

July 2007

July 2

"Rabbi Levy saw a man running in the street and asked him, 'Why do you run?' He replied, 'I am running after my good fortune!' Rabbi Levy tells him, 'Silly man, your good fortune has been trying to chase you, but you are running too fast.'" (Wayne Muller, "Sabbath," p.48)

The Ten Commandments lead off with the command to worship only the God of Creation and Redemption. That takes place in our hearts. Then the commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain," should be kept by our lips. The next commandment, the third or fourth, depending on how you count them, says, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." Where does that take place? In your management of time. God commanded His ancient people to build a day of rest into their schedule.

We've lost that wisdom, that rhythm, in our frenzied lives. Jesus says, "Come with Me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31). The days of the Fourth...enjoy them...and rethink the rhythm of your life.

July 3

"We hold these truths to be self-evident," says the Declaration of Independence, "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...."

Maya Jasanoff, a professor at Harvard University , points out that not all people held those truths to be self-evident. In fact, one out of five Americans did not agree with the Revolution. She tells of a petition in Scott's Tavern in New York . Over 700 colonists signed the petition and agreed they were "steadily and uniformly opposed" to the Revolution and that it was the "most unnatural, unprovoked Rebellion that ever disgraced the annals of Time." (New York Times Magazine, June 1; p. 20).

The passage of time, experiences with the American way of government, and wars to preserve our freedom have led us to appreciate the words "We hold these truths to be self evident." Just as our appreciation for those words about civil government has grown, it can also deteriorate. It's not unlike the words of the Bible. Familiarity and experience can make biblical words truly treasured or we can take those words of eternal life for granted. Please occupy yourself this holiday with both words of eternal life and the temporal words that enshrine so many of our civic blessings.

July 4

No Minute on the Fourth

July 5

Back in 1776 the day after Independence Day must have been a day of great hope for many Americans. But hope is not easily realized. In August the Continental Army was trapped on Long Island , New York . Although many Americans escaped, the next month,

September, the Continental Army was completely driven out of New York . It would be seven years before independence would be fully realized. Seven years. Hope is not easily realized.

What is true in civic life is also true in your personal life. Hope is not easily realized, and unless you nurture your hopes they will turn to despair. Every aspect of your life has a spiritual dimension. Every problem you face, every battle that leaves you wounded or bloodied, can easily replace hope with despair. It takes effort to nourish hope, and nothing is better than the picture of hope, the empty tomb of the resurrected Jesus Christ. He lives and offers the hope that will sustain you.

I came across this prayer: O God, You are the answer to our questions. You have promised that one day You will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Then our questions will cease and we will praise You. Grant that we guard the image of hope in our souls. Amen. Guard the image of hope!

July 6

"Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

"Come," Jesus says. He's always inviting us; His Spirit always wooing us. For some reason unknown to me, God has given us the terrible ability to resist His call, to say, "No." Still, He keeps inviting us to come.

"Come to Me." I'm afraid this is where many churches go wrong. Churches can't save you. Only Jesus can. Now that's not to say you shouldn't bother with church. It's just to say that the church should be about Jesus, not about itself.

"Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened." That's me; isn't it you? Why are we this way, burdened and weary? Do we get so busy, do we carry so much because we want to prove that we're worthy of love and respect? That's a crushing load.

"Come to Me...I will give you rest." Lay your load down at His feet. Rest in His love for you. Rest in His strength...and, by the way, you'll be renewed to carry your burdens.

Don't just do something; sit there. "Oh, Lamb of God, I come, I come."

July 9

From the "Odyssey," the epic poem probably from the eighth century B.C: " 'My good host,' (Odysseus) said, 'I hope Zeus and the other gods will reward you with your heart's desire for receiving me so kindly.' 'Sir,' said the swineherd Eumaeus, 'my conscience would not let me turn away a stranger in a worse state even than yourself, for stranger and beggars all come in Zeus' name.'" (xiv, 54-58)

From Gordon Lightfoot, the refrain in "The House You Live In:" "And the house you live in will never fall down, if you pity the stranger who stands at your gate."

From Exodus: "Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt " (22:21).

From Jesus: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in" (Matthew 25:35).

These quotations from secular and sacred writing do not mandate specifics of an immigration policy, but shouldn't they weigh heavily on our minds as we debate our borders?

July 10

On this date in 1804 Vice President Aaron Burr killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel. Burr, always an enigmatic and often a troublesome political figure, was indicted three years later for treason. "Aaron Burr...being...under the protection of the laws of the United States , and owing allegiance...(thereto), not having the fear of God before his eyes, but being moved and seduced by the instigation of the devil..." So read the charge. (James F. Simon, "What Kind of Nation," p. 245)

"We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

What would happen if more people in government and business were mindful that they will appear in that judgment on that day, the last day? How many relationships would be better off, how many marriages preserved, how many lives brought into the world and cared for... How different so much would be in your life and mine if we lived each day mindful that "We must all appear!"

The Bible teaches that our only hope at judgment is Jesus. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). That final deliverance, however, is not a blank check to do our will rather than God's. That's the highest treason.

July 11

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 in order to tell the enemy we will not let them destroy our routines of peace and freedom.

So it's been with the All-Star game, held last evening in San Francisco . 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 Pittsburg 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.

Broadcaster Jeff Torborg said several years ago, "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."

So there was more to last night's All-Star game than meets the eye. Keep on "Playing Ball!"

July 12

Today's Minute is a "thumbs up!" for God.

God is so mysterious, so unseen, that even believers sometimes wonder if He really exists.

Maybe we're trying to peer too far into the universe, an answer being closer at hand.

Consider the following quotation from world famous doctor Paul Brand, taken from Philip Yancey's book "Soul Survivor." "For several years our team worked specifically with the pain system of the human hand, trying to find ways to protect the hands of leprosy patients who can no longer feel pain. What engineering perfection we find there! All (our) techniques correct the deviants, the one hand in a hundred that is not functioning as God designed. But we have found no way to improve on the hand God gave us. We wonder at the genius of Beethoven, but we have forgotten to wonder at the mystery behind the human hand that plays the sonatas he composed. After operating on thousands of hands, I must agree with Isaac Newton, 'In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence.'" (p. 14f.)

So next time you're wondering about God, twiddle your thumbs. Poet Walter Chalmers Smith put it this way, "All laud we would render; O help us to see 'Tis only the splendor of light that hides Thee!"

July 13

About church bells...

My home church rang its bell every Saturday night. That wasn't for the 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.

About the bells on Sunday, 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 the presence of God and to a community that will pray with you and for you.

July 16

My friend Bill shared an e-mail about a woman who visited the shop of a silversmith. The silversmith held a piece of silver over the fire, explaining that the silver had to be held in

the very middle of the fire to burn away any impurities. The woman, a Bible student, thought of Malachi 3:3: God "will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver."

She asked the silversmith if he had to be there the whole time and he answered, yes. He had to hold and keep his eye on the silver. Otherwise, the silver might be in the fire too long and be destroyed.

"How do you know when the silver is fully refined?" she asked. "Oh, that's easy," he answered, "when I see my image in it."

That anonymous e-mail helps us understand tough days. "The Lord watches over you" (Psalm 121:5). And the refining of Christians will achieve its goal. "He who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). On that day, fully refined, you'll see Him face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12).

How else can we understand this strange statement of James, "Consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials of many kinds?" James 1:2).

July 17

My parents taught me, and Diane and I taught our children, to say bedtime prayers. I confess I don't do that too much myself. When I hit the bed, I might watch a few minutes of TV but usually fall asleep quickly.

New research shows that sleep consolidates memories, somewhat like storing data on a hard drive (AP; St. Louis Post-Dispatch, October 9, 2003; A8). I knew that. In grade school we discovered the best time to learn memory work was in the evening, shortly before going to bed. As a minister I try to memorize my sermons in the evening. Is that why I fall right to sleep??? At any rate, the best time to memorize is in the evening.

So what if I would apply that to my delinquent bedtime prayer habit? The scientific reports on memory suggest that falling asleep with my mind on some eternal truth will consolidate spiritual insights and confidence in the morning.

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray Jay Leno my soul to keep? What good will that do tomorrow morning? I've slipped into a bad habit and need to correct it. How about you?

July 18

Years ago I was teaching religion class to 8th graders at our parochial school. One day I had enough of their picking on each other, their cliquishness, their hurtful behavior. So I unloaded the standard grown-up lecture they'd probably heard many times. "Pastor, you've got it wrong," interrupted a courageous girl. "How's that?" I asked. "The reason we act that way is we're afraid that we're not going to fit in."

Why does that office worker hoard information that would help the rest of you do your job? Why does the up-and-coming professional hide the fact that he's drowning in debt? Why does the fearful woman present herself as having it all together? Is there any way that some of your behavior grows out of a fear that in some way you're not going to fit in?

Because we compartmentalize our hectic lives, security in one area of life does not afford security in another. What we need is a security that embraces every aspect of daily living, a centered sense that "It is well with my soul" whatever tries to scare us.

"Come unto Me" (Matthew 11:28).

July 19

I'm feeling guilty. Last week a six day trip, gone last weekend, gone this week, finally home tomorrow. Do you explain away the time and energy you pour into work by rationalizing, "It'll pay off for my family and my career?" One woman did and came to regret it.

"We worked day and night at a feverish pitch," wrote Athena Dean in "Consumed by Success: Reaching the top and finding God wasn't there" (Wordpress, 1995). "Ailen was involved in Little League and Roby was active in drama at school. While they searched the audiences to find our faces at games and plays, they never did spot us. We were too busy chasing the dream to make time to attend their activities. Those kids hardly ever saw us, but they saw plenty of the baby sitters. We rushed them from school to day care to baby sitters to home, shuffling them from one person's care to the other. We held the idea close that it would eventually be worth the sacrifice. I only wish the kids felt the same way." (p. 21)

Thanks Athena for the reminder. "God sets the solitary in families" (Psalm 68:6) but obsessive "chasing the dream" undoes that blessing to us. None of the Ten Commandments are about careers but two are about family. I need to stay home more!

July 20

Think you know what someone else believes?

First century Romans misunderstood much about Jews. Because Jews took every seventh day off, the Sabbath, the Romans assumed they were lazy. Not true. Romans, even Emperor Caesar Augustus, believed the Sabbath was a day of fasting. Again, not true. Scholar Erich Gruen: "Most Romans contented themselves with a half-baked idea, frequently repeated but never examined" (Diaspora, 48).

So when Christians, originally a sect within Judaism, were getting heat for what they believed, Peter encouraged cool conversation. "Be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." (1Peter3:15) Half-truths are the name of the game, witness the current campaign, but when it comes to something as eternally significant as religious belief, assumptions should be explored before being asserted.

When a student asked how to convince someone of the truth of biblical Christianity, I answered that he should put that on the back burner and first find out what that person believes and why. That's a lot harder work than bandying about Christian evangelism slogans. More and more I believe that

living according to Christianity is a stiff challenge. But that's the way of the cross. Glory awaits another day.

July 23

"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22 -23). That's a sweet list, isn't it? Does it describe you? No doubt the Spirit of God is putting out love, joy, peace, and the like, but it doesn't always get through to us.

She's best known to us as Tammy Faye Bakker. She died last Friday, after a long battle with cancer. Tammy Faye and husband Jim Bakker led the PTL ministries with half-a-million followers, a business empire, and in the end, disgrace. She used her struggle against cancer to tell people not to be afraid. "Don't let fear rule your life." "Live one day at a time and never be afraid." (AP; St. Louis Post-Dispatch; July 22; A2)

But how do we get there, get to a point where we're not afraid of cancer or anything else? Love, joy and peace don't have an easy way into our hearts. Instead of accepting a blanket, "Don't be afraid," why not admit you're afraid...and then go to the One who can calm you? You'll best know the fruits of the Spirit by acknowledging their unpleasant counterparts in your life, anger, sadness, impatience, and the like. "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24).

July 24

The minimum wage goes up today, goes up to \$5.75 an hour from \$5.15, a 70 percent increase. It will go up the next two years, ending at \$7.25 in 2009. What do you think of that?

Someone getting the new minimum wage will make \$12,168 a year before taxes, that's above, but not too much above, the federal poverty level. Says Fawn Townsend, a minimum wage worker, "My goal personally is to get a vehicle so I can independently go back and forth to work and maybe pick up extra work so I can have that extra income because minimum wage is not cutting it. Being a single person, you can't pay all your bills with one minimum-wage job." (AP; St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 22; A4)

Factor this into your opinion: In Deuteronomy chapter 15, God commanded people in ancient Israel to forgive all debts every seventh year. The seventh year, like the seventh day, the Sabbath, was to be a time of no work, of total rest. It was to remind Israel that all they had, all we have, is ultimately a gift from God. Forgive all debts God said, because in the last analysis it all comes from Me.

From that perspective, can you see that you are much more like Fawn Townsend than different?

July 25

Hi, Christian here. Did you miss me? I have been busy. I have learned a new way to get what I want. I put out my hand and I take Mommy's hand. I lead Mommy where I want to go.

Last week Mommy came to get me from day care. Mommy was talking to Carmen. They were talking about wonderful little me. I wanted to go home. I walked up to Mommy, took her hand, and led her to the door. I get what I want.

Mommy was mean the other night. Mommy gave me a bath. After my bath I wanted to go out and play. I walked up to Mommy, took her hand, and led her to the door. Mommy said, "No, Christian, you are not going outside." I cried. Shouldn't I get what I want? Mommy picked me up and plopped me in my bed. I cried and I cried and I cried, but mean old Mommy wouldn't give me what I want.

Opa says, "Christian, it's not about you putting out your hand to get what you want. It's about you putting your hand out to be led by God." I don't know what Opa is talking about. Opa says a lot of big people don't understand that either. Do you?

July 26

If God is a presence in your life, there will be times you wonder about the pureness of your devotion to Him. It's not that our intentions are consciously against God; it's that deep down in the inner recesses of our hearts there are feelings that strive against God and His commands. "Who can discern his errors?" (Psalm 19:12)

In this morning's New York Times, Steven Kurutz writes about "house stalking," which is more than admiring someone else's house. "The level of interest can escalate, and people often turn from casual admirers or failed bidders to near-obsessives who may stop and stare longingly...." (D1)

Little attention is ever given to the last of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house...or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:17). But the commandments don't end on a whimper. God had freed His people from Egyptian slavery, as He has freed us from domination by sin, death, and the devil, and "You shall not covet" is His final command: You are free! Don't put yourself in bondage to anything or anyone except Me!

Think about house stalking or any desires deep in your heart. Innocent or not? Is God alone Your satisfaction? "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9)

July 27

Vladimir Lenin established a dictatorship in Russia and said he ruled by, "power, based directly upon force, and unrestricted by any laws." Lenin died in January of 1924 and his body was preserved for display in a Red Square monument. Last week it was reported that there are no more long lines of people waiting to see and honor Lenin. Thus passes the glory of this world.

"Trust not in rulers; they are but mortal; Earthborn they are and soon decay. Vain are their counsels at life's last portal, When the dark grave engulfs its prey. Since mortals can no help afford, Place all your trust in Christ, our Lord. Alleluia, alleluia!" (Lutheran Service Book, 797, 2)

Many do just that, trust Jesus Christ. Put the lines of church-goers together and you have one very, very long line that is impacting nations. According to the Pew Research Center , 63% of Americans say that they probably would not support a candidate who did not believe in God. 46% were likely to vote against a Muslim and 30% against a Mormon. (New York Times, July 22; 4, 4). Outside of America Christianity is even more alive.

“Every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:11). Better now by worship than later with Lenin in terror.

P.S. Time to rest my brain and body. I'll be on vacation until August 13th. Christian and I will be planning our future Minutes!

July 30 and 31-no minutes-vacation