

December 2005

The Meyer Minute for December 1, 2005

Here's what happens when we have a valueless society, when no moral view is accepted as true, when anything goes. The Los Angeles Times reports that 26-year-old Michelle McCusker was fired from the Roman Catholic school in New York where she taught because she got pregnant and did not plan to marry the father.

"The school singled her out because she was pregnant, and the only way she could do that was because she was a woman," said the ACLU attorney. Pregnancy had nothing to do with it. To use a dinosaur phrase, when a person charged to teach Roman Catholic family values to young children gets pregnant "out of wedlock," the church's moral teaching has been publicly violated.

Says Miss McCusker: "I don't understand how a religion that prides itself on being forgiving and on valuing life could terminate me because I'm pregnant and am choosing to have this baby." Like so many people, she doesn't understand forgiveness. God forgives and we should too, but the consequences of our actions still remain. Ask any forgiven sinner in jail.

It's good that Miss McCusker is keeping the baby and I suspect the Brooklyn Archdiocese agrees. Too bad the ACLU and young Miss McCusker are promoting an intolerant society that won't allow people and groups to have a moral view of conduct.

The Meyer Minute for December 2, 2005

Diane and I went out the other night and I bought a hat. It reminded me of a speech from Mark Twain.

"Yesterday I was at a luncheon party. At the end of the party a great dignitary of the English Established Church went away half an hour before anybody else and carried off my hat. Now, that was an innocent act on his part. He went out first and, of course, I had the choice of hats. As a rule I try to get out first myself. But I hold that it was an innocent, unconscious act, due, perhaps, to heredity. He was thinking about ecclesiastical matters, and when a man is in that condition of mind he will take anybody's hat. The result was that the whole afternoon I was under the influence of his clerical hat and could not tell a lie. Of course, he was hard at it.

"It is a compliment to both of us. His hat fitted me exactly; my hat fitted him exactly. So I judge I was born to rise to high dignity in the church somehow or other, but I do not know what he was born for." (Wm. Safire, ed., Lend Me Your Ears, p. 52)

When you go out, can people tell what you were born for?

The Meyer Minute for December 6, 2005

“‘Tis the season to be jolly” so let’s have some fun with the nonsense du jour, the effort to turn Christmas into a totally secular holiday.

Today, December 6th, is St. Nicholas Day. Nicholas lived in the fourth century and, according to tradition, was imprisoned by the emperor Diocletian, a fierce persecutor of Christians. Nicholas was released, served as the bishop of Myra, and, tradition also says, was a great confessor of Jesus Christ.

The story goes that Nicholas heard of an extremely poor family in his town, so poor that the family’s only hope for survival would be to sell their three daughters, a prospect they hated. To save the girls from such a life, Nicholas went secretly to that home in the middle of the night and left a bag of gold coins. Hence the remembrance of this confessor of Christ, Santa Claus, has come to include the giving of gifts.

The First Amendment promises freedom of speech and free exercise of religion to people of all faiths. There are some wanna be Diocletians among us, people who would eliminate the sounding of any Christian themes in public, but they’re doomed to frustration and failure. Ho, ho, ho! See Santa, give gifts and you’re in the spirit of that confessor of Jesus Christ, Saint Nicholas!

The Meyer Minute for December 7, 2005

Above the old easy chair in my bedroom is a copy of a painting by John Constable, a famous 19th century British artist known for painting landscapes. Constable was fascinated by the sky. He said the sky is the “principal instrument for expressing sentiment.” (Great Museums of the World: National Gallery, Washington, p. 149)

The prophet Isaiah used the sky to express his deep religious sentiment. “Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down!” (Isaiah 64:1) Aren’t there days when you wish God would come down in a very visible way, come down and once and for all eliminate evil? Be careful what you wish for! You know some shameful things about yourself, sinful things. “How then can we be saved?” Isaiah’s answer is to plead to our heavenly Father for mercy. “Do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all Your people” (64:9)

Children imagine animals in the clouds. Adults, sometimes world-weary, see more. Advent, these weeks before Christmas, is time to see God’s coming from heaven, coming in the past as the babe of Bethlehem, coming now with a good word of forgiveness and hope, and coming in the future on Judgment Day in a way all will see. What will you see now when you look to the sky?

The Meyer Minute for December 8, 2005

It's a familiar scene. There's one computer where they live and Vicky wants to use it but can't. He gets first dibs but today he's having trouble getting on the computer. Just like the computer problems you and I have, he doesn't know exactly what's wrong but it's wrong and he's annoyed. Making the situation worse, he's hungry but he knows he has to do his computer work before he can eat. So he paces and paces while Vicky waits. You can probably identify, right?

His name is Keo, a 47-year-old chimpanzee at Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago. Every day at 1:30 Steve Ross, the zoo's Supervisor of Behavioral and Cognitive Research, takes Keo to the computer. The ape sits in front of the monitor and sees the face of a chimp and then the face of two chimps. If Keo touches the icon of the first chimp he saw, he gets food. Mr. Ross hopes to teach the apes to let keepers know what they want. (Chicago Tribune, Friday, December 2; A1)

Apes on the computer. You and I on the computer. Is there a difference? If you think we're descended from apes, maybe not. If you think God made man and woman as the crown of creation, then you know there's more to your life today than computers and food.

The Meyer Minute for December 9, 2005

How it happens I have no clue, but there is hidden heavenly knowledge revealed only to my wife, who in turn lays it on me. It has been revealed to her that now is the time for us to buy the family Christmas tree.

My Mom let Dad buy the tree all by himself...once. Great tree he got. You could see right through it. He probably liked the price but Mom was not happy and when Mom's not happy....

In my own marriage there were some years when I insisted on a big tree. I have no sense of proportion. They were great trees, so great they didn't leave any space in the living room. So now I tag along to the tree lot and say, "Oh, Diane, I like that tree you've picked!"

There are sacraments, ways God gives and strengthens faith. There are also sacramentals, human rites that point us to the grace God gives sinners in the Gospel and sacraments. I think Christmas trees serve that function. As a kid growing up, I stood with mouth-open wonder at the huge Christmas trees in church. Those great trees made an impression. There's something bigger than normal life here, an eternal revelation that puts even grown-ups in awe.

That's still true today. God's grace is coming down in Jesus. Happy tree-hunting!

The Meyer Minute for December 12, 2005

The weather has gotten cold, bone chilling cold. Is cold also biting at your soul or are you trying to keep your soul cuddly warm? In “Michael Row the Boat Ashore” the contrast is wrong. “River Jordan is chilly and cold, alleluia, chills the body but not the soul, alleluia.” Christmas candles, roaring fireplaces...Don’t let the niceties of the season insulate your soul against the cold truth.

It was at the Jordan River that John the Baptizer said about Jesus, “After me comes One more powerful than me.” Professor Jeff Kloha points out that John said, “powerful,” not “warm and cozy,” not “cuddly baby in the cradle.” Powerful. “His winnowing fork is in His hand, and he will clear His threshing floor, gathering His wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:11). If the soul is to be warm these days, we sinners must feel the heat of the powerful Son of God...and plead for His forgiveness. Only then, only in repentance, can the body be chilled but not the soul.

So don’t bundle your soul against the cold truth. Thomas Troeger sees repentance as a plunge into the Jordan. “Throw yourself in Jordan’s streams, Plunge beneath each wave that gleams. Wash away what only seems, Rise and float on heaven’s dreams.”

The Meyer Minute for December 13, 2005

Face transplants?

Cartoonists are having fun since French doctors did a partial transplant on the face of a 38-year-old woman but the real debate is serious. What if the transplant is rejected? What about emotions afterwards, guilt, anger, grief? What happens to your sense of identity? Disfigurement is devastating. Nothing less is due than total compassion, but there are questions.

Dr. Maria Siemionow of the Cleveland Clinic is an advocate of selective face transplants. She says the transplant is “taking a skin envelope.” I’m not sure what I think about the whole topic but thinking of skin as only an envelope over our true identity is debatable. Practically, appearance is part of our identity. Theologically, that God’s Son become skin, bones and body shows that human life is body, soul and spirit, all wrapped up in one. Isolating identity from its physical home was rejected as heresy two millennia ago.

Matthew Teffeteller was so disfigured by a car accident that his face scares children. Yet he says, “Having somebody else’s face...that wouldn’t be right. When I look in the mirror, I might be scarred but I can still tell that it’s me. I’d be afraid (of a transplant)” (Detroit News, December 11; 25A).

When you look in the mirror, on what, on whom, do you lean for your sense of identity?

The Meyer Minute for December 14, 2005

Some weeks ago I was walking through O’Hare Airport. As I passed two women I overheard them crabbing about people who don’t speak English.

There's opportunity for that. On Monday the Center for Immigration Studies reported that 12.1% of the American population, 35.2 million people, is immigrants. This is the highest influx since 13.5 million came in 1910. If you're wondering, 9.7 million of our current immigrants are illegal.

This is biblical. God called Abraham to emigrate from his native country. When there was famine in Israel, Jacob immigrated to Egypt. Today we might say "they sought better economic conditions." The Babylonian Captivity forced people out of Israel, helping make the Diaspora, Jews living away from Israel, an enduring fact. And Christian talk of being pilgrims is sometimes figurative, but other times literal. "I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world..." (1 Peter 2:11)

He who "knows every bird on the mountains," and says, "the creatures of the field are mine" sees all this and uses it to His purpose (Psalm 50:11). There will be nothing wrong if America alters its immigration policies, but that lady should check her crabby attitude. We all should. I bet a certain innkeeper from long ago now wishes he had made room in his heart for some strangers (Luke 2:7).

The Meyer Minute for December 15, 2005

Ole Hallesby, a Norwegian theologian, wrote, "To pray is nothing more involved than to let Jesus into our needs. To pray is to give Jesus permission to employ His powers in the alleviation of our distress." (For All the Saints, III, 81). So people of faith pray for today's elections in Iraq, asking God not to be a spectator but an unseen factor for good.

Pray that God be at work, His angels dispatched, to protect workers and voters at the polls. Pray that God be at work that security will grow throughout that country, that Iraqis may lead peaceful lives and the world become more stable. Pray that God be at work so that these infant processes of democracy will produce a unity even among the disagreeing Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. Pray that God be at work so that the outcome of the election will result in greater unity within the United States, that shallow partisanship be replaced with thanksgiving for progress. Pray that God be at work that our men and women in uniform will be encouraged, told by events that their labors have not been in vain.

"He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love." Yes, pray for that and, sometimes against the evidence, believe that.

The Meyer Minute for December 16, 2005

Sunday I go back to jail. I've been doing weekend time at this Illinois state prison since the late 80's. Been in other prisons... I guess I'm supposed to say "correctional facilities," whatever... I especially remember Fort Leavenworth. Anyway, I do most of my time at the one in Illinois, in Centralia. There I get time to read the Bible and I read Jesus say, "He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners" (Luke 4:18). Huh?

Must mean more than getting out. Hey, I know there are business people imprisoned in their big deals and career climbing. People out there imprisoned to all sorts of things...to addictions...to fear and anger and guilt...to meaningless lives. A few of them end up here but most of them stay on the streets, looking free but not really free. Chaplain tells me what freedom is. It's God forgiving me, God helping me wherever I am, God giving me hope for a better tomorrow.

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

Oh, I forgot to say the jail time I'm talking about is the privilege I have to take a Christmas message to that Illinois facility. I'm blessed to do that time.

The Meyer Minute for December 19, 2005

Ten Cultural Commandments for the Season:

I. Thou shalt not pause to plan thy ways, so that thy only goal will be to make it to the 26th. II. Thou shalt feel obligated to blanket the world with thy Christmas cards, much as snow covereth the earth. III. Thou shalt deny the simplicity of Christ's stable by impressing guests with thy holiday house. IV. Thou shalt not be like the shepherds and show up in the same old clothes. V. Thou shalt think thyself a wise man or woman by searching far and wide for gifts. VI. Thou shalt blow the budget, imagining that thus it will go well with thee. VII. Thou shalt so stress thyself that thy family calleth thee Scrooge. VIII. Thou shalt be so busy that thou sittest not by the Christmas tree with family and friends. IX. Thou shalt not lay aside old grudges, even while singing of peace and good will for all. X Thou shalt forget the Reason for the season.

Lord, give us the courage to leave some things undone. Amen.

The Meyer Minute for December 20, 2005

Avoid death. All partisans who debate the war in Iraq agree on that. Do what we can to avoid death.

An old legend tells of a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to the market. The servant returned, terrified. "I was jostled in the market, turned around, and saw Death," the servant told his master. "Death made a threatening gesture, and

I fled in terror. May I please borrow your horse and ride to Samarra so Death cannot find me?" The master agreed and the servant rode to Samarra.

Later the merchant went to the market, and saw Death in the crowd. "Why did you threaten my servant?" Death replied, "I did not threaten your servant. I was surprised to see him here in Baghdad, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra."

"Come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death," prays one of the great "O Antiphons" of Advent. That's an apt prayer not only for those serving in Iraq but for us all, since we all live in "the valley of the shadow of death." The Child whose birth we soon celebrate became the servant who kept the appointment, who met the terrors of death in our place. "I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me" (Psalm 23:4).

The Meyer Minute for December 21, 2005

The first day of winter. Brrrrhhh!

In December, 1914, British citizens sent Christmas packages to their troops fighting in the trenches of France. People in Germany did the same thing for their soldiers. To say "thank you" for his Christmas package, one German soldier wrote a poem and sent it to his hometown newspaper. "I wear love's gloves on my hands," he wrote, "love's leggings warm my thighs. Love's tobacco fills love's pipe. In the mornings I wash with love's soap. For loving gifts, a thank-you letter: Warm is love's cap against my skull; I sigh to myself, "So much love – and no girl!" (Stanley Weintraub, Silent Night, p. 11).

The Savior came to bring us God's love, becoming one of us. Our own well-motivated Christmas gifts can never replace close and personal demonstrations of love. So please remember...the widow, the widower, whose heart hurts because their dearest one is absent... the single adult who may feel especially alone this time of year... military personnel stationed far from home... the person in the trenches of work, surrounded by people but so lonely... In whatever ways we can, let us warm those for whom these days that can be cold and lonely.

"Lord, lay some soul upon my heart and love that soul through me." Amen.

The Meyer Minute for December 23, 2005

"It came to pass in those days..." Who would have thought that God works through the mundane things of daily life?

"...there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus." Who would have thought that God uses government for His great purposes?

"And Joseph also went up...with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child." Who would have thought that God works blessings through our inconveniences?

“She brought forth her firstborn son...” Who would have thought birth is the way God chooses to come into our world?

“and laid him in a manger.” God in a feed box? And who would have expected the birth announcement would go first to minimum wage workers on the night shift? Who would have suspected that the shepherds were hurrying on the streets because God had quickened their steps? “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass.”

Who thought back “in those days” that God is in the mundane things of daily life? “Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.” It is still true today. God bless you in these days as you celebrate the birth of God’s Son, Immanuel, God with us. Routine made divine. “This is the day the Lord has made” (Psalm 118:24).

P.S. I’m giving myself a holiday. The next Minute will be January 2.