

Chapter 29-The 700 Mile Sermon

Preface:

I drove 700 miles to DePere, Wisconsin to attend a silent retreat with my sister. I planned to fade into the congregation during Sunday church but the Holy Spirit had other plans. This was one of those sermons where you feel like the pastor was talking directly to you. My plans for the future were about to be changed.

The 700 Mile Sermon

In August of 2014 I drove 700 miles from Branson West, MO to DePere, WI to attend a two day silent retreat with my sister. Time flies and I had not been to her house in five years. That was unbelievable so I planned the trip so I could stay with her for a week and we could have some brother-sister time. Technically we are cousins but after our spouses died we developed a brother-sister relationship. We are soul mates.

Completion of my book on the history of the Hudson Fire Department was in view. I was tired. I had developed a plan for the retreat to read the four gospels and make preparations to withdraw in to my cave and live an obscure life. I felt like I had accomplished many things in life and I was ready to just withdraw from a busy lifestyle.

I arrived on Friday for a purpose. Friday Night Fish is a tradition in Wisconsin but some might call it a religion. Sis introduced me to that tradition and I embraced it with enthusiasm. As part of the Friday Night Fish tradition she also introduced me to the State Drink of Wisconsin, the brandy old fashioned sweet. I embraced that also. So that night we, and other members of my Wisconsin family, gorged ourselves on fried fish. It was one of those nights of which fond memories are made.

Sis had a meeting to attend the next day and I had the entire day to indulge my vices in Green Bay and DePere. At Fleet-Farm I got some Green Bay Packer accessories for my pickup and my garage. To my joy, Enginehouse Services was having a sale on model train cars and I had a list in my hand as I entered the door. They had everything I had on the list and more. Their help and conversation was also helpful as I continued to grow my train layout. Then it was off to Cabelas for a T-shirt. Can't have too many T-shirts. They also had a sale but were out of the style and size I wanted. Not to worry, I went back in a few days and got one. I now had Cabelas T-shirts all the way from Green Bay, WI to Gonzales, LA.

Sunday we attended church as usual. I had not seen the new sanctuary and I was thrilled with its look and feel. Pastor Luther would be preaching as Pastor Lori was preparing for the silent retreat on Tuesday. I visited this church many times and in the winter of 2008 I attended services for several weeks, including the 40 days of Lent. Pastor Luther is an excellent teacher and I had learned a lot about God and the Bible from him. I put a lot of weight on his teaching and preaching. Besides that, when you are in a Lutheran church with a pastor named Luther Swenson you know that the roots of Scandinavian history and tradition run deep into the soil. This was one of those places where the seeds fell on fertile soil.

I settled into the pew contemplating life in my cave as Pastor Luther started his sermon based on 1 Peter 4:1-11. He made three major points to begin. "A mark of real and living faith is that it keeps growing in holiness; A faith that is dead to discipleship, dead to stewardship, dead to good works is a faith that is dead; To not pursue spiritual growth reveals a faith that is neither living or real". Now

I'm wondering how Pastor Luther knew I was thinking about going back to my cave. I had been to that cave several times in my life and it felt good.

He talked about his daughter moving out of the house to start her new job as a teacher in Minnesota. I'd had the experience of a daughter moving out of the house to start a new life as a teacher. Pastor Luther had my attention. With sermons, it is not always what the Pastor says but what you hear. What I heard was that as a Christian you have to keep moving forward, learning, studying, and doing while surrounding yourself with other Christians.

His second point, "A faith that is dead to discipleship, dead to stewardship, dead to good works is a faith that is dead." Pastor Luther is telling me that if I live an obscure life in my cave then my faith will be dead. Wow. Pastor Luther had no knowledge I would be attending on this day but he had written a sermon for me. I looked around the sanctuary but could not see Him, the Holy Spirit. Pastor Luther continued to emphasize staying engaged, growing, learning, and not giving in to our sins of the past. His words were contrary to my desire to again live in my cave. After all, I'm old, the greatest part of my life is behind me, I just want to coast the rest of the way. Somewhere in the corners of that sanctuary the Holy Spirit was smiling and saying "Are you listening?"

As Sis and I left the service I'm thinking, "I drove 700 miles to hear a sermon telling me I shouldn't go live in my cave?" Unbelievable. However, my Danish stubborn streak kicked in. By the time I get back to Missouri, I'll have plans in place to go live in my cave.

A day and a half later Sis and I drove to St. Norbert's Abby to begin the silent retreat. Sis had been to previous silent retreats and remained silent, much to the surprise of her sisters and cousins. I had never been to a silent retreat and we knew it would be a challenge for both of us to remain silent. It took effort but we did remain silent. Pastor Lori, wife of Pastor Luther, was leading the retreat. One of her first comments was to put all your preplanned activities and book readings on the shelf. The retreat would include scripture and other readings that would allow you to reflect, ponder, and absorb God's word for you. It is an acquired skill to be silent and listen to God speaking to you. We were here to improve our silent listening skills.

I had driven 700 miles to hear a sermon about staying engaged in Christianity. Now I am told to put my plans for the retreat on the shelf. What is going on here? I really wanted to read the four gospels, and do nothing else. I could see that wasn't going to happen and my stubbornness was somewhat intact. I decided to read the Book of Acts and I did. I pondered obscurity in my cave. I knew I had been guided to Branson West and to the Branson United Methodist Church to write and share my stories. I had written many stories and now I just wanted to live in my cave and coast.

Pastor Lori described the labyrinth just outside our rooms and gave us instructions about walking it, praying, and listening. In the past I had an opportunity to walk a labyrinth at a writers retreat but I never took it. I decided during this retreat I would walk this labyrinth.

I had more stories to write and I knew that; in fact I had a list of stories to write. On May 1 of 2014 I attended the Ozark Mountain Prayer Breakfast to hear keynote speaker Bobby Bowden. I knew about his fame as a football coach but it was a single event that tugged at my heart. That event was depicted in the movie "We Are Marshall". Coach Bowden, and his staff, shared their knowledge of the veer offense and placed crosses on their helmets in support of a recovering Marshall University. I've watched that movie many times and I always cry when the football players turn around the there are the crosses on the back of their helmets.

Coach Bowden spent an hour telling his life story about how God had been part of every coaching job he was offered. He talked about how God was an integral part of his life, including coaching,

and how he treated the football players. I was in awe of how God had guided the events, good and bad, in his life. I was very moved by his story. I got a chance to shake his hand and I thanked him for what he did for Marshall. Coach Bowden stated "It was all Lengyel", Marshall's new coach. Coach Lengyel deservedly gets the credit but Coach Bowden, a Christian disciple, gave Coach Lengyel a hand up when many would not. I left that breakfast moved and inspired that an 80 year life could be shared in an hour in a very moving and inspirational story.

As I started my labyrinth journey I studied its construction. Engineers are like that. Several people were walking and that helped me discern the path to the center. With the physical details of the path determined I began to focus on the spiritual portion of the journey. As I walked the labyrinth, Pastor Luther's sermon, the silent retreat, and the cave were heavy on my mind. It was warm and humid. The afternoon sun was hot on my back and I soon wished I had brought a bottle of water. I became more focused on the silence and on listening. I slowed my pace and let the moment soak into me. I reached the center and did a slow three hundred sixty degree pivot. I stood still and listened. The message was clear, my vision of an obscure life in my cave was fading fast. I walked the outgoing path of the labyrinth pondering that message.

Later in the year I was attending a workshop at church in Branson. Somewhere in the lesson was the discussion about sharing your spiritual story journey, why are you a Christian. It was recommended you should make an hour Keynote presentation of your life; make a 15 minute talk about your life, and have a 30 second elevator story to tell people why you are a Christian. Great food for thought and I recalled Coach Bowden's hour story covering more than 80 years of earthly life.

So as Thanksgiving drew near I was still thinking about getting into my cave. I could write stories in my cave and be happy. The weekend before Thanksgiving my girlfriend Linda and I went to Iowa for Thanksgiving with Maxine's family and the next day with my kids and families. After we got back home I read in the BUMC newsletter that Pastor Stacie was putting her sermons on the BUMC web site. I logged on and listened to the sermon she gave on November 23, the weekend we were gone. After I listened to it I was almost in shock.

I was certain that Pastor Stacie and Pastor Luther had never met but they were telling the same story. Sometimes I don't always listen the first time. Was the Holy Spirit sending another SIGN?

Pastor Stacie's sermon was about being thankful for the church and for being part of a church community. She based her sermon on Colossians 1:3-8. She talked about the need for each of us individually and as a congregation to bear fruit. She shared that we are not in our present place by accident. We are here because others supported us and encouraged us along the way. That struck home with me. I didn't get to Branson and BUMC by accident. I knew I was guided here but wasn't sure exactly why.

I paraphrase her as she continued by saying our mission was to spread the love of Jesus Christ, make disciples, and obey the Great Commission. Our job is to live that out in the world, bear fruit, and share our stories in community with one another. In doing so we are inspired by stories of the faith of others and by stories we share with each other. By now I'm beginning to think I might not make it to my cave.

She said we can't live the way we used to live because the church inspires us to live differently. We can't live the way we used to live, we must change the way we live so others might live. That's the meaning of the gospel. Now I'm sure Pastor Stacie and Pastor Luther are in cahoots. Pastors 700 miles apart preaching sermons with almost identical messages. The Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways you know.

After listening to her sermon on the computer I had to ponder Pastor Stacie's message. I was gone to Iowa the Sunday she gave the sermon. She had just learned how to post her sermons to the BUMC web page. These were not coincidences. I was meant to hear this sermon. I have listened to it several times. So in the matter of a few months I heard two sermons, 700 miles apart, telling me to stay engaged with living as part of a church family and be fruitful. Not exactly a lifestyle of obscurity in a cave. The opening to my cave was growing smaller everyday.

While I was researching publication of the Hudson Fire Department History book I learned a lot about self publishing, blogging, and web site creation as a means to share stories. Two sermons about staying engaged, plus newly acquired knowledge about sharing stories, could not be ignored. God incidences were occurring again. I have never thought I was a lost sheep but several times I have been a sheep that didn't want to be found. However, the Holy Spirit had found me again. The cave would have to wait. I reengaged and went to work on a method to do a better job of sharing my stories. Be patient, there may be another story to be written.