

Do you have a bucket list? If so, how are you doing on it? Have you scheduled that trip-of-a-lifetime you've contemplated for years? Do your summer plans include sailing across a Great Lake or jumping out of an airplane? Are you at a place in your life when you can make time for that driving tour of Civil War battlefields?

Perhaps some of the things on your list are closer to home—walking the Tart trail from Suttons Bay to Traverse City, having a Harry Potter movie marathon with your kids, learning your favorite hymn on the piano. It matters not the distance traveled or time spent, marking something off a bucket list is a satisfying experience.

Like any to-do list, a bucket list is a way to organize our priorities and channel our energy. It creates opportunities to be intentional about attending to what is truly important to us. Without this intentionality, we often end up spending our time, energy, and resources, flapping around, reacting rashly to things around us without giving much thought to whether or not our reactions are attuned to our values and priorities.

And really, so much of what the Lenten season is about is being intentional about our priorities. The forty days of Lent is a reflection of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness before he began his public ministry. At the end of those forty days, Jesus was tempted three times. He was tempted with bread—a representation of being tempted by earthly hungers. He was tempted to exhibit his own strength and power by throwing himself off a building to prove he could save himself—a representation of being tempted to display our egos. “Look at me! Look at me!” And, he was tempted to claim all of the kingdoms and wealth of the earth for himself—a representation of being tempted by the materialism and consumerism of our world.

In all three instances, Jesus leaned into his values and priorities instead of succumbing to the tyranny of the urgent. Even when vulnerable—alone, hungry, and exhausted—Jesus had the spiritual maturity to stay true to who and what God created him to be. And, when it was all over, Jesus found refuge in God's love and mercy shown to him by the angels who came to attend to him in his time of great need. And I wonder if, in that moment, the words of the Psalmist returned to him, “my refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.”

This steady reliance on God's refuge and strength is a hallmark of the life of the spiritually mature. And yet, spiritual maturity doesn't seem to be something a lot of people think about or aspire to. I think it's fair to say that “growing more mature in my faith” rarely shows up on a bucket list.

And yet, in my 18 years of ordained ministry, I have glimpsed the gift that spiritual maturity is for those who have it. They are the people I look at and wonder, “How have they been through what they've been through and aren't bitter?” They are the people I look at and wonder, “How can she be so calm in the midst of all that's going on?” They are the people I look at and think, “They seem to have the peace that passes understanding.”

One of the things spiritually mature people have in common is that, at least most of the time, they are relatively “unflappable.” As someone who can be extremely flappable, which according to Webster's means *being excitable and quick to lose one's composure*, something that is on my bucket list is to

become more unflappable because being flappable is exhausting. I don't want to be so reactive to so many things. I want to remember that, no matter what, God is my refuge and my strength and therefore, there is really no reason to, well, "flap."

Now this isn't to say that the lives of spiritually mature people, people who tend more towards unflappable than flappable, are easier. It doesn't mean that bad things don't happen to them. Indeed, spiritual maturation isn't about what is happening in our lives, it is about how we respond to what is happening in our lives.

It's likely we all have moments of spiritual immaturity and moments of spiritual maturity—times when we're flapping around like sea gulls with our feet stuck in a net and times when we are as steady as an anchor resting on the floor of the bay on a calm summer's day when the water is as smooth as glass. After all, regardless of our level of spiritual maturity, we are all still human and we all still have our moments. And yet, those moments do seem less "momentary" for those who are intentional about their spiritual growth.

I'm lucky, I'm surrounded by people from whom I learn lessons on a daily basis about spiritual maturity. That is why I hesitate to do what I'm about to do. And yet, I'm going to go ahead and do what I'm about to do which is to lift up just one example of spiritual maturity I witnessed first-hand. I share the story not to glorify the person involved, but rather because I hope you will find it as inspiring as I did. Indeed, it's something that happened months ago but I trust it's a lesson about spiritual maturity I will never forget.

I was in an after church meeting. My cell phone rang and I ignored it. It rang again immediately and so I checked caller ID. Seeing it was a church member, I answered. When I picked up, the voice on the other end said, "Robin. Something has happened here at the condos and Eve needs you. Please come over."

Eve is our own Eve Howe who was my neighbor before she was my parishioner. The condos are the York Condominiums south of town where Nathan and I lived as Eve's neighbors for a few years.

As I pulled up in front of Eve's, the first thing I noticed was her neighbor Denise scrubbing Eve's sidewalk. When I got out of my car, I realized Denise was trying to scrub away the reminders of what had happened there, not long before, when a dog who was on the loose attacked and killed Eve's grand dog Riley. Riley had been a fluffy little bright-eyed poodle who wiggled all over the whole place with the happiest little spirit.

I found Eve sitting in a lawn chair out in front of her condo. When I arrived, the person who had been sitting with her quietly took her leave. Eve and I sat there in the warmth of the summer sun as she told me the story of what had happened—of what she had seen, heard, and experienced. It was gruesome. Not only did she love Riley and was deeply grieving his death, but she knew she was going to have to tell her daughter, to whom Riley belonged, what had happened. As we sat there, we could hear the neighbors, whose dog it was who had killed Riley, crying in their own condo. A dark cloud of shock, grief, and anger hung over the York Condos on that sunny, summer afternoon.

After we'd sat there for a time, there was movement at the neighbors where the other dog had lived. They were packing their car. Duffle bags and suitcases got thrown haphazardly into the trunk. Finally, when it appeared they were ready to go, Eve turned to me and said, "Just a minute." She got up and

started walking over to her neighbors as they were about to get into their car. I wondered if I should follow—I had no idea what Eve was planning to do. They were already grief-stricken. It seemed that nothing good could come from a confrontation.

It was then that I saw Eve spread her arms wide as I heard her tell them that she loved them. She embraced the mother and her daughters. She embraced the people who had been irresponsible such that their pet was unleashed and loose on condo property—something that is not only against the law but also in violation of the condo’s strict policies about pets. And, because they were not in control of their pet, Eve had been traumatized when she watched dear, little Riley die. And, not only that, Eve still carried with her the burden of needing to tell her daughter—who was on vacation at that time—that her dog was dead. And yet, even with that burden weighing her down and the cloud of shock and grief hanging over her, Eve reached out to embrace her neighbors and remind them that she loved them.

In the conversation I had with Eve about sharing this story with all of you, she said “God was there crying right along with me, I’m sure.” Her words reminded me yet again that a hallmark of spiritual maturity is the ability to find refuge and strength in God, even in the midst of trial and tribulations.

This brings to mind something that is in a handout you’ll receive in a few minutes that I really hope you will read sometime this week. It’s about ten hallmarks of spiritual maturity. Number one on the author’s list is “The highs and lows of life don’t impact your relationship with God.” And he goes on to write . . . “I love [amusement park] roller coasters. My favorite part is ascending to the apex, stalling for a moment or two, then taking a free fall only to begin the next ascension. What makes roller coasters awesome is the constant rise and fall. But this is not what makes Christianity awesome. I have seen too many people live for the mountaintop experience. They are up, then down. They are all in, then all out. They have an emotional high (conversion experience, weekend retreat, etc.), but when the high wears off, so does their relationship with God. Mature Christians, however, do not allow the highs and lows of life to impact their walk with God. They are consistent. Oh, yes, they celebrate the mountaintop moments, but they do not rely on those moments to sustain their faith.”¹

Christianity is not all sunshine and lollipops. It’s not all coffee hours and happy hymns. It’s not about good people getting good things and bad people getting bad things. It’s not a transaction with a divine entity who rewards and punishes based on what we do or do not do.

Rather, Christianity is a journey. It is choosing to prioritize maturing in our faith. It is about finding refuge and strength in God. It is understanding that God is loving and merciful—weeping with us when we weep, laughing with us when we laugh, abiding with us when we are lonely, and loving us no matter what. The spiritually mature realize, in the words of theologian Sally McFague, that “*Whatever happens, happens to God also and not just to us. . . the loving, compassionate God [is] on the side of those who suffer, especially the vulnerable and excluded. All are included, not only in their liberation and healing, but also in their defeat and despair.*”²

“God was there crying right along with me, I’m sure.”

And so it is that in our mountain top moments and when we feel stuck in the valley of the shadow of death, God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Thanks be to God.

¹ <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/251414-10-marks-mature-christian.html/3>

² Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Fortress Press: 1993), 150, 179.

Communion

Invitation

We gather for this holy meal—some of us coming off mountain top experiences, others wondering if we'll ever move through the valley of the shadow of death, still others at an even keel just now. No matter how we are, we are welcome here, invited here, wanted here. Let us pray.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Loving and merciful God, we thank you for meeting us here at this table. We are grateful you abide with us on the roller coaster of life. We pray for your guidance as we mature in faith and ask for the wisdom and courage to live according to the priorities set out for us by Jesus, our host at this holy meal. Amen.

Consecration

On the night our Lord Jesus was betrayed, he took bread, gave thanks, and broke it. Then he said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this as a means of remembering me."

In the same manner also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The body of Christ broken for you.

The blood of Christ shed for you.

Come now, for all things are ready.

Distribution of the Elements

Final Prayer

Bountiful God, at this table you graciously feed us with the bread of life and the cup of eternal salvation. May we who have reached out our hands to receive this sacrament be strengthened in your service; we who have sung your praises tell of your glory and truth in our lives; we who have seen the greatness of your love continue to grow and mature in our faith as we seek to better reflect your love and mercy.

These things we pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray together saying . . .