

June 2005

June 1

What was the big news last weekend? French voters rejected a constitution for the European Union.

"As far as France is concerned," said historian André Kaspi, "there is a very deep abyss...between the elite and the French people." (St. Louis Post Dispatch A2). True enough. Polls show that farmers, public and blue collar workers and the unemployed voted no by 60-78%. (New York Times A8).

The moral: get out of your familiar routine and talk to people who are different than yourselves. Had Jacques Chirac done that, he'd be celebrating a victory instead of reading his political death notice in the French newspapers.

We like to see common people stick it to the elite, but how does that confession of sin go? "We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves." Jesus hung out with the religious elite, like the scribes, the priests, and the Pharisees, but He was also the friend of sinners, sinners meaning those shunned by respectable society. Today they'd include the terminally ill, the addicted, the immoral, and the incarcerated.

So what was the big news last weekend for you? Your answer won't agree with others. Suppose we listened to others. Might we begin to get a better picture of reality? Might you in some small way get a tiny glimpse of how God sees all of us?

June 3

I often get agitated when my seminary students hand in their sermons. "Who in the real world can understand this stuff? Your sermon is full of church jargon. What you say is true, but it's jargon. It doesn't communicate."

Oh, I'm afraid the jargon will fly this Sunday! The word "mercy" occurs in several Bible passages that will be read in many churches. Mercy. In western civilization mercy often means feeling sorry for someone who is worse off than you are. But the Bible is largely an eastern, Hebraic book, not a western book. In the Bible mercy means actions, actions of loving kindness that people in a relationship do for one another. Mercy in the Bible is not a feeling but action. So when people in church say, "Lord, have mercy," they're not begging for pity but asking their Creator and Savior to do for us what He's promised.

Jesus says in Matthew 9:13, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." God wants action. In church He wants your head and heart active as He gives you His mercies, His acts of loving kindness. Then He wants you to go out and show mercy to others. Don't just feel for them. Do something for them. Real, sincere worship results in good works.

There, now I'm happy. One word of church jargon explained.

June 6

It started June 4th and concluded on June 6th, 1942 . Today's "Minute" commemorates the 63th anniversary of the Battle of Midway.

Midway is located 1,200 miles northwest of Hawaii . The United States Navy had learned that Japan intended to capture Midway to serve as an outpost in the war. As a large contingent of the Japanese navy steamed toward Midway, it was ambushed by forces under the command of Admiral Chester Nimitz. American losses were heavy: one aircraft carrier and 150 planes. Torpedo Squadron 8, flying outdated planes, lost all but one of its 30 pilots and gunners. But their sacrifice allowed higher-flying Dauntless dive-bombers to attack. As a result, Japan 's navy was crippled for the rest of the war, losing 4 of its 9 aircraft carriers. The Battle of Midway turned the tide of the war.

God's presence in people's lives is not only known through the church but also through governments that promote the good and hinder evil. The generation of our parents and grandparents was willing to face the horrors of war so that you and I could live as we do today, in freedom and in hope. May we follow the example of those who fought and died at Midway and God help us preserve the heritage.

June 7

Florence Shinkle of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch shares this head-shaker:

The Lockwoods and the Bakers live in a neighborhood of \$300,000 and up homes. When the Lockwoods left their barbecue on the driveway, the Bakers complained to the neighborhood association. The Bakers retaliated, putting their barbecue and other items on the side of their house facing the Lockwoods, who promptly complained to authorities. The Lockwoods responded with a berm, prompting the Bakers to complain to the city. Next the Bakers dumped yard waste between the homes, which brought a violation letter from the city. Wonder who tattled? Then the Bakers installed security cameras focused on the Lockwood home. There's more but I'm running out of time. (June 5; C1, 9)

Are their tactics much different than the way office people at odds hide behind e-mails, always copying their superiors?

When Adam and Eve sinned against God, God immediately went to them to talk about it. Following that example, Matthew 18 says, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you" (v. 15). But if you let your controversies escalate before talking face-to-face, will you get to a time when you can't make peace?

Both the Lockwoods and the Bakers have put their homes up for sale.

June 8

Watch baseball on TV and you'll see the pitcher "shake off" a sign from the catcher. The catcher signals what kind of pitch he wants thrown but the pitcher can shake his head "no," "shaking off" the catcher.

Last week Chicago White Sox pitcher Orlando Hernandez, nicknamed "El Duque," shook off a sign from his catcher A.J. Pierzinski. Pierzinski looked toward the dugout but manager Ozzie Guillen didn't get involved. Guillen said later, "First of all, I am not that smart. Secondly, I am not that good. I trust my catchers." (Chicago Tribune, June 4; 3, 3)

Do you sometimes find it hard to admit you really don't know some things? Sure, I can easily admit I don't know how to do brain surgery, but what about those areas where we know just enough to... what? Be dangerous? Better to say we know just enough to deceive ourselves that we know more than we really do. Even if that doesn't get dangerous, our spouting easily frustrates people who do know their business.

"There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men" (1 Corinthians 12:4-6).

Oh, the White Sox won. Different gifts used for the same purpose!

June 9

What makes for misuse of a holy book?

The small congregation where I began my ministry, St. Salvator Lutheran Church in Venedy, Illinois, had a pastor in the mid-1800's named Paul Israel Baumgart. Baumgart's father was a Jewish shopkeeper in Germany who somehow or other came into possession of a large Bible with both the Hebrew and the New Testaments. That was not something of any worth to the Jewish shopkeeper, so he used the big book as a doorstep. Is that desecrating a holy book? Perhaps in some human eyes but not in God's. The boy, Paul Israel, started reading that whole Bible and was converted to Christianity.

The latest issue of the American Bible Society's magazine "Record," reports, "Children in a school in Bethlehem stand up to sing a new song: 'My heart is filled with joy since the day Jesus came into my heart.' In the Gaza Strip, some 4000 Palestinian students who'd been chanting the glories of martyrdom now shout a Christian song called "Peace to God's People Everywhere" (p. 6). This is happening because of "Operation Palestinian Child," an outreach of the Palestinian Bible Society.

Long ago it was written, "The word of God is living and active" (Hebrews 4:12). It still is! The greatest misuse of the Bible? Not to use it.

June 10

Summer time. Kids playing outside. Kids arguing outside, fighting, saying hurtful things. Kids wounded, bruises and cuts on their bodies and Lord only knows what wounds on their hearts and souls.

Did you ever wonder what it was like for the kids in Nazareth , children growing up along with Jesus? Devotional writer Karl Lutze has imagined it: “I need to turn to you, Lord, for perspective – you’ve been there, Lord; that I know. Yourself a child, so good, so pure, you surely must have been resented by the children who were made to hear their parents say, ‘And why can’t you be more like Jesus?’” (from “...a lot on my mind, Lord,” to be released in late September).

We are all children of God, whatever our age, and we hurt one another with our words and actions. Often we hear, only hear, religion condemn us for our sins. “Why can’t you be more like Jesus?!”

But the Bible’s Good News is yes, we can be. It happens in repentance. “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). That’s what Jesus came to our neighborhood to make us, members of His body. “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him” (John 3:17).

June 13

Compromise leaves me feeling unsure about myself. Take meetings, for example. Surprise! People around the table don’t think your idea is the greatest thing since sliced bread. Most often your thoughts get lost in all their opinions or, if someone does hear you, you get something like this, “That’ll never work!”

The eventual outcome is often compromise; you change your opinion, somewhat or sometimes totally. After you back off, do you find yourself silently taking a multiple choice test? A. I really don’t know anything; B. I have no backbone; C. All the above.

So my eyes opened wider when I read this: “Too many managers see compromise as surrender, but it is essential to constructive persuasion” (Jay Conger in Managing People, p. 254. Compromise good? Even when biblical truth is debated, what we believe is non-negotiable, could listening and questioning make our presentation of God’s truth more persuasive? But for the rest, today’s meetings and conversations where earthly things are discussed and where our opinion doesn’t carry the day, what is it? A. You’re reminded you’re not a God-anointed carrier of all truth; B. Love your “enemy,” the guy who shot down your idea; C. Don’t take yourself too seriously; D. All of the above.

PS: I’m leading a tour to Germany , including Luther and Bach sites, September 29 to October 11. Reply if you’re interested in more information.

June 14

“Does that star spangled banner yet wave o’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?”

It’s just a piece of cloth, but today, Flag Day we remember it’s more than “just a piece of cloth.” It’s a symbol, a symbol of our history, often glorious but not always so, a symbol of our continuing sacrifices for the common good, and our aspiration for the future.

If our eyes look up to that flag, our hearts are invited higher to the banners of the Eternal God. “You have set up a banner for those who fear You, that they may flee to it from the bow. That Your beloved ones may be delivered, give salvation by Your right hand” (Psalm 60:4-5). “His banner over me is love” (Song of Solomon 2:4).

Living and working on this earthly side of Jordan , it stirs us to look up to the stars and stripes, to that symbol of this great nation. And on both this side of Jordan and on the other side, the side to which the Savior is leading us, we thrill to live under the eternal banner of divine love.

“May we shout for joy over Your salvation, and in the name of our God set up our banners!” (Psalm 20:5)

June 15

In Homer’s Odyssey the giant Cyclops captures the hero Odysseus. When Odysseus escapes by blinding Cyclops, the giant asks, “What’s your name?” Wily Odysseus answers, “No One.” Cyclops, blinded and alone, calls out for help but when his neighbors ask who has harmed him, he answers, “No One.” So they went back to do whatever neighbors of Cyclops do and the giant went back into his cave, alone and blinded.

To many of us Michael Jackson is a “No One,” someone whose likes we’ve never known in our normal lives. He’s gone back into his “Neverland,” a place few of us would want to live.

By contrast, how blessed you are to know the names you know, to know your family, to know your friends, to be one among them. You’re not a “No One,” not defined by your media status as a pop giant.

How blessed you are to have a home that’s real, not a “Neverland” made up out of your fantasies, not a cave where you hurt alone, but a place where real love lives.

How blessed you are when, as they say, you’re “comfortable in your own skin.”

“I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which Thou hast shown unto Thy servant” (Genesis 32:10). How blessed by God you are, a real person living a real life!

June 16

“Mom said...” “Dad said...” Turns out mom or dad didn’t say that but your sweet, innocent little child thought the lie might work.

Have you noticed how some people will falsely cite someone who is well-known, powerful, credible, someone to whom people pay attention.... There are people who like to use, yes, that’s the right word, use another’s reputation to try and get their way?

Classic example from a vote fraud trial in East St. Louis , Illinois . A video shows a government witness making an election pitch to a political rally: “The FBI (is) going to be right here with us. I’m talking with them every day. They want to see these people here win.” In trial the truth comes out: “So you were lying?” “That’s correct.” (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, June 15; B1, 4)

“Thou shalt not bear false witness” (Exodus 20:16). We should obey that, of course, but a deeper question is what’s going on in a person’s heart that makes him or her a user? Since the Ten Commandments begin with our relationship with God, might a problem there result in breaking commandments about our relationships with people?

How do you try to make your point? Trace your words back to the desires in your heart. Better to do it now than be shamed later!

June 17

“God Allows U-Turns,” a collection of inspirational stories edited by Allison Bottke, includes this from Candace Carteen:

“By the time I was ten, I was totally ashamed of my father. All my friends called him names: Quasi-Modo, hunchback, monster.... My father was born with something called parastremmatic dwarfism. I hated to be seen with him. By the time I was seventeen I was blaming all my problems on my father.”

But friends knocked the chip off her shoulder. When she started grousing, they told her how wonderful her dad was, how he always made time to listen to their problems.

At graduation she gave the valedictory speech. “Father, I owe you a big apology. I based my love for you on what I saw.... I forgot to look at the one part of you that meant the most, the big, big heart God gave you. ...I want you to know I could not have had a better father. You were always there for me, and no matter how badly I hurt you, you still showed up. Thank you!”

“For the first time, I saw my father through God’s eyes, and I felt honored to be seen with him.”

That more fathers demonstrate the big heart of God... That we see our fathers through God's eyes... that's a prayer for this weekend.

June 20

For this day after Father's Day, another great story from Allison Bottke's inspiring collection, "God Allows U-Turns." This story from Michael Powers.

Brian "was a special education student at the small high school I attended. He was constantly searching for love and attention. It usually came for the wrong reasons, from students who wanted to have some 'fun.' He was the joke of the school..."

Mike defended Brian, even had him over to the house. "Hey, Mike," Brian asked. "How come you're not like some of the other kids at school?" Mike told him about the love of God the Father.

"Brian really opened up to me. He explained that his dad had left him and his mom when he was five years old. He told Brian he couldn't deal with having a son like him anymore, then he walked out of Brian's life and was never seen again. Brian told me that he had been looking for his dad ever since."

"Now I knew why the tears kept flowing that day in my bedroom. His search was over. He found what he had been looking for since he was five years old. A Father's love. He would never again be alone."

Psalm 27:10, "Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me."

June 21

They say you can tell you're getting older when you know the answers but no one is asking you the questions. Along that line... You can tell you're in a bureaucracy when a co-worker dodges your questions for needed information and hoards responsibility. Not talking here about personal confidences (like a co-worker sharing personal problems that you won't divulge to an enquiring mind) but rather a situation like this. Your group is responsible for some project but a co-worker isn't sharing necessary information and is hoarding responsibility.

3 negatives come from such conduct according to Tim McGuire of United Feature Syndicate. It tells other workers they aren't trustworthy, breeds distrust and destroys a feeling of ownership on the project. (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, June 23, 2003 ; E2)

Speaking spiritually, that hoarder is reflecting a desire, conscious or unconscious, to exalt himself, herself. A biblically-based approach would recognize that the project is not about me. I'm accountable first and foremost to God. From that sense of accountability, with a special appreciation for being forgiven through Christ, comes this guideline for the

office: “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather...with sober judgment” (Romans 12:3).

As we get older we learn things like this. Is anybody in your shop asking about the spiritual implications of office conduct?

June 22

On this date, June 22, in 1860 Congress approved the creation of the Government Printing Office. Thank you very much!

Also on this date in 1868 a journalist in Wisconsin named Christopher Latham Sholes received a patent for a contraption called a “type-writer.” “What’s a typewriter?” Children don’t know that anymore than they know what a vinyl record is.

When Martin Luther died in 1546 they made a death mask of his face. They also made casts of his hands. Rigor mortis had caused his hands to be in the writing position, one hand holding a pen, the other hand holding down paper. Today’s hands are at keyboards far more than at pen and paper. Carpal tunnel surgery is common.

“Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body” (Ecclesiastes 12:12). With more and more people putting out ever more words, what are your reading priorities? The Bible? I hope so but my wishing won’t make it your priority. Try reading a few verses of Psalm 119. Every verse in that long psalm talks about the benefits of spending time in God’s word. You might well find that regularly reading a few verses from Psalm 119 will help you sort out the importance of everything else you have to read. “Thy word is truth” (John 17:17).

June 23

Here’s a word picture to ponder, “prisoners of hope” (Zechariah 9:12). Many things imprison us, pressures at work, loads of guilt, troubled relationships, financial debt, weakening bodies, and on and on. Does the resurrection of Christ lead you to face your daily struggles optimistically? Are you a “prisoner of hope?”

An old milkman, Pete Iverson, told me this story about hope. In the days of home delivery, if you could have asked the lady of the house where she was going in the darkness of the early morning, she would have said, “To the front door to bring in the milk.”

When you ask, “How do you know that’s it here?” she replies simply, “I just know it’s there.”

“Did you hear the milk truck or the bottles clanging?”

“No; I just know it’s there!” She brushes past you, opens the door, puts her hand out into the darkness and...sure enough...the milk bottles are there.

That’s hope. Whatever problems you’re facing, you can reach confidently into the darkness because God’s promises are proven true by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (2 Corinthians 1:20). “Why are you so downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God” (Psalm 42:11). Prisoners of hope!

June 24

Life has its rhythms, and for most of us Friday means the rhythm shifts from the pressures of work to the relaxations of the weekend. Long ago the Christian church established special times of worship in the year, its own rhythm to keep us mindful that we are not subject only to the challenges and problems of the workaday world but also have a heavenly pulse beating within our heart. We are in the world, but not of the world, as Jesus suggests in John 17:16.

Today that rhythm of the church has some harsh sounding notes. Today we remember the nativity of John the Baptist. When John the Baptist grew up, he labeled the self-righteous religious crowds who flocked to hear him a “brood of vipers.” “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:7-8). John offended his religious audience by telling them to repent. Stop your hypocrisies. Stake your life on Jesus, not on your religiosity. That was John’s message. Still is.

Workweek and weekend, a rhythm we all know. Sin and forgiveness... laying bare to God the sins of your life and hearing His words of forgiveness in Christ. That’s a rhythm the world doesn’t know but I hope you do. You’re in the world but you’re not of it.

June 27

Steve Kelley of “The Times—Picayune” drew a cartoon with four boxes, in each box a man watches TV. In the first box the man reacts to what he’s seeing. He says, “Michael Jackson, Tom Cruise, the Runaway Bride...” In the second box he complains, “Doesn’t anyone report actual news anymore?!” In box three the TV announcer says, “And out of Iraq today, word that former dictator Saddam Hussein...” And in the fourth box: “absolutely loves Doritos.”

Last Friday I had an hour wait for my flight, time I happened to be near a TV. During all that time CNN and Wolf Blitzer covered a spectacular fire in St. Louis . Since the fire was an accident, not caused by a terrorist attack, and since no one hurt, why spend over an hour of network time on the fireworks? Maybe the answer is the old song, “That’s Entertainment.” “Doesn’t anyone report actual news anymore?”

Living in community should lead to interest in substantive news...and interest in God. What do all our doings with one another have to do with the ultimate questions? The horizontal and the vertical should connect. Too bad so much TV these days is out of whack, and the network programmers don't know where that little knob is to correct it. "Doesn't anyone report actual news anymore?"

June 28

Last Thursday the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that local governments can condemn private property in order to clear the way for new, private development. To develop 90 acres of waterfront property, development that would bring jobs and huge tax dollars, officials of New London, Connecticut condemned modest homes that were not blighted or tax delinquent. Against the majority decision, Justice Scalia asked, "You can take from A and give to B if B pays more taxes?" Justice O'Connor wrote that the "specter of condemnation hangs over all property. Nothing is to prevent the State from replacing any Motel 6 with a Ritz-Carlton, any home with a shopping mall, or any farm with a factory." (Washington Post, June 24; A1, 12, 31)

There's a curiously similar story in 1 Kings 21. The government, King Ahab of Israel, wanted the vineyard of a citizen named Naboth. When Naboth refused the king's offer, Ahab sulked. His wife Jezebel took things in hand and came up with a legal ruse to condemn poor Naboth to death. Naboth dead, the coveted vineyard went to the government. When the deal was all done, and maybe even when the courts had said it was legal, the prophet Elijah came and condemned the greedy king.

Is there a difference between the two cases?

June 29

Today the church observes the day of Sts. Peter and Paul. Lately there's been a rash of popular writings claiming to reveal disturbing new facts about the early history of Christianity, like the supposed life and death struggle of Peter and Paul for control of the church.

"When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was in the wrong" (Paul in Galatians 2:11). The most sincere Christians will disagree and spinning animosity between Peter and Paul doesn't match the evidence. Earlier in that same letter Paul stressed his cordial meeting with Peter and the other apostles. "They praised God because of me" (1:24). Just as Paul respected Peter, Peter acknowledged Paul's genius. "Paul wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16). Hmm... a prophecy about today's revisionism?

One problem with the popular pitting of Peter against Paul is that it wasn't their church in the first place and they knew it. "I will build My church," Jesus said (Matthew 16:18)

and for 2000 years He's used all kinds of personalities to do it, sometimes disagreeing personalities. Have a blessed, traditional day of Sts. Peter and Paul!

June 30

Ever get the bureaucratic shuffle? "Not my department" you're told and are passed to another person. Perhaps there you get a little satisfaction but it's just as likely that you're bounced to yet another person. What's infuriating is that each person may be very nice but still shuffles you off without really helping.

Lynne Mapes-Riordan was on American Airlines flight 360 for a 3:30 departure last Wednesday. Because of weather problems in New York, she sat in the stuffy plane for hours. At 6:27 her cell phone rang with news her brother-in-law had been killed. The attendants, polite and understanding, couldn't get her off the plane. At 7:40, when the pilot announced they'd soon take off, Mapes-Riordan pled with him to let her off. The pilot...he was polite too...said when they landed at LaGuardia she could immediately catch a flight back to Chicago. Of course, when they landed about 11:00 there were no more return flights. (Chicago Tribune, June 25; Sec. 1, 1-2)

If you work in a bureaucracy, keep this in mind: "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10). You'll be alone then, and bureaucratic answers won't excuse your failure to do good.

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). As we move into a week of celebrating our freedoms, I hope you'll rank this freedom as the greatest of all.

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