

## June 2008

### June 2

Unity or disunity is a worry for Democrats. A fiercely fought primary season may be near its end, although the Clinton camp has threatened to take their nomination fight to the party's August convention. That looks like disunity, but party chairman Howard Dean stressed democrat unity. "We are strong enough to struggle and disagree...and still come together at the end of the day and be united."

Yesterday's New York Times spotlighted changing attitudes among younger Christian evangelicals. Although younger evangelicals still follow politics closely, politics isn't what unites them. Professor Christian Smith says, "Evangelicalism is becoming somewhat less coherent as a movement or an identity. Younger people...don't believe the main goal of the church is to be political." 32-year-old Letitia Wong said, "As much as our faith informs our political views, we aren't united in one way of thinking. What unites us...is the power of Jesus Christ." (New York Times, June 1; pp. A 17, 18, 23)

The theology of my church distinguishes between essential unity ("unitas," in Latin) and outward expression of agreement ("concordia"). If there's not agreement at the heart of life together, outward claims of unity will be exposed as shallow. I don't know about the Democrats, or the Republicans for that matter, but it sounds to me like the younger evangelicals are starting to get it right.

### June 3

Breaking news. Peru and Chile are battling over the origin of the potato, and they're having a real spud fight. An official of Peru said, "Obviously the world has known for centuries that the potato is from Peru and that the Peruvian potato saved Europe from hunger." Oh, yeah? An official from Chile says, "99% of the world's potatoes have some type of genetic link to potatoes from Chile ." (New York Times, June 1; A6)

But I know better, 'cause back in fourth grade we learned "the Potato Song:"

Come, Harry, Jerry, Hans and Franz; come Dominic and Plato;

Come join me in a jolly song in praise of the potato.

Hi, ho, folderol, folderol derado,

The Indians of America discovered the potato.

(Of course, those have to be North American Indians!)

They eat them with their jackets on and stew them with the meato,

And find a hundred ways or more to cook the good potato.

Hi, ho, folderol, folderol derado,

The Indians of America discovered the potato.

Please don't let the folks in South America hear this. An international disagreement could become a world crisis! Spud slinging aside, isn't it interesting how we assume that our view of things has to be the truth? Has to be, because it's my view! On lots of things we would do well to chew more before we open our mouths.

## **June 4**

It started June 4th and concluded on June 6th, 1942. Today's "Minute" commemorates 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. 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.

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 prove ourselves worth of the trust given to us by those who fought and died these days so long ago at Midway.

## **June 5**

"Drop ins" used to cause me inner turmoil. You know, the person who interrupts when you're busy? God love 'em, these "drop ins" used to get me riled up. Not now, I'm so busy!

It changed for me when I read former President Carter's book, Living Faith. He passes this along from Rev. Eloy Cruz. "You only have to have two loves in your life-for God, and for the person in front of you at any particular time."

And what does Jesus say? "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (Revelation 3:20).

"O God, make the door of this house wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship, narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride, and strife. Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling block to children, nor to straying feet, but rugged and strong enough to turn back the tempter's power. God, make the door of this house the gateway to Your eternal kingdom."

Amen. (From Catholic Household of Blessings and Prayers.)

## **June 6**

Good luck to you, Big Brown as you go for the Triple Crown tomorrow! We'll watch you run to win, muscles straining, hoof's pounding, jockey urging, owners hoping, bettors gasping. Know it or not, Big Brown, the pressure's on!

It's on us, too. Day-in and day-out we strain to get ahead, clocking the miles, pounding the pavement, striving to come out on top, eyeing the glory, mindful of money.

In theology we call that the Law, this endless striving to prove ourselves before others and before God. That's not wrong; just know that in the last analysis, at the eternal finish, all your striving won't get you into the winner's circle. Might as well be a donkey in the Belmont Stakes.

While the Law shows us what we should do, the greatest thing about the Law is that it spotlights our deep need for God's Good News, the Gospel. The Gospel makes no threats, makes no demands and prescribes no good works that you must do to be acceptable to God. The Gospel simply invites, "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Good luck, Big Brown, but as for us, we're not dependent on luck. The Gospel makes us "more than conquerors" (Romans 8:37).

## June 9

Hi, Christian here! Opa visited me and Connor last week. Opa held baby 'Nonnor' but I rocketed around the house. I threw balls in the living room. I colored on paper...and the wall. And I climbed up on the furniture and jumped down. When I jumped down, I threw up my arms and said, "Tadah!" I know no fear. Tadah! Opa told Mimi to be sure and know the quickest way to the emergency room.

Opa left. He went home. Then Opa drove to Chicago. He was on the highway. Where is Monee, Illinois? Opa got caught in a storm in Monee. He saw a tornado. It was coming right at him. Picture that: Opa and a tornado: Two big winds on a collision course. Opa found a place to hide. He didn't say, "Tadah." He knew fear.

Opa, you should practice what you preach. "There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). When you big people get afraid, do you throw up your arms...and pray? Do you put away fear...and say, "Tadah?"

## June 10

Poor sin! It's not appreciated enough. Non-religious people think sin against God and others is an antiquated idea, not in keeping with our liberated times. Religious people grant that sin is nasty but God's forgiveness makes it irrelevant.

Reflecting on Daniel Epstein's new book, "The Lincolns," columnist David Brooks writes that in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries "the whole character-building model was sin-centric. So the young Lincoln had been encouraged by the culture around him to identify his own flaws – and...he had no trouble finding them." But sin and its resultant character flaws don't get due attention any more. "Self-discovery replaced self-mastery as the primary path to maturity, and we got a thousand novels and memoirs about young peoples' search for identity. Over the past decades," Brooks writes, "we've seen president after president confident of his own talents but then undone by underappreciated flaws. It would be nice to have a president who had gone to school on his own failings." (New York Times, June 6; A23)

Are your own sinful weaknesses something to be mastered...or do you lazily excuse them?

"Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush. So they will fall...." (Jeremiah 6:15)

## June 11

As a kid I learned corn should be "knee high by the fourth of July." Because of advances in farming corn is knee high already in June...but not this year. Driving through Illinois Saturday, most corn was only a few inches high. Fields were flooded or soaked with water. Huge tractors were sitting idle in farm yards.

A global food crisis threatens 850 million people with hunger. American farmers want to respond. This year they intended to plant 324 million acres, four million more than last year, but they're up against the perfect storm. It's not only rain, but sky-rocketing fuel prices and pressure to plant more corn for biofuels at the expense of needed soybeans, wheat and rice.

Millennia ago God gave Joseph wisdom to manage the food supply in Egypt (Genesis 41). We need to pray for the same today.

"Almighty God, You bless the earth to make it fruitful, bringing forth in abundance whatever is needed for the support of our lives. Prosper the work of farmers and all those who labor to bring food to our table. Grant them seasonable weather that they may gather in the fruits of the earth in abundance and proclaim Your goodness with thanksgiving; through Jesus Christ our Lord." Amen. (Lutheran Service Book, collect 235)

## June 12

A law professor named Douglas Kmiec was denied communion because he supports Barack Obama. The case is strange on several counts. Kmiec is a pro-lifer with substantial credentials, including serving in the Reagan Justice Department. Although he does not agree with Senator Obama's position on abortion, he believes Obama's emphasis on personal responsibility will promote the culture of life. The case is also strange because the priest was not following the policy of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. "A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who takes a position in favor of an intrinsic evil, such as abortion or racism, *if* the voter's intent is to support *that* position." (emphases mine)

Lots of interesting group discussion there, but some quiet personal reflection might be best. Professor Kmiec said, "To think you have done a generous thing for your neighbor or that you have built up a culture of life just because you voted for a candidate who says in his brochure that he wants to overturn 'Roe v. Wade' is far too thin an understanding of the Catholic faith." ("The Washington Post, June 3; A15)

When you go to the Sacrament you get a wafer that is physically thin but conveys saving substance that should be life dominating. Culturally, thin is in. Here's hoping "thin" is not your desired religious body mass.

## June 13

"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 tomorrow, 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, our continuing sacrifices for the common good and our aspirations 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 sides 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 16**

Some people will agree; others won't. Today is the anniversary of "a day that will live in infamy." No, it's not the anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor but the anniversary of President Roosevelt's announcement of the National Recovery Administration, June 16, 1933. The NRA issued rules and regulations for almost everything. The price of oil was controlled. As low as 4 cents a barrel, the NRA mandated higher prices. What can and can't you put into macaroni? The NRA told you. What can and can't a tailor sew? The NRA told you. Pick out your own live chicken for the family dinner? Nope. You must take the next chicken, like it or not. The National Recovery Administration had 557 basic codes that applied to 22 million workers. (Amity Shlaes, "The Forgotten Man," p. 151)

We're still stuffed to the gullet with rules and regulations. The one place where a person is free from choking on laws is the Good News of Jesus Christ. Yes, we have broken God's laws but His forgiveness in Christ is unconditional. "Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). "Whoever comes to Me I will never drive away" (John 6:37).

In 1935 the Supreme Court declared the NRA unconstitutional. That hasn't stopped government rules and regulations, has it?

## **June 17**

Something happened last week that has never, never happened in my 61 years. I'm in the dentist's chair and the hygienist is x-raying all my teeth. For each x-ray Donna put a contraption in my mouth and several times I gagged. One time she had just put the torture instrument in and said, "You have a small mouth." WHAT? I pulled the thingamajig out and said, "What did you say?" She said, "I know you've got a strong voice but your mouth opening is small." Over the years I've regularly been criticized for my big mouth, but now I have proof to support my inflated self-image.

Of course, the problem isn't the size of the opening but what comes through it. God's First Commandment says, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." The second or third commandment, depending how you number them, says, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." Whatever's going on in your head and heart about God and people is first going to show up in your words. "The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.... The tongue is a world of evil among the parts of the body" (James 3:5-6).

Some days my mouth is still too big. How about yours?

## June 18

It's reported that inventories are up. That's bad because high inventories indicate products aren't being sold, the sign of a sluggish economy. If large inventories are bad in economics, a large inventory is also dangerous spiritually.

Jesus told a parable about a farmer who decided to build up his inventory. His plan was to tear down his barns and build bigger ones. "There I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" He died that night and his big inventory did him no good. "One's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

Call to mind that classic comedy scene from the "I Love Lucy" show. Lucy and Ethel are working in a candy store. Their job is to process the candy coming off the conveyor belt. Faster and faster the candy comes. Can't keep up! They stuff it in their pockets, stuff it in their blouses, stuff it in their mouths... too much stuff!

That scene made us laugh. Does God smile...sadly...at the eternal vanity of the personal inventories we try to build? Would a smaller inventory of stuff around your house be better?

## June 19

Tim Russert was buried yesterday. Something wrong with nature in that, dying at 58 because of severe coronary disease. Nature, why don't you keep your place, the Creator's place, life and health?

Midwestern towns and fields are flooded; devastation is in the billions of dollars. Nature, why don't you keep your place? Stay within river banks, don't break the levees, don't bring us chaos!

Imperfect nature isn't content to keep its bounds. Going beyond limits, it destroys homes and livelihoods and damages psyches. It diseases hearts and bodies, and in every disease, as is every flood, goes beyond the Creator's intent that it simply be good.

Like sinful human beings, sinful nature needs redemption. "Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay." (Romans 8:21)

For now, California is performing same-sex marriages. Two women got married, one of them very pregnant. "We're having a shotgun wedding," joked Leanna Creel. "We can't believe the timing. The opportunity to make it legal before the baby is born was just too

good an opportunity to pass up." (USA Today, June 18; 2A) That seems to fit the pattern, sinful nature going beyond the obvious about sex, which is men and women designed to complement one another. It seems so obvious, but the wisdom of this world rationalizes everything...and believes nothing. Another levee broken.

## June 20

"Cleanliness is next to godliness." Since that saying is not in the Bible, can we dismiss the notion?

The University of Louisiana at Monroe had fallen on bad times. The school had lost its accreditation, its financial situation was dire, and student satisfaction was so low that many were transferring to other universities. When James E. Cofer, Sr. came as new president in 2002, things started changing. Some of the changes seemed minor but had major impact. Because Louisiana's weather grew mildew all over campus buildings, Cofer power-sprayed the buildings clean. The grounds staff started to keep the lawn regularly mowed and manicured. Flower beds were mulched. Curbs were painted. Dormitories were cleaned up. Classrooms were updated with new learning technology. All those little changes, and more, contributed to the resurgence of the school. This spring a record number of diplomas were granted, 718. Students, faculty, staff, and alumni now have a positive perception of the school.

If "cleanliness is next to godliness" isn't in the Bible, this command is: "Thou shalt not steal." That means that God puts a value on physical things. He wants us to keep up our property and the property of others. So what's the command for many of us this weekend? "Honey, do..."

## June 23

Many people in my extended family are dealing with serious illness. I wouldn't be surprised if that's also true for your circle of family and friends.

When the body struggles, the spirit needs God's help in double measure. God promises the hurting to be present with His mercy. "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in Him.' The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." (Lamentations 3:22-26)

The 19<sup>th</sup> century poet Edward Plumptre wrote, "Your touch then, Lord, brought life and health, gave speech and strength and sight; And youth renewed and frenzy calmed revealed You, Lord of light. And now, O Lord, be near to bless, almighty as before, in crowded street, by beds of pain, as by Gennes'ret's shore."

Lord God, the strength of the weak and the consolation of those who suffer, mercifully hear our prayers for those who are ill. Grant the help of Your power that their sickness may be turned to health and our sorrow into joy; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (Pastoral Care Companion, p. 198 ff.)

## June 24

"These are the times that try men's souls," wrote Thomas Paine. I remembered that quotation when I spotted an AP story titled, "Is everything spinning out of control?" Fires in the west, floods in the Midwest, tornadoes, hurricanes and cyclones all over the place. Credit markets in trouble, prices for everything rising, people losing jobs and homes. Physical and emotional illness, death. No wonder some 80% of us believe the country is moving in the wrong direction. (Belleville News Democrat, June 22; A5)

Obviously Christians face all this as well, but many seem to face their problems with a dead Christ. If He truly came back from the dead, as we ritually intone on Sundays, and if His Spirit works faith in us, which is God's gift to us troubled sinners, shouldn't we face our problems with optimism? "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.... But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:17, 20).  
Isn't it time to practice what we hear preached?

Paul Gerhardt: "No danger, thirst, or hunger, no pain or poverty, no earthly tyrant's anger shall ever vanquish me. Though earth should break asunder, my fortress You shall be; no fire or sword or thunder shall sever You from me." (Lutheran Service Book, 724, 8)

## June 25

Hi, Christian here! Opa is here with me. I have a question for you, Opa. I am learning words. I am learning how to say words the right way. I used to call her, "Mimi." Now I call her "Mommy." Here's my question, Opa. Will my words keep changing? Will I talk different when I'm big than I do now?

Hi, Opa here. Thank you Christian for asking me that question. Yes, we use different words as we get older. When I grew up, I always called my parents "Father" and "Mother." As time went on, it became "Dad" and "Mom." As we get older, we change and the words we use change.

Sometimes big people think they can use words any way we want because we're big people. Christian, that's a mistake...and I've made it myself. We forget that we are always children, children of our heavenly Father. We should always want to talk in a way that pleases our heavenly Father.

Call her "Mimi" or "Mommy." I know she loves you and you love her. That's the way it should be with big people and God, words reflecting our childlike love.

## June 26

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10)

Senators Obama and McCain are jousting over everything, including the flooding in the Midwest. Obama blames McCain for opposing funding for levees and flood control while McCain blames Obama for not prioritizing how to spend flood control money.

"Nothing new under the sun." In 1927 the Mississippi River flooded and displaced almost a million people. One politician did more than talk. Herbert Hoover was Secretary of Commerce and went to Memphis to take command of the situation. Hoover's leadership was impressive and people noticed. "What the public liked about Hoover was their sense of him as guardian, that he would protect them and what they had. If Hoover could win the

presidential election the following year, then he might hold back whatever waters of adversity threatened." (Amity Shlaes, "The Forgotten Man," p. 16). Smile. Hoover did win the election and we all know what happened in 1929.

"All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. All things are wearisome, more than one can say. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 1:7-9)

## **June 27**

A long-time friend is struggling with cancer. Her husband writes, "viewed from God's perspective, it is an opportunity to have Him draw us closer to Him. He is allowing a time of testing." He does not desire bad from this testing." Those are healthy words, alive with hope.

When I was working my way through school delivering milk, an old co-worker told me this story about hope.

In those 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 it's 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. For my friends with cancer, for you, reach confidently into the darkness because God's word has promised you good. "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God" (Psalm 43:5).

## **June 30**

Growing up in the 50's, summer was full of time. Long, hot days and three months of recess from school seemed endless. No complaint! My complaint now is that summer isn't much different from the rest of the year. Adults, maybe children too, don't have enough time.

"Have enough time." We routinely talk about time as a commodity, something you have or don't have enough of. "I'm running short on time." "Can you spare me a minute?" Time as a thing. That's not necessarily the way it is.

The Bible leads us to think of time more as a place. The first commandment tells us to have no false god in our heart. The second or third commandment, depending on how you number them, says to revere God with our lips. Heart...lips...what's next? "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." That is, after heart and lips, worship God in time. Time isn't

under the commandment that says, "Thou shalt not steal," time as a thing, but is the place where you live and worship God.

On Monday or any day, when you're busy or enjoying a long, slow summer day, try thinking of the day's time as your place, your cathedral of thanks and service to God.