

November 2008

November 3

We've all been there, talking with someone we don't know. A natural ice-breaker is to ask, "What kind of work do you do?" I asked that often until I heard the "correctness police" say you should focus on the person separate from whatever work he or she does. It's plausible, that a person is quite separate from the work he or she does.

Plausible but not true, not if you remember that the Bible teaches that God judges our works daily and will judge us all on the Last Day (See 2 Corinthians 5:10, Romans 1:18, Zechariah 3). Where is it then that you and I do the works that God judges? Obviously at work, at home, in community and in country. "What you do" is where you show who you are, your deeds showing how you the person fulfill your purpose in life. Yes, Christ forgives our sins in relationships, but still it's in those relationships that who we are shows up. "By their fruits you shall know them" (Matthew 7:16).

Yesterday many churches celebrated All Saint's Sunday, remembering those who have died in faith in Christ. "Their works do follow them" (Revelation 14:13). Until then, the prayer for All Saints applies, "Grant us...to follow Your saints in all virtuous and godly living." So, what do you do?

November 4

I hope I'm not too late with this, should have sent it out yesterday. Don't vote! Don't vote! Jesus says, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (Matthew 7:1). When you vote, you're passing judgment. You're passing judgment on the various propositions that are on today's ballot. You're passing judgment on the candidates, approving or disapproving their positions on issues and you're judging candidates' personalities and characters. Since Jesus says, "Do not judge," any simpleton will conclude that it's wrong to vote.

That's the problem with reading the Bible, a quick read, no attention to context, add in a little personal passion, and presto, the rest of us are suffering with a fool on fire. Writes New Testament scholar Jeffrey Gibbs, "Jesus is not forbidding all judgments with regard to our brothers and sisters, but a hypocritical kind of judging." ("Matthew, p. 369)

November 5

Can you believe someone didn't vote yesterday? The most important presidential election in our lives, or so pundits said, and someone didn't vote?

I assumed my friend was into this election as much as I was, for my candidate, but when I called him up after the election result was clear, he floored me. "I didn't vote," he said. "Whaaat?" "I didn't vote," he said again.

I gave him all the reasons why my candidate was absolutely the only choice for America. "My candidate;" no longer "our candidate." He didn't stick with me. How could you not

vote on our side against them? But to every reason I gave why he had to vote my way, he calmly said, "I know." He was so calm, unlike me, so unflustered, unlike me, so sure of Himself. "I know." His tone made it very clear that He was above me. That's the way He always is, always so calm, so quiet, above me. "I know." The only thing He shared was a family comment, what His Son said. "My kingdom is not of this world." (John 19:36)

My friend is your friend, and He's not a Democrat or a Republican. He's higher than our ways, far beyond our thoughts. When the votes are all in, He's our quiet, calm future. He's God.

November 6

How will he govern? Now that Barack Obama has been elected 44th President of the United States, he'll let us know. Will news stories prove true, that Rahm Emanuel will be chief-of-staff? Will President-elect Obama push through a second, even a third stimulus package? New governance, and we'll hear the details.

How different is God! The ruler of all will not call press conferences, no leaking word about how He's going to rule. What was will be. God is still all-powerful, His finger on more than the nukes (Genesis 17:1). He knows everything, perfect intelligence (Psalm 139:1-4). He's present everywhere, not Big Brother snooping but present helping (Jeremiah 23:24). He's fair, not captive to the wealthy or the poor (Deuteronomy 32:4). He's going to keep His promises. What politician can say that? (2 Timothy 2:13). He's going to do good to all people, not welfare but genuine loving-kindness that builds people up (Psalm 145:9). God is love, period (1 John 4:8).

Some think He needs better marketing. God's rule is just not what itching ears want to hear (2 Timothy 4:3). Why the same ol' same ol'? Maybe because God's comfortable in His own skin, in His come-into-the-flesh Son Jesus. Maybe because God is just laying back, knowing this too shall pass and He'll be there when we realize He's all there is.

November 7

Have the fall leaves been colorful where you live? In our back yard we have what botanists call a "euonymous alatus compactus." For us commoners, that's a burning bush. True to its name, its leaves have turned a brilliant red. The popular name comes from Exodus 3: "The angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in flames of fire from within a bush...God said, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.'"

A bush, and so much else we speed by every day... Wherever you look, nature offers countless opportunities to stand in awe at the magnificence of God's creation. "Earth's creamed with heaven And every common bush afire with God. And only he who sees takes off his shoes. The rest sit around and pluck blackberries." (Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

If you've only been plucking away at your schedule, you still have many opportunities for holy, marveling moments. Take a look, for example, at old "euonymous alatus compactus" when it's bare. You'll see that its branches are square, not round. So many opportunities to marvel but what do we do? Rush on to the next meeting, click the next link, pluck our Blackberries.

November 10

Hi, Christian here! My little brother is crawling. Connor crawls fast. Mommy plopped Connor in the hallway. Mommy looked away. When Mommy looked back, Connor was gone. Crawled fast away. But Connor doesn't know where he's going!

I know where I'm going. I know my way around the house. I know my way around day care. When Daddy and Mommy take me to McDonald's, I know my way to a Happy Meal.

That's memory, says Opa. Opa says Connor is going but Connor doesn't know where he's going. Big people have memory. We know where ways lead. Opa quotes Cicero, "custodes thesaurum," memory is the guardian of treasures. Around the house, around day care, at McDonald's, I memorized the way. And church. When we go to church, I know what door to charge through and what pew to sit in. Opa says memorize Bible passages and you will know God's treasures your whole life long.

No, Opa, not yet. I'm too little to memorize Bible passages, but I am memorizing rhymes. Mommy taught me this one. "This little piggy went to Target."

November 11

Our flag is out, a small expression of our family's thanks to all those who have served in the Armed Forces of the United States. This Veterans Day we immediately think of those serving now and we pray they will come safely home to receive our thanks and themselves observe many Veterans Days.

In the calendar of the church, today is designated the Day of St. Martin of Tours. "Born into a pagan family in what is now Hungary around AD 316, Martin grew up in Lombardy (Italy). Coming to the Christian faith as a young person, he began a career in the Roman army.

But sensing a call to a church vocation, Martin left the military and became a monk, affirming that he was 'Christ's soldier.' Eventually, Martin was named bishop of Tours in western Gaul (France). He is remembered for his simple lifestyle and his determination to share the Gospel.... Incidentally, on St. Martin's Day in 1483, the one-day-old son of Hans and Margarete Luther was baptized and given the "Martin Luther." ("Treasury of Daily Prayer," p. 903)

Perhaps you too will put your flag out. Certainly let us raise to God our thanks for those who have put their lives into the defense of our nation, asking that He would grant safety and give courage and loyalty to those who serve now.

November 12

Pastor John Messman of Texas was busy with his "to do" list when three Sudanese men came into his office. Persecuted as Christians in Sudan, they now sought a place where they could freely worship God. All of a sudden the Pastor's "to do" list was changed, not for a day but for years to come. God brought his congregation into Sudanese ministry.

Os Guinness sees three approaches toward the vexing issue of purpose in life. Some feel "constrained to be" whatever someone else has the power to demand. Others herald the "courage to be," but will power, great as it is, needs not only will but power. Still others believe their purpose is fated, "constrained to be." Each approach is good but only to a point. Guinness quotes C.S. Lewis, "The more we get what we now call 'ourselves' out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become."

Guiness: "When it comes to identity, modern people have things completely back to front: Professing to be unsure of God, they pretend to be sure of themselves. Followers of Christ put things the other way around: Unsure of themselves, we are sure of God." (The Call, p.25)

So the Sudanese changed a pastor's and congregation's purpose. Your purpose? God will present it to you.

November 13

I have found Oswald Chambers a welcome antidote to brain-dead Christianity. So my mind started whirling when he wrote, "The revelation of God is that He cannot forgive" (November 20).

Those of us who have spent much of our lives in the church have heard countless times that God forgives. You don't deserve it. You can't earn it. Free gift. Sweet deal. Those outside the church often hear this as a monstrous evasion of human responsibility. Do whatever turns you on, they hear us saying. God's business is to forgive.

The critics have a valid point and Chambers calls us to rethink forgiveness. Since God is a perfectly just being, our self-willed ways are affronts that He cannot tolerate.

Somebody has to pay. It should be you. That's why His son's suffering on the cross is at the heart of the biblical message. His substitutionary suffering satisfied God's demand for justice. Forgiveness follows, not as our entitlement but as a gift that we trust with all our being. Yes, God forgives, but not by sweeping sin under the rug.

So when we Christians smugly lead less than holy lives, aren't we misrepresenting forgiveness and thumbing our nose at the Holy One?

November 14

Keyword: Confession

Ready to down some drinks this weekend? The book "Aspirin, Band-aids and Tender Loving Care" says, "Alcoholism is presently considered the No. 2 killer in this country and the No. 1 health problem."

Not your problem? Not a friend or family member's problem?

"Doc H," a physician and a recovered alcoholic, writes, "How many times have I heard, 'I don't have a problem with drinking, I don't drink that much, I can quit any time that I want.' These statements are uttered verbatim by most alcoholics at some time." (Aspirin, Band-Aids & Tender Loving Care," pp. 6, 49)

Many of us at church this Sunday will go through a ritual called "confession." Alcoholism is a disease, not a moral failure, but does need to be admitted. If you're sick and tired of being sick and tired, be truthful.

"We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol--That our lives had become unmanageable." (AA's First Step)

God, help me make a thoroughly honest, a helpfully honest confession.

Amen.

November 17

No one is ever going to mistake the New York Times for a newspaper sympathetic to Christianity. So a photo caption in last Thursday's paper was interesting. The caption read, "People whose relatives died in the May 12 earthquake in Sichuan Province in China waited for the opening ceremony for the Donghekou Earthquake Site Park in Qinchaun on Wednesday." Sure enough, the photo shows those people waiting for the ceremony but it shows something else, a large homemade wooden cross. (November 13; A16)

Mao Zedong's "Cultural Revolution" from 1966 to 1976 persecuted Christians so severely that western experts assumed Christianity in China was dead. After Mao died in 1976, moderates lead by Deng Xiaoping introduced reforms and among other changes, those reforms allowed the Amity Printing Press to be established in Nanjing in 1987. Built with substantial support from the United Bible Societies, especially the American Bible Society, the Amity Printing Press now has produced about 60 million Bibles.

I wonder how the Times let that cross into the paper? Maybe they just can't keep down the real news. It is estimated that today there are 90 to 130 million Christians in China, about 10% of the population. The Acts of the Apostles says, "The word of God continued to increase and spread" (Acts 12:24). That's still true.

November 18

Yesterday's news reported that gangs are getting a foothold in suburban neighborhoods.

The gangs are attracting members from homes that look attractive and well-kept to passers-by but house dysfunctional families and absentee parents. Kids need emotional attachment and if dad and mom don't give it, they dumbly attach themselves to gangs.

Like many other modern problems, we've brought it upon ourselves because we let others dictate how we spend our time. On this date in 1883 the United States and Canada adopted a unified system of standard time zones. Good. Not good is assuming that time is standard for all people. It's not. "There is a time for everything," says Ecclesiastes 3:1 and each of us is in a different time of life. Parents are in a time to put away their own pursuits and give time, quantity and quality time, to the kids. When they're grown and gone, dad and mom can pick up again with their own life.

A modern heresy is that time is ours. It's not. Time is God's. It's one of His ways to position us in our relationship to Him and to His other children. "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). When was the last time you wasted some time with family?

November 19

Replay your conversations. Talk mostly about yourself or identify with what the other person is feeling? Your effectiveness depends on balancing the two.

On this date, November 19th in 1863, President Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address. In 266 words he did both, describe the reality people were feeling but he also held up his ideal for the future. "We are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war.... It is for us the living...to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Do both, express what people are feeling and then a better future. Yes, it's rhetoric, but yes, people can be inspired. Why shouldn't your conversations inspire?

November 20

I was heartened to read what Joseph Ellis wrote about the founding fathers. "Major political decisions that shaped the founding were usually improvisational decisions." ("American Creation," p. 18). In other words, they made it up as they went. They didn't have a book called, "Seven Effective Principles for Founding Fathers."

You're in a leadership position by virtue of Christ's call to follow Him and serve others. Your leadership plays itself out in your unique situation, as family member, citizen, manager at work, elected official, or wherever God has you. Since we Christ-followers are surrounded by a culture obsessed with leadership, it's no surprise we gobble up leadership books, periodicals, and advice just like other people, all looking for the "open sesame" of leadership.

There's something we should remember that others do not, that the end of all our decisions is hidden with the omniscient Lord. King David, no ineffective leader, knew that. So he prayed, "Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me Your paths. Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He instructs sinners in His ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them His way" (Psalm 25:4, 8-9). Call it the "Prayer of an Improviser." By the way, the best leadership books I've read? Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

November 21

Dr. Don Argue serves on the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. He recently went to Viet Nam where he met a pastor who told a story of intimidation and harassment. Early one morning the pastor's 16-year-old daughter stepped out the front door to go to school but stopped, turned around in fear, and rushed back into the house. Vietnamese security forces had surrounded the house, harassing this family for their witness to Christ. An immediate family council was held and the pastor shared a Bible story that came to mind.

The Arameans had surrounded the home of Elisha with evil intent. The servant was scared and reported back to Elisha. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked. 'Don't be

afraid,' the prophet answered. 'Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.' And Elisha prayed, 'O Lord, open his eyes so he may see.' Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha." (2 Kings 6:15-17)

It's dangerous out there, not just physically but spiritually. Remember, God surrounds you with His Spirit and word, with angels, saints and all the company of heaven. That 16-year-old girl went out and walked through the security forces unharmed.

November 24

Deuteronomy 32:36. Psalm 135:14. Jeremiah 5:30. 2 Timothy 4:1. 1 Peter 4:5. Romans 2:16. Acts 17:31. Revelation 6:10. Revelation 11:18. Revelation 20:13. This isn't making sense, I know. Stay with me.

Acts 7:7. Romans 2:12. Romans 3:6. 1 Corinthians 11:31. 2 Thessalonians 2:12. Hebrews 10:30. Hebrews 13:4. James 2:12. James 5:9. 1 Peter 1:17. 1 Peter 2:23.

Are you still with me? Matthew 10:15. Matthew 11:22, 24. Matthew 12:36. Luke 10:14. 2 Corinthians 5:10. 2 Thessalonians 1:5.

My list could be much longer. All those passages talk about God judging us and judging all the world. "Oh, God wouldn't judge us! He's love. He's for whatever we're for." That's what many say today. You, check out the passages. Then you'll better understand what Jesus Christ is all about.

November 25

45 years ago today President John F. Kennedy was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. I was a high school junior and had experienced a little grief in my few years, for example the death of Grandma Meyer, but this protected Sunday School boy hadn't had his heart ripped out. JFK, Martin Luther King, RFK, my father, my sister-in-law...grief has been reaching into me more and more over the years. You understand. "I'm not at all thankful for this" is our natural reaction, but...

If "we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Romans 8:37), isn't there a way to interpret our losses in a positive way? Somewhere Martin Luther said the special trait of a Christian is to give thanks for the hard times, not simply in the hard times but give thanks for the hard times, the heart-ripped-out-of-you times. How can that happen? Only when we let the Spirit convince us that our grieving souls are going to be filled with God Himself. Everyday there's something, loss of a loved one or smaller losses, and in some ways it gets tougher. Follow the thought, unnatural as it is, thanksgiving for the tough times and you're in for one of one of the most meaningful Thanksgivings you and your family have had in a long time.

November 26

"Opa?" "Yes, Christian." "Opa, we need a special Thanksgiving Minute for our friends."
"Good idea, little buddy. What do you think we should say?"

"Hmmm.... Food, how about all the food? We have so much food to be thankful for. We have so much food that Connor throws it from his high chair."

"Connor, what do you think? You're not saying anything. I take that to mean you think food is not what Thanksgiving is only about. I agree. We should be helping the hungry and not just thinking of them. Try again, Christian. What other things are you thankful for?"

"My goobopper, little Einsteins, Carmen, Charlotte and boccer ball."

"How about you, Connor? What are you thankful for?" "Cheerios, crawling, hugs, and clean diapers."

"I think we're onto something here. I was looking at stars and trees and hills and rivers..."

"Opa, please don't burst into 'Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens."

"Alright, but are we agreed that we have so much to thank God for?" "Agreed, Opa."

With that the Minute team, Christian, Connor, Opa and Oma wish you and yours a blessed Thanksgiving! We'll be back on Monday.