

July 2004

The Declaration of Independence begins with these words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."

Is it self-evident that we are all created equal when you listen to the words we sometimes use to describe others?

Is the right to life and liberty self-evident to terrorists and their sympathizers?

Is the right to life self-evident when the pro-choice movement denies that right to the unborn?

Is it the pursuit of happiness or just happiness that is self-evident today? We expect instant happiness, happiness on demand, change the channel, change the marriage if you're not satisfied...rather than the pursuit of happiness through sacrifice and hard work?.

Is it self-evident that these unalienable rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" come to us from a Creator?

These things were self-evident to the founding fathers. They were learned men who had thought and studied deeply about human nature and how we can best govern ourselves. 228 years later we could benefit from renewed study and appreciation of the assumptions underlying our precious independence.

## July 2

Have a happy Independence Day weekend! Be safe, enjoy the company of friends or family, and be mindful, mindful...

...that the American Revolution bequeathed liberty unlike any other revolution. We have a blessed heritage.

...that it wasn't only the wisdom of the framers but also the first generations of Americans who actually made the new Constitution work. Making a lawful society work still takes effort.

...that protest goes along with patriotism in a healthy public life.

After the bitterly divisive election of 1800, Thomas Jefferson gave one of the most conciliatory inaugural speeches of American history. "Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We are all republicans, we are all federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it."

Which means that the liberty we celebrate requires us to listen to one another, to heed the law, and to use reason to persuade our various points. So be safe this weekend, enjoy the company of friends and family and be mindful...

## July 6

What's the greatest freedom in your life?

We look to God for many things, for health, for family, for peace. That's fine, but God is more than Wal-Mart where you pick and choose the goodies you want. God, as the Bible tells it, is holy and made us to be that way...but we're not. Unless you get together with God on His terms, other things are going to become ultimately unimportant. Without the forgiveness of sins, all the other goodies are here today and gone tomorrow.

We're back where we're supposed to be, at one with God, reconciled, when we trust Christ paid the price for our sins. You might still feel guilty about some things, people might still throw your wrongs in your face, but God says, "The price has been paid. You and I are at peace."

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Now that we've celebrated our national freedom, I hope you'll rank freedom from guilt and peace with God as the greatest of all.

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1).

## July 7

That Senator Kerry picked Senator Edwards to be his running mate means they're putting aside some political and personal differences. George H.W. Bush accused Ronald Reagan of "voodoo" economics, but they put it aside to become running mates and, as the recent funeral demonstrated, became close.

Unless you're a cute, adorable puppy, there are people you don't like...who return the favor and don't like you. I came across this "Senility Prayer:" "God, grant me...the senility to forget the people I never liked; the good fortune to run into the ones that I do, and the eyesight to tell the difference." Cute, but not the best way to achieve peace of heart.

When William Howard Taft succeeded Teddy Roosevelt as president, the two close friends had a bitter falling out. They eventually reconciled. When Roosevelt died in 1919, Taft wrote he was glad "that Theodore and I came together after that long painful interval. Had he died in a hostile state of mind toward me, I would have mourned the fact all my life." (in James Chace, 1912, p. 4)

To know that God has forgiven us and made reconciliation possible... and to model that with our enemies... Now that's a prayer that reflects the true wisdom of age!

## July 8

You need to know the name of Jillian Humphries. Jillian is being touted as an excellent candidate to become the National Director of the Infant Adoption Awareness Training program...in 35 or 40 years!

Let me explain. Jillian is a baby who has been given a gift beyond words, adoption into a loving family. People of faith should have a ready appreciation for adoption. To the Romans, St. Paul wrote that Christians have been grafted into the tree of God's people Israel and to the Corinthians he wrote, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price" (Romans 10:17ff; 1 Corinthians 6:20 ). Different metaphors but the same truth: treasure being brought into something wonderful that wasn't ours by birth.

Since abortion was made legal, people have paid less attention to adoption. Indeed, abortion counselors don't present adoption as a better alternative. Dr. Paul Devantier is the National Director of the Adoption Awareness Training Program. When attendees at a conference asked if the Adoption Awareness program will continue, he held up baby Jillian and said he hoped she'd apply to be national director "and that the Program will still be going strong!"

What a gift Jillian has been given! Let's promote it for others as well.

## **July 9**

About church bells...

My home church rang its bell every Saturday night. That wasn't for Saturday service, they didn't have that, but to remind the community that the next day was Sunday and worship. Hearing that gave me a sense of order, of a place in time, and a sense of community.

Karl Barth wrote, "On Sunday morning when the bells ring to call the congregation and minister to church, there is in the air an expectancy that something great, crucial, and even momentous is to happen." What happens is that God Himself is present, present with His people through the Word and Sacraments of Christ.

And during that momentous presence, many churches toll the bell during the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father. That old custom made it possible for those who were physically unable to go to church to pray along with the assembled congregation. Again, a sense of order, a sense of community.

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong" (1 Corinthians 13:1). Don't let the church bell be an empty sound in your life. It's an invitation to an order in your life and to the Presence of Love.

## **July 12**

Suspicious of Muslim Americans?

When some local boys were about to leave our town of Collinsville to go fight the Germans in World War I, a community send-off was planned. At the last minute it

dawned on someone that they hadn't asked a minister to come and offer a prayer. Whom could they get at the last minute?

Someone suggested the minister from the nearby Lutheran church. The nearby German Lutheran Church, that is. Back then that didn't just mean some Americans who had a German ancestry but it meant people who spoke German at home and in church. Eyebrows were raised, but hey! We've got to get somebody. Let's take a chance. They did and Rev. Klein came on short notice and by all accounts gave a fine patriotic prayer...in English. That went a long way toward alleviating tensions, not all the way, but a long way.

When Jesus said, "Love your enemies" He was talking about personal relationships, not about national security measures (Matthew 5:44). To confirm our suspicions or to find them false, the first step for both sides is to venture out of our comfort zones. Time has laid aside our suspicions of German-Americans. We look forward to that with our Muslim fellow-citizens as well.

## July 13

In times of war, routine activities are up for review. Sometimes we'll give up normal activities for the sake of security or because of the compelling need to sacrifice for the war effort. At other times, though, we doggedly do usual things to symbolize that we will not let routines of peace and freedom be overcome.

So it's been with the All-Star game, held this evening in Houston. In 1942 the All-Star game was in New York but the next day a second game was played in Cleveland to benefit Army-Navy relief. Many of the All-Stars in that game were on active duty. The 1943 All-Star game in Philadelphia was broadcast to troops around the world by short-wave radio. The 1944 game was held in Pittsburgh but in 1945 the game had to be cancelled because of wartime restrictions. You can take or leave baseball...until you see it as a symbol, a powerful symbol, of our way of life.

Said broadcaster Jeff Torborg earlier this month: "I'm thinking about how we're sitting here safe watching this ball game because our kids are there (in Afghanistan and Iraq) fighting for us" (July 3 on Fox).

There's more going on in tonight's All-Star game than meets the eye. So "Play ball!"

## July 14

Yesterday the temperature here approached 100 muggy degrees, miserable weather that always prompts some minister to put this up on the church signboard: "You think this is hot?"

If you have doubts about hell, consider the possibility in the wider context of your present spiritual life. In "The Saints Everlasting Rest," written in 1650, Richard Baxter puts these words on the lips of a person who didn't think hell was a real possibility...until he found himself there. "How many weeks and months and years did I lose, which if I had improved, I might now have been happy! Could I find no time to study the work for which I had all my time? No time, among all my labors,

to labor for eternity? Had I time to eat and drink and sleep and none to save my soul? Could I take time to secure the world and none to try my title to heaven?" (p. 123)

Wrote another 17<sup>th</sup> century theologian, John Gerhard: "It is wiser to be concerned about escaping this eternal fire by true repentance than to engage in an unprofitable argument as to the nature of this fire."

So the summation, from Baxter: "Study thoroughly this one word – eternity." (p. 80)

## **July 15**

My cousin sent me the "Older than Dirt Quiz. How many of the following 25 can you remember?

"Blackjack chewing gum

Wax Coke-shaped bottles with colored sugar water

Candy cigarettes

Soda pop machines that dispensed glass bottles

Coffee shops or diners with tableside juke boxes

Home milk delivery in glass bottles with cardboard stoppers

Party lines

Newsreels before the movie

P.F. Flyers

Butch wax

Telephone numbers with a word prefix

Peashooters

Howdy Doody

45 RPM records

S&H Green Stamps

Hi-fi's

Metal ice trays with lever

Mimeograph paper

Blue flashbulb

Packards

Roller skate keys

Cork popguns

Drive-ins

Studebakers

Wash tub wringers

If you remember 0-5, you're still young.

If you remembered 6-10, you're getting older.

If you remembered 11-15, don't tell your age.

If you remembered 16-25, you're older than dirt."

I'd like to give credit to the person who came up with this quiz, but I don't know who's responsible. Actually, I'd like to blame that person. I remember far too many of those things.

"Teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Psalm 90:12).

## **July 16**

When I wrote recently about church bells, several of you rightly raised the issue of bells being silenced by complaining neighbors.

"Prior to this century," law professor Robert Tuttle wrote recently, "conflict between churches and their neighbors would have fallen under the law of nuisance.... Claims of excessively loud or frequent bell-ringing provided the most common ground for nuisance suits against churches...." (Church and State, p. 142) Today zoning controversies between churches and communities are far more common than church bell controversies.

Even if you're able to ring your church bells, which I assume is the case in most communities, it's a fact that those bells are silent most of the time. What is not silent is the steeple itself, its architecture calling us to look heavenward. Complaining neighbors, city councils, and courts can't stop you from looking up. More so, thanks to the freedom of speech clause in the First Amendment, no one can stop you from sharing your heavenward orientation in your private conversations. "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to

everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15 ). Or are you as silent each day as the bells?

## July 19

Hail Adonis! If you lived 2000 years ago in the Roman Empire , chances are good that today, July 19<sup>th</sup>; you'd be celebrating the Festival of Adonis.

Adonis, according to mythology, was a beautiful youth who loved and was loved by the goddess Aphrodite. Adonis must have been a real eye-catcher because he was also loved by Persephone, the goddess of the underworld. To end the goddesses' squabble, Zeus decreed that Adonis spend part of the year in the underworld with Persephone and the rest with Aphrodite in the realm of the living. The Festival of Adonis was the yearly celebration of the marriage of Adonis and Aphrodite, a celebration that always turned to sadness because Adonis had to return each year to Persephone and the realm of the dead.

How different is the One who says, "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades" (Revelation 1:17 -18).

Hail, Adonis? You're not missing anything there, but you are if you don't hail the One is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25 ).

## July 20

The other day our dog "Speaker" was at the door, looking like he wanted to come in. Diane opened the door...Speaker gets the kindest treatment!... Diane opened the door but he wouldn't come in, just looked at her. "In or out!" she demanded.

That brought back memories of my childhood. "In or out," Mom used to say and added, "Stop slamming the screen door!" I wonder how many kids today know what a "screen door" is. Anyway, "In or out! Stop slamming the screen door!" was part of the liturgy of summer.

And it's part of the liturgy of faith. In Proverbs 9 the Bible says, "Wisdom has built her house" and calls "Let all who are simple come in here." And what is Wisdom? Says the New Testament, it's "Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 2:24 ). We Christians are prone to confess Christ on Sundays and then go out and contrary to what we've professed. How kind that Jesus doesn't demand, "In or out!" when we sin, but keeps inviting, "Come unto Me" (Matthew 11:28 ; John 6:37 ). So, sinner, keep slamming that screen door! Just make sure you do it as you keep going back in to Him.

## July 21

Page 2, yesterday's "Chicago Tribune," big ad: "World Business Forum, Chicago 2004... McCormick Place , November 18-19." Keynote presentations on leadership, new organizations, reinvention, US and the world, marketing and sales, economy and financial markets, execution, innovation, resilience, and growth.

Strange, apparently no one will speak about business ethics. Martha Stewart's sentencing again put the spotlight on unethical business practices. Writes Professor James Fisher of St. Louis University, "The business scandals that have filled the media and are continuing to be played out provide a kind of full-employment act for business ethics case-writers like myself" (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 20; B7).

When Christians say that faith in Jesus is all you need, we are, I think, doing a disservice to others, not to mention misrepresenting biblical truth. Good works are not necessary to obtain eternal salvation. Jesus alone can do that for us. So Ephesians 2:8-9 famously teaches, but verse 10 tells why good works are necessary.

So, high profile people, like King Ahab in 1 Kings 21 or common, like Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, the time of accounting will come. Since the Bible teaches that everyone, Christians included, will be judged (2 Corinthians 5:10), business ethics should be a full-employment act for all of us. "Every good tree bears good fruit" (Matthew 7:17).

## July 22

Today's release of the 9-11 report is unfortunate timing, I think. That's not because of the report's impact on the presidential candidates...that will prove negligible...but because the release adds to public cynicism when we should all be knowledgeably engaged.

Americans are congenitally cynical about politics, not necessarily bad, but when that cynicism comes from citizens who are uninformed about current issues, who understand being spoiled better more than sacrifice, whose civic attitudes are summed up in inane sound bytes... then cynicism is biting us badly.

...which is where the word "cynic" comes from, from the Greek word for dog. In the fourth century B.C. there was a movement called "cynicism." "Disdaining traditional learning, scornful of the deference shown the powerful and of the uncritical adulation of the great philosophers by their contemporaries, the Cynics aspired instead to the simple life." (Calvin Roetzel, "The World that Shaped the New Testament," p. 70).

Simple minded, cynical, is what too many of us are and it's taking a big bite out of our common welfare. I guess that's just the way human nature is. John 6 tells us that many people stopped following Jesus when He delivered a tough love message. Anybody out there know how to get substance into the heads of couch potatoes?

## July 23

Some years ago Dr. Oswald Hoffmann was inducted into the National Religious Broadcasters' Hall of Fame, an honor well-deserved. As I walked with Dr. and Mrs. Hoffmann to the banquet hall, he asked me how the NRB convention was going. "Fine," I said, but added, "I've noticed something here."

"Oh, what's that?" he asked.

"They speak a lot about the Lord's work but I haven't heard them talk about the Lord."

"Is that so?" he said and dropped the topic. So much for my opinion.

Later, the banquet meal over, Dr. Hoffmann stood up to accept his honor and he spoke about Jesus, not a word about the Lord's work, just about Jesus. He had that vast audience doing aerobics, one minute standing and applauding what he said about Jesus, the next minute they were down, doubled over in laughter at his hearty jokes. His speech provided a glimpse of what St. Paul described, the time when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11).

So next time you hear a sermon, keep in mind the distinction between the Lord's work and the Lord. Doing the Lord's work might help save someone else but doing that work won't save you. Only Jesus does.

## July 26

"Ah, for the good old days." You've probably thought that...and then realized many things are better now.

"Ah, for the good old days" when political conventions really did decide who the nominee would be! Hmm... Back in 1912 the Democratic National Convention truly did decide...with 46 ballots and plenty of backroom dealing to get Woodrow Wilson nominated! Good old days? Today many people don't like the disproportionate influence that Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and a few other states have in picking the presidential nominees. Back in 1912 only six states held primaries. Patronage, not primaries, had more to do with picking nominees. (James Chace, 1912) There never was, never will be a perfect political system.

Various attitudes toward government are present in the Bible. In Revelation 13 the government is branded demonic because of its persecution of the church. St. Paul used his Roman citizenship... FYI, not everyone was a citizen... to advance the cause of the Gospel (Acts 22, 25). St. Peter had an optimistic view that government would do the right thing. (1 Peter 2)

The good old days? Thank you, Lord, for giving us today more opportunity to participate in government than many previous generations could have dreamed! These are the good old days!

## July 27

Sometimes Christians are so evangelistic about telling the world that Jesus Christ is Savior that we fail to appreciate the goodness of God in other aspects of life...like humor.

When President Kennedy awarded Bob Hope the Congressional Gold Medal in 1992, Mr. Hope said, "I feel very humble. But I think I have the strength of character to fight it."

He lived a long life. "I went to play golf and tried to shoot my age, but I shot my weight instead."

Bob Hope died a year ago today. God blessed us through his humor.

About his early days in vaudeville, he said, "Those were really tough times. I wouldn't have had anything to eat if it wasn't for the audience throwing stuff at me."

"Philadelphia will always be dear to me because this was where I first tried that simple little prop that kept me alive all through my vaudeville days: track shoes."

Says Proverbs 17:22, "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."

Humor often deals with something deeper. Mr. Hope was probably best loved for entertaining the troops. He once said, "The soldiers laughed, and we yelled - to cover up the lumps constantly gathering in our throats."

## July 28

Back in 1987 Penn State published Gilbert Meilaender's book The Limits of Love. When you see value in limits, "I did it because I could" is not acceptable.

Now comes a New York Times report that two homosexual women who were "legally" married in Toronto last year are seeking divorce. Although Canada has legalized gay marriage, their laws are written only to divorce a man and woman.

Proponents of gay marriage are quick to pounce on the high incidence of heterosexual divorce. True enough, but that doesn't validate crossing the limits of male-female love anymore than speeding tickets invalidate speed limits. Meilaender shows that gay marriage crosses several limits. One is the purpose of procreation. Another is self-love, which most people know instinctively is wrong. "For creatures who are finite, historical, and earthly... homosexual acts are forbidden precisely because lover and beloved are, biologically, not sufficiently other. The relationship approaches too closely the forbidden love of self" (p. 129).

The Canadian case foreshadows the endless legal problems we'll face when we transgress the limits. On the other hand, that "God is love" (1 John 4:8) can be experienced by accepting limits. "The way to human fulfillment in a sinful world may be more indirect than many people today believe" (p. 125).

## July 29

Who could bicycle 2,102 miles in 83½ hours? Who could bike up a mountain 6,070 feet above sea level at 14½ miles per hour? Only Lance Armstrong! Down here the rest of us peddle through life slowly, painfully, sometimes dropping out because we feel we can't make it. We're not legends; we're human.

In his book, "Every Second Counts" Armstrong comes down from his legend to share the anguish he feels because some people think he uses drugs. "I'm tested 30 to 40 times a year, both in and out of competition.... I never once failed a test. Not one. But no matter how many tests I took, there were still those who considered me guilty, a doper-mastermind who outwitted scientific communities across the globe...." (pp. 60-61)

How do you "peddle on" when you're slandered? Assert your innocence, of course, but don't expect everyone to believe you, even when you offer proof. Rather than repay their evil with slander of your own, St. Peter offers two suggestions. First, "Keep your conscience clear." Second, "those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (1 Peter 3:16 -17; 4:19 ).

Who can "peddle on" through slander? You...when you look up!

## **July 30**

Millicent Martinez was a woman of intellect, of strong will and of love. "I loved you so much," she told her husband about their meeting in 1967. He said, "the best decision of my life" was to marry Millie. ("Saving Millie," 2001; pp. 19, 21).

Millie Kondracke died last week after a 17 year struggle with Parkinson's disease. Although her husband Morton Kondracke is well-known as a political commentator (executive editor of "Roll Call" and a contributor to the Fox News Channel), his comments on caring teach us best. He told me in an interview that he frequently asked God, "What's my purpose here on earth?" "Take care of Millie!" was the consistent answer. That's biblical: "How can we love God, if we don't love the people we can see?" (1 John 4:20) To fulfill your purpose, Mr. Kondracke advises, "Play the hand you're dealt as best you possibly can and ask God's help along the way. So pray 5, 6, 7, 10 times a day...to ask God's strength."

God was Millie's strength as well. "He is the only one I can talk to whenever I want," she said. (p. 216). Now she is blessed to talk to God "face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12 ). Our sympathies go to Mr. Kondracke and the family.