

Journey to Hope, South Dakota
Romans 12:9-21
August 28, 2005
Lay Preacher: F. William Gray, III

Who wants to go to South Dakota in August? I didn't.

I left Buffalo on a very hot, humid and cloudy morning. When I changed planes in Chicago, the weather wasn't much better.

Fortunately I had a window seat with great views. As we flew northwest, I watched the outskirts of Chicago become the flat plains of Illinois and then the rolling fields of northern Iowa.

Below me, the handiwork of land surveyors 150 years ago was evident. Even up high the grid of parcels for 19th century homesteaders was visible. Big square farm tracts spread in all directions. Only the irregular courses of rivers and the development of villages and cities seemed to spoil the mathematical precision of straight roads and right angled lot lines.

As we approached South Dakota at a lower elevation, I could see the farmhouses and barns on the big agricultural squares.

As I looked out the plane window I thought of two things. The first was my agreement with Tom Yorty that I'd be Westminster's lay preacher this morning. I had told Tom I'd be glad to give some reflections on my church committee trip.

My second thought was that the countryside below reminded me of the grid of a big crossword puzzle.

I need to tell you something: I love puzzles. The New York Times Sunday Crossword Puzzle is my favorite. There's a gimmick to these puzzles - a puzzle within the puzzle which unlocks the key to solving the whole thing. This inner puzzle is amusing and clever. When I can figure out this inner puzzle, it's a wonderful "aha" moment. I feel great for having solved the riddle and even better when I complete the whole puzzle - or, at least, most of it. I don't always succeed. When I do, there's a sense of accomplishment. It's very reassuring and energizing "to get it"!!

Here I was landing in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, about to embark on something different. I wasn't excited about being there, yet, I was nudged by the image of a big puzzle. I didn't get it, but I was intrigued.

I was in South Dakota as a member of a committee of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). As many of you know, the General Assembly is the highest governing body of our Church. I am a member of an interesting group: the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns. The committee was created in 1993 to advocate for full inclusiveness and equity for women in all areas of life and work in the church and society.

There are 12 members of the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns and we were chosen to represent the diversity of the Presbyterian Church: we are nine women and three men; six are members of the clergy. We have four women of color. One of our members is Hispanic; one is an Alaskan native person; one is African American and one is of Asian descent. We come from nine states.

We are a good group. There is much talent and a diversity of experience. We respect and listen to each other. We enjoy each other's company. While I wasn't excited about visiting South Dakota, I looked forward to being with these friends.

Before my trip to South Dakota, I had attended two meetings of the women's advocacy committee. The first was at Princeton Theological Seminary and the second was in San Francisco.

The locations for those meetings were so pleasant that Molly joined me and we added on some personal vacation time. When we learned that the summer meeting would be in South Dakota, we were not too excited. Molly decided that I would travel solo to this meeting.

It turns out we were wrong about South Dakota.

South Dakota was beautiful, the weather was pleasant and the meeting experience was one I would not trade. I met interesting people doing good things - the things mentioned in today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans (12:9-12), people responding in love by helping each other.

Let me share some impressions of the trip with you.

- At 8:30 a.m. on the morning after we arrived, we were greeted by volunteer drivers from rural congregations who would take us on our long day's journey in rural South Dakota. Some had already traveled over 100 miles to meet us. A colleague and I chose to ride with Paula Larson a school teacher from Artesian, South Dakota who was lively and talkative. Paula and her husband Don have four children. One of their daughters is a graduate of Union Theological Seminary in New York and is an ordained Presbyterian minister working in her husband's native Scotland. The daughter was flying home that weekend to officiate at her brother's outdoor (barefoot) wedding. Paula's son - the groom to be - had substance abuse and other problems in his past. He had turned his life around and Paula was grateful for God's many blessings.

Paula teaches at a school on an Indian reservation about 93 miles from their home. She shared with us the joys and challenges of her teaching and the problems facing her Native American students. Paula, like a lot of farming

community wives we learned, works outside the home at a job where she can obtain health insurance for her family. The unavailability of affordable health insurance is a major problem for farm and rural families.

The time flew by and soon we were outside DeSmet, South Dakota.

- I had expected some "Prairie Home Companion" in South Dakota. What I got in DeSmet was "Little House on the Prairie". Literally.

DeSmet is the site of the prairie homestead of the Ingalls family made famous in The Little House on the Prairie books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. We traveled across the grassy plains of the Ingalls' homestead in horse drawn covered wagons. We sat in a one room school house where a proper school marm taught us about the lives of homesteaders. We explored a sod house, visited a wooden house and barns much like the one the Ingalls built and *had much too good a time*. Of course, I promptly called Molly on my cell phone and told her what she was missing!

What a subtle introduction the Ingalls Homestead was to our understanding of rural life on the northern plains!! We could see how hard life on the prairie was. How far apart families lived. We got a sense of the challenges that faced those who pioneered this area - and of those who failed in their efforts. We could sense the deep connections to the land of families whose ancestors claimed and tamed what are now farms that have been in the same families for five generations or more.

- Let me tell you a little about the geography of South Dakota. The state is essentially a rectangle. South Dakota is divided pretty much in the middle by the Missouri River flowing from north to south. Not surprisingly, that division also marks a change in the state's topography. Locals refer to East River and West River, South Dakota.

We were in East River, which rises from gently rolling green farmland where cattle, corn and soybean farming predominate to flatter land with grain crops as you move west to the Missouri River. East River is the home of Sioux Falls, the state's largest city.

The state's total population is about eighty percent of Erie County's population and the folks in South Dakota live in an area 73 times larger than Erie County. Communities are small, some very small, and far apart in South Dakota!!

West River South Dakota is ranch, rather than farm, country. It is drier and more sparsely populated than East River. West River is where tourists go - for the

Badlands, Mount Rushmore, the Black Hills and, of course, Sturgis - home of the annual big gathering of Harley-Davidson bikers.

One statistic sticks in my mind - it takes 30 acres of West River, South Dakota land to sustain a cow and calf for a year. Thirty acres!! It's a hard life - even for those who love it. And many do love that life.

Here are some other memories of South Dakota:

- The Rev Dick Poppen is a farmer who also ministers to three churches. Every Sunday he travels about 120 miles to preach. He is a person of vigor and imagination. On that sunny August afternoon, standing on the highway between his corn and soybean fields, Dick told us about the problems facing farm families - low crop prices, the high costs of seed, fertilizer and pesticides and this year's increase in fuel prices which is changing 2005 from a profit to a loss year for most farmers. One of the biggest problems is with large farming corporations and other "outsiders" who pay big prices for farm land sometimes only for hunting or investment purposes. While high land prices mean a good return to those who decide to sell, they prevent local farmers from acquiring and holding on to the land they need.
- Many of the problems in our cities are also problems in rural America. Domestic violence, hunger, poverty and mental health problems are a few of the issues we discussed with women from all over South Dakota who came to meet with us. In rural America, finding the critical mass to solve a problem or finding the appropriate solution to a problem seems so much harder. The resources are fewer and more dispersed.
- Two young farm wives - Crystal and Julie - delighted and inspired us with their stories. They clearly love their lives, their independence and their responsibilities. Wives and husbands are partners for marriage and business on the family farm. Crystal and Julie are proud of what they do and accomplish. Their informal presentation to us was real and unpolished. Not used to public speaking, Julie said she could speak to us only if she imagined us as sheep and cows!
- In South Dakota, like Western New York, youth leave home in large numbers for job markets elsewhere.
- People who live on farms and ranches don't feel that what they do is valued by the rest of America either as fellow citizens or as consumers of what they produce.

Before going to South Dakota, Molly suggested I read a book of essays and reflections by poet Kathleen Norris entitled Dakota: A Spiritual Journey. The insights and reflections of this literate

woman - who moved from New York City to the house in which her mother had grown up in remote, isolated West River South Dakota - are inspiring and thought-provoking.

One of Kathleen Norris's stories is about 35 member Hope Presbyterian Church in Keldron, South Dakota. The church is a small frame building sitting alone on the open plains in the middle of what many of us would call "nowhere". In that sense, it's like many churches in South Dakota.

I had a chance to share dinner and conversation with rancher Carolyn Petik of Hope Church. In 1998, her women's study group at Hope realized that their community was being badly hurt by the globalization and corporate take over of agriculture. The tiny Hope congregation - by itself - decided to do something.

Here's some of what Kathleen Norris wrote about Hope Church:

"Hope's members take seriously their responsibility as members of the world's diverse and largely poor human race. A few years ago, reasoning that people who raise food (and often have a hard time getting a price for it that covers their expense) should know more about why so many in the world can't afford to feed themselves, they conducted a study on the politics of hunger. To conclude the study they invited an expert on the subject to come from Chicago to address church people in the area. They also studied the ethical issues of raising animals for food. As ranchers who know the life history and temperament of every cow in their herds, they were dismayed to discover the inroads factory farming had made in American agriculture"

The small Hope congregation in remote West River South Dakota began a process that resulted in a compelling and well documented report by the General Assembly in 2002 called We Are What We Eat. I am ordering copies for Westminster and hope that many of you will read it. It is eye opening and could be transforming.

I can only imagine that God acting in a way - mysterious even to the folks at Hope Church -- inspired and emboldened them to start on the road to something important.

I think what the folks at Hope Presbyterian Church did is part of God's work in the world.

I should share with you something about my perspective on life. I believe in a God present in the world and in our lives. God's work is not always evident to us or understandable. I know that when I recognize the presence of God in someone or something, it's an "aha" moment. For me, it's like seeing disconnected pieces of the puzzle of life coming together.

I am grateful for my South Dakota experience.

As I thought about what I would tell you today, I realized that information about the work of our church and the problems of rural and farm families is important and should be shared.

But for me the most important message I received - the key to the puzzle image that guided me, in a sense, on my trip to South Dakota - is that to do the work God calls us to do requires an openness to hear and see differently: to have our own "aha" moments and the energy, confidence and hope that come from "getting it", understanding the message or vision.

That crossword puzzle image was helpful. I was reminded that if you look, listen and "noodle" your way through a problem (that is, work your way through a problem by reason and intuition and inspiration), you have the potential to understand it better. And, in the process, you have the potential to discover your own connection to the problem and its solution.

When I think of small Hope Church - seemingly alone on the prairie - and what has evolved from its work, when I think of the food pantry in remote northwest South Dakota started by a Presbyterian lay woman pastor, or when I think of "Hands Across South Dakota" - a program (started by a woman and supported by our One Great Hour of Sharing contributions) which addresses the problems of drought and famine and poverty--when I think of these accomplishments, I am inspired and strengthened.

If love of God and God's love for us can motivate these who are less materially blessed and smaller in number than we, think of what we can do and accomplish together.

I had to go to South Dakota to find a truer sense of hope for us here in Buffalo.

For this I thank God. Amen.