

The Road Less Traveled – February 7, 2020

Many years ago, during my two-year residency leading up to ordination, I went to the beach. That may not sound like much to report, but it was significant. You see, I am not a beach person. I go from time to time because my kids like it, but I've never cared for it. I'll take a lake or a river any day of the week. But I went – and went by myself even – because I was running out of time.

You see, one of the requirements of my residency was that I take a three-day spiritual retreat. I put it off for months because, well I had things to do and it seemed like a waste of time. But finally, with time running out, a wonderful couple in the church I served offered me the use of their beach house to complete my retreat, and off I went. I was dreading it and – truth be told – I took work along with me to do in case I got tired of being spiritual.

In the end, it was one of the most fruitful three days I have ever spent. I walked alone on the beach. I sat in the porch swing under the house and read. I sat on the beach at night listening to the relentless ebb and flow of the surf, realizing that I was perched on the precipice of something so much bigger and more powerful than I. And I prayed. I spent hours in silence, just listening for God. And I spent time talking to God. But not the quick five- or ten-minute prayer typical of the beginning of a full work day. But the slow, meandering unfolding of feelings and longings that come when time ceases to be an issue. When I returned home three days later, I vowed that I would do such a retreat on a regular basis.

It never happened.

Life got in the way. Work got more demanding. I was reluctant to go off and leave Melissa to deal with work and school and life with three kids. And it never happened. At least until a month ago.

At the suggestion of my boss, the District Superintendent, I took, for the first time, a 30-day renewal leave in January. I know it might have confused some people. And I know it put a strain on our church staff, who had to pick up much of the slack while I was gone. But my boss insisted that I would be able to better serve our church family if I immersed myself in my own spiritual journey. If I stepped away for a short time and simply opened myself to God.

He was right. Though the last week I was tired of being away and ready to get back to work – at least I learned I am not cut out for early retirement – the bulk of my time away was cathartic. To put it simply, it filled my spiritual tank. And in any relationship – whether it be husband and wife, parent and child, or pastor and church – that is vital. Because it becomes impossible to genuinely pour out when your tank is empty.

And so I want to leave you with two thoughts. One is simply to repeat what I said in church on Sunday: Thank you. Thank you to all of you for your expressions of support and well wishes. Thank you as a congregation for allowing me this time away. And thank you to the staff for making it possible. Secondly, I encourage everyone – whoever you are – to consider the value of stepping away. And I am not talking about a vacation. Vacations are wonderful, but they are often as busy and stressful as everyday life. I'm talking about taking a day or two to simply unplug. To turn off the television, the phone, the computer. To sit still. To be quiet. And to just be in the presence of God.

If you're like me, your first thought is it sounds like a waste of time. But I promise you it is not. It is simply time with God. And time with God is always fruitful.

See you Sunday.