

October 13th, 2016

2 Timothy 3:14-17 “What We Bring Along the Way”

Peggy read two scriptures this morning. The first was from Deuteronomy 6 in the Old Testament. It's known as “The Shema” in the Jewish tradition. The first two words of the passage in Hebrew is, “Shema Israel” which means “Hear O Israel.” It talks about the importance of remembering the lessons of faith and scripture day by day throughout your life whether you're at home or away, whether you're active or resting. And it's not just “remembering” either. It's keeping these things close to your *heart* so that no matter where you are or what you're doing, you can *live* your faith. Peggy also read 2nd Timothy 3:14-17 in the New Testament which is a similar passage to the Shema in that Paul is encouraging Timothy to remember the scriptures because they help equip us for every good work we do when we're proclaiming Jesus' good news. When I read or hear these passages, I'm reminded of how important it is to draw from that deep well of ... *faith* ... or at least all of the parts that help build that faith.

As most of you know by now, I didn't grow up in a home that went to church. But for some reason from as far back as I can remember, I sensed that there was something or someone bigger than what I could perceive with my five senses. Maybe this is what the writer of Ecclesiastes meant by, “God has made everything beautiful in its time and has also set eternity in the human heart.” Maybe that was it. *Something* was there ... I just couldn't put my finger on it. Maybe that was the beginning of my faith journey. I don't know. But I strongly believe that in our journey of faith, we pick things up along the way that we can take with us. We take the best of what we learned and we put them in our “faith journey suitcase.” They're the things that we write on our hearts and use later when we need them.

One of the things I wanted to do this summer was take a tour of what I guess I'd call my favorite “holy places.” So I spent a lot of my Sabbatical time outdoors because in my lifetime I've discovered a lot of

those “thin places” on this earth that the Celts recognized. Places where the heavenly realms intersect with the earthly realms ... places where the presence of God feels closer than usual. So when I was traveling through Oregon visiting these “thin places” up and down the coast and in the Cascade Mountains, I found myself passing through my hometown, Veneta, which is about 12 miles West of Eugene. While I was there, I saw the first church I ever set foot in and snapped a picture.

This is Christ Lutheran Church, home of the only pre-school and kindergarten in town when I was four years old. Here’s where I was able to put a name to this ... presence I felt from the time I was able to remember. “God.” Here at Christ Lutheran the teacher lit a candle every morning when we gathered for class to remind us of God’s light and presence. It’s also where I first learned about the Bible and all the great stories contained in its pages. David and Goliath, Samson, Daniel, Esau and Jacob ... so many stories of heroes who did what they did because they had faith in God. That was my take-a-way from the Lutherans: God was present, and even though we couldn’t see God with our eyes, we could use things like candles to remind us of God’s presence. And if that wasn’t enough, we had the Bible to tell us about the ones who did heroic things because of their faith.

Then I thought, “Well, if I’m going to take a picture of *this* church, I might as well take the time to photograph all the other churches around here that impacted my faith journey!” So I turned south on Territorial Road and traveled about a half mile to Olivet Baptist Church. That’s the second church I ever set foot in. I went there because some of the friends I went to kindergarten with went there too. My take-a-way from Olivet Baptist church was the importance of memorizing scripture. In fact, that’s where I learned the Shema long before I knew what “Shema” meant. If you have the word of God committed to memory, you have it written on your heart, and if you have it written on your heart, it will be there whenever you need it. I loved Olivet Baptist’s Christian Education program. One of the best things about it was being picked up by the “Bible Bus.” The horn was the first seven notes of Jesus Loves

me. Olivet Baptist was also the place where I learned faith songs. Those have a tendency to live in your heart too.

Two blocks from Olivet Baptist was Eldora Flick's house. It was right next door to the grade school I attended. On Friday afternoons, you could be released from school 15 minutes early for "religious education." Can you believe that? In a public school! In *Oregon*! But it was the 1970s, right? Like Olivet Baptist Church, we sang a lot of songs and memorized a lot of scripture, but what was different here is I felt *loved*. Eldora was always so happy to see the kids who came to her house. One of the ways she showed her love was by making amazing home-made goodies. We always requested her rice krispy cookies because none of us could remember having ones as good as hers. The only thing cooler than Eldora Flick's Friday after school bible class was her summer Vacation Bible School! Not only did we get daily treats, we got to run through the sprinkler in her yard. What I put in my "faith journey suit case" at Eldora Flick's house was that you can get your head wrapped around the love of God much better when it's being taught and demonstrated by someone who genuinely loves you.

At this point, I'm afraid I took a detour on my faith journey for several years. I don't want to get into why because today is about the positive things we pick up along the way rather than the negative or even scary things that can be a part of the journey. Thankfully I found Campus Life during my high school years. Or maybe they found me. Campus Life is a ministry of Youth for Christ and I was lucky enough to be attending the High School with the fastest growing Campus Life program in the County. Like Eldora Flick's Bible School, I felt loved and valued. But the biggest thing I took from Campus Life is the idea that God is relational and desires to be in relationship with us. And if you want to get to know God ... if you want to know the mind and heart of God ... look no further than the life and ministry of Jesus. Campus Life is where I made my confession of faith. That's where I decided to follow Jesus. I think that might be where I learned that song too. But my Campus Life leader said I needed to find a church. Why? Because

Campus Life *wasn't* a church. I needed to interact with believers of all ages, not just kids my own age and our young adult leaders.

I had friends who went to the Veneta Alliance Church, so I thought I'd give that a try. And guess what?! That was Eldora Flick's church too! I never knew that! And ... she still loved me. I was baptized in the Alliance Church. The confession of faith that I made at Campus Life summer camp was just one step. The confession of faith in public and the ritual of burying my old self and arising as a new creature in Christ was the next step. The Alliance Church was where I learned about the Body of Christ with all of its strengths and weaknesses, its biceps and black eyes. I learned what it meant to be part of a church *family*.

My next church was about two miles south of Veneta in Elmira which is where I went to Junior High and High School. The Open Bible church was my first charismatic church. That's not true. Let's re-phrase that: It was the first charismatic church that didn't scare me on the first visit. I settled down here for over a year. Here's where I learned about how exciting worship can be! I *loved* the music. And it was played with gusto by this young woman from Jamaica who could really rock the place on Sunday mornings with the piano and organ. She also jammed on the guitar on Sunday and Wednesday nights. Yes ... there were times when I went to church three times a week. That's how exciting it was!

My next church was Faith Center in Eugene. It was that county's mega-church at the time. I actually went there at the same time I was going to the Elmira Open Bible church. I traded the Sunday evening service at Open Bible for Sunday evening service at Faith Center. And yes ... a girl was involved. Guilty as charged. Faith Center had great music too. In fact, what made the Sunday night services so special was often-times there were nationally known gospel and Christian music artists who would stop by and play. As often as I gripe about how I don't like churches that have so many people that you can get lost in a crowd, there's something to be said about being in a crowd of 800 – 1,200

people. It reminds you that you're not alone in the world. At Faith Center, I discovered there are *many* other people who love Jesus too.

This isn't a church, but it's the place where I discovered the church I'm a part of now. Was the music and worship as exciting as the Open Bible or Faith Center? No. In fact, that about drove me crazy at first. It took me quite a few years to appreciate the ... "classic" hymns of the church. And let me tell you, that was *almost* a deal-breaker, but what I took away from the Christian Church was how faith *and* reason were both valued. Nobody was telling me that you couldn't trust science or that it was the devil who planted dinosaur bones on earth to sow confusion and unbelief. In fact, this is where I learned that belief and faith were often two entirely different things, and that there's a reason why we call it the Christian *faith*. It's because following Jesus *requires* faith. This is where I learned to ask questions about faith and practice. This is where I learned to disagree with people over matters of faith without sacrificing the relationship. It's where I learned that you can study the scriptures using every academic discipline out there. It's where I met some of the best friends I've ever made, including the one I eventually married. It's where I struggled and fought with God over this call to ministry that I didn't fully understand at the time. By the way, God won. Most of all I learned to value and utilize a lot of the things I'd been squirreling away in my "faith journey suit case" along the way.

Some of you might be new to the faith journey. Some of you have been at it quite a few years. Some of you have been Disciples all your life. Some of you have journeyed in and out of different faith traditions throughout your lives. I'm glad you're here today. I love the church. I love this church especially. I hope that as a church we can bring all of the best things we've learned along the way to this table. The Lord's Supper is best when it's enjoyed a potluck. We all benefit when we get to enjoy the many flavors of the best fixings that we all bring to the table. May we celebrate unity amidst diversity, and do all things in love and charity.