

The Road Less Traveled – June 16, 2017

I begin with a confession today. I know that pride is one of the Seven Deadly sins. I know that boasting stems from pride. But I don't care. I'm going to do it anyway. Because I am proud of you. All of you. And I am proud to serve with you as your pastor.

Let me back up a bit. A couple of weeks ago, on Pentecost Sunday, we had a family drop in on our church for the very first time. It was an unusual Sunday, if you recall. During the 10 a.m. Sunday school hour, we received and prayed over the report from the *As For Me & My House* visioning team. We looked to our future together and asked God to bless our journey. Because we did that during the Sunday school hour, we didn't really have Sunday school that day, except in our Children's ministry. Naturally, this new family showed up at the beginning of the Sunday school hour and, thus, had no place to go. What they eventually did was sit in on the gathering and listen to our dreams for the future. Then they stayed for the 11 a.m. service.

The next day, I received a lengthy email from one member of the family, sharing his thoughts on the various initiatives that he heard presented by the Visioning Team. He was excited about most of them and had some suggestions about a couple. But all in all, I'd say we communicated an exciting and positive message for our future to people who walked in cold that day. And for that I was very grateful. It was another bit of affirmation that we have been correct in our discernment of our God-ordained path.

But what really struck me from this man's email was not his impressions of Aledo UMC after they had been here for a couple of hours. What got my attention were his impressions after a couple of minutes.

He wrote: "I must tell you we were all of us were ***duly impressed*** with ***everything*** about your church facilities and congregation yesterday. About three minutes after arrival -- while noticing all the hugs, laughter and joyous chatter among your arriving congregants -- I quipped, 'Boy, you sure can tell they don't like one another here.' Four F's I've learned in my work with churches -- 'Friendliness and Fun on that First Visit are Foremost for captivating visitors and promoting growth.'"

It's not just that they liked the church that makes me proud. It's that they liked the church before we did anything deliberate. Before I preached a word, before Kriszta struck a single note on the organ, before a prayer was uttered or a song was sung, a family who walked in the door for the first time just moments before felt at home. This felt like the place where people who love each other and do life together gather to worship and serve God. All that before we even had time to try to make a good impression.

It's a good reminder that what we do matters. How we act when we think no one is watching is important, because someone usually is. And for all the planning and practice that we do to make sure that the building is ready, the music is just right and the sermon faithfully communicates the Word of God, most people really just want to know who we are.

Friends, if you've wondered why we spent so much time and effort on our visioning process, that's why. Because most people looking for a church want to know who we are, if they will fit in, feel at home. It's why we spent so much time working to discern who we are and who God is calling us to be. Because it matters – a lot.

That's why I'm proud. Not because someone was impressed with our church, but because without even trying, you faithfully communicated who God is calling us to be. Without any sort of formality, you faithfully lived out the vision that we asked God to bless that very day. That we are a family. That together God calls us to live and grow and cultivate a passion for Christ that can change the world. And you communicated all that just by being yourself.

Well done, my friends. Well done. See you Sunday.