

July 30, 2023

Let us pray.

O God of Love, O God of Truth;

Let us say strong things gently and gentle things strongly.

Let us speak the truth in love to all  
and love the truth that lives in each.

Let us hear the truth as we each need it and live that truth.

O God, we heed it through Jesus; Your Word & our Lord.

Amen.

### **A Pioneer Faith**

*Exodus 19:1-6*

*“On the 3<sup>rd</sup> new moon after escaping Egypt...they entered the wilderness of Sinai. There they camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai and Moses went up to God and the Lord spoke to him, saying ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagles wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, obey my voice and keep my covenant and you shall be my treasured people, a priestly kingdom, a holy nation...’”*

*Hebrews 12:1-3*

*“Since we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, let us put aside any spiritual, soulful or sinful burden and set our sights with perseverance on the race set before us, looking to Jesus as pioneer for our faith... Consider him, who endured so much that we may not grow weary or lose heart...”*

The year is 1803. The place is the American frontier.  
In local newspapers an add like this appeared:

**“Recruits wanted, un-married, brave and healthy,  
good hunters, experienced in survival.  
Duration 2 - 3 years. Unknown dangers.  
Pay -\$5.00 a month with land allotment on return.  
Clothing allowance and weapon provided.  
Travel by canoe, keelboat, horseback and walking.  
Soft-handed gentlemen and slackers need not apply.”**

This was an add placed by Lewis & Clark;  
looking for members of the “Corps of Discovery”;  
the famous team created to explore and survey  
that vast wilderness called, “The Louisiana Purchase”.

They were looking for people with a “Pioneer Spirit.”  
And where would America be without a pioneer spirit?  
Where would YOU be?

You certainly wouldn't be here!  
Unless any of you are Native Americans;  
most of us are here because some ancestor of ours,  
was filled with a pioneer spirit,  
who came from a foreign land,  
willing to face unknown dangers;  
willing to give up or escape from what was  
and come to America seeking a new promise.  
This nation wouldn't be what it is today

without a “Pioneer Spirit”;  
So isn't it the height of hypocrisy  
in the name of Christ and spirit of America  
that so many try to hinder & condemn that spirit today!

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Then there's the church.  
None of us would be sitting here in this pretty sanctuary,  
enjoying our freedom of worship  
celebrating the love of God in the spirit of Christ  
without centuries of “Christian” pioneer spirit.

Recently I was doing research on  
“women martyrs of the church”.  
There was Felicitas, a Roman mother,  
who converted to Christianity and tried to evangelize  
many others.  
She was reported to the Emperor,  
and executed for her faith in 162 -  
AFTER she witnessed the death of all of her  
Christian sons.

There was Cecilia,  
a noblewoman of Rome who also converted  
and converted many others as well.  
She was condemned to death  
by Emperor Marcus Aurelius, in 176;

to be suffocated by the heat of great fires.

It is said she didn't even break a sweat,  
so she was beheaded instead.

There was Perpetua, a roman citizen of Northern Africa,  
who was condemned for her Christianity  
by Emperor Severus in the year, 203.

She was thrown to wild bulls into the arena  
who did not kill her,  
so she threw herself on a Gladiator's sword instead.

This puts a whole new perspective on those churches  
who recently fired so many women ministers.

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It is fair to say there would be no Christianity,  
without a "pioneer spirit".

And our bible lesson from the Book of Hebrews  
celebrates that spirit.

*(Let us) set our sights with perseverance*

*on the race set before us,*

*looking to Jesus as pioneer for our faith...*

But the pioneer spirit inspired by Jesus  
may not be exactly the same one  
recruited by Lewis and Clark.

Unless you're going into the Catholic priesthood,  
that "unmarried" stuff doesn't apply.  
Nor do the hunting and survival-ist skills.  
But certainly the bravery and perseverance still pertains.

And certainly duration of spirit is different.  
Jesus calls us to a life-time commitment, not just 2- 3 yrs.

As for the pay & reward - it isn't in money or land,  
despite what Joel Osteen and other prosperity gospel  
preachers say.

(Although, some modern ministers might relate  
to \$5.00 a month and a land allotment -  
called a "manse" or "parsonage"!) )

And seldom do we hear about keel-boating  
when it comes to Christian witness.  
Although Dorset Church takes great pride  
in its canoeing and hiking.

As for "soft-handed slackers",  
well that describes way too many ministers I know;  
and without them, who would preach?

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So this morning the question becomes,  
what are the key qualities of the “pioneer spirit of Jesus”  
that should define our faith as Christians.

There are 3 traits I want to highlight this morning.  
The 1<sup>st</sup>. is - ADVENTURE.

Pioneers have a particular attitude toward the unknown,  
they have a unique spirituality toward fear.

They face it with faith.

They face it with bravery.

They enter it with soulful trust that whatever comes,  
life will be a journey -

a journey into the grace & love of God.

Increasingly, I wonder how many Christians have  
an abiding spirit of adventure.

Increasingly, I see people seeking

- a faith based on greater security

greater protection of their status quo -

NOT a spirit of adventure,

- I see a faith driven by controlism and perfectionism,

NOT a spirit of adventure,

- I see a faith mimicking consumerism:

an avoidance of adventure, a demand of guarantees,

& when things don't go their way, a love to blame.

From whence does this come?

The New York Times recently did an article entitled, "*The Relentlessness of Modern Parenting*".

It highlighted that never before in history has parental supervision been more constant and controlling.

Certainly, parenting is one of the scariest moments of life.

And, in this world where mass-media fixates on fear and worst-case scenarios,

more children than ever before in history -

are never out of sight, never out of communication, never out from under their parent's agenda.

It's been called a spiritual "umbilical cord".

This echoes what Richard Louv saw decades ago in his great book, "*The Last Child In The Woods*".

He says Nature is increasingly seen in 2 ways: either as a tourist destination or place of danger.

To the pioneer, nature was a classroom of adventure and a teacher of self-confidence and life-lessons.

Yesterday was Saturday.

On a typical Saturday as a 10 year old,

Mom or Dad would say, "Get outdoors",

and I remember my neighborhood friends and I

dashing to the woods to build hide-outs,  
chase and play games, explore caves and climb trees,  
for the better part of 8 hours,  
till we heard - literally heard - the dinner bell.

Louv says those pioneer-building times are long gone  
and modern children are increasingly sufferers  
of “Nature Deficit Disorder”.

This may explain why our annual youth church canoe trip  
is fading away.

15 years ago we had to limit kids going on the trip  
to ONLY 3 TIMES.

Now we have to beg, plead and cajole kids to go at all.

The world of professional counseling  
is wringing its hands over what to do  
with the epidemic of anxiety and suicide in children.  
And one of it’s concerns is this new era of  
“relentless parenting”.

Could it be that greater “pioneer spirit” might be a cure?

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Close to “adventure” is a 2<sup>nd</sup> trait - DISCOMFORT.  
Our bible lesson shows us that Discomfort is clearly  
a defining piece of the Pioneer Spirit.



*Consider him, who endured so much  
that we may not grow weary or lose heart...” (Vs. 3)*

A “Masochist” is someone who seeks pain and get’s  
satisfaction from suffering,  
and Christianity was never ever meant to be a religion  
of Masochism.

But it WAS meant to be a pioneer religion,  
where believers weren’t afraid of discomfort,  
and weren’t afraid from doing the right thing  
because of it.

Christianity was not meant to be a faith of convenience  
but rather a faith of conviction.

And the fact is, discomfort happens.

It may not come from trials & tribulation of a wilderness  
- as it was for Moses and the Israelites.

But physical diseases,  
the natural aches, pains & losses of aging,  
the heart-searing experience of untimely death,  
and the greed and lust of human beings  
will always be around us -  
and will always come discomfort.

The question is, “How will I face it?”

Some Christians trick themselves into thinking they can avoid it.

They try to immunize themselves from it, by prayer, by piety, by magical thinking.

But the pioneer spirit, on the other hand, accepts it as an inevitable part of the journey of life. The pioneer spirit sees discomfort as a teacher. Charles Dickens once said,

**“Suffering has been stronger than all other teachers. Where I have been bent and broken, I am now the strongest.”**

And poet Kahlil Gibran once said,

**“From suffering comes the strongest souls. People of great character are seared with scars.”**

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Now, some Christian theology tries to confuse us by saying, **“Jesus suffered so we don’t have to.”**

But this leads us to a 3<sup>rd</sup> key trait in The Pioneer Spirit.

The Greek word for “pioneer” is “*archegos*”.

It means “to lead like a trail blazer”.

Jesus is a trail blazer not a trail ender.

You may have noticed lately, more bedraggled-looking hikers looking lost along the

streets of Manchester.

It's that time of year when thru-hikers  
are coming off the Appalachian Trail.

25 years ago, back in 1998, I was one of them.

Before coming to be your minister,  
I hiked end-to-end on The Long Trail,  
as a kind of therapy and pilgrimage:

- to say "Good-by" to my old congregation,  
whom I loved,
- and to prepare myself to say "Hello"  
to you, my new congregation,  
whom I hardly knew at all.

As a thru-hiker, I remember fixating  
on those white blazes that marked trees every 100 ft or so,  
telling me I was on the right trail.

A thru-hiker learns to see them at a distance;  
to pick them out at a glance amongst all the trees.  
And they know when to stop  
when you haven't seen one a while  
- and go back to the last blaze you DID see.  
And re-orient yourself on the right trail.

That is precisely the role of Jesus in the life of a follower;  
to blaze our trail in life.

Alas, there's many so called "Christians"  
who don't like FOLLOWING Jesus.

They far more prefer to have Jesus confirm  
where they've already been and who they already are.  
They want Christian faith as a stamp of approval  
for their politics, their economics,  
their personalities and ethical choices,  
their personal habits and world views.

Oh yes! It's fine if God forgives them  
of sin of their past,  
but when it comes to being changed;  
when it comes to plotting their path for the future,  
they don't like taking guidance.  
They're hearts, minds and souls aren't open  
to The Pioneer Spirit of Jesus.

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In closing, the other day I was working with a couple  
helping them plan their wedding.

They were worried about their vows.

They wondered if it was mandatory to include

**"in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer,  
in joy and in sorrow, as long as we both shall live."**?

**"It all sounds so negative"** they complained.

I told them they DON'T have to say those vows,  
but life comes with lots of negatives  
and its those negatives that actually best define  
the power of love.

They went home to think about what they would promise.

Dear friends - Life is an adventure -  
an adventure filled with laughter and tears,  
joy and heartbreak,  
pleasure and pain.  
No matter how hard we try to avoid it,  
that adventure will find us out  
and thrust us into a journey-  
some kind of scary journey into the unknown.

But we are blest with a Pioneer - Jesus Christ -  
who has seen it all, lived it all  
and dearly wants to show us the way.

Amen.

Prayer of Pastoral Care Sunday, July 30, 2023

Psalm 82 gives a plea for justice, “*Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.*” Our prayer response is:

God of mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Faithful God, you have blessed us with your grace that we might live as people of justice and peace. Stir In us your power and fill us with the love of Christ, that we may be always eager to serve your promised kingdom’s reign of peace. Confident of your faithfulness, we bring to you our prayers for the world.

God of mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of mercy, throughout the ages you have led us through trial and hardship, speaking words of promise. We pray for the mission of your church, that it may plant and grow faithful people to serve others in love.

God of mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the world, and for those who hold authority in government. Enable policymakers to enact justice, transforming places of violence and conflict into havens of respite and peace. We pray for the people of Ukraine, for civilians and military in the midst of war. We pray for people facing conflict in Israel, in Niger, in Myanmar, and elsewhere in our world.

God of mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for your creation, as so much of your world, its people and all creatures are living with the effects

of world-wide climate change. Be with all who are enduring record-breaking heat waves, wild fires, and floods throughout the earth. Surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses may we join other faithful pioneers in our response so that your creation may flourish in these days and for future generations.

God of mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who suffer. May our care for them reveal your healing, as we bring before you those on this church's prayer list.

Creator God, inspire us to trust in the things we cannot see, and to ground our faith in your promises to us. Give us the clarity of your vision, that we may serve you all our days. We ask this through your Son, our Lord. Amen.

*HYMN # 499 When Love Is Found*

OFFERING Our God, who is faithful, blesses us with an abundance of gifts. In gratitude, let us offer all that we have and all that we are for the love of Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

\*DOXOLOGY

\*PRAYER God of the ages, we faithfully add our gifts to those who have gone before us throughout the generations. Bless these gifts that they may yield an increase for the spreading of your love in the world.

Amen.

*CLOSING HYMN #622 Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah*

