

Well, here we are again. There are some subtle, and not so subtle, indications that not much has changed since my last time of service with you. The minister's copy of the hymnal in the office is the same one that Bob handed to me years ago with strong recommendations to avoid certain songs and in which I recognized my own hand writing notating when each hymn had been sung. Two of today's hymns are ones that I had also selected in 2015. But today's Doxology had a big 'X' through it, which Bob didn't mark, implying that it shouldn't be used; I'm not sure why.

Kristi is still in the office, as efficient as ever. Yet the overly used furniture of years ago has finally been retired.

But most importantly, the very fact that I am here again is an indication that this congregation has reentered a time of transition.

After 28 years serving in the active army and a short stint in corporate management, I received what I describe as the 2x4 method of call into the ministry: God seemed to be whacking me upside the head with a 2x4 until I finally paid attention and entered seminary. As an engineer and physicist by education and all those years in the army, I just could not imagine myself as a minister. Apparently God has a far greater imagination, or sense of humor, than I do. When Art left in 2007 this was the second congregation for which I served as an interim pastor. I later returned in 2015 for another short period of service. As I begin my third time with you I guess that you also might have a better imagination as to my abilities.

I seem to be in a continuous period of transition. I have moved from long term interim work to what I call interim - interim service: a shorter period of service designed to allow the congregation enough time to find the correct person to lead them through the entire process of finding a long term pastor.

I have now tried to completely retire four or five times; but the way I describe it is that when I think that I have retired and it seems to be God calling me back into service, it is very hard to say no.

Perhaps it is God telling me that I am going to keep serving until I get it right!

Let's see if we can, together, get it right during this period of transition.

But that statement begs this issue of what it means to get it right.

There is an old story about a pastor who noticed a long time attendee hadn't been in church for while. After a few weeks, the pastor decided he'd better make a visit. He went to the man's home and found him alone, sitting in front of a blazing fire. The parishioner invited the

pastor in and directed him to a comfortable chair near the fire.

After an initial greeting, the two sat in silence, watching the roaring fire dance over the logs. Then the pastor took the fire tongs and picked up a brightly burning ember, which he then placed to one side of the hearth by itself. That lone ember's flame began to flicker and eventually died. Soon it was a cold, gray coal, with no life or warmth whatsoever.

Then the pastor picked up that coal with the tongs, and placed it back into the middle of the fire. Within seconds, it began to glow, with light and warmth, ignited by the flames around it.

As the pastor rose to leave, the parishioner said, "Thank you for the sermon, Pastor. I'll be back in church next Sunday."

Whether this ever really happened or not, our faith gives off more heat and light when we are gathered together as a worshipping community. From 2 Tim 1:6-7 we read: Fan into flame the gift of God ... for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

Part of 'doing it right' is to do it as a community of faith, gathering together, approaching the future, not with fear but with a sense of our God given power shaped by love and self-control. Perhaps one of the hardest concepts to grasp is the idea of God's unconditional love for all, all, of us. The more we understand about how freely given that love is, the more we are challenged to become more Christ like and also unconditionally share our love with the world around us.

In today's epistle reading Paul describes himself as the greatest of sinners before he encountered Jesus. His zealous defense of traditional Judaism led him to violently attack those who had put their faith in Jesus being the Messiah. It was only after he was physically blinded that he recognized his own spiritual blindness, realized that he had taken the name of the Lord in vain, had used violence, even violence unto death, to punish innocent believers. He totally and simply failed to use the power of love and self-control that he would later write about to Timothy.

Yet Paul did not wallow in self-pity or guilt over what he had done. He did not dwell on his own imperfect, sinful life. His focus was only upon describing the immensity of the grace of Christ, the grace that is a result of God's unconditional love for each of us, grace sufficient to cover all of Paul's sins. Although imperfect, he is perfected through the death and resurrection of Jesus. As a note, in the Greek this is an on going process: Paul, and we, are perfected and continue to be perfected. Perhaps a better translation is that we are being made more Christ like. It is through such grace that we

can move forward, leaving our own imperfections in the past and face a radically different future brought about by the love of God for us.

For those who enjoy fishing, a Minnesota church sign read: "Sure, you can worship God with a fishing pole in your hand, but when was the last time a walleye told you, 'Your sins are forgiven'?"

We, individually and collectively, are imperfect. In fact, even searching for the 'perfect' solution can lead us astray. We all too easily enter into times of dissent and confrontation, pushing our own 'best idea' without regard to what others think and say. We have trouble moving forward with any decision for soon we feel a need to defend our ego as well as our position. We have trouble hearing each other with ears full of love, tongues tempered with self-control. Those who do not sense that they are heard tend to wander away. Before long, we are nothing more than scattered embers, slowly losing the flame of God's gifts to us.

As Luke tells us, Christ comes searching for us, bringing all who stray back into the flock of the forgiven.

There are many things that happen only in movies. Only in movies, does every window in Paris has an unobstructed view of the Eiffel Tower. Only in movies, does a single cigarette butt thrown into a puddle of gas erupts in a massive fireball. A scientist investigating arsons conducted over 2000 experiments and could never get this result.

Only in the Gospel does God's love value each and every sheep so much that he searches for them regardless of why they have left the flock. Only in the Gospel do the 99 sheep stay together as the shepherd goes to search for the one missing sheep. Only in the Gospel does God's gift of the spirit of power and love and self-control keep the other sheep together.

Outside of the Gospel, the shepherd needs to search not for one lost sheep but first for the one that strayed and then for two and three, four and five more that decide to wander off in the shepherd's absence. Soon there is no community to celebrate their return.

We can talk about why we should attend church in terms of the church's survival or of the benefits we receive from being there, but it's enough to notice that when we wander off and Jesus comes looking for us, he will likely push us toward a flock, toward a community, toward a place of safety, sustenance and nurture.

And when we get there, there will be joy in heaven. "Just so, I tell you," said Jesus, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

It is all too easy to focus upon the negatives: the lost sheep, the lost coin, Paul's sinful actions. We can surmise that the wandering sheep was searching for some patch of forbidden grass and delve into what might lead us away from community. Or we can remonstratively shake our heads in disapproval of the lady who was so careless with her money that she could have even lost a coin. As for Paul, blasphemy, persecution of believers and his use of violence provide an opportunity to catalog all of our own sins.

Yet, the lost and the sin are not the gospel. The gospel is that regardless of our sins, regardless of how imperfect we might be, there is grace, grace that is sufficient to separate us from our past and free us to celebrate our future. The gospel is that God searches for us, regardless of why we might stray, and leads us back. This is God demonstrating unconditional love for us, leading and reuniting us with the community of faith.

Even more, all of heaven celebrates when the community is once again whole.

Imagine! We can bring joy to God and all of heaven when we gather in community to praise and worship God.

We can reflect God's love for us as we seek and reach out to others, inviting them to come and join us in our community of faith. By this, we can bring even more joy to heaven!

We can also reflect God's love for us as we strive to keep the community of faith together. Through love and self-control we must take care that we are not the reason one of our sheep decides to wander off.

Together, we can have the warmth and light of a raging fire of faith when all of the glowing embers are together, reinforcing one another, becoming far more powerful than when apart.

It is in community that we experience the gift of God: power and love and self-control.