

**Worship Service – First Congregational UCC, Eagle River, WI**  
**November 15, 2020**  
**L. Gail Irwin, Interim Pastor**

**Sermon**

- I. I took a road trip in September to Montana to see my brother, and on the way home, I took a detour through the Badlands Loop in South Dakota one morning:
- a. The Badlands are ancient rock formations that formed when the plains were a shallow sea (75 million years ago)
  - b. I had heard you can take a road that loops through the area and it would only add an hour or two to my trip, so I went.
  - c. When you approach the ranger station to pay your fee, you have no idea what you're going to see. It's a flat plain leading nowhere.
  - d. But once you start driving into the park, you get to a place where the earth seems to just drop off and descend into a valley of rock formations, canyons and alleys and pinnacles striped with layers of colored sediment. The guidebook says that these stripes "*represent pages of time*", eons of time!
  - e. This used to be an ocean!!
  - f. I stopped the car at a lookout and got out. I was surprised by the cliffs and the strange landscape. I tried to take pictures, but they didn't do justice to what it felt like there. Then I got back in the car and wound slowly through more rocky canyons.
  - g. It's a disorienting drive; it was overcast so I never really knew which direction I was going. I never knew what would be around the next bend. I kept getting surprised by sudden drops where you could see broad valleys, and then, at the next turn you would suddenly find yourself surrounded by steep rock cliffs that hemmed you in on all sides. It was mesmerizing; it felt sort of mystical!
  - h. And then, it didn't feel mystical anymore. After an hour, I noticed
    - i. Road workers were doing the usual summer road repairs; sometimes all the cars would have to stop and wait for opposing traffic to get through.
    - ii. I got behind an RV going at a snail's pace; he probably had all day, but I was just planning a quick detour! There was no hope of passing him.
    - iii. I noticed that my google map on my phone became useless out there among the rocks.
    - iv. There were no signs indicating how much farther this would go on.
    - v. I got very impatient! I started feeling like I was in a Chicago traffic jam.
    - vi. But then a little voice in my head whispered: *Slow down and look where you are! Look how beautiful it is! You may never be here again!*
    - vii. Then I would re-focus my eyes away from the line of traffic and out at the landscape; it was still incredible.
    - viii. Part of me wanted to get out of the car and experience that landscape with my whole body,
    - ix. But another part of me was getting claustrophobic and couldn't wait to get out of this strange rocky labyrinth.

1. I had another 9 hours of driving that day. And the road just kept curving with no end in sight.
- II. We've all become aware this year of wandering through uncomfortable new territory and having to be patient on this journey that seems to have no end.
  - a. The long journey of Covid-19 and living in quarantine; the wait for a vaccine;
  - b. the wait for an election to be resolved;
  - c. and all the personal waiting to get our lives "back to normal",
  - d. We don't know how long this odyssey will last.
  - e. But at the same time, while we plod along through it, we've been noticing things, experiencing beauty and truth that are worth paying attention to. We're learning things! We're changing. There is something important about this time!
- III. The early Christians lived with this tension: for them it was about the expected return of Christ and Christ's Kingdom.
  - a. As they came to follow Christ, they had taken a detour into a new, mystical territory, a new way of life, and left behind their old familiar religious routines.
  - b. They believed Christ was coming back any minute to usher in a new world. They were both excited and scared about the future.
  - c. And at the same time, they were learning day to day to let go of their old lives and start living a new way.
  - d. So they lived in a *liminal time*, a time between the old familiar world they had always known and the new Kingdom Christ had promised them.
  - e. They had to be patient, watching that promise unfold almost imperceptibly, in their hearts and in their community as they built the Church.
  - f. They had to wait, with fear and trembling and anticipation and impatience, for the unknown future around each bend.
  - g. And Paul was honest with them: the future would include some frightening times; but ultimately, something better was coming.
  - h. So for now, he asked them to focus on who they were in the midst of all the confusion and change: "*be found living at your best*," he said.
  - i. *Let God make the space and time for change in you, and the new world will come at the right time.*
- IV. At First Congregational, we are living in a "liminal time" too;
  - a. The word "liminal" means being in the middle of a transition. One definition says "*occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold*".
  - b. Think of yourself standing in a doorway. Now think of your whole congregation in that doorway.
    - i. You are on the threshold between a former pastor and a new pastor
    - ii. On a threshold between what churches used to be like before Covid and what they might be after Covid
    - iii. On a threshold in history between the Church of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the Church as it is evolving in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
  - c. You may not even be aware you are on this threshold.

- i. I have heard people ask, “When can we have worship again?” and I want to remind you: your church is having worship every week; now you just need to enter through a different door: a computer or on paper
  - ii. On days like today, when we share the sacrament of bread and cup on-line at our kitchen tables, we’re poignantly aware that we are living in a liminal time when nothing seems normal anymore.
  - iii.* But keep in mind that our churches have been on a historic threshold of change for several decades; now a pandemic has pushed us to step a little farther into a new world.
- V. For the interim pastor, this unfamiliar place isn’t scary, though!
- a. Interim Pastors are all about helping churches navigate change and unfamiliarity
  - b. We see this kind of time as brimming with possibilities
  - c. While you may feel lost in a labyrinth like the Badlands, as your Interim pastor I want you to stop the car, get out and really look around!
  - d. What are you seeing, hearing, feeling and learning?
  - e. In our experiences of being lost, we will learn about ourselves and God.
    - i. This is why Yahweh led the people through the wilderness, remember?

An interim period is perfect for *creating space and time for change*—the kind of change that will lead the Church closer to what God wants us to be in this new territory of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

- VI. So, let me close by getting practical and briefly explaining the work of an interim pastor:
- a. Ideally, I encourage a church to reflect on things that will help them learn about who they are and where God wants them to be: some examples are:
    - i. Reflect on your past history and what you learned from past experiences
    - ii. Study how you are doing financially
    - iii. Explore who your members are and how many are engaged with the ministry and how many have drifted off; who needs to be re-connected; who needs to be let go
    - iv. Assess your church’s unique spiritual gifts and resources God gave you
    - v. Assess the needs and opportunities that exist in your community that your church can address; including other non-profits to partner with
    - vi. And right now I’m interested in the question: *what are we learning from Covid 19 and quarantine that the Church can use to strengthen its ministry?*
  - b. This kind of reflection will help your Council and Search team and you to know where God wants to lead you, and what kind of pastor can walk there with you;
  - c. Your new Search Committee is already working on this
  - d. Your previous search team is meeting soon to talk about their past experience and what they learned.
  - e. Some learning has already been collected in surveys and previous profile work which will help you understand your church better.
  - f. I hope more conversation can happen while I’m with you, maybe including you.

- VII. It's common, during an interim, for people to feel the urge to get out of this uncomfortable wilderness of not having a pastor as quickly as possible. But I hope to slow you down a little for reflection, for space and time to learn, change and grow and be creative!
- VII. Ed Catmull, the co-founder of Pixar Animation, wrote a book about creativity, in which he says
- “There is a sweet spot between the known and the unknown where originality happens. The key is to be able to linger there without panicking.”*
- a. Let's linger with God a little in this liminal time, and while lingering, let's be found living at our best.
- Amen.