

May 2005

May 2

In her book about grieving, Will I Ever Be Whole Again?, Sandra Aldrich writes about her children's first experience with a visitation at a funeral home. Young Jay and Holly's grandma had died.

“Is she breathing?” Holly whispered as they stood at the casket.

“Well, Holly....” Sandra started to answer but then stalled. She wanted something simple but theologically correct.

“Jay then turned from his study of the casket handles to face his little sister. ‘No, Holly, she’s not breathing. Remember? The breathin’ part’s in heaven.’” (Howard Publishing, 1999; p. 92)

Your soul, your “breathin’ part,” isn’t in heaven yet. It’s here and now, Monday morning, facing the grind of a new week. So here and now breathe deeply the fresh air of Easter. Easter isn’t over, never will be, can’t be. Because the tomb is empty, the Spirit of life can inspire you with the faith, hope and love that are in Christ Jesus. You and I need that for today and all the days ahead!

Jesus, inspire my “breathin’ part” with the fresh air of Easter morning! Amen.

May 3

I’ve lived my whole life in Illinois , born and raised near Chicago . Chicago, that toddlin’ town, that gun toting town, and home of Al Capone who knew how to run a racket.

With that civic awareness in my DNA, I read with great interest that the Illinois legislators may allow the sale of lottery tickets over the Internet. “If the bill is successful, Illinois would become the first state in the nation to venture into online ticket sales.” (Kate Thayer, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, April 28; B1)

Isn’t this great! Credit card in hand, I’ll be able to buy lottery tickets in my pajamas! I won’t even have to go out of the house to find a one-armed bandit. I can invite the pickpocket into my own home. We’ll probably spend a lot of time together.

Years ago I delivered a message on The Lutheran Hour in which I showed – or tried to show – the immorality of the lottery. Some listeners were not convinced. One woman wrote and told me that I didn’t understand. “The reason we play the lottery,” she said, “is because we’re poor and need the money.”

Huh?

Back to Chicago . Representative Lou Lang has studied the issue and says, “Lottery tickets are purchased mostly by people of lesser means.”

Let me get this straight. Back in the day crooked cops helped Al Capone impoverish people. Is the government now doing the same thing openly, “legally?”

Oh, I forgot. It’s for education.

Huh?

May 4

“Mom!” Once in a while kids call out “Dad,” but we all know it’s mom who wins the calling contest.

Besieged mothers should call out too...for their children...to God. Today, May 4th, the church remembers Monica, a great pray-er for her child. Like many young people, her son gave up the Christian faith to sow his wild oats. It happens, these newly independent young adults going their own way, and it tears up a faithful mother more than most of us know.

Monica went to a priest for counsel. He told her, “Let him alone for a while; only pray to God for him.” She pestered the priest more. “Go your way,” he finally said, “and God bless you, for it is not possible that the son of these tears should be lost.” And her son wasn’t lost. Her son Augustine became one of the greatest leaders in the history of the Christian church.

Remember how your kids call to you? “Have we trials? Take it to the Lord in prayer.” Mothers, besieged by your children’s needs, worried about their lives, call to the heavenly Father for them. “Your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

May 5

The story goes that a Montana shepherd got sick and was taken to the hospital in Fort Benton . His sheep dog followed his master to the city and kept watch outside the hospital door. When the shepherd died, his body was taken to the train to be shipped back to his family in the East. The dog, Shep was his name, appeared at the train station, cried for his master and vainly chased the train down the tracks.

For the next five and a half years, Shep met every train that came into Fort Benton , hoping that one of the passengers getting off would be his master. Shep became well-known and kindly people took care of him but he refused to be taken to anyone’s home. He had but one devotion: waiting for his master to return. Shep’s devotion did not waver until the cold winter day in 1941 when he died.

Today is Ascension Day. Jesus Christ was visibly taken to heaven with the promise that He will come again in glory. Today is also the National Day of Prayer. “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear.”

Shep was devoted to his master’s return. Can’t we pray more faithfully, preparing for our Master’s promised return? “What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!”

May 6

Years ago, a March day I think, I set out to drive to my mom’s house in Chicago . When it started to snow, I-57 quickly became packed with snow and ice. Bitter cold winds were blowing across the farm fields, blowing hard. Traffic crept along at 5 miles an hour. Exit ramps were treacherous, so I couldn’t turn around, I couldn’t call anyone (no cell phones then). I was scared...and I got angry. My mother’s a stickler for being on time...I was angry about the tongue lashing I was sure to get.

The 4 hour trip turned into a 10 hour ordeal. Wow, I sharpened my tongue to answer every conceivable criticism for being late! So when I finally pulled into her driveway, I was ready for her...or so I thought. She came running at me, tears pouring down her cheeks, gave me a big hug, and sobbing, gasping for air, she said, “I thought something had happened to you.” I wasn’t ready for a mother’s love.

Scared, angry, defensive... How easily we forget that we are loved! “Put on love, which binds (all virtues) together in perfect unity” (Colossians 3:14). And for that reason, we set aside this weekend to thank God for His love to us through our mothers.

May 9

Yesterday opened some deep wounds. It was good to honor mothers, but think how hard our national observance was on...

The married woman who desperately wants to give birth to a child but cannot;

The married woman who has often miscarried;

The woman who is grieving over her earlier decision to have an abortion;

The mother whose child died;

The single woman who would love to be married and have a child but lives true to her belief that sex and motherhood is reserved for marriage;

The mother who raised her children, raised them well, but they now are unruly and ungrateful.

Yes, it's good, God-pleasing that we honored mothers yesterday and I presume that women who fit one of the above descriptions don't object to yesterday's observance. Still, it must cut deep in their hearts. We draw the conclusion that all is not as it should be. Recognizing that, the next logical step is for the hurting to look to God for consolation and for those not hurting to be sensitive.

"The Father of compassion and the God of all comfort...comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Corinthians 1:4).

May 10

What makes a weed? I was surprised years ago to learn that a weed is a plant that grows in some place you don't want it to grow. I had assumed, incorrectly it turned out, that there was something inherent in a weed that made it a weed, something naturally bad about it. No so. What one person considers a weed another might consider something beautiful.

So last weekend the people in the town of Borculo in Holland celebrated, of all things, the dandelion. When we were kids we had to spend time digging out that hated weed, the dandelion, but now in Borculo the "Dandelion Festival" celebrates the weed with a parade of more than 50 entries. A man named Vern Bohl started the festival in 1986, started it for the purpose of poking fun at Holland's famous tulip festival. One person's flower is another's weed, and vice versa. (AP in "The Ann Arbor News," May 7; A1)

The moral of this simple illustration: How many people do you instinctively think are bad, weeds if you will, people you regard with disgust? Could your disdain be an expression of ignorance, like my thinking a weed is inherently a weed? If you'd take time to learn about that person, might you find something worth celebrating?

May 11

It was scathing! And I loved every word of it. In a recent column Renee Graham of "The Boston Globe" skewered the media for their coverage of the "runaway bride," Jennifer Wilbanks.

"Even as (CNN) was reporting the Wilbanks' story, its 'news ticker' offered this accidental juxtaposition, in a promo for an upcoming topic on its weekend program, 'In the Money:' 'Why isn't the U.S. media covering the genocide in Sudan, very much, if at all?'"

Ms. Graham offers another example of the shallowness of the media: "The misguided actions of one marriage-wary woman trumped coverage of the latest spike of violence in Iraq and North Korea's recent test of a short-range missile."

“Like a big, dumb dog with more might than sense, the TV media just can’t let this go.”
 (“The Ann Arbor News,” May 7; B2)

Don’t you just love it when someone goes after the big media? Then again, TV is a commercial proposition, intended more to make money than to educate. The programming people must know that there’s an audience out there for such a story, shallow compared to genocide or missile tests. What’s the saying, the first time shame on you; the second time shame on me? Who should be more ashamed, the big media or we who ignore the real stories to follow the soaps?

May 12

Scott Shim, Matthew Grossman and Ryan Lightbody have invented a bike that starts out as a three-wheeler but turns into a two-wheeler as you pick up speed. It’ll be a great way for children to learn how to ride.

“The common thing,” said Shim, “(was) looking back to see if your dad is holding your seat and having that fear of crashing or falling all the time while you’re riding.” (Rick Callahan in the “Las Vegas Review-Journal, May 1; 2A)

Boy, can I relate! Early 1950’s; Ashland Avenue , Chicago Heights . Santa had brought me a shiny new Schwinn and now father was teaching me to ride it. One day we head north on the sidewalk, Dad steadying me by holding the back of the seat. Five houses up the street I look back to make sure Dad is still with me. He’s not! I was near the spot where the sidewalk ended and there was a pile of gravel. I panicked and crashed right onto that gravel pile.

These days many parents are congratulating their children for graduating from college. Soon those graduates will be loading up the car and going solo into life. Dad, Mom, let them go. Let them learn how to ride on their own. As you watch them go, pray to their real Father, the heavenly Father, to go with them all the way. He will.

May 13

In Zion , Illinois , Jerry Hobbs brutally kills two little girls, one his daughter. In Los Angeles David McGowan killed five family members and then himself. And half a world away and two millennia ago, King Herod “had John beheaded in the prison” (Matthew 14:10).

“When Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place” (14:13). The Greek word translated “withdrew” is instructive. Plato used it for leaving the battlefield (Republic 394a) and Thucydides similarly used it for retreating after a defeat (2.89). Jesus is the almighty Son of God but a true human being as well. So He felt the heat. One prophet beheaded; is He next? Jesus retreats to a solitary place.

I need to retreat as well. I have to realize anew that there are people who are not just seriously disturbed; there are people in the grasp of evil. Are we all basically good, only needing to bring out the divine spark within us? We haven't done that over thousands of years, so something must be fundamentally wrong with us humans. Call it "sin."

After Jesus had retreated, He returned to give Himself in the battle against evil. "Therefore God has highly exalted Him" (Philippians 2:9). No crown without a cross; after retreat, resolution to fight the sin in our lives.

May 16

"If it's good for America, it's bad for them." So said a friend about much of the media, specifically Newsweek's report that American soldiers flushed parts of the Koran. Newsweek admitted its report may not be true, but much of the Muslim world believes it is. The result is that one writer's and one editor's carelessness (or is it bias?) have cost American lives and delayed the peace we all desire.

St. James says, "The tongue...is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:5-6).

We Christians are convinced that our faith is true, but does that give us the right to speak or write without thinking about the consequences? Bashing the media is great fun, but James wasn't writing to Newsweek but to us Christians. How many people have we Christians pushed away from eternal life because we haven't loved enough to measure our words? If it's good for others, is it bad for us?

May 17

That Secretary of State Rice visited Iraq doesn't really touch our lives anymore than a finger in Wendy's chili or the "Runaway Bride," but base closings by the Pentagon hit many people where it hurts. The civilians who work on the base ask, "What will we do now?" The people who work at the local diner, the real estate agents, the veterans who shop at the base commissary, all ask, "What will we do now?"

Base closures fit, I think, under the broad category of "Life dumps on you when you did nothing to deserve it." We've all been there, under the dumping. There's at least one good thing that can happen when life is unjust. It's the painful reminder that as long as we put our hopes on anyone or anything in this world, disappointment is guaranteed. After all, everyone and everything in this world is imperfect, sinful, and therefore unable to live up to all expectations. Only God is perfect; only His Son Jesus Christ will prove to never have let us down. So when we're dumped on, as often happens, it's a reminder to return our affections to the One who promises "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). That's what we'll do now.

Our prayers for those hit hard by base closings.

May 18

I'm told that the Austrians had a tradition whenever a member of their royal family died. The last time this happened was in 1989 when the last empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary died.

When her funeral procession arrived at St. Stephen's Catholic Church, a leader of the procession knocked on the closed door of the cathedral. "Who goes there?" asked a priest on the inside.

The leader of the process gave the answer, "Queen of Bohemia, Dalmatia , Croatia , Slavonia , Galicia . Queen of Jerusalem . Grand Duchess of Tuscany and Cracow ."

Back comes this response,

"I do not know her."

A second knock on the door. "Who goes there?"

"The Empress."

Still the door remains shut.

A third knock. "Who is there?"

Now, keeping with tradition, comes this answer, "A poor sinner." At that, the door of the cathedral was opened.

Thanks to Mr. Ryan Brons for sharing that story.

"Trust not in princes, they are but mortal;

Earthborn they are and soon decay.

Naught are their counsels at life's last portal,

When the dark grave doth claim its prey.

Since, then, no man can help afford,

Trust ye in Christ, our God and Lord. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 26,2)

May 19

The rhododendron in front of our house is gorgeous now, covered with pink blooms. I look and admire. Flowers have a glory worth beholding (Isaiah 40:7).

Drive through the countryside and see the growing crops and the cattle grazing. Another testimony to something greater: “The cattle on a thousand hills” belong to God (Psalm 50:10).

But while nature testifies profusely to the glory of God, it can’t speak. It’s “dumb,” “dumb” in the old sense of that word, lacking the power of speech. “Dumb” nature leaves us wondering what’s behind it all.

Last Sunday the Church celebrated Pentecost and the coming of God’s Holy Spirit. The Spirit surrounds us (“Whither can I go from Your Spirit?” Psalm 139:7). The Spirit helps us (“The Spirit helps us in our weakness”) and prays for us (“the Spirit intercedes for the saints,” Romans 8:26). And unlike “dumb” nature, the Spirit of God speaks to us in the words of Jesus Christ (“The Spirit gives life... The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life,” John 6:63).

The “59th Street Bridge Song” asks, “Hello, lamp post, what you knowing? I’ve come to watch your flowers growing. Ain’t you got no rhyme for me?” The answer is “no rhyme, just a riddle.” So we pray, must pray, “Take not Your Holy Spirit from me” (Psalm 51:11).

May 20

Which of these two gifts did my wife like?

First, while she was home and I was on a tour to Greece, I bought her a lacy, loose-fitting white dress.

Second, for our anniversary, I bought her a gas-powered weed whacker.

Sunday many Christian churches will observe Trinity Sunday, a day we are reminded that the Bible reveals God as Triune, as three-in-one. There is only one God but there are three separate and distinct persons in this one God, Father, Son (that’s Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. How can there be three persons but only one God? I can’t understand. No one can. And what’s more, any reasoning that makes sense to this three-in-one mystery runs afoul of what the Bible teaches. Some cults say the doctrine of the Trinity is not biblical but that can be refuted from the Bible itself.

Today many people say these details don’t matter. The only thing that counts is your sincerity, not the content of your belief.

My wife did not like that dress. She never wore it, not once. It just wasn't her. But she loved the weed-whacker. It fit her, an active person who loves working outdoors. So, if I claim to love a person, I better know who that person really is.

And if we claim to love God, we must know how He's revealed Himself, as a Trinity. God doesn't want the loose, lacy dress of ill-defined spirituality!

May 23

Permit me to depart from my usual commentary to share something from my life. Last Friday I accepted an appointment to serve as the tenth president of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. With 827 students Concordia is a large institution as seminaries go. Concordia's history, 166 years old, suggests that the wisdom of the ages will not be lost to passing fads. Like any modern institution of higher learning, there are major issues to address (financial support, governance, distance learning, ethnic diversity, and many others).

But two themes must dominate all others: love for God and love for people. The pastors we train must be experts in the Bible, ready to apply the eternal word of salvation to the daily lives of people. Therefore they must love people, not just calculating how to make them church members but caring for all people selflessly and with no ulterior motive.

David H.C. Reid told about a young minister who spent six days holed up studying theology and emerged only on Sunday to preach his sermon. "When asked how he liked his new parson, an old Scot said that he supposed he was all right, in the main, but six days he was invisible and the seventh day he was incomprehensible." (in For All the Saints, II, 776)

Your prayers for my new undertaking will be most appreciated.

May 24

For years you've had to buy hot dogs in 8-packs even though the buns came 6 or 12 to a package. 'You're always complaining about having extra buns,' said Angelica Jacobs. 'Do you make sandwiches? Do you throw 'em out?'

"When I say I'm in the hot dog business, the first thing people say is, 'How come buns and dogs come in different amounts?'" said Howard Eirinberg, president of Vienna Beef.

But now the dog and bun controversy is coming to an end. Vienna Beef and Alpha Baking Company have agreed to make 8-packs of both. "We think it's the perfect opportunity to right a 100-year wrong," said Eirinberg. (Shamus Toomey, Chicago Sun-Times, May 18; p. 4)

Most of us are spectators in the big debates of life. None of us has influence in the Senate debate over filibusters. When the company you work for debates policies like

downsizing or employee benefits, do they consult you? It's like getting stuck with extra buns and you can't do a thing about it.

Things are different, though, in your more personal relationships. With your family, with your co-workers, with your neighbors, you can move to end longstanding disagreements. "As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). Hot dogs and buns wait a 100 years to make peace, not followers of the Prince of Peace!

May 25

Genesis chapter one tells us God created the world in six days. Then chapter two: "By the seventh day God had finished the work He had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all His work" (v. 2).

Why did God rest? God certainly doesn't get tired (Isaiah 40:28).

God rested to admire creation. Of the previous days the Bible says, "God saw that (what He had made) was good." So we infer that God admired His creation on the day of rest.

Since you and I are part of God's creation, God's rest shows He's interested in us. By resting God identified Himself with our human patterns of work and rest. He's with us these days, working and looking forward to a long weekend of rest.

The deepest purpose of God's rest is to teach us in our times of rest to look to Immanuel, His Son, God with us (Matthew 1:23). Jesus says, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

The coming weekend is about remembering our fallen patriots. As you plan for these next days, remember that God Himself rested. Now He wants to get close to you and draw you into His rest.

May 26

Congratulations to this year's graduates! This evening I'll speak at the graduation service for Zion Lutheran School in Harvester, Missouri. I wonder who really graduates, the student...or the parents? Obviously the student, on to high school, on to college, on to a career, on to a changing world. But mom and dad graduate as well...to ever less control, to a nest that can be empty save for memories.

A couple years ago I checked in electronically at the Portland airport. Swiped my card and before I knew what was happening, a helpful agent was punching the screen for me. Too helpful. I put my hand on her shoulder and said, "Mom, I can do it myself." She replied, "Oh, I'm sorry. I raised 5 kids." I felt like the sixth.

Here's to the parents of the graduates who face the Herculean task of gradually letting go. My daughter once asked me if I wanted to live her life for her. "Well, yes I do," I

answered...but I couldn't, I can't, and, for better or worse, she has to punch her own check-in screens and whatever else life brings her.

Experts say that graduation causes a kind of grief. Something's being lost. Here's to the parents who have to deal with it. "Here we have no lasting city" (Hebrews 13:14).

P.S. I'll be leading a tour to Germany September 29 to October 10, 2005. We'll be visiting Berlin, Wittenberg, Dresden, Leipzig, Munich and other spots, focusing especially on Martin Luther and J.S. Bach. If you're interested in joining us, please reply to this "Minute."

May 27

Although he never served on the United States Supreme Court, Learned Hand was one of America's most influential jurists. In 1944 he spoke at an "I Am an American Day" rally in Central Park in New York.

Judge Hand said liberty is not the freedom to do whatever you want. "A society in which men recognize no check upon their freedom soon becomes a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few."

Instead, the spirit of freedom "seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own...." Then Judge Hand ties the spirit of liberty to Jesus' teaching: "The spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded; the spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who, near two thousand years ago, taught mankind that lesson it has never learned, but has never quite forgotten—that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest."

And it is, he says, "in the spirit of that America for which our young men are at this moment fighting and dying." ("Lend Me Your Ears," p. 63)

I'll be off until Tuesday. As you rest and relax this weekend, remember.

May 31

We've remember the dead. Do we remember the living?

I'm guessing many of us don't pray much for others, and maybe don't pray much period. We have excuses. Too busy, too much work. You know that's lame. "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1). Why bother? God already knows everything. Is that the attitude of a close relationship? But here's an excuse I can accept: I don't know what to say.

In the middle of your Bible is a quick fix, the Psalms. The psalmists pour out their hearts to God on every basic emotion of life. When you're reading a psalm... better to say,

praying a psalm...you make the psalmist's sentiments your own. The "what to say" excuse is gone. And praying for others? Not every psalm's mood fits your mood on any given day, but it certainly will describe someone you know. So you use the psalmist's words to take that person to God in prayer.

You know who prayed the psalms all the time? Jesus. "Because those who pray the psalms are joining in with the prayer of Jesus Christ, their prayer reaches the ears of God. Christ has become their intercessor." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Life Together," p. 46). Pretty good company when you pray! Go to it.