

## What I Learned during My Summer Vacation

Many students and teachers in Kansas have been back in school for several weeks. Even though we're a bit late, I'm referring to this as our back-to-school Sunday. We already heard a bit about Sunday school. After my remarks, we'll hear from our students and teachers. We'll bless them and the MCC school kits that are on the worship table.

I don't know if this is still the case, but back in the days – long, long ago – when I was in grade school, a common assignment on the first day back in school was to write about what we did during our summer vacation. I just returned from two weeks away. So, I decided to tell you what I learned – or relearned or was reminded of – during my summer vacation.

Two disclaimers as I begin: First, my usual practice when writing a sermon is to begin with scripture and derive my remarks from what I read. Today I'm doing what I try to avoid – making my points first and then searching for verses related to those points. Taking verses out of context can lead to misuse of scripture. I hope that isn't the case today. Second, I recognize that there are exceptions to almost all my points. There are few, if any, statements that can be always true for all people in all situations.

Given those disclaimers, here are five things I learned during my summer vacation.

### **1. Connections with family and friends are valuable.**

During the first week, I flew to Pennsylvania to visit my brother, Ken, and sister-in-law, Laura. My Aunt Lois is staying with them now, so I got to spend time with her as well. We visited 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> cousins on my mother's side of the family. We looked at old pictures and recalled events that shaped our grandparents, our parents, and ourselves.

Aunt Lois connected with an old friend whose birthday is one day later than hers. They became pen pals when they were 9 years old and corresponded regularly for the next 7 decades until it became too difficult for either of them to write. It was amazing to hear them recall old stories while current events are difficult for either of them to remember.

Our need for connection became apparent to me during the second week of vacation when I traveled by myself in Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska. I enjoyed the places I visited and texted my brothers each day so there would be someone who knew where to start looking if I went missing, but after a while, I found myself longing for conversations longer than brief interactions with hotel personnel, restaurant waiters, and museum staff.

This desire for community is acknowledged in the second creation account found in Genesis 2.

*Then the LORD God said, "It's not good that the human is alone. I will make him a helper that is perfect for him." So the LORD God formed from the fertile land all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky and brought them to the human to see what he would name them. The human gave each living being its name. The human named all the livestock, all the birds in the sky, and all the wild animals. But a helper perfect for him was nowhere to be found.*

*So the LORD God put the human into a deep and heavy sleep, and took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh over it. With the rib taken from the human, the LORD God fashioned a woman and brought her to the human being. The human said,*

*“This one finally is bone from my bones  
and flesh from my flesh.  
She will be called a woman  
because from a man she was taken.”<sup>1</sup>*

## **2. Bodies are important.**

I read two books while on vacation. Technically, I listened to them as I drove. The first is titled *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church and What the Bible Has to Say* by Preston Sprinkle.<sup>2</sup> Preston draws from science, psychology, theology, biblical study, and real-life stories of close friends and acquaintances as he explores questions of gender, sex, identity, stereotypes, creation, sex reassignment surgery, pronouns, and bathroom debates. He repeatedly advocates for compassion, love, and acceptance into the faith community for all people, no matter how they identify themselves, from all Christians, no matter where they fall along the theological spectrum, conservative or progressive.

The other book I read is *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* by Amy Kenny.<sup>3</sup> Amy reflects on her experiences as a disabled Christian inside the church. She exposes unintentional ableism and advocates for church spaces where people with disabilities can fully belong, flourish, and lead. She states that much of the church has forgotten that we worship a disabled Jesus whose wounds survived resurrection. She rejects the use of disability as a metaphor when explaining human sinfulness and God’s gift of salvation. Amy challenges the church to start treating disabled people as full members of the body of Christ who have much more to offer than a story of a miraculous cure.

Both authors draw from the biblical stories of creation and incarnation.

The first account of creation in Genesis tells us that everyone is made in God’s image. Everyone is equally valuable in God’s eyes.

*Then God said, “Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.”*

*God created humanity in God’s own image,  
in the divine image God created them,  
male and female God created them.*

*God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good.<sup>4</sup>*

As Christians, we look to Jesus, who walked on this earth in a human body, as our example, teacher, and guide. The incarnation is summarized in the first chapter of John.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.<sup>5</sup>*

## **3. Knowledge and diversity enhance our lives and strengthen our communities.**

What I learned from my own family history and from reading books about transgender identities and living with disabilities helps me to understand myself and enhances my relationships with people whose experiences are different than mine.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:18-23, *Common English Bible*

<sup>2</sup> David C. Cook, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:26-27, 31, *Common English Bible*

<sup>5</sup> John 1:1, 14, *Common English Bible*.

What I've learned about systemic racism affected the way I reacted when visiting the museum and battlefields in Gettysburg. What I've learned about the Doctrine of Discovery affected the way I reacted when visiting the Missouri River Basin Lewis and Clark Visitors Center in Nebraska City. It's important to hear the stories of everyone involved in historical events. We can honor dedication to country and the discoveries of exploration while acknowledging the damage done to people who were here before us or who we forced to work for us. We need to admit that the language of fighting for our rights and pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps often cloaks our desire to protect the status and privileges we've gained through the inequities built into our social, financial, and political systems.

On a lighter note, when I'm on vacation I try to eat food that I can't get in Salina. I ate delicious meals from Thailand, Egypt, the Middle East, El Salvador, and Ethiopia. In my travels I heard people speaking Pennsylvania Dutch, Arabic, Spanish, German, Amharic, and several other languages I couldn't identify. I saw people wearing straw hats, suspenders, plain dresses, bonnets, saris, turbans, and hijabs. For some reason, on a Saturday in Lincoln, Nebraska, I saw many people wearing red. I eventually figured out that the initials GBR stand for Go Big Red. Where were the purple Wildcats and the blue Jayhawks – or the orange and blue Fighting Illini?

We are called to love people no matter what they eat, what language they speak, how they dress, or what team they cheer for. We do well to remember the many admonitions throughout all of Scripture to care for those need extra help.

From Deuteronomy 10: *So circumcise your hearts and stop being so stubborn, because the LORD your God is the God of all gods and Lord of all lords, the great, mighty, and awesome God who doesn't play favorites and doesn't take bribes. He enacts justice for orphans and widows, and he loves immigrants, giving them food and clothing. That means you must also love immigrants because you were immigrants in Egypt.*<sup>6</sup>

From Matthew 25: *"Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.'*

*"Then those who are righteous will reply to him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'*

*"Then the king will reply to them, 'I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.'*<sup>7</sup>

It takes all kinds of people to make a thriving, interesting community. How boring it would be if we all dressed, thought, and spoke alike. Our communities, our country, our world should be a foretaste of the scene described by the prophets Isaiah and Micah when people of all nations will stream to the mountain of God and worship together.<sup>8</sup>

#### **4. It can be scary to go to church.**

I visited two churches while on vacation. The first Sunday I attended Groffdale Mennonite Church in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Even though my brother and sister-in-law knew a family who attended there, it was a bit uncomfortable to discover that the door we entered led to the front of the sanctuary, not the back.

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<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 10:16-19, *Common English Bible*

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 25:34-40, *Common English Bible*.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 2:2-4 and Micah 4:1-4.

The second Sunday, I worshipped at Lincoln City Church in Nebraska. I learned of this church through videos posted on YouTube, but I didn't know anyone there. It took a bit of courage to get out of my car and walk into the church.

I'm thankful to say that I was warmly greeted in both churches while not being overwhelmed with attention. One service was more traditional while the other was more contemporary. I'm grateful that there are many ways to worship God.

### **5. Choosing the right path can be challenging.**

Verses from Psalms assure us that God is with us on our life's journey. *You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*<sup>9</sup> *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*<sup>10</sup> These are good promises to remember, however, the realities of life make it difficult to find our way.

I used Google maps and my Garmin GPS navigator as I was driving. I appreciate the way these devices helped me explore the unfamiliar. With their assistance I found interesting places, beautiful views, good food, and comfortable places to sleep (hotels, of course, not in the great outdoors). But even with their guidance, I ran into unexpected snags and needed to change course multiple times. Here are a few observations from my vacation journey that I think relate to my life journey as well.

- Sometimes GPS suggests unnecessarily difficult routes.
- Sometimes it's the only route.
- Sometimes you're told to continue to the road, and you thought you were already on the road or, you wonder exactly which road you're being told to take.
- Sometimes you run out of data.
- Sometimes you just have to make a choice.
- Sometimes you're disappointed with the destination.
- Sometimes you discover unexpected delights along the way.
- Sometimes the trip back to the hotel makes more sense than the trip to that day's destination.
- Sometimes the road begins to look familiar
- Without the big picture it's hard to know where you are and how it fits together.

There's more I learned during my vacation, but I'll stop there. It was good to go away, and it was good to return. No matter what journey you are currently on, may you go out in peace and come back in joy. On the road in between, may you find what fills your heart, feeds your mind, and inspires your imagination.

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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 16:11, *New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 119:105, *New Revised Standard Version*