

MARK'S REMARKS

Not sure why this morning was different but I found myself reflecting upon a picture in my office. In the forefront sits a somewhat tattered red barn among overgrown weeds and shrubs. One notices a few missing boards, small rock-sized holes in a few rectangular windows, and worn faded paint. These signs of age are covered by a weather-beaten blue roof capable of providing susceptible shelter in a storm. Nestled in the hills behind and to the left of this barn is a small white church covered in a roof of blue. Underneath a towering steeple is a contrasting picture of care. Fresh paint protects her from the elements, bushes seem trimmed, and a carefully groomed winding path leads people to her doors.

I had purchased this picture particularly because of these two images. The barn reminds me of my roots and heritage, values weathered into me as I carried out the instructions of my father, who like most farmers, has the soil of the earth running through his veins. The church reflects God's call upon my life. While learning and living out rural life values, God's divine plan always included a church in the distance. Unbeknownst to me, like the trees and the shrubs surrounding the church, I too was being groomed in the shadow of the barn, more for a shepherd than a farmer. Within the confines of the picture frame, the journey is relatively short between these two structures. Within the parameters of my life, however, the journey was and seemed much longer and not so direct.

Since the holiday season is much about memories and reflection, I guess I am still intriguingly awed how it is I am serving in full-time ministry. How is it that I have the opportunity to bring a message to others of what God has spoken to me through the study of Scripture? How is it that I have the opportunity to be the presence of Christ to families experiencing sorrow in the absence of a loved ones presence? Why have calloused hands, once holding pitchforks, hay and straw bales, and pails of feed become hands that hold Scripture and other lesser books? I never saw it coming but the church building and all that it represents, was always in the picture.

I am asked on occasion if I would entertain the thoughts of farming again, tilling, and harvesting my great-grandfather's land and feeding cattle (notice no mention of hogs). While the barn and all it represents will never be absent from my life I simply reply, "It is not up to me." While my blood may be a little dusty, it does not flow with the same thickness of Iowa soil as my father. But then again, it wasn't designed to be the same. I do not know what is painted behind the church, if anything.

My life is one of farming and ministry. Not so different I suppose. Both require the preparation of soil and the nurturing of new growth. Both require faithful service. Both are a way of life and are about total commitment. Both require the wisdom of knowing when to move ahead and when to wait. Both require faith. Both offer the evidence and the fruit of ones labor.

God's sovereign plan is unmovable and while we are formed in the shadows of circumstances and decisions, it is wise to 'understand' God is always majestically beyond our compete understanding. At times we may only see a weathered barn but the Designer sees the entire completed picture.

"In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind" (Job 12:10).

Wishing pleasant memories to you during the Season of Christmas,

Pastor Mark