

I've been reflecting on the last 4 years that I have been blessed to serve as the pastor of this beautiful place. 5 Julys ago, on one of my first drives to and from Fannett, I pondered if I could handle the 38 minute commute. I remembered Josh making the commute from Lumberton to Lamar for 2 years and how much he hated it. I then remembered my Dad making the commute from our home to base 20 miles one way for 16 years and how he left early to avoid traffic instead of getting caught in it. I looked to these two examples and said I can do it. Having an open and receptive mind I know helped shaped my experience. Some of you asked me after the first couple of weeks how it was going and I said honestly, I am enjoying it – I get to pray for the community. As I begin another year, I not only enjoy it, I treasure it. It is a time for me to slow down, listen to music, podcast, story or quietly ponder & pray. It is a time for me to marvel at the creation. I look for hawks, caracaras, eagles, swifts, owls, and deer to name just a few things.

And while I enjoy it, it could have been something entirely different. Instead of seeing it as a gift, I could've saw it as something to be endured. I could focus on the slow trucks I sometimes get stuck behind or the times spent waiting for a train to pass. I could be frustrated by those who tailgate. I could be annoyed that State Troopers and Sheriff's engage in safety checks – aka speed traps. I could focus on all the obstacles and that would produce something unhealthy for all of us.

In the last 2 weeks I've been thinking about how our attitudes shape so much of our lives. I've been thinking about what was great about getting to camp this summer for part of our vacation. It did so much good for my soul to get away and camp. I began listing the things that I loved.

- I loved the slower pace.
  - I enjoyed leisurely drives in the black hills driving on the Needles Highway, The Iron Mountain Road, The Wildlife Loop where most of the time the speed limit was 25 mph.
- The beauty of the scenery called to us to slow down just as much as the tunnels, pigtail turns and 1 at a time roads crafting a peaceful time and a reminder of the world beyond ourselves.
- The simplicity of making due with what we had and the adaptations we made when things did not go as planned.
- There was patience and peace.

Now lest you think I am a zen patient person. I am not! I get frustrated when lines are long or not moving. I always want everything done whenever I ask for it. I am constantly telling folks in my life to get moving or we will be late. I know I am in good company here in this place. In fact, some of us have learned some tough lessons about the need to slow down, be patient and asking for help. Why is it that in this place we call home we've moved from the Mulberry pace to a Daytona pace?

Some of you I know have read or seen the Harry Potter movies. In one of the later books, Harry wins a prize potion that will bring him luck so that whatever he intends to do will come to fruition. Now he is cautioned that he cannot use it for tests or athletic competitions. Nearing the climax of the book, Harry is convinced of the need to use it when confronted with a difficult task of getting someone, who does not want to, to share a memory. He takes it and immediately has much slower pace. His friends are pushing him to go and do it now before it wears off. But instead of going straight to the task he follows his instincts and goes takes a different path, including

visiting someone unrelated to the task at hand. Low and behold the person he needed to see was already there. Sometimes it does not make sense, that in order to accomplish a task before us we must do something unrelated. But I'm here to tell you that when the Spirit leads we are to follow.

This week, as many of you know Mary Callahan had an unexpected trip to the hospital. She & John absolutely did not have this in their week's plans. In fact they were set for 3Gs this week. I had also not planned on making a hospital visit. In fact, I had made plans to be at the office right after lunch on Tuesday and work through the evening. But my morning did not go as planned. I had stops that I had to make and no matter what I did nothing was going according to plan. But when I received word Mary was at the hospital I was less than a mile away. I was able to get to the hospital and visit with Mary & John quickly. I did not accomplish some of my plans that day but celebrated that I could be there. Little did I know that my unplanned day led me to see the Spirit teaching me about patience and peace. I chuckled to myself as that was the focus of worship this week. When Wednesday started to go the same way as Tuesday, I threw up my hands and just gave in. I convinced myself that if I did not get everything done by Thursday, that I had time on Friday and Saturday to do it.

Anyone want to guess how Thursday went? We'd guess that it went just as the other days had gone. But we'd be wrong. It still did not go according to my plan but I was able to have things fall together. So I began questioning and praying, how do we step off the everything on demand due yesterday merry go round??? How did we get here in the first place? How did we move from more simpler times to days of hurried busy-ness? It's not scriptural. In fact, while God promises to be with us, never have we

been promised that it will happen on our time line. Remember the Israelites who were being freed from Pharoah – had to go through all the plagues, cross the Red Sea AND through the wilderness for 40 years. Moses never even got to be in the promised land. We have a God whose work takes time and instead of enjoying the gift of time we hustle and bustle to get everything done yesterday. We serve a God who wants us to live a good life – one filled with love and taking delight in creation.

Almost 2 years ago we stepped out in faith to hire a new music staff person. Our dream was that our Director of Community Music would create & lead a music, art and drama ministry for the children & youth in our community. Imelda hit and we paused. The new year came and we cautiously took the first steps. Then COVID hit and we paused again. It kept feeling like this calling that we heard as a church would never be answered. Until a few months ago.

I shared with the Administrative Board in December that I was accepted into a continuing education cohort focused on developing pastor leadership for public life in rural communities. Since January I have been working every month with 9 other pastors as we look at the needs of our communities and how we lead our communities in faithful responses. We began looking at education and have now moved into mental health needs. Each of us were tasked with having conversations with our schools, CPS workers and others. As I listened, I began to hear again of the bullying in our community, the repeated trauma of devastating tropical weather events and covid in the lives of our communities. I kept praying and piece by piece things began to come together. It was not simply looking at the needs and

fixing them but rather seeing who we are and what we may bring to the needs that are present.

We are a community that loves deeply. It's not that we only love God. It's not that we only love each other. Rather we are a community that cares for each other who wants to reach those who do not have a faith community – a place they can call home. 2 years our Administrative Board worked on defining our mission & vision. It's been printed in our bulletins for the last two years. In these last few weeks I began to see the ways in which we are a HEART Community

- i. Healing – we pray for & support those who are in need of healing.
- ii. Engaging – we reach out to those around us
- iii. Artistic – this congregation is the most artistic group I've ever met. The ways in which milk jugs are turned into skeletons, wood is transformed into picture backdrops, food is grown in gardens, cards are crafted, cars are fixed & restored, buildings are organized, food is made and shared. Each one of us is an artist if we create in the image of God.
- iv. Relational – we are made to be in community and reach out beyond the membership of this place
- v. Transformative – we continue to let the spirit work in our lives so that none of us are the same as when we began.

So what do we do? We create spaces in our lives to listen, to be patient, to let the peace which surpasses all understanding lead and guide us in our work. We pause to see who may need company or encouragement. We continue to find ways to share the love of God in our lives and the in the lives of those we meet. Why? Because the Spirit of the

Lord is upon calling us to live faithfully. In the name of the Father the son and the Holy Spirit Amen.