

February 2006

February 1

Lying has been in the news lately. James Frey wrote "A Million Little Pieces," an autobiography about his struggle to overcome substance abuse, or so he claimed. The Smoking Gun website investigated and found that much of Frey's story was made up. His lie got national attention because Oprah Winfrey had touted the book on her program, an endorsement that pushed "A Million Little Pieces" into the top five on Amazon.com.

Daniel and Virginia Hopkins weren't keeping up with their debts. So they decided to refinance their home loan with Ameriquest. When their first application was rejected, Ameriquest told Mrs. Hopkins to resubmit an application but this time say she owned a small cleaning company. Not true. She simply works one day a week doing housekeeping. A lie. (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, January 27; D2)

I didn't see anyone mark the anniversary last week of President Clinton's lie. "I want you to listen to me. I'm going to say this again. I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky." That was January 26, 1998 .

After the Ten Commandments tell us to put God first and foremost in our lives, the commandments talk about our words. "Notluege" is a German word that means "a necessary lie." I doubt that any lie is necessary, but any lie necessarily reveals something about your relationship with God. Is that intact or in "a million little pieces?"

February 2

A prayer in church last Sunday prompted me to check out "weakness" passages in the Bible. "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). "God has chosen the weak things of the world" (1 Corinthians 1:27). "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9). We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). "If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness" (2 Corinthians 11:30).

There's nothing unusual when you and I don't feel up to some task, especially holy living. This is what being a "sinner" is all about. Instead of denying our weakness, depend on God's help, not our own weak capabilities.

This was the prayer that set me searching: "Almighty God, because You know that we are set among so many and great dangers that by reason of the weakness of our fallen nature we cannot always stand upright, grant us Your strength and protection to support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."

"Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble."
(Hebrews 12:12).

February 3

The wife of Seattle head coach Mike Holmgren won't be in the stands for the Super Bowl and won't be glued to TV either. Kathy Holmgren will be on a 17-day medical mission to the Congo. When she offered to stay, coach Mike said, "Go, your work is important." Many years earlier Kathy had postponed her desire to work in the Congo to marry Mike and raise a family. Their four daughters now grown, she's going, Super Bowl notwithstanding. "To everything a season." (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

I've seen a person "get religion" and want to become a minister or missionary or remain a layman but do clergy type things like reading the lessons or helping hand out communion. Is that the way to follow Jesus? When Jesus had done an exorcism, the healed man wanted to travel with Jesus. "Jesus did not let him, but said, 'Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you" (Mark 5:19). "To everything a season" and at certain stages of life our desire to follow Jesus should be pointed home to family.

Before taking a job at Green Bay in 1992, Mike Holmgren declined NFL head coaching positions. "It seemed obvious to us that the needs of our daughters must take precedence over my career." (Chicago Tribune, January 29, Section 3, page 15). "To everything a season."

February 6

Congratulations to the Pittsburgh Steelers for winning the Super Bowl.

Would it have turned out differently if Jesus had been playing for the Seattle Seahawks? Imagine the announcers. "Jesus drops back and uncorks a long pass. Look, Jesus sped downfield and caught his own pass. Touchdown!" Or how about this: "Only six seconds left in the game and the Seahawks are deep in their own territory. What's this? Jesus is going to attempt a field goal! The ball is snapped, Jesus kicks, and, a miracle! The ball goes through the uprights. Jesus kicked a 90 yard field goal!"

Could Jesus have played last night and been on the losing side? Could he have thrown a pass and been intercepted? Yes. A sports loss, a miscalculated play is not sin. Sin is our inborn rebellion against God. Jesus is Son of God and also a true human being, not a Superman. Bullets didn't bounce off Him; nails pierced Him. "He has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Life is not a Super Bowl party and we often are on the losing side. He's one of us, yet without sin. Jesus can sit down with you, sympathize with you in your problems, and assure you that He's won the ultimate victory for you with God.

February 7

Mrs. Coretta Scott King will be buried today. Do you ever think ahead to your last hours? What might you think when you're about to come before the eternal Judge? No matter how well you've lived, your record is not impeccable. "Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before You" (Psalm 143:2). It's arrogant to assume you're a shoe-in for heaven and foolhardy not to think about your death.

Folks who know the farm can appreciate something Martin Luther wrote. "In the midst of bitter death, sharp the hell-drawn harrow. Who will break its teeth and save faith's most inner marrow?" A harrow is a farm implement with sharp teeth that break up the soil. The accuser of God's people, Satan, will use your sins to try to break you in your last hours (see Zechariah 3:1). How will you avoid despair, how cling to faith? Who will break the teeth of the hell-drawn harrow? "Holy and most merciful Savior! Forever our Lord! Keep us from despairing in the bitter pain of death. Have mercy, Lord!" (Lutheran Worship 265).

Some people want to go quickly, a snap of the fingers and you're gone. Personally, I'd rather have some time to think about what's happening. I need to start getting ready today. You too?

February 8

You've heard and seen the news that five churches in Alabama were set on fire last week. The Christian church has experienced persecution off and on since the days of the New Testament. A notorious persecution came in 64 A.D. when Nero blamed Christians for a fire that destroyed Rome. Writes the historian Tacitus, a non-Christian: "Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus.... Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired."

As gruesome as that was, it was a short and localized persecution. Both Peter and Paul are positive about government in their New Testament writings. Sporadic persecutions notwithstanding, both saw the government providing an environment for the church to flourish. American Christians can say the same. Despite some infringements on religious expression, isn't our form of government a blessing to our faith and work? That will be proven when the Alabama arsonist is captured.

February 9

"I heard a story once of a husband and wife hopelessly lost in a cave," wrote Barbara Hurd in "The Yale Review." "After days had passed and they had given up hope of rescue, they began to confide in each other as they had never done. They revealed extramarital affairs, the disdain each felt for the other's naiveté.... On and on they went, unwrapping secrets, lifting layers off their life together...."

"Of course," Barbara Hurd continues, "they were rescued. Hauled out of the labyrinth and returned to their kitchen, where they could no longer stand the sight of each other. Knowing more than they could bear, they divorced, went their separate ways."

Private devotion should be your time in the cave. Take time each day to identify your feelings, to share them with God, and to read His Word of admonition, of forgiveness through His Son Jesus, and instruction for better living. Then leave the cave where you've brutally shared yourself to your God and go to the kitchen to your family, to the office to your co-workers, to the people in your life. Go, go without

playing games, go transparently as a sinner forgiven by God desiring to share His forgiving love. Nothing "will separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

February 10

Thousands of young people are in Turin , Italy , filled with hope to win Olympic medals. Some will realize their hopes; many will not.

Our daughter Katie competed in cross country and track in high school and college. She was a very good runner, so good that her trophies and ribbons have created a family storage problem. There were some races she didn't win, when she was bitterly disappointed. As long as I live, I'll never forget giving her a hug after those loses and saying nothing, just giving her a hug.

We all need hope. The early Baby Boomers were born after World War II, when America was confident we could do anything, even go to the moon. Today's young people have been born into a less confident America . Will Social Security be there for them? Can they graduate from college and get a job they've trained for? Hope cannot be taken for granted, for young and old people as well. Is there a fundamental hope underlying all our other hopes, a hope that gives us a hug after a race, a hope that assures you there is life after the Olympics, a hope that restores you when your present world has crashed?

"Put your hope in God, for I will yet again praise Him, my Savior and my God"
(Psalm 42:11)

February 13

In anticipation of Valentine's Day tomorrow and in remembrance of Abraham Lincoln's birthday yesterday...

Lincoln wrote a marriage proposal to Mary Owens on May 7, 1837 . Lincoln 's proposal included lines like these: "This thing of living in Springfield is rather a dull business after all. I am afraid you would not be satisfied. You would have to be poor without the means of hiding your poverty. Do you believe you could bear that patiently?" She turned him down.

Eighteen months later Lincoln became engaged to Mary Todd, who was described as "the very creature of excitement" and a woman who could make "a bishop forget his prayers." They married November 4, 1842 but a week later Lincoln wrote to a friend, "Nothing new here, except my marrying, which to me is a matter of profound wonder."

Can you husbands and wives relate to Lincoln 's romantic ineptness? Stephen Vincent Benet described Lincoln 's problem: "...when the genius of the water moves, and that's the woman's genius, I'm at sea in every sense and meaning of the word, with nothing but old patience for my chart, and patience doesn't always please a woman."

"Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church" (Ephesians 5:25). A bishop should not forget his prayers and neither should husbands and wives in love. (Quotations from Doris Kearns Goodwin, Team of Rivals, pp. 93-101).

February 14

A bride to be called me about her upcoming wedding. With the changes in liturgies and hymnbooks, she asked, "Do the wedding vows say 'I will' or the traditional 'I do?'" I've done hundreds of weddings but had a senior moment. So I took the wedding book off the shelf and found that it says, "I will." She asked, "Could we do the traditional 'I do?'" and when the wedding day came that's what we did.

The more I thought about it, the more I liked her request. "I will." Well, when's that going to happen? The next minute, the next day, the next decade, when you retire? It's a fine commitment but it's not "time sensitive," as they say. "I do" is here and now. Your spouse needs a helping hand. I do help you here and now. Your loved one is down in the dumps. I do sit with you and talk about it here and now. Your spouse has a great day. I do rejoice, remembering that this marriage is not all about me.

"I do." As you "do," Jesus' desire will be fulfilled. "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you" (John 15:11).

February 15

We wish recovery and health to Harry Whittington, the lawyer accidentally shot by Vice President Cheney. Comedians are having great fun with the incident but the Washington press corps is bent out of shape. "Why weren't we told immediately about this?" Apparently some reporters want the news brought to them rather than ferreting the news out themselves. Perhaps their pride has been offended?

"He who is of a proud heart stirs up strife" (Proverbs 28:25). "A haughty look, a proud heart...are sin" (Proverbs 21:4). "To seek one's own glory is not glory" (Proverbs 25:27). "Whoever exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12).

Let's forget the Washington press corps. Are there people in your office who expect others to come to them rather than they leave their desks to go to others? People who can shoot out e-mails rather than call someone or walk down to another office?

Forget others. Do you ever think life is a one way street that should see people coming to you, bringing you information, and you're offended when you haven't been told something?

Did Jesus ever show pride? No. Did He exalt Himself? Yes, once, in His sacrificial death for us. "If I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all peoples to Myself" (John 12:32).

February 16

A friend gave me a book to read. "What's this?" I wondered when I saw the title, The Virgin of Bennington. It's Kathleen Norris' autobiographical account of her years at Bennington College and the beginning of her career as a poet in New York. She reflects on her experiences with drugs, with sex, reflects on them now as a committed Christian.

"I have always been grateful for the night I spent (at an openly free sex and drug dealing hang out for young people), among other young people who, like me, were struggling with questions of identity, of acceptance and rejection. Some...were eventually lost to drugs, others to the plague of AIDS. Some have survived. When I think of them I summon the comment of the early Church theologian Philo of Alexandria, who advised human beings to always 'be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle'" (p. 96).

Maybe all that calls up the fears that you might have for your children. Maybe Kathleen Norris' experiences were your own.

I'll be in Manhattan tomorrow and I'll be passing hundreds of anonymous young people. They'll give the appearance of having it together. Do they? Are the young people you'll meet today grounded in teachings of God's love or are they on the brink, fearfully holding onto life by a thread? "Be kind."

February 17

I was truly moved to meditation when I came across the following prayer in my devotional reading.

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve...
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health, that I might do great things...
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.

I asked for riches, that I might be happy...
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.

I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men...
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life...
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for...
But everything that I hoped for.

Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered...
I am among all men most richly blessed. Amen.

Should you choose, you can spend more than a minute, more than a once through, meditating on these words. And, adding to its poignancy, this prayer was found in the clothing of a soldier slain in the Civil War.

February 20

"Establish the work of our hands for us; Yes, establish the work of our hands" (Psalm 90:17). It's prayed twice, so important that God make our works last.

Though George Washington could have maintained his army when the Revolutionary War was over, he didn't. By disbanding his army he set the precedent of civilian control over the military.

Though the Constitution does not require, "So help me God" in the oath of office, George Washington said it and his successors have followed his lead.

Though a Senate committee proposed he be addressed as "His Highness, the President of the United States of America, and Protector of their Liberties," Washington simply preferred "Mr. President."

Though Washington could have served longer, he retired after two terms. His wisdom was made law by the 22nd Amendment in 1951.

"Washington's conduct in his ... retirement showed that a republic need not fear its ex-leaders... As he had embodied republican restraint as general and as president, so he largely controlled himself as ex-president, thereby helping to give birth to the now-familiar role of the elder statesman." (Akhil Reed Amar, The American Constitution, p. 148f.)

On Presidents' Day we thank God for establishing the good work of Washington, of Lincoln and others for our benefit. Pray that good will continue to be established for generations to come.

February 21

A 90-year-old woman is sitting at a bar, having a drink. A man of about the same age comes up and sits on the barstool next to her. He orders a drink, looks at her in an interested way, and asks, "Do I come in here often?"

There is a forgetfulness more serious than the forgetfulness age brings, a forgetfulness found in many younger people. Isaac Watts wrote, "Oh, bless the Lord, my soul, nor let his mercies lie forgotten in unthankfulness and without praises die." How many people routinely forget all the mercies of God, all the loving kindnesses He showers upon us? That we awake each morning, are fed and clothed, can take everything to the Lord in prayer, that He's given us a Savior from sin... These and so many mercies lie forgotten by the routine thanklessness of many people, young and old.

A friend told me he was hunting all over the house for his glasses...until it dawned on him that he was wearing them! He smiled, recalling that many years earlier he had teased his grandma about exactly the same thing. Forgetfulness comes with age but no age need take away the memory of God's abundant mercies. "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken" (Psalm 37:25).

February 22

Do you listen to the President's radio address on Saturday mornings? Probably not; it's not exciting. On February 8, 1922 President Warren Harding installed the first radio in the White House. Two years later on this date, February 22, 1924, Calvin Coolidge was the first president to deliver an address over the radio. People listened to this novel thing, radio, and 82 years later commercial media is still trying to get our attention with anything new. Reality shows are just one example.

New things titillate us. When Paul spoke publicly in Athens (public speeches were an ancient version of today's mass media), the Bible comments, "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (Acts 17:21).

The titillation of the new can be a temptation. "The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their passions and will turn away from listening to the truth" (2 Timothy 4:3-4). "Sound teaching" simply means old Bible truths. "Ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls" (Jeremiah 6:16).

What's it for you, the latest novelty...or "The old, old story, of Jesus and His love?"

February 23

When asked if many women are studying for the pastoral ministry on our campus, I said, "None, our church does not ordain women." When I explained our position is based upon some Bible passages, I was quickly dismissed. "Well, interpretations change," she said stiffly. Variations on that theme are common. "It's been translated so much, who knows what it means?" "Well, that's just your interpretation." There are controversial teachings, like women's ordination, but the major teachings of the Bible are quite clear.

Take, for instance, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). A friend shared this quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Humanly speaking, it is possible to understand the Sermon on the Mount in a thousand different ways. But Jesus knows only one possibility: simple surrender and obedience - not interpreting or applying it, but doing and obeying it. That is the only way to hear his words. He does not mean for us to discuss it as an ideal. He really means for us to get on with it."

On this date in 1803 the Supreme Court ruled in Marbury vs. Madison that it can decide the constitutionality of laws. Our civil society assumes there are truths that can be accurately interpreted. What happens to society and to your personal spiritual life if we, if you don't obey God's clear teachings and instead interpret them to death?

February 24

Potato chips and racial profiling.

The big news this past week was the port deal with a company of the United Arab Emirates. Some have charged critics of the deal with a national type of racial profiling.

About potato chips: Some years ago Diane and my chip of choice, Jays Potato Chips, become available in the St. Louis area. Growing up with Jays in Chicagoland, we missed them when we moved away. Jays goes back to 1927 when Leonard Japp began selling snacks, eventually selling "Mrs. Japp's Potato Chips."

More on racial profiling: On February 19, 1942, only two months after Pearl Harbor President Roosevelt signed an Executive Order that resulted in the forced relocation and internment of 110,000 Japanese-Americans. In that kind of atmosphere, "Mrs. Japp's Potato Chips" were renamed "Jays."

I don't know what to think about racial profiling. On the one hand, we know that God is no respecter of persons (1 Peter 1:17 for example). On the other hand, God is omniscient and can see the intent of a person where I can only guess. Is the answer this: in my individual relationships I should love my neighbor as myself (Leviticus 19:18) but at an international level our government should err on the side of profiling? Anyway, I never eat a potato chip without pondering that problem.

February 27

Olympic figure skating? I couldn't bear to watch it. The dread that some young hopeful is going to stumble makes me not want to watch. That young person's disappointment, tears, lifelong regret "if only..." Last Friday's sports sections carried pictures of America's Sasha Cohen and Russia's Irina Slutskaya with looks of great disappointment. They had stumbled in their performances, just as I feared someone would.

Yesterday many Christian churches observed a downhill event, a downhill event of greater consequence than the Olympics. Yesterday's Gospel reading was the story of the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-9). Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain where He was miraculously changed before them, suffused with the glory that is His as Son of God. Peter got into that quickly and wanted to stay, but soon the glory left and Jesus took them back down the mountain. He led them back down to His coming suffering and death for their forgiveness and eternal life, and for ours as well.

We all take our falls in life. A fall in figure skating isn't sin, but many of the falls you and I experience do come because of sin, because we haven't lived up to God's expectations for us. If it weren't for Jesus going downhill, you and I could never get back up with real hope for life!

February 28

The Berghoff closes today. For 107 years the German style restaurant at 17 W. Adams Street has been a Chicago landmark. In 1898 Herman Joseph Berghoff started selling his Dortmunder beer at State and Adams for a nickel, adding a complimentary sandwich. Prohibition shifted the business to a full service restaurant but Prohibition ended and The Berghoff was given liquor license #1. "The Berghoff has been known as an old-style, family-run restaurant where the waiters wear black jackets and white aprons." (Mike Hughlett, Chicago Tribune, December 29, 2005 ; A12)

Black jackets and white aprons? I can't remember in which Nebraska town this restaurant was, Heartwell or Juniata , but when friends took me there I was dumbfounded by this sign: "Caps must be worn in the proper position." How about a sign that you don't wear a cap inside?

There is something religious in proper table manners, in fine restaurants with black jackets and white aprons. Jesus gave us two great commandments. The first is to love God, which suggests a humble heart always conscious of His greater presence. "The second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:39). Isn't that what manners are about, showing respect for the presence of other children of God?

It was called "The Berghoff, because there's something special in dining out that is fast being lost.