end of their lives. In a way, I can imagine that the next six months for both will not be all that dissimilar to the last six months. Both have spent considerable time receiving medical treatments. They have been in hospital rooms and waiting rooms and known the care of professionals. Both have felt their families circle around them. Neither is wanting a major change in his daily routine.

I admire both for their courage. I also admire the simple fact that they are willing to die as they have lived.

One thing that a career as a pastor has taught me is that life and death go hand in hand. We encounter death and the grief associated with it in the midst of life. The tears of sadness often mingle with tears of joy on our cheeks. Sometimes, when I am speaking with colleagues, we will report how many funerals we have conducted in the last little while. Several funerals seem to clump together often in the life of the church, then there will be a season when there are fewer deaths. It feels a bit like waves on the seashore. They come, they recede, they come again.

Another thing that a career as a pastor has taught me is that death and grief can surprise you. The first funeral at which I was an officiant came with the sudden death of the wife of a man who was in very poor health. "I always thought that I would go first," he repeated over and over as we planned the funeral. His life didn't play out in the manner he expected. His plans about what would happen to their house and finances all had to be revisited and revised.

Over the years I have been present to deliver the news of sudden, traumatic and unexpected deaths. I have witnessed as people experienced a total reversal of their day. They woke up expecting one set of experiences and found themselves in the midst of a totally different reality.

Yesterday brought me news of the death of a young man who I've known since he was a teenager. I know his sister and brothers. I knew his parents and grandparents. I have stood next to him at the cemetery as we buried the remains of his father and mother. I've even been present for the burial of some of his pets. His health has been poor and the news of his death wasn't shocking. I've known it was a possibility for some time now. He spent more time in hospitals and rehabilitation centers than at home in the past year. Still, there is something unsettling about his death. He isn't the oldest of the children in his family. It seems that children rarely die in the order they are born. So there is a bit of a sense of things being out of order. And, since he is younger than I, I never considered, in those days, that I would be called upon to officiate at his funeral. Life is full of twists and turns that we don't anticipate.

One of the things that seemed strange to me about the movie is a common feature in television and movie stories: the financial implications aren't a part of the story. The movie doesn't attempt to explain why two people of very different financial means end up in the same hospital room. I'm sure it happens, but it isn't common. People with enough money and insurance end up in private rooms in hospitals. And the money required for all of the travel and adventures in the movie is provided by the wealth of one of the characters. Such generosity is not uncommon, but receiving such generosity isn't simple. In real life people worry about finances. The two men with whom I visited

this week both expressed concerns about finances and how their financial affairs would work out. In the world where I serve as pastor, major illnesses usually represent significant financial problems for families. In many cases, extended hospitalizations, even with good insurance, result in major financial setbacks for families. Healthcare costs are the leading cause of personal bankruptcy in our country, and I see financial distress in relationship to death and grief frequently. People are sometimes irrational about financial issues when they are under duress. Not long ago I listened as a grieving person expressed distress over a \$1,000 insurance deductible and on the same day plan a funeral that included \$11,000 of costs.

Life isn't like the movies. And, knowing the people with whom I visited this week, I'm glad it is not. Actually, I prefer life to the movies.

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September 9, 2017 – Heroes of Our Nation

I sometimes hear people speaking of the rules for boating who have misinformation. It is commonly stated that sailboats have the right-of-way over power boats and that human-powered boats such as kayaks and rowboats have right-of-way over sailboats. This is sort of true, but not quite. The right-of-way rules take into account the ability of a craft to change course. When I paddle in the Columbia River, my kayak is far more maneuverable than a huge barge being pushed by a tugboat. And, believe me, that big boat does have the right-of-way. So seasoned sailors, on watch on the bridge of the USS Fitzgerald were not thinking incorrectly as they saw a much slower ship, the ACX Crystal, heading their direction. They assumed that the Crystal would see them on radar and in reality and alter its course. That was a reasonable thing to expect, were the crew of the Crystal alert and paying attention. The reality, however, was that the Crystal was on autopilot and those who should have been on watch were either sleeping or not paying attention. Furthermore the Crystal weighed more than three times the weight of the Fitzgerald and was impossible to maneuver at the last minute.

In the dark of the middle of the night the two ships collided. The bow of the Crystal striking the Fitzgerald both above and below the waterline. The Crystal's bow punctured the superstructure, collapsing several compartments including the CO's stateroom, tossing Commander Bryce Benson through the hull actually outside the skin of the ship. Down below, a 13' x 17' hole was ripped in machinery and crew living spaces, including an area with 47 bunks and a crew lounge. As they were trained, the crew of the Fitzgerald immediately went to damage control stations and fought to keep the Fitzgerald afloat.

Two decks below the water line sailors were sleeping in their bunks. Some were thrown to the floor by the force of the collision. The gaping hole allowed seawater to gush into their living quarters. Mattresses and pillows started to float. Tables and chairs are

swirling around. The water is cold. It is dark. It is chaos. Within a minute the water was waist deep in the living quarters. Moments later, it reached the ceiling. Those seeking to keep the ship from completely filling with water are afraid that the ship will take on so much extra water weight that it will roll and capsize. The Fitzgerald was in deep trouble. If you don't seal the room, you risk losing the entire ship. Yet there are sailors below in the water. Sealing the hatch meant sealing their fate.

The training of the ship's crew took over. They had to place the needs of the entire crew over the needs of individual sailors, even if those sailors were their personal friends. Their responsibility was clear. General Quarters drills and damage control training were followed. The hatch was sealed. The next level was flooding. The sailors climbed up to the main deck and sealed the hatch there. It was an awful decision.

Twenty-eight sailors escaped the living quarters. Seven did not.

These events are not about statistics. They are, in the final analysis, about individuals. They are about those whose lives were sacrificed so that others could live. They were a cross section of the nation that they served with honor and distinction. Dakota Rigsby was the youngest, just 19 years old. Ngoc Troung Huynh was of Vietnamese heritage. Shingo Douglas was the son of a career Marine. Noe Hernandez was a Texan from Guatemala. Victor Subayon was a Filipino from Manila. Xavier Martin was a white man from Maryland. Gary Rehm was the oldest at 37, and the last body to be recovered. He had been observed risking his life to save others.

Just reading the list of names serves as a reminder that our nation is comprised of more than White Anglo Saxons. We are a country of great diversity protected by armed forces composed of men and women from different ethnic backgrounds and with heritages from all over the world.

We should never forget who these people were.

They were all volunteers.

Those who volunteer to serve are as diverse as those of us who are served.

I am aware that the Navy's investigation was critical of the leaders of the ship. The US Navy has relieved the Fitzgerald's commandeer and two other senior leaders of their duties. Investigators said that inadequate leadership and flawed teamwork contributed to the crash. It is unclear from the reports whether Cmdr. Bryce Benson was relieved due to his injuries in the accident or the flaws found in leadership or both. He is temporarily serving at Navy Yard in Washington, D.C., where he can receive medical care. The Navy was, however, quick to point out the heroism, sacrifice, and excellent teamwork of the crew of the Fitzgerald. "Through their swift and in many cases heroic actions, members of the crew saved lives," the report said.

We are living in a time when nationalism and exclusivism are receiving sanction from the highest levels of government. Building walls, closing borders, limiting immigration, rescinding DACA - all have been promised by our nation's leaders. It is as if they have forgotten who we are. It is as if they have forgotten the heritage of this grand experiment in democracy.

Walk across any military base in this country and you will encounter people of all different ethnicities and family origins. There are plenty of first generation Americans serving in all branches of the US military. They do so proudly and they do so voluntarily. They represent and reflect the best of this nation. Their names are as diverse as they are. And they do not all look alike. They look like the country they serve.

With hateful rhetoric spewing from national leaders, the time has come for us to stick together and work together for all of the people of our country. As another hurricane bears down on our shores, we need to focus our attention on support for those in need. The victims of Hurricane Irma are as diverse as the heroes of the Fitzgerald.

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September 10, 2017 – I'm Not Suffering

I once had a conversation with a man in his eighties who told me that he had lived an extremely healthy life. He said that he rarely missed work because of illness and that he had never suffered from anything worse than a cold or the flu. Later that same day his wife informed me that he hadn't been accurate in his report. He currently suffered from stage four lung cancer that required him to use oxygen full time and likely had metastasized to other parts of his body and had a large aneurism near his heart that was deemed inoperable because of his other health conditions. She said that he suffered from dementia that resulted in his not being aware of his health condition and his forgetting what his doctors had told them.

Unless I'm suffering from that type of dementia, I, on the other hand, have so far lived a life that is remarkably free from illness and suffering. I spent one night in the hospital to be prepped for a diagnostic procedure when I was a child. I was treated in the emergency room for burns on one occasion. I have had a couple of small out-patient surgical procedures and that is about it for medical treatments. I contacted the normal run of childhood diseases: chicken pox, measles and mumps. And I occasionally suffer from a cold or the flu, though I'm very good at getting my flu shot each year and have been free of serious bouts with that illness.

It is a good thing, but I suspect that I wouldn't be a very good patient. I'd probably complain and make myself more miserable than the illness from which I was suffering.

Right now I'm really getting tired of day after day of itchy and watering eyes, runny nose and sneezing that are a part of living with smoke-filled skies. I long for the coolness of autumn and a bit of fresh air to breathe. It must be noted that we don't have things bad here in South Dakota.

As the winds rise and category four Irma lashes at Florida, as California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, Montana and Wyoming have more acres in flames than there are acres in the state of Maryland, as Mexico struggles with a hurricane on the east coast and the aftermath of a major earthquake in the west, being in South Dakota is a pretty good thing. There is a bit more smoke in our air than usual due to the fires off to the north and west. There really isn't much for me to complain about, not that it keeps me from complaining.

It is possible, however, that this persistent irritation in my eyes, nose, throat and lungs gives me just a little bit of understanding of and compassion for those who suffer from chronic pain. I have a brother who was disabled by a workplace accident in which he slid underneath a truck. While the truck missed him and didn't crush him, the twisting action caused spinal injuries. Even after surgery there is significant pain that remains. A few years ago he told me that it was a bit of a revelation to him that he could sit at home with a lot of pain in his back or go to work with a lot of pain in his back. Either way he was going to have pain so he decided he'd go to work. Although he has limits on his activities, he has assumed a new normal in his life that includes working. The pain goes with him wherever he goes and whatever he does.

Pain may be a constant companion for many people, but I don't think it ever becomes a friend.

News reached us mid week of the death of a man we have known for decades. Due to some complex family dynamics the funeral is being delayed for a short while and we are in that "in between" phase of grief. We'll be able to be with the family for the funeral when the time comes, but right now we are left with our memories of the man and the life he lived. Compared to anything that I have experienced, he experienced a lot of pain.

These days pain is considered by doctors and medical schools to be a vital sign. In addition taking pulses, counting respiration, and measuring blood pressure, health care professionals assist patients in assessing pain levels. Unlike other vital signs which can be measured by an objective means, pain is a subjective assessment. A number scale, ranging from no pain to the worst pain you've ever experienced is usually employed. Then, like abnormalities in other vital signs, pain is treated based on the observed and assessed levels. This man's pain levels were so intense that his physician prescribed high doses of opioid medications - levels that would be considered to be beyond addictive to other patients. Opioids are tolerance medications. The more you take the

more is required to produce the same effect. They are also controlled substances. Overdoses are fatal. These are not medicines with which to mess around.

With all of the attention paid to these medications, it is probably safe to assume that his doctors were without other options for the treatment of his pain.

I don't really know how many years he suffered from chronic pain, but it was, I believe, many. He was a large man with multiple health complications. On top of the physical pain he experienced and the mind-altering effects of the medications he was administered, he had known the pain of loss and grief over the years. He had been the primary caretaker of both of his parents as they neared the end of their lives. At one point he dropped out of a college program in which he was enrolled in order to stay home and care for his parents. There is no way to measure psychological pain but when it is added to physical pain the effect is compounded.

I find some comfort in the image of his being embraced by God at the moment of his death as all pain and sorrow are ended for him.

All of this is to say that if you hear me complaining about smoky air, don't offer your pity. I don't need it. I need to be reminded that my suffering is minuscule and my life isn't a burden. That is unless I'm suffering from the same form of dementia as my friend.

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September 11, 2017 – On Faith

There is a long-standing theological argument, going back at least to the 19th century that is called, by some, God of the gaps. It has mostly been used by people of faith who are disagreeing with and even chastising what they see as lazy or incomplete theology on the part of others. The evangelist Henry Drummond, in a series of Lowell Lectures titled "The Ascent of Man," criticizes Christians who point to the things that science can't explain - "gaps which they will fill up with God" - and urges them to understand that all of nature belongs to God. He argues that the God of Evolution is infinitely grander than the occasional wonder-worker, who is the God that is often described by those who set up a science vs religion dichotomy.

Several times in this journal I have asserted that scientific discovery enhances and expands the understanding of God and that there is no threat to God or to faith inherent in scientific method. In general I am not swayed and sometimes bored by arguments that posit that religion is in decline because scientific discovery provides explanations of natural phenomena. It may be true that participation in religious institutions is in decline, and it is possible that some religious institutions have taken implausible stances in regards to scientific discovery, but that is hardly a sufficient explanation of the decline of religious institutions in recent decades.

Church growth and decline is a complex phenomena and, for the most part, is the result of the limits of institutional organization. Being big or financially successful does not mean that the church is being faithful. Often small and deeply committed communities are more able to maintain a close resemblance to the early Christian church. Faith involves risk. And one of the risks of faith is that of institutional failure.

Even after millennia of Christian living, we have difficulty defining faith. There are many things that faith is not.

Faith is not a blanket to cover all of the things we don't understand. We do not have to "accept on faith" phenomena that inspire inquiry and might lead to new discovery. There are many things that we don't understand that can be explained and understood by diligent exploration and careful observation.

Faith is not a matter of intellectual assent. People often confuse faith and belief. There can be a set of beliefs that are stated in a creed or church doctrine. These are, in general, a set of concepts to which one can express agreement or disagreement. Sometimes church leaders have promoted these ideas as the key to discipleship. "In order to be a Christian, you must believe . . ." Then they add the particular doctrine or idea that they want to promote. But there is more to faith than simple intellectual assent. And a room full of people who are in full agreement of an idea or concept is hardly a faithful Christian community.

Faith is not the result of emotional manipulation. It is not merely a feeling. We enjoy times when our emotions are stirred. We like to have strong feelings. Worship can often trigger emotions and worship that is sensitive to emotional experiences serves a congregation better than an experience that is solely intellectual. However, faith is not a matter of emotions only. There are countless arguments that speak of the head as the center of intellect and the heart as the center of emotion. While this probably is no longer anatomically correct, it also posits a dichotomy that is false. Emotions are not separate from ideas. They both are part of the basic nature of humanity. Faith involves both emotions and intellect and it isn't merely a combination of the two.

One of the foundations for the discussion of faith is the 11th chapter of Hebrews, which begins, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The chapter then goes on to recount the stories of the generations of Israel and continues in chapter 12 with the example of Jesus. It is clear from the argument presented in Hebrews that faith is not the possession of an individual or even of an individual generation. It is an intergenerational relationship with God that plays out in the midst of a changing world and wildly different circumstances and events.

Which brings us back to the old God of the gaps argument. God is not only present in the gaps of our understanding, but in the center of the things we do understand as well.

Faith is not just for the things that are unseen, but also the things that we do see and understand.

The institutional church rises and falls with a variety of circumstances. Ours may not be a generation that will be noted for particular devotion to the church. We seem to be living in a time where people have other priorities and make commitments to other institutions. But this does not mean that faith is dead in our generation nor does it mean that God is silent in our time. We belong to a great line of faith that extends back to some of the earliest ancestors that we can recall and extends forward through generations yet unborn. Each new discovery brings fresh information and deeper understanding, but there is no end to the mystery of the universe. There is no day when we will have discovered all there is to discover or will understand all that is to be understood. In this universe there is plenty of room for people for whom faith is not an idea and not an emotion, but a relationship in which they participate. And people of faith will remain long after the debates of this generation have faded from memory.

God remains the God of everything - of science and religion, of intellect and emotion, of faith and of doubt. And we, like our ancestors before us and our progeny after us, are called into relationship with God.

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September 12, 2017 – Challenges of Preaching

Preaching is a real challenge for me. I am called to find a balance between faithfulness to the scriptures and traditions of our people and the realities of contemporary life. Both are important precisely because we believe that our scriptures and traditions exist to guide us through the trials and perils of our lives. Scripture and tradition are not just parts of an ancient world preserved to connect us with the past. Rather they are living connections with the past that also belong to our future and our lives are bridges between what has been and what is yet to become.

Since Sunday, I've been mulling a genuine and honest comment received from one of the members of my congregation. I won't get the words quite right, but the comment was something like, "You spend most of your time explaining the Bible. I need more instruction on how to deal with what is going on in our world. There is so much bad news going around and people need to be told to love one another." As we had a bit more conversation, I understood that the person was asking for more moral instruction in the sermons, something at which I admit I am a bit weak. I have a strong sense of right and wrong, but I don't often feel the authority to interpret the behavior or actions of others. I'm not, by nature, a judgmental person and I find offering moral direction to another to be a bit of condescension. Who am I to tell someone else what to do. I'm much more comfortable providing information that can guide another to reach his or her own conclusions and make her or his own choices about behavior.

It is, however, a rich gift, this comment from a member of my congregation - and a rare gift as well. I've often heard comments that were offered in a less heartfelt manner. Preachers often hear an admonition to "be more biblical." We rarely know what the speaker wants, as we spend hours studying the scriptures for guidance on what to say. The idea that there is some way to be "more biblical" doesn't seem apparent to us. Interestingly, that comment often comes from someone who doesn't participate in bible classes or studies in the church.

There is, however, a balance between the teaching of bible, tradition and theology and providing commentary on the realities of contemporary life. The theologian and scholar Karl Barth wrote, "Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible." Subsequent generations of preachers have quoted and often misquoted that line. I've heard "Preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other," and "Pray with the Bible in one and and the newspaper in the other." Both may be sage bits of advice, but they don't reflect the fullness of Barth's original meaning.

In seeking to be led by scripture, I have found that there are some dangers in over reacting to the news of the day. I don't want to allow contemporary events to set the agenda or to cause me to twist the readings of the day into saying what they do not say. I don't want to be overly partisan and further polarize the congregation. I don't want to become narrow in the topics of my sermons, returning to the same political themes over and over again. And, frankly, I don't want to preach about events in the world in a way that is so bland that no one could ever be offended - the gospel often offends our sensibilities.

I do, however, want to preach in a way that engages the full lives of my congregation. I do want to touch not only their persona lives, but also the life of the congregation, the life of our city, state and nation. I want to say words that are relevant to the realities of those who attend worship.

The request of my parishioner has also inspired me to think about another necessary balance. In my life, I have often been the bearer or bad news. I have been asked to be the one to deliver news of the death of a loved one. I have been asked to be present when people are notified of accidents or other traumatic events. I'm sure that there are some people who associate me with some of the worst experiences of their lives.

My calling as a preacher, however, is to be the bearer of good news. This grief that overwhelms, this terror that cannot be ignored, this tragedy that seems ever-present - these are not the final words on the meaning of life. Even in the midst of the deepest of tragedies, God's gift of life has the final victory. It is this belief - this reality - which empowers the work I do. I have witnessed the power of resurrection in some of life's darkest moments. I have seen the power of friendship and compassion in the face of

overwhelming grief and loss. "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39) The Good News breaks forth in life's darkest moments.

I wish I could preach like Ron Wallace writes poems. He finds the right balance of humor to open our eyes to deeper realities:

Blessings

occur.

Some days I find myself
putting my foot in
the same stream twice;
leading a horse to water
and making him drink.

I have a clue.

I can see the forest
for the trees.

All around me people
are making silk purses
out of sows' ears,
getting blood from turnips,
building Rome in a day.

There's a business
like show business.

There's something new
under the sun.

Some days misery
no longer loves company;
it puts itself out of its.

There's rest for the weary.

There's turning back.

There are guarantees.

I can be serious.

I can mean that.

You can quite
put your finger on it.

Some days I know
I am long for this world.

I can go home again.

And when I go

I can take it with me.

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September 13, 2017 – A Needed Conversation

Dr. Lori J. Simon, Superintendent of Schools in Rapid City, sent a letter to the families of students in Rapid City Area Schools this week. She opened with news that many of us already knew:

“I am writing you today to address a topic that we often do not discuss. Suicide. Since July, three of our Rapid City Area Schools students have died by suicide. There are so many students who are hurting right now. Suicide does more than end one life — it can often create a ripple effect throughout a community, as surviving family members and friends experience a range of grief and emotions”

She went on to announce a meeting that will be held this evening for parents and community leaders to provide information about teen suicide and actions that adults can take to help students cope with stress, mental illness and other significant problems.

She ends by indicating that there will be more conversation:

“I hope you will join us. Whether you are looking for solutions for your teen who is struggling with a recent loss, or just want to educate yourself—please attend. This is an important discussion and the starting point of a broader conversation that must include multiple community members and agencies working toward one goal: keeping our kids safe.”

I plan to attend, though it will be a bit inconvenient for me. A bit of inconvenience is a small price for a conversation that needs to be held. But I was struck with several things as I read the letter. The first thing was the timing of the meeting. While this appears to be a high priority for the school district - after all they are calling a public meeting on a very short notice - it apparently wasn't important enough to reschedule any of the school district's events. Instead they placed the meeting on church night - a time when the district had no scheduled activities. I may be a bit cynical, but it strikes me that churches may have a great deal to contribute to the conversation about the health and well being of teens in our community. And what we experience from the schools is that they ignore us and act as if we aren't among the people who care deeply and provide for teens in our community. I didn't receive the letter because I am a pastor. It didn't go out to pastors in general. There will be no pastors who are presenters at the meeting.

However, that is a minor criticism. What strikes me more about the letter is its ignorance of all of the work that has been done in our community in the area of suicide prevention.

It purports to be starting a conversation: “This is an important discussion and the starting point . . .” It is not the starting point.

I don’t expect Dr. Simon to know the history of suicide prevention efforts in our community. She is new to her job. The school district changes superintendents as often as some people trade cars. I say “some people” because I’ve been driving the same car for the past four superintendents of Rapid City Area Schools. But it would not have been difficult for her to have a conversation about what is already going on in our community.

More than a decade ago, a cluster of teen suicides resulted in another public meeting at a Rapid City School. Out of that meeting grew a coalition of parents, teachers, students, churches, community mental health providers, businesses, law enforcement and survivors of suicide loss. We call ourselves The Front Porch Coalition. That coalition has continued to work and to grow in the time since. It has grown to the point of being a community institution with full-time employees providing the most comprehensive evidence-based suicide prevention education available. That coalition supports a team of first responders to suicide loss who are trained and available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That coalition has many institutional supporters including law enforcement and a long list of area businesses.

The City of Rapid City decided that supporting the coalition was not a financial priority and after a decade of membership, dropped out of the coalition last year.

Rapid City Area Schools have never been members of the coalition and have never seen their way to provide financial support to the coalition.

All of that history is probably a bit too much for a letter to parents, but I can’t help but wishing that Dr. Simons had done enough research to know it herself. Because it looks like the school panics when suicide touches it and forgets that suicide is a threat when there are none for a while. It looks like the school is blind to all of the Mental Health First Aid, Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training, QPRT (Question, Persuade, Refer and Treat) for professionals, that have been taught in our community. It looks like the school doesn’t know about all of the Safe Talk classes taught to youth in area churches. It looks like the school is unaware of all of the work that has been done to help prevent teen suicide in our community.

Certainly what we have done is insufficient. One death by suicide is too much. Three in such a short period of time is devastating. I know that first hand. I was present with two of those three families as they walked through the initial stages of grief and I am well acquainted with the third. More needs to be done to prevent youth suicide. I wish the Superintendent of Schools had been present when members of the coalition met with the principal of one of our area high schools immediately following the first of the suicides. Maybe more of what was recommended at that meeting would have been followed.

Having vented a bit of my frustration, however, I do know that we need to look forward. The meeting has been set. I will attend. The Superintendent has indicated that she will make future meetings a priority. We definitely have the support of law enforcement as we go forward. Dr. Simon was correct when she wrote, “We must work together with our community to address suicide, as it is an issue that goes beyond the boundaries of our schools. By having the conversation about this often-taboo subject, we can work to educate our community about the warning signs of suicide and remove the stigma surrounding mental illness. Most importantly, we can ensure that our young people know how and where to get help.”

My hope and prayer is that a year from now and five years from now the school will continue to think of suicide prevention as a priority and see itself as a member of our community and a member of the Front Porch Coalition.

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September 14, 2017 – A Pastor’s Work

One of the things about being a pastor is that you have a congregation full of “bosses.” Most of the members of the congregation don’t try to direct the work we do and they don’t think of themselves as the boss over the pastor, but we who are called to serve, take their comments and direction very seriously. Even though we know that you can never make everyone happy, even though we are trained to set and keep boundaries, even though we work within a carefully defined structure of leadership, there is always a sense in our minds that we are beholden to every member of the congregation.

Yet, at the same time, most of the work we do is not visible to the majority of the congregation. Most understand the role of worship leader and the task of preaching in part, but few know how much preparation a well-led worship service takes. For me, personally, writing and reading a manuscript is much faster than preparing a sermon delivered without notes. I preach from a manuscript when I am pressed for time. I’m sure that it is different for other preachers. Despite what it may look like, I never “wing it.” People will comment that I just stand up there and speak, but it is not improvisation - at least most of it is not. There are times when a bit of improvisation is required, but my anxiety level soars when I do that and I like to keep such behavior to a minimum.

Most of the congregation, however, understands that it takes time to prepare for worship. And those who have served on Boards, Departments, Task Forces and Committees know a bit about the time and preparation that meetings require.

The majority of the work I do, however, is done with one or two or a small group of witnesses. Yesterday, for example, I happened to meet a member of the congregation as I was walking to a meeting and he was walking to his office. We walked and talked for six or eight blocks and then separated. It was an important bit of pastoral work. That

relationship will pay off down the road when I will be called upon to provide extra pastoral support to his family in a crisis that they know is coming. Getting to know a bit better what he is thinking and how he wants me to be available for other family members will enable me to be a better pastor when the time comes. It was a very good investment of my time. Likewise there were a couple of other conversations with members of the congregation that took place in small clusters of people and were important parts of my work. Returning to the office 2 1/2 hours after I left, there was little evidence of the work that I had done. Someone seeing me strolling up to the building might think that I come to the office late every morning and be unaware that I'd been on the job for nearly four hours at that point in the day. By the end of the day, choir members with whom I had shared a rehearsal knew that I arrived late, without knowing the important meeting that caused the delay and having arrived late, they thought nothing of the fact that I stayed behind. When I locked the building it was more than 14 hours after I unlocked it in the morning.

I'm not complaining. I love the work that I do. I am very fortunate to have the kind of flexibility in my schedule that allows me to take care of a certain amount of personal business in the midst of an otherwise busy work day. I was allowed to spend more time with my family when our children were growing up and more time caring for aging parents than was the case with those who have different jobs. There are plenty of jobs that involve long days and I am not displeased with the hours I work. Furthermore, although I have heard some terrible stories of congregations abusing pastors, I have never had that experience. The congregations I have served have been fair and supportive and I have been treated well by the people I serve throughout my career.

I have joked (and these days it is even more of a joke than it was a few decades ago) that I should offer students and parents the option of, instead of an extended period of confirmation classes, the candidates for confirmation simply job shadow me for two days, one of which is a week day and the other a Sunday. I'd pick up the student for breakfast and drop the student off just before bedtime. In between the student would follow me through a typical day of ministry. After two days, I would have gotten more contact hours with the student than is the case in a year of classes, and the student would understand the nature of the church more fully than after completing the typical confirmation curriculum. The reason this is a joke is that I know that we'd never find those two days. The lives of teens are so filled with activities and events that they simply don't have the time to devote to confirmation preparation. We often go through the rite of confirmation with candidates who could have used a lot more instruction. Inconsistent attendance at church events and activities is the norm these days for all of our students. Being a member of a church, however, is a life-long experience and it seems to be acceptable to welcome new members who have much they still are learning about being disciples of Christ. We would welcome adults with a similar lack of formal instruction.

Now that I have decades of work in the church to look back on, I am learning to be quite comfortable with the reality that much of my work is behind the scenes. After all, my calling is to service, not to the limelight.

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September 15, 2014 – A Prayer for Children

Each year, our congregation participates in 40 days of prayer for children during the fall. Each year I sign up to pray on September 14. It is the birthday of our daughter. I am inspired by the life she lives as a teacher of preschool children and a loving child development professional to pray for children everywhere. Yesterday, I wrote out a prayer for the children as part of my participation in the 40 days of prayer. Here is that prayer:

Great and gracious God, through the voice of Isaiah you described a beautiful vision of peace for all humanity led by a little child; in Jesus you welcomed the little children and reminded those of us who are no longer children that unless we become like a child we cannot fully comprehend your way. Today, I pray for the children. For all of your children everywhere.

As a father, I cannot pray for children without thinking of the children with whom you have blessed our lives. So many images come to my mind whenever I think of them. I remember the triumph of our son's conquering his two-wheeled bicycle. I recall the size of our beautiful daughter the first time she was handed to me. But I also know the pride of visiting their work places now that they are adults and watching the quiet confidence and competence both show in their jobs. I am amazed and delighted with both of them.

As a grandfather, I cannot pray for children without thinking of the three grandchildren who grace our lives. One is just learning to roll over. One is developing conscience. One is exploring first grade. All fill our lives with delight and joy and amazement.

I know, however, dear God, that in your heart and mind are images as potent and as powerful for each of the children of this world. Your love is not restricted. It flows out to the children in the midst of natural disasters - the little ones on Caribbean Islands who have nothing to shelter the rain from their heads and those in northwestern towns whose lungs are being clouded with smoke from wildfires. Your tears flow for the children of war in Sudan and Myanmar and Palestine and Ukraine and countless other places around the globe. Your heart breaks with parents in many places who witness the suffering brought about by poverty and injustice.

My prayer for children would be incomplete if I tried to hide from my consciousness those of your children who are marginalized, abused, hungry, sick and neglected. I can't help but ask, "is the child playing in the dust of the refugee camp the one you have

anointed to lead us on the path to peace?" "Is the little one growing up in the midst of devastating addiction and generational poverty in our own state the one whom we are called to welcome and become like to enter your kingdom?"

I confess before you, gracious God, that the children who most frequently populate my awareness are children of great privilege. They are ones whose parents can afford a private preschool. They are the ones whose homes have multiple vehicles. They are the ones who have not felt the sting of racism nor the deprivation of war nor the displacement of a refugee's life. Surely you are present in the lives of these children, but theirs are not the only spirits whose animation you inspire.

So I pray for the children I have not yet met.

I pray for the ones whose images occasionally flit across the newsfeed on my computer. I pray for the ones whose photographs have never been recorded. I pray for children born into the deep entrenchment of generational poverty, whose basic needs are not always met and whose options for their future are limited by forces that are no fault of their own. I pray for the children who are the inheritors of the burdens of slavery - a system so terribly painful that it is still felt to the seventh generation and beyond. I pray for the children of trauma whose eyes have witnessed what you never intended for any human eyes to see.

I pray for the children whose names I do not know.

Some are very near, in communities so close that they are our neighbors. Some live in places so far distant that our paths are unlikely to ever cross. Some carry traditions and cultures that are more ancient than my own. Some are born into lives that are disconnected from the heritages of their past.

I pray for all the children.

How many times have I sung, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world!" How rarely have I paused to truly pray for all of the children?

Inspire in me a new dedication to the well being of all of the children. Teach me the art of sacrifice for the sake of others. Help me to turn aside from the seeking of pleasure toward the service of your children.

Our most beloved prayer addresses you as "Our Father." I know that you are father to all of the children of the world and that in your eyes each of us is a child of your choosing and of your loving. In your eyes we all are children. May the child in me discover my similarities and commonness with your other children of many different ages, many different cultural backgrounds, many different languages, many different locations, many different circumstances.

May our lives echo the sentiment of the prayer of your son, our savior, who prayed, "That they all may be one."

May the children whose laughing voices ring through the halls of our church as I pray be one with the children whose tears drop onto the bare ground in the places of poverty. May the children who suffer from disease and pain be one with those who fill the playground with their activities. May the children whose lives have been short be one with the elders who have lived for many years. May we all be one.

And may we follow that little child into the kingdom of peace and be like that child in the realm of resurrection.

And just one more thing: God of all glory, guide my life that I might in some small way enable you to experience the parent's satisfaction you have granted to me when I think of the daughter and son you placed in my life. In your holy name I pray, Amen!

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September 16, 2017 – Sheep and Goats

Many of Jesus' parables are challenging for those of us who read them over and over again. The process of repetition enables us to discover nuances that we might have missed in our initial reading. Different life circumstances provide different perspectives on the teachings of Jesus. I often experience those with rigid faith and unchanging rules about belief to be simply inexperienced in bible study. When you live with the texts of our people day in and day out for many years you discover that there are many different interpretations and that different ways of reading the texts can be deeply meaningful.

One of those parables that comes up over and over again in my life and my thinking is the arable of the sheep and the goats, sometimes titled "The Judgment of the Nations." Now mind you this is not, as it is most frequently interpreted, a parable about individual action and the judgement of individuals. It is a parable about nations and how the nations of the world will be judged: "When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. . ."

Even knowing that, it is pretty hard to read the parable without some sense of individual judgment because most of us have found our individual behavior to be on both sides of that judgment divide. There have been times when we have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick and imprisoned. But there have also been times when we passed by hungry folks and offered no food, passed by those who needed clothing without responding and failed to visit those who needed our presence.

Yesterday was a good example in my own life. I made visits in the jail and in the hospital. I shared prayers with a crew working on a habitat for humanity home site. But I also missed phone calls from someone who was seeking assistance and ended the evening by responding to a text message telling the sender that I was unable to help by buying gas for her even though she was sitting in the Wal-mart parking lot with her baby and her gas tank on empty.

In my own defense, I have yet to find any place in the bible that refers to buying gas for people's cars and the request for gas money is one of the most frequent cries for help that I hear. I have, on occasion, helped with a tank of gas. It is a very expensive commodity and spending my money on gas threatens my ability to help with food and diapers and other needed items, but there have been times when I felt it was the best way to help. One time, the morning after I helped a family with a tank of gas, I was greeted by four cars in the church parking lot all with people in them who had been told that the guy with the "Rev Ted" license plates gave away free gas. I informed them that I didn't know of any source of free gas and that all of the gas I gave to support people had to be purchased as full retail price. Then again, a few years later I decided not to renew my vanity plates and no longer have license plates that are easy to remember. Another time, I helped someone with gas on two occasions to assist someone to visit a family member who was incarcerated. They put my cell phone number into their cell phone and the cell phone now is routinely passed around their community with the advice, "When you get to Rapid City, call this guy and he'll buy you gas to get home." That scheme got old very quickly. And it didn't work last night. It wasn't the first time it failed to work. It won't be the last.

But the bottom line is that Jesus' parable is not primarily about my personal decisions and behavior. It is about how nations behave. It speaks of corporate judgment by God. It proclaims that God judges nations for their behavior.

Have we really taken into consideration the treatment of the hungry, naked, sick and imprisoned when we voted for leaders? Is the political structure of our nation such that God, sitting on the throne of judgment, would deem us to have been compassionate? Read the parable, Matthew 25:31-46 and ask yourself where our nation might find itself in such a scenario.

Lord, when did you come to us hungry and we fortified our boundaries so that you couldn't get in? Lord, when did we find you in need and set up a committee to debate whether or not you were worthy of assistance? When were you a refugee and we refused you? When did we see you in prison and respond by increasing mandatory sentences and incarcerating a larger percentage of our population than any other country in the world?

I could go on and on, but you get the picture. This wonderful nation that we love so much - this noble experiment in Democracy - doesn't fare too well at present in the sheep and goats test.

It hasn't always been that way. The majority of the citizens of our country are the descendants of immigrants who left parts of the world that were experiencing famine and deprivation and resettled in this land in search of a better life. The European Recovery Program, also known as the Marshall Plan was heavily supported by our country for the rebuilding of Western Europe after the end of World War II. Churches and families across our nation have raised fund in response to natural disasters, sponsored refugee families, developed health care ministries at home and abroad and invested in prison visitation programs.

It is quite possible for us to see ourselves on both sides of the sheep and goats judgment.

Still, I can't help but read this parable as a message that seems directly aimed at our behavior and the choices we make as a nation.

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September 17, 2017 – Smoky Air

It was really nice to get a break from hot weather yesterday. Following a day of rain, we had a second day that felt like autumn. Not bad for the middle of September! I worked outside in the morning and it even felt a bit chilly as we got started and by evening there was a definite chill in the air. I can begin to think of days when we will be wearing jackets. I know that we've got plenty of warm days ahead. The high is supposed to reach 70 today and we'll have nice weather. I'm not quite ready for a killer frost. The tomatoes are producing well and we're really enjoying them. But it is nice to know that the weather is changing and the seasons will come and go.

I've been thinking of those out west a lot lately. My wife's sister and her husband live in Hood River, Oregon, where smoke has descended on the entire Columbia River Gorge. At times the smoke gets so thick that they cannot see across the river. Schools have been closed. Activities have been cancelled. Unhealthy levels of smoke have blanketed the city for a long time now. Our relatives live in a neighborhood which is under a Level 2 evacuation warning. That means there is no evacuation set, but residents are asked to be ready to evacuate on short notice, should fire conditions warrant.

A little bit east of Oregon, but still west of here, we had a new great niece born in Missoula, Montana yesterday. Baby Edith joins her two-year-old sister and parents in a community that is ringed by major wildfires. The smoke in Missoula comes and goes, but just a little south of town, in the Bitterroot Valley, below the Lolo Peak Fire,

hazardous, unbreathable air descends regularly - nearly daily. Never before have residents experienced so many wildfires so close to home for so many weeks. Up above Seeley Lake, the massive Rice Ridge Fire burns and fills the valley every night with smoke creating unhealthy conditions.

What makes the smoke so dangerous is the fine particulate that is contained in wood smoke. It is so tiny that it can enter your bloodstream when it is breathed in. And air pollution is cumulative. The more you are in it the worse it is for you. Asthma symptoms are aggravated. Lung friction causes wheeziness. The risk of heart attack and stroke rises. Developing lungs in children are threatened. Smoke is dangerous. It increases emergency room visits, hospital stays and deaths. Health officials don't know what six weeks in the worst smoke ever recorded will mean for the people in Seeley Lake

I know I've complained a bit about the smoke around here. Those big fires in the west have combined with the effects of some smaller fires in the hill to leave us with smoky skies on many days in the past couple of months. My eyes have burned from the smoke, and I seem to have developed an annoying little cough. One night last week, we decided to shut up our windows to keep the smoke down inside of the house, something that we rarely do in the summer. Without central air conditioning, we rarely are uncomfortable in our home because it cools down comfortably at night even during the heat of summer. Fortunately temperatures were cool enough for our home to remain comfortable without the smell of smoke inside.

It hasn't been so easy for those who are living closer to the fires. Homes with central air handling systems can have good filters installed and changed regularly and that helps keep inside air quality better. There are a few people who have obtained HEPA room filters and health officials have begun to assist people in finding adequate filters to improve the air quality inside of their homes. There really isn't much that can be done for the air outside.

When surrounded by smoke, the weather is a tricky thing. Warm air makes fighting the fires more challenging and contributes to the spread of fires. But warm air also makes the smoke rise. For towns in the bottoms of valleys, a little warmth can help make the air more breathable. It is at night, when the air cools that the smoke descends and fills the valleys.

Health officials have been consulting smoke maps to determine where the closest clean air is and directing those with certain breathing problems to leave their homes and go to where the air is clear. The official position of county health officials is to leave the area until the smoke clears. That option isn't available for many residents who stay because of jobs, school, and other obligations. Many simply cannot afford to leave their homes and go somewhere else. Government funds have been found to purchase a few room filters for clinics and hospitals, but there is no financial support for homeowners and renters who are seeking to make their living space more bearable. The American Lung

Association has stepped up with some funds for filters, but it is a case of too little too late for many people.

Perhaps, however, just perhaps, the weather is beginning to turn. The forecast for Missoula and much of Western Montana calls for cooler temperatures and a week of rain showers. It is welcome after such a hot and smoky summer. The rain helps scrub the particulate from the air. Over in Hood River, Oregon, there are scattered rain showers and all of Northwest Oregon is under a flash flood watch for later this afternoon when heavy rains may be coming. With the big fires, the weather is what finally provides relief. Firefighters do what they are able and they are amazingly competent at saving structures, but there are limits to their efforts.

So, like so many generations before us, we will pray for rain and hope that the air clears for those who are suffering. And here, in the Black Hills, we will pray our prayers of gratitude for the gifts of the weather we have received.

Over the winter, however, I am going to study up on HEPA filters. It wouldn't hurt to be prepared.

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September 18, 2017 – Being Present in a Troubled World

I'm not sure what people who live in densely populated urban areas do, but I know where I go to gain perspective and balance in my life. I go to the hills. I drive up to Sheridan Lake. I take a walk in the woods. Some days I just sit on my deck and watch the deer and turkeys. I seem to need contact with nature and space from other people in order to maintain my balance. The one period of my life when I lived in a big city that city was Chicago which has Lake Michigan. I would walk down to the lakeshore where I could gaze out at the emptiness and away from the city. But I have to admit that the years we lived there were a challenge for me. The first two summers I returned to the mountains of Montana to retreat from the city. I left behind locked doors and traffic and the intensity and headed deep into the high country beyond the end of the pavement, beyond the reach of telephone lines, where it got dark when you turned off the lights and the canopy of heaven stretched above and the stars seemed to completely fill the night sky.

I don't have any problem making a long list of worries these days. I cry with people who have lost a loved one to suicide and I fear that there are more losses in our future. I visit those in jail and I witness the crowding of our facilities and sense the hopelessness in the lives of some of the people incarcerated. I read about the devastation left by hurricanes in the Caribbean and I fear as the next storm takes aim at a similar path. I watch with anxiety the reports from fires across the west and worry about the firefighters who have risked to much in an attempt to save lives and property. I think of those

breathing the smoke and the health effects that will linger - in some cases for the rest of a lifetime. I follow the path of Typhoon Talim as it skips up the west coast of Japan passing close to where our daughter and son-in-law live. Instant messaging reveals that they are safe but I know that big storms regularly batter Japan. A year ago Typhoon Lionrock left 22 dead. Last month Typhoon Noru killed two and injured 51. And I can also worry about the missiles launched from North Korea that have crossed over the north of Japan. The potential from such weapons is far more destructive than just a few families.

Here in our own country I worry about the inability of congress to come to common understanding on any topic. Increasing partisanship has rendered our national legislative bodies nearly incapable of meaningful action. The capriciousness with which our President handles public relations makes it impossible to know what he will say, do or tweet next. The uncertainty wears on people whose lives hang in the balance. What is a DACA young adult supposed to do? Dare they travel? Dare they apply for a new job or a promotion? There are so many unanswered questions.

I fear that we may be on the edge of no return in terms of environmental destruction. Despite overwhelming scientific evidence, we abandon international treaties in favor of short term profits. The boundaries of public lands are being reshaped and the value of conservation seems to have taken a back seat to ill advised development. Global wildlife populations have dropped by 60 percent since 1970. By the year 2020 two-thirds of the wild animals on the planet will have disappeared. I watch the mule deer come into our neighborhood displacing the white tailed deer and know it is the product of urban sprawl and development. I wonder how long it will be before all of the deer have moved out of the neighborhood.

Stephen Hawking recently predicted that we humans have only 100 years to colonize other planets or face extinction as a species.

I'm good at the lists of things about to worry.

Too much worry can be debilitating. I recently read about a New Yorker who was so worried about climate change that she couldn't sleep. She was taking the stairs everywhere to save electricity and distributing pamphlets and couldn't understand why others weren't as concerned as she. The anxiety was so intense that she required hospitalization from her worry. The American Psychological Association has added the diagnosis "eco-anxiety" to its official list of mental illnesses. There was just a report about how worrying about climate change is causing damage to mental health. "The psychological responses to climate change, such as conflict avoidance, fatalism, fear, helplessness, and resignation are growing," the report concludes.

My smallest canoe, called a "Wee Lassie" is a light-weight and simple boat. I sit on the bottom of the boat and paddle with a double paddle. It is like a kayak without a top deck.

I launch it at the edge of the lake and dip my paddle for a few strokes to move out into water that is deeper than the shoreline shallows. I lean back and listen to the clatter of the geese clustering for their fall trip south. I scan the sky for the osprey as I move to check out the nest from which the chicks fledged earlier in the summer. I sniff the pine scent in the air and note the change in the colors of the shoreline plants. I watch the cattails release their cotton-like seeds to the wind. I breathe deeply. In the center of the lake, I can feel small in the vastness of the universe. I know that the reservoir where I paddle is tiny, but a smaller boat helps to make the lake seem bigger.

I realize that I am dependent upon paddling as a release from the tensions of everyday life. An hour on the water can give me energy and lift me from the edge of despair. Our grandfather Moses used to walk up the mountain. Jesus went off to a lonely place to pray. I paddle.

I may not change the world, but I can offer my presence. I am here.

It is what I do best. Whether comforting the grieving, visiting the sick and imprisoned, counseling the troubled or guiding a congregation, the gift I offer most is my presence.

I'm here if you need me.

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September 19, 2017 – The Story is Bigger than Me

Last spring my brother completed and self-published a memoir that covers a brief period of his life from 2006 and 2010, when he made multiple cross-country bicycle trips in conjunction with an organization called Bike4Peace. I suppose that I read the book with a slightly more critical eye than some readers, and I wasn't along on any of his bicycle trips, so his version of them is the version I know best. There is a small reference to our great grandfather that portrays him in a different light than I remember from family stories, but again, he died before I was born and I am no expert on family history, either. I purchased a copy of my brother's book as soon as I was aware of it and I congratulated him on his efforts in writing and publishing when I spoke to him on the phone.

The process got me to thinking about memoirs in general. I have a friend who is near to my age whose son wrote a memoir of his life to date when he was completing his college career. It was the kind of tell-all book that might make a parent cringe. Although I found nothing in the book that should embarrass my friend, it does seem that information about his divorce, reported by his son, might make the book a difficult read for him.

I suspect that we are drawn to writing memoirs in part because of a need to tell our version of the story. We fear that others might not tell the whole story and the parts of our perspective will be lost if we don't get it down in writing. The motivation for me to write this daily journal may follow a similar pattern. I have often wondered to what extent I write because of a need to tell my story. I'm sure that it is a major factor in my motivation.

There is, however, at least one different perspective. Despite my urge to tell my story, there is another sense in which my story, the one I'm in, keeps telling me. I am shaped by the events of my life and the people I meet. I have control over some of my reactions to the events of my life, but I think it is a stretch to assume that I'm the one in control.

Mark Nepo addresses this in a poem:

“Understory”

by Mark Nepo

I've been watching stars
rely on the darkness they
resist. And fish struggle with
and against the current. And
hawks glide faster when their
wings don't move.

Still I keep retelling what
happens till it comes out
the way I want.

We try so hard to be the
main character when it is
our point of view that
keeps us from the truth.

The sun has its story
that no curtain can stop.

It's true. The only way beyond
the self is through it. The only
way to listen to what can never
be said is to quiet our need
to steer the plot.

When jarred by life, we might
unravel the story we tell ourselves

and discover the story we are in,
the one that keeps telling us.

I think that one of the spiritual disciplines that is beginning to emerge in my life as I travel through my seventh decade, is the discipline of releasing control - “to quit [my] need to steer the plot.”

One of the disciplines that continues to grow in meaning for me is the discipline of silence. There are a couple of times each week when I make time and space to sit quietly. I used to follow a routine of centering prayer, carefully focusing my attention on my breath as I quiet my mind and release the thoughts and distractions of the day. These days, I often sit in silence and allow my mind to roam freely. Either way, I soon discover that I am floating on a sea of events. There is much in this world that is beyond my control that affects me deeply. Images of starving children in Yemen, concerns for those suffering in the wake of hurricanes in the Caribbean, threats of war coming from world leaders - a thousand other thoughts not of my own making flood into my mind. The pop theology admonition to “let go and let God” contains a bit of sage advice, but it certainly doesn’t mean that we are capable of simply releasing all of our concerns and not feeling anything about the world. If that were possible, I don’t know that it would be desirable. Compassion is a human quality that I treasure and one to which my faith calls me. And, in my experience, surrendering to God’s control of my life often involves quite a bit that is not easy.

More helpful for me is the understanding that the story in which I am a tiny part is a story that is much bigger than myself. Part of the reason I study the scriptures is that I can see myself in the stories of our people. My life is a part of a story that did not begin with my birth. I wrestle with ideas and concepts that our people have been thinking and refining for generations and generations. When I ask about the nature of God, I’m joining a long heritage of faithful people who raised the question. When I witness to God’s power, I’m joining with a long line of witnesses. The letter to the Hebrews has this powerful image of being surrounded by “a great cloud of witnesses.” This realization reminds me that there are generations yet unborn who also will share in this great story.

I don’t know if I will ever reach beyond this journal to write my memoirs. Perhaps one day I’ll edit a volume of the best of my essays and allow that to suffice. I’m not even sure that it is important that the story be written from my perspective. After all, when I am honest about it, I’m not the one steering the plot.

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September 20, 2017 – Succession Planning

A conversation with a church member last evening has gotten me to thinking. The conversation was a part of a wider conversation about leadership transition in our

church. For almost a year our Pastoral Relations and Personnel Committee has been discussing the topic in part because of the age of our pastoral staff. Those conversations accelerated with the announcement of the retirement of our Minister of Christian Nurture. The church does not have a mandatory retirement age, but there is also an awareness that none of us can go on forever and that there are times when inviting and encouraging leadership is an essential part of the mission of the church. The conversation with the member included a description of how the corporation for which he used to work required staff members to have "succession plans" that provided essential information for their work to continue in the event that they became disabled or otherwise were unable to perform their duties. Among the elements of these succession plans were lists of the tasks performed by the employee so that tasks could be reassigned.

It would be a major job, requiring that I divert energies from other parts of my work, for me to make a complete list of the tasks I perform. There is merit to the assignment, and I think I will at least start a list that might prove to be useful in the future. At the same time, however, I am reluctant to take the notion of succession planning to the same extent as it is taken in some businesses.

First of all, the church, while having to be attentive to and follow some business practices, is not a business. It is a ministry, which has different priorities and functions than a corporation whose purpose is maximization of profit. We are, after all, a nonprofit organization. We aren't about the business of making money. I have seen many people come into leadership positions and try to operate the church like they have successfully operated their businesses only to discover that it behaves differently. One example has to do with cash reserves. A business needs a certain amount of reserve available for changes in the economy, ups and downs in revenues and unexpected expenses. In the church, those reserves are in the generosity of the members, not in bank accounts. Churches that build up reserves find that having reserves suppresses giving. People figure that if the church has a lot of money in savings, it doesn't need additional donations. Furthermore, people give to mission, not bank accounts. There is little appeal in making a charitable gift to a savings account. Learning to trust and to tolerate a slightly higher risk than one might take in business is essential to understanding church finances. After a career of balanced church budgets and leading congregations without debt, I have learned not to panic at the results of a single monthly report and I have become comfortable with simply explaining to the congregation what the needs of the church are.

Another reason a succession plan isn't quite the right move for the congregation is that there is much of the work of a pastor that is dependent upon careful confidentiality. A list of pastoral calls and what is discussed is inappropriate. I work with the stories of other people and they are not my stories to share.

A third reason is that the way that I pursue the ministries of the congregation is not the only way that those ministries can be conducted. A new pastor with new priorities might be just the right match for the congregation. No future pastor should be bound by my style of leadership and no future pastor should be judged on whether or not that pastor follows my priorities. I hesitate to give too much advice to those who come after me. Rather I trust God to provide the leadership that is needed at that time.

Having said that, there is merit in the development of a list of some of the tasks. The example I used in the conversation is that one of the things I do is to reset the clock that controls the church bell. It is not exactly a pastoral duty, but it is one of the jobs in the church that I've done for the past 22 years and my predecessor did for a dozen years before me. The clock is a complex mechanical device that runs a 7-day, 24-hour cycle and can only be adjusted in the forward direction. When we "fall back" at the end of daylight savings time, the breaker needs to be tripped and the clock left without power for at least an hour in order to reset it properly. There is another clock that controls the light on our outdoor cross. In the case of these two devices, I know that there are volunteers in the church who understand where they are and how they work. But I suspect that there are a lot of similar tasks, some of which are not quite as apparent. I set the codes on an exterior lock that can be used to enter the church and I know how to clear and reset codes. I'm sure I've explained how this is done to office staff, but they have never actually performed the task.

I also do a number of things simply because I am a member of the church. They are not unique tasks that can be done by me alone. I clean up messes when I see them. I use the toilet plunger when needed. I dust the top of the cross when it is draped for Holy Week. I put out new candles for the late night Christmas Eve service. Others know how to do these tasks.

I'm not ready to focus my attention on retiring. I plan to serve in this position for quite a while yet. But no one is irreplaceable and none of us can go on forever. It is prudent to think of what happens after I am gone. Fortunately for me, that is not up to me. After I am gone, others will carry on the ministry of the church and then, as is the case now, God will be in charge of the church and its ministries.

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September 21, 2017 – That Made Me Cringe

On Sunday, in a conversation with a delightful and competent mother of three wonderful children in our congregation, I made a comment that I've made many times before: Before my wife and I had children of our own, we were experts in child-raising. We had studied and worked extensively with children, my wife with preschoolers and I with teens. Then we had children of our own and we became normal people - not experts at all. The academic knowledge of child raising that we had gained all faded in the light of

24/7 childcare. It was only after our children were grown and on their own that we began to regain a bit of our expertise.

It is an exaggeration, and a bit of a joke, but there is a bit of serious truth in those comments. It is easy to criticize others when you don't have the experience to understand the intensity of their work. Now, as a grandfather and an elder in the community, I often witness parents who are doing a wonderful job raising their children. All children can be challenging. All children experience problems. All children misbehave at times. But I get to see parents who really care and who are really involved in the lives of their children. I witness parents who are struggling with the demands of employment, parenting and multiple other pressures who put their children first in their lives. There are some truly exceptional parents raising children today.

So, when I listened to a podcast put out by our local newspaper yesterday, I cringed. I listened because it was about the topic of teen suicide. I listened because the person interviewed is a colleague whom I know and respect and love. Then I heard what was said and I cringed.

Just a little background is in order. The person interviewed has no children of his own. He does, however, work with youth in our community every day. He really cares about those youth and consistently goes above and beyond the expectations of his job to form meaningful and safe relationships with the youth he serves. He has touched and made a difference in the lives of many youth and his organizations programs have gained prominence and recognition across the city.

But the conversation somehow headed in a direction that, as I said, made me cringe.

Two points were made and repeated over and over in the conversation. Both had been made in a public meeting on teen suicide a week before. The first and most prominently repeated was that teens need relationships with adults in order to cope with the problems in their lives. It is true, as it stands. The second was that in a world of cyber bullying, teens need to develop a kind of toughness that gives them the ability to let some of the comments slide off of their backs. Again, it is true such as it goes.

The problem is that the conversation was billed as a discussion of teen suicide and it came off as critical of parents. As much as I respect my colleague and honor his work, he is not an expert on suicide or suicide prevention. I know. I've been working very hard in this community in the field of suicide prevention for longer than my colleague has been an adult. I sit with parents who have lost a teen to suicide nearly every year and often multiple times in the same year. I've been with three such families since mid-summer.

Their teens did not die because of inadequate or incompetent parenting, though the parents did have some problems. Their teens died as a result of severe and untreated

mental illness. Those who have never been parents of teens with brain diseases, which includes me, can never fully understand what goes on in the lives of families who are struggling in a society that attaches a stigma to mental illness and where effective treatment is difficult to obtain. I've visited with parents who have gone from provider to provider and program to program in a desperate search for help for their child. I've watched as families struggle with the effects of teen depression that was not caused by the actions or decisions of the parents. I know parents who would do anything to ease their child's suffering.

Just spending more time with your teens is not an effective strategy for suicide prevention. Although encouraging parents to spend more time with their teens is good advice, it is not a solution to the pain and tragedy of suicide loss.

Trust me, I will be nagging my colleague to take the time to attend a full Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) course and then to become certified in QPRT Suicide Risk Assessment and Risk Management Training. I've done both. Every adult who works with teens should have specific skills and knowledge of suicide prevention and intervention. Taking the classes, which involves the investment of several days with certified trainers, will make my colleague aware of the fact that he is not an expert in the field.

Anyone who tosses off the phrase "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," has never been the victim of intense bullying. Language matters. Cyberbullying can cause genuine pain and suffering. And our society will not address this problem by advising teens to "toughen up." Our church just launched a new year-long outreach program of education and advocacy that addresses the topic of bullying directly. Ben Anderson, our commissioned minister of disabilities education and advocacy has written on the topic of bullying and leads excellent workshops on responding to bullying. We will continue to work with schools and churches and other institutions to improve education and advocacy around the issue of bullying and will continue to expand our education and outreach programs to combat cyber-bullying.

The newspaper needs to do several follow-up podcasts if it is interested in getting information out to our community. The misinformation contained in the podcast they released this week is dangerous. The newspaper didn't do its homework and speak with real experts in suicide prevention or bullying. And, the "expert" they did interview has never had children of his own. He is my colleague and my friend. I pray he will never experience the anguish of a parent whose child has been bullied. I pray that he will never know the pain of losing a child to suicide. But I also pray that he will become more educated before he speaks on public media again.

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September 22, 2017 – Halloween Already?

Yesterday a story on the BBC News website caught my attention. It was about a call from the Greene County, Tennessee, Sheriff's Department Facebook post: "ATTENTION EVERYONE!!! For those of you driving on Chuckey Pike in Greene County: THIS IS A HALLOWEEN DECORATION! Do NOT call 911 reporting a dead body. Instead, congratulate the homeowner on a great display." The story included a photo of a straw-filled pants, shoes and shirts under a closed garage door with red splatters and handprints on the bottom of the door.

I am not tempted to congratulate whoever put up the display. I certainly would not want my grandchildren to witness such a nightmarish scene.

It certainly seems to me that Halloween traditions in our country are changing dramatically. I remember Halloween from my childhood as a children's holiday - a time when children dressed up and visited neighbors in search of small treats. In my home, we weren't allowed to go "trick or treat" after the age of 12. Halloween was for children. It doesn't seem that way in my neighborhood any longer. Families invest some serious funds in putting up elaborate displays, special lighting and other features around their homes.

Outside of what seems to me to be simply poor taste, the "decorations" in that Tennessee home caught my attention because the BBC story was posted on September 21 - more than a month before Halloween. Is it just me, or has this holiday become a bit blown out of proportion? Halloween is more than 5 weeks away. We only have Advent for four weeks before Christmas.

We seem to have fallen into a lifestyle of perpetual holiday, at least when it comes to marketing. There were Halloween displays in big box home improvement stores in August this year in our town. Selling holidays is big business. The day after Halloween, which, I might remind you is the eve of the real holiday - all saints day - decorations for Thanksgiving will be up in the stores, followed by Christmas, Valentines' Day, St. Patric's Day . . . you get the picture. Many stores have a section permanently devoted to holiday merchandise.

According to the National Retail Federation, Americans spent a record \$8.4 billion on Halloween last year. That is a significant amount of money for a holiday.

Halloween in our neighborhood, and I suspect all around the world, has become detached from reverent remembering of those who have died. The recognition of the on-going influence of those who have died is a meaningful exercise. We recognize the on-going grief in families and remember those who have been lost while at the same time celebrating that death is not the end and that God's gift of life has the final victory.

The celebration, set for November 1st is usually recognized on the first Sunday of November in our congregation. It is meaningful each time we celebrate.

Halloween is a shortened version of "All Hallow's Eve," the name of the night before November 1. It was once an evening of good natured pranks and a few sweet treats that was a kind of celebration of childhood. At least that is the way I remember the holiday.

I'm sure it took different forms in different places. Holiday traditions vary around the world. In Japan, for example, Halloween is a newly recognized holiday. With Christianity coming to the nation relatively late in its history, the day wasn't observed until recently. There are now a few halloween parades for children dressed in costumes and some stores have sweet treats for children in conjunction with the parade. In Spain, All Saints is the preferred designation for the holiday. One tradition is the making of artificial graveyards in public parks and gardens. People wearing costumes make a somber walk through the areas while thinking about those who have died. In Central and South America, haunted houses and displays tend toward the macabre, with lots of fake blood and images of partially decomposed bodies.

Historians tell us that Halloween first emerged from Celtic traditions in Britain and other parts of Europe. At the end of summer, the Celts thought the barrier between our world and the world of ghosts and spirits got really thin. This meant weird creatures with strange powers could wander about on Earth. They responded with what was essentially a big party to scare away the ghosts and spirits. Here in the United States, where Halloween has the largest commercial impact in the world, the observance of Halloween seemed to emerge from the waves of Irish immigration in the 19th century. The holiday strengthened in observance and spread to other ethnic groups throughout the 20th century. Observation of Halloween as a holiday in Japan seems to have arisen mostly out of a fascination with all things American that has emerged in Japan since World War II.

For what it is worth, I have no plans for fake bodies in or around my home this year. I might carve a pumpkin. I do that some years and don't do it other years. I'm amazed at how many children in our congregation seem to be unaware that pumpkin is food that can be eaten. They see the gourds as decorations only to be carved, painted, and put on display. I have no plans for special lights, fake spiders or spider webs, imitation gravestones, or party lights to decorate my home.

It might be interesting to talk to some of my neighbors. Perhaps they think that we have no sense of humor or wonder or that we are old fuddy-duddies who are grumpy and don't observe holidays. They know, or at least their children do, however, that we always have some treats for children who stop by in their costumes.

I'm comfortable with Halloween being for children. I enjoy their delight in wearing costumes and exploring the world, as long as it doesn't involve things being too scary for the little ones. One year I sat on our front porch in a gorilla costume to hand out treats. My daughter has convinced me that the costume is too frightening for little children, so I've given up that particular practice.

I'd like the children of the neighborhood to identify our home as a safe place, not as a place that is frightening. I'm thinking that the people who put up the display in Tennessee that is so realistic it prompts 911 calls had different goals in mind.

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September 23, 2017 – Saint Pio?

I'm guessing that most of the members of the congregation I serve don't have special plans for celebrating Saint Pio's day today. There is a young couple, who will be married in our church today. The groom is Roman Catholic and the bride is a member of our congregation. I will be co-officiating with my good friend, Roman Catholic priest Brian Lane. In our preparations for the day, the topic of Saint Pio didn't come up. I'm thinking he isn't one of the biggest stars in the Roman Catholic Church, either, at least not around here. He is a larger following in some parts of the world. There is a statue of him at San Sebastian Cathedral of Tarmac in the Philippines, and his canonization ceremony on June 16, 2002 was one of the largest such ceremonies in history with more than 300,000 people filling St. Peter's Square and the streets surrounding the area.

Padre Pio grew up in a family of farmers in southern Italy. He joined the Capuchin Franciscans at the age of 15, got drafted, was discharged because he had tuberculosis, and was assigned to a friary on the Adriatic. In 1918, he had a vision of Jesus. When the vision ended he had stigmata in his hands, feet and side. The authenticity of the stigmata was questioned and, for a time, he was not allowed to hear confessions or celebrate mass. He accepted these decisions quietly, and they were soon reversed. In 1924, he stopped writing, even letters. He devoted himself to hearing confessions. His confessional ministry soon expanded to ten hours a day. Strangers from all over the world would come by the busload for him to hear their confessions.

Padre Pio died on September 23, 1968 and was ratified in 1999. Saints days are celebrated on the anniversaries of their deaths.

If you're looking for another saint to celebrate, today is also the saint's day for Stanley Rother, a missionary priest from Oklahoma who served in Guatemala, where he was killed by thugs who broke into his rectory. He is considered to be the first American martyr. The part of his story I like is that he was a poor student and couldn't master

Latin during his studies. He would never have become a priest were it not for the advocacy of Bishop Victor Reed who put in a good word for him with the seminary.

Or you could celebrate Pica Bernardone, who was not really ever beatified, but was the mother of Saint Francis of Assisi. I kind of like the thought of thinking of today as Pio and Pica's day. It seems to have a nice ring to it.

We protestants tend to think that there are a lot more saints than those who are officially recognized and beatified by the processes of the Roman Catholic Church. We remember every day people who have blessed the lives of those who knew them and gone before us. In our congregation, we recognize all of the deaths in each preceding year on the first Sunday in November. It makes sense to us.

Still, from time to time, I enjoy looking at the lists of official saints of the Roman Catholic Church. It is clear that there are many people who have lived faithful lives and touched the lives of others and deserve to be remembered.

Actually, it can be quite entertaining to read the calendar of saints. If I didn't do that from time to time, it is unlikely that I would know that there is a Saint Copacabana. In fact she is the patron (or is that matron) saint of Bolivia. Bolivia has such musical names for its places. Copacabana is a town located on the shore of Lake Titicaca. Say that quickly three times in a row.

If you live here in Western South Dakota, you'll find lots of things that are named after saints. We have streets in Rapid City named for St. Patrick and St. Francis. We even have one named for St. Onge, who has a whole community to our northwest with the same name. I guess the fact that there was never a Saint Onge doesn't change the name of the town. The best guess is that the name refers to Saint Gemma of Saintonge. Not a lot is known about Saint Gemma other than that she died as a result of a prison beating. She was thrown in prison because she refused an arranged marriage. With the independent spirit that is a part of our culture around here, naming a town after a strong-willed woman seems to be in order. Saint Gemma's memorial is June 20, but that doesn't seem to spark any kind of official holiday in St. Onge, South Dakota. They don't have any parades or fireworks on that day.

Faithful members of the Roman Catholic church speak of saints as "our extended family in heaven." I like the notion that we are all related in faith and that our lives are somehow connected to the lives of faithful people in other generations. Our spiritual connections are as genuine and authentic as are the connections of genetics and genealogy.

Not being a member of the Roman Catholic church, I get confused on all of the technical differences when it comes to saints. Becoming an officially recognized saint requires a whole bunch of steps which I forget. I think that one is Beatified before one is

Canonized. Canonization is the official entry into the records of the Roman Catholic Church. The records are known as the Canon.

Not meaning to be critical of the Roman Catholic Church or its official records, I suspect that there are very good and faithful people who never make it into the official record books. God has many servants who don't gain official recognition. And God's love isn't limited to those who have been recognized by other living people as being special. God loves all of the people of this world and embraces them with the full glory of heaven.

So, happy Saint Pio's day. And don't forget the other saints whose faithfulness has contributed to the lives we live every day.

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September 24, 2017 – When We Have Enough

The stories of our people seem to be filled with examples of human desire to possess more than is necessary. We seem to have a problem when it comes to being satisfied with what we have, even when what we have is more than we need.

One of the first things that the people of Israel did after they had been led out of slavery in Egypt was to complain. "The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness." In their defense, they were hungry when they made the complaint. They also had not yet learned to trust God fully. Even though God had shown a series of miraculous events, even after they had been saved from their pursuers by the waters of the Red Sea, they weren't sure that God was really going to provide for them. They remembered that in Egypt, even when they had to work hard and their overlords oppressed them, they had food to eat.

We, who have read their story over and over again and who are living lives far removed from those events, know how the story ends. The people do not starve. God provides what they need: quail in the evening and manna in the morning. There is enough food to sustain the people as they travel. Their complaints were unnecessary. God was taking care of them all along.

The people of Israel, however, had not yet learned to trust that having enough food for immediate use was enough. When they gathered more than they could eat, "it bred worms and became foul." (Exodus 16:20)

We continue to wrestle with the concept of having enough. We continue to want to possess more than we need. Sometimes we convince ourselves that we deserve more than we need. It is that kind of story that Jesus told his disciples in today's Gospel reading: the parable of the workers in the vineyard. This parable makes even contemporary hearers squirm.

The story, as reported in the 20th chapter of Matthew, tells of a landowner who hired workers early in the morning for the usual day's wage. Then, later in the morning he hired some more workers. At noon he hired even more. Then, near the day's end he hired still more. Then, when the day's work is finished, he pays all of the workers, starting with those hired last. They receive a full day's wages. The same goes for each other group of workers. There was plenty of grumbling. Those who worked all day felt that it was unfair for those who had worked only an hour to be paid a full day's wages. When they saw that those workers were paid a full day's wages, they expected that they would get more. But they had been paid fairly. They were paid the amount that they agreed to at the beginning of the day. The landowner didn't short change them in any way, he simply chose to be generous with the others.

At the end of the day each worker had what was required to sustain his family, but some of them were disgruntled and felt that they had not been given enough.

We are like those workers in the vineyard. We want more than a day's wages. We want more than what is required to sustain our families for another day. We want savings and retirement plans and multiple fancy cars and bigger and bigger houses. We want security for our aging years and a full pantry. We want more than is required.

It doesn't take much more than looking around our city to recognize what abundance we enjoy. In some homes in our town, families are crammed together with too many people in too little space. There are children in our town who go to bed hungry. School officials have observed that there are many children who come to school too hungry to be able to learn. Service agencies have found that they need to send backpacks filled with food home with some children so that they will be able to eat over the weekend. This is not some strange third-world phenomenon. It is a daily and weekly reality in our own town.

Yet we continue to fill our pantries with more than we need. We continue to pour over the advertisements and seek the bargains and purchase in bulk so we will never have to fear running short of food. And like the people of Israel so long ago, we find that when we gather food in excess, it spoils. A recent Washington Post article, people in the United States waste \$165 billion worth of food each year. As much as 40 percent of food produced in America is thrown away. To put it another way, the average American throws away about \$400 worth of food each year, or nearly 1,400 calories per person per day.

Of course it isn't just food that we collect in amounts more than we need.

We collect all kinds of other things. And then we complain because we cannot afford the excess to which we aspire.

Maybe the reason we cringe a little when we hear the parable of the workers in the vineyard is that we see ourselves in the parable. This is often the case of Jesus' teachings when we consider them seriously: we find that we are as much a part of the stories as were the original listeners.

So today, as we worship, we will consider our desire for excess once again. We need to be reminded of this over and over again. It is a lesson that we don't learn easily. For us, as was the case of Israel when the people were first led from slavery, the problem is a lack of trust in God's ability to provide what is needed.

But God will provide. God can be trusted. That is the lesson we need to learn.

May we learn to be contented with enough.

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September 25, 2017 – False Values

The Neilson ratings people called again a week or so ago. This time we simply informed them that we don't watch television. They pressed a little bit and then accepted the fact that they had to get someone else to participate in their study. The last time, I let them send me their little book and dutifully filled out that I did not watch television each day of the ratings survey. I know that when they get the books with "no television watched" clicked for every time slot, they just toss them in the garbage - such books give them no useful information for their purposes.

So I don't really know much about reality television. I've never watched an episode of The Apprentice and the only episode of Survivor that I watched was when visiting family in another state. I've watched several clips from America's Got Talent on YouTube, but never a whole series.

I do know enough to state my opinion that the name is inappropriate. It is not about reality. It isn't even as real as professional wrestling. It is about a completely artificial set of circumstances, carefully manipulated for what the producers deem to be entertainment values, although, I don't find it entertaining.

Survivor is not about a team of people learning to work together to guarantee the greatest good for the greatest amount of people. It is about eliminating people and trying to be the last one standing after you've gotten rid of everyone else. Cheating and deception is encouraged. Neither of these qualities serve people well in real survival conditions.

The Apprentice is not about nurturing talent and mentoring leadership. It is about getting to its signature line, "Your're fired!" each episode.

America's Got Talent isn't about exposing audiences to a lot of talent. It is about eliminating very talented persons in an environment that only has one winner.

Dancing with the Stars isn't about people learning to dance, but rather about discovering tiny flaws and mistakes in the genuine attempts of very talented people so that once again they can be eliminated.

The net result of all of this so-called reality television is that those who watch are learning false values and poor citizenship. If you want reality, watch the self-sacrificing efforts of rescuers in Mexico City. If you want to learn about surviving, follow the coverage of hurricane recovery in Puerto Rico.

Here are three false values espoused by reality television that are becoming visible in very negative ways in our society and undermining the concept of citizenship.

Some people have come to falsely believe that anger is the same as seriousness. You can see the expressions of anger increasing all across the board. It has entered politics in a way that is very corrosive of our ability to govern ourselves. Anger and seriousness are not the same thing. Just because someone is angry doesn't mean that person is serious or capable. With all due respect to the President of the United States, "Rocket Man" is a line from a song made popular by Elton John, not a helpful way to refer to the leader of a nation in a speech to the United Nations. Instead of appearing to be serious in front of an international audience, the effect was comical, like watching an infant being ineffective in getting what he wants. John Waters said, "If you are angry at 70 you're a real jerk! Angry at 20 is sexy. Anger at 70 is lonely."

High school debaters all across this country can show politicians the value of learning to control anger when making effective arguments. In fact I believe that every legislative body in our country ought to discipline itself to devoting at least one day each year to listening to high school debaters wrestle with the issues. They would learn more about the art of persuasion and effective argument than is displayed in their usual mode of business.

People have come to falsely believe that restraint is a sign of cowardice. Nothing could be further from the truth. Showing restraint can require a huge amount of courage. Conversely, those who show no restraint at all frequently demonstrate cowardice. Genuine human emotions are worthy of expression, but uncontrolled are rarely helpful. Learning appropriate ways of expressing emotions involves discovering where and how expressing them promotes mental health. Those who are incapable of restraint also become incapable of contributing to society.

During the struggle for Independence in India and during the Civil Rights Movement in America, organizers learned that it was very difficult to teach the principles and

behaviors of nonviolence. However, when those concepts were well learned, those engaging in the struggle were far more effective. When the anger of the opposition produced consistent nonviolent action, those whose tools were anger were consistently overcome. Restraint can be taught and learned and effectively used for political and social change.

People have come to falsely believe that rudeness is the same as telling the truth. Actually, people can be rude and lie at the same time. It happens all of the time. The judges on the so-called reality programs may often say, "I'm not here to be polite," or "I'm not here to make friends." However, there is no excuse for a lack of common civility. A fair judge of character has to be fair. People can disagree and be civil with one another.

Robert Fulghum wrote a poem, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." We actually teach young children important lessons about behavior and working with others. I watch it in the preschool at our church nearly every day. Children learn that there is a great social value in being polite to one another. Compassion and empathy are not only virtues that can be taught, but when there is a failure to teach them, the individual fails to mature. When basic conscience is not learned at the appropriate developmental stage, usually before the age of 5 years, a child can be scarred for life.

I am no expert on television. I don't know anything about using the media to sell products or make money. But I do know that face-to-face relationships are much more honest teachers than the screen. If we want to teach the truth instead of false values, we'd best invest our time in talking to one another.

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September 26, 2017 – Contemplating my Investments

I guess yesterday was service technician day. Since it was my day off and since our dishwasher has been not working for a few weeks, I scheduled an appliance repair technician to come to our home to repair the dishwasher. I had made the arrangements a couple of weeks ago, planning it to occur on a day off when I would have time to visit with the technician and see what repairs were required. A broken dishwasher isn't much of a crisis when there are just two of us in the house. We can do our dishes in just a few minutes. The dishwasher doesn't really save us that much time compared with just washing the dishes in the sink, so we didn't mind waiting until the repair person could come at a convenient time.

So, of course, my day began with a call that the fire alarms had gone off at the church. I rushed to town to discover that dust in a smoke alarm had caused the excitement. It ended up being a good thing that we checked it out, because it could happen again and the sounding alarms were frightening to the children in the preschool. Besides, the

boiler had failed to fire for the second straight day, so we needed to have a couple of switches replaced to provide reliable heat for the building. After making sure that the repair technicians for the alarm system and for the boiler were on their way, I left the building in the capable management of a volunteer and returned home to do some chores.

Our appliance repairman arrived on time, and in addition to the dishwasher our in-sink disposer was not working. He looked at both, quickly repaired the dishwasher by unplugging and replugging a control panel, and determined that the disposer needed to be replaced. I'm not sure that I didn't pay \$100 for the technician to simply unplug, wait 30 seconds and replug to reset a computer, but the problem was solved with the dishwasher.

Meanwhile the boiler technician at the church had no way to determine whether or not the computer was calling for heat in the building and despite over the phone instructions to the volunteer, I needed to head back to the church to make sure that those repairs were being made. It turned out that the system was calling for heat all along and that I really didn't need to make that trip, but the faithful volunteer had already spent several hours in the church and showing my support wasn't a bad thing to do.

Repairs made both places, I headed to a big box home improvements store to purchase the new disposer. I had it installed, inspected for leaks and working by early evening.

While I was doing all of that running around, I was thinking about the "joys" of home ownership. For most of us our homes are our biggest investments and once we've figured out how to arrange an appropriate loan and get into our houses and start building equity we are faced with the reality that homes are in constant need of repair. Yes, it is true that they appreciate in value and make a good investment, but they also are pretty much in need of constant repair. I can do some of those chores myself, like installing the disposer, which saved about \$100. But some chores, like diagnosing the problem with the dishwasher, are beyond me and I need to hire people who know what they are doing.

A person my age is constantly bombarded with advertisements for retirement investments and the like. Being 64 and having not yet joined AARP is frustrating to that organization and they send me membership cards at least twice each month. So far, it has been entertaining for me to know they spend more on trying to recruit me than I would spend on membership were I to join.

I'm no expert in investment and the modest savings that we have are managed by investment professionals, who may or may not be better at that job than I would be, but at least I don't have to be thinking about money all of the time knowing that they are at work.

Still I've made some pretty sound investments in my lifetime. I have a kayak that I built and launched in the spring of 1999. At the time, it cost me just under \$300 to build the boat. At that time, I figured that going to a movie cost somewhere in the range of \$6 per hour. Using that price as a base line for the cost of entertainment, I needed to paddle about 50 hours to "break even" on my kayak investment. I easily topped 50 hours of paddling the summer I launched the boat That is 100% return on investment in the first year, something my stock broker has never offered me. Actually, it is more than that since the kayak, which is now 18 years old, is probably still worth \$500 were I to sell it. Add to that the 50 -70 hours I've paddled that boat each year since and the increasing costs of entertainment, it comes out as a pretty good deal. I've made other investments that didn't return anywhere near as well.

Following that logic, in place of increasing my retirement savings, I've since built and bought a few more boats. The theory is that when I retire, I will have more leisure time and therefore will need more entertainment. Leaving aside the simple fact that I've collected enough boats to now require a rental storage unit which costs money every month, it looks like I'm well prepared for retirement.

The math doesn't actually work out, however, because in order to get a full return on my investment, I'll need to paddle each boat about 100 hours a year, which comes out to 1100 hours or slightly more than a half-time job just paddling. It is clear that retirement won't be an easy job. Perhaps there is a flaw in my investment plan.

If you know anyone who wants to buy a canoe or a kayak, I might be willing to talk to them. On the other hand, if during my retirement I spent half of my time paddling and half of my time repairing appliances . . .

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September 27, 2017 – Pray for Puerto Rico

There was an anniversary last March that slipped by with little notice. At least it didn't make the newspapers around here. On March 2, 1917, more than one million Puerto Rican were granted United States citizenship. The deal, at its inception, wasn't exactly founded in altruistic ideas of human development or an extension of privileges to the citizens of the island nation. It was the result of a simple math calculation. The United States was on the verge of declaring war against Germany. That declaration came one month later, on April 2, 1917. The citizenship of Puerto Ricans meant that President Wilson had approximately 20,000 more bodies that could be drafted into the war effort.

Puerto Ricans didn't exactly gain equal status with their citizenship. After a century as citizens of the United States, US federal agencies control the island's currency, banking system, international trade, foreign relations, shipping, maritime laws, TV, radio, postal system, immigration. Social Security, customs, transportation, military, import-export

regulations, environmental controls. coastal operations, air space, civil and criminal appeals and judicial code. It is a modern example of colonialism. While the great European colonial powers have recognized the failure of colonial systems and have, for the most part, granted independence to the nations that were once colonies, the United States is effectively running a colonial system in Puerto Rico.

The system isn't lucrative for the citizens of Puerto Rico. The per capita income of Puerto Ricans is about \$25,200 - half that of Mississippi, the poorest state in the union. In addition, the retirement age has been raised, water rates have gone up, gas and sales taxes are among the highest in the United States, and electricity rates have skyrocketed. In 2013-2014, 105 different taxes were raised in Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico had its homeland invaded, its wealth exploited, its patriots persecuted and jailed.

The economy, largely administered by US governmental agencies and decrees, is failing. Recent attempts to balance the budget have involved the closure and sale of over 300 public school buildings, a cut of \$300 million from the University of Puerto Rico, a 10% cut in the federal retirement system, a cut in the minimum wage to \$4.25, and more draconian actions. But the debt continues to rise. The island has \$72 billion in debt, requiring \$6 billion each year just to avoid default. The tax base is shrinking, the debt is mounting and Puerto Ricans have little option other than going to the mainland to work in order to survive.

That was all before Hurricane Maria slammed into Puerto Rico. While our news is dominated by the President's twitter storms and the dysfunction of congress, the entire nation - some 3.4 million people remain without regular electricity. An estimated 1.5 million are without access to clean water. Communications systems have failed and countless residents are cut off from access to any physical infrastructure at all.

After nearly a week, President Trump finally did make mention of the crisis in Puerto Rico. Using his favorite method of official communication, he sent a curious stream of tweets that seemed to blame Puerto Rico's woes on internal dysfunctions and "massive debt" to Wall Street financiers.

As an unincorporated territory, Puerto Rico's citizens, while they are official citizens of the United States, have no vote in presidential elections and have no voting representation in congress. Yarimar Bonilla, professor of anthropology and Caribbean studies at Rutgers University wrote, "Vulnerability is not simply a product of natural conditions; it is a political state and a colonial condition. With a poverty rate nearly double that of Mississippi, failing infrastructure that has been neglected for more than a decade and a public sector that has been increasingly dismantled in response to the debt crisis, the island was already in a state of emergency long before the storm hit."

Nelson Dennis, author of “War Against all Puerto Ricans,” wrote: “Puerto Rico has been little more than a profit center for the United States: first as a naval coaling station, then as a sugar empire, a cheap labor supply, a tax haven, a captive market, and now as a municipal bond debtor and target for privatization. It is an island of beggars and billionaires: fought over by lawyers, bossed by absentee landlords, and clerked by politicians.”

We can argue the politics in the situation until we are blue in the face. Meanwhile Puerto Ricans are literally dying.

Many will be forced off of the island, which for now and for the foreseeable future, is incapable of providing the basic necessities of life for its population. They are, after all, citizens of the United States. Despite a century of being treated like second-class citizens, they are deserving of our compassion and our dedication to making serious changes to support them as fellow citizens.

Our fellow citizens are feeling very alone at this moment. As they sit in the dark, without access to power, unprotected from the elements because of destroyed roofs, facing thirst and disease from a lack of clean water, they feel very distant from those of us who are fellow citizens, but so far away from the realities of their plight.

Cash support for victims of Maria in Puerto Rico can be directed through the United Church of Christ, including our congregation, UNICEF, Save the Children, and other agencies. Emergency construction supplies from bottled water and hand sanitizer to extension cords, tarps and safety glasses can be donated as well. The web site United for Puerto Rico has information on what is needed and how to make donations.

You can also help by spreading the word on the plight of those suffering in Puerto Rico through whatever media you have. With the infrastructure in Puerto Rico down, those living there wonder whether or not we on the mainland are even aware of their plight.

We all can prepare to welcome and support those who will be forced to come to the mainland.

The history of the world is filled with stories of how colonialism has failed the people of colonized countries. After we have begun to clean up the mess and respond to the immediate needs of those who are suffering, the time has come for the United States to examine its relationship with the people of Puerto Rico and discover a new way for us to forge a better relationship.

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September 28, 2017 – Post-Adventure Hangover

I'm not a drinker. Although I do occasionally drink alcohol in social settings, I do not enjoy the sensation of over-consuming and my body does not need the calories of excessive drinking. As a result, I really don't know what a hangover feels like and I have no desire to find out. I think, however, that it must be a bit like the feeling I have experienced after taking a particularly adventurous trip. We've gone on some wonderful vacations over the years and I have really enjoyed hiking and paddling and traveling. I puzzle a bit, however, over the simple fact that returning to my regular life after an adventure can leave me feeling restless and irritable. If I have been recreating, why do I return to work with a feeling that is not refreshed?

Recently I gained a bit of perspective from reading an article in a paddling magazine. I discovered that I'm not alone in my sense of letdown after a wonderful adventure. Paul Caffyn described the depression he suffered after he kayaked around Japan in 1985. "the word side of sea kayaking for me was the immediate period following a successful trip. It was not one of elation and satisfaction, as you might expect." Instead a sudden lack of purpose left Caffyn feeling adrift. Neil Schulman observed that after days of steady exercise, nature and simple rhythms, walking into his own front door left him feeling overwhelmed. While he is longing to return to the outdoors, he has to deal with catching up on social connections, cleaning and storing gear, doing laundry, reading mail and email, and getting back into the routine of work.

Another part of returning to routines after an adventure is that we return to people who haven't shared the adventure. Although we try to describe what we have seen and done, the storytelling falls short of the reality and it is impossible to share the full experience with those who haven't been there and done that.

Additionally, returning after a trip reminds us all of our mortality. Being gone for a while, we come back to discover that things went on smoothly without us. We are reminded that if we were to die life would go on without us.

I have been thinking of that sensation of returning to the normal after a particularly exciting adventure as I have been preparing to speak to some new officers and their families. The sheriff's office, like other law enforcement agencies, holds regular ceremonies where new officers are greeted by the agency, given their oaths, and receive their badges. It is a time for celebration of the completion of a period of training and preparation and an opportunity for the new hires to get to know and be known by others in the agency. Our office has a rather recent tradition of having the chaplains address the new hires and their families. We usually speak a little bit about the unique stresses that are a part of law enforcement and ways that family members can support their officers. There is a lot of research about the hyper vigilance cycle, law enforcement stress, and stress management techniques that extend longevity in law enforcement.

The stress affects entire families and speaking with family members at the onset of an officer's career can build understanding and support for law enforcement professionals.

The usual talk, however, has become a bit tired in the last year or so, and I'm always looking at new ways to introduce material that are fresh and meaningful to those who are listening. It has occurred to me that those who work in law enforcement are a lot like my canoeing and kayaking buddies. They love physical exertion. They push their own limits. They enjoy excitement and the challenge of adapting to unforeseen circumstances. Each shift is a unique challenge that tests their abilities and extends their limits.

Returning to their own home after a particularly exciting shift at work is a bit like returning from a great adventure. There is a natural letdown and a sense that it is impossible to fully share the experience with those who haven't had it.

Cops, like kayakers, tend to hang out with each other even when they aren't engaging in their chosen activity. We all are tribal. We like being with those who we feel understand our experiences. That sense that some people can understand while others do not can create isolation from the community and even alienation. Kayakers, and some cops, make the situation even worse by hanging out together in places that serve alcohol and, after a while, have an additional hangover to deal with.

The solution is not to avoid others who share our interests and understand our passions. But it does involve cultivating honest and meaningful relationships with those whose lives are different from my own. I've learned to enjoy the comments I get from some church members about the fact they can't understand how anybody would want to crawl into the small cockpit of a kayak and then roll under the water. I know they don't know the feeling of a successful kayak roll and probably never will. But they are worth getting to know for their own reasons. Just because someone isn't passionate about paddling doesn't mean that person has no passion or doesn't enjoy excitement. Getting to know people whose pursuits are different from my own can be deeply meaningful.

It is easy for law enforcement professionals to assume an "us" and "them" attitude about others. After all, most of their shifts are spent with people who are dramatically different from them. They see the addicts and the victims and those who have strayed from the law. They deal with the angry and the violent and those who have lost control. Their jobs involve a lot of being with people who are not at all like themselves. But most of the world's people are not the same as those who end up in the back of a patrol car or in the county jail. There are lots of regular folk who would make good friends for law enforcement officers. Taking time to cultivate those friendships can help ease the transition from work to time off.

Probably anyone who enjoys an adrenaline high will experience a letdown. There are, however, many things we can do to ease the transition.

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September 29, 2017 – What the Advertisements Say

For the past couple of days, I've been reading through a small pile of canoeing and kayaking magazines. I usually read magazines as they arrive at the house, but for some reason I collected a small pile of partially-read and unread magazines. Likely I was distracted by some book I was reading that got more of my attention than the magazines. Perhaps it is because at the beginning of the summer I obtained a used tablet computer and have been reading books in the electronic format and that altered my reading habits for a while. I know that most of the magazines I read are available in electronic formats and can be read on the tablet, but I haven't gotten around to figuring out, one by one, how to switch from print editions arriving in the mail to electronic versions viewed on the screen.

The thing about reading several magazines that focus on the same topic in a row is that you end up reading a bunch of advertisements. Most of those advertisements are for things that I don't happen to need or want.

I have no plans to purchase led rope lighting for my kayak perimeter. I do own a small battery powered mast light to make my boats legal for nighttime paddling, but it doesn't get a lot of use. Most of my paddling is done in the daylight. And when I do paddle at night, I prefer to have the light behind me so my eyes adjust to the darkness and I can see. There actually is a lot of light available at night, especially when the moon is full and the clouds are few, which are the best nights for paddling. I learned years ago that if you use a flashlight to walk in the forest at night, you can see what is in the circle of light cast by the flashlight and the whole rest of the forest is dark. On the other hand, if you turn off the flashlight and allow your eyes to adjust, you can see a whole lot more. The same applies to paddling in the dark. Less light is better.

I'm not the customer for the latest fashion pfd. My old flotation devices seem just fine and I put them on, so I don't have to look at them. I don't care if the colors match the rest of my "outfit." I am a big fan of paddling safety, and I always wear a pfd, but I don't wear it for appearances. When I was growing up, we took great pride in not wearing matched outfits for outdoor recreation. It was common knowledge that the folks who had matched outfits on the ski hill didn't know how to ski. The real skiers had jackets with duct tape patches. We didn't want to look like the tourists when we went skiing.

I won't be buying a paddling performance computer that has a wireless sensor attached to my paddle and a digital display that straps to the deck of my boat. I have no interest in finding out what the computer determines to be my optimal stroke. I don't care how far I paddle when I go out. Boating is recreation for me, not competition. I understand that Olympic athletes need training aids, but I'm an old guy poking around a little lake in

a boat I built myself. And, quite frankly, anything that takes batteries doesn't enhance my enjoyment of the sport.

In that same vein, I don't need cup holders or usb ports on my boat. Yes, I've been known to take a thermos of coffee, though these days it will be decaf or herbal tea. But I like to stop and sip my coffee while I look at the osprey nest or the beaver lodge. I don't own the latest \$40 Yet cup and am not motivated to obtain one. I sort of like the little cup that screws onto the top of my old thermos. It is just the right size for a small sip. If the cup is too big, you have to stop too often. USB ports for what? To charge your cell phone? I'm still working through my disappointment that there is cell service at the lake. I used to be able to get away from my phone at the lake. These days I carry it in a dry bag just in case of an emergency, but I sort of resent the connection to the outside world when I paddle. I usually turn off the ringer because the sound is so jarring when I am paddling.

The other complaint I have about the ads in paddling magazines, and in virtually all outdoor magazines these days, is that they are mostly for clothing. I remember when we joined REI so we could get carabiners and harness webbing that wasn't available in our home town. We looked at sleeping bags and tents and backpacks. Now those items are relegated to the back of the catalogue which is 90% clothing. I've already ranted about clothing in this blog post and I left this complaint to the end of the list because I am perfectly capable of going on and on about how much I believe thinking about clothing detracts from the wilderness experience.

I paddle three seasons and get in more days than most recreational paddlers I know and I've never been tempted to purchase a \$1,500 dry suit. Clothing doesn't restrict my access to recreation.

Paddling is a sport that is always done on the surface. We don't dive deep underwater. But that doesn't mean that paddlers have to be shallow in their personalities. You wouldn't know that from reading the ads in the paddling magazines. I understand that those full-color bright, slick ads are what pay for the magazines. My subscription price doesn't cover the cost of writing, editing, printing and mailing the magazine to my home. And some of the best outdoor photos end up getting printed as part of the ads. Still, I wonder if the sport wouldn't be improved by those advertisers spending more time out on the water paddling and less time thinking about what they are wearing.

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September 30, 2017 – Thinking of Wild Places

I grew up just outside of the Gallatin National Forest. We used to hike, camp and hunt in the area that is now known as the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. It is nearly a million acres of undeveloped land on the Montana/Wyoming border. It was officially designated

a wilderness area the same year that I was ordained to the ministry, and I have not lived close to that part of the world since, though I have hiked in that region several times since it has become a wilderness area. The conversations that I remember prior to the wilderness designation were similar to many other arguments that I have heard about the best use of public lands. Prior to the designation, the multiple-use policies of the forest service allowed for grazing permits, mining and some logging in the area. For many years, people seriously proposed a road be built from the end of the Main Boulder River over the divide into Slough Creek, providing a new entrance into Yellowstone National Park at the Lamar Basin. Proponents of the road argued that it would alleviate some of the traffic in the Mammoth area and provide a great introduction to the park by giving visitors access to a great wildlife viewing area. Opponents of the road cited the truly remote and beautiful area that would be overwhelmed by too many people and the impact of the road building would cause too much environmental destruction. They argued that the wildlife would decrease with the increased human impact. Grizzly bears and people don't mix well and when there is conflict between the two species, the bears usually lose in the long run.

These days I live in the Black Hills of South Dakota which are much more explored and filled with people. The Black Elk Wilderness is a little over 13,000 acres in the center of the hills designated as wilderness in 1980. Hiking in the Black Elk wilderness is, however, different from hiking in the Absaroka-Beartooth wilderness. Each time I've hiked in Black Elk, I've run into groups of other hikers, usually several different groups in a half day's hike. It isn't hard to be alone in the Black Hills, but you always have the sense that other people are not far away. The feeling is different from the backpack trips of my youth where even though I had left my plans with people who cared about me, I knew that were rescue to be needed, it would require multiple days for others to reach us. Even the coyotes sound different when you are sleeping in a tent a dozen miles from the nearest road and wondering if your food is high enough in the air to be safe from a bear and hoping there aren't any smells in your tent that might attract that bear.

It is a dilemma that faces us all when it comes to the wild places. Do we tell others about the beauty we have witnessed and risk the place becoming too crowded? How much access do we provide? Will the most beautiful places become ruined by having too many people fall in love with them? Yellowstone National Park is, in my mind, one example of a place that has been overwhelmed with people. They love the experience, but the place seems at times to have been loved to death. Traffic jams at Old Faithful, excessive litter at Norris Basin, eroding trails in the canyon near the falls. Everywhere you turn the pressure of people is evident.

On the other hand, these are public lands. They are not the exclusive retreat of those of us fortunate enough to live near them. They belong to all of the people. There is an inherent selfishness in wanting to keep others out of the most beautiful places. I am reminded of that continually by the stream of tourists who flood to the hills every year. We receive more visitors at our home here than we did in some other places we have

lived simply because we live in such a beautiful place to visit. Who are we to try to keep this beauty to ourselves?

Additionally, public knowledge and recognition is required to save public lands from destruction. Back in 1963, Eliot Porter published a photo book, "The Place No One Knows," about Utah's Glen Canyon, now drowned by the Glen Canyon dam. The place was so remote and visited by so few people that its beauty was largely unknown and when the dam was proposed there were so few people who spoke out in favor of preserving the canyon that the canyon's beauty was easy to sacrifice for the water-hungry needs of the cities.

Actually, I think wilderness is better at defending itself than we believe, however. The truth of the Absaroka-Beartooth is that it is a difficult place to visit. The mountains are steep. The trails are challenging. The snows are deep. Avalanches are frequent. The Beartooth Highway, built in 1937 from Red Lodge to Cooke City, Montana provides access to the northeast corner of Yellowstone Park, but it is impossible to keep the road open once the heavy snows come in the fall. Even in the spring it requires serious snow removal and nearly constant maintenance. It is almost as if the mountains are repelling the idea of a smooth road, shifting and sliding and dropping large rocks on the road surface. The altitude of the pass is high enough for those who have trouble breathing to notice the lack of oxygen. Off to the west, the site of the old mining town Independence has no structures left with roofs and in a few more years there will be little sign that it once was a place where people lived. The wilderness is taking over again.

The hills where we live are remarkably resilient even with the crush of all of the tourists who visit every year. Former mining camps are disappearing. Unused trails disappear. Even the reservoirs which transformed the appearance of the hills are slowly filling with silt and plants. You can see that they will one day become meadows and eventually be reforested.

I absolutely believe that beauty exists even if it is not seen. However, there is something very special that occurs when sentient life recognizes beauty. Our connection with wild places is essential to our spirits and to the preservation of wilderness. So take a peek. Take a hike. Come and visit. But learn to travel lightly and leave no trace of your passing so the next visitor will witness the raw beauty of nature.

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