I am very much enjoying Pastor Elbert’s sermon series in which he has been sharing with us his experiences as a pilgrim on the Camino De Santiago. I am finding his stories of what he carried and those he encountered who provided him guidance to be moving and inspiring.

Elbert’s stories have caused me to think about my own travels. Not five hundred mile pilgrimages. Not walking. I am talking about driving in my car. Being guided by this: my phone, and the map app on it. It is a very effective tool for getting from point A to point B, but I have issues with it.

While I use my phone for navigating me from point A to point B, it doesn’t ever tell me enough. It shows me where I am in the moment, and what the next few miles of the journey may hold, but that’s it. It alerts me to the next turn, but it only provides me with guidance one turn at a time.

When I play with the screen to see more of the route, I am asked by the program whether I want to re-center my view. And that is when I have a real problem.

I prefer maps. When I look at a map, I can see the whole of my journey. Where I’ve been. Where I am at. And where I am headed. For me, being centered is about knowing my place in the whole journey, and not just being located in a moment with a view of my next turn. When I navigate with my phone, it is about me, and where I am and where I turn next. When I look at a map, I see so much more. It is about the whole and me finding my place and path in it.

One of the meetings I had this week was with a group that is beginning to plan for the 200th anniversary of our congregation, which will occur in 2021. We have a wonderful history of being God’s people in this community. At the same time, we have our FORWARD initiative, which is about tending to the soul of who we are as Birmingham and Berkley First, with the goal of helping us get a clear vision about where God is calling us.

Day to day, we as a congregation go from point A to point B with planning and programs. In our FORWARD process, we are intentionally remembering when we have been at our best and naming how we experience God in our midst now. We are taking a season to step back, widen the view, and get a broader perspective on what ministry and mission might look like moving
forward at Birmingham First and Berkley First. It is an important process. I am glad that those of you who were in worship last week had the opportunity to participate in the FORWARD process survey. I encourage those of you here today to sign up for one of the FORWARD Listening Circles, so that you can hear and tell stories of your own journey with God. The past. The present. The future. Each is critical in our journey together.

* * * *

The disciples on the road to Emmaus were pretty sure that their experience of God in Christ was an event in the past. In the section just before our reading for this morning, the disciples explain to the stranger who has joined them on their journey the events of the past days. They are events recounted in the past tense. They had hoped Jesus was the Messiah. But he was gone. There had been some reports of a missing body, but they had not seen anything.

Then, as the disciples were drawing near to their destination and it appeared that the stranger in their midst was going further, they extended hospitality and invited the stranger to stay with them. And when it came time to break bread at the table, the stranger took the bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to them. And then their eyes—and hearts—were opened, and in the broken bread they experienced Christ with them.

In the celebration of holy communion, we remember the final meal Jesus shared with those closest to him. In the communion liturgy which we will share together in just a few minutes, we recall the words with which Jesus instructed his disciples: “Take, eat, this is my body, broken for you, do this in remembrance…” In holy communion we remember.

As was true for the disciples on the road to Emmaus, there is also a present reality in the meal we are about to share. In our communion liturgy, we petition God, saying: “Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and cup. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ….”

Here, now, in the celebration of holy communion, we believe there is a real presence of God in Christ Jesus. As United Methodists, we do not believe the bread and juice to be literally transformed into Christ’s body and blood. At the same time, we do not believe this is simply a memorial meal, an acting out of a past event. We believe that through the power of the Spirit at work in the community as we celebrate this sacrament, Christ is present. In the words of our doctrinal statement on holy communion: “The Wesleyan tradition affirms the reality of Christ's presence, although it does not claim to be able to explain it fully.” As was true for the disciples who invited a stranger to break bread with them, when we break the bread and lift the cup, we believe it to be an occasion when our eyes might be opened and our hearts warmed by the presence of Christ with us, here, now, in the present.

Past. Present. Future. We pray: God, “by your Spirit, make us one with Christ, One with each other, and One in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at the heavenly banquet.”
The heavenly banquet. It is described earlier in Luke’s gospel, in chapter 13: “And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God.” It is the future feast imaged by the prophet Isaiah: “… the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.” (Isaiah 25:6)

We celebrate communion. We remember. We experience God’s presence with us now. And we look forward, we lean into the promised future. Past. Present. Future.

* * * *

Today, as we celebrate World Communion Sunday, we intentionally celebrate communion with sisters and brothers in Christ around the world. We are intentional today in framing our communion celebration to take in the whole map, the whole globe.

Numerous articles and books describe the power that goals have in motivating achievement. When our goals are clearly articulated, when we know where we want to go, when we can clearly see our destination, then we tend to get there. Having clear goals causes us to see things differently. We begin to discover ways to move towards our goals that were not previously obvious to us.

This is the concept behind the visualization that elite athletes and other performers practice. They see their desired optimum outcome, and that helps them to direct their energy and focus to that end. How does this work? I’ve heard it described as being like what happens when you look for your car in a parking lot. You know what your car looks like. You have a clear picture in your mind of what you are looking for. You have a clear picture in your mind of what you are looking for. So you can quickly scan the lot, process information, make decisions, and head to the car which is yours.

At least most of the time...

Knowing what you are looking for is critical to finding it. Knowing where you are headed is essential if you are going to get there. This morning we intentionally set aside the divisions that divide the Christian church so that all who follow Christ might join in a common day of celebrating holy communion.

There is a goal for God’s people. As we break bread and share the cup in union with sisters and brothers around the world, we act in anticipation of the goal. God’s goal, God’s future, is that heavenly banquet that we anticipate. World Communion, when people from the north and south, east and west—black and white and yellow and red and every combination and hue thereof, people who live in Asia and the Americas, Africa and Europe and Australia—when people the world over will gather in union at God’s table feasting as one family: this is what we anticipate today and every time we celebrate the feast of communion.

What does the future hold? Where is this all leading? And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and feast as sisters and brothers around God’s table.
Do I worry about what tomorrow’s headline might be? YES. World leaders engaging in name calling. Wars and rumors of war. An emerging norm that disregards basic civility and respect. Citizens of our own country without water and sanitation. Do I worry about what tomorrow’s headline might be? YES.

Which is all the more reason that I am here.

I am here to remember: God has already acted to redeem me, to reclaim the divine image from all that would distort it.

I am here to experience: Here and now, God’s presence in Jesus Christ; the power and peace of the Spirit at work in our midst.

And I am here to anticipate the future—the heavenly banquet, world communion, a clear vision to be fully realized in God’s time. Is it here yet? No. But this morning, we take bread and juice, conscious of the fact that as we do so with brothers and sisters around the world, we do so as one with those from whom we are divided by human borders. And as we do this, we are reminded that God’s goal and our goal as God’s people is world communion.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. published an article 1958, when the struggle which he led was just beginning. From that article comes this often-quoted excerpt:

> Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but that same Christ arose and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. Yes, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Dr. King, grounded in the church, believed in God’s future. Even when the struggle seemed long, even in the darkest of days, King was able to convey hope and live and act in an equality that others were not willing to recognize.

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Past. Present. And, yes, the future.

With a clear goal in mind, we behave, we act each day as if the goal is fully realized. In how we treat each other. In how we speak to each other. In the dreams and aspirations we take into each new day, we live into the future we experience in world communion, the future that includes all—ALL—around God’s table.

We are invited to God’s table, to remember, to experience, to anticipate. Past. Present. Future. Let us now prepare to come to this table, to find our place in God’s unfolding story.

Amen.
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