

1 June 2020

Dear Monson friends and neighbors,

I have **two purposes** in writing this letter. **The first purpose** is to thank you for your part in making it possible for **Mary** and me to continue to enjoy living here in this little northwoods village. A town cannot exist without residents. So thanks for also living here, paying taxes, and doing your part to keep **Monson** on the **map**. The past few months have been rather unsettling as we've all watched events play out across the nation and around the world. Many folks have lost their jobs and fallen on hard times. **If you're in a really bad way right now** because of all that's happened, we wish that we could help. We don't have the bank account of Bill Gates or Jeff Bezos but, if you'll let us know, maybe we can do our wee little bit.

Forty-five years ago this Fall Mary and I moved into the Parsonage on Center Street. We were young and excited. We were made to feel welcome. I preached my **first sermon** at the **Monson Community Church** on September 14, 1975. In 1976 twin boys (**Andrew & Stephen**) came into our home. Our third son (**Timothy**) was born in 1979. Life was full. I was serving three growing churches and we had three energetic boys. Today each of our sons has a wife and three children of their own. Here's a photo (left) of Mary and me with our sons, taken on Pleasant Street in **August of 1990**. And at right is a photo of the two of us with our **nine grandchildren** taken in **August of 2019**. We love them all.



On December 12, 1984, I woke up with **Guillain-Barré syndrome**. That was a day that changed my life. I spent the next eight months in the hospital. I've been in a wheelchair ever since. But with Mary's help it's been possible to live a fairly productive life. I can drive. I can think. I can still work a full-time job at the **AIIA Study Center**, i.e. the little red Swedish church building on Wilkins Avenue. I am very blessed in many ways. But some things are a challenge as we get older.

Some of you reading this letter were living in Monson when we came to town in 1975. I became well acquainted with many of you during the years that I served as pastor. I officiated at many weddings, scores of baptisms, and hundreds of funerals during those years. One Winter day during my third year as a pastor I received a call from the **Erickson family** on Water Street. Vaughn Erickson had suddenly died at the young age of 43. I officiated at his service. I got to know **Mary Jane**. Before long she turned to faith in **Jesus Christ**. She lost a husband and gained a Savior. Jesus became very real to her. She took her faith seriously. She was committed to Christ and the church. Only God knows the human heart, but I'm as certain as I can be that **Jesus** personally welcomed her into His presence when she left this world on **April 15**.

Some people have wondered, "Why did you and Mary ever leave your families and **beautiful Lancaster County** in Pennsylvania to spend your lives in **Monson, Maine**?" One major reason is because in 1975 God opened the door for us to serve the three churches here in Monson, Abbot, and Sangerville. **So this is where my work brought us**. But we also loved the idea of living in rural Maine. I'm sure that reading books about the northwoods as a child played a role in that.

But someone might say, "Why did you choose to be a **Christian minister** in the first place?" The answer to that question is directly related to my **second purpose** for writing this letter. But before I give you the answer, let me tell you the story of a **kind lady** who once offered a **freshly-baked loaf of bread** to all of her neighbors — if they would simply stop by and pick it up. They were all informed of her offer but no one stopped by. So she personally called a few of them. Some didn't answer the phone. Others refused, thinking that there must be some catch. But a few did come by and took her up on her offer. That evening, with their families, **those few** enjoyed the best warm freshly-baked bread that they'd ever eaten.*

Some of you will not be interested in what I've written on the **backside** of this paper. You can just throw the paper away. I won't be sending you another letter like this anytime soon, if ever. But there may be others of you who sense that God is speaking to you in what you're about to read. You should probably **take that sense seriously**, and act on it. (over)

None of us is perfect. I'm not perfect. You're not perfect. Every single one of us has broken at least one or more of the Ten Commandments — maybe even already today! Breaking God's commandments and acting badly is called **sin**. So we're all **sinners**. The Bible says, "There is none righteous, not even one." (Romans 3:23)

On the other hand, **God is 100% perfect, pure, and holy.** He isn't comfortable around sin. And in our sin, we're not going to be comfortable around Him in His purity. If we were to suddenly find ourselves in the immediate presence of God in all of His holiness, we would be as **self-conscious** as a bride on her wedding day with grass stains on her dress.

I think that's why many people don't come to church. They'll say, "Oh, the roof would fall in if I ever set foot in a church." But what they're really thinking is: "I wouldn't feel comfortable there because I'm not all that good and holy."

I've heard God being blamed for sending people to hell. The truth is, many people don't even want to be with God for **one hour a week in church**. Why would they want Him to force them to spend **eternity with Him in heaven**?!

I was raised in a Christian home. But in my early 20s I questioned almost everything that I had been taught. I stopped attending church and explored many world religions (such as Buddhism) and philosophies (such as materialism and solipsism). It's a long story but, in the end, I became convinced that there was more and better evidence for Christianity than for any other worldview in human history. I'm a thinking person. I considered it all. Then I came back to Christ.

Some of you may be saying, "Well, that's good for him. But I'm not religious. Each to his own. Many people, many views. Maybe they're all true in their own way." Really? Two contradictory views can *both* be true? I read of a fellow who once tried that logic with the IRS. He said, "In my view, **not** paying taxes is the **same** as **paying** taxes." Didn't work out so well.

The Bible says that Jesus came to earth to forgive sins. If you're brave and humble enough to ask for forgiveness, God will wash away all the stains of your sin. Jesus said, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." (John 3:16-18). Either those words are **true** or they are **not true**. If they're not true, Jesus was either lying or deluded. Neither seems likely.

One afternoon a number of years ago I met **Carl Vainio** on **Homer Hill Road** not far from my home. Carl said to me, "Hi, boy." Not too many people call me "boy" these days. But I smiled. I knew that Carl didn't take his cue from others. We spoke for a while. He told me that he felt that **God** had given him all these Monson **slate quarries**. I said, "Well, Carl, since you believe in God, let me ask you a question. If you were to die and stand before God tonight and He would say to you, 'Why should I let you into My heaven?' how would you answer?" Carl replied, "I guess I'm about as good as some people and not as bad as some others." I said, "Well, how good do you suppose that you'd have to be?" Then I explained the gospel to Carl — and he listened. I told him that according to Scripture God doesn't save anyone on the basis of how good they are. He saves people **by grace** if they will **repent** of their sins, **ask for forgiveness**, and **be serious** about **following Jesus**. He'll do it for even those who are a totally **no-good mess**. Did you ever know that the song, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a **wretch** like me?" was written by a rough blasphemous old English sailor?

So here is my second purpose in writing this letter — and the reason that I decided to be a minister. I think of myself as an old beggar who has discovered this vast gold mine — of **God's grace**. There's more than enough grace for you and me. Why wouldn't I want to tell you about it? But then also, ignoring **unforgiven sin** is like speeding along late at night on the **road to eternity**. I've discovered that there's a **washed out bridge** on that road. Why wouldn't I want to warn you about it?

Many people have been asking whether the **coronavirus crisis** is a sign of **end times**. I think that it may very well be at least a **harbinger** of end times. The Bible talks about **pestilence**, and about a time when one-third and one-fourth of the earth's population will die. (Revelation, chapters 6 and 9) *Much more trouble is ahead at some point*. This should be our wake-up call. **Now** is the time to **get right with God**. If you need help doing that, please **contact me**. If you had a serious physical problem you'd make an appointment with your doctor, strip down, and bare your body. **Jesus Christ** is the **Great Physician**. You have a spiritual problem. Don't be too proud to bare your **soul**. Don't be too sophisticated to accept the simple truth of the Bible. Don't be too independent to admit your need of God's grace. And don't be too busy to get to it.

I'm available by mail, phone, or email (see below). Or we could meet in person at the Study Center some day or night.


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* "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger . . ." — the words of Jesus (John 6:35a, NASB)