The Weston Boy

580 words

The sign out front claims a well-kept church up on a hill north of Flandreau is "The Oldest Continuously Used Church in South Dakota" (all caps because it is, for sure, a title worth coveting). That means it's been "First Presbyterian" for 137 years, "River Bend Church" when it was established along the Big Sioux River long, long ago. The name change came later.

But a church is no more or less than the people of its family, including the old ones out back in the cemetery, where a long history begins to come alive in the outlines etched on the oldest stones. You can read some of that story for yourself if walk through the stones sometime.

There is one here lying in the grass, well-weathered, but still readable in spots, some of its old lines anyway.

It may take you a minute or two, but if you look close you’ll see it’s a child, a boy, I think, although the name is not easy to read. The dates are clear enough, however--he was three years old, and his last name was Weston, and he died long ago, in 1894.

If you look closer, beneath the Weston boy’s dates, the inscription carved into the stone is a line of gospel one might expect on almost any child's grave: "Jesus said, 'Suffer little children to come unto me, . . .for of such is the kingdom of heaven. . .'"

You can still read most of that, 120 years later.

But beneath that line from the book of Luke, in letters I couldn't have read even if they'd been crisp and clear as an October morning, is another wording of the same verse, this one, a bit larger font, written out in the Dakota language. I'm guessing, of course--I can't read the words.

Not long ago, I stood right there on a Saturday morning in dewy summer grass, and told myself that some stories are readable in every language, because here lies a child, dead for more than one hundred years, a Santee three-year-old from some home along the Big Sioux River just outside of Flandreau, SD. Looks to me as if his grieving parents were believers, maybe bilingual, but still Santee enough to want to read the comfort of Jesus's words in the warmth of their first language, which is always, for everyone, the blessed language of intimacy.
When, after some time, the death of a child can be spoken of, the story of grief itself can be told in any language because a beloved child who is no longer among us becomes a pained absence realized in every last community around the world.

I stood there in the wet grass of a country churchyard as if no time had passed, stood there that morning as if around me were gathered all the goodly saints of Riverview Presbyterian Church, a whole crowd of witnesses of every race and creed.

There's not much more to say than what's inscribed there in the weathered stone and lichen. That grave is lying in the grass of the cemetery of an old church up on a slow hill outside a small town in eastern South Dakota, marking the grave site of a little boy who died when he was three years old, a story on a stone tipped over by age and relentless Great Plains seasons.

No matter what language, in a way, we've all stood there, don’t you think?