

How the West Was Won

July 1, 2007

A number of years ago, I read about those who set out to win the west, but unfortunately, I couldn't find the original source where I read it. However, I still remember the three types quite clearly, because they made an impression on me. They were the scouts, pioneers and settlers.

Clearly, if we stop to think about it, we can probably figure out what they were like. Scouts were those who ventured out ahead of the rest. They went or were sent to check out what was out there, and to come back to report. The Native Americans had scouts among the tribe members, and they were typically the ones who went out ahead of the others to find buffalo or any other source of food for the hunters who followed.

Next came the pioneers. We usually think of them as the ones who packed up their meager belongings, loaded their stuff into the Conestoga wagons, and forged the trail that others might follow. In fact, our family has sort of an inside joke when we drive into the mountains, because if I've said it once, I've said it a hundred times—"Can you imagine what it was like to come through here on a covered wagon?" It has gotten so they say it to me before I say it to them.

Nonetheless, I still find it pretty remarkable that ordinary folks like you and me would take off into parts unknown and blaze a trail for others to follow. The way was treacherous, and many didn't survive the journey. They faced incredible peril and hardship, and crossed mountains and rivers that didn't have the benefit of I-70 or any other interstate highway system. The pioneers were a special breed.

Some of those pioneers actually turned into settlers. They got to a stopping place, and when the rest of the wagon train loaded up to move on, they decided to stay where they were. They liked the spot; it was comfortable, and they were happy to stay put.

Mostly what I remember from my reading was the focus on the pioneers and the settlers. A pioneer, by definition, is one who ventures into the unknown and unclaimed territory; he/she can be one who opens up new areas of thought, research or development. Pioneers are the trailblazers and the champions of a new order, those into a new way of being and doing. To be a pioneer meant that the person was about change and moving forward.

Settlers, on the other hand, are more concerned about certainty, predictability and safety. They're more content with the status quo and staying where they are. Settlers are the ones who settle down and settle in. In fact, the root word for settle comes from the same root as the word "sit." It's about staying put, and not being so excited to go into the new and undeveloped areas.

Even today, I think we can see both the pioneering spirit and the settler spirit at work—in our lives individually, in life in general, in our organizations and businesses, in the church, and even when it comes to our faith. In fact, we saw a real, live example of that not too long ago when Methodist clergy and laity in the south half of Indiana went to what we call our "Annual Conference."

This was a weeklong meeting in Bloomington in which much of the business of the United Methodist Church in South Indiana is conducted. There were several major items of business, but none was more telling than the discussion and vote when it came to the decision about whether or not to unite all Methodists in Indiana and create a new entity—a new conference. The debate went on for what seemed like an eternity, and I can assure that, had you been a witness to it, you would have been able to identify the pioneers from the settlers. There was a very clear distinction in the type of comments that were made, and in large part, those opposed were reluctant to make the changes that will be inevitably necessary. They were content with the status quo.

Now, let me tell you, the status quo is a sorry state of affairs in Indiana, and has been for a number of years. We have lost members steadily for many years, and many of our churches are losing or have already lost their vitality. It's become an issue of refusing to change to adapt to a changing world, and settling in to what church was like 50-100 years ago. Those were our settlers.

As you can probably guess, I was in favor of creating something brand new. Stan and I and 2-300 hundred others have worked for the past year to create a broad picture of what something new might look like, and I find it exciting to think of the possibilities. I guess you could call that more of the pioneering spirit. I'm somewhat relieved to tell you that the pioneering spirits won round one, and this year will be devoted to working out all the details. We have a bishop who's forward-looking and energetic, and I'm excited that he's leading us forward into a new future.

I can recall another time in my history when the difference between those two spirits was most evident. It happened 15 or more years ago, and a deeply loved senior pastor was looking toward his upcoming retirement, and he was becoming content to settle in and ride out the years until he would actually retire. One of my colleagues, who has always had a wonderful way with words, said to our esteemed leader, "It sounds as though you want to stay here, or even go back east. Some of us want to go west." Our leader, who'd never been content with the status quo, responded as we hoped he would, and we kept heading west.

So, OK. My guess is that we all 'get' the difference between the two kinds of spirits, so the question for us to consider is: "Which one am I?"

Which one are we? When it comes to most aspects of my life, am I a settler, or a pioneer? When I think about my faith, is it more like that of a pioneering spirit, or a settler one?"

Before we answer those questions for ourselves, I have to say that one is not better or worse than the other. The reality is that we need both, and we need settlers who are top-notch settlers, and pioneers who are top-notch pioneers. If everyone were of the pioneering spirit, and constantly on the move to the next new thing, we wouldn't have any of the sense of stability that the settlers provide. We need settlers who dig in and invest and make where they are the best it can be, and we need those who are willing to venture into uncharted territories, to discover new possibilities that can enrich both the lives of other pioneers and of settlers.

My hunch is that the way we are at work or life in general is probably pretty much the way we are when it comes to our spiritual lives, and I would guess that those of us at this place called The Garden have spiritual lives that are not all that settled in. I don't want to be guilty of a gross generalization, because I'm sure that's not true of everyone. However, one thing I do believe is certain is that those of us who have come and stayed at The Garden are willing to ask the questions and even live in the midst of the questions. We are making new discoveries about who we are as individuals and as children of God.

is all about and what really matters. We're willing to try to be what we believe we were created to be, and that's being on a spiritual journey.

I really like how William Sloane Coffin defines faith in that little book I've mentioned several times—*Letters to a Young Doubter*. In it, he writes, "Faith is a matter of being faithful. It's not believing without proof; it's trusting without reservation." It has to do with stepping into the unknown, not sure what's out there, but being willing to step because we trust that there is goodness and love waiting for us.

That's what our Bible passage for today is trying to say to us. It reads like this: Jesus said, "The simple truth is that if you had a mere kernel of faith, a poppy seed, say, you would tell this mountain, "Move!" and it would move. There is nothing you wouldn't be able to tackle." Clearly, Jesus didn't literally mean that we could move mountains out of the way, but that we could find ways around the mountain. Any seemingly insurmountable object in our path could be overcome.

And it doesn't take a gigantic, gargantuan sized faith to move forward, but only as much as one of the tiniest seeds in the world—the poppy seed as our version says, or more commonly cited, the

mustard seed. Even having our doubts means that we have that smallest ounce of faith. As the theologian Paul Tillich once said, "Doubt is the surest sign of the presence of God."

There's an old story that's been around for years, and you may have heard, but in my mind, it bears repeating. It's about a tightrope walker who stretched a wire between the tops of two multiple storied buildings, and stated his intention to walk across the wire from one building to the other. He asked the crowd below if they believed he could make it, and they shouted that they did. So, slowly but surely, he stepped out, and inched his way from one side toward the other, finally getting there after teetering his way across.

Upon reaching the other side, he pulled out a wheelbarrow and shouted down to the crowd to see if they believed he could make it across the wire while pushing the wheelbarrow. Some shrugged their shoulders and moved off, but others nodded that they believed he could do it. The tightrope walker pointed to one man in the crowd, and asked specifically if he thought the walker could make it across, and the response was an enthusiastic "yes!" So, the tightrope walker said to the man, "Then climb in the wheelbarrow."

When it comes to our spiritual lives, it's all about climbing in the wheelbarrow. It's about trusting without proof, but filled with hope and assurance. It's going west, when we'd really like to settle down. Faith is an adventure, but it's an adventure worth it. I don't know how many times I've sa

Closing:

One of the great preachers of the 19th century, Phillips Brooks, once said, "We never become truly spiritual by sitting down and wishing to become so. You must undertake something so great that you cannot accomplish it unaided." Something like getting in a wheelbarrow...like heading west.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.