

May 2008

### **May 1**

Ascension Day: Jesus "was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight." (Acts 1:9) So now we find ourselves in the greatest "hide and go seek" game of our lives, seeking after a hidden God. There are times I resent God's hiddenness, but that's the way it is. In part because God is too much for us to behold. "You cannot see My face, for no one may see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20) In part because we have fallen from His holiness. "Your sins have hidden His face from you." (Isaiah 59:2)

But there is a focal point for seeking after God. "From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another. No one has ever seen God, but the only begotten who is at the Father's side has made Him known." (John 1:16, 18) The focal point is Jesus Christ, a focal point not for our eyes but for our trust. "We live by faith, not by sight." (2 Corinthians 5:7) "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:29)

So when it seems like a great cosmic game of "hide and go seek," you know where to look and you can trust He will find you. "We shall see face to face." (1 Corinthians 13:12)

### **May 2**

50, 45, 30, 20, 10. Abraham prayed again and again for Sodom, "Sodom" synonymous with the most sinful conducts. The Lord answered, "For the sake of 50, then 45, then 40, then 30, then 20, and finally 10 righteous, I will not destroy it." (Genesis 18:20-33)

"He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous." (Matthew 5:45). God has a heart for all people, wants all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), even those who refuse to walk in His ways. 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10. Not esteemed by society, the faithful are the most precious to God. When judgment comes, as it must, He will save His people.

Today is the day after the National Day of Prayer. 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10. Are you still praying for those who don't walk in His ways?

### **May 5**

Daughter Elizabeth and sons Christian and Connor spent last week with us. All good things end, so Saturday they went to the airport. Sin shows itself in many places. Last Saturday we met sin in heartless bureaucracy. Elizabeth was sick, very sick. We had called American Airlines to ask if Diane could help Liz and the kids to the gate. Yes, they said, but when we got to the airport, the hard-hearted gate agent showed no sympathy. Neither did her supervisor, who summarily said, "No." Bureaucracy covers a multitude of sins.

So sick Liz and the wild things had to go through security on their own. You know those bins at security where you put your shoes, toiletries, and computer? Two-year-old Christian saw people taking those bins and decided to help. He unpacked the whole stack of bins. How can a sick mom cope with this? Diane and I watched helplessly.

Thank God for people who care. Two TSA people saw Liz's plight and helped her and the kids to the gate. They were wonderful. So was American Airlines ticket agent Judy Levinson who was in and out of the whole infuriating story. She couldn't change the heartless bureaucracy but she showed us real care.

Do you let bureaucratic rules excuse your heart-heartedness...or do you rise above and show care?

## **May 6**

Some months ago I happened to watch Charles Stanley on TV. Rev. Stanley is a good teacher and spoke about the value of getting down on your knees to pray. Not just figuratively but actually, physically getting down on your knees to pray. He said that posture is a reminder to be humble before God.

"Pray without ceasing," (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Christians have often puzzled over that command. Certainly you can't always have your hands folded, your head bowed, and maybe even your knees bent all day long. I'll admit when it comes to the formal postures of prayer, I'm not very good. As I get older, I think I'm starting to understand better. To "pray without ceasing" is not about the posture of your body but the posture of your mind. Is your every waking thought, word and action before others done in dialogue with God? Are you constantly thinking vertically as well as horizontally? And some of those times you also put your body in a special posture.

I wrote yesterday about our daughter Elizabeth, mother of Christian and Connor. She is ill and tomorrow will enter the hospital. I think I'll go off today where almost no one sees and almost know one knows and bend my knees. Affliction cooperates in sanctification.

## **May 7**

This is the date of Germany's surrender in World War II. On the 5<sup>th</sup>, representatives of the German High Command came by train to Rheims, France. On the 7<sup>th</sup> at 2:30 a.m. ....yes, 2:30 a.m. ....they announced they were ready to sign papers of surrender.

James Ballard was there. He had landed at Omaha Beach, was later wounded, and after recovering was assigned to the staff of Brigadier General "Beetle" Smith. It was serving Smith that young Ballard witnessed the surrender. When he died at age 85, his daughter Mary Ballard Deffenbaugh said, "It's hard for those of us so much younger to realize that his generation was pretty private about things. We talk about everything today. I wish Daddy

had told me more stories. But he came from a time when people felt that some things were not meant to be spoken." (Claire Martin, The Denver Post; April 25, 2004 ; 34A)

"Still waters run deep." Some things are too horrible, like war, like 22,500 killed by the cyclone in Myanmar . "The prudent man keeps quiet in such times, for the times are evil" (Amos 5:13 ). The reserve of older people is something to emulate, not regret.

### **May 8**

I love those sermons that challenge the way I think. Yesterday Dr. David Schmitt did that when he preached in chapel on 1 Peter 4:7-8, "Be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."

Dr. Schmitt said that when he prays he often asks God to put things right in his life. Most of us do the same thing. Something is out of kilter in our lives and we ask God to help make it right. But in this verse St. Peter puts it the other way around. Live your life right so that you can pray. Be clear-minded, be self-controlled, love others...so that you're in the right posture for full and unhindered prayer time with God. By the way, Peter follows that same line, live right for the sake of prayer, when he says to husbands: "Husbands, be considerate as you live with your wives...treat them with respect...so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (3:7)

When things get out of kilter in life, we should go to God for help. Do we want to hear Him say, "You're asking Me for help when you're living your self-willed way, not My way?" Be clear-minded, self-controlled, love one another...so that you can pray.

### **May 9**

A loving mother's heart for her children is so large that hurts enter from many sides. When Simeon saw the baby Jesus, he told Mary, "a sword will pierce your soul" (Luke 2:35 ). Was Mary hurt when Jesus asked, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" (Matthew 12:48). She believed her Son. When there was no wine at the wedding in Cana , she told the servants, "Do whatever He tells you" (John 2:5). Who could describe how she felt at the crucifixion when Simeon's prediction came terribly true? (John 19:26) A loving mother could!

"I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow." (Jeremiah 31:13) God fulfills that promise for every Christian mother in Easter, in the resurrection of His Son and Mary's Son from the dead. Easter, resurrection, hope for children, each centered in a loving Savior who is alive and present. "He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted" (Isaiah 61:1). For every mother filled with Easter hope we praise God!

Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,

Who wondrous things has done, in whom His world rejoices;

Who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way,

With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

## May 12

Jesus said, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound." (John 3:8)

Oh, we hear the sound of wind, Jesus, we hear it. In parts of the Midwest it was like the sound of a freight train. With that came the sounds of metal twisting and tossed, of wood cracking, splintering, and strewn...and then crying. 23 victims of tornadoes. The sounds of burials and feeble clergy attempts to make some sense. Those are small sounds compared to Myanmar where the death toll could rise to 100,000. Add the sounds of a humanitarian disaster, insufficient relief supplies and disease. Oh, we hear alright.

Jesus was talking about the work of the Spirit giving new birth to people for the kingdom of God . Yesterday was Pentecost when God gave the Holy Spirit to the first disciples. "They were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house" (Acts 2:1-2). Today that Spirit gives new birth with the word of Jesus. "My words are spirit and life" (John 6:63).

When the winds of life blow hard at us, we cling desperately to this conviction the Spirit gives kingdom people, that God is good, despite the evidence. "Take not Your Holy Spirit from me!" (Psalm 51:11)

## May 13

Hi, Christian here! I am happy. My Mommy, I call her "Mimi," is coming home today. Mimi was sick. So she went to that place with long halls and many beds. It's the place we got my baby brother Connor. This time there is no new baby. Mimi rested. Mimi had needles and tubes in her. Did she cry? I would! Daddy took care of me and Connor. Just us boys! What's a clean house?

Opa and Oma came to help. They went with us to church. Big people asked about Mimi. Thank you, big people. When we folded our hands and bowed our heads, the man said Mimi's name. Opa remembered Psalm 41:3, "Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the Lord delivers him in times of trouble, the Lord will sustain him on his sickbed and restore him from his bed of illness." When all the big people were done, they said, Amen. I can say that word Amen. Opa says it means, "It shall be so!"

Psalm 103:2-4, "Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits – who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion." Amen; it shall be so!

## May 14

Picture this: Someone runs the stop light because he's in a hurry. Picture this: The fasten seat belt light is illuminated on the plane, but someone gets up anyway. Picture this: A student ignores a class because the subject doesn't interest her. What's common to these pictures? Individualism. Life is all about individualism and I am my most important individual. Does my running a red light jeopardize others? Does getting up when the seat belt light is on go against the rules? Does my lack of interest in a class show disrespect to the learning of others? Of course! To all of these, the answer is yes, of course. But hey! Modern American society is about individualism and I am my most important individual. The rest of you, go hang.

A friend recently gave me the book, "Monk Habits for Everyday People." Dennis Okholm talks about his experiences with Order of St. Benedict. In the Benedictine order individualism is less important than community. Imagine that, you are not the measure of all things! Writes Okholm, "The sign of love is obedience, whether I am observing the rules of family life, of being a good steward of God's resources, or of working faithfully as an employee." (p. 67f.)

Love "is not self-seeking" (1 Corinthians 13:5). Get God's picture?

## **May 15**

A large tent is going up today at Concordia Seminary. Tomorrow evening the graduates will receive their various diplomas but first tonight, under that tent, a reception will be held for the graduates and their parents.

You see people every day who place no value upon an education, often because they were raised that way. Tonight under the tent we say "Thank you" to all those parents who kept asking their little children, "What did you learn at school today?" and kept hearing, "Nuttin." "Then why are we sending you to school?" "I dunno." Slowly it dawns on the child that he or she has learned something, and by college or graduate school has learned a lot.

Years ago I sat in a crowded corner in a hot gymnasium and watched my daughter graduate from Valparaiso University. The feeling was overwhelming. My parents grew up in the depression and watching my daughter graduate I understood like never before why they always and earnestly asked, "How was school today?"

"The more knowledge, the more grief" (Ecclesiastes 1:18). Perhaps so, but the education parents provide can orient their children to heaven to that they truly value their blessings on earth. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline" (Proverbs 1:7).

## **May 16**

"Lead us not into temptation" says the Our Father. The prayer is that God would keep us from evil, but what about people in power deciding how we should live? Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's new book, "Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness," advocates changes to nudge us into better behavior. "A 'nudge' is any non-coercive alteration in the context in which people make decisions." For example, the sharp curves on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago have been the scenes of many accidents. New lines on the street, spaced more closely together approaching the dangerous curves, trick the

driver into slowing down. There are many examples where “nudges” push people toward someone else’s desired decision.

Why “nudges?” Reviewer Evan Goldstein wrote, “Human beings are lazy, busy, impulsive, and irrational creatures susceptible to biases and errors.” The Bible labels it sin, inherited sin and the sins we commit. Sin, and stupidity, need to be controlled...but by whom? But before control there must be recognition. An unthinking person who denies the nature of sin as rebellion against the good God is going to be easier to manipulate. Read the Bible and learn more about the dark side of human nature, especially when a person has power to enforce his will. (“The Chronicle of Higher Education,” May 9; B8-11)

## **May 19**

Most Christian churches have summarized their beliefs in short statements called “creeds.” Three creeds have found wide acceptance, the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. Yesterday some churches used the Athanasian Creed to observe Trinity Sunday.

And some people choked. Ephesians 2:8-9 is well known: “By grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works.” But this ancient creed says, “Those who have done good will enter into eternal life, and those who have done evil into eternal fire.” You see the problem.

The Bible often talks about being judged for our works. The problem is our works are riddled with sin, just like our being. Psalm 143:2, “Do not bring Your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before You.” So we need to be delivered from our predicament, we need “salvation” in religious jargon. The Athanasian Creed says that Jesus Christ “suffered for our salvation” and “will come to judge the living and the dead.” So what’s the “good” that will get you into eternal life? Your relationship to Jesus Christ. Do you believe He will judge you? Do you throw yourself on His mercy for forgiveness?

The creeds sure do get us to think!

## **May 20**

For nine years Randy and Lisa Wilson of Colorado Springs have put on a “Father-Daughter Purity Ball.” The formal event focuses on fathers promising to be faithful to their wives, thereby modeling fidelity to their young daughters. Mr. Wilson pleads, “Fathers, our daughters are waiting for us. They are desperately waiting for us in a culture that lures them into the murky waters of exploitation. They need to be rescued by you, their dad.”

One of the Wilson’s daughters says, “Something I need from dad is affirmation, being told I’m beautiful. If we don’t get it from home, we will go out to the culture and get it from them.” Another daughter says, “The culture says you’re free to sleep with as many people as you want to. What does that get you but chaos?”

Farther west, the California Supreme Court claims that gay marriage is protected by the Constitution. When I wrote the other day about “nudges,” a reader pointed out that the law is a nudge. It’s a way of forcing some right conduct. Do we really believe that any behavior is protected by the Constitution? Do we really believe that any expression of sexual urges should be protected? “What does that get you but chaos?” (New York Times, May 19; A13)

## May 21

We heard yesterday that Senator Ted Kennedy has cancer. Whenever I hear someone has been given that scary diagnosis, I wonder what it feels like to hear, "You have cancer." Like being hit by a truck? Like unreal, this must be a bad dream? I can only imagine.

Let me change the subject. Isn't that what we often do, move away from something scary? Now that warmer weather is here, Diane and I sit in the front yard in the evening. Walkers, runners and bikers go by, many with earphones. We wonder about that. They don't hear the rustling of the new leaves, don't hear the birds singing, don't hear the kids playing. They're not sharing with someone dear. And maybe – iPod dominating their mind, just like people always on their cell – maybe they're avoiding being alone with themselves. Did I mention changing the subject?

I hope I would face a terrible diagnosis head-on, that I would have spent enough time alone with myself and enough time with my God to deal with the shock of a bad diagnosis. Time spent that way before the diagnosis provides an anchor to keep us fixed when the storm of illness comes.

Haven't been there – yet – but my prayers to all struggling with illness. And remember Easter. Hope to you!

## May 22

A key to relationships is not simply spending time together but how you spend time together.

A scientist named Aylmer married a beautiful woman named Georgiana. They loved each other deeply and, since life was slower back in those days...The story is set in the 1700's... Aylmer and Georgiana spent much time with each other.

But...

Georgiana's beauty had one flaw, a small crimson birthmark on her left cheek. The more time they spent together, the more Aylmer obsessed about that one physical flaw. Georgiana, wanting to please her husband, also obsessed about it and consented to let her husband, the scientist, concoct a potion to remove the mark that was ruining their life. He did...and in removing the birthmark he also took Georgiana's life. Her imperfection was part of her being.

The story is called "The Birthmark" and was written by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

How will you spend your time together over the Memorial Day weekend? Sin makes us rationalize our obsession with other people's imperfections. The love of Christ suggests a better way. "Love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8)

## May 23

"And God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night.... And it was so. God made two great lights – the great light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars.'" (Genesis 1:14-16)

NASA hopes to land a robot on one of those lights on Sunday. After a journey of 422 million miles, "Phoenix" is scheduled to land in the arctic regions of Mars, put out its robotic arm, and dig down two feet to look for organic compounds that could have sustained life.

Last January a team of Princeton astronomers saw a supernova, the explosion of a star. The starburst lasted only five minutes but was brighter than a billion stars combined. This supernova happened 90 million light years away, a light year being about 5.9 trillion miles. Alicia Soderberg said, "For years we have dreamed of seeing a star just as it was exploding, but actually finding one is a once-in-a-lifetime event." (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, May 22; A10)

"God saw all that He had made, and it was very good." (Genesis 1:31) Take some time this weekend to look where God looked, to look into the heavens. But don't expect to find Him up there, unless you know Him down here.

## **May 26**

## **May 27**

Here's the official line: The purpose of Memorial Day is to honor those who died in the service of our country. What's the reality? While most of us honor those who died, we also want to enjoy the holiday. Memorial Day ends up being less about sacrifice and more about us enjoying good times.

In the run up to Memorial Day, everyone pays attention to weather forecasts. Yes, we will honor the fallen but then we want to barbeque and enjoy the day. It didn't turn out that way yesterday for many of us. Many of us were stuck inside because of thunderstorms and rain. Who can we blame for messing up our holiday expectations? Weather forecasters!

This next thing surprised me. St. Louis weatherman Dave Murray apologized for getting the forecast wrong. The "official line" is always that we didn't do anything wrong. We all defend whatever it is that we did, always. But reality is that we're not all-knowing and often get it wrong, weather forecasters...and you and me. Defend yourself always, blame others always, or admit your mistakes, be content, and keep striving to serve others?

Memorial Day. Honoring those who died for our country should reinforce ideals, should raise us above petty selfish self-justification and raise us above merely enjoying our lives. Call it part of "repentance."

## **May 28**

The Duke of Windsor died on this date in 1972. He had abdicated the throne of England in 1936 to marry his love, Wallis Warfield Simpson. Ah, Romance! Ah, Love!

At the other extreme I read some years ago about the "Divorce Bus." Once a month the "Divorce Bus" makes its run in Miami-Dade County, serving people who have filed for an uncontested divorce. The Washington Post reported that one day the Divorce Bus facilitated 26 divorces in 45 minutes. (Internet, May 4)

C. S. Lewis observed that "being in love" is a feeling...and no feeling lasts forever. "But of course, ceasing to be 'in love' need not mean ceasing to love. Love in this second sense—love as distinct from 'being in love' is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity, maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit. It is on this love that the engine of marriage is run: being in love was the explosion that started it." (From Mere Christianity, quoted in For all the Saints I, 271f.)

Stay off the bus! Get out your will power and spend some time today tuning up the engine of your marriage.

## **May 29**

Danica Patrick got angry in last Sunday's Indianapolis 500. Just after she had driven her car out of the pit for lap 171, she was hit by Australian driver Ryan Briscoe who also was leaving his pit stop. When Ms. Patrick pulled the car off the track, she went after Mr. Briscoe and was going to give him what for.

I had a similar experience but at a much more pedestrian level, literally. Some years ago I walked to the cleaners to pick up some laundry. When I walked out of the cleaners with the clean clothes slung over my back, I stepped onto the main sidewalk without looking. A man walked up beside me and chided me for stepping right in front of him. He was very polite. What did I do? Outwardly I apologized but inside I fumed. For the next block of my walk I was angry that someone had criticized me, wonderful me! Finally my conscience spoke. Get a grip, Dale! You're not perfect; you're a sinner. Just admit it, get off your pedestal, and tell God your anger is wrong.

Anger is a natural emotion. Sometimes it's justified; other times it's not. Whatever happened with Danica Patrick and Ryan Briscoe, she yielded to calmer voices. "In your anger, do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26 )

## **May 30**

"Spiritual" is a popular word for people today and I use it myself, but it can mean different things to different people. One possible meaning of "spiritual" is non-physical, talk about God or faith that is airy, not bound to physical things.

Jesus told a parable about a man who sowed seeds (Matthew 13). A seed is a physical thing and it gets planted in physical ground. You don't grow gardens or crops with ideas. In the same way Bible truths are physical. Words go into your ear, and go from your eardrum and into your head...and hopefully into your heart. Or when you read the Bible you see words on paper, the words go to your brain, and if your brain understands the word will go down into your heart. Just like planting a real seed in real dirt, letting God help you through His word is physical, hearing it, seeing it, physically getting it into your brain, understanding it, and then letting it, like a seed, take root in your heart.

Think through your schedule for the weekend. How much time will you devote to getting God's words physically into your eyes and ears? The answer tells a lot about what kind of Christian you really are and whether you'll stay with Jesus Christ until the end.