

## **The Road Less Traveled – June 15, 2018**

This past Tuesday I returned to Fort Worth from Annual Conference to perform a funeral for an old friend. This was a man I knew when I served his church more than 10 years ago. I was blessed to be the teacher for his Sunday school class, and I got to know Howard and his wife quite well. Last week I got a call from his daughter letting me know that he had passed away and that her Mom really wanted me to do the funeral.

We don't usually do that. As United Methodist clergy, the unwritten rule is that when you leave a church, you leave it, so as not to interfere with the ministry of the current pastor. But the church's current pastor was very gracious and invited me to come and be a part of the service.

As I was visiting with the Howard's wife and daughter late last week, however, I learned something that I did not know. Howard was a sick man. I remember him being quite sick when I knew him, but only because his wife kept me updated. But what I learned is that Howard was sick for practically his entire adult life. He had Crohn's Disease, and it plagued him from the time he was a young man. His family knew, of course, as did his lifelong friends. But I never knew the extent of his physical struggles.

I spent some time reflecting on that after meeting with Howard's wife and daughter. At first it bothered me. I kept feeling like I had failed as a pastor because I didn't know what all Howard was going through. But the Scripture that his wife chose for his service helped put it in perspective for me. She chose Ephesians 4:1-6. It begins with the Apostle Paul saying, "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." And Howard's wife Peggy picked the Scripture because she really felt he lived into Paul's call for Christians to treat each other with gentleness and patience, bearing one another in love. And I wholeheartedly agreed.

But there was something else. As I reflected on the Scripture it hit me that Paul's description of himself – as a prisoner in the Lord – was not just clever metaphor. Paul literally is a prisoner for Jesus. As he writes this letter, he is under house arrest in Rome, imprisoned for his commitment to Christ and his unflinching, unwavering mission to share the message of Jesus with anyone who will listen. And even as he is imprisoned, even as he is suffering for his faith, his commitment to the Gospel never wavers. In fact, it fuels him. It fuels his mission. For to hear this encouragement from one who is suffering so mightily is a shot in the arm for the Ephesian Christians who are languishing in their faith surrounded by a culture that constantly tells them they are wrong. You see the way Paul suffered, the integrity with which he faced adversity, and the fact that his faith never wavered in the face of that suffering, that was a ministry all its own. It was, without Paul saying a word, a powerful witness for Jesus Christ.

That thought helped me put Howard's life and faith into perspective. The truth is we all suffer, some of us certainly more than we would like. And the equal truth is that none of us like it, nor do I believe God intends us to. But the way we face our adversity, the way the world witnesses us

struggle through faith, makes a profound statement about what we believe. You don't have to look very far in our own church family to see people struggling mightily, and yet revealing something of Christ in their struggles.

I guess what I am saying is never forget the power that your personal experience has in the world around you. Never forget that what others witness can change lives, even the world. Never forget that our adversities – in the hands of Jesus Christ – can *be* the Good News.

See you Sunday.