

The Life of Our Times

Wayne Waibel – 10/02/2022

When I was younger, I aspired to many things. I wanted to be an astronaut. One of my boyhood idols was Dr. Albert Schweitzer, so I wanted to be an organist and a medical missionary. My awareness of politics was informed by the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations, but I grew up in a staunch Republican household, so my influences were very conflicted. I was raised a Presbyterian, but lived across the street from a huge Catholic church; surrounded by Catholic neighbors, so again – somewhat conflicting doctrines, creeds, and theologies.

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A number of years ago, while I was opening the church on a Wednesday morning, a brother and sister wandered in - on the off chance the church was open. They had grown up in the church. Mark lived in Waconia and Donna now lived in Lincoln, Nebraska. Neither had been back in a very long time.

They chatted excitedly as they wandered the halls reminiscing and pointing. "This used to have four classrooms, but I like how it looks now – all open," Donna said, while reviewing our lower level. They went on and on about vacation bible school and how it had been a very popular two weeks in June back in the day.

They wandered up into the kitchen, which hadn't changed much at all to their eyes. Then through the fellowship hall and into the sanctuary, where they noticed the quilts at the back. I just let them be - to point and remark and generally relive their past square by square.

After more than a little while spent on this, Donna turned to me and asked, "How come we're not up there?" Not knowing exactly how to respond to that, I simply said, "I think everybody made their own." Donna then offered, "Oh - well that's why we're not up there."

As the tour started winding down and they both reminded each other of their obligations to be somewhere, Mark abruptly turned to me and asked, "How did you come to be here?" I gave them a very brief answer knowing they were just being nice and had other places to be, but the question lingered, "How did I come to be here?"

The answer to that question is quite simple, really. My life has been an endless parade of leaps of faith. Some very small and some gigantic, but all taken with the same emotion - a quiet, calm elation.

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I'd be hard pressed to remember my first leap of faith, or my most recent. It's been pretty much a non-stop series for me. It's as though I know no other way. My end game has never been by intent, but the leap has always been deliberate.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus responds to the request from His disciples to "Increase our faith." His response is a tough one to preach on because it's both simple, "If you have faith of a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." – and confusing, "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'"

To lend context to this section of Luke, it would be helpful to note that the request to "Increase our faith," comes on the heels of Jesus reminding them that they need to forgive again and again, so the disciples are sensing that they need to prepare for the challenges they will be facing shortly after their leader has been taken from them.

And the parable of the worthless slave needs to be understood from the perspective of first century Palestine, not today's standard. We have an entirely different view of both the word worthless and slave, then the illustration Christ was imparting to His disciples.

It may help to realize that faith – while aspiring to great things, must also know how to kneel and serve. Faith cannot be measured, only enacted. The thing that I have always had going for me is the primary focus of gratitude, and gratitude always puts things in perspective. Increasing faith does not come about because of our belief, but because of the One we believe in.

The same truth that sets us free may just as truly add pain and frustration. We need to be able to handle either with equal enthusiasm. Much of our pain is self-inflicted, either directly or indirectly.

Our God is the One who is beyond our understanding, yet who stands with us. It doesn't excuse us from being an active participant in the world, or from engaging fully in the life of our times. It is impossible to change what we are unwilling to acknowledge. Sometimes it is our problem, not God's.

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Communities must remember the impact of their actions on individual people. Take Donna and Mark for example. They returned to the church of their youth – this church. It filled their hearts with a sense of joy and acceptance that what began here led to a full and prosperous life. And the new life they encountered on that pilgrimage became witness to that glory - and set in motion a stream of consciousness that answered the question, "How did you come to be here?"

He aspired to be an astronaut and he learned how to fly. He aspired to be an organist and became a musician. He aspired to be a medical missionary and became an emergency medical technician. The clash between his geopolitical world and his religious exposures were tremendously conflicted and yet – he became a pastor. One who would speak truth to power or serve French toast - with the same measure of commitment.

My life has not been extraordinary, but the folks I have encountered along the way have been. Starting with my mother and father – to my amazing life partner that left this world only after seeing to it that I was prepared for the next phase. I completed my training in the CRE Program nine days before Stacy's last day. And a year later I was seated in the fellowship hall of the First Presbyterian Church of Belle Plaine preparing to join you on your mission of ministry and servitude. How did I come to be here? By the grace of God – how else? Amen.